

My Inspiration

By Stopquidont@bellsouth.net

Rated PG-13

Submitted May 2010

Summary: Life can be difficult when you're a celebrity. But sometimes you find inspiration in the most ordinary places.

I want to take a minute to thank all the wonderful readers of the message boards. I'm glad you braved this little adventure. Thanks for all the great comments everyone made as well. This was inspired by the movie 'Notting Hill', identified correctly by Ann. I always loved that premise, but it took me a while to get a story hashed out. Like many of my stories, I started this, stopped, started, and on and on until finally something just clicked. I hope everyone enjoys reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

No copyright infringements intended. I just borrowed the characters for a while.

Why was it there was never anything to wear in her closet? Lois surveyed the two blouses lying on the bed, insisting that today she was going to dress to impress. In the end, she chose another of the soft, worn tee shirts she always did. She'd get paint on it was the excuse she used. She headed into her kitchen for coffee, and flipped the television on to see what was making the news.

"Clark Kent was in New York last night promoting his new book." The camera panned out to focus on a tall, dark-haired man winding his way through a crowd outside a bookstore on a busy city street. "An early review in from the critic of the Daily Planet says that this is the best novel the super man has written. It's a chilling tale of betrayal and intrigue that's sure to keep readers on the edge of their seats." Another shot showed the writer signing autographs and laughing at a lady in front of him.

"Speaking of Clark Kent, his super side made an appearance on the children's ward of Lexington Memorial Hospital while in the Big Apple." This time the scene was of the same handsome man in a flashy blue suit, complete with a red cape. He was reading to a group of kids. "Superman will attend the peace summit next month in Australia. World officials are hopeful that with his presence many compromises will be reached this year."

Lois continued to watch the coverage of the world's resident superhero. Clark Kent was nothing short of extraordinary. Until a few years ago he was content to spend his life writing, with the world none the wiser that he was also the famous self-made savior. Who the world thought was a simple farm boy from Kansas turned out to be an alien from another world. Not only that, he had vast powers that were beyond explanation. He could actually fly! He'd used his powers to help others when he could and had eventually created Superman to allow him anonymity so that he could live a somewhat normal life.

However, a man named Jason Trask had had other plans. Trask had once been a colonel in the US Army and had led a task force to protect the country from alien invasion. His beliefs had eventually cast him to the cusp of reality and earned him a discharge from the military. He'd regrouped, with the help of various sources, and formed his own paramilitary group and continued to seek out those he felt threatened his way of life. Superman was his first priority and he set out to prove the man in the cape had another agenda. That mission took him to Smallville,

Kansas. There he discovered Clark Kent's biggest secret and within a short time, the entire world knew of that man's amazing abilities.

Clark had been hounded almost relentlessly in those first few months. He'd been chased by the government because they felt he really was a threat. Why else would he hide his true identity from the world? Eventually he'd helped out when a major earthquake shook apart an entire village in South America, and the world began to see him in a different light. He'd reached nothing short of celebrity status, although he was the most grounded celebrity Lois had ever seen. He was modest, honest, and compassionate. He gave freely of what precious little time he did have outside his Superman duties and his writing career. He loved his parents and protected them at all costs. To top it off, he was gorgeous.

Lois licked her lips and forced her attention away from the television. Clark Kent was untouchable and gawking at him wasn't helping her. She needed to get to the gallery. There was a prospect coming in early this morning.

The day promised to be beautiful. The sun was bright and the air crisp. Though she should get moving, Lois was in no great hurry as she walked through the busy streets. It was barely eight in the morning and already the street was filled with people. She lived in a section of the city known as Market Row. Street vendors of all kinds lined the sidewalks every day of the year. Traffic had long ago begun to by-pass this area so walking was the most efficient method of transportation until one reached the next block.

She grabbed her morning bag of fruit, then hurried the last few steps to the door of her gallery. Living and working on the same street had its advantages.

The Lane Gallery was nestled right in the middle of Market Row, in between the various shops in the older buildings. Situated in a popular area of town for shopping, it wasn't the best place for selling art. At least that's what one would think. However, the Lane Gallery had showcased some the best art in the world over the past few years. Lois not only sold the art she loved so much, she also sought out unknown artists and gave them their first break. She'd present their work to the city in shows at her gallery and within weeks, they were on their way. She could have done the same, trailing on the heels of the many proteges she'd turned out. Instead, she was content to stay tucked away in her little art haven on a busy market street in Metropolis.

"Good morning!" Lois sang out happily to the fish in a large, circular bowl that sat in the front window of her gallery. As usual they chose to wait patiently for their food. "Yeah. I got it," she told them as she dropped a pinch of food into the water.

"Sorry I'm late," came a breathless voice as another woman entered the room.

"Good morning to you, too," Lois answered.

"Oh. Good morning, sis." Lucy Lane, Lois' younger sister, tucked her bag under the counter against the far wall. "You would not believe Charlie's nerve," she continued.

Lois tuned her out as she moved around the gallery turning on the various lamps. Lucy helped Lois in the shop and was her roommate. She was also her best friend when she found time to work Lois into her very busy social life. And Lucy talked a lot.

A smile tugged at the corners of Lois' mouth as she admired the painting on the easel before her. She'd just

arranged an opening for another up-and-coming artist. And his work was simply breathtaking.

"Hey, Lo. Want a juice?"

"Sure, Luce." She turned as Lucy exited the building, headed in the direction of their favorite deli.

There was a ton of paperwork involved with an opening, so Lois pulled out the chair at her desk to get started. She'd just settled when the bell signaled someone had entered the door. She looked up in time to see a man face her fish tank.

"May I help you?" she asked softly.

"I'd just like to browse," came his answer as he bent to get a better look at the fish in the water.

"Sure. Make yourself at home and if you need anything, just yell."

"Okay." He moved slowly away from the fish tank toward the wall.

Lois watched as he stared up at a painting of Market Row. He moved on down the wall, gazing briefly at the art. When he turned to admire a statue on a pedestal, she was able to see part of his face for the first time. Her eyes widened as she recognized him. Or at least she thought she did. He looked a lot like Clark Kent! His eyes were covered by dark shades so she couldn't say for sure.

She wasn't sure — not until he turned toward a half-wall directly in front of her. He bent to look at the treasure contained on that wall and as he did, he removed his glasses. There was no denying it. He was definitely Clark Kent.

"That was painted by Dale Cromer," Lois felt compelled to point out.

He merely nodded and moved further into the gallery.

Thank goodness she'd designed the place with an open floor plan, Lois thought as she continued to snatch glances of her visitor. Why had he drifted into her place? He usually didn't go out without a huge crowd nipping at his heels. Though he'd adamantly insisted that Clark Kent was who he was, everyone always beckoned for a glance of Superman. But he was a bit of a celebrity even without his flashy suit. Clark Kent had made quite a name for himself in the world of prose. He was one of the best selling authors in the world.

"Is this an original?" he asked as he stood facing a small statue.

"Yes," Lois told him as she made her way over to him. "It's one of the first pieces Tony Blair made."

Clark turned it over in his hand several times before he held it out to Lois. "I'll take it," he said.

"O ... kay," she managed after a moment. She was able to see his face fully and it nearly took her breath away. She'd have to have been blind not to think him a handsome man from the hundreds of pictures and videos she'd seen. She'd heard others say he was even better looking in person, but to see for herself was something else altogether. He wasn't just good-looking, he was ... beautiful.

Making sure she had a firm grip on the statue, she somehow managed to keep her hands from shaking as she took it from him.

He turned and continued his perusal of the paintings on the back wall. Lois went to place his new art on the front counter and when she turned back, he was still looking at the same painting. It was one of hers. She'd only painted ten portraits and five were on display in her gallery. She'd sold three and the remaining two hung on the walls of her apartment. Painting had once brought her tremendous pleasure and joy, but her true calling was to promote the

work of others.

"That one is a rare find," Lois explained as she again headed toward him.

"It's very beautiful," he said softly and reached out to touch the canvas lightly with the tips of his fingers. "The colors are amazing."

And they were. She wasn't sure where she'd gotten the inspiration, but she'd captured the setting sun perfectly. It was as if she were above it looking down, the coast of an ocean in the background.

"It's exactly what it looks like from up there," he commented.

And he should know, she thought. He was able to see it any time he wanted, without a plane.

"My father has his pilot's license," Lois told him. "He'd take me up nearly every afternoon when we vacationed in New England."

"You painted this?" Clark asked as he looked at her for the first time.

"Yes," Lois answered as she continued to stare at the painting, completely unaware that the man beside her had discovered new inspiration. But he'd begun to roam again by the time her eyes drifted back toward him.

"And this one," Clark said as he stopped in front of another of her paintings.

It, too, was painted as if she'd been looking down from the sky. Instead of an ocean, this one was a painting of the mountains, and it featured bright sunshine glistening off of beautiful snow caps.

"Wyoming," Clark remarked.

"Great eye," Lois replied as she moved over beside him.

"This is Herman's Gorge." Clark's finger skimmed over the area on the canvas he was talking about. "My dad and I went on a hiking trip there when I was twelve."

Lois merely nodded. She noticed, out of the corner of her eye, that Clark was smiling slightly, as if remembering that trip with his dad. It must have been a special memory, she noted.

"I want both of the paintings as well," he announced after a moment, then continued his perusal of the gallery.

Nodding, because she was too stunned to speak, Lois made her way back toward her desk. Clark was both famous and wealthy, and though she'd known that already, it was still a difficult concept to grasp. This wasn't some shopping trip she'd heard about him taking on television. He was here, in her gallery, about to buy several thousand dollars worth of art. She'd purposely priced her own paintings on the high side because of the sentimental value. If they were expensive, chances were that no one would ever buy them and they'd remain in the gallery. Crazy idea, but it had worked for her for years. Now, however, she was about to take down her paintings and send them off to be someone else's treasures. And they weren't being purchased by just anybody. Clark Kent would actually own some of her work. Rather than saddened by that fact, she was a little overwhelmed.

"Could you have these things delivered?"

The question pulled her from her reverie, and she looked up at her patron with a smile. "Absolutely."

During the time she'd been thinking about the single most recognizable man on the planet buying items from her gallery, she'd been gathering the paperwork to transfer ownership.

"I'll need a few signatures from you," she told him as she pushed the papers over in front of him. He'd come to stand at the counter before her. "And you'll need to fill this

out.”

Clark’s eyes skimmed over the documents, then he reached for the pen Lois held out to him. When he was done, he looked up at her. “I would appreciate a little discretion,” he said as he handed the papers back to her.

“I assure you that the Lane Gallery is the most reputable business you’ve ever dealt with,” she replied seriously.

He looked at her for a moment before he nodded and reached into his pocket to pull out his wallet. “I assume this is sufficient for payment?” he asked as he held out a credit card.

“It is as long as it clears the bank,” she half joked as she reached to take the card. Instead of releasing the plastic, Clark held it until Lois looked him in the eyes. Then he did something that almost took her breath away again. He smiled brightly.

“Thank you,” he told her before he gave up the card.

She returned his smile, then turned to complete the transaction. When all the paperwork was done, she walked over to where he stood gazing out the window. “One more signature.” She waited patiently for him to pen his name. “When would you like these delivered?”

“Friday,” he answered. “Any time after two.” He handed her a card he was holding. “To this address.”

She glanced down briefly. “This is not ...”

“My home address?” She nodded. “No.”

And that was all he offered in the way of explanation. “They’ll be there,” she assured him. If he expected privacy, she wouldn’t disappoint him.

Clark nodded, pushed his sunglasses back up on his face, then smiled. “I’ll be looking for them.”

And with that, he was gone. Lois watched from the window as he made his way down the street and into the alley beside her building. A second later, she heard the familiar boom she’d heard many times on television, signaling his departure.

“Wow!” she whispered.

“You won’t believe who I just saw!” came Lucy’s happy voice as she breezed back into the gallery.

Oh, yeah? Lois challenged her silently.

“Barry Conner!”

How about Clark Kent? Lois asked thoughtfully as she took one last look out the window. She was certain he wanted his visit kept quiet. Lois felt that even her sister didn’t need to know about it. She made her way over to her desk and unlocked the drawer where she kept private files. With a final glance at the paperwork in her hand, she placed it inside, then relocked it. She tucked the card he’d given her into the pocket of her jeans. She’d give Lucy the day off Friday. They’d certainly made enough money today to take a few. Lucy wouldn’t mind. By the way she was going on about their former neighbor, she’d be able to fill her time.

It’s been way too long since I’ve been out, Lois thought as she carefully wrapped the painting on the table. She’d spent the last two days setting up an opening for another talented artist, which had kept her busy enough so that her thoughts didn’t drift to the man who’d purchased her paintings. But it was Friday — time for her to deliver his items. She’d never been one to get caught up in the ‘Superman’ hype. Sure, he was phenomenal. The things he could do were nothing short of amazing. He was also a talented writer. She’d read his books long before the world had found out he wasn’t even from this planet. Yet, here she stood, her heart thundering in anticipation. He hadn’t technically said he’d be there — just that he’d be looking

for them. So ...

So stop acting like a school girl, she chided herself for the tenth time in the last hour. She’d come in much too early to make her delivery and had subsequently spent the morning watching the man in question on television. The morning news had run an interview he’d done the week before, after he’d saved several children from dying when an orphanage burned down. As with everything he did as Superman, he’d shrugged off his heroics as just another day.

How did someone with such extraordinary power become so humble? And his humility seemed to reach into his personal life as well. The very few interviews he gave as Clark Kent projected him as the most grounded celebrity in recent history. She couldn’t help but wonder if he really was.

Glancing at her watch, she took a deep breath. Maybe he’d be there to accept the artwork for himself and she could find out something else about him. Like why he’d wanted these sent to somewhere other than his home address.

Lois pulled her silver Jeep up the curb and rechecked the address on the card again. 344 Clinton — she was in the right place. The large, older building was in the middle of the block in one of the less-than-affluent sections of the city. Though not exactly the slums, it wasn’t at all what she’d expected. Slowly she exited her car. Taking another daunting look up at the building, she wondered if her prized SUV would be here when she got back.

It took her a few minutes, but she finally found apartment G around the side of the building, down an alley. She repositioned the bag containing the statue on her shoulder so she could better hold the paintings before cautiously climbing the stairs up to the small stoop outside a blue door. Potted plants with brightly colored blooms flanked the opening. Quaint, she thought as she lifted her hand to knock.

“Be right there,” came the call from inside.

Clark was indeed waiting for his art. It was his voice that called from the other side of the blue door. She’d only heard it for herself speak a few words, but there was no way she’d forget it. It was a low, sexy rumble.

Sexy? Sheez, what was wrong with her?!

Before she could analyze her continued infatuation with Clark Kent, he opened the door. And for a second she forgot to breathe. He’d been absolutely breathtaking when he’d come to the gallery- in his black slacks, gray dress shirt, and black jacket. But today ... today he was stunning. He was wearing a tee shirt- a very tight, blue tee shirt.

“Ms. Lane?”

“Ah, what?” He’d spoken and she hadn’t heard a word. “I asked if I could take those?”

Finally she managed to get her eyes to focus. Of course, that might have been a mistake because he was even better looking in focus.

“Here,” he said as he reached out to take her load.

She relinquished the wrapped frames and forced herself to concentrate. “The statue is in here,” she told him as she pulled the strap of the bag off of her shoulder. He simply motioned with his head for her to follow him inside.

“Close the door,” he called.

With a glance behind her, Lois stepped inside. Clark had already made his way down into the inner room. She pushed the door closed before surveying her new surroundings. She was standing on a landing with a banister

on either side of three, wide stairs. Below was a large room. One end was a living room, the other a dining area. Off to the left on the far end she could see a kitchen. A large opening in the middle of the wall to the left led into what looked to be a bedroom.

"Please, come in," Clark told her as he unwrapped one of the paintings.

Again, she almost forgot to breathe. Clark was standing at the table on the other end of the room tearing the paper off one of his paintings. What impressed Lois was the tight blue jeans that hugged him like a glove. She saw this man almost daily in spandex, yet the sight of him in denim was having a serious effect on her equilibrium. And if that wasn't enough, he was barefooted. He had really ... really, nice feet.

"I have the perfect place for this."

Drawn to him by that sexy rumble, Lois made her way down into the living area. He was hanging the painting of the ocean on the wall behind the table.

"How does it look?" he asked when he'd felt it was perfectly hung.

It looks fantastic, she thought. Then she averted her eyes away from the man beside her. "Good. It looks good." He must have noticed she wasn't necessarily talking about the art because he grinned slightly. But instead of commenting, he turned and lifted the other painting from the table.

"This one is going in the loft," he said as he moved across the room and stood it against a bookshelf.

"Is that a Darren Jackson original?" Lois asked as she crossed the room. A small, clay sculpture stood on the middle shelf of a bookcase.

"Yes, it is," Clark answered as he lifted the item in question. It was a deep red statue of a mother holding her child.

Lois could only stare at the priceless artifact. Darren Jackson was one of the most famous artists in the world. She'd met him several years ago at show in London. "He projects such life through his work."

"That's why I like it," Clark said as he returned the sculpture to its place.

For the first time Lois noticed Clark had a very eclectic collection of art pieces. A mask looked to be African, a small drum was South American, and a vase had a Russian print on it. "Did you collect all of these in person?" How stupid did that sound? Of course he did. He could fly around the world in seconds.

He chuckled softly. "Afraid so. I've been on every continent on the planet in almost every country and all fifty states."

She looked up at him. "I've been to all fifty states and on every continent but Antarctica." At his questioning expression, she shrugged. "Daddy was in the Army. We've lived in twenty different states, and the ones we didn't live in, we traveled through to get to one we did."

"Ah ..."

God, he was cute when he did that. Focus, girl, she scolded herself.

"I wouldn't have thought you'd make your own deliveries," Clark said after a moment.

"Yeah, well, I usually let my sister make the deliveries — she's more of a people person — but I just kind of figured ... well, you did say you'd appreciate the discretion. So, I didn't think you'd want just anyone — especially my sister because she can be a little ... loud. And I just felt it'd be better if I brought them. And ..." She stopped when he

laughed softly. "What?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you babble?"

She felt her cheeks burn slightly and she lowered her head, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear nervously. "I might have heard that a time or two." The fact was she'd heard that many times. Lois was famous for going off on tangents, usually when she was passionate about a particular subject. Or nervous ... like now- standing beside the most well known person on the planet. Sheez! She even babbled in her thoughts!

"I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"You didn't," she said quickly. She looked around the room again, trying desperately to keep from bolting out of the door. She couldn't believe she'd blabbered in front of Clark Kent. Glancing up at him, she noticed he didn't seem to be put off by her outburst though. He looked ... intrigued.

"So," he managed after a second. "You said something about that statue ..."

"Oh ..." She pulled the bag from her shoulder and retrieved his prize. "Good choice, by the way."

"I think so." He turned the bubble-wrapped object over in his hands a couple of times before he set it on the shelf. "It's a birthday present for my mother."

"You must be a good son ... buying your mother expensive art for her birthday." What did she say that for?

"I bought her a beach house three years ago, a Lincoln two years ago, and sent her on a week-long trip to Rome last year. This ..." He picked up the statue again. "... is nothing." He replaced it again before stepping around her. "Would you like something to drink?"

Well ... it was certainly something to her. It was three months rent. But then again, the value of the pieces on his bookshelf alone would probably buy her entire building.

"I have cream soda."

Cream soda? This man was perfect!

She turned to see him flop down on the sofa. He held up the can of soda in invitation for her to join him. The most famous man on the face of the planet wanted *her* to sit beside him and drink cream soda. Okay, so she'd been standing inside his — what ever this place was — for the last few minutes. But ...

"Don't you like cream soda?" he asked when she didn't move.

"Ah, no. I mean, yeah. I love cream soda," she replied without moving.

He slowly lowered his arm, eyeing her closely. "Don't like strange visitors from other planets?"

What?! "What?" That prompted her to move. She eased around the coffee table and gingerly sat down onto the cushion beside him, all without taking her eyes off him. He looked so ... lost. He didn't answer her, just took a gulp of his own soda as he stared across the room. "Is that how you see yourself?" she asked him softly.

"Doesn't everyone else?" He shrugged and lifted his feet to prop them on the coffee table.

Lois reached over and took the cream soda from his hand. "I've learned not to worry about how other people see me." She popped the tab and took a long swallow from the can. "As long as I know who I am, I couldn't care less how others see me."

"And who is Lois Lane?" he asked, his voice even sexier when he spoke softly. Did this man have any idea how gorgeous he was?

What was he doing? Flirting with this woman was not a good idea. He'd learned a long time ago that Clark

Superman Kent was destined to spend his time alone. He'd only met a handful of people who didn't want anything from him. None were women. Oh, he could get a companion for the night; they were a dime a dozen. Women camped outside his door just to see him. But they were all the same. They wanted the acclaim that came with being seen with Superman. They wanted to boast they'd bedded the Man of Steel. None wanted to actually get to know the man under the suit.

He'd come close to finding a special person to share his time with once. He'd known her growing up; they'd been high school sweethearts. She'd even known about his super side. She just hadn't been able to handle the exposure when the world found out just how super he was.

Something about the woman in front of him was different. She hadn't acted like a star-struck teenager when he went into her gallery. No, he hadn't missed the looks she'd given him. She'd known who was and yet, she'd treated him just as he suspected she would any other Joe off the street. That had impressed him. And he wasn't very easily impressed.

"I am ... a simple gallery owner, artist, and big sister. I travel, promote talent when I see it, and try to spend time with my friends."

Damn! She was absolutely fascinating. Her lashes had to be the longest he'd ever seen. And those eyes — he could get lost in them.

"Who is Clark Kent?"

What? She'd just asked him a question and he had no idea what it was. He blinked quickly and took another sip of his soda.

"Hey ..."

He looked at her and immediately wished he hadn't. She was simply beautiful.

"Come on. I answered."

"What?" She cocked her head and looked at him closely. God, she had a nice neck.

"You didn't hear me, did you?"

His eyes flashed to her eyes, then settled on her lips. Nice, inviting lips. Acting on pure euphoria, and months of abstinence, Clark leaned forward and kissed Lois soundly. He reached out with his free hand and gently squeezed her knee while he held his lips against her in sweet agony. When he pulled back, she was staring at him with wide eyes. Obviously he'd shocked this poor girl senseless. She'd come to deliver artwork he'd bought from her gallery, and he'd kissed her like some deranged fool.

But God help him, he felt like he was on fire. His lips tingled with the sweet taste he'd been given of this incredible woman. He squeezed her knee again, without taking his eyes off hers. "I should apologize for that," he said softly. "But ..." His eyes flashed back to her stunned mouth, leading his body to follow. Just before his lips met hers again, his brain finally kicked in. He practically jumped to his feet, spilling his cream soda all over the coffee table. "Dammit!" The spill barely had time to get the table damp before Clark had flashed into the kitchen for a towel and had the soda cleaned up.

"Wow! You could be really useful around the house."

Clark looked at Lois. There was a fair amount of wonder on her face at his show of super speed, but she seemed to be more tickled than anything. He grinned at her. "You should see me take out the trash." He wagged his eyes at her, affecting a bright smile. A very nice smile. Now that was impressive.

Before he could make a fool of himself, a phone rang.

That broke the spell that had been cast between them.

"Sorry," he apologized as he went to retrieve his cell from the table. "Hello?"

Breathe! Breathe! Lois had to look away from him or she might never take another breath in her life. It had been only a touch, but he'd kissed her! Clark Kent had kissed her! Glancing at him again, she was trying desperately to figure out why this man seemed to be so taken with her. She was just a girl from the south side of Metropolis. She wasn't unlike hundreds of other women he must have met in his life. He'd been everywhere. He'd seen millions of women. What made her so special?

How did she manage to turn the head of a man who could have any woman he wanted? Just look at him, she thought as she did just that. He was the most perfect specimen she'd ever seen. Well defined muscles; shiny, black hair; pearly, white teeth — they all formed the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. Hell, even his feet were gorgeous.

And his looks had nothing to do with his celebrity. She was sure if he was the least bit cocky about his position in society, he wouldn't be nearly as appealing. It was that quiet, soft-spoken demeanor that made him so irresistible.

"I, ah, I have to ..." He made a gesture with his hand and she knew he meant he had to leave, even if he didn't really want to voice it.

"Oh," she said and stood up. "Sure. I'll just ..." She motioned toward the door. "Thanks for the soda," she told him as she held out the half-empty beverage.

"You're welcome," he replied as he took the can.

"Enjoy the art." She was inching toward the door. Would he say yes if she asked to see him again? He didn't actually look as interested in her as he did a few minutes ago. She managed to tear her gaze from him and make it up the stairs to the front door. She reached out for the knob, but turned back before she could open it. "I won't say a word about this place."

"I never doubted it," he said with a smile. "Thank you."

"For bringing the art or the kiss?" What was wrong with her? Asking such a forward question like that? She swallowed hard when his eyes seemed to darken and he took a step closer.

"Both," he whispered.

He was so close. Was he going to kiss her again?

"Would you like to go with me to my mother's birthday dinner?"

Huh? Had she just heard him right? "What?"

"Tomorrow night ... My father's grilling steaks. We'll probably drink too many beers ..."

"You want me to go with you to your parents' house?"

"Yes." He was still looking at her like he wanted to kiss her. "Unless you're too scared to fly?"

"What?"

"Fly ... with me. They live in Kansas."

Fly ... with Superman? That was a fantasy to beat all fantasies! She looked closer at the man before her. She'd much rather fly with Clark Kent. "I'll bring a gift."

Clark smiled, the most beautiful one yet. "I'll pick you up on the roof of your gallery at seven."

"The roof?"

"It's harder to be seen up there."

Of course. They'd have tons of camera hounds chasing them if she were seen flying off with Superman. "Okay." This time she managed to open the door and step through before she looked back. He offered her another brilliant

smile, which she returned before she hurried down the stairs and through the alley. Her jeep was still there — still in one piece. She jumped inside and started the engine before she took a deep breath. “Wow!” She’d just made a date with Clark Kent! Suddenly tomorrow seemed much too far off.

What had he done? Asking a virtual stranger to go with him to meet his parents? The only girl he’d ever taken home was Lana and that was because he’d known her since they were in diapers. His parents wouldn’t mind, of course. Hell, his mother would have him married before the night was over.

She’s such a fantastic person, he thought of his mother. Martha loved him unconditionally, and he was thankful every day he had her. Even when the world had found out about him, Martha had been a trouper. She’d handled the press like she’d been a starlet all of her life. She’d also been the one to encourage him to continue his work as Superman. She hadn’t let him give up.

No, taking a girl home wouldn’t be a problem, at least not as far as his parents were concerned. The problem was him — how he felt every time he looked at Lois Lane. He’d wondered into her gallery to find something for his mother’s birthday, but he’d never expected to find anything as priceless as Lois. Her eyes had widened slightly when she’d recognized him. He’d expected her to jump up and start to fawn all over him. Instead, she’d just watched him. And that was why he’d taken a second look at her. Hidden behind casual, comfortable clothes had been a very beautiful woman. She’d been void of heavy make-up or a costly hair style, which only made her more appealing. But what had really impressed Clark were those long lashes and stunning dark eyes.

He’d prayed she’d be the one to deliver his art and yet, he’d hoped she wouldn’t. The moment he saw her again, he’d known he was in trouble.

And she was even more wonderful than he’d first thought. She’d replaced her paint-splattered tee shirt in favor of a plain, white blouse. The form-fitting cotton was carefully tucked into a pair of gray slacks. Lois was a tiny woman — he could probably wrap his hands around her waist. And he’d imagined doing just that, among other things.

Clark shook his head to get rid of those thoughts. He changed his clothes, again. Why was he suddenly having difficulty choosing what to wear?

He was in *big* trouble. Taking Lois anywhere would seriously complicate things. The poor girl didn’t want paparazzi chasing her all over the city. And that’s what would happen if they were even seen speaking to one another on the street. The media’s relentless pursuit to expose the personal details of his life would drive her insane, the same way it did anyone who got involved with him. Yet, right now all he could think about was looking at her. He’d be content to do that all night. Of course, the slight thrill he got when he heard her speak made him lightheaded.

And if he didn’t hurry, he’d be late.

Clark crossed the roof again for the tenth time. He’d been there for nearly ten minutes, too anxious to wait another second. The anticipation felt like a knot deep in his belly. What was wrong with him? It wasn’t like he hadn’t been out before. He usually had a companion when he made appearances. Some of whom were quite pleasant.

There were even two or three he’d seen more than once. They were pretty women, intelligent enough to carry on fascinating conversation. But none, not one, had made him feel remotely like he did when he simply thought about Lois Lane.

Who was she? What was she like? He found himself eager to find out those things and more.

“Hi.”

He’d been so engrossed in his thoughts, she’d managed to sneak up on him. He turned and almost passed out. Her small frame made the little burgundy dress she wore look like an evening gown. Tonight she had on slightly more make-up, though nothing heavy. Her hair was piled on top of her head, a wisp outlining her face. The short heels she wore drew his eyes to her long legs and his fingers flexed slightly. What he wouldn’t give to touch that silky skin!

“Should I have dressed more casually?”

“Ah, no!” Dammit! He’d answered way too loudly. “You look great,” he offered.

“So do you,” she answered with a smile.

And that was what made the picture complete. That gorgeous smile ...

Think, Clark! He took a step toward her, his body beginning to hum in anticipation of holding her for the flight to Smallville.

“Should we go?”

He’d managed to hear her this time. “Sorry about this.” He waved his hand to indicate the roof.

“I understand. Fewer complications.”

It pained him to do this to her. It also thrilled him to no end. He stepped closer. “We’ll go straight up pretty quickly.” She nodded. “It’ll be easier if I just ...” He glanced at her, then before he could lose his nerve, scooped her up. She automatically wrapped her arms around his neck, nearly causing him to drop her. She smiled when he looked at her and then they were airborne.

“Oh!” Lois inhaled deeply as they shot into the air. When they stopped, she was looking down on the city. “Wow!”

“That’s the way I feel nearly every time I fly,” Clark told her, then set a course for Kansas. Again, she nearly squealed in delight. “Don’t worry,” he chuckled. “I haven’t lost anyone yet.” But she wasn’t listening. She was engrossed in her surroundings. He’d expected her to be a little apprehensive. Instead, she was excited. He could hear, and feel, her heart thundering in her chest.

“This is amazing!”

“Yes, it is,” he answered, although he meant the company and not the view. He hadn’t lied when he said he got a little thrill each and every time he flew. He’d just never gotten a thrill quite like this.

“Why am I so warm?”

“You’re in my aura.”

“Your who’ra?”

He laughed softly. “I have an aura surrounding my body.”

“Like a force field?”

He’d never heard it put like that before, but, “Yeah, something like that. It only extends out a few millimeters and to anything that touches my skin.”

“That’s ...” She was looking at him, an expression he’d never seen from a woman before. “Wow!” she mouthed before turning her head back so she could see more of the landscape.

What had he done? His heart felt as if it would jump through his chest at any second. How would he ever survive

the night?

She'd done many, many thrilling things in her life, but none compared to this. Flying with Clark was the most amazing experience in her life. She suspected it had much more to do with the man than his abilities. Once the initial thrill had subsided, she'd tightened her arms around his neck slightly and asked him about everything she saw. He'd patiently answered every question and pointed out other things she might have missed. The flight had taken them just under an hour. They were slowly descending to the ground and once again, she was nervous.

She couldn't remember ever going home to 'meet the parents' on a first date.

Date? Was this a date?

"Here we are," Clark said as he slowly lowered her feet to the ground. Another thrill ran through her when his hand lingered just a second on the small of her back.

"That was great," she said breathlessly. He smiled at her — God, what a great smile! She fiddled with the small handbag she'd brought along, unable to think of a single thing to say when he was looking at her.

"Ready to go in?"

Lois looked up at the small farmhouse. It was quaint, with soft lights glowing in the windows. A huge porch stretched all the way across the front. There were two rocking chairs on one end, a swing on the other. She could just imagine spending long, lazy summer evenings out there.

"Lois?"

She looked back over at Clark's anxious face. He must think she'd changed her mind about being here because she hadn't answered him. "I'm sorry," she apologized. "I was admiring the house."

Clark chuckled softly. "My great grandfather built it with his own two hands."

"Really?"

"Yep. There have been some updates over the years ... The most recent was a few years ago when I offered to build them a new house. They wouldn't hear of it, so I put on a new roof, siding, new plumbing, wiring ... the whole nine yards."

This man might be Superman — the most powerful man on the planet — but she was pretty sure he was priceless to the occupants of this house. His expression changed when he talked about his parents. She could almost feel the love he had for the couple who'd raised him as their own.

"Why don't we go see all those updates?" she asked when he glanced back over at her. Suddenly she wanted to meet the people responsible for creating such a selfless person.

"Okay," he answered with a smile. He waved his hand for her to go ahead of him and they slowly made their way across the front lawn.

Lois looked around at the little she could see of the farm in the evening dusk. With all Clark could do, it was almost hard to believe he'd grown up here.

"I must warn you. My mom is ..." He trailed off as they climbed the stairs to the porch.

"She's what?" Lois asked him when they were at the door.

"She's outspoken, fiery ..."

Oh, no! She was about to meet the mama from hell. "Mean?" Lois added.

"No! Absolutely not," Clark insisted. "She's one of the most loving women you'll ever meet. She's just ..." He

cocked his head to one side as if trying to find the words to describe his mother. "... a mother all the way to her core."

Lois relaxed a bit. The admiration she saw in Clark's eyes assured her that his mother was not to be feared. And before they could further discuss Martha Kent's attributes, she opened the door.

"Clark!" The older woman pushed open the screen door and her eyes widened slightly in surprise when she saw her son had a guest.

"Mom!" Clark immediately stepped up and kissed her cheek. "This is ..."

"Lois Lane!"

"You know her?" It was Clark's turn to be surprised.

"Of course I know her. My art isn't just a hobby, son." She extended her hand to the younger woman. "I've read every one of your reviews in 'Art in the City'."

Lois smiled and reached to take the offered hand in greeting. "Thank you. I just offer my honest opinion on the up-and-comers."

"Not to mention helping to thrust them into the spotlight."

Her cheeks heated a bit from the praise. "I do what I can."

"That you do." Martha finally released her hand. "Well, I've had a wonderful birthday already!"

"Oh, please. You're too kind, Mrs. Kent."

"Hush with that Mrs. Kent mess. Call me Martha."

Lois glanced at Clark, who shrugged. "Okay. But only if you call me Lois."

"Lois it is," Martha told her, then pushed the door open wider. "Now get in here. Jonathan is dropping the steaks now. I'll tell him to add one more. Clark didn't tell me he was bringing a guest."

Lois stopped just inside the door and flashed a glare at Clark. "I don't want to intrude ..."

"Don't be silly," Martha said as she urged Lois to walk with her. "We don't use words like that in the Kent house. And anyone Clark brings home is more than welcome."

"Even if she crashes your birthday party?"

Martha laughed softly. "Those were always the best parties! Don't you think?"

And in that moment, Lois was lost. She'd never known her own mother very well. Ellen had passed away when Lois was ten. Though her father had been a very loving, wonderful father, he never could replace what Lois had longed for in a mother. A few simple words, a devilish little glint in her eyes — those things told Lois about the kind of person Martha was.

"Yeah," Lois finally agreed with a smile. "They usually were." She and Martha exchanged a silent agreement. She wasn't an intruder in this house — she was ... at home.

Clark lightly touched the small of her back, offering his wordless support. "I'm going to go out and help Dad."

Lois nodded. She would be in good hands.

"Would you like something to drink? Tea, coffee, wine?" Martha held up her own wine glass. "I only drink on special occasions."

"I think wine would be good."

"That's the spirit." Martha turned and poured another glass. "I wasn't aware Clark even knew you. If I had been, I would have insisted a meeting long ago."

"Well, actually we just met this week," Lois told her as she took the offered glass of wine. They were in the dining room. Martha motioned for Lois to sit at the table with her. "He came into the gallery to buy a few pieces for his place."

“Like something that would fit in that box?” Martha pointed to a beautifully wrapped gift on the buffet.

“No comment,” Lois told her with a grin. He must have flown out Martha’s gift earlier that day.

“Clark’s always buying me things. I tell him he doesn’t have to.”

“But he wants to,” Clark said as he entered the room and stepped up behind his mother, placing his hands on her shoulders. “I love you and want you to have everything your heart desires.”

“I know, honey.” Martha patted his hand, then looked back over at Lois. “But all my heart desires is for her boy to be happy.”

Lois’ heart melted as she watched Clark bend over and kiss his mother’s cheek. These two were friends. She was glad he’d had that relationship.

“Is she getting you skunked already?” Clark asked as he stepped over to pour himself a glass of wine.

“Don’t listen to him,” Martha warned. “He’s a wise guy.”

She couldn’t help but laugh as mother and son continued their light hearted banter. Clark settled at the table and he and Martha passed insults back and forth for a couple of minutes. This was definitely not what she’d expected. She wasn’t exactly sure what she’d expected. This woman had raised a super man. Had she thought Martha to be ... strict, unyielding, demanding? She wasn’t sure, but she did know this wasn’t it.

“Lois, can we expect another DaVinci any time soon?” Martha asked when she tired of her game with Clark.

“Ah, well, there’s an opening for a painter next week? Very talented.”

“That’s great.”

“You know, Mom’s an artist,” Clark spoke up.

“I like to dabble, Clark. There’s a difference.”

“I’d love to see some of it,” Lois said. “What you consider dabble might be worth something.”

“No.” Martha waved her off.

“She’s modest.” Clark rose from his chair and left the room. Before either could say a word, he was back. He placed the frame he held on the table in front of Lois. “This isn’t dabble.”

The frame was a shadow box. Inside was a complete miniature kitchen. Each piece was a small cast of some type, intricate in detail. There were even tiny utensils on the table. “This is definitely not dabble,” Lois said in awe. She held the work closer as she studied the pieces. “Is it clay?”

“Yes.”

“And you made all of these pieces?” She looked up at Martha, who simply nodded. “Martha, these are fantastic.”

“I told you,” Clark said proudly.

“Do you have more?” When Clark snorted, she looked up.

“She has tons of them.”

“I don’t have tons.”

“Come on, Mom. You have a lot.”

“I have fifty-three that are finished.”

“And ten million more pieces waiting for a home.”

Again, Clark reached out to squeeze his mother’s shoulder before he took his seat again. “You’d think she had super-speed as fast as she makes those things.”

“I’ve just been making them a long time, honey.”

“I’d love to see more,” Lois told her. She didn’t care how many Martha had, she wanted to see them all.

“After dinner,” Martha answered.

Very modest, Lois decided of the woman across from

her. Martha considered her little treasures a way to pass the time and nothing more. To her, it wasn’t talent. It was just something she did.

“Okay, birthday girl. These steaks are perfect!”

Everyone turned as Jonathan entered the room. He set the platter down on the table.

“Dad, this is Lois,” Clark spoke up as his dad’s eyes landed on the young woman.

“Well ...” He reached out to shake the hand Lois had offered up. “You are a breath of fresh air!”

“Thank you.”

“Ah, boy,” he continued as he glanced over at Clark.

“You have a keen eye.” Reluctantly, he released Lois’ hand. “Dinner in two,” he announced, then left the room again.

Lois watched as both men hurried to get the rest of their dinner on the table.

“The only other day of the year I don’t lift a finger to do a thing,” Martha said as she leaned back in her chair. “I get breakfast in bed, lunch on the porch, and a wonderful supper. They even do the dishes.”

“Now that’s a good birthday,” Lois agreed. They shared a laugh before their dinner was served up.

Clark watched as Lois laughed softly. He loved how her eyes crinkled at the corners, how the light danced on her pupils. Her eyes were her most expressive feature. As they’d shared a wonderful meal and even better conversation with his parents, he’d delighted in the changes in her dark pools. Did she have any idea how incredibly beautiful her eyes were?

The one thing Clark had always been truly grateful for was his parents’ tact when it came to his personal life. They respected his privacy almost to the point of being ridiculous. While the world knew he was Superman, very few were privy to who Clark Kent really was. So, they’d spent the evening discussing current events, local artists, farming, and the motives of a billionaire named Lex Luthor. Much to Clark’s surprise, Lois seemed to be as equally grateful not to have to discuss subjects more personal.

“So, what do you say we open gifts?” Jonathan suggested as he got to his feet to retrieve the three gifts on the buffet.

“Ah, honey, thank you.” Martha exchanged one of those looks with her husband Clark loved to see. He was also incredibly envious of what his parents shared. He would never tell them that — he didn’t have to. His mother knew how badly he longed to find someone to share his life with. He glanced at Lois who smiled and leaned up on the table to watch as the older woman ripped the paper from her first gift.

“How do you buy for a woman who has everything?”

Jonathan asked as he retook his seat. He winked at Lois, eliciting a laugh.

Martha’s first gift was a brand new high-definition DVD player. “This is great!”

“Mom’s a movie buff,” Clark explained. “She’s been wanting one of those for a while. You should see the movie room.”

Lois nodded and watched as the next package revealed a lifetime membership to one of those mail order movie services.

“Compliments of Superman,” Clark told her with a wink.

Martha laughed softly. “I love that boy!” That caused everyone in the room to laugh out loud. When she’d unwrapped the statue Clark had bought, she smiled over at

Lois. "My boy has good taste."

"He certainly does," Lois agreed. "And I have something ..." Lois rummaged through her small handbag and produced an envelope.

"Oh, dear, you didn't have to do that," Martha said.

"There's no way I was coming without a gift."

Martha smiled and took the envelope. Inside was a pair of tickets to the gallery opening in Metropolis the following week. "Lois, this great!"

"I figured that if Clark was buying you art that you might like something like that. And, well, Superman isn't the only one with connections." She winked over at the man she'd just spoken of, unaware that the simple act almost caused him to float out of his chair.

Down, boy! He told himself as he forced his lungs to take in air. This woman was doing a number on his libido.

"I love it. Thank you, Lois."

"You're welcome, Martha."

"Jonathan, honey, would you like to go?"

"I would love a chance to see this pretty little lady again," he answered.

"Clark, will we be able to use the penthouse?"

"Of course, Mom. And I'll fly you out." Clark smiled at Lois. "Thank you for such a generous gift."

"Actually, I'd like to offer Martha a more generous gift." This got everyone's attention. "I'd like to take a few of your shadow boxes to show some people. And I'd love to display them in my gallery."

"Don't be silly. Nobody wants to see those things." Martha waved her hand dismissively, then took a drink of her wine.

"Miniatures are very popular. I think they would be a hit."

Clark looked over at the woman across from him. She was essentially a promoter. She would know if his mother's art would be popular or not, but promoters made a living on the works of others. Was that Lois' intention? To capitalize on his mother's talents? He studied her for a moment, then quickly dismissed that idea. Lois was not that kind of woman. Yes, she was a stranger, but there was something about her he recognized. She wouldn't do anything to take advantage of his mother.

"What would it hurt to let her show a few, Mom?"

Martha's smile faded and she looked at her son. "Do you really think it's okay?"

He reached over and squeezed her hand. "I do." He smiled softly.

"Okay," she told Lois.

"Great!"

"My wife, the artist! Who knows, honey? We might be able to retire soon."

"Oh, Jonathan!"

Clark gave Lois a grateful look, one she seemed to readily understand. "Now, I have one more gift."

"Oh, Clark, tell me you didn't," his mother begged.

"This one you'll like." He pulled a set of keys from his pocket. "These fit a brand new luxury motorcoach."

"Ah, son!" This time it was Jonathan who spoke up in a very excited voice.

"You'll leave the Friday before Labor Day. You can stay gone as long as you want to."

"What about the farm?" his mother asked.

"Hired Wayne's boy to tend to the farm. He's a senior this year and he needs every penny for college."

"But, Clark, we're not retired yet," his father added.

"Ah, come on, Dad. Why wait on tomorrow if you can

do it today? Haven't we learned from my experiences not to waste a moment?" He reached over to grasp his mother's hand. "The coach is stocked, gassed, and ready to go. There's a folder in the desk drawer with tickets to all those places you've talked about seeing. A brand new digital camera with a memory card big enough to store tons of pictures. And there's always a photo lab around the corner so you can email them home. I've opened an account so that you can have what you need for as long as you need it. All you have to do is pack and hit the road."

By now Martha's eyes had swelled with tears. "But ..."

"But what? The dolly's hooked up so you can pull the sedan. Go, Mom." He looked over at Lois. "Tell her, Lois. They've always talked about traveling around the country, seeing all the wonders out there. I can see them any time I want. Hell, I can take them anywhere they want to go. But to just lumber around the country, stopping when and where they want ... The people they'll meet, the time they'll spend together ..."

"Clark's right, Martha." Lois reached over and rubbed the older woman's arm. "You'll make memories you couldn't anywhere else or any other way."

"See? You can spend the week in the city with me, get all dressed up for that opening next week, then hit the road."

Martha smiled widely, then leaned forward to kiss Clark's forehead. "Thank you, son."

"You're welcome." He pulled away from his mom and tossed his dad the keys to the coach.

"Hot dog!" Jonathan was clearly not as reluctant to turn down such a generous offer.

"The coach is at Wayne's. Beth helped me stock it."

"Well, I say let's cut the cake!" Jonathan spoke up.

Clark quickly agreed, then his eyes fell on his guest. She looked at him with more admiration than he'd ever seen on anyone's face. His smile faded from the intensity of the moment. This woman looked at him like a man instead of an object. She appeared much more interested in who he was instead of what he could do. That was something new to the superhero. He was used to being viewed as larger than life, too untouchable for association with mere mortals. Most people didn't even stoop to pretenses, simply fawning over his super side. But this woman really didn't seem all that impressed with the son of Krypton. She did, however, seem very impressed with the son of Kent.

Lois was the one to break the tension, excusing herself to go to the restroom. Clark's eyes met those of his knowing mother, but she didn't say a word. She just smiled. Did this woman know everything?

The cool night air helped to calm her nerves. There was no denying the electricity jumping between her and Clark tonight. Then she'd had to endure the closeness of his body on the flight back to Metropolis. He must have felt arcs too, because he was the one to suggest landing in Centennial Park and walking the two blocks west to Market Row.

"Guess it's convenient working and living in the same neighborhood," Clark remarked as he and Lois walked along in the shadows. She'd told him earlier she lived on the same block as the gallery.

"It is," she answered. "Especially when I'm having a bad morning."

"I don't think I could have a bad morning waking up to the energy on Market Row." He stopped a second, tilting his head to the side in thought. "Then again, it's hard to *not* have a bad morning when you wake up to your personal

business all over the news.”

Lois smiled at him sympathetically. “I’ll bet that really is hard.” They started walking again.

“Sometimes,” Clark relented. “My mom helped me realize that I do so much to help that it’s a small price to pay. Of all the things I can do, nothing compares with pulling a small life back from the brink of death.”

She looked over at him, the truth of his words written on his face. “That probably makes you feel more ... alive than anything could.”

“Exactly.”

They walked on in silence for a moment before Lois asked, “Are you sure it’s okay that we’re out like this?” She glanced around them. Market Row was never truly empty. Granted, at midnight there was no where near as many people as it was during the day. But there was still the potential for someone to recognize him.

“I think it’ll be okay. Unless you’d rather not be seen with me?”

And it was a question he needed to know. He was asking just how she viewed the possibility of being photographed with Superman. “Oh, I don’t mind being seen with such a wonderful son,” she gushed breathlessly. She’d been extremely impressed with Clark tonight and his interaction with his parents. Those people had made that boy feel loved growing up and it showed. He made them feel very loved now.

Clark chuckled softly. “I can never repay them for all they’ve done for me.”

“Do you think they want payment?”

He looked up at her, slight annoyance on his face. “I, well, of course they don’t want payment.” He seemed to concede defeat and hang his head. “Point taken.”

“Oh, Clark, I didn’t mean anything by it. I think it’s wonderful that you buy them all the things they need. And sending them on a trip they’ve talked about all of their lives ... that was priceless. I think you gave them more by bringing a guest for dinner.” His head snapped back around so he could see her. “They want you to be happy. And people who are alone are not usually happy.” She’d hit a nerve because he looked away. She’d only spent a few hours with this man, but she’d felt his loneliness more than once.

“So this is me,” she said as she waved at the stairs leading up to her building.

Clark glanced at the building before shifting his eyes back to hers. “Thank you for coming tonight.”

“I enjoyed it. Your parents are great.”

“I need to ...” He made a flying gesture with his hand.

“You didn’t leave tonight. No major emergencies?” She’d wondered about that all night. How did he decide when and where to help?

“I decided a long time ago unless there was a major catastrophe that I wouldn’t leave when I visited my parents. Of course, there’s always something major happening somewhere in the world. I’ve learned my limits, too.”

“I guess it would be hard to answer every call.”

“I tried that for a while. Even a super man can’t do it all.”

“Absolutely.” She offered him understanding in a mere expression, one he readily accepted. “Thanks for a wonderful evening.”

“Would you like to go out again? Saturday maybe?”

“I’d love to, but Saturday’s bad.”

“Sure.”

His expression told her he thought she was blowing him

off. “I just have this thing — a cookout with friends up at Lake Troy. We go up every year the weekend before Labor Day. A group of us met up there years ago when our parents all bought lake houses. We got separated after high school, then life took over.” She stopped when he smiled at her. “Anyway, we meet now every year on the weekend before Labor Day to catch up.”

He nodded in understanding, but he didn’t really understand. This man had been mistreated because of his differences, turned down too many times because others thought him to be too much trouble — thought there was too much involved with being his acquaintance.

It must have been awful where women were concerned. They probably fawned over him because he was Superman. She could just imagine dozens of sleazy women falling all over themselves to go out with him. In fact, she’d seen as much on television. There was something on nearly every day about this woman or that woman claiming to be Superman’s girlfriend or the mother of his love child. And not one of those reports ever showed a woman fawning over Clark Kent.

“Why don’t you come with me?” WHAT?! Had she lost her mind? She was going away for the weekend. The *entire* weekend. She was going to be staying in a small house with an open floor plan. Sure, it had two bedrooms, but to have Clark in the next room would not be a wise thing at all.

“What?” His eyes were full of every question Lois knew they would be.

“Why not? The house has two bedrooms. It’s right on the lake, literally. The outside walls are glass.” She was insane! The last time she spent the night with a man was when she made the biggest mistake of her life. While she had no intentions of taking Clark along as her ... as that, she knew all too well what could happen when people were together in close proximity, especially when one of them was as gorgeous as Clark. “Unless you’d rather not be seen with me?” she repeated what he’d asked earlier.

Clark grinned. “Oh, I don’t mind being seen with such a wonderful lady.” They shared a smile, then something changed in Clark’s eyes. He lifted his hand to tuck the wisp of hair on her face behind her ear.

Lois involuntarily gasped at the look in his eyes. Then she did something she would normally never do. She stepped toward Clark, reached up to grasp the back of his head, then pulled him down for a long, slow kiss. She drew back to gauge his reaction, seeing only pleasant surprise in his expression. Her thumb smoothed over his lips to remove the lipstick left behind.

“Friday afternoon at six. I’ll pick you up this time.” She pressed another kiss to his lips and before he could say a word, she turned and hurried up the steps. Once inside the elevator she finally let out the breath she’d been holding. “Wow!” Tonight had been one of the most wonderful nights of her life. She couldn’t remember spending time with such a great man. And that had nothing to do with his powers. So why had she gone and done something that might ruin whatever it was that was developing between them?

What did he do now? Lois had made a date with him, for the whole weekend. He couldn’t go away with her. He couldn’t go away with anyone. If that got out ...

Clark kicked the sidewalk lightly with the toe of his shoe before setting off toward home. But how did he tell her no? In the short time he’d spent with her tonight, he’d fallen into a dangerous abyss that he didn’t want to climb out of. She was exhilarating. She could talk for three

minutes without taking a breath. She knew more about politics than the President. She was a writer of sorts, an artist, a promoter. She was full of energy, passionate about her art. She was confident, self-assured. She was everything he could have asked for in a woman.

He just couldn't be what she needed. He came with the heaviest baggage imaginable. His life was an open book. He snatched snippets of privacy only because of his ability to fly away from everybody chasing him. Superman was almost vital to his existence. Being able to help the way he could seemed to give his powers meaning. Clark Kent was vital to his sanity. He'd grown up as a farmer's son from Kansas. He'd had friends; he'd gone to school; he'd learned how to make his way in the world. He *needed* to be a man, just as the next guy. To have a meaningful relationship with anyone would be a gift. To share a life with a woman would be miraculous. He just couldn't be what a woman needed a man to be.

So why was he considering going on this trip?

Simple. Because Lois Lane made him feel more like a man in a few short hours than he had in his entire life. His mind quickly justified the notion by reminding him that she was the one who had invited him. Yeah, okay, so he'd taken her home to meet his parents. It was just one night, in the company of other people. This would be an entire weekend, some of the time spent alone, in private. He'd never shared space with a woman — his mother didn't count. He didn't expect anything more than a companionable few days with a really terrific lady. He also wasn't naive enough to believe something *couldn't* happen. He was a man, she was a woman. A very attractive woman. And he was definitely interested. While he'd been raised to be a gentleman, there was only so much even a super man could withstand. He was almost positive his resolve couldn't stand up to Lois Lane for two long days.

The tingle on his lips reminded him of the thrill he'd felt when she'd pulled him into that sweet, torturous kiss. Her soft, pliant skin against his made him feel completely alive for the first time in ages. The way she'd wiped the lipstick from his mouth — he was sure he'd died and gone to heaven in that moment. He'd had no idea a simple gesture could have such an awe-inspiring effect on a man. The second kiss had almost caused him to soar into the stratosphere.

And that was why he was even entertaining the thought of going away with her.

He was in *so* much trouble!

I must be out of my mind, Lois thought as she made her way down the alley toward Clark's place. He hadn't actually said this was where he'd be, but she was pretty sure he actually lived here while his penthouse downtown was for public consumption.

What am I doing taking a man away for the weekend? she asked herself again for the hundredth time. Granted, they were going as friends. And other than the kiss in his apartment — on the second day she'd ever met him — Clark had been a perfect gentleman. She'd had all the arguments with herself; she knew what could happen. Yet here she was, knocking on his door.

"Hi," he answered when he opened the door.

"Hi." Why did he have to look so darn good? He was back in blue jeans and a tee shirt that showed off his attributes. And he was wearing flip flops! How was it possible for him to look so good? "Ready to go?"

"Are you sure about this?"

"Just grab your bag," she told him with more gumption than she knew she possessed. He was packed; she could see his bag sitting on the top of the landing. She turned and started down the steps. When he didn't immediately follow, she glanced over her shoulder. "What's-a-matter, Superman? Can't keep up with me?" And she flashed him a devilish grin.

He stared at her wide-eyed for a moment before he snatched up his bag, pulled his door closed, and sped after her. He was waiting in the car when she made it to the curb. It was her turn to stare at him with a slack jaw. He shrugged at her, a sly grin of his own playing on his mouth.

"Show-off!" she mumbled as she climbed behind the wheel. "How did you know this was my car?"

"The vanity plates kind of gave you away."

"Oh," she mouthed silently as she started the engine. "I know you're probably used to getting around pretty quickly ..."

"Actually, I have a car," he interrupted her.

"Really?" she asked as she glanced at him.

"Well, yeah. I like cars. I have ten of them."

"Ten?" When he nodded, she whistled. "Wow!" They drove in silence for a few moments, Clark looking less than comfortable as Lois weaved in and out of traffic. She was a city girl. She had always lived in big cities, and she drove just like the other crazy drivers clogging the city streets. It was only when they were settled in the hammer lane on the interstate that she spoke again. "This trip takes about two hours. Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. Although ..."

"I know. I know. You could have us there in two minutes." He simply grinned, causing her to chuckle. "I kind of thought you might like something with a slower pace for a change." He gave her that look — the one that told her he was grateful she understood a little about him, about his life. "What kinds of cars do you have?"

"A '51 Studebaker, '66 Vette, '68 Mustang, T-bird, Model T Ford, Coupe de Ville, Ram, Navigator, Escalade, and a Jeep Cherokee." He said the last with a waggle of his brows.

"Guess I know who to call if mine breaks down," Lois said with a laugh.

"I'm your man!"

Well ...

Don't even go there, Lane! Focus! She needed to focus on the road or they'd be in the ditch. She glanced at him. He looked so good sitting there, in her car.

Way to focus, Lois!

"Where do you keep all those cars?" she asked to steer her mind back to less dangerous territory.

"The garage at the penthouse. I own the building."

Ahh ... She kept forgetting he was rich. She'd only been privy to the farm boy side of him, other than when he bought the art at her gallery. And that side certainly didn't flaunt his money.

"Will Superman be able to relax this weekend?"

Clark looked over at her. "Unless something huge happens, he's got the next two days off. I could use a break."

"We all need breaks." Lois relaxed a bit in her seat. It would be a while before they reached their exit. "So, do you like to swim? Boat? Ski?"

"Yes, yes, and yes. Will we do all of that this weekend?"

"Absolutely. We'll eat at Deb's tonight. Tomorrow we'll go out on the boats — ski, tube, swim. There will be a lot of

food, way too much beer, loud music ... You know, a great time. Tomorrow night, we'll cook. Sunday morning will be Scott's turn. We usually do something in town in the afternoon, then we all head out Sunday evening."

"Deb? Scott?"

"Deb was my best friend in high school, once we moved to Metropolis. She married Dave, who was also in our graduating class. We met Scott up at the lake. He and his family came up every year like the rest of us city slickers. He's single and gay, so he'll probably hit on you." At Clark's raised eyebrows, she giggled. "Relax. He's the best bud around. Deb and Dave have a ten year old son, Mike. He'll be there. Then there's Trish. She's Scott's sister. My sister might make an appearance."

"You mentioned you were a big sister."

"Yep. Her name's Lucy. She's six years younger than me. She's also my roommate, works for me, and is a wild child."

"It must have been great having a sibling," Clark said, an expression of longing on his face. "My folks couldn't have children. That's why they so readily accepted me."

"I think they would have readily accepted you if they'd had a dozen children," Lois told him as thoughts of the wonderful people she'd met earlier in the week invaded her mind.

Clark gazed out of the window for a moment before he smiled. "I think you're right."

She nodded at him before they settled back into companionable silence. After a while, Lois said, "My mother died when I was ten."

Clark's head snapped around to hers, his eyes full of sympathy. "I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago. I had a wonderful father."

"Still, it must have been hard growing up without a mother."

"I guess there are things I missed out on, but ..." She shrugged. She gulped when Clark reached over and rubbed her shoulder.

"So, how will your friends feel about an outsider joining the party?"

"I think you'll be pleasantly surprised." Her friends were some of the most grounded people she knew. They were fiercely loyal and knew how to keep a secret. They protected their friends at all costs and would come any time night or day if she needed them. Deb and Dave had once dropped everything on their schedules to come to her side after she'd had an emergency appendectomy. Scott had talked with her all night when she'd had her heart broken by her first love. Dozens of times over the years, her friends had proven themselves to be priceless. And she was more than certain they'd treat Clark just like one of the gang.

Clark certainly hoped he'd be surprised. It was his experience that once the initial shock wore off from meeting him, people tended to act like they'd lost their minds around him. They tried to be slick about an association with him, but all too often the celebrity caused them to fold. Or they buckled under the pressure of being hounded by the media. Superman was huge news and anyone remotely connected to him was, too. Sure, they'd be spending the weekend on the lake, away from prying eyes. Still, most people could embarrass themselves quite well around him. He certainly hoped for something different ... for once.

He was definitely experiencing something different with Lois so far. She was presenting herself as someone

who could become a friend. She didn't seem particularly impressed by his celebrity — she hadn't mentioned that other than in passing. She listened to him when he talked, acting as if she really cared about his opinion. It was a refreshing change from the people who usually fawned all over him.

She was also beginning to open up to him. She'd told him a couple of personal details about her life. What did that mean as far as their relationship was concerned?

Relationship? Is that what they had? At the very least they were building a friendship. Or he hoped they were. And didn't friendship involve a certain amount of trust?

"The place on Clinton ..."

"You live there," she said, as if it were obvious.

"I wanted a place no one knew about. The penthouse is my official ..." and he gestured with his fingers as he said this ... "residence."

"How did you manage to get it without anyone finding out?"

"I have a friend." Probably his only friend in the world. "Jimmy Olsen."

"Olsen? As in award-winning photojournalist for the Daily Planet?"

"That's the one. I've known him since we were kids."

"He grew up in Smallville?"

"He did. His dad's the town doctor." Clark smiled as he thought about his friend — his one and only true friend.

"Did he know about you before the world did?"

"Yes. We became blood brothers when we were ten. I told him about all the crazy things starting to happen to me."

Lois looked puzzled. "Starting?"

"My powers didn't start developing until I was about eight. You could say I came into my own." She laughed at that. "I didn't fly until I was eighteen."

"And Jimmy was there through it all?"

"Every burnt hole, crushed tree limb, and record breaking trip around the grove. He was the first person to fly with me."

"So how did he manage to rent a place for you and no one find out about it?"

"Jimmy is also a computer whiz. He can get information from a dead man. When it came to my place, I didn't ask and he didn't say."

Lois laughed softly at his expression. "He sounds like a great guy."

"He's the only true friend I have in this world ... besides my parents." Jimmy was more than his friend, he was his brother. They'd been through so much together. It wasn't until they were teenagers that they learned Jimmy's parents already knew about Clark. Frank Olsen was the doctor who signed off on Clark's birth certificate. The long time doctor was the only reason Clark was considered a legal citizen of this country. He'd also come under extreme scrutiny when Clark's true identity came out. Never once did Frank waver under the pressure. In the end, Clark kept his citizenship and Frank Olsen became one of the most highly respected men in the world. He would always be grateful to that man. And the superhero never failed to show him his appreciation.

Clark was pulled from his reverie when Lois reached out to squeeze the hand resting on his left knee. "Maybe after this weekend you'll have some more," she told him with a smile.

"Is that what you want to be, Lois? My friend?" Clark had shifted in his seat so that he faced her a little more. He

knew it was unfair to ask at this juncture of their relationship, but he wanted to know — *needed* to know.

Lois looked over at him as if he had two heads. “Of course I do!”

“Do you have any idea what that means? To be friends with me? Sneaking around so we won’t be seen? Hiding in the shadows, meeting in out of the way places? Or worse, you’re outted! You’d be hounded by photogs, with your picture plastered on the front of every tabloid in the world. Hell, I have two houses. The press camps outside one ... all the time! They leave my parents alone now because the sheriff is a friend of ours, but there’s always one or two bottom feeders in Smallville trying to find out something new about the ‘alien freak’.” Again, he emphasized his point with his fingers. “I get so tired of it all! I eat the same things everybody else does. I drink, I sleep, I pass gas, and read in the bathroom! I have body odor, have to clip my nails, brush my teeth, and cut my hair. I shave, I sweat, and I work like any other man!” The expression on Lois’ face caused him to stop. She’d parked the vehicle on the shoulder and had turned in her seat to face him.

“Clark, I know you’re just a man. That’s why you’re here with me. I also understand the celebrity behind the man. No, I haven’t experienced what it’s like to be associated with that kind of life, but frankly, I couldn’t care less. I’m more concerned with you and your feelings. Right now, nobody knows you’re here or where you’re going. So, why don’t you sit back, relax, and enjoy the next couple of days? The lake house doesn’t have a phone, my cell doesn’t get reception, and the neighbors are all friends. I’m almost certain we won’t have to deal with prying eyes. We can deal with everything else later.”

Clark felt himself relax as her expression softened. He lifted his hand and brushed his fingertips across her cheek. “I have never met anyone quite like you,” he told her seriously.

“And you never will.” She grinned at him, then leaned closer to place a soft kiss on his lips. “We need to go,” she told him when she pulled back.

He relented with a grin of his own. “Okay.” She took a long lingering look at him before she turned around and put the car back in gear. “Is this our exit?” he asked when he realized she had continued down the ramp.

“Yes sir. It’s all back roads from here. And some of the prettiest country you’ll ever see.”

He didn’t doubt that. They were just now turning off the interstate and he’d already seen the most gorgeous country since Kansas. He’d seen the most beautiful places this country had to offer, but he was certain none was as pretty as what was before him at that instant.

And it had nothing to do with geography. The woman beside him made this place the most wonderful anywhere. She might have meant every word she said, but she had no idea what life was like when one was associated with Clark ‘Superman’ Kent. She was also right when she said no one knew where he was, which meant he *could* relax and enjoy himself for once. And that’s just what he intended to do.

Lois pulled the jeep to a stop on the gravel drive outside the house where she’d spent many summers. The outside walls were glass and you could only reach the structure by crossing a long dock. Lois hadn’t been kidding. It was literally ‘on’ the water.

“Wow! This is great!” Clark commented as he took in his surroundings. The house was completely surrounded by a huge dock. Lights surrounding the structure were

beginning to flicker to life, casting a warm glow over the entire place. The lake beyond stretched for miles. Nearby he could see the glow of lights on another dock.

“That’s Deb’s place over there,” Lois pointed to where he’d just looked. “We’ll take our bags in and head on over.”

Clark grabbed his bag and reached out for Lois’. She smiled and relinquished control to him as they continued down the dock. Lois unlocked the door and Clark stepped into a gorgeous retreat. They entered the living room, which stretched all the way across the house. The kitchen was off to the right. The bedrooms flanked the sides of the living area, each with its own bathroom. There was an exit to the dock from the living room and from each bedroom. On the back, overlooking the water, was a built-in grill. There was a table and chairs, a swing, and an exit out onto another dock where a boat was anchored awaiting someone to take her out.

“What do you think?” Lois asked him when they closed the door.

“Nice.”

“You can take the bedroom off the kitchen.” She reached out to take her bag from him.

“Sounds great.” Both bedrooms were exactly the same. He’d already seen that with the help of his super eyes. He set off in the direction of his assigned room, bag in hand. It only took him a couple of minutes to put away his clothes. The setting sun lured him out onto the deck. Lois found him on the lower dock looking out over the water.

“Hey.”

He glanced back, reminding himself to breathe as he did. Lois had changed into a pair of shorts and a snug tee shirt — one that left little to the imagination. She also sported a pair of sandals, which gave Clark his first look at her beautiful feet. “Hey, yourself.”

Lois walked up to his side, leaning on the railing beside him. “Great view, huh?”

“Fantastic view.” It took her a second before she realized he hadn’t meant the view of the lake. He was looking at her. He hesitated only a second before he closed the distance between them and kissed her softly. “Sorry,” he apologized as he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I’m not,” she told him, then pressed her lips to his again. The smirk on his face was undeniable when she pulled away. “Come on.” He let her take his hand and lead him over to the boat. “It’s quicker on the water,” she explained as she climbed on board.

Clark released the ropes anchoring the boat to the dock and stepped down onto the deck as Lois started the engine. She slowly maneuvered them toward the brightly lit dock he’d noticed when they’d arrived. It must have been great to spend summers in such a wonderful place.

And to have friends like the ones that Lois had found here ...

“That’s Scott’s place,” Lois told him as she pointed out a place across the narrow stretch that made up the cove they were in. There was a small house tucked under the trees, as brightly lit as the other two houses.

Soon enough they were easing up next to a dock down from the house Lois said belonged to Deb and Dave. “Last name?” he asked quickly.

“What?”

“Their last name?” he asked again as he hopped out onto the dock and tied up the lines of their boat.

“Tyler.” She reached out for him to help her up. “Scott’s last name is Harding. What does that matter?”

“I don’t know. I just like to know a person’s name.” She

gave him a bright smile before she hurried across the deck toward a squealing woman.

“Loooiisss!!!” Deb grabbed Lois and the two women jumped up and down for a second before drawing back to look at one another. “Gorgeous- as usual!” Her eyes darted past Lois to give Clark a quick once over. “You sly dog, you!”

Lois reached out to Clark, who had slowly made his way up to them. “Deb, this is Clark.”

Deb’s eyes seemed to finally register who their guest was. Her brows climbed toward her hair as she glanced from Lois to Clark. Then this woman did something Clark had never expected. She stepped forward and hugged him. “Welcome!”

Clark was too stunned to speak at first, gazing at Deb like she’d lost her mind when she pulled away. “Thank you,” he managed after a second.

The vibrant red-head seemed to look into his very soul as they stood in the fading sun. “A friend of Lois is a friend of ours.”

Releasing the breath he wasn’t aware he’d been holding, Clark smiled.

“So, Lois,” Deb said as she grabbed her friend’s arm and began the journey toward her house. “I hear Kevin James is the hottest ticket in town.” She stopped, turned to see Clark a step behind them, then reached to grab his arm with her free hand before she started them walking again.

“Kevin is getting his big break next week,” Lois told her as she glanced at Clark.

Clark just went along with them, thrilled for Deb to feel so comfortable around him. He listened as they talked about Lois’ newest sensation, Dave’s newest script, and Mike’s upcoming classes. They’d made it all the way up to the beautiful patio off the back of the house before Deb released his arm and took his hand.

“Dave?” She waited for her husband to turn from the grill. His sharp intake of breath told Clark he immediately recognized him. “This is Clark, Lois’ friend.”

Dave’s expression instantly changed from one of surprise to one of delight. “Nice to meet you, Clark!”

“Nice to meet you, Dave,” Clark told him as he took his hand.

“How ‘bout a beer?”

Clark grinned widely at Dave. “That would be great!”

Dave exchanged a look with his wife, then motioned for Clark to join him at the grill. Deb drifted back over to Lois and before long, two separate conversations were going on.

Lois watched him from across the patio. He’d been shocked at her friends’ reaction to his presence. And they’d reacted exactly like she’d hoped they would. They’d readily accepted him into their circle as if he was just an ordinary guy. Mike would probably gush over him. Scott would definitely make a big deal out of him being here. But they’d get over it and treat him just like anybody else.

Before she could ponder long, Scott came barreling up the hill. “Don’t tell me you’re getting this party started without me!”

“We wouldn’t dream of it,” Deb told him.

“You won’t believe the day I’ve had,” Scott continued as he reached into the cooler and pulled out a beer. He barely glanced at the others as he talked. “Some idiot came in insisting I rewrite his entire portfolio.” He threw back his beer for a slug and Lois knew the instant he recognized Clark. Scott spit his beer out in a rush. “Holy hell! Clark Kent!” Clark’s brows rose nearly out of sight. The man’s

eyes frantically searched the others, as if they held all the answers. “Why didn’t somebody tell me Clark Kent was going to be here? I would have gotten a hair cut.”

Everyone was silent for a second before they erupted in laughter. Lois watched the amazement on Clark’s face. He was surprised Scott had called him by his name, instead of Superman.

“Well I would,” Scott mumbled as he smoothed his hand over his short, stylish cut. He shrugged then stepped over to offer Clark his hand. “Scott Harding, and I’m a huge fan. I’ve read every book ... twice.”

“Thank you,” Clark replied as he shook the younger man’s hand.

Scott studied him for a moment. “Thought I’d call you by your other name?” he asked Clark knowingly.

“Well ...” Clark’s eyes roamed over the others before focusing on Scott again. “Most people ...”

“I’m *not* most people,” Scott insisted.

Lois made her way over to Clark, placing her hand on his back. “Told you that you’d be surprised,” she whispered. He grinned down at her, a mixture of relief and awe written all over his face.

“Lois, girlfriend, please don’t tell me this gorgeous creature is with you.” Scott said as he watched the exchange between her and Clark.

“Okay, Scott,” she said as she grinned at him. “I won’t!”

“Ah, damn!”

Everyone laughed out loud again and even Clark didn’t seem offended. They all looked up when they heard talking out on the deck. Trish and Mike were making their way up to the others, laughing about some story one or the other had told. They all waited with bated breath as Trish noticed Lois.

“Lois!” She ran over and smothered the other woman in a hug. “Girl, you look great!”

“You, too!” Lois answered.

Mike, however, had noticed their other guest. He was just standing there, staring at Clark.

“Hi,” Clark offered when the little guy’s scrutiny became too much.

“Thank you,” the boy told him.

“What?”

“You saved a classmate of mine from dying in a fire in Suicide Slum last spring. Not many people like Tasha ‘cause she’s poor. I like her ‘cause she’s smart and funny. And thanks to you, the world will get to know her one day when she’s a doctor.”

Clark blinked, clearly shaken by the boy’s words. He stepped forward and knelt to be eye level with Mike. “She was the girl who had burns on her legs?”

“Yes, sir. But she recovered. Mom took me to visit her a lot this summer. She’ll be back at school ‘cause I helped her with her work.”

“I’m glad she’s doing well.”

“I know I don’t know you and I shouldn’t ask, but do you think maybe you could go see her some time?”

“Mike!” his mother admonished. She moved over to grasp his shoulders. “Sorry about that,” she apologized to Clark.

“Don’t be,” he replied. “Mike, I’d be happy to visit Tasha. I’ll make a point to see her as soon as I get back to the city.”

The small boy’s mouth spread into the widest smile he could muster. “Thanks, Superman.” He stepped over to offer up his hand in greeting. “And I do know your real

name is Clark. I've read your books."

"Really?" Clark wanted to know as he shook the boy's hand.

"Yeah. I love to read." He shrugged.

Clark laughed softly, then rose back to his feet. Lois watched as he started to talk once again with the others. He felt comfortable with her friends and she was glad he did. Trish grabbed her arm, forcing her to look at her.

"Clark Kent?" she whispered. "Clark *Superman* Kent?"

Lois pulled her off to the side where she hoped Clark couldn't hear. What was she saying? He could hear them talk all the way across the lake. "He's just plain ole Clark Kent, Trish. He's a great guy, so don't give him a hard time, okay?"

"He's with you?"

Taking a look back at the man across the patio, Lois smiled smugly. "Yeah. He came with me."

Trish leaned over on Lois, sighing dreamily. "You lucky dog!" She and Lois looked at one another, then burst out laughing.

The next three hours sailed by. Clark fit into the group as if he'd been part of it as long as any of them had. They had almost as much tact as Clark's mother, refraining from asking him personal questions. They talked mostly about their group, which meant Lois was embarrassed to no end because they knew far too much about her. She watched as Clark's eyes crinkled in laughter — full, deep laughter that made him irresistible. This was definitely a side of him she'd never seen on television.

He'd apparently developed a friendship with Mike. Many times during the night she noticed the two of them sharing a private conversation. The boy had surprised her by not going crazy over the superhero. And everyone had surprised Clark. They'd welcomed him into their inner circle without batting an eye. Even Scott, who'd flirted shamelessly, treated Clark like a friend. By the time the party broke for the night, her guest was almost as relaxed as he'd been with his own parents.

Clark couldn't remember having a better time in the company of others his own age. Each and every one had seen him as a man and not some thing. He'd felt wonderful. They'd shared a delicious meal, great conversation, and probably too many beers. At least for Scott anyway.

"So, I hope Scott wasn't too much," Lois commented as they made their way down the dock toward their boat.

"He was ... different." Clark held out his hand to help Lois down into the boat. He wasn't sure how much she'd had to drink.

"Tomorrow he'll have accepted that you're straight. That won't stop him from making passes. He does that to Dave."

"I noticed." Clark released their lines and joined Lois in the boat. He liked Scott, passes and all. "Should I drive?"

Lois smirked at him. "I only had two beers, thank you."

"Hey, I didn't mean anything by it. I just thought ..." He stopped when she reached for his hand.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're wound too tight?"

"I am not wound too tight," he defended himself. And to prove his point, he leaned back in the seat and stretched out his legs. Lois chuckled as she set them on a course across the lake. Clark dropped his head back and looked up at the stars. He'd seen them up close and personal, but the sight of so many never ceased to impress him.

And Lois had been right; he'd been very surprised by

everyone's reaction to him. They were all great. None of them asked personal questions he really didn't want to answer. Even Mike seemed to respect his privacy.

"I'm sure you've seen them a little closer, but it is something, isn't it?"

Clark turned to see Lois point toward the sky. "How would you like to see them up close?" he asked her.

"What?"

"Let me take you closer." He jumped out and tied off the boat as soon as they reached the dock. He took her hand and when she was standing in front of him, he gripped her sides. He could see the excitement in her dark eyes as he lifted them into the air slowly. "I don't think we have to worry about being seen tonight," he said softly. Lois had immediately rested her hands on his chest when he'd grabbed her, but as she glanced down at the lake, she slid her arms up around his neck. Clark felt as if he'd died and gone to heaven. By wrapping her arms around his neck, she'd brought their bodies closer together. The heat coming from her was causing him to feel lightheaded.

"How high is too high?"

He realized that they'd almost flown farther than they should. He'd been too intent on the woman in his arms to keep track of their progress. "Sorry," he mumbled as he began to float.

"This is ... WOW!" Lois remarked with absolute wonder written all over her face, her eyes frantically sweeping the wide expanse around them.

Wow was right, Clark thought but his eyes hadn't moved from the woman in his arms. To be able to share this with her was incredible.

"Which one do you think is the one you're from?"

Clark's brows furrowed at her question. "Star," Lois explained. "Which star do you think is yours?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "None of them. Mine blew up."

Lois looked horrified. "What?"

"Krypton, where I'm from, blew up." He shifted his hands, looping them behind Lois' back, bringing them even closer together. If she didn't approve, she'd tell him. When her arms seemed to tighten more around his neck, he sighed inwardly. "There was an informational orb on my ship. A couple of years ago, it began to glow. There was this hologram of my birth father. He explained that I was sent away because the internal core of the planet was overheating."

"Couldn't he save himself?"

"Apparently there wasn't time. He searched the galaxies until he found a planet that was biologically compatible with Krypton."

"Earth," Lois said in awe. "So, your father was a scientist?"

"I assume so."

"And your mother?"

"She was with him, worked at his side."

"Oh, Clark, I had no idea."

"Yeah, well, I thought that was something the world didn't need to know." And the world didn't. The public statement he'd made didn't give any details of his true identity, only that he was from Krypton. That was until he was outed. The world knew then that he'd been raised on Earth. His revised statement was simply that he didn't know how or why he'd ended up on Earth, but that he was here and he intended to help.

"And you trusted me to know?" she whispered as she gazed into his eyes. Before he could answer, she pressed

her lips to his.

Clark's entire existence shifted. Lois kissed him once, twice, three times. She licked his lips, causing him to lose altitude.

"Sorry," he apologized when he balanced them out again.

She giggled. "Guess you don't get a lot of practice flying and kissing at the same time."

"Ah, no." And he chuckled softly as he pulled Lois into a hug. "Damn, girl, you've taken me completely by surprise."

She sighed and rested her cheek against his chest. "Good surprise?"

Clark smoothed the hair on the side of her head, his cheek pressed against her crown. "Definitely a good one." He smiled when she sighed again. He was content to hold her all night and apparently she agreed.

She was in *so* much trouble. The flutterings she'd been feeling when she was around Clark had morphed into something much more substantial. Lois squeezed the hand she held as they made their way toward the house. They'd floated for a while, held each other close, and shared another soft kiss before Clark brought them back down to Earth. Although, she wasn't sure if she'd touched the ground yet.

"I'm glad I came," Clark spoke up when they reached the house.

"Me, too." Lois smiled at him, then opened the door.

"I'm gonna say good-night," he told her as he pulled on her hand, bringing her up against his chest. He kissed the tip of her nose, eliciting a giggle.

"That's probably a good idea," Lois managed around her laughter because Clark was tickling her.

"Yeah," he agreed as he lifted her hands to kiss them. "Night." He shoved her gently toward her room.

She laughed again, watching while he backed across the kitchen. When he closed himself off from her view, she sighed again. Tonight had been simply magnificent. The wonder of seeing the stars so close paled in comparison to being held in that man's arms. She'd felt so good wrapped in that cocoon of strength, pressed against his heart. He'd smelt so good. And he'd tasted even better. She'd wanted a deeper, more intense taste, but she'd taken him by surprise. His reaction was adorable.

He was adorable!

She managed to get inside her room and find her night clothes without swooning. God was she in trouble!

The silly smile stayed plastered across her face while she changed, brushed her teeth, then fell into bed. Staring up at the ceiling, she sighed *again*. Trouble didn't begin to describe her. Three days, three short days and she was falling so helplessly. Her last relationship might have been a disaster, but there was just nothing in the world to compare with that flutter in her stomach every time she looked at Clark. Obviously he felt something, too. He'd said as much. If he wasn't comfortable, he'd tell her.

At least she hoped he'd tell her. The truth was she didn't really know him at all. She was slowly getting to know who he was, and hopefully before the weekend was over, she'd know him a lot better than she did now. But there was something about him — a part of him that a part of her recognized. It was crazy to think that way. There just wasn't any denying it. She knew this man, at least what she needed to know. He was kind, gentle, desperate for acceptance by a single person who wouldn't treat him differently because he

was from another planet. Earth, Mars, Krypton — it didn't matter to Lois. He was a man who needed a friend. And given the way she felt every time she was near him, they might be more than friends.

Trouble with a capital 'T'!

It had taken Clark nearly an hour to go to sleep, thoughts of Lois stifling in the confines of his room. To top it off she was just across the house from him. He'd heard her sigh, all six times. The sound of clothes hitting the floor, the ruffle of the sheets when she climbed into bed, the slow intake every time she took a breath, the beat of her heart — all worked to drive him mad. It had been all he could do to keep from going to her. Willpower alone wouldn't have kept him in his room. It was the thought that if he did that, if he crossed that line, he'd ruin every single second they'd spent together. This thing between them couldn't be denied. It was new, refreshing — it was real. There was no way he'd mess it up.

When he'd finally fallen asleep, he'd slept like a baby. It was the soundest he'd slept in three years, probably longer. Only the smell of coffee had brought him back to the land of the living. After a trip the bathroom, he ventured into the kitchen.

"Hey, sleepy head," Lois told him when he reached the counter.

"Hey." He took the cup she pushed toward him, then poured himself some morning brew. It was only after he'd taken a sip did he notice that Lois was smiling at him.

"What? Are my clothes dirty?" He looked down at himself just to be sure.

"Your clothes are fine, but that hair ..." She whistled softly. "No wonder you slick it back with gel when you fly out to save the day."

Clark patted the top of his head where he knew his hair was standing straight up. He'd been so intent on getting out here to see Lois, he'd forgotten to comb it. And he knew it would look like this. It was always standing on end first thing in the morning. "Sorry," he told her softly.

"I think it's adorable."

"Adorable?" he asked with mock aggravation.

"Superman is *not* adorable."

"No, but Clark Kent is."

Clark lowered the cup in his hand back to the counter, then leaned across so that he was just inches from her. "So are you," he whispered.

She gulped audibly. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a baby." He trailed his fingers down the side of her face. "And you?"

"Very soundly," she replied as she rubbed the bottom of his chin lightly.

He opened his mouth to say something else, then thought better of it. He leaned over and captured her lips in a kiss instead.

"Nice," she remarked when he drew back to look at her.

"Very nice," he agreed before he kissed her again.

"Would you like some breakfast?" he asked, still inches from her face.

"We need to go to the market. There's not much here."

"No problem." Her hair swirled around her face as he disappeared. He heard her say 'wow' as he zipped out of the door. Even though Lois seemed to like the man more than the powers, he secretly wanted to show off for her ... just a little. He flew to a little bakery he knew of not too far north, grabbed a variety of items, then headed back. When he stopped across from Lois again, he had put croissants and

chocolate donuts out on a platter, sliced a few kiwi, and squeezed some orange juice.

Lois calmly folded the paper she'd been reading and laid it aside. "You want me to say that impresses me." He grinned widely. "It does ... a little," she told him as she chose a pastry. "I won't ask where you got these." She pulled her eyes from him to take a bite. "This is good," she mumbled around a mouth full of bread. She chewed for a moment before she finally looked at him again. "Maybe more than a little."

Clark bit into his own food while he continued to watch her. Part of him was glad she was impressed and part of him wished she could just forget that he was Superman. Was he losing his mind? One minute he wanted to show off, the next he was thrilled she liked it, then back to disappointment because she was. How could he possibly explain that?

"We need to come to an understanding."

Her words tore him from the thoughts that were quickly headed toward dangerous territory. The last thing he needed this weekend was to take a pity trip.

She waited until she had his complete attention before she continued. "You're Superman." Well, dah! "You'll always be super. You don't know why and you might not always understand it, but it's something neither of us can change. You're also Clark Kent — this incredibly great guy that I happen to think is just as impressive as 'Supes'. I'm also impressed with his super side. Hell, you can fly! Who wouldn't be impressed with that?" She wiped her mouth before she continued. "I need you to accept that I might ... swoon a bit over your super stunts."

"Swoon?" he asked, unable to stop the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

She glared at him, then kept going. "I might just as easily swoon when you look at me. And when the new wears off, I'll probably yell at you for being such a lunkhead!"

By the time she finished, there was fire in her voice. This was that passion that simmered just below the surface. It was impressive to behold. Clark slowly ate the rest of his croissant before his eyes met hers again. "Fair enough."

"Good!"

She was proud of herself, Clark thought as he watched her. If she wanted him to relax, then he'd do everything he could to make that happen. "Lunkhead?" he asked after a moment. Lois shrugged, then they both laughed out loud. This woman was a refreshing change from other people he met every day. He'd relax, he'd show off, and he'd love every second getting to know this great woman.

"I really hate to do this," Lois said as she picked up her bag from the table by the door.

"Yeah, I know. Unfortunately, if we want to enjoy the rest of the weekend, I think it's for the best," Clark replied as he finished oiling the reel in his hand.

Lois was on her way to the market in the small town a few miles away. She and Clark would cook for the group tonight and they needed something to eat. She was actually the one who'd suggested she go shopping alone even though she really didn't want to. She felt like she was doing something wrong by not including Clark. He was right, of course. As small as the town was, someone was bound to recognize him. And everyone in town knew her. If they were seen together, it would only be a matter of minutes before they'd be found at the house. The rest of their weekend would definitely be ruined. It didn't make her feel

any better about leaving him though. He'd insisted he'd be fine. He'd found her father's rods and reels in the storage room and was all set to fish until she returned. In fact, he actually looked excited.

"But ..."

"Bye, Lois," he said with a wave as he went through the back door. She sighed and set out to do the shopping.

The drive to town only took ten minutes. She was surprised to see Deb cross the parking lot.

"Deb!"

Her friend stopped and waited until she caught up. "Hey, Lo! How's it going?"

"Good."

"I'd say that's probably an understatement," Deb replied with a wink.

Lois smiled and held the door open for them to enter. They both chose a cart and headed for the produce section.

"Come on, Lois. You can't keep me hanging about Mr. Gorgeous."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Lois said as she chose some tomatoes.

"I can't believe you said that." Deb picked over the cantaloupes. "You bring the hottest guy ever to the lake with you and you play innocent."

"We're just friends, Deb." Lois moved on to the onions.

"Yeah, right!" Deb chose a large bunch of herbs, then pushed her cart in front of Lois'. "Now, talk."

Lois put her produce in the cart, then looked up at her friend. "He came into the gallery last week. He bought some things, I delivered them, and he took me to dinner for his mother's birthday."

"You've met his parents already?"

"Already? Deb!"

"Okay, okay. Just tell me how you ended up bringing the heat to the lake."

Lois chuckled at the narrative before she went on. "We had a great time. His parents are wonderful people. He took me flying."

"Wow!" Deb said dreamily.

"We talked, had a nice walk, and he asked me out again. I told him I had this thing and well, before I could stop myself, I asked him to come." Lois finished with a shrug and headed for the potatoes.

"And he slept ..."

"Deb!" Lois tried to act shocked at her friend's suggestion, but these two ladies knew each other all too well. Deb knew Lois would only have a man under the same roof with her if she knew for certain he could be trusted. Deb had offered Lois a shoulder to cry on when she'd made the biggest mistake of her life. She'd also been there for every good and bad decision since. "I slept alone," Lois relented as she lifted the bag of potatoes into the cart.

"I really like him," Deb said as they made their way further into the store. "I've always thought he had a lot going on behind those beautiful chocolate eyes. Every picture and video showed this lonely, gentle soul." Lois smiled. Deb had always been a good judge of character. So many times she wished she'd listened when Deb told her to stay away from Paul. "Meeting him proved it. But, God, he's a great guy."

"He really is," Lois agreed as they stopped to make a few choices in the deli. "He's kind, gentle — he's got this quiet strength. And he's a fantastic son. He gave his mother a statue that cost nearly four grand."

"I saw in the news that he gave her a Lincoln once."

"And trips all over the world, a beach house, and this

year he's sending his folks on a trek around the country in a luxury coach."

Deb reached out to choose a cut of meat. "How does one raise a super-powered teen?"

"I know!" Lois hoped that Clark would soon become comfortable enough with her to share a few stories from his childhood. She could just imagine Martha pulling on his ear and threatening to tan him like cheap leather. "He was so worried about how you guys would take him," Lois said after a few minutes.

Deb stopped and looked at Lois with a stricken expression. "Poor fellow. I guess he's used to the fawning from all the groupies. Probably why he looks so lonely."

"Yeah."

"Oh, God. He must really be messed up now. We sprang Scott on him!" She looked at Lois, who promptly burst out laughing.

"I think he was most impressed by Mike," Lois put in after they'd made a few more selections. "He seems to really like kids."

"They're some of the few people that will be truly honest with you. They don't suck up to you just because you're popular or famous, at least not until they become teenagers."

"I told him he'd be surprised by you guys."

"We aim to please."

Lois pulled Deb to a stop. "Really, Deb. Thanks."

"Lois, Clark came as a friend of yours. That was enough for us to give him a chance. We learned he's really a great guy. We like him and we are very glad he came." They shared a smile before Lois nodded and headed toward the check-out. "You do know Scott won't be the only one ogling him today?"

Lois laughed softly as she unloaded her purchases. She was glad she'd brought Clark along. She believed the super guy needed the morale boost from spending time with people who saw him as a person and not a thing. And it didn't hurt her feelings a bit that she was able to spend a little time alone with him either.

Clark couldn't remember the last time he went fishing. He and his father used to take a trip every spring. They stopped about three years ago, right after all the media hype took over his life. Of course, that was when he stopped doing a lot of things. He'd almost given up on living except for going through the motions. But a simple trip into an art gallery was beginning to show him that he might have been wrong.

The tug on his line surprised him a bit. Another tug, then a solid slam. Clark snatched back, careful to rein in his strength appropriately. The hook was set solidly and he began to reel. He'd kicked off his shoes a while ago, walking along the edge of the water as he cast. He was knee deep now and having the time of his life. After a few minutes, he finally hauled in his catch.

"Nice!"

He turned to see Lois on the bank. She almost made him forget about the fish he held. He lifted a monster bass to show it off. "Want to have fresh fish for supper?"

"Are you cleaning them?"

"Sure." He began making his way back to shore, unhooking his catch as he did. He pointed toward the bucket sitting closer to the dock. "I have four more. I thought they'd be great on the grill."

"Don't tell me you cook."

"I love to cook," Clark commented as he set off toward

the bucket.

"You looked like you were having a good time catching that."

"I was." He cast again, slightly under the dock. "I may be able to do almost anything, but just doing nothing ..."

"This isn't nothing," Lois said as she cast out a line, too.

Clark hadn't seen the rod in her hand. Watching her was threatening to send him into sensory overload. She was so incredibly beautiful. The shorts she wore left barely anything to the imagination. Her thin shirt was open in front, revealing a red bikini top covering two of the most ...

"So, what time are we setting out with the others?" How was he possibly going to survive today?

"In about twenty minutes." She snatched back on her rod. "Got him!"

Clark smiled as he watched her reel in another good-sized bass. What wasn't there to like about this girl?

"Okay, Farm boy, get him off!" She waved the bass around at him, hanging from the end of her line.

"What?" he said with a laugh.

"Take the fish off. I don't ... touch them."

He chuckled again as he took the fish off the hook.

"Some fisherman you are!"

"Yeah, yeah," Lois clipped out as she threw her line out again.

Clark threw his line out a few times before he asked, "Farm boy?"

"Would you rather I yell, 'Help, Superman'?"

If you yell it like that ... Damn, that was sexy when she said it!

"Clark?"

He managed to get his wayward thoughts under control and focus on what she was saying. "Yeah?"

"Where were y ... ?" Her eyes narrowed on him when she realized what she'd said and how he must have taken it. "You are such a typical male!"

"Trust me. I am *not* your typical male."

"Tell me you were not just thinking what I think you were thinking," she challenged him.

"If I told you, I wouldn't be thinking it. I'd be saying it."

Her eyes narrowed even more. "You are so infuriating." But she said it with laughter in her voice.

"You are so ... adorable," he finished in a whisper as the smile faded from his face.

She just looked at him for a minute before she turned and cast her line again. "Okay, then," she said with finality.

"Okay," he agreed as he let his line plop softly in the water beside hers. They fished in silence for several minutes, Clark glancing at her every now and then. This woman was the breath of air he hadn't known he was lacking until now. Each second with her only made him long for another gasp. He also found himself wanting to get to know her even more.

"Hey, Clark? Look what Scott taught me to do," Mike yelled just before he leaped backwards off the front of the pontoon. He completed a perfect flip before splashing into the lake.

Clark clapped along with everyone else when the boy surfaced. "Try it this way." He ran toward the end of the boat, jumping into the air, then flipping backwards to dive into the water.

"That was great!" Mike told him when he came up for air.

“A half gainer,” Clark informed him.

“Race ya’ back to the boat,” Mike challenged, then set off in that direction.

Clark laughed softly before following.

Lois smiled as she watched from her seat under the canopy. It was a gorgeous, sunny day, albeit a bit warm. She was slathered in sunscreen; the last thing she needed was a sunburn. Their group had spent the rest of the morning and much of the afternoon out on the lake. They’d eaten sandwiches from the cooler for lunch, and Scott had cracked open the first beer to wash it down with. He’d since downed quite a few. The men had showed off their skills on the skis and they’d all been for a swim more than once. They’d debated which of the summer’s movies was the best, talked about Lois’ gallery opening later in the next week, and had listened to Scott moan about his co-workers. They’d all been entranced when Clark shared a brief childhood story. It had been a terrific day.

Mike giggled and pointed from the deck of the boat. “I beat you,” he bragged.

“Yeah, yeah,” Clark moaned as he pulled himself up. “Show-off,” he said softly.

The young boy laughed out loud, then leaped in again. Clark shook his head before making his way over to the others.

“Tell ‘em, Clark,” Scott was saying. “Tell them you haven’t sold one of your books to be rewritten as a screenplay.”

“Not that I know of,” he answered as he took a seat beside Lois. He exchanged a glance with her before focusing on the others.

She felt her heart sigh. That look ... it could melt icebergs. And it was a look he gave only her.

“I told you,” Scott said loudly.

“I was just telling you what I’d heard,” Trish replied.

“Don’t believe everything you hear,” Scott answered.

“Scott’s right,” Clark agreed. “You’ve seen me in swimming trunks and I’ll bet money you’ve heard I was some kind of monster under my clothes.”

That silenced them all. They cast a sympathetic expression toward their new friend.

“I’ve heard it all,” Clark went on as he reached out to take the beer from Lois’ hand and took a sip.

“And don’t it just piss you off?”

Clark laughed at Scott’s question. “Yeah, Scott, sometimes it does.”

“Stupid bastards should mind their business.” Scott slugged down some of his beer. He was brutally honest when he was drinking. Heck, he was brutally honest when he wasn’t drinking. “I remember when I first came out. It was awful. I could have handled it if they’d said things to my face. But those whispers!”

“You don’t have to be gay ... or even super to hear whispers from people who think they know more than you,” Trish put in. “Folks just don’t seem happy unless they’re talking about someone else.”

“Tell me about it,” Lois mumbled.

The conversation continued in that vein for a bit. Mike clamored back onto the boat asking for food. And eventually Dave pulled up anchor and set them on a course back down the lake. Everyone continued to chat, laughing now and then. Lois was content to listen to the man at her side all day. He had the sexiest voice ... and an even sexier laugh. He was enjoying himself, which made her glad she’d invited him. Suddenly he got up and reached for the volume on the radio. It had been playing softly in the background,

but something had gotten his attention.

“... should do all you can to avoid Exit 10 on I-95.

Authorities aren’t sure what the truck was hauling, but the area is strewn in debris. We are hearing early reports of at least three casualties ...”

“Go!” she told him when his stricken eyes shot toward her. He looked almost relieved before he handed her the bottle in his hand and disappeared in a streak.

“Damn! I hope he doesn’t do everything that fast,”

Scott said after a brief silence, everyone clearly awestruck by his departure.

It finally registered what he’d said, causing the small group to burst into laughter. For the briefest moment, Lois wondered the same thing.

Boy, was she in trouble!

He’d told her he wouldn’t leave unless it was for something major. Granted, the accident on the freeway had been horrific, and he’d saved a couple of lives, but it didn’t make him feel any better for having ducked out on their peaceful weekend.

Clark landed with a soft plop on the deck, then reached to open the sliding door.

“How was it?”

He lifted his head to see Lois chopping vegetables in the kitchen. “Not very pleasant,” he answered flatly as he headed toward his room. He needed to shower and change. Although he’d changed back into his swimming trunks, he needed to wash off the feel of death that seemed to seep into his skin when others died during a rescue. Yeah, he knew they’d died before he’d even gotten there, but it didn’t make him feel better about it.

Lois’ hand grasped his arm, bringing him up short at the end of the counter. “I’ll listen if you need to talk.”

Her voice was soft and the look in her eyes almost made him cry. She meant what she said. She’d listen all night if he needed her to. His parents and Jimmy had listened to him whine more than once, and although it had always made him feel better, he wasn’t sure he wanted to drop so much onto her shoulders. Not now.

But her very being seemed to call to him. His expression softened and he gave her a grateful glance. He couldn’t speak; he didn’t trust his voice just now. The compassion he saw reflecting back at him was overwhelming. And somehow Lois seemed to understand what he felt at that moment. She gave his arm a squeeze before lifting her hand from him. He’d talk to her, he thought to himself. After his shower, he’d tell her how rotten he felt when others perished.

He nodded, then disappeared into the bedroom.

Poor guy, Lois thought as she continued her dinner preparations. She’d heard the reports. There was nothing Clark could have done to save those people, yet he felt bad because they’d died. How did he deal with this kind of thing on a daily basis by himself? How did he manage to remain so upbeat and giving when he saw the things he did? He’d looked so lost when he came in.

She looked up when the door to the bedroom opened. Clark emerged, his expression not as stricken as it had been when he went in. She just offered him a knowing smile. He looked almost grateful that he didn’t have to explain. He went out the back door again. Lois watched as he became a blur on the deck. Within minutes he was walking back in.

“I need to wash up,” he told her.

She nodded as he again left the room. He was back a

moment later.

"I cleaned the fish," he explained. She must have had a questioning expression on her face.

"Ahh." She'd forgotten about the fish. They'd put them on ice before going out on the boat earlier. Clark rummaged through the cabinets, digging out a few spices. He really does cook, she thought as she watched him move around the kitchen. He seemed to be right at home. "The kitchen was never my favorite place," Lois said to break the silence.

"You don't cook?" he asked as he worked.

"No, no. I cook ... just not very well. I make a mean pasta, an awesome salad, and order the best take-out in the world."

Clark chuckled before he stopped to look at her. "Thank you," he told her seriously.

"For what?"

"For being here." He reached out to rub her arm.

She placed the knife she held on the cutting board before facing him fully. Staring into his eyes for a second, she did the only thing she knew to do. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his neck. He was incredibly tense, but after a moment he relaxed into the embrace. His strong arms came up to hold her tight against his chest and he sighed.

"Guess we need to come back later."

Lois reluctantly pulled away from Clark to see Scott and Trish cross the living room. She glanced up at Clark, relieved to see him smile at her.

"Two more minutes and we might have been busy."

Lois gasped when she heard what Clark said. He gave her a devilish wink. "You'll pay for that one," she told him when she realized she'd been poked fun at.

"Promises, promises," he said softly.

"Clark Kent!"

He laughed and moved over to greet their guests. Lois couldn't believe he'd just done that. That devil! She was glad he felt better after his rescue though. And maybe later he'd tell her about it.

She greeted Trish as Clark and Scott made their way back outside. Gradually, the evening began to tick away. Everyone else arrived and they all shared a wonderful meal. Clark seemed pleased with the praise he received on his cooking. No one asked him about his rescue. Scott had commented about his speed, which caused Clark's cheeks to turn bright red. He'd talked, he'd laughed, and he'd looked as relaxed as he'd been before the accident. But Lois saw the shadow that seemed to loom around him now. He looked at her more than once with sad eyes. She'd almost told everyone to go home so she could hold him until that shadow lifted. It was hard seeing him this way, knowing he was in pain.

How had she fallen so deeply in such a short time? God help her, she was lost.

It had only taken him a few seconds to clean up from dinner. Now he stood on the back deck, looking out over the water. Their guests had gone home a little while ago. Deb had given him a hug and whispered in his ear to feel better. Had he been that transparent?

He almost jumped when Lois rubbed his back.

"Sorry," she told him. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"Not a very easy thing to do," he pointed out.

"I guess not," Lois agreed, tugging her ear lobe.

He smiled down at her. This woman was fantastic. He couldn't stop himself from wrapping his arm around her

shoulder and pulling her close. Her arms closed around his waist and she leaned into his side. They stood in silence for what seemed like hours before she spoke.

"You did all you could."

"I know," he answered. "I just hate to lose anyone."

"I know," was her reply. She tugged at him until he looked down into her eyes. "Even a super man has his limits. You told me that yourself."

He lifted his other arm to surround her. "I have to grieve for them, Lois, or I'd never be able to go to another rescue." He watched as understanding flashed in her eyes.

"The world doesn't have a clue what they've got," she said as her hands smoothed over his back.

No one had ever made him feel like he did at that moment. He couldn't explain it. Being Superman had never been as sweet. He leaned over and kissed her soundly. In seconds, their encounter went from comforting to passionate. He buried his hands in her hair to hold her to him while her hands knotted into a fist in his shirt. Soft moans and sighs punctuated the night air. Their kiss grew into an all out assault on one another. They drew apart only long enough to stumble through the sliding door.

He wasn't sure how they'd ended up in Lois' room. They'd continued to explore, with mouths and hands. She'd pushed his shirt off somewhere between the deck and the bed. Realization hit when he felt the soft, warm flesh of Lois' hot skin against his palms.

"Please don't stop it," she begged when he grew still. She covered his large hands on her body with her own, urging him to continue his soft exploration.

"Lois ..." Whatever he was going to say was cut off as she pressed her lips against his again. He should stop this. There were just too many strings attached to any kind of association with him, let alone the complications this could cause. But rational thought rushed from the recesses of his mind when he felt her hot hand brand him.

When had she gotten his clothes off?

It had been entirely too long since he'd had this kind of encounter and she felt much too good for him to stop. Clark's chest rumbled his approval as she continued her exploration of his body. He lifted her up and settled with her on the bed, settling his body on top of hers. She readily accepted him.

When had they gotten her clothes off?

It was all a haze now, his mind much too muddled to think. He jerked his mouth from hers and buried his face in the hollow of her neck, sighing deeply.

"Oh, Clark," Lois moaned and as she did, her body eased into the mattress, lost in the sensations of the moment.

"Lo-is!" he hissed, slowly losing himself in their actions. "You ... are ... so ... beautiful," Clark told her as he lifted his hand to smooth over the side of her face.

It all became too much, and he closed his eyes to allow his mind to catch up with his body. It was if they already knew one another intimately.

In a fog of pleasure, Clark collapsed beside her. They both lay there, staring up at the ceiling. Finally rational thought came back and he turned his head to look at the woman beside him. She was staring at him, a satisfied smile on her lips.

"Proud of yourself?" he asked her, unable to stop his own smile.

"Very." She reached over and smoothed his hair back on his head.

Clark leaned over and placed a soft kiss on her lips.

“Thank you.”

“Thank you.” She leaned up over him, her small hand covering his cheek. Without saying a word, they exchanged an entire conversation.

Not one regret. He couldn't find a single one in her dark eyes. All he saw was intense desire. He'd had no idea a woman could want a man the way this woman wanted him. She initiated the next encounter. Before long, they were completely naked exploring one another thoroughly. Lois took Clark into the night on a wave of passion he'd never experienced before. For the first time in his life, he was thrilled to be so completely lost.

Clark blinked several times as the morning sun dragged him from his haze. His arms tightened automatically around the soft, pliant body lying on his chest. She moaned, a sound he'd come to love hearing. And he'd heard it many, many times the night before.

“Too early,” she whined, burying her face against his chest.

He simply sighed, content to hold her like this all day.

“Why don't you have hair on your chest?”

Her question caused him to chuckle softly. “I have no idea,” he told her, smoothing his palms over her back.

“Maybe it's a Kryptonian thing,” she said as she lifted her head to look at him.

“Maybe,” he agreed as he tucked a stray hair behind her ear. Damn! She was even more beautiful this morning. Did this woman have any faults?

“It's bad, isn't it?” she asked him when he continued to stare at her.

“What?”

“Morning head.” She pushed a hand through her hair, trying in vain to straighten the wayward locks.

“I think you're kind of cute.” He rolled a few strands of her hair between his fingers, his mind taking him back to last night. He'd inhaled the scent of her shampoo more than once. He could still taste her, feel her. He'd never enjoyed sex the way he had with this woman. And he'd certainly never felt the way he had in the throes of passion. Lois made him feel more alive than anything ever had.

“I think you're partial to brunettes.”

“Just partial to this brunette.” His hand cupped her face tenderly and he offered her a smile.

“You are so good for my ego,” she told him as she pushed up to kiss him quickly before sliding to the edge of the bed.

“Where ya' going?”

“My bladder is screaming for relief.” He laughed softly and watched her hurry across the room toward the bathroom. “And I need coffee,” she called from behind the cracked door.

Okay. He could take a hint. He pushed up from the bed and pulled on his shorts, opting to leave off his shirt. She'd already seen him naked anyway. Smiling again at the reminder of their night together, he left the bedroom to start the coffee pot. Too preoccupied with his scandalous thoughts, he didn't hear the other woman enter the kitchen until he closed the cabinet door and was face to face with a petite brunette wearing only a tee shirt and underwear.

She shrieked loudly, almost scaring him senseless. Slowly the girl collected herself, her hand over her heart from the fright she'd just received. Then the fear left her eyes as surprise replaced it.

“You're ... you're ...” She looked around the room as if to make sure she was in the right place. “You're ...

Superman!” Her eyes roamed his body briefly. “Half naked in my kitchen!” Her eyes shot downward as she realized she was less than dressed herself. Without a word she ran from the room.

Clark was left to stare after her.

“Did I hear someone scream?” Lois asked as she entered the room.

“Ah, I think I just met your sister,” Clark told her with a wry smile. He finished starting the coffee before he looked up at Lois. She was wearing a tee shirt and shorts, but without his super eyes he could tell she'd left off her bra. If not for the sudden intrusion moments before, he would have taken advantage of that situation.

“Then I'm glad you spent the night with me,” Lois said as she eased up beside him. “Could you imagine the fright you'd have given her if you'd been in the bedroom?”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed with a chuckle. He leaned over to place a kiss on Lois' nose before he headed around the counter. “I should probably put a shirt on.”

“Damn, Lucy,” Lois mumbled.

He laughed softly as he disappeared into the bedroom. While he was there, he took a moment to clean up a bit in the bathroom. A shiny, silver case caught his attention. He lifted it from the vanity, realizing it was Lois' birth control pills.

Damn! He'd never once thought about taken precautions with Lois. He felt like kicking himself. He wasn't sure why something so important had slipped his mind. He'd certainly never forgotten when he was with Lana.

He turned the offending object over in his hands several times. Lois, too, had failed to mention precautions. Had she trusted him that much? She might have been protected from pregnancy, but what about other things? Did she just assume he was safe because he was Superman? And that he would be protected from her? Their relationship was at such a critical juncture, and it could have potentially been ruined by lack of good sense. The only thing that had been on his mind was being completely and utterly surrounded by that woman.

Yet, it still didn't excuse his lack of responsibility. He finished washing his face, then went back out to the kitchen.

Lois was in the middle of an animated conversation with Lucy, but the younger woman clamped her mouth shut when she saw Clark. He felt a little uncomfortable under her scrutiny.

“I was telling Lucy that you and I are friends,” Lois said and pushed her sister toward him. “Lucy, this is Clark Kent. Clark, Lucy Lane.”

Clark's manners prompted him to offer her his hand in greeting. “It's good to meet you, Lucy,” he told the awestruck woman. She nodded numbly as she shook his hand, obviously too taken by his celebrity to say a word. Clark flashed a look at Lois, begging her for help.

“Lucy, he's just a man,” the older woman hissed, clearly embarrassed with the way her sister was acting.

“One hell of a man,” Lucy murmured as she continued to stare at him. Then suddenly she jerked her head toward Lois. “And he saw me half naked,” she whispered fiercely.

“Then you're even,” Lois reminded her. “I think he was minus a shirt.”

“That's not the same!” Lucy folded her arms across her chest and stared daggers at Lois.

“Believe me, Lucy, I'm just as embarrassed by our meeting ...” Clark began but was cut off.

"You can't possibly be," she told him through clenched teeth. She closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, then looked back up at him. "I'm really sorry."

"So am I," Clark told her, offering what he hoped was a comforting smile to ease the tension between them. She seemed to consider that for a second before she smiled back. "How about a cup of coffee?" Clark didn't wait for an answer, just went to work pouring them all some of the fragrant brew. "I'll cook breakfast," he offered. "You two can catch up." He set their coffee on the table and left to start breakfast.

"I cannot believe you spent the night with him," Lucy whispered to Lois.

"Lucy ..." Lois' voice was louder, more of a conversational tone.

"He's like this god or something. Look at him!"

"Lucy, stop!" Lois tried again.

"How is he?"

"He can hear you," Lois pointed out matter-of-factly.

That worked. Lucy closed her mouth and snapped her eyes toward Clark. He continued to prepare breakfast as if he hadn't heard them. It was nothing new for him, though it stung a bit after the night he'd spent. And he needed to speak with Lois — apologize for his lack of responsibility. He just hoped his indiscretion hadn't ruined anything.

Lois wasn't sure she'd lived through a worse morning than the one she just had. She'd watched, in complete horror, as her sister made a fool of herself. Poor Clark had looked as if wanted to crawl underneath the table more than once. This must have been what he'd feared in making this trip with her. She was thankful none of the others had acted this way.

"Just give us a minute, Luce," Lois called as her sister exited through the back door.

"Kay!" Lucy gave Lois a thumbs up, grinning widely as she backed down the dock toward the boat.

Lois pushed the door closed again and sighed heavily. "I can't believe that girl!"

"Come on. She's not that bad."

She turned to face Clark. "Superman doesn't lie." Clark shrugged innocently. "I'm sorry," she told him as she eased toward him. She stopped and eyed him closely. His body language was far from invitational, and he'd been distant all morning. Granted, he'd been subjected to Lucy's open infatuation. But she could tell there was something wrong. His expressions had changed. There was definitely something on his mind. "Let's have it."

"Have what?" Clark leaned back against the counter.

"Whatever it is that's been bothering you." She placed her hands on her hips, clearly challenging him to deny it. "And it's not the way Lucy's been acting."

His expression grew serious and he stood up straighter. "Last night ..."

"Clark, I wanted that to happen just as much as you did." Please don't let him regret it now, she begged silently. She couldn't stand it if he felt that way.

"And I want it to happen again," he assured her. "But, Lois, I never once thought about taking precautions."

She smiled slightly. Leave it to the boy scout to be thinking about that. Sure, she'd been caught up in the moment as well. But she was covered. She'd taken birth control pills forever. "I think we'll be okay," she told him.

He winced a little. "It was my responsibility ..."

"It was *our* responsibility. And I seem to recall being just as out of control as you were."

"That's just it. I should never be that out of control."

"Why? Because you're Superman you can't get carried away sometimes?" He stared at her blankly. "You're a man, too."

"And even a man should take responsibility for what he does."

Lois sighed heavily. "Okay. We should have thought about it ..."

"Discussed it. Done something about it," Clark insisted.

She pushed a hand through her hair. "You're right. But Clark, I've been on the pill for years ..."

"Even so, I shouldn't have taken the situation for granted."

"You weren't thinking ..."

"Exactly! I was ..."

"Hopefully thoroughly preoccupied." His eyes locked with hers and for a moment she feared that he did regret their night together. Then he smiled at her — the smile that could melt ice.

"Thoroughly," he told her as he reached to pull her close. "Thoroughly and utterly preoccupied," he whispered as his lips descended on hers.

She giggled softly, but yielded to his touch, kissing him in return. She was the one to break the contact. "We should go."

"Yeah," he agreed without taking his eyes off hers.

They shared another brief kiss before making their way out of the house. They were sharing brunch with the group this morning and didn't want Lucy to leave them behind. Lois felt a rush of relief. Clark didn't regret what they'd shared. And he hadn't bolted after his meeting with her sister. Maybe that meant he might feel about her a little like she did about him.

And now was not the time for her to analyze her feelings. She'd do that later, when she was alone. She could berate herself for hours. Right now she would just enjoy being with him. Everything else could wait.

"I wish you two would join us," Deb said as she walked with Lois and Clark to the end of the dock.

"That might cause complications," Lois told her.

"I know." Deb pulled on the arm she held, stopping them both. "I'm just reluctant to say good-bye."

"I know," Lois returned before she leaned forward to hug her good friend.

"Clark, it was a blast," Scott told the man.

Clark clasped the hand before him. "I'm just glad you guys didn't run me off."

"Not a chance." Scott moved over so Dave could shake hands with their new friend.

"Take care of our girl," Dave told him.

Clark glanced at Lois, then smiled fondly. "I will. And you take care of this little guy." Clark reached over to ruffle Mike's hair.

"Don't forget about Tasha," Mike said with a grin.

"Not a chance." Clark turned and was face to face with Deb. She simply reached to hug him.

"We'll keep Lucy here until you two leave."

Clark chuckled softly. Even Deb had noticed how the younger woman had fawned over him. Trish had stayed behind to keep her company while he and Lois made their getaway. Everyone around the brunch table had looked as uncomfortable as he'd felt all day. It was Scott who'd pulled Lois aside and made the suggestion they leave early while Lucy was occupied. Clark had already apologized for not being able to join them on their outing later in the

afternoon. They'd all understood and had worked as a team to get them moving without their early morning guest.

They said a final good-bye, then made their way back to the house. After packing up, they set out for the drive back to the city. Conversation during the trip was light, about nothing in particular. Finally Lois pulled her Jeep to a stop in front of his building.

"Want to come in for a while?" he asked, unwilling and unable to part just yet.

"Sure. But ..." She looked around briefly. "What about spectators?"

"Give me a second?" He gave her an apologetic expression. When she nodded, he disappeared in a blur. A few moments later he was opening the door for her. He felt awful to have to treat her this way. "I'm sorry," he told her.

"I'm not," she replied as she took a step toward him.

They stood there, eyes locked, searching in each other's eyes for the things they'd both longed for. Not another word was said. Clark stepped forward and almost inhaled Lois. She went willingly.

"Will I see you later?" Lois held his hands as they stood in front of his door. It was Monday morning and she had to get home so she could shower and change before she went to the gallery. She was meeting with several people this morning to make the final preparations for the opening in two days. She and Clark had spent the rest of Sunday in bed, becoming as intimately acquainted as they could get. Lois had spent the night in his arms, too sated and satisfied to venture from his place ... or his arms. Clark hadn't complained a bit. He hadn't left either. She'd asked him several times if he was needed somewhere, and he replied every time that he was already there. They'd talked. He'd shared private things with her that she doubted even his parents knew. In turn, she'd opened up to him. Lois felt as if she'd known this man her entire life and prayed he felt the same way about her because she'd fallen so completely, without the possibility of ever seeing daylight again.

"I can't make any promises," he told her with a stricken expression. "I'll do my best."

She nodded. And while she completely understood, it still made her a little maudlin.

"You can count on me being at the gallery opening though," he assured her as he slipped a hand through her hair.

"I'll be looking forward to it." She smiled brightly, lifting her head to him in invitation. He didn't disappoint her, planting his lips solidly against hers. She moaned when he broke contact, offered him one last smile, then stepped out of the door before she lost her nerve. She'd been apprehensive about simply being in the room with this man a few days ago. Now she was apprehensive about leaving him. She missed him already.

Clark waved a hand and offered a slight smile at the photographers waiting outside his publisher's building. He'd had a meeting this morning to discuss an idea he had for a new book. Franklin Stern was almost jumping in excitement over the possibility of Clark Kent writing a romance novel of sorts. It would be an instant hit. Who wouldn't want to read what Superman thought to be romantic? Clark considered it more of a release than anything else. A release from the incredible loneliness he'd felt most of his life. He got a rush just thinking about finally being able to tell the world he wasn't alone — without actually telling them.

Lois was his inspiration. He found himself wanting to protect her from the world ever learning of his feelings for her and wanting to shout them from the top of his lungs at the same time. He'd spent the most wonderful weekend of his life with the most incredible woman alive. And they hadn't just shared their bodies; they'd shared their very beings. That woman knew more about him than anyone else alive. He'd talked openly about his childhood, coming in to his powers, his overwhelming loneliness. She'd held his globe, seen the holograms of his birth parents. That was something even his mother and father hadn't been privy to. She alone knew the things that made him happy, that made him sad. Her arms had held him tight as he trembled when he'd talked about some of the rescues that gave him nightmares. In the span of hours, he'd shared his life with Lois Lane. She had the power to literally destroy him. Yet, that was the furthest thing from his mind.

All he could think about was the fact that he hadn't seen her since then. Everybody had needed Superman, it seemed. Then he'd had the meeting with his publisher. And he flew out to bring his parents to Metropolis for the gallery opening. It was finally mid-week, the night of the opening. He'd be able to breathe again — once he saw her, inhaled the smell he'd already imprinted in his mind. He'd called her a couple of times, but she'd been busy. She'd called back when he was out, leaving messages on his machine. Brief apprehension had washed over him that she might not want to see him again — talk to him. Then he'd remembered the many things they'd talked about. He hadn't been the only one to bare his soul. She'd been just as open with him. That kind of trust was not given easily. Sharing herself with him the way she had could only mean that she felt she'd see him again — and often.

He'd read the articles in the Daily Planet about the opening. It was easily the largest one she'd ever promoted. Clark had felt overwhelming pride over her success. And he wasn't about to analyze his feelings. All he knew was that he was crazy about Lois Lane and she appeared to feel the same way about him. The rest would take care of itself. Even his brief lack of good sense over his thoughtlessness before they made love the first time hadn't swayed her feelings.

Of course, she hadn't become media fodder yet, he felt compelled to remind himself. He'd have to be careful tonight around her. If he let his true feelings show, their relationship would not be private for long. Just the thought of being around Lois and not expressing how he felt made him almost ill. How would he ever survive that?

Lois shifted from one foot to another, looking at the door for the hundredth time in the last ten minutes. Where was he? The opening was almost over. She'd had a wonderful time with his parents and her newest sensation was a complete success in the art world. But all she could think about was Clark. She hadn't seen him in nearly three days. She'd tried to return his calls, but there had been no answer. Granted, Superman had kept him busy. She understood that. Though it didn't stop her from feeling a little selfish, wanting to hide away with him again like they'd done over the weekend. She must have played the messages he'd left fifty times, just so she could hear his voice. Maybe they should have exchanged cell phone numbers so they could stay in touch.

Listen to yourself, Lois, she thought. You've spent a few days with the man and already you're trying to keep tabs on him.

Just then the insistent click of cameras drew her attention away from the woman she'd been speaking with. Clark had entered the gallery, smiling brightly at the continuous flashes in his face. She smiled when their eyes met, sighing inwardly. She gave her apologies to her guest, then made her way across the room.

"I'm glad you could make it, Mr. Kent," she told her honored guest as she reached for his hand.

He took the offered limb with a wide grin. "Thank you for inviting me, Ms. Lane."

"Superman, is it true you spent the weekend with Ms. Lane?" came the shout from one of the reporters.

The question caught him off guard and his smile faltered slightly.

"Sources have revealed that you kept Ms. Lane tucked away in a secret location while your fiancé discovered she was carrying your child."

Clark's wide eyes snapped toward the reporter who'd asked that question. "What?"

"I have sources that tell me Lana Lang is two months pregnant with your baby and that you stood her up for this woman."

Lois must have looked as shocked as she felt because the cameras were now trained on her and flashed over and over. What did she do here? She looked up at Clark, silently begging him to do something.

"Is it true, Lois? Are you a home wrecker?"

How the hell did she answer that? She jerked her head from Clark to flash a look of utter resentment toward the reporters. "I ... I ..."

"I don't think ..." Clark jumped in but was interrupted by the insistent reporter.

"Apparently you didn't," the man said with an arrogant leer. "Tune in to the eleven o'clock news," he declared to their audience before he headed for the exit.

After several more flashes, the throng of reporters bolted for the door, apparently eager to find out the latest scoop on the Man of Steel.

Lois flashed her eyes angrily at Clark before leaving to say goodbye as the few guests left began to make their departures. There had been whispers when Clark had first entered, then all eyes were peeled as everyone waited for the Man of Steel to answer the reporters' questions. Now that the excitement was over, the small group was ready to leave. They were probably anxious to see the news and learn the latest scandal involving the city's resident hero. Luckily his parents had left some time ago and she wasn't forced to deal with this new development with them as an audience. The short time she'd known them had shown her that more than anything, she wanted their respect and approval. The way she felt at this moment, she wasn't so sure they'd give her either one. She felt as if she'd explode at any second.

Lois found Clark in the back corner of the gallery as she was cutting the lights. Obviously he had faded into the background.

"I thought you'd left," she told him flatly. She wasn't sure what she felt. She knew what she thought. She thought she'd never been so thoroughly humiliated in her life!

"Lois ..."

"Fiance?" She almost shouted at him, her anger beginning to bubble to the surface. "I thought you and Lana were over?" He'd told her about Lana. She knew of their past, that they were close friends even now. He'd also told her that he and Lana hadn't seen each other in months.

"We are. We have been for a long time. We just never

made an official announcement."

"Then didn't you think the media would have thought you were still engaged?" He shrugged helplessly. Lois huffed her indignation as she stomped toward the front of the gallery.

"Lois ..."

"You looked shocked when he said she was pregnant."

"I didn't know."

Lois whirled around to face him. "Please tell me there isn't a possibility this baby might be yours." She was practically begging him to say it. If there was a chance, that meant that just mere weeks ago he'd shared himself with another woman. That thought didn't bode well for their budding relationship — at least as far as Lois was concerned. She'd done the betrayal bit before, with Paul. But Clark's stricken, apologetic expression told her all she needed to know. She snatched up her handbag and started for the door.

"Lois, please. Talk to me." He reached out to grab her elbow, but withdrew in surprise when she snatched it away from him.

"Good night," she told him with finality as she held the door open for him. He closed his mouth, shoved his hands into his pockets, and headed through the door. He was met with more camera flashes and questions. He glanced around briefly before disappearing in a blur. Lois stepped through the door and stopped to turn the lock.

"Ms. Lane!"

"No comment!" She hurried through the crowd and down the sidewalk toward her building. It wasn't until she leaned back against the elevator wall that she allowed the hot tears stinging her lids to burst forth. How could she have been so stupid? There was no way he could care for her the way she did him. He'd been in another woman's bed just a short time ago.

And made it to yours in just days, her errant conscience pointed out.

I know, she yelled silently. She'd just never felt as incredibly alive as she had with him. Her body had physically ached to touch him, make love to him. And against all rational thought, she'd given in to those desires. Just as quickly her heart had raced behind. She'd been so sure there was something special between them after all they'd shared with one another.

Numbly she made her way into her apartment, flipping on the television. The last thing she wanted was to see her face plastered all over the news, but she had to know what proof they had. She was horrified when she recognized the short footage. It was taken during their brunch at the lake. The camera pulled in tight on several subtle exchanges between her and Clark. After seeing that, there was no way one could deny that there was something between the two of them.

But what made her ill was knowing who had taped that footage.

She stormed through the living room and pushed through Lucy's door without knocking. Her stunned sister's head snapped up from where she was hunched over the computer.

"What the hell have you done?!"

Clark had winded his way through the throng of reporters outside Lana Lang's townhouse. He had intended to land on the roof and make a more secret entrance, but they had the roof staked out, too. He'd been hounded with questions he couldn't answer, so he'd kept his lips tightly

closed. Thankfully, Lana answered on his second knock. He breathed a sigh of relief when they were behind closed doors. He made a precautionary sweep of the place with his super senses just to be sure there were no bugs. Satisfied they were completely alone, Clark skipped all pretenses and jumped directly into the fire.

“Are you pregnant with my baby?”

“Good to see you, too, Clark.” Lana flipped her hair over her shoulder as she crossed the room to settle in a chair.

She was a difficult woman. Clark had always known so. She’d been a difficult child. But she’d known who he was and hadn’t turned her back on him. She was demanding, impatient. She was also caring and gentle. He’d once loved Lana very deeply. He still cared about her, loved her as a friend. They’d known each other far too long for him to turn his back on her. But she could be infuriating.

He sighed in frustration before he took the seat across from her. “Why did I have to hear about this from the media?”

“I wanted to be sure before I told you. Someone must have leaked it to the press.”

Clark glanced down at his clasped hands. What the hell did he do now?

“I’m nearly two months,” she told him softly.

It meant they’d made this baby when he’d visited her after a particularly difficult rescue. An apartment complex in mid-town had burned to the ground. Several children and a couple of elderly people had perished. His parents had been visiting his Aunt Opal. Jimmy had been on an assignment in Mexico. He and Lana might have severed their romantic relationship, but she was still one of his best friends. He’d gone to her and she’d known what he needed. She’d offered him comfort in her arms. Then later he’d sought a different kind of comfort that she’d given just as freely. It wasn’t something he’d done before or since, but it had been exactly what he’d needed at the time.

“We took precautions,” he reminded her. That had always been something he’d insisted on.

Until another night ...

Not now, he told himself.

“Obviously not enough,” she retorted angrily.

He sighed heavily, too upset to think. “I ... I don’t know what to say,” he managed in a cracked voice after a moment.

“I’m sorry you found out the way you did. I was going to call you this week.” She turned away from him. “I was debating on what to do.”

His head snapped up. What she hadn’t said resounded loud and clear in his mind. “You didn’t think there’d be a reason to tell me,” he clipped out.

“Clark, neither of us needs this.”

“You mean, you don’t need this. Lana, you know what a child would mean to me.” And she knew all too well. He’d revealed his fears to her long ago about being the last of his kind. Until recently he hadn’t even been sure if he could actually impregnate an earthling. He’d allowed a friend at Star Labs to run a few tests and it had been discovered then that he was very compatible with earthlings. And other than Lois, Lana knew exactly what a child would mean to him.

“And what would it mean to me, Clark?” Her lip quivered slightly. “My life would effectively be over. I’d be hounded worse than ever.”

“Isn’t that being a bit selfish?”

“What?!” She thrust herself to her feet. “I can’t live like that!”

“What about this baby?” Clark asked as he stood to face her. “He or she didn’t ask to be brought into this world.”

“Exactly!”

“It’s my baby, too.”

“It’s my body!”

They stared one another down. Clark saw Lana clearly for the first time. “I can’t believe you’d do this to me,” he said dejectedly.

“And what do you propose we do? Play house? Pass the kid back and forth on the weekends? Oh, I know. We’ll have your mom sew you a pouch in your suit.”

“Lana ...”

“Superman cannot have children!” She crossed her arms over her chest in defiance.

Clark thrust his hand through his hair to keep from yanking some sense into her. “We can still get married,” he finally relented. It was the absolute last thing he wanted to do, especially now.

“Clark,” she whined as she paced across the room. “We don’t love each other ...”

“We do,” he countered.

“Not like that,” Lana told him with a sad smile.

“It will be enough,” he insisted. It had to be.

“No, Clark. And your weekend with Lois Lane proves it.”

“She has nothing to do with this!” His voice had taken on the forceful tone of his alter ego, his need to protect Lois, even from Lana.

“She has everything to do with this,” Lana told him softly. “I saw that footage. And I saw the looks you gave her. You never looked at me like that. Not once.”

He sighed and glanced away from her, unable and unwilling to deny his feelings for Lois. Lana knew him too well. She could see what others couldn’t. Of course, the emotions between him and Lois on that footage had been so open and raw, everyone could see what she meant to him. He looked back down at Lana when she placed her hand on his chest.

“You deserve to be happy.”

“Killing my baby won’t accomplish that.”

“Having this baby won’t either. It would drive a wedge between you and Lois you wouldn’t be able to move.”

“If she cares anything about me at all, she’ll understand my need to have this baby.” He’d thought she already understood his needs. He would have bet his life on it.

Lana just smiled sadly at her old friend, her hand cupping his cheek gently. “I promise I won’t make a decision before I discuss it with you.”

“Fine,” he snapped and stalked toward the door.

“Clark, don’t be like this,” she whined.

“And just how am I supposed to be?!” he threw at her before he opened the door and zipped through without waiting for an answer. Behind him, Lana sank to the sofa, sighing softly. Good, he thought. She was miserable. Hopefully she was as miserable as was. How did he handle this? It was shocking enough to find out he’d fathered a child. It was devastating to learn that his supposed friend might terminate that pregnancy before it even really started.

He pointed his body and pierced through the air quicker than he ever had. He was angry, too angry to see or talk to anyone. He landed in the middle of the Arctic, frustration and misery flooding to the surface in a rush. He yelled out in anger. In a matter of days he’d gone from sheer elation to pure agony. He needed to talk to Lois, but obviously she’d made up her mind where he was concerned. Lying with her just days ago, he’d been so sure he’d found his other half.

Now he felt as if he'd lost his very soul.

Lucy Lane had been so taken by her encounter with Superman that she'd taped several seconds of footage on her cell phone, not to mention the tons of pictures. She'd hardly made it home before the footage and pictures were plastered on her 'My Space' page for all her friends to see. If her sister was with the resident super hero, she'd be a big deal by default. She'd had no idea the demons she'd released with a simple push of a button.

Lois had to fight her way through the throng of reporters every morning to get to the gallery. She was followed to the market, the bank ... everywhere. The constant questions about her being a home wrecker were starting to pierce her armor. After she'd gotten over her initial anger with Clark, she'd felt sorry for him. Lana had announced to the world that she hadn't decided if she was going to keep the baby. That announcement had nearly killed the Man of Steel. He'd tried hard not to let it show, but she could see it. She'd come to know him very well and she knew enough to know he was in pain.

She'd nearly called him, opting instead to speak with his mother. Martha had confirmed what she'd suspected. Clark viewed this baby as a solid connection to this world. For a man who was the last of his kind, that meant a lot. To lose that connection would destroy him. You can't turn your feelings on and off like a faucet, Lois decided. She'd fallen for Clark Kent and had fallen hard. Seeing him on the news day after day in so much pain was killing her. She'd made up her mind that she would go to his place after work. He needed to talk, needed someone to tell him everything would be okay. And she was pretty sure only she could bring him any kind of peace at all.

Pushing thoughts of Clark from her mind so she could make it through the reporters outside the gallery, she ducked her head and hurried inside. Lucy had opened up, so she didn't have to waste time unlocking the door.

Lois met the apologetic eyes of her sister. Lucy had been almost as miserable as she was since this whole thing broke. Lois had heard a million 'I'm sorry's' from her little sister. After hearing all she could possibly stand, she and Lucy had spent an entire night talking, confiding in one another the way they'd never done before. Lois and Lois had renewed their friendship from her personal tragedy.

"You, ah, you have a guest," Lucy told her and waved toward the other end of the gallery.

Her eyes landed on two of the most pathetic brown orbs she'd ever seen. Clark rocked up on his feet, his hands stuffed in his pockets, looking for all the world like a small lost child.

"I ... I needed to see you," he began.

Lois tore her eyes from his to look at her sister. Lucy took the hint and hurried from the building in silence.

"I'm sorry, Lois, about all of this." He waved his hand toward the windows where several photographers were glued against the pane snapping pictures.

She shot them a threatening glare before crossing the room to grab Clark by the sleeve of his jacket. She pulled him into what appeared to be a studio — a studio with all of the windows covered with blinds.

"I'm sorry," she told him after a moment. "You must be devastated about the baby."

His eyes looked as if they were about to fill with tears, and she had to fight the urge to reach out to him. "Yeah, well ..." He let the rest of his sentence just trail off. He didn't have to say any more.

"Has she ... ?" God, how could she ask him that?

He shook his head. "Not yet."

"Not yet? Then she is ... ?"

This time tears did fill his eyes and he looked away.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered again. She had to wrap her arms around herself to keep from putting them around him. There were things that needed to be said first.

"Lois," he breathed, pushing his hand back into his pocket as if he was scared he might touch her if he didn't. Suddenly studying the floor was more interesting than anything else in the room. "I miss you," he managed in a strangled tone after a brief silence neither seemed willing to break.

"I miss you, too," she admitted. That caused his head to snap up, hope flashing behind his eyes. "I said goodnight, not good-bye." What the hell was wrong with her? Suddenly rational thought kicked into overdrive. It reminded her that the last few days had been horrible. She hadn't been in this much misery after her break-up with Paul. She'd only known Clark a few days and he'd managed to rip her heart out. If she continued an association with him, how much more pain would he cause her?

Hadn't she had all of these arguments with herself? Hadn't she decided that she loved this man and that was all that mattered?

Self-preservation just wouldn't allow her to kiss and make up, even if she had decided that he needed someone to talk to. His life was too complicated. He lived in the spotlight, and she wasn't sure that was a place she wanted to be. And something would happen sooner or later. Like Lana deciding to keep the baby. Where would she fit into that little world?

But for the life of her, she couldn't turn her back on what she felt for this man.

Just as quickly as hope flashed in his eyes, it was gone. "You don't deserve this."

"Deserve what? Your heart?"

"My complications," he replied. "You're already hounded relentlessly."

"And that won't change any time soon. They know you're here. What do think they'll make of that? And if we don't see each other after today? I'll be branded 'the fling'." She gestured with her fingers.

"And if we do see each other? Especially if Lana aborts this baby ... you'll be branded 'baby killer'." He, too, gestured with his fingers. "Not to mention if she doesn't."

"So it's damned if we do, damned if we don't," she spat at him. He looked away again. All those arguments why she should just walk away from Clark Kent — they all made perfect sense. She *should* walk away. Rational thought never stood a chance against the heart though. "I'd rather have ten minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special."

His anguished eyes met hers, begging her to understand — to explain it all to him. When he found no answers, he stepped forward and grasped her face so he could kiss her soundly. He pulled back to look at her. "Just know you had the power to move a Superman," he told her fiercely before he released her and disappeared.

Tears welled in her eyes because she knew he'd just said good-bye. Lucy found her huddled in the corner of the studio fifteen minutes later, her face red from crying.

"Lo ..." The younger woman eased to the sofa her sister sat on, and pulled Lois into her arms.

A while later, Lois pushed away from Lucy and patted

on a brave smile. “He might be Superman, but he has no idea what he’s given up,” she said with more conviction than she felt.

Lucy gave her a sad smile.

“Come on,” Lois managed. “We have a gallery to run.” And with that she crossed over her despair. Refusing to allow misery a home any longer, she forced the fear and uncertainty from her body. She might never see him again, not the way she wanted to, but for a brief time, she’d loved and had been loved completely. She wouldn’t trade that for anything in the world.

Clark hurried down the hall of Metropolis General Hospital. His mother had called him moments ago to tell him Lana had been rushed to the emergency room. She was hemorrhaging profusely and had since slipped into shock.

“Clark!” His mother waved to him from the end of the hall.

“What happened?” he asked as he reached her side.

“I called Lana up to ask if we could talk ...”

Leave it to his mom to try to fix this for him.

“She invited me to lunch and as we were talking, she turned white as a sheet, then there was blood everywhere.” Martha reached out to touch his chest. “I’m afraid she might have miscarried,” she whispered to her son.

Clark pulled his mother to his chest. “It’s okay, Mom. It’ll be okay.” But even as he said that, fear washed over him. He knew his mother was right. She’d suffered this misfortune more than once. She would know if Lana had miscarried.

They settled uneasily in the private waiting room the charge nurse had taken them to. Security had instructions to not allow press inside the building, but there were always one or two that slipped by. If that happened, they wouldn’t find Superman waiting anxiously in the public waiting area.

Some time later a doctor finally came in. “Mr. Kent?” “Yes?”

“Ms. Lang tells me you’re the closest family she has.” Clark nodded. “She’s a lucky lady. The tumor would have killed her if it had grown much bigger.”

“Tumor?”

“Yes. She had a tumor the size of a softball in her uterus.”

“And the baby?”

“What baby?”

Clark’s brows raised in surprise. “She was over two months pregnant.”

“No. The tumor caused Lana’s cycle to cease and because the mass had been growing for a while, it was easy for her to make the assumption that she was pregnant.”

“Was it cancerous?” Martha wanted to know.

“Thankfully it wasn’t. But because of its sheer size, we had to remove her uterus. I’m sorry.”

And in that moment, so was Clark. Lana would never have the option to have children.

“Poor girl,” Martha said as she looked toward the door.

“She’s in recovery, but you should be able to see her in a bit. She’ll be asleep for a while though.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Clark shook his hand, then glanced down at his mother. “She’ll be devastated,” he said softly.

“Even so, I’m thankful she’s alive.”

“Me, too, Mom.” Clark pulled his mother into another embrace as he thought about his longtime friend. His own devastation paled in comparison to hers. He still had the option to have children some day, but she never would.

Correction ... he, too, would never have children because the only woman he wanted to carry his children never would. He’d seen what a mere acquaintance with him could do. There was no way he’d push that off on her again. No, Lois deserved more than he could give her. She deserved happiness on her terms without her every move being scrutinized by the world.

And he loved her enough to allow her that.

Clark held the small, fragile hand between his stronger, larger ones. He’d been sitting with Lana off and on for two days. She’d been in and out of consciousness, mumbling incoherently. He’d be there for her when she finally woke up. He didn’t want her to hear about her surgery from anyone else.

She moaned and rolled her head to the side. “Clark?”

“Yeah. I’m here.” He reached over and smoothed her hair off her forehead.

“The baby? Did I lose the baby?”

Her eyes were full of fear, his full of regret. “No.” He swallowed hard, squeezed her hand.

“What’s wrong?”

She knew him too well, even under the influence of pain meds. “Lana, you had a tumor.”

“Cancer?” she asked frantically.

“No. It was benign.”

“And the baby survived the surgery to remove it?”

He looked away. How did he tell her this?

“Tell me,” she whispered, tears filling her eyes.

“Lana ...” He swallowed again. “They had to remove your uterus.”

“But ... but ...” She stopped, realization setting in. “I wasn’t pregnant.”

“No,” Clark managed in a strangled whisper.

She rolled her head back to look up at the ceiling as silent tears rolled down her face. “And I never will be,” she managed finally.

Clark stood up to sit on the edge of the bed, reaching out to cup her face. “I’m so sorry.”

Lana leaned up gingerly and wrapped her arms around his neck. “So am I.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Clark told her as he held her close to his chest.

“I didn’t know. You thought I was having your baby ...”

“Shhh,” he soothed softly. “Let’s just get you well.” In the silence of the hospital room, Clark comforted his friend. She managed after a moment to relax and when she did, the tears came. Clark held her until she cried herself to sleep. He felt like crying with her. He’d heal; he’d move on the way he always had. But this would scar Lana forever. He just hoped she’d channel all her strength so she, too, could move on someday.

For a few days Clark had been too busy to think about himself and how awful he felt. He’d helped Lana get settled at home and spent a couple of days caring for her. They’d talked and came to a new understanding where their relationship was concerned.

He’d refused to discuss Lois with Lana. And she’d asked. That was a subject he just didn’t care to breach, not with her. Not with anybody, especially himself.

But when he was alone all he thought about was Lois and how badly he wanted to see her. How was she? The press had begun to lose interest, so there were fewer pictures in the papers. His mother spoke with her from time to time. She’d mentioned it to him. Knowing him the way

she did, Martha also knew not to push the issue either.

He'd done the right thing, he repeated every few seconds. His high profile life would take its toll on Lois and there was no way he wanted to see that happen. He'd seen what that had done to Lana and he'd be damned if he'd repeat that with Lois. He'd rather know she was living on her own terms than dancing the dance he did day in and day out. Even if it nearly killed him not seeing her.

More than once he'd found himself floating above the gallery or her building. Just a peek, he'd say to himself, just to make sure she was okay. He'd never taken a peek though. He knew if he did, he might not be able to leave her again. Instead, he scoured the art magazines, had taken a subscription to the one his mother had mentioned Lois wrote for. He absorbed any and every detail he came across, but he stayed away. He'd just hold the receiver when he caught himself about to call her. He'd put the cell phones he'd purchased in the drawer by his bed. He had planned to give her one the night of the gallery opening so they could stay in touch at all times, not wanting to play the game they had those first few days. Sure, they both already had cell phones, could have easily exchanged numbers. But there would have been something special about them having a matching pair.

Did that sound desperate? Foolish? Childish?

Whatever it was, it didn't matter now. He should have returned them; he just hadn't been able to bring himself to do it. He'd look at them from time to time, imagining what she would have said about them.

'Sheez, Clark, trying to keep tabs on me?!' He could just picture her teasing smile.

It had been weeks since he'd seen her, weeks since he'd felt whole. He finally turned to his writing to give himself a slight reprieve.

Lois had watched with the world as Clark announced that he would not be a father any time soon. Apparently Lana Lang had not been pregnant at all. While Lois was sorry to hear of the woman's misfortune, she was incredibly relieved that a certain super man had not created life with his ex. For a brief moment she was ashamed of herself. But she just couldn't help how she felt.

Then she was painfully reminded that Clark had walked away. She'd told him flatly that she still wanted him, baby or no baby. Well, that's what she'd meant. And he'd still walked away.

The days ticked off. Fall faded to winter. Snow covered the ground. Christmas was right around the corner. She'd had two more gallery openings for up-and-comers. She spoke with Martha Kent often — sold some of her artwork, was even planning an opening for her after the New Year. Superman patrolled the skies. And Clark Kent was about to release another book.

The shadows that had surrounded him had faded to something he appeared to be able to manage, but he never looked very happy. She saw him on the news almost daily, craved that simple connection. It wasn't very healthy, she knew, but she had to see him. She had to know he was okay.

But he wasn't okay. His eyes were haunted now. He always looked as if he were searching for something. Too many times that expression — like he was lost — had nearly caused her to go to him. She'd slammed her phone down more than once when she'd almost called him. As much as she loved him and missed him, she just couldn't bring herself to cross that line. Clark was the one who needed to take that step first. And by the lack of calls, that

wasn't going to happen.

The reporters didn't follow her around any more. She'd noticed they didn't follow Clark around as much, opting instead to report mostly on his super side. It probably had a lot to do with the way he'd handled the press lately. He'd insisted that he was just an ordinary guy like the next Joe on the street. He needed his privacy as much as anyone, and if they'd allow him a bit, he'd make sure they stayed well informed. Amazingly they'd respected that and had mostly left him alone. Though now and then the public couldn't resist. His new book was due out in two days and that was big news. The rumors were that this one was a romance novel, and the world was more than a little curious to know what Superman considered romantic. Early reviews would be released today. And no matter how many times she'd told herself that she wasn't that interested, she could hardly wait to see what he'd written. She'd been able to know the man like no one else and knew that whatever he'd penned would be incredible.

The phone rang, causing her to jump. She'd been staring out the window of the gallery, watching the snow fall, lost in her thoughts.

"Lane Gallery."

"Guess what I got today! Just delivered a second ago," came the voice of Scott over the line.

"Hey you!"

"Guess!" he insisted excitedly.

"What?"

"An advance copy of Clark's new book! He signed it, too. The dedication reads: 'For some of the most wonderful people I've ever met.' And Lois, it's about you!"

"What?"

"The book ... Clark wrote a romance novel! I knew I loved that man!"

Lois chuckled softly. Scott was one of a kind. The bell rang on the door and she turned to see a delivery man.

"Hold on, Scott. I need to sign for a package." She signed her name on the clipboard for the man, then dropped the heavy envelope on her desk. "I'm back."

"I can't wait to read this. I'm taking the rest of the day off."

"Well, enjoy it."

"I will. I'll call you." And he cut the connection.

Lois laughed softly at his enthusiasm. Then she thought about what he'd said. He'd gotten an advance copy of Clark's book. She was a little envious. Why had Clark sent Scott a copy? She could understand him not sending her one. Really she could.

But ... Had Scott really said the book was about her?

It couldn't be. Why would he write a book about her? He'd left her!

Damn him! Why would he do that?

Come on, Lois, you don't really know if it's about you, she berated herself mentally. Scott just got that impression because Clark's such a good writer.

And with that, she shook away those thoughts and opened the package that had just been delivered. There, in her hands, was a copy of Clark's new book. It was titled simply: 'My Inspiration'.

Scott hadn't mentioned that there was a dedication just for her. On the inside of the first page were the words: 'I'd barely met you, barely breathed your name before you had become 'my inspiration'. To Lois with the deepest meaning.' He hadn't said love, but that's what he'd meant. She sighed softly, warm tears making tracks down her cheeks. If he felt that way, why would he stay away from

her?

Turning another page she read the dedication Scott had mentioned. And after two more pages, she jumped to her feet and locked the door, displaying the 'closed' sign. She settled again behind her desk with her prize and began to read.

Lois became so engrossed in her reading that she didn't see the slow trickle of reporters that had begun to gather outside the gallery. When she finally looked up, there was a throng gathered in wait. She should have closed the blinds. Maybe they wouldn't have known she was in here. And she knew exactly why they were out there.

Clark had penned some of the most beautiful words she'd ever read. He'd written a tale about a lonely man, convinced he'd never find love. By chance the man had met a woman who literally stole his breath away. She, and her incredible friends, had shown him that some people still cared about those close to them. He'd rewritten their weekend together. But his take had a much better ending — she'd skipped ahead to find out if the characters he'd created found happiness.

Damn him! How many times had she thought that today? If he felt this way, why in hell did he stay away?

"Oh, damn," she muttered about the relentless mass on the other side of her window. She pushed her book back into the envelope, gathered her things, and steeled her nerves to face the music waiting outside.

"Ms. Lane, what are your feelings about Clark Kent's new book?" came the first question the time she stepped outside.

"I'm thrilled for him," she said truthfully. "I wish him every success."

But they weren't buying her practiced ignorance. "How do you feel about the book being about you?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Clark's a professional writer."

"We saw you reading it and the dedication is to you. I quote, 'To Lois with the deepest meaning.' You can't possibly deny it's about you."

Lois stopped her trek through the fresh snow and you could have heard a pin drop. They all waited anxiously for her to respond. "Clark and I were friends. I'm touched he felt our friendship precious enough to earn a dedication for his new book."

"Were you the one who dumped him?" came another shout. "He clearly has feelings for you. Come on, Lane. Shoot us straight."

"You want straight?" she clipped out between clenched teeth, finally pushed to her breaking point. "Not too long ago, you bottom feeders had dubbed me a home wrecker and a baby killer. When you found out there was never a baby in the first place, you hounded poor Lana Lang to death. Clark had to literally make a deal with you devils to get you to back off. You read the reviews of his new book and now I'm back to ... what? 'Superman's secret love'?" She waited, as if expecting an answer, but not one reporter breathed a word. "One minute he's a saint. The next he's the biggest sinner. Why can't you just leave him the hell alone?!" She huffed her indignation before continuing her trek.

She'd said too much. They really would crucify her now. And poor Clark ...

Damn! I'll probably have to call and apologize for this, she thought as she made her way carefully up the stairs of her building. At least she'd shut up when she had or she'd have been apologizing for a lot more. It was because of

them that she and Clark were apart. Their incessant need to know every move Superman made kept him from telling her all the things he'd told the woman in his book.

But she knew now. She knew exactly how he felt. If he never said the words to her aloud, he'd said them very clearly through the lines of his book.

Pushing her way inside her apartment, she dropped her bag on the sofa before taking her book to her bedroom. She'd order take-out and finish reading how she'd inspired her super man.

The reviews were through the roof, just as Franklin Stern had predicted. Clark had not formally commented on the writing, choosing instead to say 'judge for yourself'. That was all the press had gotten. And he'd seen Lois' outburst on television several times. The press had gone wild, speculations becoming more outrageous by the day about the true nature of their relationship. She'd been brilliant and for the briefest moment, he'd almost changed his mind. Lois was very capable of handling herself with the press. And by the things she'd said, maybe she was willing to do it.

Yeah, she'd told him as much that day in the gallery. But it would eventually become too much and he'd lose her all over again. He wasn't sure he could do that.

So, he'd chosen casual attire — gray slacks and a black pullover. He would be signing copies of his book in the lobby of Stern Publishing today. His book had only had a limited release until today, but it had been received exceptionally well. The Planet had dubbed this book his best yet. Others had said they wanted more.

He had more — a lot more. Writing was the only way he could explore a relationship with Lois. And he'd explored quite a bit. He had enough for at least two more books, and he wrote more every day. When he wrote, he could say all those things to Lois he never could in person. He could love her in the pages of his writing. And he did so freely and completely. He carved a life filled with love and happiness, all in prose.

He glanced down at the sidewalk. A line stretched all the way down around the corner- folks waiting in the cold for his signature on their book. While he was pleased so many had come out, he wasn't very pleased they had to wait outside.

He landed softly among the whispers and shouts of the waiting crowd. He waved and smiled as he made his way toward the door. Once inside he insisted Mr. Stern open up the huge reception hall to allow those waiting to come in from the cold. Not only were they allowed in, Mr. Stern had already set out the hot chocolate and donuts. Clark went right to work signing books. He spoke with everyone, thanked them for buying his book, and stopped occasionally for a picture. He refused to leave until every last book was signed. Morning began to wind its way into afternoon.

Offering the young lady before him a smile as she moved away, it faded when he saw the next person approach the table. "Scott!"

"You didn't give me your damn number, so I had to come all the way down here just to see you!"

Clark chuckled softly and stood up to greet his friend. "It's good to see you."

"And you ... look at you — all buff and beautiful in your twill shirt."

Scott was definitely one of a kind. "Did you get the book?"

"Did I get the book? I've read the dang thing like ten

times already.” He held up his prized possession for him to see. “And look at the groupies I brought with me.”

For the first time Clark saw Deb, Dave, Trish, and Mike standing behind the markers. “It’s okay,” he told the security guard. They can come in.” He rounded the table so he could accept the hug Deb was offering. He received another from Trish, shook hands with Dave, and gave Mike a high five. They were all talking at the same time, but he finally focused on Mike.

“Tasha loved the flight. Thanks, Clark.”

“You’re welcome.” He’d indeed kept his promise to his young friend. He’d taken Tasha flying, spent the afternoon playing with her and her siblings, then gave her parents the number to the Superman Foundation so they could get help to find a better place to live. He’d since visited her again at her new apartment not far from his Clinton Street address.

“So, are you going to sign these or not?” Scott held out his book with a grin.

“I believe I’ve signed those already,” he pointed out.

“And?”

He shook his head with a grin, but took the first book to write another inscription in it before moving on to the others. He also wrote his phone number in each one. None breathed a word as they looked at what he’d written.

“I want my kick-back,” Scott told him as he shook his hand again.

“The check’s in the mail,” Clark replied with a laugh.

“Seriously,” the other man added. “Barrett’s, Friday night at seven. And before you say no, not one of us cares about all those cameras.”

“We consider you a friend, Clark,” Deb put in. “A hundred photographers won’t change that.”

Clark hesitated momentarily, then nodded. “I’ll be there.” He hadn’t seen any of these people since the weekend at the lake and if they considered him a friend, he needed to act like one. Besides, he wanted to be friends with them. Maybe it was time to take a chance or two.

“Good, ‘cause you’re buying the first round.” Scott left Clark laughing softly as he headed for the door, his newly signed book tucked under his arm.

He said his good-byes to everyone else, apologizing for not keeping in touch. As he watched them leave, he found himself looking forward to Friday night. Maybe they were right. He alone had carved out his self-imposed prison because of his celebrity. If he wanted anything different, he’d have to be the one to change that.

After another hour of signing books, it seemed the crowd had become a trickle. He was concentrating on something lying on the table when a voice said, “It took me all day to convince myself to come down here.”

He looked up to see Lucy Lane.

“I owe you an apology.” She held up her hand when he went to say something. “I didn’t realize what she meant to you until I read your book. And I sure as hell never imagined you meant so much to her. I guess ... I guess I saw you as untouchable. Because you’re this huge deal, I figured no way you’d fall for little ole Lois Lane. It’s like ...” She stopped, her eyes welling with tears. “But I’ve seen the damage I’ve caused and I’m truly sorry. I’ve also realized that you’re not just the next celebrity on the street. You’re a very special person. And my sister’s not just little ole Lois Lane. She’s incredible and special and she deserves a great guy.” She wiped her eyes and took a breath. “I’m so sorry. Please accept my apology.”

And before he could say a word, Lucy walked away. Thank goodness the press hadn’t been allowed in today.

He’d insisted on that. His readers deserved to have his undivided attention and that wouldn’t have happened with cameras flashing in his face all day. But now he was glad he’d made that decision for other reasons. There was no way he wanted Lucy’s confession splashed all over the front page of the papers.

He glanced around at the curious stares. It was bad enough that a few of the people closest to the table had probably heard what she said. Yet, he was surprised at the expressions on those faces gazing at him. They all looked as if they were about to cry — almost if they were happy for him, in a strange sort of way. A woman offered him a knowing smile, giving him the courage to finish his day. He cleared his throat and called the next person in line. He’d think about what Lucy had said later. It would probably be all he’d think about.

There were only a few more signatures before he called it a day. He headed out into the snowy night, recalling all the wonderful praises he’d heard that day. But what had really gotten him were the looks. They all knew how he’d felt — how he still felt. Of course, he’d known they would. He’d put it all out there in the open for the world to know. But the only opinion he truly cared about was the one he might never know.

He’d been right. He was his own prisoner. He alone chose to distance himself from others for fear of how they would handle being dragged into the press. Deb had pointed out to him, albeit painfully, on Friday night that it wasn’t his choice to make. He had to give others that option, just as it had been with Lana.

And that was what he feared most. He would lay himself out there, fall even deeper than he was now — if that was possible — only to have her decide later that being in the spotlight was too much. How would he live through that? How could he possibly share himself so completely, then lose that?

How could he stop himself from trying? Scott had been the one to ask that question. Somewhere after hello their conversation had turned toward his decision to stay away from Lois. And they knew it was *his* decision. They were Lois’ friends, too. She probably hadn’t volunteered a thing. This crowd had a way of drawing it out of you. They’d been respectful of his privacy at the lake, but now that he was a full fledged member of their group, the gloves were off. They hadn’t held back a single punch either.

‘Just talk to her’, Deb had told him. ‘Didn’t he want the things he’d written about in his book?’

Things weren’t like they were in fantasy, he’d pointed out.

‘And they never would be if he didn’t even try.’ Dave had been the one to put it into perspective. He’d been right, too. He’d never know how things could be if he didn’t try.

Could he do that? Could he try? Would Lois give him that chance? Obviously she still cared or Deb and the others wouldn’t have been so intent on convincing him to see her.

God, how he wanted to see her, hear her speak, touch her. He still had those first messages she’d left on his machine. He played them so he could hear her voice. But it wasn’t the same as standing across from her, watching her expressions change, feeling her excitement.

Clark found himself unable to function another day without speaking to Lois. He picked up the cordless phone and eased out onto his balcony. He dialed a number he’d never forget.

“Hi! You’ve missed me. I have something pressing

somewhere else right now. If it's Wednesday, I'm at the gym. If it's Nunk, no comment." He smiled at that. "Oh, and if this, by some small miracle, happens to be Clark, you know where I'm at. Come see me." There was a pause and he expected to hear the beep. Instead, he heard, "And, Farm boy, I ... I love you." The beep blared in his ear, but he couldn't say a word. He just stared at the phone. That was the first time he'd actually heard those words. He'd known how she'd felt. She'd made that clear in the gallery that day. He'd actually used her 'moment of wonderful' line in his book. Hearing her say it though, was breathtaking. Yeah, Deb and the others had said she still cared, but he hadn't honestly expected it to be true.

He clicked the phone off without leaving a message. What did he say to that? Oh, hi. It's Clark. I love you, too? Scott would probably say that was exactly what he should say.

Pushing to his feet, he dropped the phone and shot into the air. Flying always seemed to help him clear his head.

He'd done a heck of a lot of flying over the past few months.

Friday night found him pacing the floor of his apartment, his mind replaying the message on Lois' machine again and again. He'd told himself that it was just an old message she'd forgotten to change. And when he felt he'd go mad, he snatched up the phone to prove it to himself.

"Sorry. Gone again. If it's Friday, I'm trying to keep Scott from driving home drunk. Still no comment, Nunk. I'll be at the lake until Sunday night, so you'll have a wait for me to get back to you." A pause. "And, Farm boy, I haven't changed my mind yet."

It hadn't been an old message. She'd recorded it on purpose. Did she mean it? Why hadn't she tried to see him?

"Easy, lunkhead," he said aloud. "You basically blew her off. She's been giving you time." He sighed and sank down onto the sofa. "What now, Kent?"

Clark paced back and forth outside Lois' building. She wasn't home yet; he'd already checked. "This is crazy," he told himself. Just go home, he thought. She doesn't need you. She doesn't deserve being stuck in your shadow. He'd convinced himself again that Lois was better off without him and had turned to walk down the sidewalk, when he heard her.

"Leaving without saying hi?"

He froze, his heart thundering loudly in his chest. As if his feet had a mind of their own, he turned to face her. His breath left him in a rush. She was more beautiful than he remembered. "Hi," he managed lamely.

"Hi, yourself," she told him with a smile.

God, how he loved to see that smile. After everything that had happened, he instantly relaxed. "I was just ... in the neighborhood."

She eyed him closely, not for one moment convinced. "Signing autographs for the new book?"

"Ah ... I guess not," he finally said with the hint of a smile, thrusting his hands into his pockets. Both stood there as fresh snow began to fall.

"So ...," Lois said.

"Yeah ..." He looked up at her, then down the street. "I should probably let you get inside. It's starting to come down pretty good."

Lois looked up to watch the flakes dance in the lights. "Yeah." But she didn't move.

Clark had been studying the ground again, terrified to

look at her. What did he say to her? Sorry I broke your heart? Yeah, well, mine's been killing me, too. He decided instead on, "I, ah, I saw Scott and Deb and the others."

"Deb told me ... and I saw the pictures." She gave a short snort of laughter. "Loved what Scott told the press."

"Yeah," Clark agreed with a slight grin. When asked if he was part of the group of people Clark had mentioned in the dedication in his book, he replied, 'Of course not, I'm Lois.' The poor photographer had been so stunned he hadn't known what to say. Clark had let the guy off the hook by saying Scott was a friend and that he expected the media to respect his privacy. Amazingly, none of the group had been given the mud treatment ... yet.

Both seemed lost in thought, then Lois cleared her throat. "Would you like to come up for coffee?"

Clark lifted his head, his eyes searching hers for any uncertainty. All he saw was hope glistening in her wide, expectant eyes. He'd missed those eyes! "Ah ... are you sure?"

She just looked at him, as if searching his for that same hesitation. Finally she smiled and moved toward the stairs. "I'm sure. Besides, some of us are not as super as others. My tush is starting to get numb." And she started the climb toward the door.

He could only shake his head in amusement. He'd definitely missed this woman! By the time she reached the landing, he was there to open the door for her.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," he replied and waited until she was inside before following. He stomped his feet briefly to rid his shoes of loose snow before heading toward the elevator. His heart was pounding against his chest at the mere thought of spending time alone with Lois. He'd been away from her for so long it almost seemed like the first time they'd met.

Although, he couldn't remember being this nervous. Hell, he'd kissed her on their second meeting ever!

The elevator opened, and ever the gentleman, Clark held up his hand for Lois to enter first. Once inside the close confines, the sound of her rapidly beating heart invaded his hearing. Apparently she was as nervous as he was.

"Going home for Christmas?" Lois asked, probably to break the deafening silence.

"Yeah. My parents are coming off the road until after the New Year." Martha and Jonathan had still been traveling.

"She tells me they're having the time of their lives."

"I know. I have to leave messages for her to call me. I can never get her."

"Same here," Lois told him as the doors opened to deposit them on her floor.

She stepped off and Clark had to force himself to look at her back. His hearing hadn't been the only thing affected in the small space. Her shampoo, her shower gel, the soft scent that was uniquely Lois had rushed around him with unforgiving force. Super willpower alone had been the only thing that kept him from ravishing her on the spot.

"This is me." Her voice pulled him back to the present, and he realized they'd walked to the end of the hall.

501. Of course, he already knew which apartment was hers. She'd told him before she'd left his place that fateful weekend.

"Are you coming in?"

He realized he'd been just standing in the hall and she'd already gone inside. "Sorry," he said softly. Her apartment

was small. They'd entered the living room. Off to the right was the kitchen. Beyond it he could see a doorway — one he could only assume was a hallway that led to the bedrooms. There were several photographs hanging on her walls, so he ventured in to get a look. Lois had put her coat away in a closet and headed for the kitchen.

There were images of Lois and Lucy, a man he assumed was her father. There were also pictures of a woman who could only be Lois' mother. Lois looked a lot like her. He couldn't help but smile at the skinny, little dark-haired girl she'd once been.

"I forgot those were up there."

He glanced over at her. "You were a cute kid," he couldn't help but say.

"I'm still a cute kid."

That made him chuckle softly. And he certainly couldn't deny it. "You've seen pictures of me when I was younger. It's only fair I see these."

"Is that how it works?"

"Yep," he answered as he continued to move around the room. Now that he was here he couldn't stop himself from learning even more about the woman he already felt he knew so well. She had a few houseplants, even if they did look a little worse for wear. Her television was an older model and there was a DVD player. She liked old soap operas and romantic comedies, he noted of her movie collection. One long sofa with reclining ends was flanked by two beautiful tables. A matching coffee table was piled high with various art magazines. The wall to the left of the door was comprised of a long window that led out to a small balcony. In the left corner was another sitting area consisting of a rocker, a small table, and a lamp. She wasn't a smoker, but he already knew that. The dust that covered the tables was testament that she wasn't home much either.

He stopped his perusal at the large display case against the wall separating the living area from the kitchen. The case held several art awards. And ...

"You won a gold medal!" he said in surprise looking up at her. She hadn't told him that.

"Swimming," she replied with a shrug, then turned toward the kitchen.

Why hadn't she shared this with him? She'd shared so much. Curiosity made him follow her until he was standing across the counter from her. "Why didn't you tell me about that?"

For a moment she didn't answer as she prepared their coffee. When she pushed his across, she finally looked up at him. "My mother taught me to swim when I was three. She loved swimming. By the time I was six, I felt the same way. I'd been competing for two years when Mom died. But she'd always tell me, 'Lo, one of these days you're gonna win us a gold medal'. I didn't swim for a year after she died. Then I found some old papers. Mom had won a spot on the Olympic team. I found out from Daddy that her father wouldn't let her go. So ..." She shrugged again and lifted her mug to her lips.

"You went for her," Clark finished her sentence, new awe of this woman washing over him. She answered with a sad smile. As he followed her to sit at the table, he realized that her mom was the one thing she hadn't talked about during their weekend together. Other than telling him she'd died, Lois hadn't said anything else about her. They sat in silence for a moment before Clark said, "Guess I know not to challenge you to a swim race."

After a beat, Lois started to laugh. "Somehow I don't think you'd have a tough time winning."

"Maybe not," he agreed with a soft laugh of his own.

He took a sip of his coffee, but couldn't help sneaking a glance at Lois. His nerves had calmed a bit since they'd entered her apartment, but now that he didn't have anything to concentrate on, he wasn't sure what to say.

"I read your book," she offered without looking over at him.

What did she think about it? He wanted to know, but his lips wouldn't cooperate to ask her.

"Is that how you feel?"

Boy, she didn't beat around the bush! "Yes," he whispered, his eyes cast downward. Why was he finding it so difficult to look at her? Hadn't that been the reason for coming here? His uncontrollable urge to see her?

"Why, Clark?"

That made him lift his eyes to hers. "Why do I feel that way?"

"Why did you walk away?" Her voice was flat, unemotional, raw.

"You know why."

"No. I don't. I know you think your life is too complicated, that it's too much to force onto me. And I know you didn't give me a choice. Shouldn't I have decided if it was too much? Clark, I knew who you were when I flew to Kansas with you. I knew who you were when I asked you to go away with me."

"And both times we had to sneak around like we were doing something wrong. Do you know how I felt doing that?"

"Did I ask you to do it?"

He clamped his mouth closed and looked back down at his coffee.

"We could have had dinner in the middle of LNN for all I care."

"Then we'd never be here," he said softly.

"How do you know? You're so sure I'll cave under the pressure, you never gave me a chance. I've been hounded relentlessly and we aren't even seeing one another." She paused. "And I'm here," she said just as softly as he had.

Slowly he lifted his head to look at her. Weeks of pain and longing caused his eyes to well with tears.

"You could have come," she whispered, her own eyes welling up.

"I was so stupid," he proclaimed.

"Lunkheaded?"

He chuckled softly and wiped his eyes. "Very lunkheaded," he agreed after he'd composed himself a bit. "So," he began as he looked back down at his coffee. "Want to ... have dinner tomorrow night in the middle of LNN?" He slowly lifted his eyes back to hers as he spoke.

Lois smiled. "I'll call Nunk."

That caused him to grin widely. Nunk was a relentless reporter who had grown fond of hounding Lois. "And you can bet he'd be there." They both laughed for a moment before he pushed up straighter in his chair so that he could lean over on the table. "You really want to do this?"

He watched as she pushed her hand across the table to cover his. "I really want *you*."

The only thing he could do was stare into her dark eyes. She meant what she said. "I've missed you," he admitted, the only thing he could say. And it was so true. He'd missed this woman so much he'd been physically ill.

"And I've missed you," she replied as she squeezed his hand.

Clark slowly turned his palm up so that he could hold her as well. "It'll be a media event."

“It’ll be a relief.”

That caused him to furrow his brows in confusion. Of all the things he’d thought about their relationship becoming public, relief wasn’t one of them.

“I can finally breathe again,” she told him in answer to his silent question.

She was right. He’d been able to breathe again the moment he’d laid eyes on her tonight. “I’m sorry,” he offered, the only thing he knew to say.

“Yeah, well, you can make it up to me.” She gave him a sly smile and wagged her brows.

Clark laughed again. God, how he’d missed this woman. He glanced down at their joined hands again. If they were really going to do this, then they were going to do it right. “So, Ms. Lane, would you like to fly or should I pick you up in a car?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I only date men who fly.” She leaned her chin over on her free hand and grinned at him.

He grinned back. This was going to be the start of the best adventure of his life, he decided. And this woman was going to be high maintenance. “Seven too early?”

“Not early enough,” she answered.

Definitely not early enough. Could they go tonight? A glance at the clock told him it was much too late to go out. And much too late for him to be keeping her up. He hated to leave her, but he needed to. He needed to give her time and space to think about what she’d agreed to. He needed her to think about it and have time to change her mind. There was a big difference in telling someone you love them on a recorded message and putting yourself out there for the world to see. Once that reality set in ...

The thought of her changing her mind was too painful for him to consider. Yet, it was a very real possibility and he had to know.

“As much as I hate to say goodnight ...” he began without releasing her hand.

“Yeah,” she agreed. They sat there for another moment or two before she pulled on his hand. “Come on. I’ll walk you to the door.”

Relief flooded through him. He couldn’t have made the first move to leave if he’d wanted to, no matter what he needed to do. She continued to hold his hand until they reached the door.

“Don’t be late,” she told him.

“Not a chance,” he assured her. And while he had the nerve, he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. He was about to reach for the door with his free hand when it opened. In stepped Lucy.

She stopped, staring at the couple with wide eyes for a moment before realization set in. “Oh ...” she croaked, her eyes flashing from Lois to Clark, then to their joined hands. “Oh,” she repeated. This time her voice cracked with emotion.

“Hi, Sis,” Lois said. “Clark ...”

“You came,” she breathed through her tears as she looked up at him.

He gave her a soft smile. “Yeah,” he told her as he looked over at Lois.

“Oh ...” This time it was a happy exclamation. She reached out to squeeze Lois tight, then looked up Clark. “I’ve learned my lesson. No more pictures or videos or ...”

“It’s okay, Lucy,” Clark said. “I think we’ve all learned our lesson.”

She shrieked again, obviously itching to hug Clark, too. He reached out with his free hand to indicate it was okay and she almost launched herself at him. He laughed as he

hugged her back.

“Thank you,” she whispered in his ear. Then she released him, gave Lois a knowing smile, and ran from the room.

“Sorry. She’s a little high strung,” Lois apologized.

“She’s great,” he replied, then eased into the open doorway. He reached out to cup Lois’ cheek, allowing his emotions to seep from him. When she nodded, he slowly released her hand and backed up into the hallway. He just stood there staring at her, trying to convince his feet to move. Finally, he offered her a smile, then turned and started down the hall. Behind him he heard the soft click of the door and the excited squeals of the two women inside. He couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across his face. With a new spring in his step, he headed toward Clinton Street.

Lucy had been peeping around the kitchen wall and when Lois closed the door she stepped into the living room. When Lois turned, they exchanged a look, then burst into excited squeals. They jumped up and down hugging one another, tears rolling down their cheeks. Lucy knew what Clark being there meant to Lois and couldn’t be happier for her big sister.

“So?” Lucy wanted to know as she eased back from their embrace.

“So ... we’re going out tomorrow night,” Lois offered as she wiped her face.

“Out? In the open?”

“In the open.”

“No more secrets?” Lucy asked with a hopeful expression. “Are you ready for that?”

“Lucy, I might never get used to being in the spotlight, but I can live with *that* better than I can live without *him*.”

Lucy smiled through her tears. “I’m so happy for you, Lo.”

“And I miss him already,” Lois said as they started toward the hall.

“Rocky Road and a good tear jerker?”

“I’ll get the spoons.”

The pair settled in Lois’ bed to watch their movie, but ended up talking long into the night. Lucy promised again to keep Lois’ privacy and Lois told her little sister a few of the reasons she was crazy about Clark Kent. When Lois finally closed her eyes that night, she slept soundly for the first time in months.

Clark had spent a few hours the night before flying for a very different reason. Pure elation. He felt as if his heart had been released from a vice grip. Of course, the elation gave way to apprehension. Then on to fear, worry, and back to elation again. She’d be ready. She wouldn’t back out. She just couldn’t.

Excitement brought Clark from his bed just after seven in the morning. It was all he could do not to go knock on Lois’ door. Technically, he didn’t distinguish which seven he’d meant. His good sense prevailed and he decided to be patient.

He decided on the restaurant and called ahead to reserve a table. Every piece of clothing was pulled from his closet before he chose what to wear. He flew out to order a bouquet of flowers and smiled brightly when the florist’s mouth fell open in surprise. All the preparations were finished with nearly nine hours to go.

He paced the floor. He flew to twelve rescues. He called his mother and got the answering service. He flipped

through a few magazines and looked at his watch for the millionth time. He'd showered, shaved, and saved six people, showered again, and he still had three hours to go.

Clark could clearly recall his very first date when he was fifteen. He could remember how his palms had sweated and how stupid he'd looked with that silly grin on his face. But for the life of him, he never recalled being as nervous as he was waiting for this date.

Flopping to the sofa, he wondered what Lois was doing.

Lois was standing in the middle of Kohl's dressing room trying on yet another dress.

"I don't know, Luce," she whined.

"The little black number, Sis," Lucy told her. "Trust me. He'll be speechless."

"Ya' think?" Lois asked as she held the black dress up in front of her.

"I know so." Lucy smiled over her shoulder.

Lois smiled and nodded her head. "The black one." She got dressed and paid for her purchases. She and Lucy had left the gallery early to shop. They'd decided to pick up a few last minute Christmas gifts as well. And they'd shared lunch at a little pizza place.

"I've had a blast," Lucy remarked as they made their way through the slush that covered the parking lot.

"Me, too," Lois agreed as she opened the back door of her Jeep. If she hadn't had the distraction shopping had offered, she would have gone mad. It seemed that time had come to a crawl. Seven couldn't come quick enough. She'd been home to meet Clark's parents, spent the weekend with him — in bed — and she was nervous about this date. They'd skipped this part, so she was looking forward to it.

Is that why he'd suggested it? Did he, too, feel they needed to do this? She wanted this time to reconnect with him, almost like getting to know him all over. There was nothing in the world quite like following in love. And as deeply as she already loved Clark, she was falling all over again.

Clark fingered the cell phone in his jacket pocket as he rode the elevator up to Lois' place. He'd brought them on a whim. Hopefully tonight would go well enough for him to suggest using them.

The doors opened and he took a deep breath. There had only been a couple of times he could remember sweating in his life. And most involved this woman. He wiped his hand on his jacket, then softly tapped on Lois' door. When she opened it, his breath left him in a rush.

How was it she could look better every single time he saw her? "Wow!" he breathed.

"Good wow or bad wow?" she asked.

"Good." His eyes swept down the entire length of her body before they settled on hers. "Very good," he added as he extended the roses out to her.

"Thank you," she said as she took the offered bouquet. "Let me put these in water before we go."

He stepped in behind her, his eyes following her every move. His mouth went dry when she stretched up to retrieve a vase from a high shelf. That position ... made him glad he was a man.

Mind your manners, he told himself silently and dragged his eyes away from Lois. But his super senses were on high alert. He could hear the rapid beat of her heart — a sound he'd come to love. He could smell her perfume, shampoo, and hairspray. She'd used baby powder! He almost growled in frustration.

"Ready?" she asked, holding her coat.

Oh, yeah! his excited libido screamed. But he decided to help her with her coat instead. He didn't trust his traitorous mouth. They stepped through the door and he waited while she locked up. When she reached out to take his arm, he had to force himself to remain on the ground. If he was out of control now, what would he be by the time they reached the lobby?

Lois felt almost lightheaded with her arms wrapped around his neck, the smell of his cologne working her into a frenzy. It had been strange taking off with him out in the open, but it felt incredibly liberating. She'd been amazed at how warm she was. He'd reminded her of his aura.

They'd enjoyed the short flight to Callard's, one of the nicest restaurants in the city. Clark landed directly in front, causing several people to stop and stare. He carefully set her back on her feet, then offered his arm. She took it with a smile.

"Ready?" he asked, a hint of concern written on his face.

"Ready," she assured him.

They stepped through the front door and the small crowd waiting for a table parted in awe.

"Mr. Kent!" The host rushed around to greet them.

"This is my guest, Ms. Lane," Clark announced with pride.

"Ms. Lane." The host shook her hand and bowed his head. "We have the best table for you." He turned and led them into the dining room.

Lois watched as heads began to lift. At first everyone was too stunned to make a sound. Then the soft hum of whispers began. She was surprised when the host seated them in the middle of the room.

"I figured we should go all the way," Clark answered her questioning expression.

"Good," she replied as he held her chair. "I want the world to know you're mine."

Clark took his seat and grinned at her. "I can see now you're going to be high maintenance."

"You don't know the half of it," she replied as she picked up her menu. She watched over the top, offering him a sly grin when his eyes met hers. He laughed softly before looking away.

"I think I'm looking forward to finding out," he said as he picked up his menu as well.

For his part, the poor waiter looked stunned, but he only faltered for a second. "Could I suggest a nice blush this evening?" he asked the couple.

Clark looked past his menu. "How about it? Red or white?"

"I trust your choice." She continued to peruse her menu, so he ordered their wine. "I think I'd like ..." She folded her menu and placed it on the table. "... the penne pasta with white wine sauce."

"Sounds good." Clark continued to go over his choices before he closed his menu. Lois was inspecting the forks on the table.

"Why do you suppose anyone would want to punish someone else so much?"

Her strange question caused Clark's brows to furrow in slight worry.

"I mean," she continued as she lifted her dinner fork. "One fork would be okay. Us normal forks just lick the dang thing clean between courses. Fewer dishes to wash." She put it down and looked up at Clark. "And speaking of

courses, it's all dinner to me. Give me the dang salad or not. Sometimes I'm in the mood. And I like bread with most of my meals. Dessert is always good. But still all dinner."

When she finished, Clark grinned widely. "I've missed that most," he told her as their wine arrived.

"Yeah, what can I say? I babble. And oh my God!" She snatched the bottle of wine away from the waiter, surprising him to no end. "This is like ... five hundred bucks a bottle!"

"I'm pretty sure I can cover it," Clark managed around his laughter.

"I'm not sure my simple stomach can," Lois replied as she continued to stare at the bottle. She usually just grabbed wine at the grocery store. And this was never on the shelves.

Clark reached across and grasped the bottle. "Let's see if it tastes like half a grand."

Lois felt her cheeks heat and slowly released her prize to Clark. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"Don't be," Clark offered as he poured them both a glass. "We'll be okay," he told the waiter, who had the grace to hurry away without comment.

Had she ever been this embarrassed before? It wasn't that she was poor. She was simply frugal. That's the way she'd been raised. Why pay so much for wine when you could get a good one for less? She ventured a glance at Clark.

"It's really okay."

"You've probably drunk wine even more expensive than that." She'd briefly thought of this before, but it was so easy to forget that Clark was more than just a farmer's son. He was so grounded. His *celebrity* was the root of their problems, yet she just didn't see him as ... rich!

Clark swirled the wine around in his glass. "I guess maybe I have." He set the goblet down without taking a drink. "I took an expensive bottle of wine home once."

Lois felt herself relax slightly. She could just imagine what Martha had said.

"Mom drank a glass, then put the cork back in. She told me that she knew what money tasted like, but she still preferred the priceless stuff." Clark grinned — that grin he had when he was remembering something he was especially fond of. "The priceless stuff is what you can get with the change in your pocket on your way out to your favorite picnic spot with someone you love. It took me all night, but I finally figured out that she'd drank cheap wine many times while I was growing up. And to this day I love picnics."

She wanted to melt all over her chair. She could actually feel the love this man had for his mother. "Your mom is so great," Lois told him as she leaned over on the table. And she was. During the short time she'd known Martha Kent, Lois had come to love her almost as much as she loved her son.

"Yeah ..." Clark, too, leaned closer. "They toasted with paper cups and a bottle of wine that cost two bucks the night Dad asked her to marry him. They still have the rest of that bottle in the wine cabinet."

They stared at one another for a moment before Lois finally began to feel the many eyes watching them. She glanced around, but remarkably all the gawking didn't bother her as badly as she'd thought it would. She guessed the reason was the man across from her. She was certainly more interested in him than everyone else.

"Does this bother you?"

Clark's question snapped her back to attention. He was holding his wine glass. "What?"

"We can order something else."

"Clark ..." Glancing around again, she felt a little too far away from him. She leaned over on the table again. "It doesn't bother me. It just took me by surprise. You're a ... farm boy from Kansas — at least that's who I met. I know you bought some very expensive art in my gallery, but you're just ... Clark. I know you can afford expensive wine. It's just ..." She sighed when she couldn't quite find the words.

"I think I understand."

"Do you? To me, you're ... Clark."

"I think I like being *Clark*," he said with a grin.

"I like you being Clark," she said as she smiled back.

They looked at one another for a moment before Lois lifted her glass. "Let's see if this stuff is priceless." She slowly sipped the dark liquid, her eyes never leaving his. Taking another sip, she finally set the glass back on the table. She continued to stare at the man across from her. "Definitely priceless." And she didn't mean the wine.

"Lois," Clark whispered, his expression longing. Before either could get lost in the moment, the waiter was back. They ordered their meals, then settled into comfortable conversation.

Clark held Lois' coat while she slipped it on. His hands lingered briefly on her shoulders before he removed them. He was curious to know what Lois thought about all the eyes that had been on them tonight. He'd chosen Callard's because he'd known that while everyone would look, no one would approach them. And the restaurant had a policy about the press being allowed in — they weren't. The upscale eatery catered to many celebrities and wanted each one to feel they could relax during their meal. He'd overheard a few whispers, all of which had been supportive of their hero's date.

"Come again, Mr. Kent," the host told him one last time.

"Thank you."

"And good night, Ms. Lane."

"Good night." She smiled brightly before reaching out for Clark's arm.

"I know it's cold out," Clark began as they passed through the doors. "But how would you like to walk a bit? They keep the sidewalk clear for most of this block."

"That sounds nice. And if I get cold, you can wrap your arm around me."

He chuckled softly at the expression she gave him. "I guess I can." They stepped out onto the sidewalk, then headed toward the entertainment district. It was after nine, which meant the nightlife was just getting cranked up. Several people passed them before they realized who they were. They'd stop and stare. Some would whisper. Clark smiled when one man whispered, "Way to go, Superman."

"It seems people like us together," Lois said to break the silence.

"Do you have super hearing, too?" Clark asked.

"I can tell by their expressions. They're stunned, then they looked pleased."

He watched a few people react to their presence.

"You're right."

"Hey, you two. How about a picture for the society section?"

Clark pulled them to a stop when he recognized that voice. He turned to see Jimmy Olsen approaching them with a huge smile on his face. "Jimmy!"

"Good to see you, bro!" Jimmy grabbed Clark in a bear

hug before releasing him. “I’ve got the goods on the Bolo organization.”

“Good for you!” Clark grasped Jimmy’s shoulder, then turned toward Lois. “Lois Lane, this is Jimmy Olsen.”

“She doesn’t need an introduction.” Jimmy reached out to take her hand. “This is who you need to see if you want to make a name for yourself in the art world.” And with that he pulled Lois in for a hug. “And the lady who makes my brother smile,” he whispered in her ear.

Lois squeezed her eyes tight and offered Jimmy a smile when he drew back. “It’s good to meet you, Jimmy. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Don’t believe a word of it,” Jimmy said as he ribbed Clark with his elbow. “This guy’s full of it.”

Of all the people to interrupt his evening, this was the one Clark hadn’t thought of. Jimmy had been skipping across the country and in and out of South America covering a story for the Planet. He’d spoken with him on the phone and had flown down once to talk. Jimmy definitely knew who Lois was.

“Please tell me you’re in town for a while,” Clark said to his old friend.

“Home for good if I have anything to say about it. I’m ready to cover the local beat.”

“Nothing around here but Superman stories,” Clark joked.

“I think I can live with that,” Jimmy answered. He reached out to wrap his arm around Lois’ shoulder and set them walking back down the sidewalk. “So, please tell me this guy’s not too cheap to provide you with a proper ride home.”

Lois laughed softly. “He makes me ride coach. Can you believe that?”

“Sadly, yeah. I can.” Jimmy shook his head. “Shame on you, Clark. This lady deserves first class.”

“Absolutely,” Clark agreed, his lonely hands tucked into his pockets. He was more than thrilled to turn his date over for a bit. She was in very good hands.

“Dewey McGregor’s work is remarkable,” Jimmy said, suddenly very serious. “My mom became a fan when a friend gave her one of his paintings for Christmas. Said she bought it when Dewey was peddling his paintings on the sidewalk.”

“That’s where I found him. He was set up on the far end of Market Row one day. My sister ran into him – literally — while she was getting coffee. She was crazy over one of his paintings and dragged me down to see it. The rest is history.”

“And a long one it’s going to be,” Jimmy put in. “I have a beautiful little gem; I think you discovered this work more recently. A shadow box of a newsroom.”

“She’s amazing,” Lois told him of her newest find.

“Mine was a Christmas gift the year I started at the Planet.”

“Hang on to it. It’ll be priceless one day.”

“It already is,” Jimmy told her. He brought them to a stop outside what was obviously a dance club. “This is my stop. I have to see if I can find my future wife.” Everyone laughed. “Make this louse take care of you.”

Lois glanced back at Clark. “I think I’ll be okay.”

“Yeah,” Jimmy agreed as he looked over at Clark.

“When you get ready to comment, I’d love to write the article.”

“Do you have a camera?” Lois asked him.

“I wouldn’t be much of a photographer if I didn’t,” he said as he extracted a digital camera from his pocket.

“Why don’t you take the first picture?”

Clark’s brows rose in surprise, but he automatically took Lois’ outstretched hand.

“Is that okay?” she asked Clark.

“Sure.” He’d like nothing more than for his friend to be the one to take the first picture of Superman and his date. His breath hissed slightly through his teeth when Lois wrapped her arm around his waist. It felt so good to have her this close again. His arm immediately pulled her closer.

“To heck with the society page. Look out front page,” Jimmy said as he began to click off a few shots. “Now my wife will have to wait while I make the deadline for tomorrow.” He said it as if he were upset, but his expression told them he was more than pleased. “Keep it real,” he told Clark as he hugged him again. “I’ll call you tomorrow. We’ve got to hit the courts this week. I’m way too rusty.”

“I’ll be there,” Clark assured him.

“Lois ...” He hugged Lois again, conveying in the hug all he needed to say. When he pulled back, he offered them a smile before hurrying in the opposite direction.

“Are you sure you’re okay with that?” Clark asked as he looked down at Lois.

“Very,” she replied as she urged him to walk again.

He was surprised when she didn’t drop her arm, but was all too happy to keep her tucked against his side. They walked in silence for while. He took in the lights twinkling brilliantly all around them, reminding him that Christmas was just days away. This year would certainly be different, he mused. He had someone to share his holiday. Of course, he was flying home and Lois had Lucy and her father.

“What does Christmas look like at the Lane house?” he asked, curious to know if his day was going to be bleaker than he first thought.

“We go to Daddy’s. Eat breakfast, open gifts, cook a little. In my case, keep the dishes washed.”

Clark chuckled. “Just the three of you?”

“I think Daddy’s girlfriend might be there this year.”

He nodded, his mind already picturing his day. The day he wanted to have. “Do you think Daddy and Lucy would ... spend their Christmas on a Kansas farm?”

Lois looked up at him. “What?”

“We have a small house on the edge of the grove. It was built for hired hands years ago. Mom keeps it up for when Aunt Opal visits. I could fly all of you out for an old fashioned Christmas you’d never forget.”

“Oh yeah? Just what does a Kent Christmas look like?”

“Well, I usually fly out two weeks before and go out with Dad to cut the tree. It’ll be a little late this year because they’re traveling. But we’ll get it up. I’ve already flown out and put up the ten million lights my mom insists on every year. We have traffic on our road because of the display.” Lois laughed. “On Christmas Eve we have a huge party in the barn for all of our friends. Last year there was just over sixty people there. Santa comes and everything. Superman’s offered rides, but everybody keeps insisting they’d rather spend time with their friend, Clark.”

“I’ll bet that makes you feel pretty good.”

“Incredible,” he admitted. He squeezed Lois’ shoulder slightly. “Mom and Dad are treated to breakfast in bed.”

“What? No excited little boy running down to see what Santa left?” Lois teased.

“Not since I was fifteen. That was the year I started giving back.”

“And after breakfast?” she coaxed.

“We start cooking. We usually eat by noon. The Olsens come over and once we’re so full we can’t move, we open

gifts. We watch 'It's a Wonderful Life' and nap in the afternoon. The Olsens usually head home around dinner time — stacked with plates. We eat in front of the TV, talk, laugh, then turn in for the night."

"Sounds wonderful."

"So, you'll come?" He looked down at her with a hopeful expression. "I wouldn't dream of asking you to come alone. You should be with your family on Christmas."

"I'll talk to Daddy. Lucy will be packed in two seconds."

Clark laughed with her. He could just picture the younger sister- speechless and excited all at once. They'd reached the corner and when they made the turn, three or four people were coming their way. Clark immediately recognized them as reporters. "I think we have company."

"We knew it couldn't stay quiet all night."

"Yeah, but I don't think I'm quite ready to share you." Clark wrapped his other arm around her and they began their ascent.

"Ah, come on, Kent!" came the frustrated voice of one of the men below.

"Maybe next time, guys," he called, then headed them across the city from above. While he had her up here, he decided to show her all of the beautiful lights.

Clark reluctantly released Lois' hand for her to open her door. She turned to offer him a brilliant smile. She must be the most beautiful woman alive, Clark thought, not for the first time tonight.

"Want to come in?" she asked.

Did he? He wanted to do more than that. But he quickly reined in his wayward thoughts. "I'm going to be a gentleman and say goodnight."

"You don't have to," she assured him.

"And I don't want to," he was quick to tell her as he reached up to cup her cheek. "I just think ..."

"I know," she whined as she closed her eyes and leaned into his touch.

Wow, Clark thought as he absorbed every bit of energy flowing from her. "Tomorrow," he managed around the thick lump of regret and longing lodged in his throat.

"Promise?" she asked as she opened her eyes to look at him.

"Promise." He slowly dropped his hand. "Oh ..." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a shiny new cell phone. "Don't take this the wrong way. I'm not trying to ... keep tabs on you or anything. And I'm pretty sure that we'll be seeing a lot more of one another. And I know you have a cell phone ..." He stopped when she giggled. "Sorry," he said sheepishly.

"Superman babbles," Lois remarked as she reached out for the phone.

"Superman does not babble." He grinned, his heart soaring that she so readily accepted the phone. "It's programmed. And I'll keep mine with me all the time," he told her as he pulled the match from his pocket. "We had such a hard time getting in touch that first week ..."

"I'd actually thought about suggesting we exchange cell numbers. I'm not sure why we didn't."

"Yeah. We could do that, but ..." He motioned at the phone in her hand with the one in his. There was just something about them having matching phones that *he* had bought for them.

"This is more ... us," she answered with understanding.

He couldn't help but smile. She was thinking about him as much as he was her. "Lois?" Suddenly he was very

serious. He waited until she was looking at him. "Tonight was great." He'd meant to tell her he loved her but his traitorous tongue wouldn't cooperate.

"And tomorrow will be even better," she replied as she stepped closer.

He didn't move a muscle as she pushed up on her toes until their faces were inches apart. She wanted him to come to her and he wouldn't disappoint. "I love you," he whispered before he chickened out, then closed the distance to kiss her before she could respond. The kiss was soft, gentle, longing. His hand went up to hold the back of her head. He slowly explored before pulling away. He looked at her, trying desperately to convey everything he felt for her. Without another word, he turned and hurried down the hall.

"Clark?" Her voice stopped him just before he turned the corner and he looked back. "I love you, too." His heart melted from her softly spoken endearment. He offered her one last dazzling smile before he headed into the stairwell. He was entirely too keyed up to take the elevator.

He broke through into the frigid night air, his heart soaring as freely as his body did. He'd listened to her tell him how she felt on her machine, but hearing it in person was much more satisfying. He was just about to pour on the speed when his new phone began to ring. He smiled when he took it out and realized it was Lois calling already.

"I just wanted to see if you'd answer," she told him immediately.

"I'll always answer," he assured her.

"And if I asked you to come right back?"

"Lois," he began seriously. "I may have to leave you from time to time — as Superman and as Clark. I have commitments. And yes, I walked away from you like an idiot once, but I've learned my lesson. While I might have to leave you, I'll always come back."

He could hear the strangled whimper on the other end, and he was ready to zip to her side when she finally said, "I just wanted to know."

A smile spread across his face. "Goodnight, Lois."

"Goodnight, Clark."

He waited until she'd cut their connection before he closed his phone. How had he managed to live a day without that woman? Tucking his phone into his pocket, he shot across the sky. Tomorrow certainly looked a lot brighter for the Man of Steel.

Lois had just exited the bathroom the next day when her new cell phone rang. "Hello?" she answered with a smile.

"Good morning," came the sexy voice on the end of the line.

"Good morning to you. Sleep well?"

"Like a baby. I forgot to give you the charger for your phone. I'll drop it by the gallery this morning."

"Could you stay for breakfast?"

"Sure."

"My treat this time."

"Okay ..." He paused. "Got to run. Someone needs Superman."

"Okay. Bye."

"Bye."

Lois closed her phone, grinning widely.

"Must be serious if he gave you a phone," Lucy remarked as she inched into the room.

"It's been serious for me since ..." She just sighed and flopped to the bed.

"I know," Lucy replied as she sat down beside her sister.

"We had dinner at Callard's and drank expensive wine. I met his best friend."

"I know that, too," Lucy replied as she held up a paper Lois hadn't seen until now.

There, on the front page of the paper, was a picture of her and Clark. The headline read: 'My Inspiration'. The short article proclaimed Clark Kent had found his inspiration. The byline belonged to Jimmy Olsen. Lois smiled even wider. "I want the whole world to know."

"Yeah, well, most of them are waiting downstairs." Lucy motioned with her finger toward the other room.

"Are you okay with this, Luce?"

"They don't want to see me, girl."

"Yeah, but you'll kind of end up in it all by default."

Lucy wrapped her arm around Lois. "I'm thrilled for you, sis. You forget I listened to you cry at night when you thought no one could hear. I'd much rather see you smile."

"Thanks." Lois leaned her head on Lucy's shoulder for a minute before something came to her. "Oh," she said, sitting up. "Clark wants you and Daddy to fly to Smallville with us for Christmas."

"What?"

"He wants me to spend Christmas with him. And he wants to be with his folks. And doesn't want me to be away from you guys. So ... I'm pretty sure Jimmy will be there. And ..." Her eyes widened. "You'd be so perfect together!"

"Lois!"

"How 'bout it? Want to spend an old fashioned Christmas in Kansas?"

"I certainly never thought Kansas would be a place to go for the holidays, but for you, when do we leave?"

"Good!" Lois began to talk excitedly about their holiday. Soon enough Lucy was adding in her own thoughts. This year would certainly be much different than she'd imagined just a few days ago.

Lois walked along with Clark through the grove of pecan trees behind the barn on his parents' farm. They'd just shared one of the best Christmas dinners she'd ever eaten. Her father and Lucy had indeed joined them for the holiday. Clark had been an immediate hit with Sam Lane. The younger man was just as crazy about the older one. And Lucy and Jimmy seemed to be interested in one another because they had taken a walk down to the pond.

The annual Kent Family Christmas party was a smash. Clark's childhood friends had taken to Lois at once. She'd told him she felt like she'd been engulfed in love. Clark had assured her she'd always feel that way with him.

Martha and Jonathan were tickled to have guests this year. They'd rolled out the red carpet for their new friends. The small guest house was spotless and stocked with plenty of coffee and snacks. Fresh linens covered the beds and the bathroom was filled with clean towels. There was also a small Christmas tree twinkling in the den to welcome them.

Gift opening had been met with mixed emotions. Lucy had convinced Lois that Clark would probably ask Lois to marry him. While Lois would say yes in a heartbeat, she'd told her sister that she was crazy. She and Clark were not ready for that yet. Though his gift had been very beautiful, Lois couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed. And when she'd looked around, everyone else seemed just as disheartened. She was even sure Jimmy had been about to say something, but was ribbed hard by Lucy.

Martha had given Lois a shadow box depicting a gallery. The younger woman was thrilled and had hardly been able to take her eyes off of it. She'd offered the older

couple a pair of tickets to an art show, another pair to an antique tractor show, and a rare Lois Lane painting. She'd painted it especially for them. She'd also painted her father a portrait of her mother and another for Lucy. It seemed she, too, had found new inspiration. Clark had stared at the self-portrait she'd given him most of the afternoon.

Everyone had held their collective breaths while Martha and Jonathan opened the single gift Clark had given them. Knowing his history of going all out for his folks, they couldn't wait to see what he'd come up with this year. But none had expected a first copy of a new book. It was his childhood memoirs, a rare glimpse of how he became a super man. It detailed his life on a farm in Kansas with extraordinary parents and because it was mostly about them, he assured his parents not another book would be printed unless they gave the okay. He also explained that, should they decide to release the book, profits would be deposited into a retirement account for them. Just as they'd anticipated, Clark had gone all out once again for his parents.

He'd also gone all out for his guests. He gave Lucy a year's worth of trips to the spa two blocks from the gallery. He'd told her that if she had to put up with all the media hype over his relationship with Lois, the least he could do was provide her with a few hours of escape. Lois had confided that Sam still loved to fly but couldn't afford the fees to rent a plane. Clark's gift came with its own hanger at a small airport just outside the city. That had stunned the man so completely he couldn't speak for nearly an hour.

They'd had an intimate, family affair and planned to have another celebration with the rest of the gang when they got back to the city. They'd spoken to Scott, Deb, and the others on the phone that morning. Poor Mike couldn't wait until their dinner.

Lois fingered the diamond heart that hang from a necklace around her neck. There was little doubt that it was the real thing. It was beautiful and probably very expensive. She loved it, of course, but there was a small part of her that would rather have gotten a diamond for her finger. It was crazy, she knew. And she'd even managed since to tell herself that it was sensible to wait. They'd just gotten back together and really didn't know one another well in the first place. They'd only had three dates! Yes, it was very sensible to wait before taking a huge step like marriage. Yet, her heart just didn't agree.

Clark pulled her just a tad closer, her new leather jacket crinkling slightly under his touch. She'd been amused when Jimmy offered her a jacket to match Clark's. Clark's jacket had been a gift from Jimmy years ago, and the younger man insisted they'd look 'cool'.

"Have you enjoyed your Christmas?" Clark asked her softly.

"Very much," she replied. And she had. Still ...

"I love my painting. Now I can look at you even when you're not with me." He laughed a little, but she just smiled. He sighed and turned them slightly so that they were entering a field. "I wanted to show you something," he told her.

That got her attention. "What?"

He pointed across the field. "See that large oak tree?" She nodded. "Right under it was where my folks found me."

"Really?" Lois glanced up at him, then back at the spot he'd pointed to. They crossed the field, dredging slightly through the fresh snow. It had come down pretty good during the night.

“Dad said my ship landed right about here.” He waved at the spot he meant. “Then it skidded across the ground, coming to a stop just under the tree.” They continued to walk until Clark found just the right spot. “About here,” he told her as he stopped them, turning to face Lois. “I wanted you to see where my life on Earth began.”

She looked around, trying to imagine the tiny ship she’d seen in his holograms lying beneath the tree. Finally she lifted her eyes back to his. “I’m glad you landed in this field.”

“You have no idea how many times I’ve thanked God I did, too. If I’d landed anywhere else, I wouldn’t have such great parents.”

“And you wouldn’t be such a wonderful man.” She pulled her glove off her hand so that she could touch his face.

“I might have never met you,” he told her. “And might have never been able to give you this.” He pulled his hand from his pocket and opened his palm. Lois’ eyes landed on the solitaire lying there and her breath caught. “I saw the disappointment in your eyes when you opened your gift today. I saw everyone’s disappointment. It nearly killed me to do that to you, but with so much of our lives being out in the open, I felt this was something we should share in private.”

Lois’ eyes flashed between his and the ring. Before she could say a word, Clark dropped to one knee.

“This was where my life began and I wanted this to be where it changes forever.” He held up the ring between his fingers. “Lois, will you marry me?”

Large tears had filled her eyes and the only thing she could do was cover her mouth with her hand.

“I know our relationship is relatively new. I know there are tons of things we don’t know about each other. But the few months we were apart were enough for me. That little ugly voice in my head keeps insisting that you’ll get tired of the media hype and my fairy tale will come to a screeching halt. My heart wants to shut it up for good. Marry me, Lois. I don’t want to spend another second without you.”

Slowly she lowered her left hand. It shook slightly as she whispered. “Yes.”

“Yes?” he asked as if he couldn’t believe she’d said it.

She blinked away her tears, swallowed to clear her throat, and repeated her answer with more conviction. “Yes.” Clark’s hand was the one that shook as he slowly pushed the ring onto her finger. He leaned to kiss her finger, then stood to pull her into his arms.

“I love you,” he whispered into the hollow of her neck.

“I love you ... with all my heart.”

Clark pulled back so that he could kiss her. She moaned into his mouth and he pulled her closer. His tongue asked for and received entry into her mouth, desperately reacquainting itself with Lois. He trailed kisses across her cheek and up to her ear. “I want you,” he breathed.

“You have me,” she assured him.

This time he moaned as he kissed her lips again. When he drew back, he smiled at her. “Feel better now?”

“Huh?” Her mind was much too clouded to understand his quick change of subject.

That caused him to chuckle. “Your gift.”

“Oh,” she replied and held up her hand with a grin. “I love the necklace, but this ...” She just grinned as her ring reflected the light.

Clark laughed and reached down to lift her into his arms. “What do you say we go deflate the rest of the disappointment balloons back at the house?”

“Let’s do that,” she squealed happily, kicking her feet as he lifted off into the air.

Behind another oak just across the small grove, a couple faced one another with huge smiles.

“I feel horrible that we overheard that,” Lucy said as they started toward the house.

“Yeah, me, too,” Jimmy agreed. “Never tell them. Okay? If Clark didn’t hear us, then he was too wrapped up in Lois. We’ll let them keep their moment.”

“Yeah.” They hurried along in the snow. “But wasn’t it so romantic?” Lucy asked dreamily.

“Absolutely. I couldn’t be happier for Clark. This is all he’s wanted his whole life — someone to love him unconditionally.”

“And Lois has finally gotten her knight in shining armor.” They continued on in the snow. “I hope they wait until we get there.”

“Me, too,” Jimmy agreed excitedly. He’d always been a bit of free spirit, but he was thrilled for his friend. It felt almost like his best girl had said yes. Glancing at Lucy, it flashed through his mind that maybe it would be sooner rather than later when he would be the one making an announcement of his own.

Clark was so happy he was nearly shaking. He couldn’t blame it on the cold because he didn’t feel the cold. He’d decided to show Lois his hometown from the air before taking them back to the farm. The rapid thump of Lois’ heart told him she was feeling every bit of the moment like he was. There was something else. It was almost like both of them had relaxed. There was no one in the world he felt more comfortable around than Lois, even his parents. But now it was as if he could totally lay himself out for her to see. Just by the slight change he’d noticed in her, she felt the same way.

She’d asked dozens of questions while they made their short flight. And every now and then she’d press her lips to his cheek, or his brow, or the side of his mouth. Clark loved each second. He was thrilled she felt so comfortable with him now.

He landed them softly in the snow at the back door. When she pulled away, he reached out and gave her tush a slight tap.

“Clark Kent!” she reprimanded, a look of surprise on her face.

“I had to see if it felt as good as it looked,” he defended himself with a smug grin.

She looked as if she was going to say something, then clamped her mouth shut. “If you want a piece of ...”

“Hey, guys!” Lucy’s excited voice interrupted them.

Clark glanced back at the approaching couple, then stepped over to Lois. His hand went around to grasp her rear firmly in his large palm and he leaned close so that his mouth was at her ear. “I want the whole thing,” he told her in his sexiest rumble. When she shuttered, he squeezed her butt, leaving little doubt of his statement. Then he quickly turned around to smile at Lucy and Jimmy. “Did you two find the pond?” Beside him Lois struggled to swallow. He wasn’t sure whether it was because she was stunned or turned on. Probably a combination of both.

“I tried to get Lucy to go out on the ice with me,” Jimmy told Clark as they came closer. “City girls don’t have spines!”

“I beg your pardon,” Lucy objected.

“You tell him, Luce,” Lois put in, defending herself as

well.

Clark moved his hand higher up Lois' back so he could pull her close. "You need to watch the footage of Lois handling Nunk, Jimbo. I assure you *this* city girl definitely has a spine."

"Okay, so maybe it's just Lucy here," Jimmy teased.

"You'll pay for that!" Lucy announced as she reached down to scoop up a handful of snow. A second later, she launched it at Jimmy.

"This means war," he replied as he shoved his hands into the snow.

"Oh, don't you dare," Lois warned Clark when his eyes flashed at her.

He just grinned wider as he reached down for a pile. Lois squealed and ran across the yard. From a perch behind the well house, Clark would have sworn she had super powers because she hit him in the face with a snowball before he could throw one of his own. Within seconds, the war was raging. The guys were getting pummeled by the girls.

"I thought you were Superman," Jimmy shot at Clark after a particularly wicked ball landed between his eyes.

Clark laughed even harder. He hadn't had this much fun in a long time. He allowed them to get bombed for a few more moments before turning on the heat. The snowballs leaving his hands looked like missiles. The poor girls didn't stand a chance.

Jimmy began to cheer when the girls went down. "Yeah!" he shouted.

"Stop!" came Lucy's scream of defeat.

"Clark!" Lois shrieked and went down.

Clark immediately stopped his assault and shot across the yard. He'd hurt her! His heart pounded as he kneeled before her. "Lois, honey, what's wrong?!"

She was huddled over on her knees as if her stomach hurt. When his face leaned over her shoulder, he realized his mistake. A huge ball of snow met him head on, catching him off guard. She used his surprise to her advantage and flipped him onto his back. With him sprawled out like a wounded bird, she stood and dropped her foot in the middle of his chest as hard as she could. He actually grunted.

"Don't ever trust your enemy!" She turned and gave Lucy a high five.

"Damn!" Jimmy declared as he saw the fate of his friend. He walked over and looked down at Clark. "She's good, bro."

"Too good," Clark replied with another grunt as he struggled to get up. "I think Superman is in *deep* trouble!" He wiped the snow from his face and chest as he grinned at Lois. She had a satisfied expression on her face.

"Payback's hell, big boy," she declared as she clapped the snow from her gloves.

Clark just shook his head. He was in so much trouble. "Come on, Jimmy. Help me lick my wounds." He was about to walk away when Lois reached out for his hand. When he turned, she yanked and before he knew what was happening, she kissed him hard.

"Better luck next time, honey," she told him when she released him.

He was left standing with his mouth hanging open. Lois and Lucy laughed happily over their victory as they made their way inside.

Jimmy, who'd watched them along side Clark, shook his head. "Close your mouth, Clark." He swatted the other man's chest, then ran toward the house.

Clark could only stand there grinning like an idiot. Lois

Lane had changed his life in more ways than one. If this was just the beginning, he could hardly wait for the middle.

Clark was waiting at the bottom of the stairs when Lois came out of the bathroom. She'd been soaked from their snowball fight. When Clark looked up, he almost passed out. She was wearing one of his flannel shirts.

"I hope you don't mind that I borrowed your shirt. It was hanging behind the door. Mine was wet."

"Ah, no." He swallowed hard. "You look great," he breathed.

He'd changed his clothes as well, and he was wearing a tight white tee shirt. "So do you," she replied as she reached out to lay her hand on his chest.

Not being able to help himself, Clark leaned over to steal a kiss.

"Hey, hey, hey. Get a room," Jimmy reprimanded.

"Later," Clark whispered as he leaned back. "Ready?" he asked Lois, his fingers toying with the ring on her finger.

"Yes," she replied, a word he was coming to love.

He held her hand as they entered the living room. Everyone was sitting around chatting. "Hey, guys. I was wondering if you'd like to see the other Christmas gift I gave Lois."

Conversation stopped and for a second there was total silence. Then a very loud, very excited 'yes' resounded throughout the room. To Clark, it sounded like air being released from that very large disappointment balloon.

Lois slowly opened her eyes, half fearing to find out that last night had been a dream. After sharing the news of their engagement, Clark had flown Lois back to Metropolis to his penthouse. She'd been impressed, although she'd informed him that she preferred the small apartment on Clinton. However, they decided to take advantage of what the expensive apartment had to offer, spending a relaxing hour in the hot tub in the expansive master bath. They'd enjoyed a whole lot more than just the hot water, slowly and deliberately reacquainting themselves physically as well. From there, they'd ended up in the kitchen. Preferring Clark to anything he had in the fridge, Lois had backed him against the island and explained to him why she liked his body so much. And she hadn't said a word.

She'd never forget the sounds he made when she touched him so intimately. No man had ever made her feel so empowered or sexy. When they'd spent their weekend together, they'd made love many times. Yet, every time was just as thrilling and just as breathtaking. Clark might be the strongest man in the world, but a small woman had nearly brought him to his knees. They'd shamelessly given and received pleasure from one another in the light shining through the wall of windows that made up one side of his kitchen. Slowly, reverently she'd worshiped his body and Lois had been introduced to Clark's true sexual being. If he hadn't already been named Superman, she would have named him last night.

It hadn't been a dream. Clark was looking back at her with a beautiful smile on his face.

"Good morning," he said in that low, sexy rumble that drove her wild. He leaned over and kissed her softly.

"Mmmm," Lois moaned when he leaned back. "I was afraid I was dreaming."

"Then I won't wake you," he told her with a waggle of his brows.

She laughed softly as she pushed herself up slightly on her pillows so she could look at him. She would be happy

to do that and only that for the rest of the day.

“What?” he asked after a moment.

“I just ... like looking at you.”

He leaned to kiss her nose. “Look all you want, but you’ll get tired of me being around.”

“Not a chance.” She reached out to smooth her hand down his arm.

“Have you changed your mind?”

“About what?”

“Becoming my wife.”

Her smile faded and she placed her hand over his cheek. “There is nothing I want more.”

“Even with all of this craziness?” He reached behind him to retrieve the newspaper from the nightstand. A picture of them kissing was plastered all over the front page. It had been taken the night they’d left for Smallville. He’d met her coming out of the gallery and had been completely unable to stop himself.

Lois glanced at it. “Oh, they’ll get tired of us smooching on each other.”

Clark pushed himself up into a sitting position against the headboard. “Wait until the news of our engagement hits the press.”

“Clark, I’ll be glad when it hits.” He furrowed his brows. “I want the world to know that you’re mine.” She’d told him that before. When was he going to believe her?

His lips slowly spread into a smile and he leaned over to kiss her. “Last night was incredible.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet,” she told him as she pushed up and straddled him.

He grunted. “This is a nice position,” he told her, grasping her hips.

“Very nice,” she agreed as she grinned at him. “Very, very nice.”

Clark squeezed her hips. “Oh, baby.”

Baby. He’d said that many times the night before. She never thought she’d allow a man to call her baby. This man could call her anything he wanted to. She’d decided that after he’d taken her to heights she’d never been the night before. The things he could do. Did he have any idea just how different he was from other men? That made her stop and open her eyes to look at Clark.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, immediately concerned.

“How many women have you done this with?”

“What?”

“Sex ... how many women have you had sex with?”

“Why?”

“I want to know.”

“Right now?” He looked pained. “I’m kinda ... feeling the moment, honey.”

She moved to get up. “I’ll get dressed.”

He reached out to grasp her arm. “Baby, wait. I’ll tell you anything you want to know. And the answer is two. You and Lana are the only women I’ve ever slept with.”

Lois looked back at him. “Really?” She turned around to face him. “All those women you’ve dated ...”

“Dated,” he elaborated. “You *can* date without having sex.”

“I know that,” she replied.

“Where did all of this come from?”

“I was thinking about last night. You were ... incredible. I mean, you were incredible the weekend we spent together, but last night was ...”

“I was hoping I didn’t scare you.”

“Scare me? Clark, the things you did to me! I’ve never felt like that in my life.” That caused him to smile, a hint of

red tinting his cheeks. That was so adorable. Even after the night they’d shared, he could still blush around her. “I don’t know. I guess I was just wondering how much practice you’ve had.”

“Ahh ...” Clark pulled Lois closer to him. “Last night was the first time I’ve ever had sex like that. Correction. That was the first time I’d ever made love like that. Something came over me. It was like I was someone else altogether. I wanted you in a way that almost made me ashamed of myself. I tuned all of my senses into what I was doing and just ... let go. That’s the first time I’ve ever let go.”

“That’s the first time I’ve ever let go,” Lois told him as she looked down at his chest. “I wanted to eat you up. And the more I had, the more I wanted.”

“That’s what I felt like.” He cupped her cheek. “Every time we make love will be very special and very dear to me. But when we share nights like last night, I will never be able to deny that I’ve found my soul mate.”

Lois leaned over to kiss him. In no time at all the kiss grew out of control.

“Dammit, woman!” he breathed when he drew away from the kiss. “You have more power than kryptonite,” he told her before losing himself in another kiss. It was long minutes later before Clark leaned back to look at her. This time he was grinning down at her.

“Proud of yourself?” she repeated what he’d asked her the very first time they’d made love.

“Very,” was the same answer as he kissed her again. “I think we need a shower.”

“Ya’ think?” Lois asked through a soft laugh, but neither moved.

“I can’t wait for you to become my wife,” Clark said out of nowhere.

“I can’t wait for you to become my husband.” Lois smoothed her fingers in the hair above his ear. “Dammit, woman?” she asked.

Clark began to laugh and hugged her to his chest. She squeezed him tight, deciding she’d never heard a phrase like that sound as sexy. And her heart soared to know she alone had made him say it. Lois Lane, owner of a little gallery on Market Row, had the power to bring Superman to his knees.

“What’s kryptonite?” she asked as they made their way toward the bathroom.

Neither had been able to wait to get married, so the media event of all time didn’t even become news until a week after they’d married. The wedding had taken place on a small island in the South Pacific just two months after the New Year. Members of a quaint little village, who owed a favor to their savior, played host to nearly a hundred of Lois and Clark’s closest friends and family. The only press there had been Jimmy, of course, and Nunk. The couple had grown quite fond of the frustrating reporter and had allowed him to be there with the understanding that the Planet would announce their union to the world through the prose and photography of James Olsen.

Sam Lane had walked his daughter down the aisle. Martha Kent had shed tears of joy. Lucy had caught the bouquet. Scott had shamelessly flirted with everybody. The first dance, the first kiss as man and wife — it had been the best day of their lives. The world would even get a picture of the ‘super’ couple — Clark, dressed as Superman, with Lois by his side. It had been perfect.

They’d spent their wedding night and the following

week tucked away inside Clark's little apartment back in Metropolis while their guests were treated to a week on the island. When they surfaced again, Superman returned everyone home, with Sam's help as pilot of a small jet.

With a deep breath, Clark faced Lois. "Ready?" They'd decided to make their appearance from the penthouse. While he could easily sneak in and out of their place on Clinton, Lois couldn't. So, they'd decided that they'd live in the penthouse and use the loft for getaways. Clark had beefed up security for his new bride and she'd assured him a million times this was what she wanted.

Jimmy's article had hit the streets the day before, making waves across the globe. The Inquisitor had played host to the wedding of the century just that morning. Sam had called to say he'd given a short statement praising his new son-in-law. Lucy was basking in the glow of her new relationship with Jimmy, too preoccupied to let the press bother her. The Kents were off on a book tour to promote Clark's new book. They had loved it and were more than thrilled for him to release it. Scott, Deb, and the rest of the gang had already been introduced to the press through their friendship with Clark, so the wedding was just a natural transition for them.

Lois grasped his hand as the doors of the elevator opened.

"Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Kent," came the friendly voice of the doorman.

"Good morning," they returned in unison.

"It's a mob out there," he told them as he moved to hold the door.

"We have to face them sometime," Clark replied.

"Yes, sir!" And with that he pulled the door open.

The flashes began immediately, but when Lois and Clark stepped out onto the sidewalk, they were given a wide berth.

"Congratulations, Superman," came a voice from the crowd.

"Congratulations, Mr. Kent," came another voice.

"Congratulation, Ms. Lane." The voice of Howard Nunk caused the crowd to become completely silent.

"Thank you, Mr. Nunk," Lois replied.

The silence lasted only a second before the questions started.

"How does it feel being married to Superman?"

"Where did you get married?" That bit was not revealed to the public.

"Why didn't you invite the press?"

"Will Lois help you campaign for good?"

"Should we refer to you as Ms. Lane or Mrs. Kent?"

Question after question was fired at them.

"How was the honeymoon?"

"Super," Lois spoke up, causing everyone to laugh.

Clark held up his hand. "If you'll allow us, we'll give you a statement." He waited for everyone to get quiet. "We chose for our ceremony to be private and that's the way it will stay. You've all read the coverage in the Daily Planet and the Inquisitor. Lois and I will live here in the penthouse, but after the new wears off, I'd appreciate you guys leaving us alone. We're just like every other couple. We love each other passionately and we'd like to have time to grow comfortable in our new life. And yes, the honeymoon was super." He grinned down at Lois. "My wife will have to answer the questions pertaining to her. I wouldn't presume to answer for her."

"Good boy," came the reply of a female reporter in the crowd, causing another round of laughter.

"It feels wonderful being married to Clark. To me, that's who he is. Superman is just what he can do."

"And I have to speak up and tell you all that she whipped Superman's butt in a snowball fight over Christmas."

More laughter.

"I will help Superman as much as I can, but art is my passion. I've begun painting again and I'll continue to promote other artists through my gallery. In the art world, I'm Lois Lane. In my husband's world, I'm Lois Kent."

"Okay, guys, that's enough for today. I've got a new book to promote and Lois has a gallery to open." Clark pulled Lois out onto the sidewalk, out from under the canopy on the building.

"How do you like your ride to work?" came another question.

"It's the only way to travel," Lois told them as she wrapped her arms around Clark's neck and he lifted them into the air. The flashes continued as they left the ground behind.

"Still sure?"

"I'm right where I want to be," Lois assured him. "In your arms." She smiled up at him.

"You know, I'm glad I wondered into that little gallery on Market Row that day," Clark replied as he held her close.

"Me, too, honey. Me, too."

THE END

122