

When the Sky Falls

By **bobbart** — Bob Bartholomew [bobbart_99@yahoo.com]

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Summary: In the episode “All Shook Up” what might have happened if EPRAD and the military had used some technology to improve the chance for a successful Nightfall mission? In the aftermath of a failed Nightfall mission, amnesia and disaster might lead to opportunities for Lois and Clark.

Disclaimer: This is a fanfic based on the television show, Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman. I have no claim on the pre-existing characters whatsoever, nor am I profiting by their use. The new story elements are mine. No infringement is intended by this work.

Time frame: Season 1: Reinterpretation of All Shook Up

Chapter 1: Visitor

It all started innocently enough on Tuesday. It was a slow news day and Clark was looking for a story worthy of The Daily Planet. He had a number of investigations in progress. Some of these involved his occasional reporting partner, Lois Lane, and some were solo efforts, but none of them were nearly far enough along to generate copy.

He was still adapting to the position of being one of the newest members of the paper’s staff. As Superman he might be on the top in Metropolis, but as Clark Kent he was the new kid in town. However, while it was true that he was the rookie in this newsroom, he had quickly distinguished himself, and after only a few months on the job, he was second only to Lois Lane amongst the primary news reporters for The Daily Planet.

Lois... She didn’t seem to be having trouble finding something to write about during slow news times. While he had been floundering for the past week or more for a suitable story, Lois had turned out one front page story after another. Sure, Clark had gotten a front page or two in that time, but if this were a contest, she would be so far ahead that the game would have been stopped on a mercy rule.

She was busy at her desk, probably working on tomorrow’s lead story. Just looking at her was intoxicating. When Clark had traveled the world, he had met many beautiful women. As Superman he had met many more. But ever since he laid eyes on her that first day, there was no one that could hold a candle to the fiery woman who was both his partner and competitor at work. Her beauty was only the start of what made Lois irresistible. She had an energy that could light up a city and she was one of the most capable and intelligent women that Clark had ever met.

In an effort to get his mind back on business, Clark tore his eyes from Lois and surveyed the rest of the office. By chance, he was looking in the direction of the elevator when its door opened to reveal an army officer. The man stepped into the bullpen and started looking for something. Because of the Bureau 39 incident this type of encounter was disconcerting. It didn’t get any better when, as soon as the man made eye contact with Clark, he headed his way. The officer stepped up to Clark and offered his hand.

“Mr. Kent?”

“Yes. I’m Clark Kent,” Clark answered as they shook hands.

“I’m Colonel Goodson. I’m sorry to be abrupt, but I’m here on important business. Mr. Kent, we need Superman at the Anderson Research Center on a matter of the utmost importance.

Our intelligence people tell us that you and your partner, Ms. Lane, are the best contacts for getting a message to Superman.”

“Colonel, I might be able to get a message to Superman, but I can’t guarantee it. Like other people, most of my encounters with him are at crime and accident scenes. Anyway, I’m not sure if you know this, but the last time the military came in here looking for information on Superman, it was a rogue group called Bureau 39 that wanted to kill him. If I’m to attempt to deliver a message, I’d like to believe that this isn’t going to be a repeat of that situation.”

“Mr. Kent, I can understand your concern and I was asked to deliver this message for exactly that reason. Why don’t we discuss this with Perry White?” The colonel’s relaxed seriousness certainly made a better impression on Clark than the heavy-handed arrogance of Trask’s Bureau 39. When they reached Perry’s office, Clark was surprised to see that the colonel didn’t bother to knock. Instead, he just opened the door and walked in.

Perry’s head immediately popped up from the papers he was reading and he let loose with an all-too-predictable bellow of, “What in the...” However, the shout ended as soon as he made eye contact with the officer. “Jack! What the blazes are you doing here?” As he greeted an obvious long-time friend, he made his way around his desk and extended his hand to the colonel.

“Hi, Perry,” the colonel replied as they shook hands. His tone and the slightly stiff smile on his face suggested that even though he and Perry were friends, this was not just a social visit. “I’m afraid that I’m here on business. I need to get a message to Superman and the smart guys say that the best way to do that is through Lois Lane or Clark Kent.” The colonel, his impatience starting to show in his expression, turned to Clark. “I ran into Mr. Kent, but he’s not sure if he should trust me.”

“Well, Jack, you must have heard of the problems we had with that crazy Trask guy and his Bureau 39. If I didn’t know you myself, even I’d be skittish.”

Perry turned to Clark. “Son, you can trust Jack here. If he says that he needs a message delivered to Superman, you can be sure it’s on the level.”

Jack turned to face Clark. “Now that we settled that, can you deliver the message?”

If Perry was so confident in this colonel, that was more than good enough for Clark. “I can try. You did say it was urgent. When do you want Superman at the Anderson Research Center?”

“There are scientists waiting for him there now. The sooner you can deliver the message, the better.”

“All right. I need to check up on a source. While I’m out I’ll try to get Superman the message as quickly as I possibly can.” With that, Clark grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

Lois Lane had been paying close attention to the interactions between Clark and the military man. She had actually been watching Clark before the stranger had arrived. She would have been mildly surprised to learn that Clark had been wondering about how to get a story that would be up to the standards that she set. For Lois, the contest looked considerably less one-sided than it did from Clark’s perspective. Since Clark had arrived on the scene, Lois had found that she faced real competition for the first time in years. As Clark had observed, even during this dry news spell she had been able to produce a string of front-page stories. What he failed to appreciate was that Lois had been working harder than ever before in her career to stay ahead of her new coworker.

When Clark had arrived at the Planet, she had called him a hack from Nowheresville. While she was not about to publicly retract that allegation, the Kansan was clearly a talented investigative journalist. She still had some key advantages that should allow her to stay a step or two ahead of him, but it would by no means be easy.

When Clark darted for the door, it looked like time to interject herself into the situation and find out what it was that sent Clark scurrying out of the office. She stood up and hurried over to Perry's office before the visitor could leave. Lois barely paused at Perry's door before she stuck her head in. "Excuse me," she said, looking back and forth between Perry and his guest. "Do you know where Clark went? I wanted to ask him about his progress on one of our joint stories."

"Jack, this is Lois Lane. Lois, this is Colonel Jack Goodson. He and I go way back."

As Lois and the Colonel shook hands, Perry continued. "Jack needed to get a message to Superman. Clark's out trying to track him down."

At this, Jack interjected. "Ms. Lane, I came here today looking for either you or Mr. Kent. I understand that you two are the people most likely to be able to get a message to Superman. I hope I didn't offend you by speaking to Mr. Kent. I just happened to spot him first when I arrived."

Lois shrugged nonchalantly. "No, you didn't. In fact, Clark is really the one that seems to be able to contact Superman. I've encountered Superman in the course of my work and have interviewed him several times, but if you need a message delivered, Clark may be a better bet. I gather that there is some urgency in getting this message to Superman?"

"Yes there is. I wish I could tell you more, but I don't know all the details myself. I was contacted through channels and asked to make this trip. I guess there was a concern that you might react to a military representative with some skepticism based on the problem that you people had with Bureau 39. Since Perry and I are old friends, they asked me to deliver this request."

"Request?" Lois asked.

The colonel continued. "There's an important meeting taking place at the Anderson Research Center. Superman's presence is critical and the request was for him to attend."

"Lois, has Clark ever told you how he contacts the big guy?" Perry asked.

"No, but I've never pressed him on it. I get the impression that they know each other better than Clark lets on. Remember that Superman came to Metropolis not too long after Clark. Also, remember that Clark spent those years traveling the world. I've sometimes wondered if they didn't meet during that time and decided to come to Metropolis together. It's obviously a good place for Superman to use as his base, and Clark said right from the beginning that working here was a dream for him."

Lois turned back to the colonel. "Are you sure you don't know what this is about?"

"No. The fact that my superiors asked me to deliver the message says a lot. You can put the pieces together as well as I can. Whatever this is, someone wanted you to know that the request to attend that meeting was on the level and that it was serious."

Clark waited a few minutes before changing and heading for the research center. It was disconcerting to have the colonel show up and explain that he knew that Clark Kent could contact Superman. Just in case this was some sort of test, he took some extra time and made sure that no one was following him. This colonel might be a friend of Perry's, but it was best to be careful.

After a few trips through buildings with multiple entrances and exits, Clark figured that he had ditched whatever tail might have been following him. He maneuvered to a sheltered alley, made a quick change, and shot skyward. The Anderson Research Center was on the outskirts of Metropolis so it only took a few seconds for him to be standing at the entrance. The guards had apparently been notified that he would arrive because as soon as he was on the ground one of them came immediately over and said, "Superman, please wait here a moment and someone will be

right out to escort you inside."

Within a minute, two men had exited the door and were heading towards him. One was a military officer and the other was wearing civilian clothes. As they drew near, the officer took the lead and approached Clark with his hand extended. "Thank you for coming, Superman. I am General Zeitlin and this is Doctor Aames, head of this facility. There's an urgent matter that we need to discuss. Would you please come inside?"

They led him through a series of doors and hallways and past two more security checkpoints. They finally reached a small meeting room where two other men waited. One was another military officer and the second was dressed in civilian clothing. They had been seated but stood when the group arrived. General Zeitlin made the introductions. He indicated the military officer. "Superman, this is Captain Fairbanks. He is a naval pilot that has been trained for space duty." While Clark was shaking hands with the captain, the general indicated the other man. "This is Dr. Klein. He works out of Star Labs and has specialized in...well, you, Superman."

This caught Clark off guard. "Me?" he asked with sudden visions of dissected frogs shooting through his mind.

The stranger seemed to sense his concern. As they shook hands, he introduced himself. "Superman, it's so nice to finally meet you. I'm an admirer of the good works you do and I've wanted to meet you since you arrived in Metropolis."

His exuberance and friendly tone helped allay Clark's fears, but the idea that Superman was an object of study still left Clark feeling nervous. However, he knew better than to let his fears cause him to prejudge this Dr. Klein. "It's nice to meet you," Clark said. He hoped his concerns didn't show.

The general seemed impatient. "Please be seated and we can start." Once they were sitting, General Zeitlin turned to Clark. "Superman, we've asked you here today to request your help in saving the lives of most of the people on this planet."

Clark was stunned. "General, I don't understand."

The general turned to Dr. Aames. "Dr. Aames, would you please explain?"

The scientist's expression turned somber. "Superman, we've discovered an asteroid on a collision course with Earth. It's an irregular hunk of rock roughly seventeen miles in diameter. We've given it the name Nightfall, and to be perfectly frank the potential danger to our human civilization and life on this planet in general is terrifying."

Clark could hear genuine fear in the scientist's voice. "How much damage will it do?"

"Have you ever heard the theory that the dinosaurs were wiped out by an asteroid impact?"

"Yes. If I remember correctly it hit in the area that is now the Yucatan Peninsula."

"That's right. Well, that asteroid was less than half the size of Nightfall. We fear that if Nightfall hits the Earth, it will wipe out almost all of the life on the planet. The human death toll would almost certainly be in the billions—at best. At worst, it would mean the extinction of mankind."

Clark's mind was reeling at the implications of what he was hearing, but some part of his mind seemed to be in 'Superman autopilot' mode and he responded that way Superman should. "So you want me to try to stop it?"

Dr. Aames paused and looked at the general. "General?"

"Superman, we need your help for a mission to deal with Nightfall, but we aren't going to ask you to try to push it away or anything like that. Our team discussed that idea but we believe there are better options. Dr. Klein, would you please take it from here?"

"Superman, we've developed a preliminary plan based on two observations that I made of your abilities. First, you were able to lift the 100-ton Space Transport into orbit. Second, you

have been observed in different places around the world at what has appeared to be almost the same time. There is circumstantial evidence that you have achieved speeds in excess of 1000 miles per second. Our idea is to build an impact projectile and ask you to fly it to intercept Nightfall. We believe this to be the best way to deflect the asteroid, but before we can commit to the plan we need to ask if you are willing to help. If you are, then we need to know how much you can lift and how fast you can fly.”

“Well, Dr. Klein, I’ll help in any way I can, but wouldn’t an atomic bomb be more effective?”

Dr. Aames answered this. “We considered the nuclear option, but there are problems. First, to be most effective it would have to be placed in exactly the right position on the asteroid. In order to maximize the potential for success, we would have to ask you to be the delivery system and we weren’t sure that you would be willing to carry such a device.”

Clark cut him off. “If that is our best chance of success, I’d be happy to carry it.”

“Thank you, but the fact of the matter is that if you can fly fast enough carrying a heavy enough mass and deliver the kinetic energy impactor that we’re considering, it will be far more effective than any atomic bomb in existence.”

“Kinetic energy impactor?” Clark asked.

“Sorry,” Dr. Aames said with a smile. “The energy of any solid body in motion is kinetic energy. A thrown rock is a small kinetic energy impactor. We want to use something much larger moving very fast. This has the potential to deliver far more energy than a nuclear weapon. More energy means a greater chance to divert Nightfall.”

Clark considered this for a moment. He would be willing to deliver an atomic bomb if necessary, but he was just as glad that they didn’t ask him to. As for the rest, he didn’t know. “To be honest, I don’t know exactly how fast I can fly or how much I can lift.”

Dr. Klein responded to this. “We were hoping you would try a few things out as tests. It shouldn’t take too long, and it will give us the information that we need to determine whether this is a viable plan.”

“What do you want me to do?” Clark asked.

Captain Fairbanks took over that side of the conversation. “Have you ever flown in space before?”

Clark turned to face the naval officer. “I’ve been as high as low earth orbit. Being out of the atmosphere didn’t bother me too much. As long as I held my breath, I didn’t seem have any problems.”

“So do you think you could go to the moon and back without a space suit?”

“Probably, but I’d have to be extra careful about air. I do need to breathe.”

“We anticipated that and have a breathing apparatus for you to use. We’d like you to fly to the moon and back as quickly as possible. That should give us an idea as to how fast you can fly in space. Then we’ve arranged with the Navy’s mothball fleet for you to lift some decommissioned ships.”

“I can try,” Clark replied. “But I’ve never lifted anything that big before.”

“That is part of what we want to test,” Captain Fairbanks replied. “Dr. Klein thinks you might be able to carry a ship. Dr. Klein, would you please elaborate?”

“Normally something that large would have to be designed so that it could be lifted from a single point. However, my studies of your powers suggest that there is more to your ability to lift heavy objects than just strength. When you lifted the space transport, it should have collapsed from its own weight because of how you carried it. But when you lifted it, it didn’t collapse. I believe that you have a way of imparting some of your invulnerability to what you are lifting so that it becomes stronger.

If that’s true, you may be able to lift the ships.”

“But I don’t want to hurt anyone or break a ship trying.”

“We understand,” the captain answered. “We want you to start with a smaller ship. If you can lift it and it doesn’t collapse, then we will try a larger one. None of them will have any people on them so no one will be in danger.”

“But what if this doesn’t work and the first ship I try to lift breaks?”

Captain Fairbanks continued. “There is a team working as we speak welding plates of steel together to make a projectile that is structurally sound enough to be lifted from a single point. We estimate that before you need to leave, they can have the projectile up to over 200 tons. If possible, we would rather use a ship since even a moderately sized vessel will be over 1,000 tons.”

This all seemed to make sense to Clark. “When do you want to do the tests?”

Dr. Aames answered. “Right now, if it’s all right with you. We can go outside and perform the speed test right now. We’re fortunate that the moon is visible overhead this afternoon so there won’t be any time lost in your circling the earth.”

Clark felt a sense of determination come over him. If the world was at risk, he wanted to get going to see how he could help. “Let’s do it,” he said.

They went outside where there was a simple table set up with the equipment for the test and what looked like technicians operating the equipment. Captain Fairbanks pointed at an apparatus with some tanks. “We’ve modified a diver’s pack to provide you with oxygen for the trip.” Some technicians helped Clark put on the survival pack. When he was ready he gave a thumbs up. Dr. Aames made sure that the timing equipment was ready. Clark was amused when he noticed that Dr. Klein was holding a stopwatch and appeared to be planning to record his own data.

After a minute or so making sure that the equipment was set up properly, Dr. Aames looked up and asked, “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“On my mark... Go!”

From the perspective of those watching, Superman just disappeared with a whoosh of air followed quickly by a sonic boom. A few minutes later the process was reversed and Superman was standing there with the whoosh-boom coming an instant later.

As soon as the breathing mask was removed from Superman’s head, Dr. Aames asked, “Did you go all the way to the moon?”

“Yes. I touched the surface and came right back.” Clark held out his hand to show a grey stone. “Would you like a moon rock?”

The scientist’s eyes got huge. “Um, sure. Thank you.” As Clark set the rock on the table, Dr. Aames checked the timers. “It only took you seven minutes and four seconds to make the round trip. That puts your speed at over a thousand miles per second. Did you know that you could fly that fast?”

“Well, I’ve gone around the world in less than a minute, and that was flying in a circle.”

“This is good news!” He turned to the General. “Are your people ready for the next phase?”

“Yes.” The general answered. “Superman, if you can fly over to the Philadelphia shipyards, they’re expecting you.”

It was about an hour later when Clark returned to the research center. This time, all four of the men he had met with earlier in the day came out to meet him. They had just reached the speed test area where Clark was waiting when Dr. Klein seized the initiative. “Were you able to lift the ships?”

Clark happened to be looking at General Zeitlin when Dr.

Klein asked the question and saw that the senior officer seemed only slightly irritated by the scientist's violation of protocol. The general caught Clark's eye and responded with a tiny nod as if to say, 'Go ahead.'

Clark turned to Dr. Klein. "None of the ships broke when I lifted them. I wish I could tell you the details, but the men on the dock just told me what ship to lift and I did it. The first ones were small and then I worked my way up. I could handle the smaller ships with no real effort. I was comfortable with everything up until I tried the large aircraft carrier. I was able to lift it, but I would be worried about whether I could fly with it at my maximum speed."

Dr. Klein jumped in again. "What about the middle-sized ships? Do you think you could carry them while flying at your top speed?" This scientist seemed to be very excitable. Then again, as someone that studied Superman's powers, he was most in his element.

"Yes, I could handle all the other ships. It may take some effort to get the larger of them up to full speed, but I'm confident that I can do it."

Captain Fairbanks put his hand on Dr. Klein's shoulder as if to say 'my turn' and stepped forward. "This is good news. We had hoped to have an impactor that would be at least 1,000 tons and I know that one of the ships was a 9,000 ton cruiser. The aircraft carrier was over 50,000 tons. If you could lift it at all, then we should go with something in the 10,000 ton region. Based on what you're saying, I think we will be able to go ahead with that plan. Did you meet with Commander Hawthorne at the shipyard?"

"Yes," Clark replied. "I met with him before each lift attempt. He had the list of ships and after each lift I talked with him. There were some other military people with him and they seemed to be taking comprehensive notes as I described how much effort it took for me to lift and then control the ship."

At this the captain nodded at the general and General Zeitlin took charge of the meeting. "Can you come back tomorrow morning so that we can discuss the plan? That will give us until then to determine when we would like you to make the attempt. We will need the rest of today and probably all night to get the preparations in place."

"When do you plan to make a public announcement?" Clark asked.

"We only wanted to wait long enough to have a plan in place. If all of the pieces come together and you agree with our plan, then there will be an official announcement tomorrow afternoon."

"How long do we have until Nightfall hits?"

The general looked to the scientist on his left. "Dr. Aames?"

"It's due to hit in just under four days. Normally we would have had more warning but it's coming at us from a direction nearly perpendicular to the plane of the solar system. To make matters worse, Nightfall seems to be made up of unusually dark material, so until it was right on top of us it was simply too dim to see. We only detected it a few days ago."

Clark turned back to General Zeitlin. "Do you have any idea when you will want me to start toward it?"

"We hope to have everything ready for you to leave immediately following the announcement. We want the intercept to be as far away as possible. My guess is that we'll ask you to leave approximately 24 hours from now."

Chapter 2: Decisions

When he was finished at the research center, Clark found that there was just enough time to meet with one source. If the world wasn't going to be destroyed by Nightfall, then he still had responsibilities as a reporter. He was lucky enough to run into Sam the Mouse who had some interesting information that would help in an investigation he was working on with Lois. After a

brief meeting, Clark started back to his apartment, but never got there. As he was heading home, he realized that didn't want to be alone in that apartment. He wanted to see Lois. He wanted to see his parents. He wanted...he didn't know *what* he wanted. Besides, what he wanted didn't really matter. What did matter was that he'd given his word to keep silent. He needed to think through what he could and should say.

Since he couldn't figure out what else to do, he went on patrol over Metropolis. It should have been routine, but he kept finding himself hovering above Lois's building. He felt himself torn between the need to share this with her, and his promise to keep it secret. He kept ending up above Lois's building and having to fight the temptation to approach her window. The fourth time he found himself in that spot, he concluded that Lois's roof was probably the safest place in Metropolis and decided to head home.

When he reached his apartment, there was a message on his answering machine. Given all that had happened today, Clark wasn't surprised that he felt a sense of dread as his finger approached the 'Play' button. The click of the button was followed immediately by Lois's voice. "Clark! Where have you been? Does it have anything to do with what Superman was doing today? Call me. Now!" The message was four hours old. Maybe it would be easier if he just flew out to Nightfall tonight. After all, could a speeding asteroid really be that much worse than a Lois Lane who never had her message returned?

He picked up the phone and dialed Lois. She picked up almost immediately. "Hello?"

"Hi, Lois. It's Clark."

"Okay, Kent, spill it. What's going on with Superman?"

"What do you mean? I've been out working on leads for the Schmidt Industries bribery story. I haven't talked with Superman since I gave him that message this afternoon."

"So you're telling me that you don't know why he was in Philadelphia moving ships around the shipyard?"

"Lois, what are you talking about?" Clark hoped he sounded appropriately surprised.

"A dock worker took several pictures of Superman carrying ships from the mothball fleet. There were reports that he would lift a ship out of the water, fly around with it for a few seconds, and then put it back where it had been. It sounds as if he was involved in some kind of test. I thought you sent Superman to a meeting at the Anderson Center here in Metropolis?"

Clark was fighting the growing panic rising within him. "I did. This is the first I've heard of him moving ships around." He'd been so focused on the events of the day that he hadn't thought about the implications of being seen at the shipyard.

Lois paused for a second. Clark could tell that the devastatingly sharp Lois Lane mind was at work. "Clark, if you knew something but Superman had sworn you to secrecy, would you tell me?"

Clark's growing unease was only exacerbated by this question. Was it that obvious that he wasn't telling her the truth? Superman hadn't actually sworn him to secrecy but someone else had. Unfortunately, the delay while Clark pondered Superman and secrets provided his partner with all the information she needed. The next thing he heard was Lois's surprisingly calm voice saying, "So you do know something."

"Lois, I... I'm really sorry, but I've been sworn to secrecy."

"What! I can't believe you won't tell your own partner!"

"If I could tell anyone, it would be you. There is supposed to be an announcement tomorrow. Please don't ask me again until then."

The discomfort in Clark's voice was evident to Lois. "All right," she said. "I guess if I were in your shoes, I'd feel obligated to keep quiet. But Clark, this is big, isn't it?"

There wasn't much point in trying to deny that now. "Yes."

His voice was as solemn as he could make it.

Clark sensed, more than heard, when Lois took a deep breath and moved on. There was only a short pause before she asked, “So, what did you learn about the Schmidt Industries case?”

Clark was relieved that she had switched to a subject he could discuss honestly. “Well, actually I didn’t spend that much time on it. I learned...” Clark spent the rest of the conversation bringing Lois up to speed on the parts of the investigation that he had completed.

That night, Clark didn’t sleep at all. It seemed that even the extra expenditure of energy that went into moving around those ships wasn’t enough to overcome the anxiety brought on by the situation. Nightfall threatened the world, and saving it, and everyone he cared about, was going to be up to him.

Wednesday morning Clark wasn’t sure if he should go into work. The idea of seeing Lois, knowing she was still probably going to be mad that he wouldn’t share the secret, left him somewhat reluctant to be there. However, he had spent more than a few sleepless hours thinking about his life and where he wanted to take it. The one common thread that ran through all of the possibilities was Lois. After last night, the idea of spending the morning with an angry Lois was infinitely more appealing than not seeing her at all.

Since he was not able to sleep, it was easy to arrive early for work. He spent the morning making up for the time that he had spent as Superman yesterday. He was so focused on his work that he managed to miss Lois’s arrival. By the time he realized that she was in the office, she was getting settled at her desk. He wanted to see if she’d really forgiven him for keeping the Superman secret so he headed right over to her. When he reached her desk, she was busy on her workstation. He tried to make his greeting as cheery as possible. “Good morning, Lois.”

She didn’t bother to look up when she replied. “Good morning, Clark.” Her tone made it impossible to judge her mood.

“Lois, I’m sorry that I had to be evasive about the Superman thing.”

He was relieved at the lack of anger in her features when she looked up at him. “I understand why you can’t tell me anything. If Superman had sworn me to secrecy, I wouldn’t tell you either.”

Good, she really seemed to have forgiven him. “Thanks for understanding. I wanted to make sure we were okay on that. I have an errand that I have to do involving...that thing I can’t talk about. I’ll be gone for an hour or so.”

Lois was surprised at his telling her what he was really doing. “Clark, you could have said that you were just going to be out following a lead. Why are you telling me this?”

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately and...well, whatever else happens I want you to be able to trust me.”

“You’re the most trustworthy person I know. Of course I trust you. I just got mad that you wouldn’t tell me...that secret, whatever it is. I know you wouldn’t lie to me.” Then the rest of what he said hit her. “Hold it. What do you mean, ‘whatever else happens’?”

His first reaction was that he’d said too much. He also wished she had stopped before saying that she knew he wouldn’t lie to her. He wanted to find a way to end the lies, and had sworn to himself that they were about to end. “Lois, I...”

Just then, Clark noticed the clock and he realized he was late. He should have been at the research lab five minutes ago. In a more urgent tone, he began again. “I need to go right now.” With that, he rushed out.

For an instant, Lois was irritated at his departure, but this secret, whatever it was, clearly had Clark off-balance. Besides, with him, sudden unexpected exits were just part of the package. She pushed her partner from her mind and went back to studying how the information from Sam the Mouse fit into the Schmidt

investigation.

Less than a minute later, Superman arrived at the research center. A guard led him inside where the same team as the day before was waiting for him. As soon as he sat down, Dr. Aames spoke up. “Superman, we’ve compiled the test results and they look very promising. If you can do what we hope, then we believe that we have a way to deal with Nightfall.”

Clark could hear the optimism in the older scientist’s voice. “You sound much more confident today.”

“Yes. Even with Dr. Klein’s data, we didn’t have accurate enough measurements of your abilities to be sure that our plan would work. You see, we need to apply a force to divert Nightfall. In simple terms, the more energy we can apply, the more likely that we will succeed. Yesterday you asked about using an atomic bomb. The value of a large bomb is that it’s a way to apply a lot of energy in a controlled manner. However, we don’t want to risk atomic fallout if we don’t need to. If we can hit the asteroid hard enough, we can divert it without resorting to a nuclear weapon.”

“Yesterday’s tests show that I can do that?”

Dr. Klein jumped in with a reply. “Yes, Superman. We now know you can carry a ship with a ten thousand metric ton mass. If you drive it into the asteroid at one thousand miles per second, the energy released against Nightfall would be more than sixty times more powerful than the biggest atomic bomb ever exploded.” Dr. Klein motioned at the other men. “We’ve discussed this and believe that if you hit Nightfall in just the right place, you will save the Earth.”

No wonder they were optimistic today. “So when the ship hits, it will destroy Nightfall?” Clark asked.

Dr. Aames answered this one. “No. The asteroid is much too massive for that. If you hit it at that speed, the collision will either divert Nightfall or break it up. We’ve been probing Nightfall with radar since we discovered it. Fortunately, it is a relatively solid mass so deflection is an option.”

Clark wished these people came with translators. “Could you explain what you mean?”

“Think about what we are trying to accomplish with an impact, and it should be easier to understand,” Dr. Aames answered. “If Nightfall were a solid ball of iron, we would want you to hit it on the side to make it change direction. It would move as a single unit like a giant pool ball. On the other hand, if it were a collection of smaller pieces loosely packed together, then hitting it would do no good. It would be like hitting a snowball with a baseball bat. The asteroid would break into pieces, but many of those pieces would keep going in the same direction—straight at the Earth. Luckily, we don’t have to worry about that. As I said earlier, we now know that Nightfall is a reasonably solid body. It’s not made up entirely of iron, but it does appear solid enough to go ahead with the impact plan. When the ship hits, Nightfall may stay together or it may fragment. Either way, as long as you hit it correctly, the plan will work. Even if it splits into pieces, they’ll be going in a new direction and miss the Earth.”

“Both you and Dr. Klein have said something about hitting it correctly. What does that mean?”

“As long as you hit it at the right angle, either the entire asteroid or—and we think this is more likely—whatever pieces it breaks into, will be deflected enough to miss the Earth. The one thing we don’t want you to do is hit it straight on in the center. That would either do nothing at all or it might break it into pieces without changing its direction. A lot of little rocks hitting the Earth isn’t much better than one big rock. That’s why we’re going to provide you with a guidance system. For that matter, we are already building the mission apparatus.”

“Apparatus? I thought I would use one of those ships that I lifted yesterday and just throw it into Nightfall.”

Dr. Aames looked at Captain Fairbanks who took over the explanation. “You will be using a ship. In fact, it will be one of the ships you carried yesterday. There simply isn’t time to build anything that massive from scratch. There will also be a two-part mission pack. One part will be a guidance system and tracking radars attached to the ship. The readouts and controls will be next to an area that will be fitted with grips so you can hold on to the ship while guiding it to Nightfall. We are also building a survival pack that will be a more complex version of the one you used to fly to the moon and back. It will provide you with oxygen and a communication system. We want to do everything that we can to ensure the success of this mission.”

Clark looked thoughtful for a minute. “How far away will I be intercepting Nightfall?”

Dr. Aames answered. “As we said yesterday, Nightfall is such a dark object that we didn’t discover it until it was very close. It’s only about 1.2 million miles away from where it will cross Earth’s orbit. We hope you can get to it while it is still more than a million miles out. At that distance if we can get a one-degree change in direction, Nightfall will miss the Earth.”

“How soon do you want me to leave?”

“As soon as the ship and survival pack are ready.”

For an instant Clark almost snapped back at them. He wanted to know how much time he had. He was feeling more stress than he was used to and he needed to be careful. With an effort, he kept his voice calm. “When will that be?”

Despite his attempt to hide his reaction, the other men seemed to notice his irritation. They looked at each other for a second before the general answered. “The ship is being prepared at the same shipyard that you were in yesterday. Our projections are for a departure time of around 8:00 this evening.”

That would leave time to see Lois and his parents. But what could he tell them? “When will there be an announcement?”

“There’s so little time that we don’t see a reason to start a panic. We’ll be making the announcement just when you leave.”

“You do know that rumors of my doing something secret have reached the press?”

“Yes. We knew that the ship movements would be noticed. Officially we are saying ‘no comment,’ but some rumors have been planted about the possibility of you being asked to help with ship deployments. We also planted a different rumor that your activities were a test of the structural integrity of the ships themselves. There should be plenty of confused information to keep everyone busy until you depart tonight.”

Clark considered all that they had told him. Despite the optimism of the mission team, he couldn’t shake a sense of anxiety about this mission. He hoped that it was simply because this was the biggest thing he’d ever done. Based on what he’d been shown, this should go like clockwork. He didn’t understand where the nervousness was coming from.

Something about his expression, or maybe it was the delay while he was thinking, must have betrayed his uneasiness, because he was startled out of his musing by General Zeitlin trying to get his attention. “Superman?” The general seemed to make an effort to show that they were all on the same side. “I assure you that we have taken every precaution to assure your safety. The survival pack will have more than five times the air you need for the trip. Furthermore, we were going to cover this in your final pre-flight briefing but it might ease your mind to know that we don’t want you to be holding the ship when it hits. The targeting system will signal you that you are on-target and close enough to Nightfall to release the ship. As soon as that sensor tells you it’s time, we want you to let go of the ship and start back.”

“Why don’t you want me to be holding the ship when it hits Nightfall?”

The general nodded to Dr. Aames to answer this. “We are

basing our calculations of the optimal closing speed, approach angle and impact position on the mechanics of the impact between the ship and the asteroid. Your presence with your powers would add a level of unpredictability that would invalidate the calculation. So, not only is it safer for you, we believe it will substantially improve the probability of the success of the mission if you release the ship just before impact. The guidance system will include a proximity sensor that will signal you that it’s time to let go and start back.”

Clark’s mind was spinning but he didn’t know what else to do other than continue. He turned back to General Zeitlin. “What time do you want me at the shipyard?”

“Please be there at seven o’clock tonight. We’ll make the announcement and then spend about an hour in preparation.”

“All right. I’ll be at the shipyard promptly at seven.”

With that, Clark left. He hovered high over Metropolis to think through what to do. He had eight hours to get ready. After only a moment, he knew where he had to go. He needed to see Lois.

When Clark arrived at the Planet he was relieved to see Lois at her desk. He went immediately to her.

“Lois, can we talk in the conference room for a minute?”

“Clark, I’m busy.”

“Please. This is important.”

Lois could see from the expression on his face that he was especially serious about this. “Okay, Clark. But this better be good.”

They walked over to an unused conference room and went in. Clark waited for her to get completely into the room, and then closed the door behind her.

“There is something very big going on. It is extremely serious and involves Superman.”

“I know all this. Can you tell me more?”

“Not yet. I... I need to be out of the office the rest of the day. There is some personal business that I have to take care of and...”

Lois cut him off. “Don’t tell me that this was the big secret that caused you to drag me in here.”

“No, it’s not. Lois, you need to be at your apartment at 6:30 tonight. Superman needs to talk to you. Can you be there?”

“I guess so. As long as a big story doesn’t come up.”

Sometimes he wanted to strangle her. “That’s not good enough. Please believe me when I tell you this is more important than any story.”

Lois could hear that tone of desperation in his voice. She could also see that her partner was very upset. By normal Kent standards, he seemed to be bordering on hysteria. “Clark, what’s going on?”

“I... I can’t say right now. Just promise you’ll be at home tonight.”

His insistence seemed so personal. “Are you planning to come by too?”

“No. I... No, I’m not.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“I don’t mean to. It’s just that this is very important.”

Something in his tone and body language was sending very confusing messages. “Is it important to Superman or to you?”

The pause dragged on for several seconds. Finally, very softly, Clark answered, “Both.”

The quiet seriousness of his reply said as much as his anxious nervousness earlier. She may not have known exactly what this was about, but it was certainly important to Clark. She stepped over to him and reached for his hand. “Okay. I’ll make sure that I’m at home.”

She couldn’t miss the intensity of the look he gave their clasped hands. It screamed of words not said. After a few seconds, he seemed to realize what he was doing, came out of the

trance, and lifted his gaze to her face. “Thank you Lois. This is... Thank you.” The look on Clark’s face was a mix of emotions that Lois had never seen before. She was still trying to figure out a reply to Clark’s cryptic thanks when he started speaking again. “Lois, if anything happens...”

Clark stopped. His fears about Nightfall, no matter how irrational, were making him careless. He’d almost said too much for this meeting. He’d worked out a tentative plan last night but being here with her made it difficult to stay with an idea no matter how good it sounded.

The appearance of Nightfall had shaken him to the core. A year ago, he had believed that he knew his way in this world, and he was destined to walk that path alone. That belief had changed. He still wasn’t sure if it changed the moment that Lois had interrupted his interview, but it had certainly happened by the time she told him not to fall for her. He had fallen for her, and then she fell for Superman.

It was frustrating that she was so ready to accept him as Superman but not for who he really was. But then, this whole Nightfall mess had him wondering about that part too. When he first put on the suit, he had thought it was nothing more than a false-front to hide behind. This past day, in dealing with the military and the scientists, he’d come to realize that Superman was much more real than he’d wanted to admit. As he’d lain awake last night, it occurred to him that maybe he’d been taking the wrong approach. Lois had come to accept the hack from Nowheresville to be a good reporter and a reliable partner, but only after she’d been exposed to the real person behind the supposed hack. Could it be possible that she could accept that there was a person behind the hero?

Lois was no shallow groupie. Once she had the idea that there might be more to Superman than the bright colors and spandex, she’d probably put all the pieces together herself in short order. If he was ever to have a future with Lois, that day was going to come anyway. Better to have it come about because he initiated the process. Despite his fears, this idea felt so right. Introduce Lois to the concept that there was no future with Superman but there might be with the person behind the flashy colors and the powers. That was the plan. He would take the first step tonight.

Clark realized that he’d fallen into a muse and had been staring at her for several seconds. He knew what he wanted to do but that was for tonight...and tomorrow. “Lois, I need to be out for the rest of the day. I’ll see you...tomorrow.” With those words, Clark darted out of the office.

Lois was in a state of near shock. Her partner had an annoying habit of rushing off unexpectedly, but this was different. Usually his exits were because he claimed to have just remembered an appointment or something. Now it was obvious that he had planned to leave and he just needed to deliver that message first. And what a message! The part about the Superman meeting was strange enough. What did he mean by that “if anything happens” line?

Her thoughts were interrupted by Perry bellowing from his office. “Lois, in my office now!”

As soon as she entered Perry’s office, it was clear that the irritation that she had detected in his voice was not her imagination.

“Where’s Clark?”

“He’s been working on some story related to those strange Superman sightings. He seems to know something, but Superman has sworn him to secrecy and he won’t say what it’s about. He just left to follow up another lead. I don’t think he expects to be back in the office until tomorrow.”

“That’s just great!” Lois was not used to hearing such sarcasm in Perry’s voice when talking about her partner. “There’s a big secret Superman story, he has the inside track, and he isn’t sharing the story.”

“Chief, I pressed him on this and...well, he seems really shaken up. I could tell that he wanted to tell me but, like I said, Superman swore him to secrecy. He did tell me that Superman wants to meet me this evening. I have a feeling that I’m going to learn what this is all about then. I think between what Superman tells me tonight and what Clark knows, that by tomorrow morning we’ll have all we need for a great front page.”

“I hope you’re right. The reason I called you in is a story coming out of the West Coast. There’s an astronomer who’s claiming that there is an asteroid on a collision course with Earth. Normally I wouldn’t think much of something like this, but this woman is a well-respected scientist. With all the mysterious things that Superman has been doing the last day or so, I thought it would be good for you to check this out.”

“Okay, Chief. I’ll work on this immediately. I’ll also see if any of my government sources have any idea what is going on.”

“Something about this is setting off all my alarms. This is your top priority. Just don’t miss that appointment with Superman.”

“Believe me, that is one meeting that I have no intention of missing.”

Chapter 3: Preparations

Clark arrived in Smallville only a few minutes after leaving the office. A midday arrival meant that he had to either risk flying slow enough that he might be seen or fly fast enough to risk the sonic boom. Later that afternoon there were several discussions in Smallville as to whether the source of the sonic booms was some type of clear-air thunder or a plane from the air force base a few counties over.

Clark spent most of the day with his parents. He tried to project as much confidence in the plan to intercept Nightfall as the scientists seemed to have. However, he couldn’t shake his lingering nervousness, and it was obvious to both Jonathan and Martha.

“Why are you so jumpy?” Martha asked. “From everything you’ve said, the scientists who are putting this plan together have put a lot of thought into it.”

“I know, Mom. I guess it’s just that I’m used to depending on myself. The whole idea of flying out into space to Nightfall and trying to divert it is scary enough. The idea that I have to depend on people I don’t know to get me back... It just bothers me.”

“Clark, this isn’t so different from when you ride on an airplane. When you get on the plane, you’re betting your life that nothing critical will fail.”

“I know. It’s just... I don’t know how to say it. The way this whole thing is being rushed together makes me nervous. And...there’s something else.”

“Something else?” Martha asked.

“On Monday, I responded to a bomb threat at a bank. It turned out to be a hoax, but when I went to leave... Well, I’d just started to fly away when I was hit by a feeling of pain. It made me dizzy and I dropped back to the ground. It reminded me of how I felt when I got too close to that Kryptonite.”

Martha’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, no. Are you okay now?”

“Yeah. I think if there were any lingering effects, they would have shown up in those tests yesterday. Whatever it was only lasted a second. I don’t even think most people noticed. I was only a foot or so off the ground when it happened. The pain was gone instantly and I was able to fly away with no more problems. It may not have been Kryptonite, but if it wasn’t, there might be something else out there that can do the same thing. Whatever it was, it just adds one more thing for me to worry about.”

Jonathan finally spoke up. “Well, Son, if you’re worried about the mission, is there anything you can do on your own to give you more of a sense of control?”

“What do you mean?”

“What part of this Nightfall mission worries you the most?”

Clark thought for a few seconds before responding. “I guess it’s the air supply. When I flew to the Moon yesterday, I didn’t seem to have any problem being out in space, but I need air. If anything else goes wrong, I feel like I could handle it and get back to Earth, but if the air supply fails I don’t know what I’d do. I can hold my breath for a long time, but not that long, especially when I’m exerting myself.”

Martha spoke up. “So carry a backup.”

“What?” Clark just hadn’t thought along those lines.

She turned to Jonathan. “Honey, do you remember where we put the equipment from when I took diving lessons last year?”

“Sure. It’s all in a storage area out in the barn.”

Martha turned back to her son. “Why don’t you take your own backup air supply? You’ve had diving lessons so you know how to use that kind of gear.”

Clark looked doubtful. “Mom, I don’t know. Somehow I don’t think diving gear would work correctly out in space.”

Martha remained undaunted. “There must be someone you can trust who would have access to equipment that you could use in space. Do you think you can borrow something?”

A smile lit up his face. “I’ll be back in a bit.” With that, he took off.

About an hour later, Clark reappeared carrying what looked like a black backpack with some hoses attached. “I got this from a scientist in Britain. It’s an experimental rebreather that he’s been working on as an air supply for lightweight space suits. It’s basically a diver’s rebreather that’s been modified for space work. It’s passed all of the ground-based tests and he was trying to work out a way to do a space trial. I remembered his work from some research I did for a scientific article I wrote a few months ago. It’s designed to provide air for up to a three-hour space walk. He was happy to loan it to Superman when I promised that I would test it in space for him.”

“But Son, you’re still depending on someone else.”

“I know, but I like the idea that this is something that I initiated. I met the person and I remember him from the article. I feel like I have some level of control over this.”

“Does he know what you plan to do with it?” Martha asked.

“No, I promised I’d keep the existence of Nightfall a secret. He might put the pieces together when the Nightfall announcement goes out later tonight, but by then it will be all right. I’m wondering if I should tell the mission team that I want to carry a backup.”

“Honey, aren’t they going to fit you with some equipment before you leave?” Martha asked. “I think they’ll notice if you have your own extra gear.”

Clark sighed. “I guess you’re right. But I don’t want them to think I don’t trust them.”

Before Martha could respond, Jonathan spoke up. “Son, I like the idea of you keeping this to yourself. I can’t help but worry that there might be some people like Trask involved in the mission.”

Clark started to interrupt. These people didn’t seem that way to him. However, before he even got out a single word his dad raised his hand in a ‘please let me finish’ motion.

“Son, I’m sure these people didn’t come off that way. But just the same, if they don’t need to know about this, I don’t think you should tell them. If Trask proved anything it was that there are still crazies out there that want to dissect you no matter how much good you do.”

“Okay, Dad, if you feel so strongly.”

“I do,” Jonathan replied. “Is there any way to take it along without anyone else knowing?”

Clark thought for a minute. “I guess I can put it on top of a building near the Philadelphia shipyard before I check in. When I

leave, I can use some super speed and move it to the ship before I lift it into space. If I go as fast as I can move when I get the rebreather, it’ll be impossible for anyone to see me. As soon as I’m in space, I can get it from the ship so that I’m carrying it with me.”

“Son, maybe your old dad’s paranoid but I’d feel better if you did it that way.”

Clark smiled and put his hand on Jonathan’s shoulder. “I understand, Dad. Thanks for looking out for me. I’ll carry this along and if everything goes according to plan I’ll do the space test for the British scientist after the Nightfall risk is past.”

Clark looked at the clock and realized that it was time to go if he was going to get everything ready and still have time to stop by Lois’s apartment. “Mom, Dad, I need to go. There are some things I need to take care of in Metropolis.”

Martha moved over to him and gave him a hug. “Son, I’m sure it’ll be fine, but you be careful.”

“I will, Mom,” he answered. After another few seconds he found that his dad had come up to them. Jonathan put his arms around them both. “I’ll be fine, Dad.”

“I know, Son. But this is a lot bigger than stopping a bank robbery or even helping to land a plane. Is it okay if your mom and I worry a little bit?”

He smiled back at his dad. “Yeah, I guess it’s okay.”

In less than a minute Clark took off for Metropolis.

Lois had been ready for nearly fifteen minutes and growing more nervous with each passing second. These past two days had been stranger than anything she could remember. Yesterday, Superman was doing odd things at the Philadelphia shipyard, and then today he seemed to have disappeared for most of the day. On top of that, Clark’s behavior this morning had been confusing.

A movement outside the window interrupted her train of thought. A quick glance at a clock revealed that Superman was more than five minutes late. She went to the window to invite him in. Only seconds later, the hero was standing in the middle of her living room. “Superman, it’s good to see you. I hope you can tell me what this is about.”

“I can tell you some of it.” He took a deep breath. “A newly-discovered asteroid is on a collision course with Earth. The scientists have named it Nightfall. It’s very large and if it hits, it could kill most of the people on our planet.”

Lois stared back at him in shock. “So that astronomer was right.”

“What astronomer?”

“There’s an astronomer out west who’s been trying to convince people that she found a killer asteroid. I did a phone interview with her today. No wonder she seemed so convincing.”

“I guess I’m surprised that there aren’t more people reporting having found it. There will be an announcement within half an hour. I’ll be flying on a mission to try to divert Nightfall. The scientists are optimistic but...well, I’ve never tried anything like this before and... Lois, I couldn’t leave without seeing you.”

The message in his tone was clear to Lois. He was worried. “Superman, what are you saying?”

He pulled back from her so he could look at her properly. Clark brought his hand up to her cheek and just gazed tenderly into her eyes for a few seconds. “Lois, since I found out about this, I’ve been thinking about...the future. There are many things I’d like to say, but not when I’m about to leave. I have something that I would like you to think about while I’m gone.”

“Yes?” she asked.

“I’d like you to think about me.” Clark focused on putting as much tenderness in the request as he could. “Try to think of me as a person and not think about my abilities. Can you honestly say that you’ve ever done that?”

Lois’s reply felt like a plea. “Superman, I already know...”

Clark cut her off. “Lois, can you honestly tell me that you have ever thought of me as a normal person with a regular life? How would you see me without my powers? How would you feel if I were the guy next door that makes mistakes and... I... I have something that I want to tell you, but first we need to talk about...” This was much harder than he’d expected. He should have rehearsed this speech. “Lois, you must realize that the person wearing this...” he indicated his uniform, “...can’t have a personal relationship with anyone.”

Lois’s mind was spinning. It sounded like he wanted to say that he had feelings for her. Except for that part at the end, she would swear that he was trying to find a way to say that he wanted to start dating. Or did he mean that since he was Superman, he could never date anyone no matter how much he might want to? And, what was it with the “guy next door” stuff? Did he mean that he was going to give up being Superman? And what kind of mistakes could he be talking about?

While these ideas were percolating in her thoughts, she sensed a movement from Superman. When her eyes met his she knew. In an instant the distance that separated them disappeared. It was Superman who initiated the kiss but once it started, it was very much a cooperative venture.

The kiss seemed to go on forever. When they finally separated, Lois was speechless. She had kissed men before but this was different. After that first second she had lost herself in the feeling. It wasn’t arousal... well, it wasn’t just that. This was something more. This was a connection. This was a feeling of belonging that she had never felt before. The kiss at the airport during the pheromone case last week/month had hinted at this, but today was far stronger. Somehow it felt more real.

As she stared up into his brown eyes, it was clear that the kiss had something of a similar effect on him. She had to say something. “Superman. I...” But the words died on her lips.

Before she could regroup he stepped back to create some distance. “Lois, that was... but not now. This is more complicated than you know because of... Well, like I said before, I promise we’ll talk when I get back. Will you think about what I asked?”

“Yes,” she replied, somewhat breathlessly.

He could hear the confusion in her voice but he didn’t see any way to fix that right now. Instead, he gave her his best smile and said, “We’ll talk tomorrow.” And with a whoosh of air he disappeared.

The guidance system had been telling Clark that he was on course for some time now. The image being relayed from the other side of the ship still showed nothing. There wasn’t much more to do than simply stay on course and maintain speed.

The scientists had simply insisted that the guidance system was very easy to understand, and Clark had to agree with them. There was a video screen that showed a path made up of green circles. All he had to do was stay in the center of the path. As long as he was on course, the circles stayed green. At the suggestion of mission control, he had deliberately strayed off-course right after he left Earth. Sure enough, the path had turned from green to red and he heard an alarm sound in the headset he was wearing. He quickly returned to the path and the circles changed back to green.

Except for the tension, Clark found the flight boring. Fortunately, it wasn’t going to take very long. When he left on the mission, Nightfall was about 1.1 million miles away. The idea was to fly toward Nightfall as fast as he could. The goal was to achieve an impact speed of greater than 1000 miles per second. There were two indicators to show Clark how fast he was going. Ground-based radars from all over the world were monitoring his progress and the mission control technician was providing near constant information mixed in among the other mission chatter. When he got closer to Nightfall, a second system, built onto the ship, would kick in.

They had stressed to him that at 1000 miles per second, it would only take 18 minutes to reach Nightfall. Therefore he needed to work as hard as possible to get the ship up to speed quickly. Clark found that it was much harder to reach the desired velocity when pushing a ship. When it was just him, whether flying to Europe or the Moon, he would reach full speed almost instantly. When pushing the ship it was very different. It had taken several minutes of giving it everything he had to reach the desired speed. Mission control told him that he had actually achieved more than 1100 miles per second and had asked him to not try to go any faster since the higher speeds were outside both the capabilities of the guidance equipment and the parameters of the mission plan.

The scientists told him that because of the vacuum of space, once he got the ship up to speed it should take very little force to maintain that velocity. That was true to a point, but there must be more friction than they expected because when he relaxed, there was a noticeable decrease in forward velocity. The mission control scientists said that there must be a cloud of dust and debris surrounding Nightfall.

Clark was surprised how just a few minutes could seem to drag on. He was waiting for the radar systems on the ship to report contact. He had been briefed that when he got close enough to Nightfall, the radar systems on the ship would provide additional guidance information for the last part of the trip. The scientists had said that having the local guidance system would make for a much more accurate determination of speed and impact position. Therefore, the ship-based system was going to tell him when to release the ship and head back.

Clark felt a shudder come through the hand rails. It felt like the ship had run into something. A second later he felt another one.

“EPRAD control?” Clark called.

He waited for their reply. The mission planners had made sure that he understood that near the end of the mission, the million mile distance would lead to a ten second delay in round-trip communication. They had stressed that the five second delay for one-way information flow had been factored into the mission plan. They wanted him to understand why it was going to seem like mission control was going to get slower in responding as the mission proceeded.

“EPRAD here, Superman. What is your status?”

“Everything is fine. I’m on course but I just felt a vibration like the ship ran into something.”

“There may be some small fragments ahead of Nightfall. Are you having any problem maintaining the velocity of the ship?”

“No. I was just surprised to feel it.”

“Superman, our radar scans didn’t pick up anything, but the presence of some leading debris was always a possibility.”

“Okay, EPRAD. I’ll let you know if it becomes a threat to the mission. How much longer do I have?”

“Superman, you are nearly there. Your terminal guidance radar on the ship should pick up Nightfall any second now. You will know because the guidance rings will turn from green to blue. Once that happens, watch for the release notice. The whole screen will turn yellow. That means that you are close enough that the ship is certain to hit Nightfall at the target location.”

“Thank you, EPRAD control.” Clark found that he had to be careful not to let his annoyance show. That had been covered in the mission briefing. “At my present speed, how close will I be to Nightfall when I am to release the ship?”

“At your current speed the release point will be five and one-half seconds before impact. It’s very important that you are exactly on the right course when you release the ship. Even a slight variance could be disastrous. That, combined with the time delay for communication, is why we built release-determination functionality into your mission pack.”

“Don’t worry, EPRAD, I’ll make sure we are on course and I won’t release early.”

At that instant the guidance rings changed from green to blue.

A few seconds later he heard mission control. “Superman, our remote telemetry shows that you are on final approach. Do you confirm?”

“Yes, EPRAD. I have blue guidance rings. I need to concentrate now, so I won’t be talking much.”

“Very good, Superman, you have 85 seconds until impact. Do you see the countdown timer on the screen?”

The time delay made talking about the time confusing. “Yes, EPRAD, I now see 74 seconds.”

“Good luck, Superman. We will continue to monitor.”

Only a second later Clark heard the rumbling of several impacts against the ship. Then there was a veritable storm of clanging. It seemed clear that he had encountered a much denser debris field. However, despite the noise he had no problem maintaining course and speed. After another second of clanging the sound stopped. He figured that he must be through this debris field.

The timer countdown had just reached 55 seconds when it happened. Instead of clanging there was a strange sound like grinding mixed with metal tearing. Suddenly the guidance screen blinked and turned yellow with the word “RELEASE NOW” flashing in the middle of the screen. Strangely enough, the guidance rings were still there and the countdown read 53 seconds. He heard a faint pop and even though the air smelled different, he had no trouble breathing. The communication system seemed to fail and his ears were filled with static. However, that only went on for an instant. The silence was broken by the last voice that Clark wanted to hear.

“Hello, Superman, Lex Luthor here. I wanted to thank you for saving the planet for me. You should know that LexCorp built your survival suit. In fact, I personally helped in the design. From the instant your guidance system signaled that you were no longer needed, your air supply has been laced with Kryptonite and poison gas. You were a worthy adversary, but I always win. Have a nice death. Oh, I’ll be sure to be there to comfort Lois Lane when you’re gone.”

As Clark listened to his enemy’s voice, he realized he felt dizzy and weak. As soon as he heard the word Kryptonite he stopped breathing, but it was too late. He felt slightly dizzy and it was becoming hard to concentrate. He pulled off the breathing mask and reached for the rebreather. As soon as it was over his face, he tried to breathe quickly to see if that would purge his system.

It helped some, but not enough. Just as his hands reached the grips for the ship, there was another shock through the handles on the ship and Clark realized that he had drifted out of the still visible guidance rings. When he tried to guide the ship back, he found that he no longer had enough strength to control the ship at all. As much as he strained, it was to no avail as the ship continued to drift off-course.

Through the growing fog that was his thoughts, Clark realized that there was nothing else he could do. With a cry of anguish he released the ship and turned away. Fortunately, although his strength was mostly gone, he still had some of his power. He set his sights on Earth and accelerated to his top speed. With the EPRAD-supplied survival pack still strapped to his back, and the rebreather slung over his shoulder, he headed back to Earth.

As the minutes passed Clark could feel that something was definitely wrong. With each passing second it got harder to maintain his speed. It was also getting harder and harder to concentrate. Whatever was in that gas that Luthor used, it was having an effect.

Without the burden of the ship, the return trip seemed to take

very little time. But everything was becoming so confused. He knew he had to go to that city over there but... There was someone there who was important but he just couldn’t remember. The last coherent thought was the image of a dark-haired woman and the name Lois.

Chapter 4: Effects

After Superman left her apartment, Lois just sat there for nearly half an hour. Her mind was spinning with ideas and images of Superman. What did he mean? What was he going to tell her when he returned? Was it that he loved her? After that kiss, what else could it be? But what did he mean by that bit where he said that no one wearing his uniform could have a relationship?

It was the sound of her phone ringing that snapped her out of the endless loop of musing. She was so sure this would be her partner following up on Superman’s visit, that she answered the phone with, “Clark?”

“No Lois, it’s Perry.”

“Oh. Sorry Perry, I got distracted by... Well, after Superman left.”

“I can imagine. I’m watching the announcement now. How much more did he tell you?”

Despite everything, Lois almost laughed at that. Superman told her a lot, but most of it was none of Perry’s business. “I know about Nightfall and I know he’s going to fly an intercept mission to the asteroid.”

“Darlin’, the whole world knows that now. The EPRAD news conference is still in progress. I knew you were meeting Superman, but once the announcement started and I saw that he was in Philadelphia, I took a chance on you still being in your apartment. Have you seen Kent? Did he give you any information beyond what is in the official announcement?”

Lois was growing more irritated by the second. Not at Perry, but at herself. She had let Superman’s visit distract her so much that she had completely forgotten about covering the story. She was tempted to turn on her television but wanted to get into the office as quickly as possible. “No, Perry. Isn’t Clark at the press conference?”

“No. This was handled like an emergency announcement. There are video feeds coming out of EPRAD and Philadelphia. Everyone in the press is scrambling to get coverage on-site. The ship that Superman is going to fly into Nightfall is coming from the Philadelphia mothball fleet but some of the key experts are here in Metropolis. Anyway, since you said Superman was going to meet you at your apartment, I thought Clark might have been there with you.”

“Perry, I haven’t seen Clark since early today. If he’s not at the office, I don’t know where he might be.”

“Nobody has seen him since this morning. Lois, I need you in here. As far as we know, you’re the only person outside of EPRAD who has talked to Superman today. A moment ago he said a few words from the shipyard, but it was just a short statement about doing his best to help. He’s about to leave on the Nightfall intercept mission and we’ll need to have the story for tomorrow morning. According to the EPRAD spokesman, Superman will be leaving from there carrying the ship to use as a projectile. The idea is to smash the ship into Nightfall at a thousand miles per second and try to deflect it. They think that a ten thousand ton impact at that speed will deflect Nightfall enough to miss the Earth. Weren’t you watching the announcement?”

“No. I got...distracted. How much time until it happens?”

“They estimated that it would only take about twenty minutes once he leaves. He’ll be leaving within the hour and will be in contact by radio the whole time.”

“I’m on my way in now. Are you sure that no one knows

where Clark is?"

"Lois, you were my best hope. You told me that he was researching the secret Superman project. He hasn't even said that much to anyone else and, like I said, he's gone missing."

This reminded Lois of why she had always preferred to work alone. "I'm on my way in. I'm sure he'll show up as soon as he's finished with his cheese-of-the-month or whatever he's off doing."

She didn't even wait for Perry to answer before she hung up the phone. In less than a minute, she was locking the door to her apartment.

When Lois arrived at the office, she found a strange mix of nervous anticipation and frantic activity. The bullpen television was on and turned up loud. The television press had gotten organized and was now broadcasting from the EPRAD press center. There were talking heads discussing Nightfall and the intercept mission. Superman had left less than a minute before Lois walked into the office. The newscast kept cutting to a tracking graphic that showed his progress. Finally, whenever Superman talked with EPRAD control, the radio communication between Superman and EPRAD control was included in the broadcast.

She'd been there for less than a minute when Jimmy came in carrying a stack of papers. As soon as he caught sight of her he changed course and hurried over.

"Lois, where have you been? I thought that you or CK would have been in the middle of all this."

She may have been willing to confess an embarrassing lapse to Perry, but Jimmy was going to get a slightly different spin on where she'd been. "I had an exclusive interview with Superman just before he went to EPRAD. I need to work up my notes."

Jimmy's face burst into a smile. "I knew you would have the inside track on this. I haven't seen CK all day. Is he working on this too?"

"Clark was working with Superman earlier today. He said he had some inside information but Superman had sworn him to secrecy until after the announcement. I'm surprised he's not here yet, but I'm sure we'll see him before too long."

Jimmy seemed to suddenly remember that he was carrying papers. "I need to get these to Perry. I'll let him know you're here."

Jimmy hurried off toward Perry's office. The zone-out after Superman's visit had cost her precious time. But she did have an interview—okay, more of a talk. Was there some way to use that conversation without betraying the personal nature of the visit? She certainly wasn't going to share any of the more intimate details of what he had said. She considered building the story around the fact that he was obviously nervous about the mission. With that thought, she sat down to see what she could do.

A few minutes later she sensed someone standing near her desk. She looked up expecting to see Clark and was mildly surprised to see Perry instead.

As soon as she made eye contact Perry asked, "What do you have for me?"

This was embarrassing. She had the only exclusive interview with Superman, but she couldn't publish any of it. It was clear that Superman intended that to be a private meeting. There was no way she was about to share anything he said. "Perry, I hardly know how to say this, but Superman didn't tell me anything that wasn't covered more thoroughly in the official news release."

Perry was staring at her as if she had two heads. "Lois, this isn't like you." His tone was that of an all-business and unhappy editor. "I mean, I know this is Superman, but you're the best there is. Don't you have anything you can use?"

She reviewed their conversation for a minute. "About the best I have is that he seemed confident that the mission would succeed. He talked about..." The only thing she could come close

to sharing was that he clearly expected to come back after the mission to...talk. Unfortunately she realized that there was nothing she could say without saying too much. "I just don't have anything. I guess the best I can do is to combine the press release with my interview of the West Coast astronomer. I'm sorry Perry, I was expecting more information from Superman and I thought we'd have Clark's information to use."

Perry was clearly unhappy by this development but he could tell that Lois was already trying to give him everything she had. "Fine," he said gruffly. "Go with what you have and send it to me as soon as you can."

Despite his obvious irritation, Lois detected a tone of worry in that last phrase. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I'm trying to figure out what happened to Clark."

"What do you mean?"

"No one has seen or heard from him since this morning. Did he give you any idea of what he was up to?" Now the concern in his voice was obvious.

"It's like I told you on the phone. He had the inside track on the Nightfall story. I was sure that once the announcement was made and he was free of the promise to keep the story secret, he would be in here with all kinds of background information."

"Is there anyone you can call to ask about Clark?" Perry asked.

"I can try, chief." She looked at the clock and realized that it was fairly late. "Has anyone called MPD to see if they have anything?"

"No. I kept thinking that he was going to walk in at any moment. It wasn't until Superman left and we still hadn't heard from him that I started getting worried. There was no answer on his home phone so I figured it was time to take some steps. Lois, this isn't really your problem. If you'd rather focus on the story, I can have someone else try to find out what happened."

This was all she needed. Between a killer rock threatening to kill everyone and Superman getting her all confused with what he did and said in her apartment, she'd managed to forget that Clark had been acting strangely. This morning, when Clark had said that it was important that she meet Superman at her apartment, his tone had caused her to ask if it was important to him or Superman. His reply of 'both' was surprising enough and the emotion in his voice when he said it had left her thoroughly confused. In light of the real reason that Superman had visited, that enigmatic 'both' took on even more meaning. Perry wasn't the only person that was worried about Clark. These past months they had grown closer than she generally liked to admit. "No, Perry. I'd like to see what I can find out. I'll set my Nightfall piece aside for a few minutes and see what I can turn up on Clark."

The call to Bill Henderson at MPD didn't reveal much except for the fact that they were staffed for an emergency. The Nightfall announcement seemed to have stirred people up but, all things considered, the citizens of Metropolis were remaining generally well-behaved. Lois was unsurprised to find Henderson in his office. He said that he was planning to stay all night. The Police Chief had ordered all senior officers to be available. Knowing that she could trust him to take the request seriously, she asked Bill to keep a look out for Clark.

Lois made a few more calls to some of her contacts that knew Clark. They were able to provide a sense of how the city was reacting to the crisis, but they were a complete bust as far as finding out anything on Clark. Their regular contacts hadn't seen him for even longer than she had. Except for those few meetings in the office this morning, it seemed like Clark had disappeared off the face of the Earth. She debated calling his parents but decided against it. She figured that would be better left until tomorrow. If Clark didn't turn up by noon she would give them a call.

By the time she gave up on the “great Clark hunt” it was only a few minutes until Superman was due to reach Nightfall. Lois joined the crowd around the television as the final minutes ticked by. At about two minutes before impact, Superman encountered some debris. There was an edge in his voice. Lois couldn’t help but wonder if anyone else could hear his nervousness. Probably not. No one else had seen him the way she had tonight and so they wouldn’t be looking for it. After all, Superman didn’t get nervous.

The countdown timer had just passed two minutes and the bullpen went deathly quiet. The only sound was coming from the television and that was nothing but the exchanges between Superman and EPRAD. The delay in their conversation was distracting at first but it was easy to get used to. Mission control would say something and then nearly ten seconds later Superman would reply. Under other circumstances it would be a great lesson on the effects of time delay on very long distance communication. Tonight it was just annoying.

Lois noticed that Superman’s voice had gone almost mechanical. “Yes EPRAD. I have blue guidance rings. I need to concentrate now so I won’t be talking much.”

Then there was the voice of that too-calm EPRAD controller. “Very good Superman, you have 85 seconds until impact. Do you see the countdown timer on the screen?”

“Yes EPRAD, I now see 74 seconds.” He didn’t sound so nervous now. That was the confident voice she knew so well.

“Good luck, Superman. We’ll continue to monitor.”

There were a few seconds of almost eerie quiet. The silence was broken by a clanging sound on the radio.

“Superman, what was that?”

Twelve more seconds crawled by. “Superman, please reply!” Now the EPRAD voice didn’t sound so calm. Lois decided that she liked the calm mechanical voice better.

“Superman, you are veering off course. Your path is shifting toward the center of Nightfall. If you can’t correct your course, then you should abort. I repeat. Do not hit Nightfall head on!”

The countdown timer was at fifteen and counting.

Now she could hear a variety of voices in the background from EPRAD. They were trying to verify whether or not Superman’s radio link had gone dead. Then the main mission-control voice came back. “The intercept ship is on course for a near-head-on impact with Nightfall. Forward velocity has dropped below one thousand miles per second. Impact in five seconds. Four. Three. Two. One.”

After a brief pause the voice returned once more. “Ground telemetry has confirmed that the ship has hit Nightfall at nearly its exact center at a velocity of 982 miles per second. We are monitoring Nightfall and will report as soon as any changes are detected.”

Lois looked around and found that Jimmy was right next to her. “Jimmy, what was the big deal about hitting Nightfall in the center. The ship hit it. That’s good, right?”

Jimmy looked surprised. “Didn’t you hear the briefing? The one thing the scientists were most afraid of was a dead center impact. They were worried that if the impact was in the center, because of the energy in the collision, Nightfall would shatter and instead of one giant impact we could have thousands of small to middle-sized boulders heading our way. The danger from that could be as great as what Nightfall might have done if we had just let it hit.”

At that moment the EPRAD voice returned. Now it was more mechanical than ever. “It has been confirmed that Nightfall has shattered. At this time we are unable to determine if any deflection has taken place. Preliminary projections place the arrival of the Nightfall fragments at approximately 48 hours from now.”

Chapter 5: Memory

From his perspective at the Metropolis Police Department, Detective Bill Henderson watched his city deal with the stresses of Nightfall. He still couldn’t quite believe that police departments didn’t receive a heads-up warning them to have their people on call. When the announcement came, they were just as surprised as everyone else.

The one positive aspect of the situation was that there was so little time between the revelation of Nightfall and Superman’s departure that the city seemed to be in shock. Based on the lack of commotion on the streets, most people seemed to have been content to watch the news unfold on television. That had given MPD the time to call in all of their off-duty staff and get them deployed in anticipation of a later reaction. Early on, most of the senior staff at MPD figured that if the Nightfall intercept went well there might be partying in the streets but it was unlikely to get ugly. They had all agreed that it was best to have a visible police presence to encourage calm. When the mission went awry, Bill was glad that they were ready with officers already deployed.

When Nightfall was shattered, the situation in Metropolis had gotten crazy. The streets filled up and soon there had been sporadic outbreaks of rioting and looting. Fortunately, either luck, the presence of MPD on the streets, or some combination of both, kept the violence from getting out of hand. It was only slightly over an hour after the rioting began that the streets were quiet again. There were still people milling about, but the anger and energy seemed to have gone out of them. It was as if the great city had taken Superman’s failure personally and lacked the energy to react.

Most times when Bill was in his office at 2:00 a.m. he didn’t expect his phone to ring. Tonight, however, the ringing phone signaled just one more in a long line of calls that he had fielded this evening. He answered the phone with a gruff, “Henderson!”

“Detective, this is Officer Jordan. I’m at the Memorial General Hospital emergency room and there is a man here that you might want to see.”

“Jordan, you know what kind of night this is. I don’t have time for riddles. Who have you got there?”

“We aren’t completely sure. There was an explosion and fire in an abandoned building at the edge of Suicide Slum. A previous fire had already gutted the building earlier this year, so when the fire department arrived there wasn’t much to do. When they searched the building to make sure that there wouldn’t be a flare-up, they found a man inside. It looks like he might have been in the building when the explosion occurred. He’s alive but he’s been burned.”

“Officer Jordan, you still haven’t told me why this man is of particular interest to me.”

“Sir, one of the firemen thinks this might be the reporter, Clark Kent. I heard you were looking for him.”

Bill wasn’t irritated about this call anymore. “I’ll be right there,” he replied as he hung up the phone.

It only took a few minutes for Henderson to reach the hospital. Even tonight, the streets were almost empty after two in the morning. He found Jordan waiting for him in the emergency room. Bill walked right up to the younger officer. “Where is he?”

“This way.” Jordan led the way down a short hall. “He was pretty banged up and has some minor burns—nothing serious. Physically, he should heal quickly. But...”

“But, what?”

“He seems to have lost his memory. That’s why we aren’t certain that this is Kent. He doesn’t remember who he is and he didn’t have any identification. In fact, he was wearing only his underwear, and that was pretty burned.”

When Bill entered the room, he saw a man laying on the gurney looking very much like someone that belonged in the hospital. There were bandages in a variety of places and several

abrasions that were not covered. Parts of his skin looked sunburned. The man looked at Bill but didn't say anything.

Henderson walked over to the bed. "Kent?"

The man's answering look was an odd mix of confusion and hope. "Do you know me?"

This was bad. As soon as Bill heard the voice, he was certain. "Yes. I'm Detective Henderson and I'm a friend of yours. Your name is Clark Kent." Clark just stared back at him blankly. "You just rest for now and I'll call your partner."

Clark wasn't sure what to make of all this. At least he had a name. Clark Kent. He was disappointed that his own name didn't mean more to him. It was nice that someone knew him. It also seemed right somehow that a police detective said he was his friend. Detective Henderson looked vaguely familiar but so did everyone else, so he didn't think much of that. The doctors had told him that all of the injuries seemed to be superficial and that they had no explanation as to what was wrong with his memory.

He wished the injuries only felt superficial. Whatever the doctor might have said, the truth was that he hurt all over. The bruises ached. The various cuts and scratches each had their own unique and different pain. His skin hurt everywhere he was burned, which seemed to be most of his body. However, at least for all of those pains, the doctor could explain what was happening. The worst pain of all was the burning that he felt on the inside. When he woke up the first time, the pain was almost unbelievable. He felt like he was about to burst into flame from deep inside his body. When he told the doctor what he was feeling, she gave him a shot for the pain and put him on pure oxygen. She guessed it was due to smoke inhalation. That seemed to help and now it was just a dull ache all over. The doctor had taken off the oxygen mask only a few minutes before Detective Henderson arrived.

It was odd though—when he saw Henderson, it felt different from the other people he had met that night. It was like a memory was trying to come out but it couldn't quite make it to the surface. One thing was sure—Henderson felt familiar; there was something right about this police officer.

It had been a while since the detective told him that Clark's partner was on the way. He hadn't said any more than that, but something about the term "partner" seemed special. It was like there was something tickling his memory but no matter how hard he tried, nothing else would come.

A moment later, a noise outside his room made him look over. There was a woman coming through his doorway. On seeing her face, he felt a wave of emotion so strong that had he not been lying down, his knees might have buckled. Riding that wave of emotion was a name. It burst out of his mouth seemingly on its own volition. "Lois!"

The concern in her reply was evident. "Clark, what..."

She got no farther. In that instant, Clark had jumped off the bed and rushed over to her. Before she could get out another word, he was holding her in his arms. All the aches and pains seemed to fade into the background. For Clark, suddenly the world wasn't scary any more. Lois was here.

The first few seconds were heavenly. Everything about Lois felt so perfect. Clark searched his memory for images to go with the name and feelings she triggered. Unfortunately, he couldn't find any. Despite the wonderful feelings he got when he saw her and the sense of rightness that came from holding her in his arms, except for her name, there were no memories at all. But these feelings... It felt so wonderful to be in her arms that after a few seconds a word escaped his lips. "Darling."

When she entered the room, Clark had come to her so quickly that Lois didn't have time to think or react. She was glad to see him, and doubly pleased to see that he was healthy. When she found herself in his arms, it was both unexpected and far more

pleasant than she would have imagined. It felt good to be in Clark's arms.

She had been terribly worried and was still basking in the warmth of these sensations when she heard his murmur of, "Darling." The word, spoken by her partner with obvious deep affection, sent a chill through her. What was Clark thinking? In that instant, the joy she had been feeling at finding Clark disappeared and her muscles tensed. Now her only thought was how to escape the suddenly uncomfortable situation.

She jerked only the slightest amount but it was enough. Clark could feel the change. She wanted him to let go. He didn't understand why his love wanted to leave his embrace, but it was enough that she did. It tore at his heart but Clark loosened his arms and stepped back. When he could see her face, he found confusion there. He had to make this better.

"I'm sorry, Lois. Did I do something wrong?"

She perked up at this. "It's okay, Clark. I'm sure you're just confused," she offered hopefully. "We were so worried. What happened to you?"

"I don't remember. To be honest, until you walked in the door I didn't remember anything or anyone at all."

"Bill said you were suffering from amnesia, but when you said my name, I thought your memory had come back."

"No, I don't remember anything. Well, nothing but you and your name."

"That can't be! What about your parents? The Planet? Perry White? Jimmy?"

Clark just stared back blankly as she recited name after meaningless name. When she finally ran down, he filled in the rest of the story. "I'm sorry, I don't remember any of them. I don't remember anything about myself either. You say I'm Clark, and I believe you, but I didn't remember that name before the detective told me a little while ago."

"But you knew my name and...well, the way you reacted when you saw me..." She paused and Clark saw a touch of confusion creep into her expression. "Clark, why did you call me...darling?"

Clark could see in her eyes that she was genuinely confused. He was battling emotions that were threatening to overwhelm him but it was clear that she didn't feel toward him the way he did about her. It was obvious that she was his friend, but nothing more. "I'm sorry about that. When you came in the door, I felt this wave of emotion... It was so strong that I thought we...well, I thought we were closer than I guess we really are. I promise I won't do that again." But he felt so much, there had to be more than simple friendship. "Lois, we are close, aren't we?"

Clark's question caught Lois off guard. Of course they were close. But now it seemed that he may have felt more than friendship. Could the amnesia have left those feelings when he lost his memories? Lois was torn. She didn't want to deceive him into believing there was more to their relationship than there really was. However, the way he reacted convinced her that if she said they were nothing more than friends, Clark would be devastated.

"Clark, we are close. You're my working partner and you're my best friend. We just aren't together like...that."

When Lois said that he was her best friend, Clark felt the stirring of another emotion. She was right. She was his best friend. It was like there were two sides to how he felt. The fact that he was in love with this woman was undeniable. Based on her reaction a moment ago, it was clear that he had kept that feeling hidden from her. But it was more complicated than that. There was also a feeling of excitement that was part of being around her.

"Lois, I'm sorry that I embarrassed you. I remember you, but I can't remember any facts *about* you. I can feel something that tells me that you are my best friend too."

Lois could hear the truth in those words. “Clark, how can you be sure of your feelings if you don’t have any memory of me?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have any memories, but the feelings are clear. When I first saw Detective Henderson, I didn’t recognize him but I knew I could trust him. With you, it’s more. Much stronger doesn’t even begin to describe it. There aren’t any memories but the feelings are all there.”

Clark noticed that Lois had grown nervous at the mention of feelings. “Lois, I’m sorry. That first rush of emotion carried me away. I can see that we don’t have that kind of relationship and I promise I won’t...do anything like that again.”

She could see that he was trying so hard to make this better. She reached over to him, took his hand and replied, “I wasn’t embarrassed. I was surprised. You’ve never hinted that you had feelings like that before.”

Clark wished he knew why. “I really am sorry. I just don’t remember anything about, well, anything. It’s just the feelings were so...” A thought popped into his mind that might explain why he hid his feelings from his best friend. “Do you have a boyfriend or something?”

For an instant, the image of Superman’s farewell kiss crossed her mind. But Clark didn’t know anything about that. “No. But when we first met I told you that I didn’t get involved with coworkers.”

Clark’s face fell. “Oh.”

The disappointment on his face tugged at her heart more than she would have imagined. However, she was not going to pretend that something was there when it wasn’t. “We aren’t involved but you are my best friend now. I’m sure that’s what you were feeling.”

His expression brightened slightly. He looked up at her with a half-smile. “I’m sure that’s it.”

Even before Clark had finished his reply, that part of her mind that was so useful during an interview was screaming, ‘He’s lying!’ Lois was certain that Clark would have a hard time lying to her even if he still had his memory. In the state he was in now, he definitely shouldn’t try deceiving his partner. Whatever it was that he felt when he saw her, it wasn’t simple friendship. Clark had obviously felt something much stronger.

That was interesting enough, but what really had Lois off balance was what she herself had felt when he held her. She hadn’t wanted to admit it but she had been worried sick about Clark. When she had heard he was safe at the hospital, she was relieved. When she had stepped through his door and he had rushed to her and held her in his arms she had felt... She didn’t know. That had been a feeling she didn’t recognize. It would be best if that was put aside for now.

“Clark, they told me I can take you home.” She stepped back and looked him over. “You’re pretty beat up but they told me on the way in that all of the burns and scrapes are superficial. I stopped by your apartment on the way here and got you some clothes and a pair of glasses.” Lois reached in her pocket, took out a pair of glasses and put them on Clark. “There you go. Now, why don’t you change and we’ll get out of here.”

Chapter 6: Emotions

By the time Clark had dressed and gone through the hospital release procedure, it was 5:30 am. Because of his amnesia, his head had been thoroughly examined and he’d been given a series of cognitive tests. The hospital was feeling the stress of the riots from the previous night and they were eager to have his bed free. Since all of these tests had turned up negative and Clark showed no other symptoms, the hospital physicians provided a reference to a memory specialist in the city and released him to Lois.

After getting dressed, he stood in front of the mirror in the small hospital bathroom when he noticed the stubble on his chin. As with everything else, he didn’t specifically remember shaving,

but knew that he wanted to be clean-shaven to go out in public. One of the ER orderlies was able to get him a hospital shaving kit and by the time he was ready to leave the hospital with Lois, he looked like a man who, although he’d been through a wringer, was ready to face the day. The skin of his face didn’t like the safety razor from the kit, but he had enough scrapes already that the new ones from shaving didn’t seem that bad.

A few minutes later, he was out of the hospital and walking with Lois toward her car. She had been quick to recover from the inadvertent revelation of his feelings and he was thankful that she still seemed to be so comfortable around him. They had just reached the parking lot when Lois turned to him and asked, “Clark, would you like me to take you to your apartment? I need to get to the office and see what’s going on.”

The mention of his apartment had no draw for him. Thinking about it revealed no memories, not even an emotional reaction. Being around people seemed to be infinitely more attractive than being alone. “I’m not tired at all,” he said. “I slept some when I was at the hospital. I’d rather be around people. You said I’m your partner at work. Can I come with you?”

“Clark, you said yourself that you can’t remember anything. I don’t think you’re going to be at your peak as an investigative reporter. Wouldn’t you rather rest and let those burns start to heal?”

“I’m really not tired and I meant it when I said I didn’t want to be alone. If nothing else I can get you coffee and...there’s something else. I can feel something but I can’t find the memory. There’s something about my bringing you some kind of food.” It was so frustrating. So many things were like memories of memories. He knew there was something there but no matter how hard he tried, the real memory wouldn’t come.

Lois looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, when the doughnuts arrive you almost always make sure to snag a chocolate-covered one for me.”

That felt so right. “That’s it,” he declared. “I still don’t remember, but when you say it, I can tell that’s it.” Clark concentrated for a second. “I think I have it. I make sure you get the best chocolate doughnut in the box. So, how about it Lois? I’ll find a way to make myself useful.”

She looked almost convinced. “Are you sure? You still look pretty beat up.”

He tried his best smile. “I’m sure. I really don’t want to be by myself. Let me try to be useful. If nothing else, I’ll have the chance to interact with people I’m supposed to know and maybe it’ll help me remember.”

That seemed to do it as Lois smiled back at him. “Okay, Clark, I’m convinced. You have to promise that if you start feeling tired, dizzy or anything like that you’ll tell me so I can take you home.”

Clark was relieved. For a moment, he was afraid that he was going to have to beg. He *really* didn’t want to be alone. “I promise I’ll tell you if anything starts.”

She gave him a look that made him think that she only half-believed that he would admit to any problems. “I still think you should go home and rest, but fine, let’s head for the office.”

When they arrived at The Daily Planet, most of the people made a point to welcome him back. The first few times were awkward since he didn’t recognize any of his friends. However, it only took a few minutes for word of his amnesia to spread, and thereafter people were more cautious and made a point of introducing themselves. None of the faces looked familiar, but he continued to have that strange emotional connection with some of the people that greeted him. No names came to mind, but he had stronger reactions to four people. He didn’t know what Ralph had done, but he was the first person that Clark had met where he felt a genuine negative reaction. It wasn’t very strong, but he got the

impression that he didn't think too much of this man. Jimmy Olsen had evoked a feeling like he might expect for a younger brother. When he met Perry White, his reaction was one of respect mixed in with a mild affection. Those all made sense.

Unfortunately, the most memorable meeting was with Cat Grant. He had been in the office for less than ten minutes and had met many of the staff when a woman charged him and threw her arms around his neck.

"Darling, I was so worried. Are you okay?"

Darling? He didn't remember much of anything, but the memory of his own use of that word was all too fresh. There was no doubt in his mind that Lois was the only woman that he wanted addressing him with that term. With as much tact as he could muster he disengaged her arms. "Please Miss...?"

"Cat," she answered. Then she lowered her voice to just above a whisper. "Clark, honey, don't tell me you don't remember me. We've kept it kind of quiet but we're...involved."

The sly smile told him exactly what kind of 'involved' she meant. When he had seen this Cat person approaching, he did detect an emotional reaction. However, it was one of amusement mixed with mild distaste. He couldn't imagine that he would have that sort of reaction to anyone that he was having any sort of relationship with. What was going on? He was sure that if he really was in any relationship, even a secret one, he would feel some level of affection. For Cat, the emotional clues were confusing. Mixed in among the other feelings was a sense of frustrated irritation. Then he had it! This was a woman who played games. At this realization, Clark felt a surge of anger. His memory loss was not a game to him.

He leaned in close to her ear and pitched his voice so that only she could hear. "Why are you doing this? I don't have my memories but I can tell how I feel toward people. Unless I'm some kind of complete creep, we don't have any secret relationship. Please stop this now."

This seemed to catch her off-guard. From the expression on her face, he could tell that he didn't normally take assertive stands like this. She pulled back with a startled look on her face that told him he had hit it right on the mark. She didn't have the look of a brokenhearted lover. She had the look of someone that had just been outplayed in a game. After a second, she gave him a wink and leaned in to deliver her own whispered message. "You're right, but it's still your loss." When she pulled back, he saw that she was now sporting a very provocative smile as she turned and walked away.

As he watched Cat walk away, Clark was slightly surprised that his anger toward her for what she tried wasn't stronger. Her ploy hadn't been the nicest thing to do, but now that it was over he had the sense that even if he hadn't known that they were not in a relationship, she wouldn't have let it go so far as to take advantage of him. He took a second to explore his feelings. He got the impression that he didn't approve of her, but that her actions generally didn't seem to have much impact on him personally. Based on what she had just done, Clark guessed that she had probably tried to initiate a relationship sometime in the past and had failed.

He moved back to his desk and sat down. There were no memories of this place either. Staring at his nameplate did no good. There should be memories of some kind but no matter how hard he tried, his past remained a blank. Clark was growing more and more convinced that the feelings that he kept experiencing were the only part of his memory that was working correctly.

This whole "emotions instead of memories" business was helpful, but still confusing. Earlier this morning at the hospital when Lois had said Jimmy's name, there had been no reaction at all. But when he saw him, the connection surfaced. The same seemed to be true for everyone else. The names were meaningless until he saw the faces. Their images triggered the emotional

reactions that were proving to be so valuable. He looked over at Lois busy on her phone. She was still a puzzle. With everyone else so far, the feelings were there, but no names. Lois was the only person for whom he had come up with a name on his own. And the feeling of connection to her was so much stronger than with anyone else.

Lois hung up her phone, interrupting his thoughts. "Clark, I've been trying to reach your parents, but I can't get through. The panic from Nightfall has all the phone lines tied up. We can barely get calls to work across the city."

Clark thought that it was strange that her failure to reach them didn't bother him. "Do I get along with my parents?"

She looked surprised by the question. "You have a great relationship with your family. When I was in Smallville, and saw all of you together, it was obvious where your sunny disposition comes from. Why do you ask?"

"When I try to think of them, I don't feel anything. I'm getting used to the idea that I don't remember anyone, but I have gotten a few clues based on emotions and feelings. It's weird. It's like my emotions are tied to memories that I can't reach. When I try to think of my parents, I don't feel anything at all."

"What people have triggered these emotional reactions?"

"You, Jimmy, Perry, and..." He was uncomfortable going onto the details of people that provoked less positive reactions. "...some other people here in the office."

"Clark, when I said Jimmy and Perry's names in the hospital, you said they didn't sound familiar. Why didn't you tell me that you had another reaction then?"

Clark thought back for a moment. "I didn't feel anything then. It wasn't until I met them in person that I felt something else."

"Could it be that you have to see a person to trigger the feelings?"

"I think you're right," Clark replied. "As far as I can tell, I don't react at all to names of people or places. The only time I get anything is when I've seen people."

"I wonder if a picture would work," Lois said. "When we get back to your apartment we can find a picture of your parents and see if that triggers a reaction."

The way that Lois said, "we" will go to his apartment and "we" will see about a reaction, triggered that same warm feeling that he had come to associate with Lois. He needed to figure out the real status of their relationship. He hoped knowing that would reveal to him why he hadn't told her how he felt. They were friends and seemed to get along well. There had to be a reason that he hadn't pressed their relationship. For now, it was best to learn what he could about Lois, the Daily Planet and what they did as their jobs. "Lois, what's the latest news on Nightfall?"

She frowned slightly at the mention of the asteroid. "There have been some updates about the fragments, but not many. The scientists and the government are being tight-lipped. Information is being released so slowly that I have a feeling that it must be pretty bad. They keep saying that there will be an announcement shortly. Eduardo is at EPRAD for when they make an announcement. For now they've asked people to stay where they are until more tracking information is available."

Lois paused for a second and then it was as if a dark cloud descended on her. She went on in a more subdued tone. "They haven't said anything at all about Superman."

It was clear that Superman was very important to Lois. After another second he realized she was giving him a sideways look. "Clark, are you sure that you aren't having any kind of reaction to Superman?"

"No Lois. That's just a name to me. Do I know him?"

"Yes. You know him as well as anyone." Lois paused as she recalled that farewell kiss. "Well, except maybe me."

Something about the way she said that last phrase triggered

something. There was something about Lois and Superman that was related to Clark and how he felt about Lois. The feeling was very fleeting and as he tried to focus on the feeling, it was gone like mist.

Lois dug around in her desk and pulled out an article with a picture of Superman. "This is him," she said. "Does this picture trigger anything?"

As Clark stared at the picture, he felt a confusing mix of feelings. "Lois, I'm getting a reaction but it's very strange. I feel something like pride but...I just don't know how to describe it. You say I'm his friend?"

"I think so. You know how to contact him and you get more interviews with him than anyone else."

"Lois, the feeling that I'm getting... It's strange. In some ways it feels strong but in others... Well, the feeling of friendship that I experienced when I saw Jimmy was stronger than my reaction to Superman. I just don't know what to make of it." What he didn't tell her was that there was a slight flash of jealousy. Based on Lois's reaction when she brought up Superman a moment ago, that reaction made sense. Clark was surprised that the feeling wasn't stronger.

Her voice took on a tone of compassion. "Don't worry, Clark. None of us really know him and perhaps you just happen to be the person that has his phone number."

Just that second there was a loud series of beeps from the bullpen television, which was showing the Emergency Broadcast Symbol. The image changed suddenly to that of a man behind a desk. There was a voice-over that said, "This is an emergency broadcast from the President of the United States."

Then the picture zoomed in so that Clark could make out the features of the man. His image stirred no emotions and he had to assume that this was the President. A second later he began to speak. "Fellow citizens and members of the world community, despite our best efforts, the mission to divert the Nightfall asteroid was not as successful as we had hoped. However, I come to you with a measure of good news. The original estimates were that if Nightfall had hit as a single solid object, the resulting disaster would have killed most of the world's people. Thanks to the efforts of our military and scientists, Nightfall has been shattered and most of the remaining parts will miss our planet. Unfortunately, many pieces of Nightfall are going to fall on Earth. The next few days and weeks will be among the greatest trials our nation and world have ever known. As these events unfold, I ask you to join me in looking toward the future, because despite the dark times that we will all see, I believe we will come through this stronger together. Thank you."

The image switched to a static image with a simple graphic reading, "Please wait for a briefing from the Nightfall emergency team."

After a few more seconds the image changed to that of two men standing together behind a podium. One of them was wearing a uniform and the other was wearing a business suit. As Lois and Clark moved to get closer to the television, the man in the uniform began to speak.

"My name is General Zeitlin. This is Doctor Aames, lead astronomer for EPRAD and head of the Anderson Research Center in Metropolis. We're here to report on the status of the Nightfall asteroid fragments. When we've finished, we will both be available to answer a few questions. To begin, Dr. Aames will report on the asteroid. Dr. Aames?"

The general stepped back and the astronomer approached the microphone. "The good news is that the intercept mission did result in well over 95% of the mass of Nightfall being deflected so that it will not impact the Earth. Unfortunately, thousands of asteroid fragments are still heading toward our planet. The largest piece that we have been able to detect is only a few hundred meters across. The majority of the fragments are much smaller

than that. The first to arrive will be small bodies, generally less than a meter in diameter, and while they will provide a light show, very few of these will hit the ground. The majority of the fragments will begin arriving approximately 36 hours from now. When the main mass of fragments arrives, many will be large enough to reach the ground. General Zeitlin will continue the briefing from here." The scientist stepped back and allowed the general access to the microphone.

"As of six am Friday morning Eastern Standard Time, all planes in the United States will be grounded. We are recommending similar precautions for other governments. Based on our radar readings of the primary meteor swarm, there will be a period of destruction that will last for about 12 hours. For the eastern portion of the United States, the period of highest danger will begin at 8:00 pm Friday evening. Preliminary estimates are that it will be possible to declare an all-clear by nine am Saturday morning. All buildings with bomb-shelter capability are being opened and you are encouraged to spend Friday evening in one of these if possible. This announcement will be followed by the release of written Nightfall preparation guidelines. I will take questions now."

There was a flurry of shouting before one voice emerged. "Franz Klinger, Washington Post. What area will be the hardest hit?"

The general signaled Dr. Aames to answer. The scientist moved so that he was standing right next to the general. "Based on the original trajectory of Nightfall and what we have been able to discern from our efforts to map the incoming fragments, we believe that there will be a band of impacts all around the world centered at approximately 37 degrees north latitude. The most dangerous area will be largely confined to plus or minus 15 degrees of latitude from this line. There is the potential for significant impacts outside of this region but numerically, the majority of the impacts will be between 22 and 52 degrees north latitude. As you can see in our graphic..." Dr. Aames pointed off-screen. "...the areas most affected include some of the most populated regions of the world."

The image widened to show that near the podium was a map of the world with a band in grey. It covered all of the United States as well as Japan, large sections of China, Russia and the southern half of Europe.

Dr. Aames walked over to the map and continued. "Europe and the Atlantic will get the leading edge of the main debris field. Then the United States will be hit. We expect the shower to continue across the Pacific and reach Japan and East Asia. Let me stress that while this map represents the area that we believe will be most severely affected, a large body could potentially land anywhere."

When Dr. Aames finished there was another clamor before a question emerged. "Jean Simmons, Times of London. How destructive will the fragments be?"

Dr. Aames answered. "We believe there are hundreds of thousands, possibly millions of fragments that will enter our atmosphere. Most of these will burn up and not reach the ground. However, there are so many that thousands will reach the ground. Most of these will be less than a foot across. That is the basis for the recommendation to spend Friday night in a shelter." He paused as if gathering himself before continuing. "However, some of the fragments are large enough to leave mile-wide craters when they hit."

A male voice boomed out, "Why aren't there evacuations being set up?"

The general moved to the microphone. "There are two reasons for not initiating an evacuation. First, there isn't time for any large-scale evacuation to be organized. However, the more important reason is that there is no safe place to go. There will be hundreds of thousands of small impacts. Dr. Aames outlined the

area of risk. That region covers most of the United States”

A female voice boomed over the others. “Gertrude Stein, Miami Herald. The President said that casualty estimates for Nightfall were originally very high. Have any estimates been prepared for the new situation?”

“Some have been prepared but they are pure guesswork. If one of the large fragments hits a major city, many thousands could die from that single impact. If no major cities are hit by the large fragments, the death toll will be much smaller. The President mentioned that the original estimates for Nightfall were that most of world’s population would have been killed. Most of the projections for the expected event call for a casualty rate of less than five percent. We hope for a much smaller figure than that.”

Ms. Stein jumped on that number. “Five percent? That’s over 200 million people!”

The general’s face turned very solemn. “Yes, we know.”

There was an instant of silence where it seemed like the reporters were digesting the implications of those numbers. Then another unidentified voice burst out. “You’ve said that there will be millions killed. What are you suggesting that people do?”

There was a long moment of silence before the general replied. “Try to remember that most of us will survive this event. However, there will be a certain level of disruption and turmoil. We are requesting that above all else, everyone try to stay calm.”

Another shouted question. “What do you plan to do?”

“I will continue to do my job. On a more personal note, as a simple matter of prudence, I will take steps to make sure I have taken care of unfinished business. And I plan to pray.”

The resulting silence dragged on for several seconds before a male voice interrupted. “Eduardo Friez, Daily Planet. What news do you have about Superman? What happened and where is he now?”

“The tracking data shows that approximately 55 seconds before impact we lost contact with Superman. By 30 seconds prior to impact, the ship was off-course. There is no way for us to know what happened to Superman. All we know for sure is that everything seemed fine until communications were lost and that Superman has not been seen nor heard from since that time. In short, we have no idea of the status of Superman. Unless some other information comes to light, we have to assume that he died in space on the Nightfall mission.”

Chapter 7: Apartment

When General Zeitlin announced that the official position of the government was that Superman was presumed dead, Lois was struck dumb. For her, it was as if time had stopped as a cold chill ran through her body. The general’s voice was still echoing in her head when she felt her knees start to give way. Before she had fallen even a few inches, she found herself in Clark’s arms.

“Lois, are you all right?” Clark asked, his concern obvious in his voice.

She glanced around as if trying to figure out where she was. “What? What happened?”

“The general announced that they believe Superman is dead. I think you fainted.”

For an instant, Lois was tempted to deny it, but she had to admit that there was a gap in her memory between hearing the general speak and finding herself in Clark’s arms. As comfortable as her position was, she had to shake this off. Lois Lane did not show weakness. She freed herself from Clark’s support and focused on putting the incident behind her. She turned to Clark and summoned up her most authoritative voice. “Clark, we have work to do.” Then she headed for her desk.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Like every other writer on the staff, the two of them worked to document how Metropolis and the world were preparing for the looming disaster. In some

places, there was an outpouring of goodwill. Other areas were besieged with violence and looting.

As part of the coverage, Lois made several trips out to talk with business owners and relief workers. Clark came along on these outings and proved to be surprisingly helpful. Even without most of his memories, he asked effective questions. Lois could see that the sense of compassion that had always been a hallmark of Clark’s personality was still evident when he spoke with people.

When they returned to the office, Clark asked Lois to let him try to write up the story on relief preparations. Since they had enough material for two stories, one on relief and another on how businesses were planning to cope with Nightfall, Lois didn’t see the harm in finding out what Clark could do. Later, when he showed her his article, the write-up was so good that Lois was almost tempted to think that his amnesia might not be as severe as it had seemed.

After she proofread the article, she had to ask him about it. “Clark, how did you do this? I thought your memory was mostly a blank.”

He looked confused. “It is. I don’t remember anything about my past, at least not consciously. Because of my memory, I know that I’m missing the experience necessary to judge what makes a good story. Is there something wrong with the article? If there is, I’d appreciate it if you could show me so that I can fix it myself.”

“No. That’s just it. This story is well written and it’s exactly in your own style. How did you do that?”

“I don’t know. I used our notes from our interviews and it just came to me. I knew what to write and how it should be worded.”

The rest of the day passed quickly as Clark and Lois worked together on several articles. It seemed to Lois that even though he didn’t remember learning to write, his command of style and knowledge of the rules of grammar were untouched. Clark might not remember his past, but given a set of facts, he could still generate a compelling story.

At the end of the day, Lois took Clark home. As they approached his apartment, Clark wondered how they were going to get in. “Lois, I don’t have a key to my apartment. Do you know a way to get in?”

She smiled sheepishly. “Well, right now I have a key. You normally keep one hidden in a flowerpot near your door. I’ve tried to tell you that it isn’t wise to have a key so close to your entrance, but sometimes you can be just as stubborn as me. That was how I got into your apartment early this morning for the clothes that I brought you in the hospital. I meant to give it to you earlier today but I forgot.”

Lois pulled the key from her purse and handed it to Clark. He fumbled with the lock for a moment but in a few seconds, he had the door open. Clark stood back and invited Lois to go first. Once she was inside, he followed her into the unfamiliar apartment.

“I live here?” he asked.

“Doesn’t it look familiar at all?”

“No. It sure is a nice place.”

“When you rented it, this place was a mess. That first day I thought it was too run-down to be livable.”

This surprised Clark. “You were with me when I rented this apartment?”

“Well, yes. You were new at the Planet and I was worried that you had a secret source for Superman information. I followed you to what I thought was a meeting with a source. Turns out it was actually a meeting with the building superintendent to look at this apartment.”

“Oh.” The simple explanation disappointed him. For an instant, he hoped that they had been close enough friends right from the beginning that she’d been helping him find a place to live.

Clark walked around his apartment. He stopped in front of a photograph of an older couple. The surge of emotion that he felt when he looked at the picture was overwhelming. Without looking up he said, “These are my parents.” It wasn’t a question.

“Do you remember them?”

“No. But I can feel them. I love them very much.”

The tone of Lois’s reply suggested that she agreed. “Oh, Clark. You do. You and your parents have one of the best relationships that I’ve ever seen.”

Clark continued to stare at the picture. “You said their names are Martha and Jonathan. Now I can feel echoes of emotion when I say those names. It all feels so...warm. I wish I could remember something about them.”

“Well at least you remember their names,” Lois offered hopefully.

“No, I don’t. I remember that you told me their names. I haven’t remembered anyone’s name except...”

“Mine,” she said very softly.

“Um, yeah. Lois, the last thing I want to do is make you feel uncomfortable around me. I can’t help that you’re the person that I...remember.”

Lois realized that his voice had gotten very soft when he said, “remember.” From the phrasing and the slight pause, she knew immediately that he was thinking about feelings as much as his recollection of her name. Why was her name the only one he remembered? Right now, Lois wasn’t sure she was ready to come to grips with what that might mean. “It’s okay, Clark. Why don’t you look around your apartment some more and see if anything else triggers memories or feelings.”

Clark started moving around his apartment and looking into cabinets. He opened one kitchen cabinet that he seemed to use as a small pantry. He turned to her and said, “I sure must like Double Fudge Crunch bars and Cream Soda. I have a lot on hand and I’m getting one of those emotional reactions from looking at them.”

Lois found herself blushing. “Actually, those are for me. We’ve worked late here a few times and you know I like them.”

Clark spent a few more minutes looking around his apartment. He didn’t comment on anything else he found. After a few minutes, she found him looking at her intently. “Lois, is something wrong?”

“What do you mean?”

“You look antsy. Do you have somewhere you need to go?”

“It’s not that. I just feel like I need to know what’s happening at a time like this.”

“Let me turn on the radio and we can see if there’s any news,” Clark said.

Lois knew that, like her, he normally kept his radio on an all-news station. She wasn’t surprised that the subject of the current broadcast was Nightfall. They listened for a few minutes while the station worked its way through the information about the impending meteor strike. None of what they heard was news to either of them. She suspected that most of the real-time media services were in a holding pattern waiting for more information to come in.

Clark was about to turn off the radio when they finally heard something new. “As we reported earlier, noted businessman and philanthropist Lex Luthor has promised to commit the full resources of his company to help rebuild not just Metropolis, but other areas as well. Mr. Luthor had these comments earlier today.”

She motioned to Clark to leave the radio on. She wanted to get Lex’s perspective on Nightfall.

Lex’s voice came on. “This tragedy will test the world. But challenges such as these define turning points in human history. In our greatest need, we turned to Superman. However, in this time of ultimate peril, he was not up to the task. Because of his

actions, the world may see the greatest loss of life in recorded history. I have been a supporter of Superman, but how can we ignore results such as these? And how can we overlook the fact that Superman had been told that the effect of a direct impact would be among the most dangerous for the people of our planet.”

Lois was shocked. She thought she knew Lex, but this sounded like he was suggesting that Superman didn’t try his best to have the Nightfall mission succeed. But Lex wasn’t finished yet.

“I wish this were not an issue. However, since the accident I have been reminded that some in our government had cautioned us that we knew nothing of Superman’s background or long-term goals. After Nightfall, as we rebuild, we must learn to place our trust in humankind. I am committing all of the resources of LexCorp to the recovery of this great city. We will be our own salvation.”

Lois reached for the radio and turned it off. “How could Lex say things like this?” This didn’t seem like the Lex that she thought she knew.

She was so deep in thought that Clark’s voice surprised her. “Do you know Lex Luthor?”

Her answer was abrupt. “We both do. I’ve interviewed him and since then I’ve accompanied him to a few charity functions.”

“So you’re dating him?”

“No, Clark.” She was trying to figure out what was going on with Lex. This was irritating and she was only half-way paying attention to what Clark was saying. “There isn’t anything personal to our relationship.”

Clark’s reply was defensive. “I’m sorry, Lois. I was just thinking that if you were dating someone, then that would explain...” Clark stopped short.

What was he talking about? “If I were dating Lex it would explain what?” Lois asked. Was Clark suggesting that her association with Lex might mean that she doubted Superman too? Lex’s speech had her on edge.

“Nothing,” Clark replied. His voice still carried a defensive tone.

She didn’t have time for this. What was Clark getting at? She put her hands on her hips and hit him with her best Mad Dog Lane glare. “Kent, spit it out. If you had your memory, you’d know that when I want to know something I get the information one way or another. Do us both a favor and finish what you were saying.”

She thought he looked a little like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. After a long pause, Clark answered. “If you were involved with someone it would explain why...I didn’t tell you how I feel about you.”

Lois felt her breath catch. Her irritation gave way to shock. It had finally come out. She knew she should respond, but in that instant she was at a loss. She wasn’t prepared to deal with this sort of situation. If only Clark hadn’t asked about her dating Lex then nothing would have happened. If Clark’s memories had been intact, he would have known that she wasn’t seriously involved with Lex.

Wait a minute...Lex. Yes, that was the perfect excuse. She really did need to go talk to him. Facing Clark with a confidence she didn’t actually feel, she offered, “I’m sorry, Clark, I can’t talk right now. I need to see Lex right away. I’m sure I can make him see reason.” She was out the door before he could open his mouth to answer.

As she headed down Clark’s steps, she was glad to have some time away from him to think. He all but admitted that he was in love with her. She wondered how long he’d been hiding his feelings before the accident removed his defenses. Her mind flashed back to his greeting in the hospital. It had been over-the-top, but except for his use of “Darling,” she might have dismissed

it as nothing more than Clark being glad to see her.

Now she knew that there was more to it than that. With that last exchange, there was really no room for doubt. She had never really given any thought to the idea of a relationship with Clark. First there had been Superman. Then Lex had started to seem interested. But...Clark? However, what confused her most wasn't that he might have feelings for her. What she found most disconcerting was that she wasn't appalled by the idea.

As Lois drove across the city, she focused on putting every thought of Clark out of her mind. Because of her history with Lex, Lois was sure she would be able to see him even on a night like this. As soon as she heard his statement on the radio, she knew that she needed to talk to him. She was confident that she could get him to see reason. How could he imply that Superman would deliberately do something that would hurt so many people? She knew Superman. He could never act like that.

Her musings were interrupted by her arrival at LexCorp Tower. She found a security guard waiting at the front door. As she approached the building, he opened the door and held it for her. "Good evening Miss Lane. Mr. Luthor is waiting for you."

Lex was waiting for her? Why would that be? The guard closed the door behind her and made sure that it was secure. Then he escorted her to Lex's private elevator, which was waiting with its doors open. The guard motioned her in. "Mr. Luthor is waiting for you in the penthouse." The guard remained on the ground floor as Lois rode up alone. She was still trying to figure out why she was expected.

When the door opened, Lex was there. "Lois, I'm happy to see you. I see that you got my message."

"Message? No, Lex, I never got it. I've been helping Clark. He was hurt. He's lost his memory. Between helping him and covering Nightfall, I must have missed it."

"Ah, yes. I was informed that Mr. Kent had been injured. You say he's lost his memory?"

"Yes. He was found in a burned-out building at the edge of Suicide Slum. He doesn't remember how he got there but I suspect he was there to meet a source. Based on the state of his memory, we'll probably never know."

A thoughtful look crossed Lex's face. "To be without memories in a time like this might almost be a blessing. No matter, I'm pleased you're here. I have an issue that I'd like to discuss, but as you didn't come in response to my request, good manners compel me to first ask what you wanted to see me about. Would you like to sit down?"

Lois followed Lex to the nearby seating area and they both sat. No wonder it had been so easy to see Lex on such short notice. What did he want? In any case, she had her own agenda and it was time to deal with it. "Lex, I heard your announcement on the radio. Do you realize that your comments will lead some people to believe that Superman deliberately caused the Nightfall mission to fail?"

He met her intensity with a practiced calm. "Lois, you know that in the past I've had as much respect for Superman as anyone. His actions and accomplishments speak for themselves. However, I'm afraid that when the evidence becomes public, many people will come to doubt his intent. At times like this I have to put my own admiration for Superman aside, and consider the evidence as it presents itself."

She started to react but Lex cut her off. "My dear, I know that you hold him in the highest regard. Unfortunately, the evidence seems to be overwhelming. You see, LexCorp was deeply involved in the preparation of the equipment. We designed the mission pack with multiple back-up systems. For some of the parts, such as the radar, there were three units so that even if two of the systems failed, the third would be enough to complete the mission."

Lex seemed to pick up the doubt in her face. He took a breath and his voice changed tone slightly as if trying to project compassion. "I'm sorry to be the one to break this news to you, but I've seen the telemetry data. Right up until we lost contact with Superman, none of the systems showed any signs of malfunction. And don't forget that the reason Superman was asked to fly this mission was that even if every automated system failed, he would still be able to hit Nightfall in the correct spot. The one thing he was told not to let happen was a head-on impact that might shatter the asteroid."

When Lex had started talking, Lois had been tempted to cut him off. But he sounded so reasonable. The way Lex described the situation it made a certain amount of sense. But that couldn't be right. Superman would never do that. Besides, after that kiss and what he'd said, Lois knew he had every intention to return. But there was no way she could share that information. While these thoughts were swirling around her mind, Lex moved on.

"As I said, I know that you thought very highly of Superman. I'm only trying to help you prepare for the allegations that others will make when the full news of the Nightfall mission becomes public. I wouldn't want you to be caught on the wrong side of the facts."

Something in his voice made Lois shiver. As before, he sounded so smooth. But there was something about his speaking pattern that seemed familiar. Then she had it. The overall feel reminded her of a politician's speech. It was as if Lex had polished these words to achieve the most effective delivery. But that couldn't be right. Lex was her friend. She shouldn't hold it against him that he was a talented speaker. It really did sound like he had her best interests at heart.

Lex stood and invited her to follow him across the room to another elevator. "Lois, now please let me explain why I wanted to see you tonight." He pressed the button next to the elevator door and entered. She was confused and, almost on autopilot, Lois followed him in. When the doors closed, they started down. Based on the feeling of acceleration, they were going down a long way. When they arrived, the door opened to a utilitarian hallway.

Lex made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "Welcome to my survival shelter. We are several hundred feet below ground. This is where I'll be spending the night tomorrow when the Nightfall fragments arrive."

"Lex, this is very impressive but based on the reports, if a major fragment hits Metropolis, no shelter will be safe."

"My dear, as I said, I have access to more information than is being generally released to the public. There are no exceptionally large fragments heading toward our city. While Metropolis will be at risk from the smaller fragments, this shelter will be completely safe."

"Lex, this looks big enough for many people. Will you be opening this to the public?"

He turned toward her with that same polished smile that he had shown earlier. "I'm afraid that looks can be deceiving. This shelter can't house as many people as you might think. On the off chance that this building was to be hit by a moderately-sized fragment, we could be cut off for several weeks. The population of this shelter must be determined by the ability to sustain its residents for that period of time."

Again, his explanation sounded so smooth as to seem reasonable. As they walked through the shelter, Lois wondered about how the ordinary people of Metropolis were preparing for the meteor shower. Lex approached a door and as his hand touched the doorknob he paused and turned back to her. "I have a surprise for you." He opened the door and Lois was stunned. "How do you like it?" he asked.

It was her apartment. Here in Lex's survival shelter he had built and furnished a complete replica of her apartment. She

followed Lex in and looked around. The accuracy of the copy was amazing. It took a moment for her to find her voice. “I don’t understand.”

“Lois, perhaps I haven’t been clear about how strongly I… admire you. I had hoped to show this to you after our relationship had developed a bit further. However, with Nightfall fragments approaching I couldn’t bear the thought of you being at risk with the rest of the city. I want you to be here. I’d like you to stay with me.”

This was all coming too fast. She had just told Clark that she wasn’t dating Lex. Lex seemed to have had other ideas. “Lex, I… I don’t know what to say.”

“Then say yes. All I want is your well-being. Come and stay here for tomorrow night. I assure you that this is the safest place in Metropolis.”

The air outside LexCorp Tower felt particularly fresh. When Lois had turned Lex down a moment ago, it had been a close thing. Lex hadn’t exactly said that staying with him would lead to any expectation that their relationship would change, but that implication was unavoidable. Of course, it would probably be only for a single night and it would be nice to be in her apartment. Well, sort of her apartment.

Lex had taken her refusal in stride. She had been sure that after the effort to replicate her residence, he would have been disappointed or possibly even angry. He was neither. All he did was smile that confident smile and tell her that the invitation would remain open. He reminded her again that this was the safest shelter in Metropolis. His final words still echoed in her memory. “Lois, your safety is very important to me. If you choose not to accept my invitation, please grant me peace of mind and promise that you will spend tomorrow evening in another shelter. I would be terribly worried to think you were at risk in your apartment when the Nightfall fragments arrive.”

His plea had been so impassioned that she had agreed to make sure that she was in some kind of shelter. After that, she made a quick exit. She felt confused and she needed to think. But where to go? That decision took only an instant. Back to Clark’s.

Chapter 8: Friends

Lois’s quick departure to see Mr. Luthor had left Clark wondering about the reason behind the suddenness of her departure. They had just finished listening to Luthor’s address where he seemed to blame Superman for the failure of the Nightfall mission. Then Clark had also gotten careless and let his attraction to her come out in the open. When that had happened, at first she just stared at him for a few seconds. Then she seemed to snap out of it, muttered something about needing to see Lex immediately, and darted out. He couldn’t help but wonder if the real reason for her departure was Luthor, or was it what he’d said?

Clark wasn’t sure what to think about Lex Luthor. He must be a good person for Lois to be involved with him at all. However, Lois seemed very upset by what he said about Superman. Clark expected that once he either met Mr. Luthor or saw a picture of him, some feelings would surface since Lois said that they both knew him. He was a successful businessman and a pillar of the community, so Clark expected that when the reaction did kick in, it would be somewhere between how he reacted to Jimmy Olsen and Mr. White. Clark had already concluded that he seemed to like just about everyone. His most negative feelings had been toward Ralph and, having watched him at the office all day, the basis of those feelings was obvious. Ralph was an obnoxious jerk.

As he looked around, Clark could hardly believe that this was his apartment. He had spent nearly an hour familiarizing himself with his home but no matter what he did or where he looked, he

just didn’t find anything that stirred any memories. He had found a photo album of what appeared to be pictures of himself growing up. He recognized his parents, but none of the other people triggered any strong feelings and certainly no memories. It was very confusing. From what Lois said, he was a friendly person. But based on the emotional clues, he didn’t develop strong ties. So far, the only strong reactions had been when he had seen pictures of his parents, and, of course, Lois.

During his survey of his apartment, he’d made a careful search of the bathroom. He found soap, shampoo and various other toiletries, but despite his best effort he found no razor. He had been curious about what kind of razor he used. The orderly who had provided the shaving kit at the hospital had checked on him before he left. When he saw the cuts on Clark’s face, he suggested that Clark probably used an electric razor at home. He said that the scrapes on his face were common for men the first time they used a blade-based razor if their skin was adapted to an electric shaver. Clark was surprised when he couldn’t find any shaving supplies in his apartment. He was glad that he had kept the kit and it would serve for a few days until he either found his shaver or bought one.

After examining his apartment, Clark realized he didn’t know what to do. He thought about turning on the television but knowing that the coverage would probably be nothing but Nightfall made that unappealing. Thinking about Nightfall sent a chill through him. He’d noticed a similar reaction each time he’s thought of the impending meteor shower during the day, but didn’t think too much of it. The Nightfall meteor shower was probably making everyone nervous and scared. Now, in the stillness of his apartment, he realized that the sense of dread was stronger than he’d realized. After considering it for a few minutes he imagined that most people were having similar feelings about the approaching menace.

Clark ended up just sitting on his sofa trying to explore the grey fog that was his memory. No matter how hard he tried, nothing would come and it was very frustrating. He had been so busy during the day that he hardly noticed his missing memories. Sure, he would like to have a better feel for people and friends, but his day had been so full that he didn’t have time to dwell on what he was missing.

He suspected that Lois was largely responsible for his more positive mood earlier in the day. It would be hard to imagine being around her and having to worry about things being too quiet or too still. She was energy made flesh. Based on what he had seen today, and the way he reacted to working with her, it was clear that her drive and zest for life were much of what attracted him to her.

Sitting alone in the stillness of the empty apartment caused Clark to lose all track of time. After a while he gave up on his uncooperative memory and decided that while he wasn’t interested in anything on the radio or television, listening to music seemed appealing. He had noticed that he possessed a wide-ranging music collection and concluded that listening to it might help pass the evening. He had just started looking through his collection when he heard a knock on his door.

Clark opened the door to find Lois waiting. As soon as he saw her it was as if the sun had come out. The surge of emotion felt almost as strong as when he had seen her at the hospital. As he felt his face develop a smile, he wondered if she always affected him this way. How could he feel like this and never tell her? There had to be a reason, but that was lost along with the rest of his memories.

She seemed nervous and maybe a little confused. “Hi Clark. May I come in?”

Was it even possible that he could say no to anything she asked? “Of course, Lois.” He stepped aside to invite her in. As they walked to the sofa he asked, “Did you get to see Mr.

Luthor?”

As she started to sit down he thought he detected unsteadiness in her movements. Then when she was finally seated, he noticed that her hands were trembling. “Clark, I... I was able to see him but...”

She was clearly very upset. What he had first thought to be simple nervousness seemed to have gotten worse. Her hands were in her lap and she looked more agitated than he’d seen her all day. He had an impulse to put his arms around her slender shoulders and assure her that he would do whatever he could to make things better. However, he knew she would never accept that kind of support from him. Instead, he sat down beside her and reached over to place his hand over hers. He moved slowly because he was afraid that she might view it as too forward, but it felt like it was the right thing to do. As his hand settled over hers, he asked, “Lois, what happened?”

It warmed his heart when she turned her hand and grasped his. “Lex... He claimed that there was evidence that Superman deliberately caused the Nightfall mission to fail. He insisted that is the only possible explanation based on the telemetry and other mission information.”

She looked so distraught. Clark didn’t have any memory of Superman but the idea that Superman would deliberately hurt anyone felt wrong. While he was searching for a reply, Lois started speaking again. “It’s just not possible. Superman’s... He’s a good person. He’d never do anything like that.” Lois was now squeezing his hand with enough force that it hurt. It was like she needed to have something to hold on to and he was it. Tears were starting to run down her cheeks.

Clark fumbled for what to say. “I don’t remember Superman, but I do have some of those feelings and I’m sure you’re right about him. I don’t remember any details about him, but the idea that Superman would do anything like this feels very wrong. Lois, I can’t tell you why you’re right, but I’m sure you are.”

She loosened her grip on his hand and he took that opportunity to reach into a pocket and pull out a handkerchief. When he offered it to her she said simply, “Clark, you’re a good friend.”

If only he could be more, he thought. “You were gone for quite some time. Did you spend all that time talking about Superman?”

The question seemed to unsettle her even more than she already was. “No. Lex took me down to his basement. He has a bomb shelter under his building.”

“That doesn’t seem surprising,” Clark replied. “Many buildings have those sorts of things. I heard today that the Planet has one in its basement and will be opening it tomorrow night. I imagine Mr. Luthor will be doing the same thing.”

“Not quite, Clark. Space in Lex’s shelter is by exclusive invitation only. He invited me to stay there with him.”

As he thought about Lois staying with Luthor, he felt a chill similar to what he felt when he thought about Nightfall. However, given that Lois was a friend, an invitation shouldn’t seem surprising. Clark had to be careful in his reply because he didn’t want to sound petty or jealous. “He’s probably trying to express his friendship.”

“He showed me my apartment.” Her tone lacked the confidence that he usually associated with Lois.

“He set aside an entire apartment for you? That’s really...something.”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand. He showed me a perfect reproduction of *my* apartment. It is the same layout. It has my furniture and copies of many of my...more personal items. Everything was in the same place as at home. Even the bedroom furniture was arranged the same. He’s certainly never been in my bedroom. It was...strange.”

Even without memories, Clark knew this didn’t seem right.

“How did he know all of the details? Did you provide him a plan of your apartment and a survey of your furniture?”

This seemed to catch her by surprise. “No. I was so upset about Superman that I didn’t think. How did he know all that?” She paused for a moment and looked like she was rethinking what she saw. “It wasn’t just the furniture. There were little things were even more personal than the furniture. There were copies of the books I own on the shelves in that apartment. And, Clark, I think they were even in the same arrangement on the book shelves.”

The more she described that apartment, the more wrong the whole situation felt to Clark. “Lois, this is your business, but it doesn’t feel right. How would he get all those details if you didn’t tell him? To do all that he’d have to have detailed pictures of everything inside your apartment. Is there any reason that he would have had your apartment searched?”

Now she looked even more perplexed. Clark wanted to help but didn’t know how. “Is there anything I can do?” he offered.

“I don’t know. I feel so...confused. I turned Lex’s invitation to stay there down at first, but I had been rethinking that decision. Now... well, there’s no way I’m staying in that clone apartment. I guess I haven’t had time to decide what to do. The idea that someone might have gone through my apartment makes me feel...violated. Right now I don’t even want to go to my real apartment.”

“Would you like to stay here tonight?” The offer had come without conscious thought.

“Clark...?”

He had to fight to keep this sounding like a suggestion and not a plea. “I know there’s nothing personal between us. But given how you’re feeling... Even if you weren’t upset about that copy of your apartment, this isn’t a night to be by yourself.”

From the look on her face, Clark could tell that she saw right through him. She knew that this was as much about his well-being as it was hers. “Lois, I know this is selfish on my part but you make my world brighter just by being here. I would love it if you stayed. When you left earlier it was like...well, the world got darker. You just said that you didn’t want to go back to your place. Why don’t you take the bedroom and I’ll sleep out here on the sofa. It looks comfortable enough for me.”

That brought an unexpected smile to her face. “Clark, I can’t believe you suggested that.”

Her words didn’t seem to match the pleasant expression she wore as she said them. He was suddenly afraid that his suggestion to stay seemed inappropriate. “I’m sorry. I didn’t...”

She cut him off with a touch on his arm. “Relax, Clark, there’s nothing wrong. It’s just that I’ve spent a few nights in your bed with you on the couch. Mostly it’s been after a stakeout when we’ve come back here to write up notes on the evening. The way you asked just now reminded me of the first time you made that suggestion. You were worried about offending me that time too.”

“So you’ll stay?”

“There’s no place I’d rather be.”

Another wave of warmth passed through him. Looking at her smile filled him with the courage to ask, “Lois, how can there be nothing more personal between us? Think about it. Yours is the only name that I remember! When I opened the door a little while ago it was... When I see you...well, like I said before, the whole world gets brighter.”

Her smile faded but Clark was relieved to see that it didn’t completely disappear. “We are close. Except for once, you’ve never showed that you wanted more from our relationship. I told you about that when we were at the hospital. When you first started with the Planet there was one time that you seemed...interested. I was very direct in telling you that I...wasn’t.”

He felt like he had just been doused with ice water. “I don’t remember when it happened but I remember what you said at the hospital.”

“When I said that to you, it was your first week at work. I didn’t know anything about you. Since then I’ve learned that you aren’t like anyone else I’ve met in this business. But like I said, since we’ve gotten to know each other, you haven’t shown any sign of wanting more than friendship.” Her voice had taken on an air of hesitancy. It was as if she was considering a new idea and wasn’t quite sure what she thought of it yet.

Clark shrugged in frustration at his missing memories. “From what you’ve said, I know that’s true. Maybe after that one time I thought I’d better not let anything show again. In any case, it’s great being around you and... I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. I could tell from today how much I like working with you. While you were gone, I looked through some old photo albums and based on my reactions to the people in those pictures, I think you’re the best friend I’ve ever had. I don’t want to mess that up. I don’t think I could handle it if you didn’t want me around.”

That smile crept back to her face. “There’s not much chance of that. I think today proved that even with your memory gone, we make a great team. Whatever else happens, we’re partners and I don’t want to change that. As for the rest...” She took a deep breath and looked at him even more intently. “Clark, I don’t know. I like you but this is all so new to me. I don’t have a great history in relationships. You’ll need to give me some time to get used to the idea.”

The chance that she might be interested filled him with hope. “I can do that. And honestly, I’m happy you haven’t told me to get lost. You are my best friend and this is a time when everyone needs their friends. I’ll do my best not to let...other factors...get in the way.”

They spent the remainder of the evening looking through the apartment. Lois told him whatever history she knew of his pictures and books. By the time Clark settled down on his sofa and tried to go to sleep, it seemed like things might just work out after all. That is, if they survived tomorrow night.

Chapter 9: Impact

When Clark woke up, or more precisely, since he’d hardly slept at all, when he decided to get up from the couch, he was disappointed that he wasn’t feeling better. All the scrapes and bruises still hurt just as much as yesterday and he still had that strange all-over body ache that he’d first noticed at the hospital. Yesterday, once the day got going, he’d barely noticed the pain. But in the stillness of the morning, the discomfort was conspicuous. At least the burning sensation deep inside wasn’t as bad as it had been early yesterday. He hoped that it wasn’t going to be permanent.

He had learned so much last night. Now he knew that he’d fallen for Lois right from the very beginning, but when she’d noticed, she’d slapped him down. Based on what she said last night, as well as the fact that he apparently never did or said anything again, her words must have been particularly harsh.

But that seemed to have changed. She now seemed like she was open to the idea of him as a potential romantic partner. This was great, but it made things even trickier. She’d asked for time to get used to the idea of thinking about him in that way. That meant he had to give her enough space to relax while she adjusted. However, he didn’t want to repeat his earlier mistake and be so distant as to risk appearing uninterested.

She did need him as a friend. As Clark thought about what others in the office had told him yesterday about Lois, and what he’d seen in the past 24 hours, he suspected that she hid a lot of herself behind a hard and tough exterior. For now, Clark felt that what she probably needed was for him to be her best friend and

supportive partner. He was determined to have the lovesick schoolboy take a break and, by being her friend, show Lois that she was the most important person in the world.

His preparations for the day went quickly. It only took Clark a few minutes to get ready and then they were off to Lois’s apartment. While Lois drove, Clark tried to see if he recognized any buildings. He was looking at storefronts on Lois’s side of the road when her voice startled him. “Clark! You aren’t wearing your glasses.”

He put his hand to his face. Sure enough, the glasses weren’t there. “I completely forgot about them this morning.”

She kept looking back and forth between Clark and the road with a puzzled look on her face. “I’ve never seen you without your glasses before. Do we need to go back for them?”

“I don’t think so.” Clark looked around to see if everything was in focus. “I can see fine. You’re sure that I need them?”

“I think so. Like I said, you always wear them.”

Clark picked up an early edition of the Planet from the floor of the car. He held it at various distances from his face to make sure he could read correctly. No matter what the distance, the text was crystal clear. “I’m not having any problems. Could the accident have fixed my vision?”

She shook her head doubtfully. “I don’t see how.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine at least until we get into the office. I think I remember seeing a spare set of glasses in the drawer of my desk. Maybe the accident did fix my vision. It would be nice to have something good come out of it.”

A few minutes later, Lois parked her Jeep near her apartment. When they got out of the car, he caught Lois staring at him intently. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

She shook her head slowly. “No. You just look different without your glasses. There’s just something that I can’t put my finger on.”

“Lois, if it’s going to bother you, I’ll put on some glasses as soon as we get to work.”

She laughed softly at the offer. “It doesn’t bother me. In fact, you look good without them. You should think about contacts.” Before he could reply, she’d turned away.

When they entered her apartment, Clark noticed that as she crossed the doorway, Lois stopped just inside the threshold. After a brief pause, her face took on a scowl and she stepped into the apartment.

“Is everything alright?” Clark asked.

She continued slowly into her apartment. “Yeah. I was just thinking about that copy of my apartment in Lex’s shelter.” She continued into the room and waved her arm at a chair. “Go ahead and have a seat. I’ll be out in just a few minutes.” Then she headed for a door that Clark guessed to be her bedroom.

He waited in her living room while she prepared for the day. Lois was at least as fast as Clark was, and in only a few more minutes, they were back in Lois’s Jeep and on the way to work.

The office was abuzz with activity when they arrived. Considering that they arrived extra early, the level of activity was noteworthy. Lois had headed right for the coffee machine and Clark was on his way to his desk when Jimmy came up to him. “Hey, CK. Nice look. Are you wearing contacts?”

Clark was coming to realize that he was going to get that question a lot today. “Good morning, Jimmy. I forgot my glasses at home. By the time I realized they were missing, I was half way to work. I can see fine without them. I’m thinking that my accident might have fixed my vision problem. I want to try to go the day without them and see what happens.”

Jimmy stepped back and gave him a once-over. “It’s a good look for you. Good luck.” Before Clark could reply, Jimmy had rushed off to finish whatever errand he was on.

The pattern of work today was to be unusual. Instead of the regular morning and evening editions, the Planet was going to be

issuing several smaller, “Prepare for Nightfall” notices. Each “notice edition” was very small, just a few pages, which enabled the Planet to produce four of these through the day. Today’s regular evening edition was much smaller than usual and was little more than the combination of the notice editions. The paper was publishing all sorts of information about shelters and soup kitchens that planned to operate through the troubles. They also included lists of personal items that people should consider taking to shelters and things to leave home.

Part of the Planet’s coverage had been to publish some changes in the laws of New Troy. Yesterday morning there had been a rush by people to get wills in order. However, the biggest change was the elimination of the waiting period for getting married. As of this morning, the waiting period was gone and the marriage business had been jumping from the moment the revised law took effect. It seemed that many couples that were planning marriage wanted to be husband and wife when Nightfall arrived.

Finally, the Planet was publishing reports of the ongoing meteor strikes. The fireworks show of smaller fragments had started sooner than had been predicted as did the reports of actual impacts. Clark made some calls to scientists that Lois knew, and they had said that there seemed to be far more ahead-of-the-main-body rock chunks than had been suspected. When Clark pressed them on this, he learned that before the Nightfall mission, most of the attention had been centered on determining the composition of Nightfall. The data on the surrounding debris fields had only received minimal attention. When Clark brought Lois up to date on this data, she seemed to think it was important.

“Why didn’t you press those scientists harder for more details? That kind of data might turn out to be very important.”

“I’m sorry,” Clark replied. “I was looking for news that we will publish today. The information didn’t seem very important. From a news-distribution perspective, there isn’t time to do anything with this data. Besides, I don’t know these people.”

Lois’s reply was sharp. “You do know them.” Then she seemed to gather herself and answered in a more tolerant tone. “We both know these people. You just don’t remember.” She paused again. “Remind me to brief you on who you know and how well you know them before you call our contacts. You’ve been doing all this so well that I tend to forget how much you don’t remember. Anyway, I agree that this information isn’t newsworthy now. But it might be relevant later for the Superman investigation.”

This caught him by surprise. Were they investigating Superman? “What Superman investigation?” he asked in a confused tone.

“When this is all over, we’ll need to find out what really happened to Superman. I know how these things work, and I’ve already seen it starting with what Lex said. Everyone in some position of authority will be looking for a scapegoat and Superman won’t be here to defend himself. We’re his best friends. We need to know everything about that mission. Something like this, where there was more debris in front of Nightfall than expected, is a critical clue to clearing his name.”

Clark couldn’t help but be warmed by her energy and passion. She must be the best partner anywhere. He had to wonder how was he lucky enough to be assigned to work with her. “Superman is lucky to have you as his friend, Lois. I’ll keep that investigation in mind for any calls I make the rest of the day. Do you have any more errands or phone calls for me to make right now?”

She paused briefly as if going over a list of potential issues in her mind. “No. Have you tried calling Smallville again?”

“Several times. There just isn’t any way to get through. I called the phone company and they said it’s just a matter of overstressed lines. I’ll keep trying every half hour or so, but they

warned me that I probably won’t be able to get through. Do you have anything else for me to do?”

“Not really. Go ahead and write up what you have. I think the deadline for the next extra edition is in about an hour or so and you should see if you can have something for that release.”

Clark was confident that he could easily meet that deadline. That got him thinking about planning and deadlines and reminded him that he had a ‘planning’ question for his partner. “Lois, are you staying here tonight? Perry has suggested that all of the Planet staff bring their families and spend the night in the shelter here in the building. It’s still surprisingly calm outside but the police are still expecting an outbreak of violence at any time. I’m planning to be here and...I guess it’s not really any of my business but I was curious about your plans.”

“I’ll be staying here too. I want to be in a place where I feel like I can do something valuable. I need to be involved. I just couldn’t see sitting in my apartment on a night like this.”

Clark felt relieved that she would be somewhere relatively safe. “Based on the reports I’ve seen, there may be some fragments hitting in this area big enough to destroy a building, but there won’t be very many big enough to destroy a properly built shelter. Do you need anything from your apartment?”

She shook her head. “No. I picked up some personal items on the way in this morning. Do you have everything you need?”

“Sure. I have my toiletry kit and a picture of my parents. I don’t know what else to bring in.”

“I guess it’s tough to know what’s important when you don’t remember things.”

Before Clark could respond, Lois’s phone rang. Since most of her calls today had been about stories they were working on together, Clark stayed at her desk while she took the call.

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet.” Her tone was pure business.

“That’s very kind but I’ll be working here all evening. – Everyone in the office will be in the shelter in the basement of this building. – Goodbye.” With each phrase, her tone had seemed to reflect more irritation.

“Was that one of your parents?” Clark asked.

“No. My mother is in California and I have no idea where my dad is right now. That was Lex inviting me to stay with him again.”

“It sure sounds like he thinks you two are dating.” The words were barely out and he already regretted them.

She scowled at Clark for an instant before she snapped back, “We aren’t dating.” Then she seemed to get herself back under control. “However, based on how he’s acting, and that copy of my apartment, I can see that he had other things in mind. Between what he said about Superman and realizing that he’s had me investigated and may have even had my apartment searched, whatever he thought was going to happen is over now.”

Her voice suggested that her decision about Lex Luthor was final. That didn’t bother Clark at all.

Lois was convinced that she would never fall asleep. It was amazing how dark and cold a room could feel. Sitting next to Clark helped. In fact, it helped a lot, but she’d never sat in a basement while her city was seemingly being destroyed around her.

Perry had insisted that the staff move into the shelter right after sundown. The alert had come an hour earlier, but many, including Lois and Clark, just kept on working. Lois had tried to convince Perry that her place was out on the streets of Metropolis as the fragments arrived. She had used the argument that reporters had a duty to report first-hand on dangerous events. She cited Perry’s own history covering wars and natural disasters to support her case.

She was surprised that Perry not only turned her down flat, he’d taken the extra step of telling Clark to keep an eye on her to

make sure she didn't sneak out of the building. Then he went even further and threatened not to publish anything she brought in if he found out that Lois had been out of the building to get the story. She would have exploded but right at the end Perry got all fatherly and stressed how dangerous it would be. Not only would there be a combination of looters out making trouble and the National Guard and MPD units trying to keep the criminal elements in check, there was a very real risk from Nightfall fragments.

She had to admit that his argument was compelling. The announcements of a curfew had been going on all day and the threats for violating the curfew seemed real. There were some serious concerns of looting during the evening hours and, while the official position wasn't shoot-on-sight for anyone found outside, that was only the *official* position. Lois had the impression that, unofficially, it wouldn't be pleasant for anyone caught out after curfew. And Lois had to admit that no amount of cleverness on her part would help if a Nightfall fragment landed on her.

Even before it got dark, the sky had been starting to light up with meteor trails. If it weren't for the constant reminder that these beautiful streaks were carriers of untold death and destruction, it would have been a beautiful show. The sounds of meteorite impacts weren't particularly noticeable until after dark. The first major hit sounded like nothing more than thunder in the distance.

There was still some daylight remaining when they had heard the first impact. Lois and Clark had gone up to the roof with Jimmy hoping to see something that would help in a write-up. They were up there for slightly over half an hour. They would have headed down much sooner but Jimmy was getting some great pictures of the city skyline with the occasional meteor trail in the sky above.

It was just after midnight that the strikes started to come more quickly. At first, Lois thought that being in the shelter would mean that she wouldn't have any feel at all for what was happening in the city. The sound from the early impacts off in the distance had been completely muffled by the shelter's position below street level. However, when the hits became more frequent and got closer, they felt right in the middle of things.

As the night wore on, Lois felt like she would be able to swap stories with someone that had been through the London blitz during World War II. She'd heard explosions, felt tremors, and was sure that at least one building had been knocked down somewhere nearby. She never knew you could feel so much shaking coming through the ground.

Another explosion and crash came without warning. It startled Lois enough that she grabbed for Clark. One thing she'd learned tonight was that if you had to sit through the end of the world, it helped a lot to have someone to hold. Clark had been great to hold on to.

It was so strange. He was burned, bruised and lacking most of his memory, but she could tell that he was far more worried about her than he was about himself. He stayed right next to Lois all evening. He held her when she needed it, but he had also been sensitive to when she'd recovered and needed some space again. For most of the evening they'd been sitting together in a corner. The chairs and other, more comfortable accommodations had all gone to children and older people. The shelter was very full tonight.

As Lois looked at the people crowded into the cramped space, she thought back to Lex and his super shelter. If she had accepted his invitation, she was sure that there would have been a meal prepared by his private chef. It would have been served to her and Lex in a dining room. The two of them would have eaten alone in an elegant setting, just like they did on that first interview-that-felt-more-like-a-date. She was confident that he

would have steered any conversation to his great plans for the post-Nightfall world. He might have even issued an invitation for Lois to help him with his efforts. The evening would have ended with Lois retiring to her 'apartment' and she'd be sleeping comfortably in that copy of her bed. Knowing Lex, she suspected his shelter was so sound resistant that she wouldn't be hearing the city being knocked down around her. Finally, if by chance the sounds of the bombardment did penetrate, Lex would certainly be available to comfort her. But she didn't think that holding on to Lex would be nearly as comforting as sitting with Clark.

Instead, the night had become some sort of surrealistic date. She was sitting on a concrete floor with Clark's arm around her shoulders, comforted by his solidity. As she looked around at the people and families that were here, she knew that this was where she belonged. This was her city and these were her people. In that moment, the idea of spending the evening in the luxury of Lex's world seemed repulsive. As she nodded off, her head resting against the pillow that was Clark's shoulder, she realized that the end of the world could be a great motivator for learning about yourself.

Chapter 10: Morning

By 7:00 the sound of meteor impacts had pretty much stopped and Lois decided it was time to take some initiative. The first step was to wake up her pillow. She wasn't sure who had done the most sleeping last night, but when she had woken up a few moments ago, she had found Clark's arm around her. She had been using his chest as a sleeping surface. Yes, there were far worse ways to wake up in the morning.

She looked up and studied his face for a moment. He still showed signs of the injuries suffered in the building collapse but it was clear that he was beginning to heal. She liked his look without glasses. Maybe he'd be lucky enough to continue to go without them when this was over. She considered giving him a nudge but was afraid that she might hurt him by accidentally touching a sore spot. Trying not to startle him, Lois kept her voice low. "Clark. Wake up."

His head lifted and he looked around in what was clearly a "Where am I?" moment. After only a second, he got his bearings and looked over at Lois. His face lit up with that brilliant Clark Kent smile. "Good morning. I see that we're still here."

His smile flowed over her like a warm breeze. Now that she knew how he felt, it was hard not to think about the potentials that her partner represented. But this wasn't the time to get distracted by such ideas. She reluctantly stamped down those thoughts and got back to business. "Yes we are, and it's time to get to work. I've been awake for a few minutes and I haven't heard any sounds from the city. I think the Nightfall shower is over. I want to get out of here and check out the damage."

He seemed to think about this for a few seconds. Then he got that 'cautious Clark' expression and replied, "Perry asked us to stay in the building until the official all-clear announcement. If I remember correctly, you promised that you wouldn't go out until it was safe."

Same old Clark. "Clark, you're always so... Hold it. How are you feeling this morning?"

Clark looked thoughtful. "I feel better. There are still a lot of aches and that funny burning is still there."

"Burning?" she asked.

"Didn't I tell you about that?"

"No."

"When I first woke up in the hospital, not only did everything hurt, there was a sensation like burning inside all my muscles. It seems to be getting better, but I notice it most in the mornings. The doctor at the hospital thought it might be a reaction to the smoke. I'll be fine. Yesterday I didn't notice it once I started moving around."

Since she was the one who made the hospital release him, Lois felt responsible for him. “Be sure to tell me if it stops getting better. How’s your memory?”

He got a faraway look on his face. “I think... I might have some images that weren’t there yesterday. I have vague memories of places that look foreign. Do I travel much?”

“You traveled all over the world before settling in Metropolis. Do you remember anything else?”

“Not that I can pin down right now. The images are only that—pictures without context. They’re vague and I have no idea how they go together or what they mean. The idea that I traveled a lot sounds right. I have some memories of seeing the ground from high above. I must have spent a lot of time in airplanes.”

She hoped that when his memories came back he’d continue to be as open with her as he’d been the past days. “That’s great. I bet your memory will start coming back faster. Right now, I still want to see what we can find out about the city. I guess you’re right that we should wait for the all clear. I did promise Perry. Besides, we might get arrested for looting, then the only news we’d be reporting on would be from MPD headquarters. I’m sure I wouldn’t get locked up, but it would cost valuable time.”

“Lois, if the impacts have stopped, it shouldn’t be too long until the all-clear. Why don’t we head to the roof to get a set of pictures and observations to go with those from last night? I’m sure Jimmy will be happy to come along for those shots.”

They found Jimmy and Perry very quickly. The shelter wasn’t that big. Lois pitched Clark’s idea as the rest of the story from the night before. She knew that the Lane and Kent style would be perfect for this article, but to her annoyance, it was the idea of matching pictures of the city at sundown the night before and sunrise the morning after that got Perry’s attention.

The elevators weren’t working. It was a long trip up the stairs to the roof. They were all a bit winded when they reached their goal. Lois was first out the door and was honestly surprised at the sight that awaited her.

“It’s still here,” she said with an air of relief as she took in the Metropolis skyline.

The sky overhead was gloomy and overcast. The clouds had a dirty brown-grey look that she couldn’t remember seeing before. It seemed appropriate for the morning after a disaster. Fortunately, even though the sky was dark and gloomy, the cloud layer was high enough that she had a clear view of the city.

Most of the city looked intact. Smoke rose from a few places, but at first glance the city looked like it had the night before. As Clark and Jimmy started looking around, the optimistic mood slipped away. Jimmy pointed toward the northwest. “Where is the Baxter building?”

Lois looked to where he was pointing. There should have been shimmering blue-grey glass tower. Her memory of the modern building made the gaping hole in the skyline feel personal. “Oh, my!”

Clark had been looking in the other direction. He pointed to the south. “Wasn’t there a cluster of buildings down that way?”

Lois and Jimmy both looked more carefully in that direction. “The Shuster complex is gone,” she said. Lois knew that she should have been able to see at least the upper sections of the tallest of the buildings that made up this development. As she stared, the hole in the skyline became more and more conspicuous. Lois gasped. “There was a large residential section in that complex. Hundreds, possibly thousands of people lived there.” This led to a moment of silence as the shock of how many deaths may have resulted from the destruction sank in. Over the next few minutes they were able to identify two other buildings that were not present.

Finally Lois felt her reporters’ instincts kick back in. “Jimmy, please take enough pictures to survey the city from here. We’re recording history. I wish we’d thought to take some ‘before’ shots

last night. All we’ve got is the meteor streak shots.”

“I’m on it Lois,” Jimmy replied. “I didn’t mention it at the time, but yesterday afternoon Perry sent me up here to take a series of survey shots for exactly this reason.”

Lois’s initial reply was enthusiastic. “That’s great. I can see the front page now. A set of mosaics from the top of the Daily Planet building.” Then the meaning of those missing buildings reasserted itself and she went on in a much more subdued tone. “I’m sure Perry can compose a page that is respectful given the situation.”

They lingered on the roof for a few more minutes while Jimmy shot a complete set of morning after pictures. Jimmy had marked the locations and angles from his shots the previous day and took extra time to reproduce them as accurately as possible.

As they were about to leave the roof, she noticed Clark taking one last look around. “I’m glad that so much of the city is still here,” he said. “But I wonder how many buildings were destroyed last night that we can’t see from here.”

Neither Lois nor Jimmy responded. It seemed like that was information that they would have all too soon.

On the way back down the stairwell, Clark stopped at one floor and paused as if listening for something. “Can we stop and look around here for a minute? I think I hear something.”

“People?” Jimmy asked.

“No. But something just feels different on this floor.”

Clark opened the door and the difference was quickly apparent. It looked like a small meteor had hit the building. There was a large hole in the outside wall.

“Wow!” Jimmy said. “I don’t remember hearing anything like this last night.”

Lois started toward the hole for a closer look. She hadn’t gone more than two steps when she heard Clark’s voice. “Lois, please be careful. This whole area is probably unstable.”

She started to protest but he was right. Just because the floor looked stable didn’t mean that it was. Besides, there was little to see by going closer. “Okay, Clark.” She stopped where she was and looked at the damaged area. “We’re fairly high up. It looks like the meteor clipped the building near the corner.” She pointed to a missing section of the ceiling. “See how there’s a path from the floor above? I wish we could see where it went.” She was tempted to get close enough to try to see where it landed, but she suspected she’d have to argue with Clark about safety to get any closer. If there was a hole in the building next door, it would still be there later.

Jimmy took some pictures of the damaged area. After a moment he wondered aloud, “What would have happened if that had hit us straight on?”

Clark answered solemnly. “We might have a souvenir. Then again, if the impact was lower we might have a collapsed building on top of us.” After a few more pictures they resumed their trek to the basement shelter.

At 8:36 a.m. the all-clear came in. People were free to travel but only two-wheeled vehicles were going to be allowed in the downtown area until the roads could be repaired and the debris cleared. There would be some limited public transportation starting this afternoon, but for the first 48 hours or so, the only four-wheeled vehicles allowed in the metropolitan area were to be a few buses, emergency vehicles and police.

Many of the staff wanted to get out and look around the city as quickly as possible, even if that meant walking. However, for Lois and Clark, the trip to the roof and the realization of the magnitude of destruction that awaited them curbed any enthusiasm for rushing out. They were just beginning to discuss their approach to the day and how to report on the previous evening when Perry called the Planet employees together.

He climbed on a chair and addressed his staff. “May I have your attention? For those of you that are not members of the staff,

we were happy to have you as our guests last night. We've received notice that it's now safe to travel the streets and return to your homes. For those that haven't heard, for the time being if you don't have a bicycle or motorcycle, you'll have to walk." Perry paused for a moment while many of the people started for the exit. When only the Planet employees remained, he went on. "Okay people, I'd like all of you to head out and see how your homes fared. Based on what we're hearing about the level of destruction, some of you may find your homes destroyed. I'll ask for those of you that still have a place to live to consider hosting other members of our Daily Planet family. And if you don't have anywhere else to go, please give us the opportunity to help. So, go home and get cleaned up. I want to hear back from all of you within the next several hours."

As Perry stepped down, Lois turned to Clark and said, "Will you be okay? I need to go home and get a shower."

"I guess. I should go home and do the same."

As Lois started to turn away, she heard Clark call to her. "Lois?"

"What is it, Clark?"

"I'd feel better if you'd let me escort you to your apartment. Once you're inside, I'll go on to mine. Would it be a terrible imposition for me to walk you home?"

Lois's first reaction was that Clark was being over protective. Her next thought was that she might need to put some distance between them or he was likely to get too dependent on her. Even as she had that thought, there was a counter-thought that having Clark depending on her might not be such a bad thing. That first day he had been pretty helpless. However, yesterday, in many ways he was very much like his old self. After another few seconds of rolling the idea around in her mind Lois decided to humor him for now. "Sure. I'd be honored to have an escort home."

It took nearly an hour to reach Lois's building. They encountered almost no vehicular traffic. That was just as well since they couldn't go more than a hundred feet without encountering sections of the road blocked by debris, or in some cases, large holes in the pavement. However, the streets were filled with more pedestrian traffic than Lois had ever seen. Once they had to detour around a pile of rubble that used to be a building. Fortunately, the building in question was in an industrial area and was likely to have been empty when it collapsed. They passed another building, an apartment complex this time, where there had been an impact that didn't take the building completely down. There was an ambulance out front but no one was nearby. They considered stopping and gathering some information but given the lack of anyone out front to ask, they decided to keep moving.

Finally they arrived at Lois's building. Or, more specifically, they arrived at what had been Lois's building. It must have taken a major hit near ground level because the entire structure had collapsed. The area was little more than a pile of rubble surrounded by police tape. When she saw what was left of her home, Lois froze in her tracks. The next thing she knew was feeling two strong arms encircling her from behind. The contact shocked her out of her frozen state and she spun into Clark's embrace.

After a moment she heard him say, "It'll work out."

Now she could feel the tears running down her cheeks. "You don't understand. That was everything I had." She paused to gather herself and then continued, her face still pressed into Clark's chest. "I had a break with my parents years ago. Everything I have... Everything that's me was in there."

Clark pulled back just enough so that he could turn her face toward his. "Even without my memory I know that's not true," he said fiercely. "Whatever was in that apartment wasn't what made you who you are. No more than what is in your desk at work

defines you. What I can remember, and what I've seen these past two days, tells me that you define yourself. Your energy and drive are what makes Lois Lane who she is. As long as you stay true to yourself and remember who you are, you can get through any loss."

As she considered his words, she realized that they really did help right now. "Clark, I'm... I'm glad you came with me." Then she pulled Clark into another hug. It was amazing how good it felt to be in his arms. The moment of weakness passed and she turned and looked back at the remains of her building. She was holding back the tears but it was a near thing. "In spite of that wonderful pep talk you just gave, I don't think I have the will to try digging through that pile of rubble looking for my stuff right now."

"I agree," Clark said. "Why don't we go over a few blocks and see if I have an apartment left?"

Clark offered his arm and she was happy to take it. They turned away and started toward Clark's apartment. As they walked, Lois was lost in her thoughts. Her mind bounced between things as inconsequential as her furniture to wondering about the state of her neighbors. Once or twice, Clark might have tried to talk to her, but she barely noticed and never answered.

In what seemed like a surprisingly short time, they stopped. Lois found herself standing outside Clark's building. On seeing that it was intact, she felt a sense of relief that Clark still had a home. After a few seconds she heard Clark say, "I'm sorry, Lois."

She turned to face him. "What? Why are you sorry?"

"I don't know. I feel bad that my apartment survived and yours was destroyed. Somehow it doesn't seem fair."

"You're being silly. How would it be better if we both had no place to live? Now, let's go on in and make sure the interior is in good shape."

They walked up together and Clark opened his door. The interior was exactly the way they had left it the day before. Clark went into the kitchen and made sure that he had running water. After looking around for another moment, Lois turned to Clark and said, "Why don't you get a shower and change your clothes? I'll wait for you out here."

"All right. I'll be as quick as I can." He headed into the bedroom and in short order Lois heard the shower running.

The sound of the shower reminded her that she was a bit ripe from the previous evening in the shelter. There was a shower at work and she did have a change of clothes there. That would help. She would need to see what to do about a place to live. For an instant, the image of her fake apartment in Lex's shelter came to mind. However, that idea was so repulsive that she actually said "Never!" out loud to the empty room. Ever since she had seen her demolished apartment building, she had been thinking of Perry's offer of coordinating housing with other members of the office staff. That would probably work out for the best.

She was startled from her train of thought by Clark emerging from the bedroom. She looked up at him as he entered the room. "Either I completely lost track of time or that was one very quick shower."

Clark responded with a light chuckle. "Ice-cold water is a great motivator. I guess my building superintendent followed the suggestion and had both power and gas shut off all night. Lois, would you like to rinse off? The water is cold, but it might help you feel better."

"Thanks, but I remembered that I have a change of clothes at the office. I'll wait to get back there. Besides, I've never been a fan of cold showers and while I know this water is cold, there is a chance that power may be restored at the Planet and I might be able to get hot water there. I also need to get my name on the list for people that need a place to live." Lois felt her voice catch as she thought about her lost apartment. She was going to have to come to terms with the loss of a large part of her life.

Clark sat down in the chair across from Lois. “You know, I have no recollection of ever sleeping in that bedroom over there.” He paused, took a nervous deep breath and then continued. “In fact, when I walked in there it felt more like I was in your place than mine. After all, the only memory I have is you sleeping in there and my sleeping out here. Lois, would you consider staying here?”

Chapter 11: Forward

After a few minutes at her desk, Lois had to admit that it was nice to have a place of her own, even if it was just a desk at the office. Clark’s words right after she had seen her apartment building destroyed had been perfect and were just what she had needed to hear at that moment. However, even though Clark had been right, and her possessions didn’t define who she was, it was still a comfort to sit at *her* desk and know that she hadn’t lost everything.

They had arrived at the Planet to find that power had been only partially restored. Nightfall strikes had taken out a key city power relay station and even though it was probably safe to have power in this building, most of Metropolis would be without electricity for several days. There were generators to run some of the key areas such as the newsroom and a few of the printing presses, but to Lois’s frustration, there was no hot water. She had bitten the bullet, taken a quick cold shower and changed into her back-up clothes.

After her shower she had returned to the bullpen and had been surprised that Clark wasn’t there waiting for her. She was still trying to figure out what to make of Clark’s offer to stay with him. When Clark had suggested that she stay in his apartment, she had been tempted to come right out and say no. After all, she had just turned down an offer from Lex that was, in many ways, similar. For reasons that she wasn’t sure she understood, she didn’t immediately turn down Clark’s invitation. When Clark made the offer it had a very different feel to it. It seemed that the circumstances, combined with the nature of the person making the offer, made a huge difference.

Lois had to admit that there would be some advantages to staying at Clark’s. They worked the same schedule and on the same things already. This would allow them to go to and from work together. It would also make it easier than ever to work after hours. But the newly discovered aspect of their relationship was making this an even more difficult decision. What would happen if she were to stay with Clark? Knowing him, he’d be the perfect gentleman and he’d go back to not letting her see his feelings. She was sure that she could bring that part of their relationship into the open but the problem was that she didn’t know what she wanted.

As she was considering what to do about living arrangements, Perry came up to her desk with a solemn and serious look on his face. “How are you, Lois?”

She tried to force a smile on her face. “I’m fine, Perry.”

He was showing that fatherly look again. “I heard about your building. Are you sure you’re okay?”

It was strangely reassuring to have a ‘father’ looking after her. “Yeah. I was very upset when I first saw it. I was lucky that Clark was there. He helped me get through that first shock. Who told you about my apartment?”

“Jimmy happened to go by your building. He had a bicycle here at work, so he used it to head home. That didn’t take very long and when he got back here he grabbed a camera and went out taking pictures of the city at ground level. There weren’t that many buildings that were completely destroyed. Do you want me to put your name on the list for needing a place to stay?”

“Yes, please. Go ahead and add my name but...I might have other arrangements.” This triggered a confused look from Perry. “Clark has asked me to stay with him,” she clarified.

His eyebrows elevated only the smallest amount in surprise. “Oh,” was Perry’s only reply.

She wanted to talk to someone about Clark’s offer and Perry would be fair to them both. She gathered her courage and asked her question. “Perry, just between us, what do you think? Would it be a mistake for me to stay with Clark?”

He took a second to reply but didn’t look surprised by her question. “Darlin’, this has to be your call. I guess I’d say that while I don’t know if you staying at his place will work out, whatever happens, you wouldn’t be in any danger. Now, as to how well you two will get along... I’m afraid that that’s something that I’ll have to refuse an opinion. I’m sure he’ll try to be a good host. Clark is... Well, you know what kind of person he is. That is, unless because of his amnesia, his personality has changed and he’s acting strangely.”

“Not at all. In fact, other than the missing memory, he seems more normal than ever. For all his Midwest normalcy, I’ve always felt like he was hiding something.” Lois thought about Clark and his admitting to having strong feelings for her. “Because of his amnesia we’ve talked and...he’s not hiding so much anymore. Except for the ‘no memory’ thing, he’s still the same old Clark but he’s...I don’t know, he feels more open.”

“Good. But where you stay is up to you. I’ll add your name to the list, but please let me know as soon as you can about your plans. We’re going to need every room we can get. A number of our people have lost their homes and many of those have families.” Perry paused for a second and his face took on a more businesslike expression. “Are you ready to get some work done?”

Lois took on a how-dare-you-ask-that posture. “Of course, chief. What can I do?”

“We plan to put out a special edition in a few hours. I will be running people through the official government contact points and feeding the information back here. However, I don’t want to depend only on those channels for our information.”

Lois interrupted him. “What other sources do we have? Are the news wires up?”

“No. All of our usual sources are down. However, there are certain advantages to having been around as long as we have. Back in the 50’s and early 60’s when everyone was afraid that World War III was going to start at any minute, the paper developed a plan for collecting information in the event of a nuclear strike that knocked everything else out. Down in the shelter, we had several short wave radios and a complete amateur radio installation. We pulled them out and hooked them up to the buildings emergency power. Fortunately, they still work. We have several people working with short wave radios collecting what information they can.”

“What can I do to help?” Lois asked.

“Carl Jacombe is an amateur radio operator and he has it up and running. Without general power, and with all of the other communication lines down, these are our best sources of outside news. I’d like you to work with Jacombe. I want your experience for asking the best possible questions when we make contact with anyone. He’s set up in an equipment shed on the roof. It isn’t very big, but it has power and is out of the weather.”

Lois stood up. “I’ll get right up there and see what he’s got.” Just as she was entering the stairwell she passed Jimmy who appeared to have just come up from a lower floor. “Jimmy, have you seen Clark around?”

“Yeah. He was here a while ago. Do you know what he wanted those pictures for?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“He was looking for pictures of you. I didn’t have anything current, but I told him that there were some publicity photos in the archives. When I brought them up here, he went through them and took out four or five. Then he got a faraway look and bolted for the stairwell. I haven’t seen him since. I thought you might

know what that was about.”

“Not a clue,” she replied.

“Okay. Hey, Lois, I’m sorry about your apartment. Do you know where you’re planning to stay?”

“Not yet. I’ve asked Perry to add my name to the list of people looking for a place to stay. For now I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on. I need to get going. If anyone is looking for me, I’ll be with Jacombe on the roof working the amateur radio.” As she headed up the stairs, Lois thought about Clark’s disappearance and almost laughed out loud. There must be some deep-seated personality trait that caused him to bolt at odd times for no apparent reason. Maybe with his new willingness to be more open, he’ll provide a better reason as to where he went this morning.

Lois spent the next two hours on the roof. In this circumstance, the amateur radio was a gift from heaven. They were able to get information from all over the country. There was some news that they could get from the short wave radios, but the amateur provided the ability to ask people detailed questions about conditions on the ground.

The news was not pretty. The northeast part of the United States had been among the luckiest. Most of the region had been peppered with small to middle sized strikes that caused only moderate damage, “moderate” being an unfortunate word. Despite the appearance that only a few buildings in Metropolis had been toppled, many had sustained damaging hits as had happened to the Planet building. In areas outside the city core, the same strike that would do only minor damage to a large, multi-story tower, would completely destroy a single family home or small apartment building. All over this region of the country, neighbors discovered that the loud noise in the night was a neighbor’s house being destroyed.

The fragments that struck further south and west were larger, and there were reports that entire towns had been completely destroyed. Atlanta took a particularly bad pounding. Further west, things got progressively worse. Chicago was beat up pretty bad but, as was the case with Metropolis, wasn’t hit as hard as had been expected. It seemed that across the entire country, the most severe damage was farther to the south. A lot of this was speculative as there had been no word from anywhere in the south-central United States. They had gotten some news from the west coast that suggested that they were hit about as hard as the eastern seaboard. However, despite repeated attempts, there was no word whatsoever from Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri or...Kansas. The news that they could get, suggested that this zone seemed to have been hit by the largest and most densely packed of the Nightfall fragments.

It was nearly noon and Lois was at her desk working to turn the notes from the radio contacts into a story when a familiar shadow appeared on her desk. She looked up to find Clark smiling down at her. “Where have you been?” she snapped at him. “We’re in the middle of the biggest news day in history and you just take off without a word?” She was surprised at the anger in her voice. It was only after she had spoken that she realized that she had been worried that something had happened to him and perhaps he had forgotten who he was again.

He took her anger calmly. Here was another of Clark’s basic traits coming through. Lois knew that her personality was explosive. No one else had ever handled it as well as Clark. His reply was in a calm but slightly confused tone. “Lois, didn’t Perry tell you what I was doing?”

“No. Perry and I talked, but not about that. Jimmy said you got some pictures of me and then took off.”

“I’m sorry. I thought Perry would have told you. After all, we are partners. Anyway, I was part of the team that was moving between city hall and MPD headquarters. I have been relaying information in through the messenger system that Perry set up.”

“Okay, Clark. I guess it’s me that needs to be sorry. I shouldn’t have jumped on you like that but I was worried. So, if you were those places, why did you want my pictures?”

Clark looked embarrassed. “When Perry sent me out for the morning, I realized that I might be able to take care of another errand.”

“Cheese of the month club?” Lois asked sarcastically.

“What?” Clark asked.

Inside jokes don’t work when the person has no memory of the reference, Lois thought. “Nothing. What were you doing?”

He smiled sheepishly. “I... Well, I told a few fibs.”

Clark was telling lies to someone? That didn’t seem right. “Clark, what are you talking about?”

“First I went by your apartment. I crossed the police lines and tried to see if I could find any of your stuff. I used the pictures to try to match up some of your clothes. I also know you have several Kerth awards. I was hoping that I would get lucky and find some of your possessions. Unfortunately I think it’s all buried in the rubble. Then I went to one of the relief centers and got you some clothes.”

“How did you do that?”

“I told them that you were my wife and that you were too busy to come yourself. There was a lady there that helped me find some clothes that look to be your size. I went to several places and was able to get a reasonable collection of clothes for you to wear. The quality is nowhere near your usual level of work apparel, but I hope it will be okay. I did the best I could.”

“That was sweet.” She smiled at Clark. “Are the clothes here?”

“No. I, um, dropped them off at my apartment.” Now he has that nervous and defensive look again. After a brief pause he continued in a rush. “I know you didn’t say you would be staying there, and if you go somewhere else I’ll bring them to you myself.”

“That was very thoughtful of you. I still haven’t made up my mind yet but I’ll know before the end of the day and, if necessary, we can move my new clothes together. So, what news have you picked up while you were out?”

“From what they are saying at city hall, Metropolis got off easy. Several major cities in the country had at least a dozen large buildings knocked down, but the count in Metropolis was only nine.”

Then his voice turned somber. “We had a high number of smaller hits, but not as many of the larger ones. However, hundreds, possibly thousands of single family houses were destroyed in the area around the city.” That seemed to remind Clark of his job. “I need to let Perry know I’m in. I think I’ve got enough material for at least two articles.”

Lois waved her hand toward Perry’s office. “So, go check in. We’ll compare notes and see if we can’t make each other’s stories better.”

Clark got a strange look on his face. “We do that all the time don’t we?”

“Do you remember something?”

“Sort of. Part of it was a surge of emotion I felt when you said that we work together on stories. I think I enjoy that very much. Just for a second I had this image of... Lois, have I ever corrected your grammar?”

For possibly the first time ever, Lois smiled at the mention of someone correcting her work. “You *are* getting your memory back. Yes, you have corrected my copy once or twice. Now go check in with Perry so that we can get some work done.”

She watched as Clark took off for Perry’s office and then returned her attention to her article. It was only a moment later that she sensed a presence at her desk. Why was Clark just standing there again? “Well, don’t just...” As she lifted her eyes from her work she realized that this wasn’t Clark. “Lex.”

“Lois, my dear. I’m so pleased to see that you are unhurt. When I heard that your apartment had been destroyed, I had to hurry over and verify your safety. Since you turned down my invitation, I was afraid that you might have been in your apartment when the building collapsed.”

He sounded genuinely concerned but his voice felt so...controlled. Lois didn’t know if it was that too-smooth voice or Lex himself, but she’d been feeling decidedly uncomfortable from the moment she saw him standing over her. “No. I spent last night in the shelter in this building.”

“Yes, I know how my Lois thinks. Always in the center of the news. Chef Andre was heartbroken that you were not with us the past two evenings. I had told him of the possibility of your dining with us during this crisis, and he was so looking forward to preparing your favorites.”

It was all Lois could do not to scowl at him. After spending time with Clark and then last night in the shelter with the combination of her “Daily Planet” family and other “regular” people, Lex seemed to be practically oozing snobbish fakery. His words, his posture, his sympathy all felt like a façade. How was it that she never noticed this before?

The big difference seemed to be Clark. The struggles with his amnesia had triggered a series of events where Lois had been looking at everything around her more carefully. When she looked at Clark, the truth written on his face reminded her of how much you can see in a person if you only look for what’s beneath the surface. On top of that, it had been Clark that had caused her to think more carefully about the implications of the existence of that copy of her apartment.

“Lois, my dear, is something wrong?” Lex asked in a tone that sounded concerned but felt fake just the same.

Her mind had drifted for longer than she realized. “No, Lex. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“I understand. This is a trying day for all. I lost one of my key assistants last night.”

Lois thought she almost detected a trace of genuine regret in Lex’s voice. “I’m sorry. Was it someone that I know?”

“Yes, my dear. It was Nigel. He had some business that he seemed to feel was important enough to draw him out last night. He had the bad luck to have had his car crushed by a small Nightfall fragment. His loss is a great personal blow to me.”

“I’m sorry Lex. I suspect that many people will look back on this and the phrase ‘great personal loss’ will be a common thread.”

“Yes. Losing your home and everything in it would shatter many people, but not my Lois. For you, the only result is that you feel distracted by the experience.”

She was worried that if he called her “his” Lois once more, she would scream. However, before she could say anything at all, he continued. “Please tell me that you will accept my invitation now. Your apartment is there waiting for you.”

Before she could answer, she heard a crash and saw Clark sprawled on the floor. Lois hurried over to him only to find that he was sitting staring at Lex. “What happened? Are you all right?”

He was staring at Lex with an odd expression on his face. “Who is that?”

She followed his eyes. “That’s Lex Luthor.”

He was silent for a few seconds. Then in a voice completely devoid of emotion he asked, “Can you tell me why I hate him?”

Chapter 12: News

Clark struggled with an emotion that he didn’t know he had. Since he had woken up in the hospital emergency room two days ago, Clark had gotten used to the idea that he didn’t remember anyone. But he had also come to depend on what he thought of as his “emotional” memory. In some cases, people that he didn’t

remember at all would trigger an emotional reaction. Of the people that he recognized, his reaction was usually a feeling of mild friendship. The most negative result he had noticed so far had been to his coworker Ralph, and that was no stronger than a sense of mild disapproval. Based on these reactions, and what Lois had told him about his personality, he was coming to believe that he liked everybody.

When he’d come out of Perry’s office a moment ago, he saw a stranger standing at Lois’s desk. He hadn’t taken more than a step or two when the stranger turned just enough for Clark to see his face. In that instant he felt a surge of emotion that was, in many ways, just as intense as the jolt he felt when he had first seen Lois. However, where seeing Lois had filled him with joy, this was as opposite as he could imagine. Now he had a feeling to go with the word ‘hate.’ When he saw that face, his whole body had gone cold and the shock to his system had actually caused him to trip over his own feet and fall. For just a second Clark felt an urge jump up and attack this stranger. His location on the floor proved to be a convenient check against any rash behavior.

He was still staring at this man when he felt a touch on his arm. He’d been so distracted by his reaction to the strange man, that he hadn’t noticed Lois rushing to his aid. As she knelt down beside him, he heard her ask, “What happened? Are you all right?”

Her touch was a comfort and made it easier to deal with the anger that still filled him. With the help of Lois’s presence, he asked as calmly as possible, “Who is that?”

“That’s Lex Luthor.”

This was Luthor. Now that he had an image to go with the person, the very mention of Luthor’s name triggered another surge of anger. He waited a moment for it to pass before asking, “Can you tell me why I hate him?”

With his eyes locked on Luthor, he didn’t see her reaction. However, there was a gap of several seconds before her hesitant reply. “Clark, you don’t hate Lex. You never seemed to get along with him very well, but you can’t hate him. If you did, I’d know it.”

He turned toward her. Her face showed a clear mix of concern and confusion. He didn’t know why, but she couldn’t be more wrong. He tried to keep his voice calm. “I don’t have any memory of him at all, but I didn’t know I could feel anything like this. Whatever you might think you know, I’m telling you that hate is the right word. It’s all I can do to not run across the room and attack him.” Clark found that even thinking about this man was triggering waves of anger. It took another second or two to bring those emotions under control and then he continued. “Somehow I have the feeling that if I knew why, I might do that anyway.”

Lois was shocked by what Clark was saying. This didn’t sound like her partner at all. She desperately wanted to quiz Clark on this reaction to Lex and found it frustrating to think that Clark almost certainly had no idea of why he felt that way. Glancing toward her desk, she could see that Lex was beginning to show some impatience. As much as she may have felt like punching Lex in the nose for his remarks a moment ago, she didn’t want Clark to do anything like that. She moved closer to Clark’s ear and pitched her voice to barely above a whisper. “Clark, please wait here a minute while I get rid of Lex. As soon as he’s gone we can talk.”

She watched Clark nod in reply. Then she stood up and headed back to her desk and an obviously impatient Lex. “Lex, I’m sorry but I’m sort of responsible for Clark. He’s had a hard time because of his amnesia and as you can see he’s also had a few dizzy spells,” she lied. She paused for a second and risked a question. Turning to be sure to see his face and body language to judge his reaction, she asked, “Have you ever had any interactions with Clark? I mean other than what I know about?”

His demeanor suggested that he had no idea what she was talking about. “No, my dear. My only interest in him is that he is your coworker. Why do you ask?”

She shrugged and tried to project as casual an attitude as possible. “I’ve been asking most of the people that know Clark the same question. He has so few memories that we’ve been trying to find people and events that he can use to help remember.”

Lex’s reply had a tone that suddenly felt very personal. “I’m afraid that I’ve hardly seen Mr. Kent except when he has been with you. I do envy him the time that he gets to spend in your company.”

It was amazing how that same voice was affecting her today. Just a few days ago, she had been secretly thrilled to have him address her in such a personal way. Now, well, whenever he spoke, she had the feeling she was being manipulated. Right now, she just wanted him gone. “Okay. Thanks for coming by, but I need to take care of Clark and I’ve got several stories to write up.”

“Lois, you never answered my invitation. Shall I tell Andre that you will be joining us?”

He was getting to be annoying but she didn’t want to be rude. She tried to sound as reasonable as possible. “No. I’ve already made other arrangements with another Planet employee. That will work out best as I expect to be spending most of my time here for the next few weeks.”

“Lois, I’m sure...”

She cut him off. “Lex, I’ve made up my mind.”

He seemed to freeze for an instant. Now his expression showed the same calm exterior but something felt very different. The sudden chill in the air was so real that Lois almost shivered. When Lex finally did reply, the tone was flat. “Very well. I’ll leave you to your work.” Lex turned away in a manner that was almost dismissive. The change was startling. It was almost as if he had thrown a switch and shut off the veneer of charm.

As Lex headed for the elevator, Lois started for Clark. She reached him just as the elevator door closed behind Lex. “Can you walk?” she asked.

Clark was smiling again as he practically jumped up. “Sure, I only tripped. If I’d been standing still when I felt that surge of...whatever, I wouldn’t have fallen at all. I only stayed on the ground because it seemed the safest thing to do while *he* was here.

Lois pointed at a nearby empty conference room. “We need to talk.”

As soon as the door closed, she turned to Clark. “Now, just exactly what happened out there?”

Clark moved over to one of the chairs and sat down. He took a second as if to think before he looked up at her. “I honestly don’t know. I’m not sure that there’s a lot more to tell. The feelings were...what I told you. I’m not proud of my reaction but I have no idea why I feel that way.”

Lois thought for a moment. Why would Clark react so negatively to Lex? Her new knowledge of Clark suggested one possible explanation. Could it be about her? She sat down next to him and in a hesitant tone asked, “Clark, could it be jealousy?”

Clark paused a moment before replying. When he did respond there was a note of regret in his voice. “I wondered about that while I was on the floor. I... I’m sorry to admit this but there is a bit of jealousy mixed in. I can feel it way in the background. But Lois, there’s a lot more going on than that. Most of what I was feeling was like... I just don’t know. Did he kill my mother or something?”

Her reply was immediate and far more passionate than she’d expected. “Of course not! Lex is a businessman and something of a philanthropist.”

The intensity of her defense of Lex seemed to catch Clark by

surprise. But after a second he continued in much more defensive tones. “Lois, is it possible that there is more going on with Luthor than you know about? Could he have a hidden side that I might have known about that you don’t?”

Lois thought for a moment about Lex and her attempts to interview him. She had already realized that she never had been successful in conducting a proper interview. Then she thought some more about that copy of her apartment. There was no way to get around the fact that he had rather intimate details about the interior layout. It still seemed that the only way to have made that copy so perfect was to have someone enter the apartment without her knowledge. There seemed to be things about Lex that she had never encountered in any other businessman. At least, none that were honest. “You might be right,” she conceded. “I wonder if investigating Lex was what you were really doing all those times you made those sudden mysterious exits.”

“What mysterious exits?”

“Ever since you’ve been working here, you’ve had a habit of suddenly remembering that you had to leave the office. Some of your excuses have been *so* lame. I figured that there was something else that you were doing, but it didn’t affect work so I didn’t give it that much thought.”

“Is this what you were talking about with that ‘Cheese of the Month’ comment?”

She felt herself blush that her remembered her earlier attempt at humor. “Yeah. Like I said, some of the reasons have been pretty lame.”

“But Lois, why would I have been investigating Luthor without you?”

“I don’t know. If you were someone else, I would think you were trying to keep a big story for yourself. However, I don’t think that’s what was going on.” Lois paused for a second to gather her thoughts. “If you were investigating him in secret, you must have had a reason to keep me out. My best guess is that either someone else swore you to secrecy, or that because of my involvement with Lex you were worried that I wouldn’t believe you until you had the proof in hand. Are you sure you don’t remember anything?”

“I’m sure. Maybe I’ll remember more as my memory returns, but for now he’s a complete blank. I think we’re close with this idea that I had done some investigations into Luthor that I hadn’t shared with you yet. That just feels right. I suspect I know things about him that I was keeping from you.” Clark reached over and placed a hand on hers. “Lois, I’m sorry that I was keeping secrets. I don’t know why I was doing it, but somehow I know I had a good reason. I’m... I’m sure I didn’t like keeping things hidden from you.”

She squeezed his hand. “Somehow I believe you. And if you could remember anything about my history, that’s saying a lot. But it sure would have been more convenient if we would have been working together on this.”

“I wish we would have been. If I remember anything, I promise I’ll tell you immediately.” Lois was about to stand up when Clark came back with another question. “Have you decided where you are going to stay?”

She’d almost managed to put that out of her mind. That problem wasn’t going to solve itself. “No. I hate having to figure this out. Earlier today, I was even toying with the idea of accepting Lex’s invitation. Even with the suspicions I have about him, the idea of staying in my own place, even a fake version, is surprisingly tempting.”

She found Clark looking at her with a look of disbelief. “Don’t worry, Clark. With what I know now, there’s no way I’ll be staying with Lex.” She looked over at her partner and it was clear that he was struggling not to ask her again to stay with him. She had to admit that she would almost certainly be more comfortable staying with Clark than anyone else. It would be

convenient. Of course, some people would gossip that there was something more personal going on, but under the circumstances, it shouldn't be too bad. After all, he was her partner, he needed help because of losing his memory, and her apartment had been destroyed.

It seemed that they were staring at each other for a long time. Lois finally conceded that there was no easy answer here. It wasn't about what other people would think. There were really only two questions that were important. What was best for her, Clark and the Daily Planet? Then, what did she want to do? If those were the essentials, the answer was easy. "Clark, if your invitation is still open I'd like to stay at your place."

"Of course the invitation is still open," he replied. His smile was big and bright even for Clark Kent.

When Lois saw his reaction, her whole day brightened. Now that she had made the decision, it felt more right than ever. Clark's reaction, and what that triggered in her, left her feeling confident in the decision to stay with him. She stood up and headed for the conference room door. "Come on Clark, we have a lot of work to do before the end of the day. Didn't you say that you had material for your own stories? And don't forget that you promised to look over my article."

The afternoon passed quickly for Clark. Working with Lois felt so familiar that he would have sworn he'd been doing it for years. His own first article for today was about how the city government was using satellite communications and radio to stay in touch with other government agencies. Since as of this morning the entire country was under martial law, this was being coordinated with the military. When the government declared martial law they went to great lengths to stress that the purpose of this was only to allow better coordination between civil and military authorities. MPD was still responsible for most of the police work. That pattern was true for police forces in other cities. Their efforts were being supplemented by the National Guard. This also gave the civilian authorities access to the military communications channels. Clark had prepared an article on this change in government structure. He tried to balance the advantages with the risks of a military government while being careful to try to not give the appearance of presenting propaganda.

Lois was a great help for this article. When she reviewed his initial version, she agreed that it was accurate on fact but tore it apart as too propaganda-like. Her edits made it read much more like a news report than a party line piece. When they were finished, Clark was shaking his head. "I can't believe how much better this is with your changes. Do you always improve my work this much?"

The smile she flashed back at him made his heart skip. "Of course," she replied in a teasing tone. "That's why I'm the senior partner." Before Clark could react, the smile changed to a light laugh. "I'm kidding, Clark. Depending on the type of story, I can help a great deal. However, this is an extreme case. If you had more of your memory, you would have recognized most of what needed correcting without my input. I see your style and talent in the article. You've just lost some of the polish that comes from your missing experience. Tell me, do you understand the changes I made and why they were important?"

"Of course," Clark replied without hesitation. "I feel almost embarrassed that I didn't see them myself earlier."

"Then you'll be fine. We're partners and under normal circumstances you carry your weight very well." She hesitated a second then he saw a hint of a smile appear on her face. "Of course, don't forget that I'm the *senior* partner." It was obvious to him that the line was not so much a reminder of the office pecking order as it was a reference to their camaraderie. God, he loved working with this woman!

Clark's second story focused on the activities of MPD. The police had spent the majority of their time working to keep the chaos from the Nightfall impact from turning into a crime spree. Their informants had reported that the main local crime leader, a person known only as "The Boss," had been working to keep outbreaks of violence under control. The rumors were that The Boss had put the word out that the greatest potential for profit would be during the rebuilding process. So, while in some ways the MPD found itself to be thankful for the efforts of the crime lord, they were nervous about the future. The Boss was a very smart man who was particularly ruthless and brutal when crossed. The possibility of him gaining more power was not an idea that MPD liked.

When Clark passed this second story by Lois, the result was much better. Other than a few structural suggestions, she left the article almost entirely intact. When she finished her review, Clark said in a relieved tone, "I'm glad this one didn't require the rework that the first one did. I was starting to wonder if I wasn't just freeloading off your talent."

Lois could sense the real concern in his voice and responded seriously. "If you had your memories, you'd know that I would never tolerate working with you under those conditions. You earned your position, and my respect, through hard work and talent. I'm surprised you are doing as well as you are with so little of your memory back." Then she let a smile cross her face. "But don't tell anyone I actually complimented you."

She paused for a moment and looked at her own article. "Here is something that I'd like you to take a look at. This is a report on the difficulties that people in other parts of the country are facing." Lois pointed at a notepad. "I have these notes and I can tell that there is a very moving article in here but I'm struggling to find it. This is the sort of thing you're best at. Would you look over my article and my notes and see what you can do?"

"Of course." He sounded pleased at being asked to look at her article. "Should I work here or do you want to send it to me so that I can work on it at my workstation?"

"I need to head back to the roof to check on the latest information. Why don't you just work here and I'll be back in a few minutes." Lois stood up and, as Clark took her seat, she turned back to him and lowered her voice so that only he could hear. "It's nice to know you aren't going to remember some silly excuse to disappear while I'm gone."

Lois's return to the bullpen was marked by a certain amount of trepidation. There was starting to be some news trickling out of the big information hole that dominated the center of the country. By chance, it seemed that the worst of Nightfall landed near the geographic center of the United States. There were confirmed reports of whole towns and cities that had sustained impacts resulting in damage that seemed almost unbelievable. The most shocking confirmed report was of the total loss of Kansas City. The reports suggested that a large fragment had hit on the Missouri side of the city. The impact had leveled the city and there were reports of a mile-wide crater.

The radio operator had found a contact with a list of cities and towns that were believed to have been a total loss. Smallville, Kansas was on that list. At first, Lois hadn't been willing to accept this. She had demanded that Jacombe focus on that to the exclusion of all else. Fortunately, he knew and liked Clark so he was willing to bend the rules to assist Lois in tracking down this information. Eventually they were able to make contact with a man in a town near Smallville that was willing to swear that he had spoken to people that had been over to Smallville earlier in the day. The town was gone.

As Lois approached her desk, she was surprised to see Clark missing. For only a second she wondered if, despite the memory loss, he could be doing the disappearing acts again. Given what

had transpired today, she had to believe the unexplained sudden disappearances were a thing of the past. She looked around and saw him sitting in Perry's office. Perry happened to look up at that moment and motioned her over. She used the walk to Perry's door to compose herself and opened the door with a cheery, "What's up, Chief?"

If Perry sensed that anything was bothering her, he gave no clue. "Clark and I have been going over his stories. He was worried that he would be taking too much credit if he turned them in under the Lane and Kent byline and we were talking about it."

Lois shook her head as she looked over at her partner. "Clark, I told you not to worry about it. In fact your MPD story should be a Clark Kent byline. I didn't contribute much to it at all."

Clark's reply was immediate. "Lois, I'd like to earn that solo byline. I feel like I'm depending on you way too much to have one yet."

Perry interrupted him with a laugh. "We've been going around on this for at least five minutes. The martial law story is clearly a Lane and Kent joint work. I recognized the mix of your styles instantly. But Lois, I have to say that I recognize your hand in the MPD piece also."

"I barely touched the story," she replied defensively.

"I understand," Perry replied. "I think Clark is compensating some for his memory issues by copying some of your style. We've been going over what I recognize as classic Clark Kent and what feels like Lois Lane. I called you over to let you know and remind you that when you are working with Clark you should help him focus on his own style. As much as I value the Lois Lane approach, it isn't what will work best for Clark."

"I'm with you on that, Chief," Lois said. "I'll be more careful to make sure that I show Clark the differences between his style and my own." She turned to Clark. "You should dig out copies of stories we've done that have solo bylines. That should make the differences in our styles more obvious."

"Perry already suggested that," Clark offered. "I was planning to spend as much time as possible on that this afternoon."

Perry stood up. "Good. I have to verify that we have production capability for a run this evening. Lois, you have something on how other cities are coping with the crises for me?"

"Yes Chief. Clark was looking it over while I was checking for new information. It should be in your inbox is less than half an hour."

As they left Perry's office and headed back for their desks, Lois was wondering how to tell Clark the news about Smallville. He deserved to know, but she didn't want him to hear this from someone else first. She needed to fill in some time until she could figure out how to break the news. "Clark, did you finish your review of my story?"

He suddenly looked nervous and seemed to struggle for a reply. "When I read it, it didn't sound right. I made some minor adjustments to wording and grammar. I left that for you to review. After I read it again I... well, I still didn't like the feel of it. I left your version in place and opened a new file where I made some far more extensive changes. I sort of did to that article what you did with my martial law piece. This is your story and I expect you'll use your version but I wanted to know what you thought of mine."

This was perfect for Lois. She could get the story finished for Perry and still keep Clark occupied until she had the chance to talk to him about Smallville. "Why don't you come over to my desk and I'll read through both versions. That way I can get the story submitted and we can talk about them."

Lois sat down and found the updated version of her original story. The changes were minor and didn't have a material impact. Clark's changes made sense and it reminded her that she had suggested that Clark would be a fine editor some day. She almost

hit "send" to submit this version, but just before striking the key, she thought it would be good to see what Clark had done. She found Clark's alternate version and went through it. Reading it was almost a déjà vu experience. They had just finished talking about how their styles differed and here was a prime example. Her original story had been good. It described the facts and the situations that were proving challenging in these other cities. Clark's revision was far better. After reading his rewrite, her version felt flat and dry. Clark's left her with a genuine feeling of the struggle that these communities were facing in trying to deal with the crises. His memories might be missing but the compassion that so defined his personality was just as evident as ever. The combination of her directness and Clark's compassion made the story soar. They really did make a great team.

She fixed a neutral expression on her face and pivoted her chair to face Clark. "I've read yours. Can you tell me why my version is better?"

The question obviously caught Clark off-guard. After fidgeting for a few seconds his answer was clearly in the form of a question. "Because it conveys the facts more clearly?"

She felt a little guilty at having a tiny bit of fun at his expense, but he was so adorable that she couldn't resist. Now it was time to take him off the hook. "No. The correct answer is that my version isn't better. She let the smile she'd been hiding burst forth. "Yours is far better and a perfect example of why we work so well as a team. I want to go over a few points but then we'll be submitting your version under the Lane and Kent byline."

It only took a moment to agree on the revisions and to modify the byline and the story was off to Perry. That meant it was time to talk about Smallville. Lois stood up and put her hand on Clark's shoulder. "We need to talk in private."

As Lois headed for the conference room, Clark was filled with worry as to what she wanted to talk about. His mind flashed back to the last thing they had talked about in that room. It had been Lex and where she would be staying. By the time he entered the room, Clark was terrified that Lois was going to tell him that she would be moving in to Luthor's apartment after all.

Lois closed the door behind him and said, "Please sit down. I have something I need to tell you."

What could she be thinking? This was not the time for sitting down. He had to stop her from making this mistake. He took a step toward her and pleaded, "How can you stay with him?"

Her look of determination was replaced with one of bewilderment. "What? Clark, what are you talking about?"

"You mean you aren't staying with Luthor?" He knew his voice was hopeful but he couldn't help it.

"No." Lois replied, apparently understanding his concern. "We settled all that earlier. I'm staying with you."

Clark could feel the tension drain out of him. "I'm so relieved. When you wanted to talk I started imagining the worst thing possible. I guess that was it."

"Relax, Clark. I think we both agree that my staying in Lex's copy of my apartment would be a very bad idea, but that's not what I wanted to tell you." Her tone and expression turned more serious again. "I'd really like you to sit down for this."

This time Clark sat and asked, "Okay, what's the big secret?"

She pulled a chair over and sat next to him. "While I was collecting data via the amateur radio, I got a list of towns and cities in the Midwest that were severely damaged by Nightfall. Smallville was on the list."

Clark didn't feel any emotional reaction to that revelation. "That's bad isn't it?" he asked.

His non-reaction appeared to be the last thing that Lois expected. Her reply was energetic. "That's your home town! Clark, you have friends there. What about Rachel? The Irigs? Your parents?"

When Lois said parents, Clark felt a twinge, but no more. “Lois, I know I should feel something but I just don’t have any memories. Those names don’t mean anything to me. But my parents – didn’t you say our house was on a farm that was outside of town?”

“Yes. It was a couple of miles away from the town.”

“So there’s a chance they may be all right?”

“I guess so, Clark. But I don’t think you can count much on that.”

He wasn’t sure he understood why he wasn’t feeling more. He knew he had a positive reaction to his parents, but right now there were no strong feelings of any kind. “I guess I have to. Without them... If my memory doesn’t come back I’ll never know much about myself.” He paused for a minute and the room got very quiet. “Lois, am I a callous and unfeeling person?”

“No, Clark. You’re among the most caring people I’ve met. It shows in how you write.”

“Then why don’t I feel anything? I should feel bad but I don’t feel hardly anything at all.”

She reached over and put her hand on his arm. Her touch was comforting. “I’m sure it’s all part of your amnesia. I think you will feel something when your memories return. I guess it’s just as well not to be burdened with that on top of everything else today.”

Clark sighed heavily. “Believe me, I’d rather have that particular burden.”

Chapter 13: Guest

With all that was going on at work, Clark had been sure that they would be staying at the office most of the evening. However, it turned out that Perry had plenty of hands to help, so Clark and Lois left for his apartment well before dinner time.

The bus service had started in the mid afternoon and there was a bus stop not too far from the Planet entrance. Since many of the streets were impassible, the buses were running on a very limited route schedule, which meant less than the usual number of stops. However, on the few routes that were operating, the buses were fairly frequent and they didn’t have long to wait.

The limited number of bus stops meant that there was a walk of several blocks from where they exited the bus to Clark’s apartment. There was still no power other than emergency lighting. The city had put a herculean effort into getting some street level lighting operational. Clark didn’t want to think about what the city would be like after dark if there was no lighting at all. The lights were underpowered but provided enough illumination so that they weren’t walking in complete darkness.

As they neared his apartment, Clark realized that he’d made an assumption that Lois would want to eat at his place. Before they got too far he realized he’d better check with her. “Lois, have you thought about dinner plans?”

“No. I usually worry about that when I get home. Now that you mention it, I am hungry. Sandwiches showed up at work today and I just grabbed one.” She looked around at all of the dark buildings. “I don’t think there will be many restaurants open tonight.”

He looked around at all the dark windows. A few had a pale yellow light that suggested candles, but the majority of the windows were completely dark. Metropolis without power was a surrealistic and slightly gloomy place at night. “No. The power outage has them shut down. The city has coordinated with many of the churches and other charitable organizations to open soup kitchens. I’m afraid that’s the best option for eating out tonight.”

Even in the dim light he was able to detect a smile on Lois’s face as she answered. “That might be fun. Imagine what Lex would say if he knew I turned down Chef Andre for a soup kitchen.”

That should have been funny, but the mention of Luthor had

triggered another chill in Clark. He pushed thoughts of the industrialist to the back of his mind and tried to focus on the evening with Lois. “We could go to a kitchen, but I have some produce in my apartment that I’d like to use. Will you let me fix you dinner?”

Lois turned suddenly and peppered him with energetic questions. “Do you remember how to cook? Wait, how can you cook? Does your apartment have power?”

He’d stopped as soon as she turned to face him. He was getting used to how excitable Lois could be. Clark couldn’t help but smile as he responded calmly. “As for the do-I-remember-how-to-cook part, it just seems to be there. When you went to see Luthor that first night, I spent much of the time looking around my apartment. I found a recipe box and other stuff that made me believe I cook all the time. I also looked through my cupboard and refrigerator and I have some of the ingredients from the cards. It seems strange but I remember that better than I remember people. Are you willing to take a chance on my cooking?”

She digested that information for a second before pointing out a discrepancy. “You haven’t explained how you plan to cook with no power.”

“Oh, right. I found a camp stove that I should be able to use to prepare a meal. I’ll have to do the actual cooking on my balcony but it shouldn’t be too difficult. I also found a whole box of candles so we’ll be able to see. I feel confident about my ability to prepare a meal. My amnesia doesn’t seem to have affected that ability. I’m sure it will turn out fine once I start.”

Her smile was brilliant in the darkness. “How can I possibly turn down a candlelight meal from my own private chef?”

When they arrived at Clark’s apartment, Lois noticed that there appeared to be an addition since this morning. Rough but solid-looking temporary walls blocked the two archways that divided the sleeping area from the rest of the apartment. The wall blocking the arch nearest the front of the apartment sported a door. “When did that happen?” she asked, pointing at the new construction.

“I figured that even if you didn’t stay with me, I might be hosting someone. While I was out this morning, I came back here and talked to the superintendent about having a guest. He had an extra door and I was able to get the rest of what I needed to throw up the temporary walls. They aren’t very pretty, but should make this space work better for the two of us.” Clark walked over to the door and opened it. “Why don’t you go on in and look around. You can also look at the clothes I was able to get and see if any of them will work for you.”

Dinner turned out to be marvelous. There wasn’t anything else for Lois to do while Clark cooked, so she worked right along side him and helped. Following Clark’s instructions made food preparation seem easy. She figured that this night alone might have doubled her knowledge of cooking.

After dinner, they moved into the living room. Clark had just poured the last of the wine from dinner into Lois’s glass and sat down beside her. He pointed at a picture of his parents. “Can you tell me about them?”

Lois felt a twinge of loss as she looked at the picture. Now she wished she’d had the chance to get to know them. After another seconds she said, “I really don’t know them very well.”

“But you said you’ve been to my home in Smallville?” Clark asked hopefully.

“That was one time and it was mostly business. You and I were on assignment in Smallville and I met them there. I stayed at your house.”

“Do my parents run a bed and breakfast?”

“No. They were just being friendly. That’s just what your

family is like. As soon as they knew I was going to be in town, your mom insisted I stay with them. I got your room and you slept on the couch.”

As Lois voiced the words, she realized that she seemed to spend a lot of time in Clark’s bed. But always alone. That was another thought best not pursued. She was about to move on when Clark said, “That seems to be a pattern.” After a slightly uncomfortable silence he continued. “So, what are they like?”

She stared thoughtfully at the picture. “Your mom is a bundle of energy. Not only does she help your dad run the farm, she does all kinds of art and sculpture. She seems perpetually cheerful and that’s infectious. You can’t be around her without her optimism bubbling over.”

“Is my dad like that too?”

“Not really. Jonathan reminds me of a big teddy bear. With all that energy and her art, your mom felt almost out of place on a farm. At least she did to me. I think of a farm wife as someone who spends all day cleaning and puttering around the kitchen. That isn’t Martha. Your dad, on the other hand, is the perfect image of a farmer. He’s quiet and seems more serious than Martha. I think he’d do anything for the two of you.”

They sat in silence for a long moment. “Clark, they might be fine. Just because Smallville was hit didn’t mean that your house was.”

“I know. I just wish I could remember more. The way you describe them, I can almost feel them, but when I think there’s a memory or an image and I try to grasp it, it’s gone.”

She reached over and placed her hand on his. “You’ll get your memory back. It’s only been two days.”

“I guess you’re right. This is just a difficult time to be a person with no past.” Clark paused for a moment as if looking to change the subject. “We need to spend some time getting the apartment organized. I’ll clear some space for you in the closet and some dresser drawers.”

Lois was thankful for the change of subject. “You don’t need to do that. I can pile my stuff in a corner.”

“I wouldn’t want you to do that even if you were only staying for a day. I thought you would be here for at least a few weeks. Did you have other plans in mind?”

“Honestly, I haven’t thought that far into the future. I guess I’m still thinking of this as being just like when I’ve stayed here before. You’re right, though. This isn’t just for a single night and I should be thinking about longer term arrangements.”

Clark’s voice became cautious. “I had thought—hoped—that you would stay here until you got around to getting a new apartment. You’re certainly welcome.” Clark paused for a second then offered defensively, “I promise I’ll be a perfect gentleman.”

She knew that Clark could be trusted. Given the state of Metropolis, it might be weeks before she could even begin to look for an apartment. The reasoning that had landed her here was still valid and would remain so for quite some time. She was paying the price for not having a social life. Lois didn’t have any close girlfriends that could provide a place to stay. The closest she came to friends like that were some of the other people in her apartment building and obviously, that was no good now.

“You’re right,” she finally replied. “It looks like I’ll be here for a while. I really appreciate your hospitality. I know it’s a lot to ask. And you have to promise that if you get sick of me being here, you’ll tell me. I remember the old Ben Franklin saying about fish and houseguests.”

“Fish and what?” Clark asked.

“Maybe you never heard it. It goes something like, ‘Fish and houseguests both begin to smell bad after three days.’ The idea is that after a while company isn’t so pleasant to have around any more.”

He chuckled softly. “I can’t imagine that I’ll want you to leave in a few days.”

She fixed him with a stare. “Just the same, promise me that if you do decide that you want me to leave, you’ll tell me.”

“Fine. If it happens, I promise I’ll be as polite as possible and suggest you find other accommodations.”

“Good.”

“But it won’t happen,” he said in a barely audible voice.

“Clark!”

He started laughing. “Well, it won’t!”

There was a moment of silence as they stared each other down. Clark held his happy and somewhat amused expression against Lois’s best effort to look annoyed. In this case, cheerful won as Lois felt her expression morph into a hint of a smile. “Whatever! Let’s make some space and see what kind of clothes you found for me.”

The first step was to make room. All that Lois had were the clothes that Clark had been able to get for her. That would have taken up very little room but Clark insisted that as his guest she deserved half of the space. This precipitated another minor disagreement but when it came to hospitality, Clark was as tenacious as Mad Dog Lane ever was.

Clearing out the space did provide the chance to search for memories. Most of Clark’s clothes were nice if generally unspectacular. Several times Clark asked her if there were any memorable events associated with various articles of his clothing. Unfortunately, there just wasn’t much to report. There were two exceptions. Lois was helping to move Clark’s clothes out to the front room. She returned after one trip to find Clark standing just outside his closet holding a rack of ties.

“Lois, there must be something you can tell me about this?”

She looked at the ties. “Those are your ties. Is there a problem?”

“My clothes look fairly normal and seem similar to what I saw other people wearing. Where are my real ties?”

“Clark, those are the ties you wear.”

“Why?”

She looked at the ties again. “I don’t understand.”

“Aren’t they a bit...garish. These are *not* like what I’ve seen other men at the office wearing. Why do I wear such loud ties?”

She laughed at the question. “I’ve never known. I’ve always suspected that there is another side to your personality. I think the loud ties are that part of you trying to express itself.”

He looked at her skeptically. “All right. I guess they aren’t so bad. But, Lois, I don’t think I want to know what side of my personality *this* represents.” He reached in the closet and brought out a pink veil. “Please don’t tell me that I wear this sometimes.”

Lois stared at the veil for a few seconds and realized that she was turning red. She recognized that veil from her adventure with Miranda’s pheromone drug several weeks before. She didn’t want to talk about it with Clark right now, but she didn’t want to lie to him either.

She was still staring at the veil when she heard Clark ask, “What’s the story behind this?” It was clear that he’d read something from her reaction.

“What! Um... what makes you think there’s a story?”

“Lois, please. I don’t have all my memories, but I can see that you know what this is about.”

Lois thought for another minute. They were in the process of re-establishing their friendship. While this wasn’t a great time to tell this story, there wouldn’t be a better one.

“That’s mine.”

Now it was Clark that looked confused. That veil looked so flimsy and so...personal. Very quickly he started blushing himself in embarrassment. “Lois, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I... We... I didn’t think I was the kind of person that would keep... I’m surprised that you were willing to stay with me.”

Lois suddenly realized what he must be thinking. “No, Clark. That’s not some sort of trophy or something from us, um, being

together.”

Clark felt relieved when Lois told him this. For a moment, he was having doubts about what kind of person he was. “Then what is it and why is it in my closet?”

Lois sat down on the edge of the bed. “A while back, the office what sprayed with a pheromone-based chemical that caused almost everyone to... It lowered inhibitions and people would chase after someone that happened to be nearby toward whom they felt some attraction. I... Well, I sort of got fixated on you and for more than a day I was throwing myself at you. Toward the end, I came over here and...” Her voice lowered to the point where it was barely above a whisper. “...did the dance of the seven veils.” She looked up at him and went on at a more normal volume. “Anyway, somehow you managed to control yourself and despite my best efforts that day, nothing inappropriate happened. That’s part of why I’m comfortable staying here. You had an ideal chance to take advantage of me then, but you were the perfect gentleman. You said later that it was because you weren’t attracted to me.”

Clark was looking back at her in disbelief. “Well, I may not remember much, but I’m pretty sure that was a lie.”

That’s right, she thought. With what she knew now, that incident didn’t make any sense. “Then how is it that you didn’t...go all crazy that day?”

Clark thought for a minute. “I don’t remember that day at all, but I have an idea.”

“Please, Clark. I’ve never been quite sure what to make of your reaction that day. I’ll admit that it bothered me that I was attracted to you but you didn’t seem to feel the same way. If you have an explanation, I’d love to hear it.”

“Well, I don’t know if this is right, but here goes. Before that day, I’ll bet you didn’t think too much about being attracted to me.”

“Well, we were friends but...not really.”

“I’m sort of guessing here, but I get the impression that I put a lot of effort into being your work partner and not acting like a potential boyfriend.”

“What are you saying?”

“I hope this doesn’t make you uncomfortable but I find you so... Anyway, over the past two days I’ve noticed that I have to concentrate all the time to remember that we don’t have a...more personal relationship. I suspect that’s been going on for a long time. I think the difference that day might be that you were caught off guard when the chemical affected you. For me it was just another day of having to maintain the relationship as your partner and friend and *not* act like a love struck teenager.” Clark held up the veil. “I think I understand. This was a trophy.” Noticing the confusion on her face, he elaborated. “It was an award for me. That had to have been the toughest day of my life.”

By the time all of the moving and sorting was done, it was past time to head for bed. Sleep preparations went smoothly and before long Lois found herself lying in bed thinking about the evening. When Clark had said good night at the door to the bedroom, it had felt like the end of a date. In fact, this was the most pleasant feeling Lois had going to bed that she could remember. If this were a date, it was a darn good one. As her mind started to drift around the way it does when on the verge of falling sleep, that veil came to mind. Clark’s idea explained so much. The reason he controlled himself during the pheromone incident wasn’t because he didn’t find her attractive. In fact, it was just the opposite. It was because he was so practiced at not acting on being attracted to her that he was able to fight it off. That was certainly something worth thinking about. And it was just what she did as she drifted off to sleep wearing a smile.

Chapter 14: Aftermath

When Clark woke up in the morning, he spent a moment trying to figure out if any part of his body didn’t hurt. After a few seconds he concluded that while he did hurt just about everywhere, the soreness, burns and abrasions were beginning to heal. Best of all, the funny burning-on-the-inside sensation that he’d been waking up with every morning was barely noticeable.

After that quick survey of his aches and pains, he did an inventory of his memory. The first step was to make sure that he could remember everything since the hospital. As near as he could tell, all of his recent memories were there. He remembered everything from the people at the hospital to the woman that had been so helpful in getting clothes for Lois. Whatever had caused him to lose his past didn’t seem to be having any effect on his ability to create new memories.

Then he tried to remember something new from the time before the hospital. Naturally, the first image that came to mind was Lois. The emotional reaction was as strong as ever but other than her image, there were no memories. The same was true for everything else. There were lots of feelings, but nothing else other than a few disconnected images. He was disappointed to concede that there were no memories this morning that weren’t there yesterday.

He couldn’t get into the bathroom to shower—or anything else—just yet. That would mean going through the bedroom and it didn’t sound like Lois was awake.

Having her here was wonderful, and he hoped she would stay. For about the millionth time since he woke up in the hospital, he wondered why he hadn’t pursued a relationship with her before. He hoped it wasn’t all wishful thinking on his part, but she didn’t seem to think that his being attracted to her was such a terrible thing.

Since he was awake, Clark decided that he could at least go ahead and use their limited cooking equipment to make coffee. He tried the power switch but, as expected, there was still no electricity. That meant that coffee would be via the camp stove on the kitchen windowsill. He wouldn’t want to try to cook a major meal on the tiny stove, especially not in that position, but it was adequate for coffee.

Once the coffee was ready, Clark checked his watch. It still sounded like Lois was asleep but if she didn’t get up soon they might be late for work. Besides, if he waited too much longer he was going to have to go into the bathroom whether Lois was up or not. He poured a cup of coffee and added the artificial sweetener that Lois liked. He didn’t like the taste of that stuff himself and suspected that, as was the case with the cream soda, he kept it in his apartment for Lois to use when she was here. He added a few slices of bread that he had toasted over the flame from the camp stove, and included some butter and jam. He loaded all this onto a tray and headed for the bedroom door.

Balancing the tray with one hand, he knocked on the door with just enough effort to make a sound without startling her. “Lois, it’s time to get up,” he called. After a few seconds without hearing any sounds from behind the door, he tried knocking again. “Lois, I’m sure it will be an exciting news day, even if it is Sunday,” a bit louder than before.

This time he could hear sounds from the other room. After only a moment, the door opened about six inches. Lois stood, bleary-eyed, in a robe he had acquired for her yesterday. “Good morning, Clark,” she said still sounding half-asleep.

“Good morning. Here’s something to get you started.” Clark offered her the tray.

Lois opened the door the rest of the way and took the tray from his hands. “Thank you,” she said looking at the food. “That’s very nice of you. Why don’t I start on this and you can use the bathroom first?”

“Thanks, Lois. I’ll be quick. The fact that we still don’t have hot water will make that easy.”

As she watched Clark hurry through the door and head for the bathroom, the hastiness of his movement convinced Lois that Clark's first stop was not going to be the shower. She chuckled lightly at the thought. They were going to have to work out a protocol that would provide Clark with more timely access to the bathroom.

Lois carried her breakfast to the dining table. She was still working on her toast and coffee when he emerged. Clark had taken less than fifteen minutes to get ready. When it was her turn, she took a bit longer, but, as Clark had noted, the lack of hot water was a great motivator.

When Lois finished dressing and entered the main room, she was wearing some of her 'new' clothes. She had only gone two steps into the room when she caught Clark staring at her. "What?" she asked as she glanced at her clothes. "Is something wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"Not at all," Clark replied, still looking at her. "You look amazing."

Lois felt herself start to blush. This more open version of Clark was definitely good for her ego. She fumbled around for a reply. Clark's complement was...nice but she didn't know how to react. After a second she noticed that the radio was on. Seizing on it as a convenient means to change the subject she asked, "Is there much in the way of news this morning?"

"Not really," he answered. "Most of what I've heard so far has been very Metropolis-centric. They've been reviewing where to get food and relief aid and where to find shelter for people that don't have a place to live."

The thought of all the people in need of help tugged at Lois's heart. "These times must be especially tough for people who lost their homes. I was so happy to hear that all of the Planet employees in that situation were able to find places to stay. My heart goes out to them."

"Them?" he asked in surprise. "Lois, you're one of them."

The idea actually startled her. Last night and this morning had been so nice that she wasn't thinking of herself as homeless. It felt more like just staying over at a friend's house. "You're right. I almost forgot," she said sheepishly. "I guess I should feel adrift after losing my apartment and all my stuff, but I don't. Your place already feels so much like my second home that the loss isn't hitting me quite so hard. We've been so busy that I haven't had time to think much about what I've lost." As she finished the words, she realized that if it weren't for Clark she would have been 'one of them.' Or worse...she could be staying with Lex.

Clark was trying to think of a subtle way to say that he wished she could stay forever. But before he could say anything at all, the news broadcast on the radio interrupted his thoughts.

The voice of the radio announcer cut through the silence. "Lex Luthor, celebrated local philanthropist and businessman, announced that he will be committing his entire fortune to rebuilding and recovery efforts."

The voice from the radio switched to that of Luthor. "The Nightfall catastrophe will be remembered as a turning point in human history. Our losses are staggering, but our spirit remains indomitable. Together we will survive and we will emerge stronger. We must learn to place our trust in our fellow men and women. History will show that our error was in not trusting ourselves when this challenge arose, but turning to an alien for our salvation. We will never know why Superman brought this catastrophe down upon us, but we must learn the lesson presented. The people of Earth must depend on each other and not on strangers with hidden agendas. I will be..."

Clark watched Lois reach over and turned off the radio. Lois wasn't happy. Cold rage might describe her expression, but that would be an understatement. Clark understood the feeling, but he suspected that for him the reaction wasn't related to what Luthor had said so much as to the man himself. As soon as he heard the

voice, he felt the anger rising from within. The rage was so strong that whatever Luthor had done to evoke this reaction was the one thing Clark was glad he didn't remember. Clark feared what he might do if he knew the cause of this anger.

Lois finally broke the silence. "I can't believe that I ever saw anything positive in him."

"What was he like?" Clark asked.

She almost shouted her reply. "How can you ask that? He's a worm! He all but said that Superman deliberately shattered Nightfall."

Clark raised his hand in a defensive gesture. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean Luthor. What was Superman like?"

The change in Lois was like throwing a switch. Her face relaxed and her voice got much softer. "He was... Clark, I wish you could remember. Haven't you read about some of the things he's done?"

"Yes. I spent a lot of time yesterday reading your stories and mine. Many of them covered Superman."

"His warmth and caring were what made him special. With his powers, he could have been a tyrant. Instead, he devoted himself to helping."

There was a sudden silence that caught Clark off guard. Lois seemed to be struggling with her emotions. Hearing her describe Superman was moving. After a few seconds she seemed to recover and continued. "His work against crime generated attention but his greatest impact was in charity and disaster relief. If everyone had met him and had the chance to know him the way I did, the absurdity of Lex's allegations would be obvious."

Clark felt a pang of jealousy at hearing Lois's wistful description of the hero. From her tone, he could tell that Superman meant a lot to her. He suspected that she was more than just his friend. "Are you in some sort of relationship with him?" The question escaped Clark's lips before he had the chance to think about how much it might hurt her.

Lois was quiet for several seconds before answering. "No. I was always imagining that there was something, but there really wasn't. At least, not until..." She stopped short as if realizing she was saying something she shouldn't.

He felt the stirrings of jealousy, but it wasn't as strong as he thought it would be. She seemed like she wanted to talk, but there was a nervousness in her demeanor. "You don't need to tell me anything that makes you uncomfortable," he assured her.

She seemed to think for a moment. "No, I need to talk to someone and I don't have anyone else. But this has to be private."

"Lois, I'd never betray your confidence. But if you aren't sure, then you shouldn't say anything."

"No, Clark. I need to share this with someone." She took a deep breath and composed herself. "Just before Superman left on the Nightfall mission, he came by my apartment. We talked and...it seemed like he wanted to change our relationship. He said that when he got back he had something that he needed to tell me." She paused again, staring at the floor.

The pain was so evident both in her voice and on her face. She looked so fragile. He stepped toward her and put his arms around her. Her arms flew around him and she squeezed as if hanging on for dear life. She buried her face in his chest and she seemed to be on the verge of tears. Clark was surprised at the shared sense of loss he felt. "I'm so sorry, Lois."

She pulled back just enough to look up at him. "Clark, he was your friend too."

Maybe that's why he didn't feel jealous just now. In fact, at this moment his feelings were very different. He wanted Lois to feel better. That was what was important. "Please believe me that despite... I wish he could be here for you now."

Lois wasn't exactly sure what had moved her to share the details of that evening with Clark. When he asked about

Superman a moment ago, it was like a dam bursting. She needed to talk, and her best friend was right there. Before she even knew what was happening, she was telling Clark about Superman's visit. It didn't make sense but she just knew that this was the one person that she could talk to about Superman. Given that she seemed to be on the cusp of a relationship with Clark, it should have been awkward, but it didn't feel that way. When he moved to hold her, it felt...perfect. Something was just right about holding Clark.

When he talked about wishing Superman could be here for her, she could tell that he really meant it. Clark was feeling her pain and he wanted what was best for her. Then it hit her. Right this minute, she didn't want Superman here. She wanted someone with whom she could share her secrets and fears. She wanted...

Lois took a breath to try to compose her thoughts. She loosened her arms, stepped away from her partner and sat down. She looked up at his face and saw concern staring back at her. Then she realized that she had more to share. "Now that I think about it, I don't know if a relationship with Superman would have worked. It all seems so clear now. I didn't see him as a person. I was infatuated with an image."

Clark looked like he wanted to say something. She paused for a second but he just waited, so she continued. "I think maybe Superman saw that too. One of the things he asked me that last night was to think of him as an ordinary man leading an ordinary life. I remember wondering if he might have been considering giving up being Superman so that we could...have a chance. Clark, I don't know if I would have said yes to that. If I did say yes, what would happen when he was needed but wasn't there?"

Lois could feel the stress growing again. "I don't know anymore. I just wish he was all right. I'm trying to hold out hope but... It feels selfish, but I just want to see him."

Clark reached over and took her hand in his. "You aren't being selfish. You're a good person. If Superman is the kind of person you describe, and I believe he is, it says a lot about you that he was considering a relationship."

Lois shook her head dismissively. "I'm not that great a person. I'm abrasive, hard to work with and difficult to be around. I've always been amazed you can stand to work with me. Up until recently, I didn't get along with people at all, not even socially. It wasn't too long ago that Lucy accused me of having interviews instead of dates."

"Lucy?"

"My sister."

"Oh."

"Anyway, ever since he first appeared, I've been imagining a relationship with Superman. He's such a good person and he does so much to help. But he was right. I never gave a second thought to the man inside the suit."

Lois could hardly believe how much it helped to talk about things like this. She felt a pang of regret at not having a closer relationship with Lucy. Who'd have thought that the person that she'd be sharing her feelings with was Clark? A short time ago she was sure that if there was a future with anyone other than Superman, it would be Lex. Lex...

"Then there's Lex," she continued aloud. "I guess I liked him, but after that thing with my apartment, I was having doubts. Now, with what he's saying about Superman, I realize that I know the real Lex even less than I know the real Superman."

Lois realized that she'd been talking to the floor. She looked up to find Clark listening intently. His expression was... She didn't know quite what it meant, but it didn't scare her to open up in front of him. "Then there's you. I know you better than I know anyone, but even with you, I've missed a lot. I've never let myself see you as anything other than a work partner."

When Clark replied, his voice was full of emotion. "I am your partner and your friend. I don't want anything to jeopardize

that."

Lois looked long and hard at the man before her. She'd opened up in front of him and he'd listened. Nothing had changed, but just the same, it had. Here was someone she could share with and not be afraid. Lois suddenly realized that Clark was the best friend she'd ever had.

Her thoughts touched on the other two men she'd been talking about this morning. Could she open up like this in front of them? Lex...? No. Superman...? Maybe, but she wasn't sure. Her mind flashed back to the challenge that Superman had put before her. He'd basically told her that she should be looking to an ordinary man for a relationship. She needed a friend, not a hero. A friend like Clark wasn't a bad place to start when considering a personal relationship. The fact that he was handsome didn't exactly hurt either.

She finally broke out of her muse. It was time to put sensitive-Lois back in her box and get to work. "Okay, partner. Then let's get to work and see how the world is faring this morning." As she turned to prepare to get started for the day, she resolved that no one other than Clark was going to see that side of her personality.

As they were leaving the apartment, Clark paused as if suddenly remembering something. "Lois, today is Sunday. Do you have a church that you usually attend?"

"No. I mean, I've never been much of a church person. Did you want to go to church today? I can meet you at work."

"I don't remember if I go to church much or not. If I do, I don't remember what church I attend. How about for today we just go on into work? Maybe before next Sunday, I'll remember my church."

Lois nodded in agreement. Knowing how Clark was raised, he probably belonged to a church somewhere nearby. For the first time that she could remember, Lois thought maybe it would be nice to spend a Sunday morning that way.

Because of the adverse weather, the trip to work was unpleasant. Grey-brown clouds had covered the sky all day yesterday, and today, a steady drizzle poured down. The rain felt almost dirty. Fortunately, Clark had some great wet-weather gear and between the plastic rain slickers and large umbrellas, they were able to get to the office and still appear reasonably presentable.

When Lois and Clark arrived at work, it was immediately apparent that bad news was afoot. They were early enough that only a few of the staff were in, but even for this reduced number of people, the office seemed unusually quiet. A morose stillness permeated the office like a cold fog.

Lois wondered if there was something more than the aftermath of Nightfall that had so dampened everyone's spirit. She noticed Perry in his office and headed in that direction with Clark trailing behind. Given the seriousness of the office mood, she thought better than to barge in as she usually would. She was about to knock when Perry noticed them at his door. He waved them to come in.

"Perry, what's going on?" Lois asked. "I know it's Sunday morning but I've never felt the office so still."

Perry motioned with his hand. "Come in and sit down." He paused long enough for them both to sit. "We've received reports from other parts of the country and around the world. Throughout the northern hemisphere, most large cities suffered significant damage. Almost all are estimating death counts in the thousands and many are much higher than that." He paused for a second. "You know about Kansas City?"

Lois only nodded while Clark replied with a solemn, "Yes."

Perry nodded slightly before continuing. "While that seems to have been the worst, at least in this country, it isn't the only one. Cities and towns alike have been devastated all across the south-

central part of the country. Dallas, Fort Worth, Memphis, Oklahoma City, St. Louis and countless smaller towns have all been reduced to little more than piles of rubble. Even the most conservative estimates are of several million dead.”

“Millions?” Clark gasped.

Lois looked over at her partner. “Clark, are you okay?”

He looked back at her. She could see that this news had shaken him to the core. “I will be,” he replied. He shook his head slowly. “So many dead.”

“Son, I’m afraid it gets worse,” Perry said. “From what we are hearing from overseas, the loss of life worldwide will probably be in well in excess of 100 million people. India and China were both hit particularly hard. They didn’t get the concentrated saturation of impacts that the United States sustained, but they had their own versions of what happened to Kansas City. It’s hard to tell exactly because of sketchy and incomplete information.”

Perry paused as if to give them the chance to reply but Lois couldn’t find the words. After a few seconds, Perry continued. “There is some good news. You may have noticed that we weren’t all killed in an impact-triggered tidal wave.” Perry wasn’t usually so obviously sarcastic.

Clark looked startled. “I didn’t think of that. All those impacts in the ocean should have kicked up monstrous waves. All the coastal cities in the world should have been wiped out. I don’t remember seeing any warnings about this and there were no coastal evacuations taking place.”

“There weren’t any,” Lois added. “I was watching for warning and evacuation orders. Nothing like that came through. There were some general warnings for people to stay clear of the coast but it seemed more like a severe storm warning.”

“I only heard about it this morning and that was through some private contacts,” Perry replied. “The decision not to issue a warning and call for an evacuation was a combination of lack of adequate time for such a wide-scale movement of people and nowhere for them to go. There was one segment of the scientific community that argued that many small hits all over the oceans would disrupt any large waves that might be triggered by larger impacts. They projected that there would be a general increase in wave activity equivalent to any major storm but no city-killer waves. Fortunately, they were right.”

Normally Lois would expect to feel anger at not being told that there was a chance that she, along with everyone else in Metropolis, might have been killed by a tidal wave. Right now, there just wasn’t any anger to draw on. Her reaction came out wistful. “I guess it all worked out, but I would like to have known.”

Clark’s gaze lingered on her for a second, and then he looked over at Perry. “I’m almost afraid to ask, but is there more?”

Lois could tell that Clark was hoping for some good news. As she looked at her editor, she was disappointed when Perry nodded his head seriously.

“What do you think of the weather?” their editor asked Clark.

Clark shrugged. “It’s darker than I would have expected but I figured that the impacts would mess up the weather for a few days.”

“Have you ever heard of something called Nuclear Winter?”

Clark shook his head slowly. “If that means something, it must be part of my memory that’s missing.”

Perry turned to Lois. “Lois?”

Lois thought for a second. “There was a fear that if there was a worldwide nuclear war, there could be so much smoke in the high atmosphere that it would block the sunlight enough to alter the weather. There could be a winter that went on for over a year.”

Perry nodded. “Exactly. My, um, contacts tell me that their scientists aren’t sure what to make of the weather. There was a lot

of dust kicked up by the impacts and fires are adding ash. However, there has also been rain almost everywhere. The fragments that hit in the water didn’t trigger tidal waves but they threw a lot of moisture up in the air. All that water is triggering rain, which has helped control the fires. Some of the scientists are worried that all those clouds will linger and we’ll be in one of those long winter situations. They told me that the proper term for this would be an ‘Impact Winter.’”

Lois slumped into her chair. “So even though we survived Nightfall, we still may not survive the aftereffects. No wonder everyone is so down.”

The next thing Lois knew, Clark had placed his hand over hers and given it a gentle squeeze. It couldn’t make any of the facts different, but it did help just the same. As she was considering how nice Clark’s hand felt, Perry began to speak again. “No, Lois. Most people don’t know anything about the concerns about the weather. I probably shouldn’t have told you two.”

Clark looked surprised. “You mean we aren’t going to run a story on this?”

“Not yet. It may work itself out. Son, people have more troubles than they can handle right now. Tell me, what good could come from this paper running a story saying that we may be facing a weather disaster? Remember, there’s nothing that anyone can do to improve or change the situation.”

They both stared back at Perry in silence.

“Exactly,” Perry said heavily. “If there is an official announcement then we’ll run that story. If there is a positive development that might help to lift spirits, we will publish that. Right now we have to think about the larger good in everything we say.”

Lois’s face developed a frown. “Chief, you sound like we will be printing a propaganda sheet.” Even as she asked the question she could feel Clark’s hand tighten over hers as if to offer support.

Perry’s reply was immediate. “Never! Lois, these are the times that teach the meaning of responsible journalism. Not propaganda. Never that! However, people are overstressed and frightened. In times like this, we owe it to them to tell the truth, but we have to carefully consider the value and impact of what we print. Facts that we have verified, as tragic as they might be, are appropriate and will find their way onto our pages. We will not print speculation about how much worse the situation might get. There will be more than enough of that anyway.”

“Perry, it sounds like walking a tightrope,” Clark said. “How do we know what to print and what to leave out?”

That finally brought a smile to Perry’s face. “That is what experience is all about. There will be a lot of people that will push their sensationalist predictions of bad news. But, son, in bad times people get sensitive about who they turn to. The rules of reporting have changed. Publishers that don’t understand that will be out of business so fast they won’t know what hit them. One day they will be selling more papers than they thought possible. The next, they will have lost the trust of the public and no one will want to read their stories.”

Lois finally found her voice. “I understand. I heard stories from the Great Depression and I can see how that could play out here.” Lois glanced out at the bullpen. “What do you think has the office so down?”

Perry looked toward the outer office. “That’s mostly the news of the deaths that I mentioned earlier. Those are verified facts and we’re obligated to run those reports. Otherwise ... have either of you heard any local news this morning?”

“We listened to the radio before coming in.” Clark replied.

“Did you hear anything about Superman?” His voice was a mix of caution and, for the first time this morning, defensiveness.

That wound Lois back up. “Yes! We heard Luthor making it

sound like Superman had caused all this on purpose!”

“Well, there seems to be a lot of that going around!” Perry barked with sudden energy. “Luthor may have been the first to say something, but there are accusations flying from all over. Our people covering city hall have reports that the mayor will be issuing a public rebuke of Superman. There are also calls from several prominent business leaders for Superman to be designated responsible.”

“Chief, this smells,” Lois said. The attacks on Superman clearly angered her. “I could see this sort of thing happening in another city, but not here. Someone has an agenda. Who was the first to go on record against Superman?”

Perry was slow to respond. “Lois...”

“Tell me! Please!”

“It was Lex Luthor. He cited a report from the military that there was a course change at approximately 40 seconds before impact.”

“That’s when we lost radio contact.”

“Exactly.” Perry said.

“What do you mean, ‘Exactly?’” she asked. “Something must have happened right then. Whatever caused failure of communication had to be what hurt Superman and caused the mission to fail.”

Perry’s eyes widened. “Hurt Superman? Do you know something I don’t?”

“No. But he had to have been hurt somehow. What other explanation could there be?”

“Darlin’, I believe that, but there are people saying that it couldn’t have been an accident. They were still receiving signals from Superman’s radio even after the ship hit Nightfall.”

Lois was so shocked she jumped out of her chair. “What are you saying?”

“That Superman wasn’t with the ship at the very end. The radio couldn’t have survived the impact. They lost the signal right after that but there was a small period after Nightfall shattered where there was still a carrier wave. Because of LexCorp’s involvement in the development of the equipment, they had access to some of the mission data. Apparently, Lex Luthor himself was pressuring EPRAD to release the telemetry data. I verified the authenticity of the data through my own contacts.”

Perry held up three fingers. “There doesn’t seem any way around a few key facts. First, there was a change in course right at the end. Second, the communication system didn’t fail, at least there isn’t any evidence of failure based on the presence of the signal. Finally, since the radio wasn’t destroyed right away, we know that Superman’s survival pack was somewhere else when the ship hit Nightfall. Lois, to a lot of people, if you put all those together, it makes Superman look awfully bad.”

Lois sat sitting in a stunned silence and this time Clark spoke up. “Chief, we have to do something. I don’t remember Superman, but I know what I feel. I’ve read about what he did and I’ve talked to Lois and others here in the office. I don’t know what the answer is to those points you raise, but we can’t just go along with this. You said a minute ago that we have to be responsible about what we print. Fine! We will print the facts, but we should refuse to buy in to an unproven interpretation of what those facts mean! Unless we believe that’s the only possible explanation and that Superman would do such a thing, then our responsibilities as journalists demand that we reject that explanation and look for another one.”

Both Perry and Lois sat for a second trying to absorb Clark’s outburst. This sounded like the Clark they knew with all his personality intact. He didn’t show that fire and passion often, but it was part of what made his compassion so effective.

“Clark’s right,” Lois said. “I believe Superman would have done anything, including sacrificing his own life, to avert the tragedy that we are seeing unfold. Perry, do you?”

His response was immediate. “Of course!”

“Good! You write the editorial and let me and Clark dig for the truth as to what happened on that mission. We may not be able to change what happened, but we may be able to find out the ‘why’ behind it.”

Lois led the way as they left Perry’s office. She felt a combination of energy and determination that she hadn’t felt since before the whole Nightfall mess started. She reached her desk, sat down and looked up at Clark. She hadn’t seen him following her but she knew he would be there.

“We need to get started,” she said.

“Do you have a plan?” Clark asked.

She needed to talk to people. Information was always the first step in an investigation. Lois glanced around her desk for a moment then reached for her phone. She held it to her ear for only a second before setting it back down.

“Still no phone,” she said with a hint of irritation. “Clark, you and I have a list of contacts in the science community. Normally we could start calling people but there is still no phone service. Most of my local contacts are more closely associated with the police, city government or the underworld. I have a few military contacts but they aren’t in Metropolis. My nearest science connections are at EPRAD. Do you remember any of your science or military contacts?”

Clark concentrated for a moment. “No. I’m sorry, Lois, I just don’t remember anyone.”

He looked so frustrated that she just had to reassure him. “It’s okay, Clark. Is anything else coming back to you?”

“No. When I woke up this morning, I did sort of a mental inventory. I remember everything since the hospital but nothing is coming back from before, except for those partial memories that get triggered by images. Once one of those pops out, I don’t lose it again, but I’m not remembering anything else.”

“When I picked you up at the hospital they gave me the telephone number of a memory specialist here in Metropolis. As soon as the phones are working again, we can call and get you an appointment. Until then we have to see what we can find out based on contacts that we can reach. Perry gave us that one contact that works out of Star Labs who was supposed to know something about this mission.” Lois glanced in the direction of Perry’s office. His door was now closed and he looked to be busy with a team from the production department. “He’s busy now. I wish I’d written the name down.”

“No problem,” Clark said. “Dr. Bernard Klein of Star Labs.”

Lois looked up to see Clark beaming that megawatt smile in her direction. “When I said that I remembered everything since the hospital, I do mean *everything*. Do I have some kind of total-recall memory or something?”

“You’ve never said anything, but I’ve never asked.”

“I don’t know why I’d keep that a secret from you. Maybe it’s not something I talk about or maybe it’s related to my memory loss. In any case, I like the idea that I’m not forgetting new things. Since I woke up at the hospital I’ve decided that there are some aspects of my life that I certainly want to remember.”

Lois felt a small blush start to rise as she realized he was looking very intently at her when he said that last part. “So, how do we get hold of Doctor Klein?” Lois asked. “Now that I think about it he was one of the scientists on television during Superman’s Nightfall mission. Perry knowing him should be a great help. Do you think we should go to Star Labs and try to see him?”

“I don’t know,” Clark answered. “I worry that if we head over there today, between this being Sunday and the fact that we are still so close to Nightfall, there won’t be anyone there. I’d like to go right over, but there is so much to do here. I’m afraid I’m

going to have to ask you make the call on what to do.”

Lois couldn't help but smile at this. She was going to have so much to use to poke fun at Clark when all this was over. “Well, partner, I think you are probably right. When Jimmy gets in with his motorcycle, we can ask him to swing by Star Labs to try to deliver a message. Otherwise, I think our best plan is to help with the reports from around the country. Your touch will be a great help with some of the articles.”

Once Perry was available, they explained their plan. He agreed and gave them assignments for the day. Later that morning, Jimmy verified that Star Labs was closed up tight so the day passed without any work on the Superman investigation.

The evening was in many ways a repeat of Saturday night. Clark was a magician with the camp stove and Lois again found herself thinking surprising but quite pleasant thoughts as she fell asleep in Clark's bed.

Chapter 15: Investigation

Lois thought that the city seemed much more alive Monday morning. There were still traffic restrictions so the city buses continued to be the primary mode of transportation. Bicycles and motorcycles were an option if you had them. There was a lot of motorcycle traffic but the rain seemed to be keeping the bicycle count down. Despite the fact that most of the trip was by bus, getting to work was as dreary an experience as it had been on Sunday.

When she arrived at the office with Clark in tow, Jimmy hurried right over as if he had been waiting for them. “Hi guys. I swung by Star Labs on the way in just now. The building looked to be in good shape. There was a receptionist on duty this morning and she believed that Dr. Klein would be in today.”

“Great, Jimmy. Thanks.” Clark said.

Lois wanted to get started so they stayed in the office only long enough to check in with Perry and let him know that they were planning on heading over to Star Labs for the Nightfall mission investigation. Star Labs was off the bus routes, which meant a long walk through the rain. Lois was thankful that she had kept a pair of comfortable waterproof boots in her locker at work. She had worn them to Clark's apartment the previous night and for the time being they looked to be her primary footwear. Hiking all over Metropolis in high heels would have been out of the question.

During the trip to Star Labs they talked about how to go about this investigation. There would be very little they could do until the city restored power and communication. Lois hoped that Doctor Klein would be able to provide them with details of the mission plan that would kick-start their investigation. There had been very little information released before Superman's Nightfall mission, and since then people had been busy with more pressing matters.

When they finally reached Star Labs, Lois was in the lead as they approached the receptionist. If they were lucky this would be the same person that Jimmy had spoken to earlier in the day. The receptionist greeted her with a professional, “Welcome to Star Labs. May I help you?”

“I'm Lois Lane and this is Clark Kent. We're reporters for The Daily Planet. We'd like to speak with Dr. Bernard Klein. One of our colleagues stopped by earlier this morning and was led to believe that he would be in today.”

The receptionist nodded as Lois finished speaking. “Yes. Your friend spoke to me this morning. Just a minute please.” She reached for the phone and dialed.

“Your phones are working?” Lois asked, surprised.

The receptionist raised a hand in a “please wait” signal. “Dr. Klein, this is Peggy at the front desk. I have two reporters here from The Daily Planet that would like to speak to you. Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Yes sir, Lois Lane.” She put down the phone.

“He'll be right out. As for the phones, we have power and phone service within the building from our own generator. You can sit in the waiting area if you'd like.” She pointed at an area with some padded chairs.

They had only just reached the seating area when a middle-aged man came through the inner door and approached them. “Ms. Lane? Mr. Kent?”

Clark stepped toward him and offered his hand. “Yes, I'm Clark Kent and this is Lois Lane.”

“I'm Bernard Klein but please call me Bernie,” he said as he shook Clark's hand. He turned to Lois. “I have to admit that I wasn't sure about talking with reporters until I recognized your name. You've written so many stories about Superman.” Now the scientist's face turned somber. “I'm so sorry for the loss of your friend. Were you as close as it seemed?”

Lois was surprised at such a personal question from someone that she had just met. For a few seconds she was at a loss for words.

Bernie seemed to realize what he had asked, and didn't wait for a reply. “Oh, my. That didn't sound right did it? I'm sorry. Sometimes I fumble with words. What I meant to say was that in reading your articles it seemed that Superman was a friend of yours. I just wanted to say that while his death was a tragedy for all of us, I suppose that you who knew him best will feel in even more keenly.”

That sounded a little better, but something still bothered her. “Dr. Kl... Bernie, Clark and I are both friends of Superman. Do you have a particular reason to believe he's dead?”

Now Bernie looked even more flustered than before. “Ms. Lane, he...didn't come back from Nightfall. While I don't know that he's dead I guessed that he must be.”

“You must understand that many of us are reluctant to give up hope that he might have survived,” Clark said.

Dr. Klein turned to Clark. “Of course. I understand completely. While I had never met him before we discovered Nightfall, I have been a great admirer of his. I believe that if Superman were alive he would have tried to do something to minimize the damage from the Nightfall fragments. The fact that he didn't intervene, combined with the circumstances and location of his disappearance, led me to the conclusion that he didn't survive.” He turned to Lois. “I'm very sorry. I meant no offense.”

Lois had regained her composure. His explanation sounded very reasonable. As much as she hated to admit it, this line of reasoning mirrored her own. She'd tried to keep her mind off Superman with limited success. If he were alive, he would have tried to do something. Anyway, she didn't want to dwell on the whole “is Superman dead” question so she moved to change the subject. “We were told that you worked with the team that put together the Nightfall mission.”

Bernie nodded. “Yes, I was one of the lead scientists on that team.”

Lois continued. “We're investigating the mission. We would like to know as many details as possible about the plan. We would also like to have any information you can provide concerning the equipment used on the mission. Can you help us with any of that?”

“Certainly! The information isn't classified. It's a matter of public record. Come back to my office and I can tell you about the equipment and provide you with copies of some of the technical specs that were used in its development.”

They followed Dr. Klein through a series of doors and hallways until they reached an area that could have been either a lab or an office. Whatever it was, it had chairs and a desk. Dr. Klein moved toward a chair on the other side of the desk while motioning them to take the two nearer seats. As he sat down, he pointed at the jumble of papers on his desk. “I've been looking

over the details of the mission ever since the... since Nightfall shattered. I haven't been able to figure out what went wrong. Our main concern beforehand was having the guidance system work correctly so that Superman would reach Nightfall. However, given the fact that Nightfall was shattered, that system must have been fine, at least right up until the end."

Lois had the feeling that he was going to ramble if she didn't keep him focused. "Dr. Klein..."

"Please, Ms. Lane, call me Bernie."

"Fine, Bernie, we would like to focus first on the various pieces of equipment that went on the mission. Once we understand what went along with Superman, we should have a better idea of where to push the investigation. And you can call us Lois and Clark."

Bernie blushed at this. "Okay, Lois. Well, there were four major elements. They were the impactor, the guidance system, the communication system and the life support system. The impactor was, of course, the ship. It was little more than a decommissioned destroyer. I don't have the information on the exact ship used, but it had a mass of just over 10,000 tons."

"Why was a ship used?" Clark asked.

"We needed something that had enough mass to do the job, and there wasn't time to build anything that big. We chose that ship as it was the most structurally sound of those in the mothball fleet. At least, it was for those that were between 7,000 and 12,000 tons. During the tests that we did with Superman, those ships above 12,000 tons seemed to stress his powers."

Clark came right back with another question. "Why not use a big rock?"

Bernie laughed at this. "That's a funny question. That exact issue came up late in the planning process. I imagine that if mining engineers had planned the mission, we would have used a rock. But the military was in charge of the planning and it was the first thing they thought of. The main advantage of the ship was that there were a number available with known masses. A ship was one of many possible solutions. By the time anyone suggested using a rock, the plan to use a ship was well underway. There wasn't any reason not to continue with that plan."

Lois watched the scientist carefully as Clark continued to ask questions. Bernie seemed to be friendly and from what he said when they first came in, he was a supporter of Superman. If he could be trusted, he might prove to be an incredibly valuable asset for the investigation. With that in mind, she listened and tried to get a feel for the man.

"Was the ship modified in any way?" Clark asked.

"Only minimally. We added two reinforced grip handles at a structurally strong point on the hull. That was to allow Superman to hold and control the ship in flight. The only other modification was to attach the guidance system."

"The guidance system was on the ship?" Clark asked.

"Yes," Bernie answered. "There were three independent radar systems feeding into a control panel mounted next to the grip handles. The radar units were redundant so that as long as any one was functional, it would be adequate to complete the mission."

"Were there any problems with the guidance system before the impact with Nightfall?"

"Umm, yes and no," Bernie answered defensively. "At about one minute before impact, ground telemetry indicated that one of the radar units failed. They were mounted on the forward facing side of the ship and we believe that a debris impact destroyed that unit. Ground control was receiving telemetry indicating that the other two units were functioning right up until the end." He paused for a second. "There was one other thing..."

Lois could sense that this 'other thing' was important.

"What?" she asked.

Bernie cleared his throat. "There is evidence that at the same

time we lost the one radar unit, something triggered the terminal guidance to indicate that the ship had reached the release point."

"What would that do?" Clark asked.

"Superman might have been getting a signal that it was time to release the ship and start back."

"The press was never informed of this!" Lois barked.

"We didn't know about it at the time of the initial press briefing. We only found out later when we analyzed the telemetry data. From what we could determine, it appears that Superman was getting mixed signals. The countdown-to-release timer appeared to be working properly, but he would have been getting both audio and visual indicators that it was time to release the ship."

"Do you think he released the ship at that time?" Lois asked.

"We don't know. We told him that he would be releasing the ship only a few seconds before impact. If he did release it early, and saw that Nightfall was still some distance away, why didn't he go back? Without him here to explain what he saw and did, we have nothing to go on."

Lois was both agitated and excited by what they were learning. "Did you say that he would have an audio indication?" she asked.

"Yes." Bernie took a deep breath and paused as if to collect his thoughts. "Let's back up a minute. There were four systems but they were in two assemblies. The impactor assembly consisted of the ship and the guidance system. My team, working with the military scientists, designed and built that assembly. The other main system was the survival assembly. It was a modified space suit with a long-range communication system. That was built by a commercial contractor with expertise in space systems."

"What can you tell us about the survival assembly?" Clark asked.

"Not as much as I'd like. The air supply system was supposed to be based on the same type of system used in space suits."

"Supposed to be?" Lois asked.

"I only saw it briefly just before Superman left. It appeared to be far more customized than I had anticipated. There were several air tanks and it appeared to be highly modified from a standard support pack."

Now Lois had completely taken over the questioning. "Could you please elaborate on that?"

Now that they were discussing purely technical details, the scientist seemed to relax. He shifted into a sort of lecture mode. "The impactor and the radars were only slightly modified versions of existing military systems. I told you about the ship. It was little more than an old discarded Navy ship with handles welded on the side. The radars were spares pulled from old EPRAD stock that were designed for docking maneuvering. The survival system seemed to be much more customized than that. I never had the chance to inspect it thoroughly myself, but I remember wondering why there were so many air tanks. Anyway, the communication system allowed Superman to talk with Earth during the mission. That was the part that had the strange failure where Superman stopped talking but the broadcast signal was still active."

"Are you sure? What could cause that?"

Now Bernie looked uncomfortable. "That's what some people are using to say that Superman shattered Nightfall deliberately. If the communication system had failed completely, there would have been no signal. It was like he just stopped talking."

"Was there any sound at all? Wouldn't his breathing have come through?" she pleaded.

Dr. Klein nodded. "That was my thought too. I asked that very question of one of the engineers from the contractor that

built that part. He pointed out that Superman could hold his breath for a long time. Far longer than the time between when he went silent and the point where the signal was completely lost. Besides, another technician pointed out that the microphones weren't designed to be sensitive enough to detect breathing. I've checked the recorded telemetry and the only sounds are when Superman deliberately speaks"

Lois was trying to digest that information when Clark asked the question that she almost kicked herself for not asking first. "What company built the survival assembly?"

"LexCorp."

They spent several more hours at Star Labs. Bernie was able to provide them with documents that outlined some of the mission details but the information was incomplete. It had been put together so fast that there was no single comprehensive document that covered the entire plan. The biggest hole in the information that he provided was related to the LexCorp-supplied equipment. There were only general specifications that covered things like the radio frequency and broadcast power for the communication system. There was also a requirement for a minimum of four hours of air for the trip. But there were no details available about what engineering went into ensuring that the survival system met these requirements. Bernie had so little information about the LexCorp-supplied equipment that both Lois and Clark found it worrisome.

When they finally made their goodbyes to the scientist, it was almost dinnertime. As Lois led the way out of the building, she noticed Clark looking up at the darkening sky. "I think it will be pretty late by the time we get back to the Planet," he said. "Will Perry be expecting us to come back to the office to work up our notes?"

Lois was way ahead of him on this. "Before we left the office this morning I realized we were going to be on foot for much of the trip. I told Perry that if we were successful in seeing Dr. Klein, we would probably not be back in the office until tomorrow. He understands the challenges of getting around so he won't be expecting us to come in."

"So we head for the apartment?" Clark asked.

"Yes," she answered. "We've learned a lot today and after all this walking I'll be glad to get home, take off my shoes and put my feet up." She looked over at her partner and discovered an odd smile on his face. There was something slightly amused in that look. "What is it? Did I say something funny?"

His expression got a little more serious. "No. I'm just glad that you feel comfortable enough about where you are staying that you called it...home. It's silly but, well, it gave me a warm feeling to hear you say that."

They barely made it to the bus stop before it got completely dark. The lighting in this part of Metropolis wasn't as extensive as it had been closer to the center of the city.

Later, as their bus approached the section of town near Clark's apartment, they started noticing buildings with lights on. Lois turned to her partner in the seat beside her. "Clark, did you hear anything about restoring power this quickly?"

"No, but I haven't heard any news since this morning. We've been out of touch since we left the office."

After they exited the bus, it became apparent that many, but not all, of the buildings had power. Finally, they turned a corner and Clark's building came into view. "There are lights on in your building!" Lois practically squealed. "Do you realize what that means?"

She could hear a note of confusion in Clark's reply. "I won't have to use the camp stove for dinner?"

"Hot water!" Lois supplied gleefully.

As soon as she verified the presence of hot water, she headed

for the bathroom. She took a long hot shower for the first time in days. It was so nice to feel clean again.

When she emerged from the bedroom, she found Clark working on dinner prep in the kitchen. She was wearing some of the more casual around-the-house clothes from the collection that Clark had provided. She felt very comfortable and suspected that her smile was big enough that Clark might think she was the Cheshire cat. "You have no idea how much I've missed hot showers," she explained as she walked over to the counter where Clark was working on dinner.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Clark replied while continuing to chop carrots for dinner. "While you were in there, I heard a report on the radio that the streets will be open to traffic again starting at 5:00 a.m. tomorrow. Power and phone service are being restored on a section by section basis all over the city. There's a good chance that we'll be able to use phones tomorrow from work. Ouch!" Clark lifted his hand. It was bleeding from a small cut.

Lois noticed that he was sporting a bandage on another finger. "Is that your second cut finger?"

"Yeah. The first one happened just a minute ago while you were in the shower. When I started preparing the vegetables, the motion of using the knife felt so natural. It's like my hands knew what to do."

"They should. You cook all the time."

"Do I always have Band-Aids on my fingers? That's twice I've cut myself in less than five minutes."

"No, Clark. The only time I've ever seen you cut yourself was in Smallville when you got a paper cut. I remember that you acted surprised. You said you had never had a paper cut before."

Clark was looking at his hand with a confused expression. "I must have forgotten whatever the trick was for using a knife to chop vegetables safely. If I'm not more careful, I'm afraid I may do worse than these small nicks." He gave her an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to ask you to let me concentrate so I can finish preparing dinner without any more self-inflicted wounds."

A short time later Clark was loading the vegetables into a cast iron skillet. After another minute they were sizzling and filling the room with a wonderful aroma. "Almost done," Clark said reaching for the handle. As he touched it, he jerked his hand back with another "Ouch!"

She didn't remember him being particularly accident-prone. "Clark! What happened this time?"

Clark looked over at her with a slightly confused look on his face. "It's hot."

"Of course it's hot. Even I know not to grab a hot cast iron skillet without a pot holder."

"Yeah. I know that," Clark said in a tone that sounded like maybe he didn't. He opened a drawer and took out a potholder to move the skillet from the heat. He completed the preparations for dinner without further injuries.

The meal was wonderful and they spent the evening going over what that had learned from Bernie Klein and making sure their notes were as clear as possible. The evening ended with Clark escorting Lois to the bedroom door just as he had the previous night. However, this time when Lois said good night, Clark leaned down and kissed her cheek. After she closed the door, Lois realized that by old-Clark standards, that was a very bold move. Without the memories of why he was keeping his distance, Clark was more forward about their relationship than she expected. He was still 100% Clark. When he kissed her, it had felt very natural. He had moved slowly and given her plenty of opportunity to pull away or send another signal. What she found in that moment was that she didn't want to go anywhere.

The whole living-with-Clark experience was like living in a dream. Lois kept thinking to herself that she didn't get along with people. At least, she never did until Clark. As she laid there in the

dark, she could just barely smell him on the bed and the pillow. It was a nice smell. It made her feel like Clark's arms were around her. She realized that it might be wonderful if he were really here and his arms *were* around her.

This sent a warm shiver through her body. But what about Superman? That final kiss before Nightfall had been so... What had he planned to tell her when he got back? If Bernie was right and he was dead, what did that mean? How would Superman feel about her staying with Clark? Her mind was still reeling in confusion when sleep overtook her.

Chapter 16: Connections

The availability of electric power made the getting started in the morning delightfully uneventful. Clark found it pleasant and almost surprising how well their routine went considering the newness of their living arrangements.

Shortly after they left the apartment, they passed an open newsstand. Clark couldn't resist stopping to pick up copies of The Daily Planet and Metropolis Star. He handed Lois the Planet while he took to lesser paper for himself.

Lois and Clark had planned to use the bus to get into work again this morning, but the light drizzly rain, which had become nearly unending since the day after Nightfall, convinced them to grab one of the now available taxis.

They had only been in the taxi for a moment when Lois became very agitated while reading the paper. She showed Clark the page one article in the Planet that had upset her. It outlined calls for Superman to be stripped of all honors that had been granted since his appearance. These suggestions seemed to be widespread. The story named business and government leaders, both local and national, that were making similar suggestions.

The lead Superman-related piece in the Star was worse, and left Clark glad that Lois hadn't seen it first. It was a long technical piece on some of the Nightfall intercept alternatives that were not used since Superman was available. Even though it was technical in nature, the article was clearly slanted to imply that if Superman had not been an option, the world would have been better off.

When they swapped papers, Clark was pleased and surprised at Lois's reaction to the piece in the Star. Based on her frustration with the articles in the Planet, he expected an even bigger explosion. Fortunately Lois dismissed this as typical Star tabloid trash and was simply irritated at what people were likely to think about Superman. She seemed more frustrated that the Planet had anything negative at all.

When Clark read the story in the Planet, it was clear that it was nothing more than a report of the condemnations and that there was no anti-Superman slant. As they discussed the article in the Planet, they were both somewhat surprised to realize that none of the new attacks on Superman came directly from Lex or anyone else obviously connected with LexCorp.

They arrived at work to find that both power and phone service were working. Clark was initially excited because he thought this would mean that he could follow up on what was happening in Kansas. He was disappointed to learn that only local phone service was available. Between the loss of communication satellites and the damage to ground lines, the limited long distance communication channels were being reserved for government, military and emergency services. It would be weeks before regular long distance could be restored.

The advantage of living together made itself apparent at the very beginning of their workday in the form of the concise notes that Lois and Clark had prepared the previous evening. They started the day by giving Perry an overview of their results thus far. He told them to stay with the investigation even though he had no contacts inside LexCorp Space Systems.

By midmorning, Clark was standing at Lois's desk as they

discussed possible approaches for the investigation. Based on the information from Bernie, it sounded like all of the components most critical to Superman's survival were part of the LexCorp-designed unit. Since Bernie had almost no detailed information about that assembly, unless they could get a lead inside LexCorp, the investigation was likely to go nowhere.

"We can follow up on the possible malfunction of the guidance system," Clark suggested to his partner. "We can do that investigation through our EPRAD and military contacts."

"That won't be enough," Lois replied. "Bernie was right. That part of the story is at best, supporting information. If that was all that had gone wrong, why didn't Superman correct the problem immediately? Why did he disappear?"

Clark sighed in frustration. "You're right, but without those answers it's all we have to go on."

"I could try to go to Lex," Lois offered. "I mean, if I said I was reconsidering his offer to stay with him..."

Clark felt the now-familiar chill at that name. "I wish you wouldn't do that. But...you know I can't give you unbiased advice when it comes to him."

"It wouldn't be anything other than for the investigation," she answered defensively.

"I believe you," Clark said. "I just worry. He... I can't help but think that there must be something very wrong with that man. I think he's dangerous."

Lois stared back at him intently for a long second. "You still don't remember any more about why you feel the way you do?"

"No. My memory isn't any better today than yesterday. I had hoped to wake up this morning and find that I could remember more. Unfortunately, as near as I can tell, it's exactly the same as before."

"I'll call that memory specialist and make an appointment for you."

"I can do that," Clark replied.

"I'll do it," she insisted. "Besides, I promised the doctor at the hospital that I would make that call. I wouldn't want to shirk my responsibilities." There was a playful tone in her voice that made it clear to Clark that she was enjoying her role in helping him.

Suddenly there was a commotion from Perry's office. A man stood inside Perry's half-open door shouting. "...don't care about the evidence! You have no right to defend him! Superman killed my family!"

At that last sentence, Lois bolted for Perry's office. Clark hurried to catch up. Lois wasn't even at the door when she started her own shouted contribution to the spectacle. "Superman never killed anyone!"

The man in the doorway glared at her. "He's the biggest mass-murder the world will ever know. If it weren't for Superman, the government would've done something else to divert Nightfall. Thanks to him, they didn't even try. That...alien killed over 100 million people including my family."

By this time, Perry was standing just inside his office. "Lois, Clark, this is Dr. Hanson. He lost his family to a Nightfall fragment strike. Dr. Hanson, I'm truly sorry that you found the editorial so disturbing, but I think that we may be able to work together to a common goal."

The man still looked and sounded angry, but at least he was no longer shouting. "I don't see how."

Perry remained calm as he elaborated. "How would you like to have the chance to find out exactly what Superman did and didn't do on that mission?"

Dr. Hanson just stared back at Perry for a moment. Then he asked, "What are you proposing?"

"If you'll come back into my office I'll explain," Perry said calmly. "Lois, Clark, please join us."

When they were all in the office, Perry closed the door and

then stepped behind his desk. Dr. Hanson took one chair and Lois sat down in the other. Clark took a spot behind Lois and stood with his hands resting lightly on her shoulders. Clark could see that she was still wound up at Hanson's allegation.

Perry turned to Lois. "Dr. Hanson here thinks we are incapable of being fair and recognizing what Superman did. I have tried to assure him that while we have been a friend and supporter of Superman, we're committed to the truth."

Hanson looked away in a sarcastic gesture. "Yeah, right," he said.

"Lois, please tell Dr. Hanson about the investigation that you and Clark are pursuing."

Lois glared back at Perry but he was looking at Hanson and if he saw her at all, he gave no sign. After only a second she turned to Hanson. She addressed him in a stiff and formal voice. "We're investigating the Nightfall mission. Everyone knows the result, but no one knows what really happened up there. Yesterday Clark and I spent the day at Star Labs talking to one of the key scientists that planned the mission. We're compiling information about the mission and the equipment that was used by Superman."

Perry's eyes never left Hanson as he issued a challenge to his reporters. "When your investigation is complete, if the evidence shows that Superman did betray the people of Earth, what story will you write?" Perry asked.

There was no hesitation in Lois's reply. "The truth."

Perry continued to look directly into Hanson's face. "Dr. Hanson, I might not like what we find, but I'll never let my preconceptions cause an untruth to be printed in this paper. I wrote that editorial because I believe in it. Nightfall has been a tragedy of unprecedented proportions. I would never try to underestimate your loss, but there isn't enough information for anyone to know what happened and assign blame. Lois and Clark are my two best investigators. At this time, their only assignment is to get to the truth behind the failure of the Nightfall mission. I'm offering you the chance to help bring the truth to light."

"Perry, you know we'll be fair," Lois cut in, almost in anger. "Clark and I are making great progress on our own."

Perry turned his head slowly to face Lois. "I understand. But Dr. Hanson represents a segment of our readership that we need to acknowledge and honor. Also, I think Dr. Hanson may be able to help more than you realize." He turned back to Hanson. "Please tell Lois why you feel so strongly that Superman must be at fault."

Hanson turned to Lois. "I helped develop some of the equipment used on the Nightfall mission. I'm confident that it couldn't have failed because I assisted in the design. We built in multiple levels of fail-safes and all of the critical systems were massively redundant. For almost every key system, it would have taken several independent failures to trigger a mission debilitating condition."

Lois's reply was quick but her tone was professional. "We've been all through this with Dr. Klein at Star Labs. He told us that mission data points to at least one failure that wasn't announced to the public."

Hanson looked surprised at this. "I can't believe any of our systems failed. The redundancy was as complete as any I've seen. What system do you believe failed?"

"It was something in the guidance system," Lois explained.

"Oh, that explains it then." Hanson replied smugly. "I didn't think any part of the system should have been left to the military."

This got Clark's attention. "You aren't one of the military engineers? Then what equipment were you involved with?" he asked.

"The survival assembly. I'm a senior scientist at LexCorp Space Systems. My team did most of the work on the

communication and space suit subsystems."

Lois and Clark spent the next hour convincing Hanson that they were committed to getting at the truth. It helped that Bernie Klein was already involved in the investigation. Hanson knew Dr. Klein and had a great deal of respect for him personally. However, even the fact that Dr. Klein was working with them only did so much to convince Hanson that he could trust reporters with such well known ties to Superman.

In the end it was Jimmy who provided the key that convinced Dr. Hanson that Lois and Clark could be fair about the issue. Lois was sitting with Hanson going over some of the information about the equipment that they had gotten from Bernie the previous day when Jimmy approached. After a few seconds Lois noticed him standing there looking antsy. "Jimmy, is there something you need?"

"Is CK around?"

"He'll be back in a minute. I think he went to the restroom."

"I, um, have some more news from Smallville." Jimmy's demeanor told her that this was not good news.

"What do you have?" Lois asked, almost afraid to hear.

Jimmy hesitated. Then he took a deep breath and dived into his reply. "I was with the radio team on the roof when we got an update from one of the Kansas operators. There was a major impact near Clark's parents' farm. That whole area... It's part of a half-mile-wide crater. There's nothing left of his home at all." Jimmy paused while Lois considered what that meant. After a moment Jimmy continued. "Can you tell him?" he pleaded. "I think it would be better coming from you."

Lois could feel the emotional impact as if it were her own parents. "I'll tell him."

When Jimmy turned away from the desk, Hanson asked about the message. "Was he talking about Mr. Kent?" The angry man that she's been dealing with all morning was gone. Hanson's voice was full of compassion.

"Yes. You see, we lost loved ones too. Clark's parents were wonderful and kind people. I met them once. They were all the family that Clark had. Please don't say anything to him. I'd like to find a way to tell him myself."

"Of course," Hanson replied.

When Clark returned nothing was said about Smallville, but Hanson had apparently made up his mind and very shortly asked to be called Fred.

An hour later when Fred was ready to leave, they had a plan for the investigation. He was still convinced that there couldn't have been a problem with any of the LexCorp equipment, but seemed to be completely ready to help with the investigation. Even so, they almost lost his cooperation when—just as he was about to leave—they asked him to make sure that no one else at LexCorp knew he was working with them.

"Why should I keep this a secret?" he asked. "These are my friends and coworkers. I don't want to feel like some kind of spy."

Lois put on her most patient look. "One of the things you learn as a reporter is that investigations always go better and more quickly if they are done with a certain level of secrecy. We're sorry to ask you to keep this from your friends, but... Do you believe you will be working against them?"

Fred hesitated only slightly before answering. "Against my friends... No."

Lois continued. "We need you to keep this secret. If you get uncomfortable and don't feel you can continue then let us know. We want to be as fair as possible to everyone. We have Dr. Klein working to get information on the components that weren't from LexCorp. If we're going to get to the truth behind the Nightfall mission, we need your help."

“All right,” he replied reluctantly. “But I’m still not completely comfortable with doing this in secret.”

“Believe me, we understand,” Clark added.

When Fred was finally gone, Lois realized that she’d never had the opportunity to pass along the news about Smallville. “Clark, can we go to one of the conference rooms? We need to talk in private.”

When they entered the room, Lois stopped by the door while Clark went farther in. “Please sit down.”

“What’s this about?” he asked nervously.

“Please?”

Clark sat as Lois closed the door. She then moved to the seat nearest his and turned it so that it was facing him. She sat and paused while searching for the right words.

“Lois, you’re scaring me,” Clark said in an uncertain voice.

“I’m sorry Clark, this is just hard.” She took a deep breath and plowed ahead. “We have word from Smallville. There was a major fragment impact right next to your parents’ farm. The whole area was devastated. Your home and all the surrounding areas were destroyed.”

As Lois spoke that last phrase, Clark felt a wave of despair wash over him. There was a feeling of loss but no memories on which to anchor those feelings. He was feeling the weight of losing a home and family that he didn’t know. He wasn’t sure if the lack of memories made things better or worse, but in that moment he would have given almost anything to know the reality behind the loss he was experiencing. As the darkness washed over him, he was unsurprised to realize that that his eyes were filling with tears.

He felt a gentle hand on his. “I’m so sorry, Clark.”

Her voice was a beacon in the darkness. He wanted to reach for her but was afraid that if he held her now, he’d never be able to let go. In an effort to keep from breaking down, he tried for a faint ray of hope. “Is there definitive word that they were killed?”

“No. But, Clark, based on the reports from the area, it seems probable.”

“I understand that, but I have to try to hold out some hope. I’m not kidding myself and I understand that they were probably killed in the impact, but until I know, I’d rather not give up.” He was trying to sound determined but he suspected Lois could hear the desperation in his voice. Assuming that she did, she was kind enough to not remark on it. After another second he continued. “I wish I could remember something about them.”

“Clark... All you need to do is to look in a mirror. When I met them, I immediately knew all about them. You’re a living tribute to your parents. Your kindness, compassion and belief in people are what I saw in them.”

Lois being here made this so much easier. “Thanks, Lois. I... I’m glad it was you that told me. I think I’ll be all right now. Should we get back to work?”

“Clark, do you need some time alone? Would you like to go home for the rest of the day?”

Being alone was the last thing he wanted. “No. I think this will go better if I can stay busy. Besides, I really mean it when I say that I’m not giving up hope just yet.” He managed a weak smile.

From the doubtful look on her face, Clark suspected she wasn’t convinced by his words. But she seemed to be willing to let it go. “Okay, partner. Now that we have access to the information from both the government and LexCorp, we should plan how to make the best use of it.”

The afternoon passed more quickly than Lois would have expected. First, they needed to develop a list of questions about the equipment for both Bernie and Fred. Then there was the problem of how to set up meetings with both of their technical contacts without alerting anyone to the fact that Fred was helping

them.

Perry had spread the word through the office that the Lane and Kent team was involved in a special high-priority investigation and that they should not be disturbed. Consequently, they found that they were almost totally undisturbed for the rest of the day until an unexpected visitor arrived late in the afternoon.

This time Lois sensed his presence before he got too close. She looked up from her notes and saw Lex standing just outside the elevator. He was involved in some discussion with Perry and wasn’t even looking in her direction.

She needed to get her notes covered. “Clark!” Her call was a voiceless shouted whisper.

He looked up from his work. “What is it?” he asked in a similar voice.

“Lex is by the elevator. He’ll probably come over here when he’s done with Perry. Cover your notes but leave something for him to see. If he sees your desk clear, he’ll know we’re hiding something.”

They both went about changing the papers on top of their desks. Lois saw that Clark had pulled out the information that he had gathered about how Metropolis was coping with Nightfall. She retrieved the information on other communities around the country and how they had been affected by the asteroid. While she was waiting for Lex to come over, she read through these notes. There was the genesis of a good story here. She started jotting down some issues to follow-up on later.

She became so engrossed in her work that she was actually startled when she heard Lex’s voice. “Good afternoon, Lois.”

Her head popped up. “Oh, hi, Lex. I saw you by the elevator but it looked like you had come in to speak with Perry.” She was doing everything in her power to project the semblance of friendliness toward this man that she had genuinely felt only a week before.

He replied in those controlled tones of his. “There were two reasons for my visit. First, I wanted to assure Mr. White that I will use all of the resources of LexCorp to support his position. We need to be as fair as possible to Superman.”

This wasn’t what she expected. “This doesn’t seem to be the same position that you had the other evening. And later, on the radio, it didn’t sound like you were arguing to be fair.” Lois was afraid that she wasn’t completely masking the anger she felt.

“My dear, you are correct and I regret that I may have jumped to a conclusion too quickly. In fact, you were the primary reason that I felt the need to revise my earlier position.”

“Me?” Lois wondered what Lex was up to.

“Yes. You were right that we shouldn’t jump to conclusions about Superman without giving him the benefit of the doubt. Also, your reaction to my position left me doubting my words. I found that I couldn’t bear the thought that you might think ill of me for being unfair. I suspect you were unaware of this, but Superman and I worked together on many activities that were never publicized. We were working together behind the scenes to make Metropolis a better city. I would go so far as to say he was one of my best friends.”

There was a crash from Clark’s desk. His coffee cup was in pieces on the floor and he was staring at Lex. After a second, he said simply, “Sorry,” and went about cleaning up the mess.

Lex looked back at Lois. “Your associate still seems to be having difficulties with his motor skills.” As smooth as his voice was, a note of scorn was easy to hear.

Lois finally took her eyes off Clark and turned to Lex. “He’s under a lot of stress. Between his memory loss and worry about his family, I’m surprised he’s holding together so well.”

“Yes... Well, the primary reason for my journey today was to make another appeal for you to take advantage the accommodations in my building. I admit that my having a copy

of your apartment may have seemed somewhat forward, but please believe that it was more of an accident than a calculated act on my part. When I first heard of Nightfall, I did little more than mention to one of my senior assistants that I was worried that your home might be at risk. I was surprised to find that he had interpreted my comment to mean that I wanted your apartment reproduced in a safe location. I sense that the existence of the apartment has made you uncomfortable and for that I am sorry. However, it is there now and it seems a shame to leave it incomplete by your absence.”

His voice was strangely...hypnotic. Something about the way Lex spoke made it difficult to disbelieve him. For only the briefest instant Lois found herself genuinely tempted by his offer. She found herself thinking that it could have been just as he said, an overzealous act by an underling looking to impress his boss.

Out of the corner of her eye, she detected a movement. She turned to see Clark fumbling with a mop and cleaning up the spilled coffee. It was as if a spell had been broken. What was she thinking? She turned back to the deceiver at her desk. “Lex, I appreciate the offer but I’m comfortable where I’m staying.”

Lex had apparently noticed her looking at Clark before replying. “So you would rather share a one-bedroom apartment with Kent than accept my invitation.”

Now his voice wasn’t hypnotic, it was just short of insulting. And apparently he’d been keeping tabs on her. “How did you know I was staying with Clark?”

His expression turned hard. “Does it really matter? When you said that you had found a place to stay, I assumed that you would have arranged for more...appropriate accommodations.” He glanced in Clark’s direction, then stood up. “I see that I have apparently misjudged you. Good day.” His walk to the elevator was very deliberate. When he entered the elevator, he pressed a button without even turning around.

Lois was still staring at the closed elevator door when Clark came over to her. “I’m sorry about that.”

She turned to face him. “Clark, what happened? Did you drop your cup deliberately?”

He looked aghast. “No. I thought I was doing a good job of ignoring him. I swear that I was trying my best to ignore what he was saying. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop but he wasn’t making any effort to speak softly and his voice carried. When he said that Superman was his friend... It was like when I first saw him. For an instant, I had this sharp pain in my head accompanied by a feeling of wrongness. Lois, I think there is a connection between how Luthor and Superman interacted and why I react to Luthor the way I do. As far as him being friends with Superman...” Clark winced again. “That feels more wrong than I know how to say.”

Lois nodded thoughtfully and turned toward the now closed elevator door. “I think my invitation to stay with him just expired.” She turned back to Clark. “He implied that by staying with you I’ve shown that I’m not worthy.”

“I’m sorry. I... I love having you as a houseguest but I don’t want to be part of damaging your reputation. I hope you won’t accept *his* invitation but if you would rather stay somewhere else I understand.”

Lois noticed an inflection in Clark’s voice when he said the word “love” that she suspected Clark didn’t realize was there. “Clark, I’ve never been more proud to be considered ‘unworthy’ by anyone. With all that’s happened the past few days, it’s like my senses have been sharpened. When I hear Lex talk, where I once heard polished control, now I hear arrogant self-interest with a coating of slimy oil.”

“Is that because of the thing with your apartment and his attacks on Superman?”

“Partially, but those aren’t the largest factors.”

“So, what is it?” Clark asked. Now he looked genuinely confused.

“You,” she said.

“Huh? I don’t understand.”

“Clark, you’re one of the kindest and most forgiving people I’ve ever met,” she explained. “I would have sworn that you were incapable of disliking anyone. The fact that you have such a strong negative reaction to Lex is very revealing. Not only that, but now we’ve discovered that Lex seems to be lying about his relationship with Superman...”

Clark cut her off. “I don’t know that. It’s just a feeling.”

She looked at him intently. “Think about Lex and Superman and then tell me honestly—based on your feelings, what type of relationship did they have?”

Clark closed his eyes and Lois could tell he was probing his memories, such as they were. After a moment he opened his eyes and met Lois’s gaze. “Adversarial... or worse. More like open hostility. But, Lois, can you trust my feelings? I don’t have the facts to back them up.”

“Clark, I trust your feelings as much as I trust my own. Lex is lying and that means he has his own agenda and he’s hiding something. It’s up to us to find out what it is.”

Clark looked both relieved and hopeful. “So you won’t be looking for another place to live?”

He was so cute. “And lose your cooking? Not likely!”

She saw that smile again. “Lois, I... Thanks for staying with me.” Lois couldn’t help but wonder how someone that looked as good as he did could ever reach his age and still be so uncertain of himself. No wonder he had been so careful to hide his feelings.

Lois remembered that the first night he lost his memory, he said that she lit up his world. She was coming to realize that he was doing the same for hers.

That evening followed the same general flow as the previous day. Lois stayed with Clark in the kitchen and helped cook dinner. She was learning food preparation concepts that she never knew before. Who ever imagined that there were so many different ways to cut up and cook food? Under the right circumstances, real cooking could be fun. She also made sure that Clark remembered to be careful about knives and hot utensils. They shared a sense of pride when dinner was tasty and completed with no trips to the first aid kit.

There were now two television stations operating. This was good in that there was another source of information. However, there was still no entertainment programming. The coverage was a mix of local, national and international news about the aftermath of Nightfall. It wasn’t surprising that they eventually mentioned the weather. After the talk with Perry, Lois and Clark were half-expecting tales of meteorological disasters and ‘impact winter’ but the television reporter seemed to come from the Perry White school of journalism.

All around the world there was an increase in clouds and rain from all the water kicked up from the ocean impacts. The meteorologists stressed that this rain had been a great help in suppressing some of the fires started by Nightfall. There was no talk of long-term weather problems, just the acknowledgement that the dirty rain was likely to continue for the time being.

It didn’t take long for the news to get repetitive. Given that they had spent the day in a newsroom, it was really the last thing they wanted to hear after hours. Fortunately, Clark had several videotapes that provided a suitable diversion.

Lois woke up to the sound of static. She opened her eyes to see a television showing snow. A glance at the clock on the VCR showed that the movie must have ended more than half-an-hour ago. Surveying her position revealed that she had fallen asleep leaning against Clark. Not only had she been using his chest as a pillow, his arm was around her shoulders as well. She had to admit that it felt quite comfortable. In fact, being with Clark like

this was more than comfortable. It was... It was best if she not let her imagination go down that path too quickly. She already knew that she had never felt this comfortable with a man before. It was...nice, but now it was time to head for bed. "Clark. Clark, wake up." She moved to jostle him but didn't break their embrace.

He finally opened his eyes. He looked confused for a second before saying a very tender, "Hi, Lois." Before she could respond, he seemed to sense the intimacy of their position and hurriedly removed his arm from her shoulders. As he stood up, he muttered a nervous, "I guess we should get ready for bed."

Clark took care of his bedtime bathroom routine while Lois waited in the front room. When he appeared, she could see that he still showed some signs of his injuries from the accident that cost him his memories. "How are your injuries healing?" she asked.

"Injuries?"

"I can see bruises on your arms and a few scrapes without even trying. Are they feeling better?"

He glanced at a large bruise on his left arm. "Oh, yeah. I don't even feel it unless one of the bruises is bumped. There's hardly any soreness at all anymore. I guess I'm a fast healer."

Lois wished she had an excuse to talk more, but it was late and Clark needed rest if he was going to recover. "Well, I guess I should head for bed," Lois said as she started for the bedroom door.

Clark fell in beside her. "Lois, are you sure that you're comfortable staying here? I mean, I know you aren't going to stay with Luthor, but...I want you to be comfortable. I don't want to ruin your reputation and with how I... I just want the best for you."

"Clark, I'm not worried about my reputation and this is very convenient for work. You know all that. What's bothering you?"

Clark contemplated the top of his slippers. "I just want you to be comfortable around me."

She wasn't sure where this was going. "Clark?"

"Well, with how I feel, I..."

In that instant Lois realized she was getting tired of Clark tiptoeing around this issue. Maybe this was the time to force some things more into the open. "What are you saying?" she asked.

Now a look of fear crept into his face and he started to move away. Before he could escape, Lois slipped her hand in his. He seemed to struggle for words for a second. "I... I can't say. I don't want to mess up our relationship. If I say... You'll be uncomfortable and I... I don't want you to leave."

She could see he was terrified. He needed reassuring. "Unless you're planning to tell me to get out, I don't see how you could hurt...us."

He squared his shoulders and his face showed fear overlaid with determination. "Lois, I don't know why I didn't say anything before I lost my memory, but I don't want to lie to you. For all the things that I don't remember, I'm certain that I was...in love with you before my accident. I still... I want to be your friend, and if that's the limit of the future you want, then I can live with that. But Lois, I feel so much more. I...want so much more...for us."

Lois had suspected this was coming since almost that first night in the hospital when he spoke her name. Even though she had forced the issue tonight, it was still a shock to hear him open up like this. She noticed that he managed to avoid saying how he felt toward her right now. She almost smiled at this. Always Clark, cautious to the end. However, she was thankful for his caution as it meant she didn't have to respond to a direct declaration of love from him just yet.

As the seconds ticked by without a direct reply, Lois failed to notice the look of despair that was overtaking her partner's face.

Finally, he pulled free of her hand and continued, now in a dejected tone, "Never mind, Lois. I should never have bothered you. You deserve so much more."

He had only retreated a few steps when she caught him and pulled him forcefully into her embrace. "Don't say that! You're a great man and a great friend." Those first words were delivered while she was holding him in the strongest, most intense hug her arms could produce. After a moment she loosened her arms just enough to pull back and see his face. "I'm not going anywhere. Okay?"

Clark responded with a smile. It was a hesitant and nervous smile, but it was a smile just the same. Lois again took his hand in hers and led him to her door. "As far as messing up our relationship, you haven't," she offered.

Clark could barely believe it as he watched Lois reach up with both her hands and gently pull his face down toward hers. The feel of her lips against his was almost more than he could stand. Since he had seen her in the hospital, this was what he'd wanted, but knew was forbidden. At first, he wasn't sure how to react and just at the beginning, he didn't kiss back. In an instant, he realized that she might think his failure to respond meant that he didn't want this. Even then, he was still nervous and suspected the kiss showed as much. The kiss was no more than lips pressing together but he hoped some of his feelings—his love—came through.

From Lois's perspective, the kiss moved her more than she expected. Clark's confusion was not at all surprising. As soon as their lips touched, her mind flew back to the other kisses they had shared. The one in Trask's plane had felt exactly the same as this one started. Once Clark started to respond, the kiss became more reminiscent of the kiss in the Lexor. As the kiss progressed, she remembered something else from that time at the Lexor—kissing Clark was a very enjoyable experience.

She was disappointed when, after a few seconds, Clark started to pull back. However, it was the right thing to do. Her point in initiating this kiss tonight was to tell Clark that she was comfortable staying with him and that she was also interested in exploring another level of relationship. However, that exploration was not for tonight. As she pulled back and Clark's face came into focus, two thoughts came to mind. First, Clark was a very attractive man. The second was that he enjoyed the kiss as much as she did. She didn't need a mirror to know that her own face was showing the same level of pleasure as Clark's.

She let go of his hands and stepped back through the doorway, never taking her eyes off his face. "Goodnight," she said. She hadn't really meant for it to be a breathy whisper, but it was hard to talk right with your mind spinning and the largest possible smile seemingly locked on your face.

"Good night, Lois." He didn't do much better.

Her mind was a confused blur all the time she was getting ready for bed. What had they done? She wasn't sure. Did she regret it? That was easier: no. She went to bed still thinking about that kiss. It was so nice. It also felt more familiar than she'd expected. As she lay in bed, she realized that Clark's scent was fading. For just a moment she wondered about suggesting that he take a nap in the bed for an hour or two after work. Lois laughed at this. She wasn't about to take such a silly step. Still, his scent on the bed was...very nice. Her last thoughts as she drifted off were how wonderful that kiss was—and how familiar it seemed.

Chapter 17: Discovery

This morning was one of the few where it wasn't raining. Unfortunately, it was as grey and dreary as every other day since Nightfall. Lois glanced at her partner—and roommate—riding beside her in her Jeep. He was quiet this morning. It didn't take a mind-reader to know he was nervous. Instead of heading for the office, they were on their way to meet with a doctor about Clark's

memory. The silence during the drive gave Lois time to think back over the past week.

It had been several days since Lex had left so abruptly after learning Lois would not stay with him. He seemed to have taken the refusal seriously this time. Over dinner one evening, Lois had wondered aloud to Clark if there was any value in asking Lex for all of the duplicate furniture from that fake apartment. The idea didn't seem likely to result in any furniture, but it did produce the most marvelous spray of tea when Clark burst out laughing.

The morning after Lex finally understood that "No" was going to be her final answer, the attack pattern on Superman changed. Suddenly Lex—and all of the resources of LexCorp—were aggressively pushing the "blame Superman" angle. There was no longer any doubt in Lois's mind that Luthor's claim to be fair to Superman was nothing more than an attempt to get in her good graces.

Lois wanted to think that she would have seen through Lex even if it hadn't been for the disruptions caused by Clark's memory loss and the disappearance of Superman. Unfortunately, she had to admit that Lex was incredibly good at the deceptions he practiced.

When she and Clark had started digging into the attacks on Superman from non-Luthor sources, the pattern was easy to see. Their investigations revealed that almost all of the attacks, right back to the very beginning, had come from people and companies that had strong ties to Lex.

For Lois, trying to justify her defense of Superman had become an ongoing challenge. She couldn't even count the number of times she'd heard the allegation that Superman deliberately shattered Nightfall and then went back to his home planet. With the backing of Lex and LexCorp, there were more and more calls not just for the removal of honors, but for records of his positive accomplishments to be purged. It seemed that the main question in the minds of many people was whether it would be more appropriate to have him defined alongside Hitler as a great evildoer of modern times or simply erase his existence. The latter seemed to be the option Lex was pushing. At one extreme, there were even calls to have it be a criminal act to be in possession of anything with his name, likeness or his 'S' symbol.

As for Lex, he'd been spending money in relief and recovery efforts as if it were water. There had been an editorial in the Star calling for Lex to run for governor of New Troy. Lois found it hard to believe that just a few weeks ago she might have echoed that call herself.

Progress on the Superman investigation had been much slower than Lois had hoped. Bernie had been able to get some more telemetry data indicating that there had been a malfunction in the targeting system at what appeared to be the same time that communication was lost with Superman. Unfortunately, this information was not that useful without something else to go on. While Bernie had access to all of the mission telemetry and information about the ship and the radar targeting system, he had hit a wall when it came to getting information about the equipment prepared by LexCorp.

If there had been a surprise in the investigation, it was that Fred had also hit a wall. His team had worked on the space suit system for two days. However, less than 24 hours before the mission start time, the entire project had been transferred to a special projects division of LexCorp. At the time, Fred had been under the impression that the equipment was taken directly to the military for system integration. However, there was a discrepancy in the times. Fred reported that the equipment was removed on Tuesday evening at around 7:00 pm while Bernie had records that showed the equipment arriving at 4:30 Wednesday afternoon. Bernie said that he was unaware of any pre-delivery integration that would have been necessary.

Fred had been very careful about what questions he asked

within LexCorp. His initial requests to follow-up were met with cold reactions by his superiors and he was told that that information was confidential. Fred's investigation had evolved into following up on leads based on the information he had access to. Unfortunately, the team that had taken the equipment to do the so-called system integration testing had also taken all of the plans and other documentation.

For Lois and Clark, the evenings had fallen into a comfortable pattern. They would work late and then Lois would drive them to the apartment. They had taken advantage of the few open restaurants once, but Clark's cooking skills had come through as good as ever and dinner preparation had become one of the highlights of each evening. At the beginning, Lois had only hovered nearby to remind Clark to be careful with knives but Clark couldn't resist inviting Lois to help and it had quickly turned into a regular ritual of joint meal preparation.

Lois made a point to ask Clark about his memory every day. For good or bad, Clark's memory seemed to have stabilized. Activities that were heavily oriented toward motor skills, such as food preparation, seemed to have either come back quickly or had never been lost. Clark was especially happy that whatever caused the memory loss had lumped some very useful skills into the "didn't forget" group. Aside from cooking, he said that his writing and typing skills were intact. He seemed to retain all of the tools to be a reporter except for his memory of events and experiences dealing with people. It would be some time before his reporting skills would be back to their previous level, but Lois was genuinely happy to help him reacquire them.

Unfortunately, Clark's personal memories hadn't improved from the night after his accident. There were images of places, some of which could be identified from context. Clark was fairly certain that he could remember some images of Smallville. There were images in the inside of a home that, when he described them for Lois, seemed to be the Kent farmhouse. But there were no people. As far as his memory was concerned, he might have never known another human being before his accident. No matter how hard he tried, there were no images nor were there names. Lois continued to be the lone exception to that rule. For everyone else, all he had was an emotional reaction when he saw their image. It didn't seem to matter if it was in-person or a picture, but only an image would trigger a reaction.

Clark still wondered about his reaction to Luthor. One afternoon he and Lois had gone through pictures of many people that he had encountered in the time he'd been in Metropolis. For most of these people, there was either no reaction at all or it was so slight as to be imperceptible. Of those that triggered a reaction, most seemed to be associated with mild affection or amusement. A few seemed to have negative feelings attached. It was strange that his negative reactions were so weak because the people that triggered them were, according to Lois, some of the worst villains in Metropolis.

As they were going through photos from the archives, there was one point in particular when he had trouble convincing Lois that he was reporting his reactions correctly. They had been looking at criminals with whom they had personal contact.

"Clark, that's Jason Trask. He tried to kill both of us." Lois's tone was one of disbelief.

"I believe you," he countered. "I do get a sort of negative feeling when I look at his picture. In fact, it's probably the strongest reactions I've had for anyone except Lex."

"Sort of negative! You have to be kidding. He threw us out of a plane! He tried to kill you in Smallville!"

Clark had looked at her helplessly. "I can't help it. I can tell he was a bad person but the feeling isn't that strong."

"You're sure Lex triggers a stronger negative reaction?"

Just the mention of that name sent a shudder through him. "Oh, yeah. Way stronger."

“I wish we knew what was behind that.”

“You and me both.”

The evenings had come to have a sort of ritual feeling for the two of them. Watching television was again an option now that there was programming other than Nightfall news. Clark wasn't surprised to discover how much he enjoyed sitting with Lois and either reading or just watching television. Clark's memory of books was spotty. Some he remembered perfectly while others were a complete blank. He discovered that he was a very fast reader, and that he had retained his ability to read many languages.

When the end of each evening arrived, there was always the walk to the door. Clark insisted on calling it Lois's room and Lois's door. There had been no repetition of the kiss on the lips that had followed Luthor's final invitation. Instead they seemed to be involved in a slow-motion dance of avoidance. The night after that first kiss, Clark quite deliberately and very tenderly kissed Lois on the cheek. The following evening Clark was surprised when Lois seized the initiative and kissed him—also on the cheek. They each knew that this pattern would not continue for long but were satisfied with the more measured intimacy for the time being.

They were both hopeful for some good news today from the doctor. Originally, Clark had feared that it might take weeks to get an appointment to see the memory specialist. It turned out just as well that they had waited. During one of their conversations with Bernie Klein, the subject of Clark's memory came up. Bernie recommended a different doctor than the hospital had. This was a friend of his that specialized in extreme memory loss conditions. Aided by Bernie's recommendation, Clark was able to get an appointment much more quickly than would have been possible for a regular patient.

The doctor's office was empty when they arrived. There were the usual papers to fill out. The fact that Lois had to help answer some of the questions made her feel even more like they were a couple. Even with her help, Clark was completely unable to answer many of the questions relating to drug allergies and medical history. As he scanned through the list of questions, he laughed softly.

“What's funny?” Lois asked.

Clark smiled back at her. “These questions... “ He pointed at the medical form. “If people come to this doctor because they've lost their memory, how does anyone ever answer this stuff?” Lois was considering a reply when Clark hurried on. “I know that people will have family members or medical records and things like that. It just struck me as funny.”

Clark had barely finished the forms when the nurse asked him to come into the office.

“Can my...friend come with me?”

“She can come in after the doctor has completed his preliminary examination.”

He turned to Lois. “Would you mind coming in at the end?”

“No, Clark. If you'd like me to be there, I'll come.”

“Thanks. I... Thanks,” Clark said as he turned to go into the inner office.

Lois was curious as to what was going on and had to keep reminding herself that it was not really any of her business. Then again, given the way their relationship had evolved over the past days, maybe Clark's health was her business.

It was hard to believe that it had only been a week since Nightfall and only eight days since Clark had lost his memory. So much had changed in that time. Ten days ago, Clark had just been her partner and she dreamed about a future with Superman while she occasionally dated Lex. Now, the idea of dating Lex was repulsive while Superman was...gone. As for her future—every path she could imagine seemed to involve a certain ‘Hack from

Nowheresville.’ She couldn't help but smile at that thought. But was she getting in too deep too quickly? Could she afford to open up? Even Clark could hurt her if she let down her guard. The opening of the door provided a welcome interrupt to the confusion she was feeling. She set these thoughts aside as Clark sat down next to her.

“Well?” she asked.

“Is it normal to take your pulse and blood pressure and all that?” Clark asked in reply.

“Sure,” she answered. “Every doctor's visit I can remember started exactly the same way. You go into a small examination room and then the nurse does all that and asks basic questions about your symptoms. Then the doctor comes in and asks some more questions and may do some more tests.”

“That's exactly what happened,” Clark replied. “He asked some questions and then checked my eyes and head. It seemed very strange. I'm used to not remembering things, but most of the time there is some level of familiarity. This felt completely strange. I must not have been to the doctor for a very long time.”

“So what did the doctor say? Are you done?”

“I'm not done. He seemed to have an idea of what was going on before he asked his first question. I got the impression that the exam was mostly to make sure that there wasn't something wrong with me that he wasn't expecting. It seemed like he knew what my symptoms were before I arrived.”

Lois was nervous for a second. “When I made the appointment I gave the nurse a description of your memory problems. I hope that was okay.”

Clark smiled as he reached out and placed his hand on hers. “Of course. And thank you.”

As often happened these days, Clark's touch sent a pleasant tingle up her arm. Lois's mind flashed back to her thoughts while Clark was in with the doctor. The touch was so distracting that she almost missed what Clark was saying.

“The doctor asked me to wait out here for a few minutes while he checked something and then we'll talk in his business office. He asked a lot of questions about what I could remember. When I described the emotional memory thing to him, he acted like that was very important. He also seemed to think that it meant something that you were the only person that I could remember without seeing a picture.”

“Did you tell him that all you remembered was my name and what I look like but nothing else?”

“Yes. Well, there was the other thing I remembered about you.”

“Other thing?”

“How I feel.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Lois cleared her throat. “So, how long do we wait?”

“He didn't say. I got the impression it would only be a few minutes.”

About a minute later, the door opened and a man came out. He walked over to her and offered his hand. “You must be Ms. Lane. It's nice to meet you. I'm Doctor Plinkton. Would you and Mr. Kent please come into my office?”

They went into a room that was clearly meant for talking with patients, not examinations. The doctor sat behind a desk covered with open journals and papers. Lois and Clark sat in padded chairs facing the doctor.

“Mr. Kent, do you know if you were in or near any military installations around the time of your accident?”

“No, sir. But then, I don't remember anything.”

“Ms. Lane?”

“As far as I know, his only military-related activity was to relay one message to Superman before Nightfall. Clark was investigating something that day, but Dr. Klein said that only Superman was at the preparation sessions.” After a slight pause,

she realized that it might be a good idea to clarify which Dr. Klein this was. “I’m talking about Dr. Bernard Klein of Star Labs. It was him that recommended Clark see you.”

The doctor nodded. “Bernie called me yesterday. He and I go way back.” The doctor turned to Clark. “Mr. Kent, I have no idea how this could have happened, but it’s all but certain that you were exposed to a military nerve gas. Specifically you seem to have come in contact with a gas that I only know as C127S5.”

“Where would I have gotten something like that?” Clark asked.

“Well, unless you deal in classified weapons, you couldn’t get it anywhere.”

Lois was becoming agitated. This doctor clearly knew more than he was saying and she didn’t want to have to drag the information out bit by bit. “Doctor, please tell us what you know. This is very important.”

The doctor turned back to Lois. “When I first read the list of Mr. Kent’s symptoms, I knew they were like nothing I’d seen before. However, they sounded vaguely familiar. I finally remembered reading a report on an accident that happened in a Kentucky chemical weapons facility.” He placed a hand on one of the journals on his desk. “Soldiers were accidentally exposed to a particular nerve gas. Their symptoms were almost exactly the same as those Mr. Kent described. This C127 gas is normally exceptionally deadly. In the Kentucky accident, the gas was mixed with several other gases and most of the men who were exposed didn’t die. Apparently being mixed with certain other gases substantially reduces its lethality. The strange memory loss pattern that you have shown was reported in that incident.”

“How long did it take these other people to get their memory back?” Clark asked.

There was a long silence. “I’m sorry, but they didn’t. The gas kills by disrupting the neural pathways that control breathing and other autonomic functions. That part of the process is curtailed by the addition of other gases, which is why the Kentucky workers weren’t killed. However, a secondary effect of the gas is the disruption of the neural connections which store memories. Unfortunately, that process is not affected by the other gases. That’s why the Kentucky workers—and you, Mr. Kent—lost their memories. I’m sorry, but there is no way to reverse the process. Once a memory is gone...it’s gone.”

Clark just sat there speechless. The idea that he would never get his memories back seemed to have hit him hard. Lois was looking for some good news and on a hunch she asked, “Will Clark have any problems with memory going forward?”

The doctor seemed happy to move on. “In the reports that I have access to, people that survived their initial exposure seemed to suffer no long term effects other than the initial memory loss. There were no reports of subsequent health problems and the data suggests that the people had no problems forming or retaining new memories.” He turned back to Clark. “You’re fortunate to have Bernie Klein involved. He has access to military information that I would have a difficult time seeing. With his help we have a much better chance to see the complete reports on this gas.”

This last part seemed to have snapped Clark back to the present. “Doctor, why do I remember Lois differently than anyone else?”

The doctor picked up one of the journals. “According to this report there were 17 people exposed to the leak in Kentucky. Of these, 11 survived and they all displayed various levels of the same memory loss with image-triggered emotional responses that you do. Three of those men also remembered a name and an image. Two of the three remembered their wives. The third was widowed, and his image was of his son. Subsequent investigation revealed that all three had been exceptionally close to the person they remembered. The specialists that handled the case believed

that, when they were about to be overcome by the gas, these men thought they were dying and focused their attention on the most important person that they were leaving behind. The theory was that new memories were forming while the old ones were being dissolved.”

“Didn’t any of the other survivors have—someone special?” Clark asked.

“Apparently. But these were special cases. In all three examples, the bond between the men and the person they remembered was exceptional.”

Lois’s mind was racing. Based on everything she’d learned this past week, she knew that Clark thought very highly of her. But from what this doctor was saying, she was probably the most important person in his life. Even more important than his parents, and Lois knew how close Clark was with them. And that was before he lost his memories. The idea was both thrilling and terrifying.

The doctor waited for a response. After several seconds he seemed to sense that something wasn’t quite right. “Mr. Kent, are you telling me that you don’t feel that kind of connection to Ms. Lane?”

There was another second of silence before Clark answered softly, “I do.”

The doctor was clearly flustered by the implied one-way nature of this answer. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to embarrass you. When you came in together, I just assumed...”

Lois felt she just had to speak up. “Doctor, Clark and I are close friends and our relationship was... is...evolving. This development has complicated things but I’m flattered that Clark thought of me in that instant.” Even though she was addressing the doctor, Lois hoped Clark realized this little speech was really for him. “Is there anything else we should know?”

The doctor looked considerably more comfortable now. “No. I would suggest a blood sample but this gas only lingers for a few hours. There’d be nothing to see now.” He turned to face Clark. “May I contact Dr. Klein about your case? I’d like to ask him to see if he can discover anything about that gas beyond what was published.”

After a second Clark answered, “Sure. Please see if he can help.” His voice was flat—almost mechanical.

“If you recall any more memories I’d like to know the situation. These may be personal and I’m not asking for details, but there have been so few cases that anything you can share would be helpful. Other than that, could I see you again in a few weeks? I’d like to see how you’re progressing.”

“I’ll make an appointment on the way out.”

When they exited the medical office building, Lois stopped Clark on the sidewalk. “Clark, I know we’ve talked about this before but please try again. Do you have any memory at all before the hospital?”

He concentrated. As before, except for some images, emotions and Lois, his life might have begun that night. There was something before the hospital, but it was very limited. “Not much,” he finally replied. “I remember fire and some vague images of the building that I was in when they found me.”

“Where was that?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. We’ve been so busy with Nightfall and everything that I haven’t thought to ask where that was or think about why I was there.”

“It’s time we looked into that,” Lois declared.

A call to Bill Henderson revealed that Clark had been found in an abandoned apartment building at the edge of Suicide Slum. Bill was able to provide the address.

They arrived to find the building cordoned off with safety tape. At several places along the tape and exterior of the building, signs warned of dangerous conditions. Clark looked at the

building and whistled. "I'm amazed I survived."

He watched Lois read a sign attached to the barrier tape. "It says here that the building was hit by a small Nightfall fragment," she remarked. Lois stepped back and gave the building a visual once-over. "It's hard to tell what shape the building was in when you were here. I just wish I knew why you were at this building. Does seeing it trigger any memories?"

Clark looked around while searching his memory. "Nothing. It's just a building to me."

Lois slipped under the barrier tape. "Shall we take a look?"

"I'm sure it's dangerous in there," Clark cautioned.

"So?"

Clark was about to protest when he realized how futile that would be. "Why does this conversation seem so familiar?"

Lois turned and smiled at him. "Because we have it all the time," she offered. Then she turned and went on into the building. Clark only shook his head slightly as he followed her in through the doorway.

In this case, the demolished condition of the building worked to their advantage. Even though they had a pair of flashlights from Lois's car, they still would have had trouble seeing as much as they did if the building hadn't been full of holes.

Shortly after they entered, they passed a stairwell. Clark looked at it and asked, "Should we search the upper floors?"

Lois looked up at the stairs. After a second she turned to Clark and asked, "Didn't Bill say that this building was unsafe and had been condemned even before the fire happened?"

"Yes. He also said that the firefighters searched the building for people. There were some signs of habitation on the ground floor but I was the only person here. Bill said there were no signs of recent use above the ground floor."

"Then let's search down here as thoroughly as possible before we look any higher."

Their search was slow and methodical. Eventually they reached the back of the building. "Look at that," Lois said. She was pointing to a hole in the ceiling of an interior room. "Does this remind you of anything?"

Clark moved to where Lois was standing. The hole was the last of a series that led up and out of the building at an angle. "This reminds me of the fragment impact that we saw at the Planet building the morning after Nightfall. This one doesn't seem as destructive. Could this fragment have been going slower?"

"Let's see if the fragment is here," Lois suggested as she headed through a doorway. The path seemed to end in a small room that might have once been an interior closet.

She had barely entered the room when she stopped with a gasp. Clark hurried up behind her. "Lois, are you all right?" When she didn't reply Clark was afraid that they might have stumbled on a body. When he followed the beam of her flashlight, he saw a hunk of equipment. It was burned and dented but had the look of something very complicated.

Clark aimed his flashlight at it and Lois moved in to take a closer look. "Clark, this looks like military equipment. There are tanks of some sort built into the body."

"Do you think it could be the source of the gas that took my memory?" he asked. When she didn't reply immediately he got worried. "Lois?"

"Clark, look at it," Lois said. Her voice was strong but he couldn't read the emotion behind it. "Think about how Bernie and Fred described the air system Superman wore."

Clark moved to try to get a better look. "I see your point. But it's so burned that it's hard to tell what it was. Besides, if it was the source of the poison gas that I ran into, how could it be Superman's survival pack?"

Several seconds passed before she replied. For a moment she seemed lost in thought. "You may be right," she agreed. "Still,

whatever it is we should take it to Star Labs to analyze. Do you think we can get it into my jeep?"

"I think we should keep our distance," he cautioned. "If that was the source of the gas that erased my memory, we'd better not touch it. I think we should ask Dr. Klein to come and get it with a decontamination crew."

For a second he thought she was going to argue. But she nodded in agreement. "Let's just call Bernie and ask him to pick this up."

He was glad not to have that argument. There was no way he was going to risk Lois's memory. "Now that we've found this I don't want to risk losing it. I'll stay here and guard the building to make sure that no one suddenly decides to collect this before we can get back."

"Are you sure you want to stay with it?" Lois asked. "I mean, if our guess is right this thing took your memories once. Do you want to risk being in its vicinity?"

"Don't worry. I don't plan to get any closer to it than I am now. Besides, the alternative is for you to stay. If one of us is going to be at risk, it should be me. I hate to be selfish but if you lost your memories then I would be completely lost."

Lois was gone for about 20 minutes. Clark waited near the front of the building. He couldn't help but break into a smile as she approached. "Anything happen while I was gone?" she asked.

"No. I did look around some more to verify that there isn't anything else here. However, I noticed that most of the other buildings in this area were also abandoned and look like they might have sustained some impacts. Whatever was the source of our strange equipment, it might have resulted in impacts to the other buildings."

"Good thinking, Clark! You stay here and I'll take a look around."

"We should both go," Clark said.

Lois just turned back to him for a second. "Then who will guard the part we've already found?" When he didn't reply, she turned and started toward the nearest other building.

Clark waited nervously as the moments ticked by. He did his best to keep Lois in sight but whenever she went into a building he lost track until she would emerge to head for the next one. He noticed that when she emerged from the second building she had a notepad out and was writing something down.

Lois was still moving around when a large white van arrived. Clark stepped out of the building and was relieved, if not surprised, when Dr. Klein climbed out.

"Hi, Clark. Where would be the best place for us to load the equipment you found?"

"There is a side door where you can back the van right up to the building. That should work the best. Lois told you that this may be the source of the gas that took my memory?"

"The back of this van is sealed," Bernie answered. "I brought two of my assistants in full air-tight decontamination suits. We have some hazardous material containment bags large enough to hold anything that we could take in this van. We won't move the part until it's safe to do so. Where's Lois?"

"She's checking other buildings in the area. We figured that whatever this was, there may be other parts in the vicinity. If you don't mind, I'd like to show you the part and then see if I can find her."

"Sure," Bernie replied. "Let me tell the driver where to put the van and you can show me what you found."

Clark led Dr. Klein to the part. "Here it is. Did Lois tell you that we thought it might be part of the system that Superman used on the Nightfall mission?"

Bernie's tone was cautious. "Yes. She told me that on the phone."

Dr. Klein was looking at it carefully but didn't say any more. Clark's impatience finally got the better of him. "Well, is it?"

Bernie turned to face him. "It might be. There is a resemblance. The mission pack that Superman wore was larger. This might be part of what survived if most of it burned up in re-entry. I'd rather not speculate. Once I get it to Star Labs then we'll know for sure."

Clark had hoped for a more definitive answer. "Okay," he said. "But Lois and I think this was the source of that gas that took away my memory. You need to be extra careful."

Bernie nodded. "She told me that too. I have two men in air-tight suits and we'll assume that it still may leak poison gas as soon as it's touched."

In only a moment or two Bernie and his team were working inside the building. Clark knew that Lois had been moving from building to building but he had lost track of her progress when Bernie arrived. Instead of rushing off to look, he watched the buildings just past where he had last seen her. After a moment, he saw her emerge from a building and start his way.

As she approached she said, "I see Dr. Klein arrived."

"He has a small team with him. They came ready to collect hazardous materials."

"Good," she said. Then her voice turned anxious. "So is that part of the Superman mission suit?"

"He couldn't tell," Clark answered. "He said that it was possible, but if it was, a lot of it was missing. He wouldn't commit until he can study it in the lab."

"Okay," she replied reluctantly. "I guess I understand. Well, when they're done here, there are some other items that look interesting. In that building," Lois pointed at the building where Clark had first noticed her taking notes, "there's something that looks like it might be part of the first piece of equipment we found. Then in the next to last building I checked, I found some kind of electronic device. It's small—I wouldn't have noticed it except that it was at the end of one of these impact entry holes like we saw in this building. And, Clark, all three impacts look like they came from the same direction."

"Let's tell Dr. Klein about your discoveries. He can take all of the parts with him at the same time."

They went into the building to find that the original part was already encased in a gigantic plastic bag. It only took another few minutes to finish up there and head for the other buildings. Within half an hour, all of the parts that Lois had found had been collected and were on their way to Star Labs.

For Clark, the rest of the day had turned out to be frustratingly unproductive. He tried to stay busy so he wouldn't have to think about the implications of his memory never returning. Surprisingly enough, when he did think about it, the missing memories didn't really bother him. They were so completely gone that there was no sense of loss. Besides, in those moments when he felt down, all he had to do was think about Lois and it was like a jolt of 'happy.' It made the day surprisingly bearable.

Neither he nor Lois had been able to focus on other projects while waiting for the report on the equipment at Star Labs. In a way, this proved to be convenient because that afternoon Perry needed someone to cover a Lex Luthor press conference at city hall. Lex was to announce a data link that would allow MPD to tie into the LexCorp data network. Many of the existing computer-based data warehouses had been knocked out by Nightfall and were still off-line. There was a time when Lois would have used her connection to Lex to get more information. Clark was pleased that the idea of doing that never came up.

The announcement had just finished and they were checking their notes. It suddenly occurred to Clark that such a link would be expensive. He bounced that idea off Lois. "I'm surprised that Luthor doesn't seem to feel any pressure to conserve money. Many other wealthy individuals have helped, but Luthor seems to

be spending money much more freely than anyone else."

Lois shook her head. "You're right, but the cost isn't what's interesting here. If MPD had access to Lex's computer network, wouldn't he have a link into theirs also?"

Clark nodded in reply. "I thought of that too, but I didn't want to seem unfair. I think we should ask Bill Henderson what he thinks of the new arrangement."

Lois agreed that they should check in with Bill at MPD headquarters. It was near their current location so walking was the quickest option. They were lucky that Bill was in his office. However, Lois was surprised by the way Henderson greeted her. "Lane, I'm glad you got my message. I didn't expect to see you so quickly."

She had no idea what he was talking about. "Bill, I don't understand. What message?"

"Why don't both of you come on in. Kent, would you please close the door." Henderson paused long enough for them to get settled before he turned to Lois. "Less than an hour ago I left a message at your office asking you to come on by. Olsen told me that the two of you had just headed out."

"I never got your message," Lois replied. "Clark and I wanted to see if you would be willing to express an opinion about MPD sharing data with Lex Luthor."

She saw a shift in Bill's expression. Now he looked even more nervous. "On or off the record?" he asked.

"How about both?" Lois answered.

"Ok, on the record first," Bill said quickly. "The department is happy that Mr. Luthor is helping in these unsettled times. Access to LexCorp computer and communication resources should be a great help to the people of Metropolis." Bill paused for a moment as if trying to think of something else to say. "Do you need more?"

That was such an obvious press release that Lois was even more interested in his real opinion. "Not for now. Okay, from here on we're off the record. I gather that you have some reservations about Lex and his help."

Bill looked back and forth between Lois and Clark. He glanced at the closed door and lowered his voice. "How do you two feel about Luthor?"

Lois looked at Clark and signaled him to go first.

"Bill, do you remember what I told you about my memory?" Clark asked.

"Yeah. You said you don't remember facts but you remember feelings about people."

"Right. When I saw you that first time in the hospital on the night I lost my memory, I didn't remember who you were but I knew I could trust you. Well, when I finally got to meet Luthor... let's just say that I didn't have as positive a reaction."

Lois found herself staring at Clark. She understood that he wanted to be fair to Lex, but he owed it to Bill to tell him what he really thought. "Clark, you know your reaction was stronger than that."

Clark looked uncomfortable. "Okay," he said. "Bill, I have a very bad feeling about Luthor. I definitely don't trust him."

Bill turned to face Lois. "What about you, Lane? I know you've been out with him a few times."

Leave it to Bill to have noticed her previous association with Lex. She took a second to gather herself. "Between some of the developments related to Nightfall and Clark's reaction, I've come to have a very different opinion about Lex. I mean, you know Clark. What could have happened for Clark to react more negatively to Lex than he does to that anti-Superman wacko Trask?"

Henderson had been nodding. When he heard that last part his eyebrows lifted just enough to indicate that he knew who Trask was and understood the implication of what Lois had said. He digested this for a second before continuing. "Well, I don't

trust him,” he said with more emotion than she’d come to expect from Bill Henderson. “Lane, who are the two people that have the most behind-the-scenes pull in this city?”

Lois paused for only a few seconds. “Lex is on top on the legitimate side of things and The Boss runs the underworld in the city.”

“Correct,” Bill replied. “Since Nightfall, I’ve seen patterns that bothered me. Then I started noticing how both men were taking advantage of the situation.”

Clark spoke up. “Doesn’t that make sense? They are both at the top of what they do in this city.”

“You’re right. But some of the moves almost seem to anticipate the other’s actions. Crime goes up one place and Luthor moves in to help. Instead of getting better, the troubles seem to move around. I can’t prove anything but my gut is telling me that there is some kind of connection between Luthor and The Boss. If there is a connection, the last thing we need is to let him into our computer system.”

“Are you on record as opposing it?” Clark asked.

“I’m on record against any civilian connection of the type being suggested. I didn’t single out Luthor. With no evidence against him it would be foolish.”

“So it’s okay with you if we report your concerns regarding the general connection between MPD and any civilian firm?”

“Sure, I’ve been pretty vocal about the whole thing. If you asked anyone in senior MPD they’d tell you how paranoid I am.”

Lois chuckled at the picture of Bill Henderson being paranoid. “If we use that part we’ll try not to make you sound too crazy.” She was about to finish up when she remembered Henderson’s greeting. “So, Bill, you wanted to see me about something?”

Bill looked thoughtful for a moment before answering. “It may be related to what we’re talking about. Did you know we’ve assigned police to work with the people salvaging the buildings destroyed by Nightfall? An officer is there to discourage looting and provide an official presence if any questions arise. An issue came up that links back to you.”

“Was some of my stuff salvageable?” Lois asked. “I’m glad, but surprised it would warrant your attention.”

“Actually, it wouldn’t. I want to talk to you about your building, but this has nothing to do with your possessions. The officer assigned to your place just took a class about arson investigation. He’s so enamored of his new techniques that he applies them to every building he works, even if foul play isn’t suspected. In the first building he was assigned, he was able to determine how the Nightfall fragment smashed the building. For your building, he couldn’t find a fragment.”

“It was probably buried in the rubble,” Lois offered.

“Lane, this kid is good. He didn’t find the meteorite but he did find bomb residue.”

Lois felt herself go cold as she stared back silently. Clark voiced the question that she was thinking. “Are you saying that Lois’s building wasn’t destroyed by Nightfall?”

“Yes. Very quietly, I sent a more senior investigator to the scene. There’s no question—someone who knew what they were doing planted bombs at several places on the first floor of your building. It takes a lot to knock a building down completely but whoever did this knew what they were doing.”

Lois had regained some of her composure. “Do you think this had something to do with me?”

Henderson shrugged. “I don’t know. But you’re the only resident with the sort of connections that might trigger something like this. We’ve put some discreet questions to some of our best snitches and there are hints that this was ordered by The Boss himself.”

“The Boss ordered the bombing of my building?” Lois asked, aghast.

Bill was nodding. “Like always when The Boss is involved, the information is sketchy but that’s the word we get.”

She was fighting to maintain some level of composure. “Bill, I don’t understand. None of my investigations have ever gotten close to The Boss. And right now I don’t even have anything going on.”

“Lois, if you think of any reason that someone as highly-placed as The Boss would come after you, please let me know. We won’t be able to keep this under wraps for long and as soon as it becomes public that your building was bombed, it will be that much harder to get any information.”

“Okay, Bill. I’ll let you know if I think of anything. Is there anything else?”

“No. Not for today.”

Lois and Clark left MPD and headed for the office to write up the LexCorp story. They added some quotes from other senior MPD staff to balance out the article. When they were done, it was a reasonably balanced piece that leaned only slightly toward Bill’s “bad idea” perspective.

That evening was fairly normal except for several discussions about Lois’s building. They had just finished dinner and were talking before clearing the table. “Clark, I just don’t know why The Boss would come after me.”

Clark thought for a minute. “Maybe he wanted to initiate something after Nightfall that you might have a lead on.”

Lois shook her head. “It just doesn’t feel right. I guess it’s a good thing that Lex insisted that I not stay at my apartment.”

Clark almost jumped out of his chair. “What did you say?”

“Before Nightfall hit when Lex invited me to stay with him he insisted that even if I didn’t stay in his building, I needed to stay in some shelter. He stressed how dangerous it was likely to be that night.”

Clark dropped back down to his chair. The thought that popped into his head was horrible.

Lois obviously sensed his distress. “Clark, what is it?”

He swallowed heavily. “It’s too terrible.”

“Clark, now you’ve got me worried. Please tell me what you’re thinking,” she pleaded.

Clark offered this as tentatively as he could. “At MPD today, Bill went on at length about a possible link between Luthor and The Boss. What if Luthor is the one that called for the bombing of your building?”

This suggestion seemed to catch her off guard. “Clark, I know you don’t trust Lex. I don’t anymore myself, but I think he was interested in...well, a relationship with me. He wouldn’t kill me.”

“But he didn’t!” Clark pointed out. “He wanted you to stay with him. He built a copy of your apartment. If you had accepted his invitation, it would have been only for a single night. But what if the next day you had no home? You would already be there, and what would be more natural than to continue to stay with him?”

Lois stuttered a reply. “But...he knew I wasn’t staying with him. I might have been at home when the bomb went off.”

“Lois, how difficult would it be for someone with either Luthor’s or The Boss’s resources to know that you stayed at the Planet for that night?”

That seemed to be the wrong question to ask because Lois never replied. After a moment she stood up tiredly and walked slowly to her door. When she reached it, she turned to face him. “I’ll be turning in early tonight.” With a motion that conveyed either stress or fatigue, she stepped through the door. Just before the door completely closed, it stopped and Lois stepped into view. She looked so sad. “Good night, Clark.”

She looked more fragile than he’d seen her before. “Good night, Lois. Sleep well.”

It seemed as though she tried to smile in reply but the positive emotion wasn't there. She pulled back into the bedroom and closed the door.

Half an hour later Clark thought he heard something from the bedroom. As he neared the door, he could hear Lois crying softly. He wished she hadn't shut him out. He wanted to hold her so badly that it hurt.

Chapter 18: Answers

The next morning, Clark got up extra early and made sure that it would be the smell of coffee and English Muffins that woke Lois up. When she did come out, except for being unusually quiet, her demeanor showed little of the distress of the previous evening. Even so, their conversation was limited to the minimum set of exchanges to get out of the apartment and make it to work. Clark was desperate to know the source of her anxiety last night. Was it because she had believed his theory on Luthor's involvement in the destruction of her apartment or was it because she had rejected that idea?

As soon as they got to the office, Lois went immediately to her desk and picked up the phone. While she was on the phone, Clark got her coffee and a doughnut. When he arrived at her desk with the food, she was on the phone. He waited a few seconds before it became obvious that she wasn't even going to look up at him. Apparently she really was still upset from last night. After another few seconds he simply left her coffee and doughnut on her desk and proceeded to his workstation.

The lack of communication with Lois was driving him crazy. Clark had spent half the night planning out how he was going to react today when Lois told him that she couldn't stay with someone who could think such things as Clark had said. He even had trouble rejecting his "nightmare" scenario where Lois went to stay with Luthor. He kept telling himself that whatever happened, Lois wouldn't go to Lex. But as each minute dragged by and his nervousness grew, it became harder to remain rational on that subject.

Clark was trying to focus on how to look for connections between The Boss and Luthor when he sensed a shadow across his desk. He looked up to discover his partner.

"Hi, Clark," Lois said almost shyly.

Don't spook her, be pleasant but keep it business, he thought. "Any word from Star Labs?" he asked, trying to maintain a business-casual tone.

"No, maybe later today." She paused for a moment. "About last night..."

That was all it took to break his resolve to remain casual. He didn't let her finish as the words came rushing out. "I'm sorry that I upset you. I... Well, it just seemed to be a possible answer that fits with what we know. What kind of person would think that Lu... Mr. Luthor would do something like that?"

Her reply was immediate and energetic. "A reporter! And you're a damn good one!" She took a deep breath and sat down on the corner of his desk. "I'm the one that needs to apologize. What you said last night got to me. It wasn't because I didn't believe you. It got to me because I'm afraid you might be right. It means that my neighbors who were killed in the building collapse are dead – because of me."

He reached over and took her hand in his. "Lois, whoever ordered the bombing of your building, it isn't your fault. The blame lies with whoever set the bomb." He waited for her to reply but she seemed to be lost in thought. She was just staring thoughtfully at their clasped hands. "So, Lois, now that we know what happened to your apartment, what are we going to do about it?"

That seemed to break the spell. She let go of his hand and stood. Now she had a look of determination on her face. "We find out who ordered my building bombed. I assume you've been

thinking about how to get evidence to prove or disprove your theory about Luthor's involvement?"

It was nice to hear life in her voice. "I've been thinking of some approaches," he offered. "Before we start on that, would you fill me in on Star Labs?"

"Bernie is there now," she answered. "But he won't tell me anything until he has more test results."

"You know that the artifact might be nothing more than some piece of a satellite that was knocked down by a chunk of Nightfall."

"That may be," Lois said, "but whatever it is, I'm sure that it was the source of the gas that poisoned you. My intuition tells me that we're right and it was part of the Superman mission. If that's true, then the presence of the toxic gas is even more interesting. Once we have a better idea of what it is, then we can try to figure out why you were there."

Lois was happy to get past the awkwardness of the morning. She worked with Clark to develop a plan to investigate connections between Lex and The Boss. Then they went over to her building to take a look for themselves. Their stated purpose was to contact people involved in the dig-out and provide contact information to reach Lois. The real reason was to see if they could meet the officer that had made the initial bomb assessment. From what Bill had said yesterday, his name was Zimmerman and he should still be on the case.

It only took a few minutes to find the young policemen. They took him aside and identified themselves. After they explained that Henderson had told them of his discovery, he was more than happy to point out the key elements that pointed to a bomb.

Lois found it more difficult than she'd expected to walk around the remains of what had been her home. She was glad that the rain had washed away any odors that might have been present. As they finished their circuit of the building, Officer Zimmerman completed his explanation of his findings.

"Ms. Lane, any bomb big enough to take down a building would leave a clear signature. Once I started looking, the markers were easy to find."

"Are any of the other building collapses are being investigated?" Clark asked.

"Some are now," he offered. "At first there was so much confusion that none of them were. I suspect that if I hadn't been doing it on my own, all of the building collapses would have been attributed to meteor strikes."

After they left Lois's building, they met with as many of Lois's contacts as she had been able to reach. In most cases, her contacts genuinely didn't know anything about the bombing. Naturally, when the subject of the Boss came up, even the most hardened snitch froze up.

It was late afternoon when they finally returned to the office. This time it was Clark's turn to call Star Labs. Lois was hovering over him when he hung up the phone.

"Dr. Klein said that there have been some developments and he'll be working until late tonight," Clark reported. "When I pressed, he got jumpy. He finally suggested that we come by early tomorrow."

"Did he specify a time?" she pressed.

"He said 8:00 a.m. I get the impression that he may not go home tonight."

After the stressful subject of the previous evening, Clark was reluctant to bring up anything controversial for dinnertime conversation. They spent a surprising amount of time discussing the improving weather. It was now obvious that there would be no "impact winter" from Nightfall. There were reports of weather returning to normal in many places but Metropolis hadn't had a sunny day since before the asteroid. The general feeling was that

the weather would be back to normal within another few weeks.

It was only after they had exhausted the safe topics that Lois changed the direction of the evening. “Clark, why did we find both you and the survival tank in that building?” she asked.

“We’ve been over this. I wish I could tell you why I was there, but I don’t know.”

“Could it have been some kind of secret meeting place for you and Superman?”

“A place for meeting Superman? I don’t understand. Why do you think that was it?” he asked.

“Well, I told you I’m convinced that it was Superman’s equipment that we found. Now that Dr. Klein is taking so much time, my head is just buzzing with that possibility. So, what are your feelings telling you? Could you have been there to meet Superman?”

“I guess it’s possible,” he replied cautiously. I’m not getting any emotional clues this time. It’s all a blank.”

Lois was quiet for a moment. Finally, she asked, “How much of Superman do you remember?”

“Nothing at all,” Clark replied in a dejected tone. “I know how important he was to you. I’ve tried as hard as I can to remember him. There isn’t anything there at all. Even his picture doesn’t evoke much of a response. Did I know him well?”

“You seemed to know him better than anyone.”

“Really?” Clark exclaimed. “I thought about asking some of the people at work but no one seemed to be comfortable talking about him.”

Lois sighed heavily. “You and I are in the same boat. He and I had a... well, sort-of relationship. As for you, you were the only person that knew how to contact him. Didn’t anyone tell you that the military came to the Planet to make contact with Superman right before the Nightfall mission?”

Clark was surprised at this. “No. Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Not very many people know. I guess I should have told you but I’m... I’ve been avoiding certain issues since he disappeared. Are you sure that you don’t have an emotional reaction when you look at his picture?”

“I’m positive. Are you sure we were friends?”

“I think so. Honestly, you never talked about him. For some reason it never occurred to me to ask about your relationship with Superman.”

“I wish I understood,” Clark’s voice was plaintive. “Like I said, when I’ve looked at pictures of him, I get no reaction at all. Is it possible I barely know him?” Clark paused for a moment but Lois remained silent so he continued. “Didn’t you say that maybe I’m just the person that had his phone number? Maybe that’s all there is to it. What did you think when you saw us together?”

Lois seemed to think for a moment. “Now that you mention it, I don’t recall ever having seen the two of you at the same time. I wonder if he deliberately avoided being seen with you. Maybe it was because you knew how to contact him.”

There was a long moment of silence. Finally, Lois asked, “Do you think it might be possible that he made it back but for some reason can’t communicate?”

After they found that tank yesterday, the thought had crossed his mind. He just hadn’t felt comfortable suggesting that to Lois. “Maybe,” he answered. “After Nightfall was shattered, he might have felt the need to disappear. Could it be that he knew he messed up and was afraid to face the public?”

There was a flash of anger from Lois. “Clark, I don’t believe that. Whatever happened I’m sure Superman would face the consequences head-on.”

Clark could see he was in dangerous territory, but he had an idea and pushed ahead. “Are you sure? Even if he was afraid?”

Lois started to interrupt but Clark wouldn’t let her. “Hear me out. What if he landed, contacted me and asked me to meet him

in that building. Then something happened and I was exposed to that gas. I lost my memory and...he left me.”

“He wouldn’t do that!” Lois’s voice was strident.

Clark felt compelled to defend his argument. “If you’re right and my being at that building was tied to him, what else could have happened?”

Lois jumped to her feet. How could Clark of all people be saying these things? “How can you think that?” she was shouting now. “He’s the best... You’re not...” She had more to say but didn’t want to finish. She dashed to the bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

At first, she stalked back and forth in her room. She had trouble getting past the thought, ‘How could Clark think that?’ Once she calmed down, Lois knew the answer. Clark had no memory. He didn’t know any better. Just the same, it took some time to regain her composure. Ten minutes later she was calm enough to open the door. She found Clark sitting in the middle of the room with his face buried in his hands. She walked over to him and put her hand on his shoulder. “Clark, are you okay?”

When he looked up she could see he was very upset. “Lois, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to imply anything bad about him. I just don’t remember.”

He looked miserable. Lois reminded herself that this wasn’t exactly the old Clark that knew how to deal with her when she went off. He was the same person, but with his memory gutted, he didn’t have the defense mechanisms that were so valuable in dealing with her. “Clark, I wish you had more memory of me. I’m not really mad at you. I fly off the handle a lot. You’re the only person that has ever been able to put up with some of the more inflammatory sides of my personality. Whatever happened to Superman and whatever the reason that you were at that building, we’ll find out together.”

From Lois’s perspective, breakfast with Clark seemed almost as tense as yesterday. Neither she nor Clark mentioned the speculations from the night before.

Since it was Sunday they called Bernie to make sure that they would be able to get in at Star Labs. There was no answer at his home but he picked up right away at his office and told them to come on over. When they arrived at Star Labs, they found Bernie waiting for them in the lobby. He had a very serious look on his face. As they approached, his greeting sounded a bit forced. “Good morning.” His voice was almost a monotone. “Please come to my office.”

“Dr. Klein, what’s...” Lois tried to ask.

Klein interrupted. “Please. Not here.” He glanced around. Even though no one else was around, he seemed worried that perhaps the walls had ears. “We’ll talk in my office.”

He didn’t say another word until they reached his office. They entered to find Fred Hanson waiting.

“Dr. Hanson, what are you doing here?” Clark asked.

Fred’s expression mirrored that of Dr. Klein. “I’d rather Bernie tell the story. When you hear what we’ve learned, I think you’ll understand. Until then... well, I’m here in case you have questions.”

Bernie motioned Lois and Clark toward two chairs. Bernie took the open seat next to Fred. After he sat, he made a visible effort to compose himself before starting. “The equipment module you found in the apartment building was the main section of the survival module that Superman carried to Nightfall.”

Lois felt a surge of elation and jumped up. “That means Superman made it back!”

Bernie and Fred exchanged a brief look before Dr. Klein continued. “Please let me finish before you get too excited. I’m sorry, but believe me when I say that if I had good news I would have started with that.”

Lois started to say something but thought better of it. Her

expression turned even more serious as she sat back down. The Lois Lane of a year ago would have been shocked to see that as she sat she reached, almost automatically, for Clark's hand. That earlier version of Lois would have been even more shocked at the level of comfort that his touch provided.

Bernie continued, "Fred was able to verify that the debris you found was indeed the module that his team built for Superman. However, it wasn't exactly the module his lab designed."

"Dr. Hanson?" Lois looked to the LexCorp scientist for clarification.

"Please, Ms. Lane, call me Fred. The module that my team designed was delivered for systems integration a full day before Superman left. The integration team took all the design materials along with the components. The module that you found is the one that we built, but it's been modified. This equipment has an additional air tank and the communication system was also modified. Bernie?"

Dr. Klein picked up the narrative. "The new air tank is much too small to have any value in extending the survival range. Furthermore, the air system already had a substantial safety margin built in. Given what we know about Clark's memory, we approached the analysis of the gas in that new tank very carefully. We collected samples from all of the tanks that were in the module. Those that were part of the original design have the air mix that we had expected to find. That new tank had something very different."

"C127 gas?" Lois asked.

"Yes. But there was also something else. We couldn't identify it at first, but I was able to make some discreet inquiries and figured out what it was." Bernie looked intently at Lois. "Ms. Lane, it's green, and you named it."

Lois felt herself go cold. "Kryptonite," she whispered.

"Kryptonite gas to be specific," Bernie added. "The new tank contained a cocktail of C127S5 and Kryptonite gas. It was connected to the main air supply and sealed with a compression burst valve. The valve was tied to the communication system. When the triggering condition was achieved, a signal would fire a small explosive charge that would blow open the seal and irreversibly connect the tank to the main air supply. The way the tank was mounted and the gas line was tied into the system, once the valve was blown open, there was no way to block the gas and still receive air."

Clark felt like he was missing something. "Kryptonite?" Clark frowned in confusion. His face cleared momentarily as he said, "Oh, I remember now. That was the glowing green rock in the article Lois wrote after the run-in with Trask in Smallville." But then the frown returned as he turned to Lois and added, "I thought you said it didn't really exist."

"I didn't think it did," Lois replied. "Clark, you actually invented the name that I used in my article. I never saw any evidence that made me think it was real."

Bernie stepped in. "Apparently, after Trask was killed in Smallville, the men in his group disappeared. There is evidence that some of them have been selling off parts of the Bureau 39 discoveries. Someone must have made contact with them and gotten the Kryptonite. Whoever did this must have had reason to believe it would weaken Superman. All it had to do was weaken him. The C127 gas was there to finish the job."

"You said the release mechanism was tied into the communication system. Does that mean that there was a signal from Earth?" Clark asked.

Bernie looked at Fred for a second before answering. "We think we know what happened. Why don't I walk you through what we think was supposed to happen, and then I'll describe what we believe actually happened."

Both Lois and Clark nodded for Bernie to continue.

"Part of the original design was a connection between the

guidance system and the communication system. It was supposed to trigger an audio signal when Superman reached the release point. It was a backup in case the display screen on the guidance system failed. From what we can tell, there was an addition to this alarm signal so that when the trigger signal was sent, three other things would happen. First, the gas would be released into the air supply. Second, Superman's microphone connection would be cut. It looks like this...booby trap...was designed to fire as soon as Superman reached the release point. He would be killed with no chance to tell anyone what happened."

"You said three things would happen. What was the third?" Clark asked.

"There was a tie-in to the audio system that appears to have played a message."

"What did it say?" Lois asked. To Clark she still seemed in shock but was paying attention.

"We don't know," Bernie admitted. "We found a data file that appears to contain an audio stream. Unfortunately, this file is protected by some military-grade encryption. There appears to have been a separate key module that carried the decryption engine. Unfortunately, we can see where it tied into the system but the module itself is missing. That area is badly burned so our guess is that it burned up during re-entry. Without the decryption and playback module, we may never know what is in that file. Anyway, whoever designed this intended to have Superman deliver the impactor to Nightfall and, as soon as he was no longer necessary, kill him using the gas while cutting off his communication and delivering the message."

"Why would the government do that?" Clark asked, horrified.

"Fear," Lois answered. "You don't remember Trask. He wanted Superman dead at all costs."

"No!" Fred snapped. "This mission was too important. I knew people that had been suspicious of Superman, but no one I know would have done anything like this."

"Trask was a government wacko," Lois supplied.

"We know," Bernie answered. "What you don't know is that after the Trask incident, the government initiated a probe to identify individuals or groups that were, um, concerned about Superman. They didn't want a repeat of the article that exposed Trask. On the government side, the Nightfall mission team was hand-picked from people that were known to be supportive of Superman. As Fred said, this mission was too important."

"So how did that booby-trap get there?" Clark asked.

Bernie replied. "We have photographs of the equipment when it was delivered from LexCorp. The modifications to add the extra gas canister were already there when it arrived."

"And I know that they were not there when they left my lab!" Fred was almost shouting. "I should have known that something about that so-called integration wasn't right. They're the ones who made those additions."

That statement sank in for a minute until Clark broke the silence. "Bernie, you said that you think you know what did happen. Do you mean that the booby-trap didn't work as planned?"

Bernie took a second to compose himself. "Well, as you may remember, we know that the guidance system malfunctioned and signaled Superman to release the impactor 50 seconds too early." He paused as Lois and Clark both nodded. "That triggered the system that we've been talking about. Our guess is that when the Kryptonite gas hit Superman, it weakened him and made him vulnerable to the effects of the C127. We think it confused him so that for a moment he lost track of what he was doing. We also know it didn't kill him immediately because the survival pack made it back to Earth. The fact that he could fly back would suggest that his powers were still intact."

Lois cut him off. "I thought that nerve gas was deadly."

"It can be. But, as you know from Clark's experience, it can

be neutralized if mixed with certain other gases. As it turns out, the Kryptonite gas almost completely removed the most lethal aspect of the nerve gas.”

“Why do you think the gas mixture was used?” Lois asked.

“Our guess is that someone found a way to test Kryptonite on Superman and found it to be able to affect his powers,” Bernie offered. “We believe that the Kryptonite was supposed to weaken him and allow the nerve gas to finish him off. However, the Kryptonite neutralized the C127 gas and Superman survived the initial exposure. I suspect that he was dazed for a moment when the gas mixture first hit. That reaction was seen in people that survived C127 gas. It’s also possible that the Kryptonite weakened him just enough to cause him to lose control of the ship. Anyway, Superman started back toward Earth. He may have tried to hold his breath but we know that the distance was beyond the range he can fly without air. He must have had to breathe the gas a few more times just to make it back. By the time he reached Earth he had probably received a lethal dose of Kryptonite. Furthermore, even after having been neutralized by the Kryptonite, that much C127 gas would be deadly. If it didn’t kill him, his brain would have suffered so much damage that...there wouldn’t be any of the person left.”

Clark interrupted him. “That’s horrible!”

“Yes. I’m afraid that there are many horrible aspects to this – mission. It appears that Superman tried to reach Metropolis. Based on where this was found and the burned condition of the hardware, we have an idea about the rest of the story. The trajectory indicates that the entry path was heading for the waterfront. These items seem to have been in free-fall when they landed. We think that...” He paused and looked very deliberately at Lois. “I’m sorry, Lois. But if his body survived re-entry, it would have landed in the water just off shore.”

“But someone would have found him!” Lois pleaded.

“Not if he sank. Most experts think he has a much higher molecular density than a normal human. We believe that without his flying powers to offset his density, he would be exceptionally heavy. In fact, based on his invulnerability, his natural density is probably more like stone or even steel.”

“So you think he made it back to Earth only to be killed when he arrived?” Clark asked.

“I don’t see another explanation.” Bernie said. “We think he was trying to reach you in that abandoned apartment building. That’s how the tank ended up there. I suspect that you were waiting to meet him when you heard the crash of the tank impact. The impact broke open the regulator valve and released the rest of the gas all at once. You walked into it looking for Superman and lost your memory. I’m sorry, but everything fits. If it survived the heat of re-entry at all, what’s left of Superman’s body is on the bottom of the ocean somewhere offshore.”

Lois was in turmoil. Here was all the evidence to clear Superman but it raised another, more important issue. In an icy tone Lois said, “You realize that whoever did this is responsible not only for Superman’s death, but the deaths of the millions killed by Nightfall.”

“And my family!” Fred added.

Bernie cleared his throat. “That was why I wanted to be so sure before I gave you my report.”

“So what do we do now?” Clark asked.

It was Lois who replied. “We find out who in LexCorp hated Superman enough to do this. We need to find a way to hear that message.”

Clark had a flash of memory and a sudden insight. Lex Luthor hated Superman that much!

There was little more to tell. They spent the rest of the day outlining what each would do. Dr. Klein would see what he could trace back in government and scientific channels. Fred would see

what could be found in the various rumor trails inside LexCorp. Lois and Clark would coordinate and use their own sources to produce a proper investigation. Clark was largely silent through this planning. He was still reeling from the shock of his newly recovered memories.

While Bernie had been telling the story, it was almost as if the inside of Clark’s brain started to itch. It was barely noticeable at first but as the story unfolded, it kept getting worse. Finally, there was something about the way Lois phrased the question about who hated Superman that triggered a burst of memory. All these images of Luthor came flooding in and it was like watching a movie. In these images, he never saw Superman. But he saw and heard plenty of Luthor. He was still struggling with these memories when he and Lois left Star Labs and headed back to the Planet.

The drive back to work was made in silence. Lois still seemed to be struggling with her own concerns based on what they learned. The combination made for a ride where both of them were so absorbed in their own thoughts that they failed to notice the silence in the other.

They made it all the way back to the office before exchanging any words. Clark had been too confused about the images to share his new understanding with the others yet but he had to tell Lois.

“Can we talk in one of the interview rooms?” Clark asked of his partner. “There’s something you need to know.”

“Can’t we do it at our desks?” Lois suggested.

“Lois, I had a flash of memory back at Star Labs and I think it would be best to share it in private.”

Lois glanced at a clock. “It’s already late. Why don’t we write up our notes and bring Perry up to speed. He’ll be excited to know that we have evidence that Superman wasn’t at fault. Then we can head home for the evening where we can talk about what you’ve remembered without having to worry about someone walking in on us. We can spend the rest of the evening developing our plans for this part of the investigation.”

Clark didn’t want to wait but knew that this was very sensitive information. He also knew that talking about Luthor possibly being personally involved in Superman’s death was likely to upset Lois. It would be better to have this discussion in as private location as possible.

“Okay, Lois. I think that’s a good plan.”

It was nearly an hour later before they were able to leave for the day. Perry seemed unsurprised that LexCorp was involved. When they told him that the evidence pointed toward LexCorp, Perry’s response had been cryptic.

“You two need to be careful. LexCorp has emerged as a force to be reckoned with since Nightfall. Something about the way Luthor and his company has come through all this doesn’t feel right.”

They tried to press him but he wouldn’t go any further than to warn them again to be extra careful.

When they got home the more domestic issues such as the evening meal came first. It was well into the evening that they were able to have the long-delayed talk about Clark’s memory.

They had just moved out to the living room and Lois had settled into Clark’s comfortable sofa. “What a day,” she sighed.

“I think we should talk about what I remembered today.”

Clark offered.

Lois looked startled for a second. “I’m sorry, Clark. I forgot all about that. You said it was important.”

“Yes, he said. “At Star Labs, right at the end, I had that flash of memory that I told you about at the office. I have some images that might be key to the investigation.”

Her face brightened. “That’s great. What do you remember?”

“Lois, what do you know about Luthor and his relationship with Superman?”

“Not very much. I hardly ever saw them together.”

“I found all these memories of Luthor talking to Superman.” Clark closed his eyes and found he could pull up the image of Luthor at will. “I can see him. He’s talking to Superman. I can’t see Superman but I’m there.”

Clark opened his eyes and looked at Lois. She was staring back at him open-mouthed. “What?” he asked.

“Clark, this is the first time you’ve said anything about memories this detailed.”

He’d been so focused on the nature of the memories that he’d missed the fact that these were so different from the others he’d recalled. “You’re right. These are the most complete memories I’ve had.”

Lois was animated. “This is great! Not because of Luthor. Okay, not just because of him. It means there might be a way to remember more. Do you have any idea what happened?”

Clark thought for a moment. “I don’t really know. I was thinking about Superman and Luthor. I was trying to visualize what a conversation between them would be like. All the sudden the memories were there. It was like opening a door.”

“That means that maybe more memories are still there. It might just be a matter of finding the right key to unlock the others. You need to report this to Dr. Plinkton tomorrow.”

“I will,” Clark offered. “But back to the memories, you said I knew Superman?”

“Yeah,” Lois replied. “Looking back I think you knew him better than you let on.”

“Is it possible I might have been working with him to investigate Luthor? In these memories, it’s like I was there while Superman was talking with Luthor. From the things I’m seeing, it’s clear that Luthor thought he was alone with Superman. I have image after image of them in – disagreements. I have some images of Superman being particularly angry. What is Mentamide 5 and who are the Smart kids?”

“That was an experiment that was being performed secretly on some orphans. You remember that?” Lois asked.

“Only that Luthor was behind it. I don’t even know what those words mean except that Luthor was in the middle of it and Superman was involved.”

“Lex was behind that?” Lois sounded surprised.

“You didn’t know? From the fragments of memory I have, it was all Luthor’s doing.”

“Clark, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know. Is it possible that Superman swore me to secrecy? Maybe there wasn’t any hard evidence.”

“But you still should have told me.”

“Lois, what do you want me to say? I just don’t remember. I have to guess that I – and Superman – had a good reason. I have these images that make me think there were other things as well. Didn’t I tell you anything about Luthor’s illegal activities?”

Lois looked very upset. “No,” she said. “But it may have been that since I was socially involved with Lex, Superman asked you to keep me out until you had enough hard evidence to make a case.”

They were both quiet for nearly a minute before Lois voiced the obvious question. “Do you think Lex sabotaged the Nightfall mission?”

Clark had known this question was coming. “Yes,” he said softly. “With what I’m remembering now, I’m certain that if Superman had known that Luthor was involved in the Nightfall mission, he would never have accepted the equipment.”

“Do you remember anything else about the Nightfall mission or Superman that you hadn’t remembered before?”

Clark closed his eyes again and concentrated. “I still can’t see him. I have stronger feelings. I feel like I know things about him, but it’s all confused.” Clark opened his eyes and found Lois looking at him with an almost startling intensity. In that instant, it

was like she had opened her soul to him. He could get lost in those eyes.

Then he had a flash that almost knocked him down. He was selfish enough that he almost hesitated to tell her. But she deserved to know. “Lois, Superman loved you.”

“What?”

He wanted to look away but he couldn’t. “Lois, I don’t understand how I know. I don’t have a clear image or a memory but just now, I had been concentrating on Superman and when I opened my eyes and saw you it triggered a feeling and a partial memory. He... he was in love with you.”

“Clark, how can you know that?”

“I don’t really know. It just hit me like an emotional surge. Maybe we were close friends. Maybe he and I talked about how each of us felt about you. It’s all confused.”

He paused for a minute shaking his head. “Lois, now I’m getting all these random images and emotions. It’s like there are flash bulbs going off all around, but instead of light these are flashes of images and emotion.”

“Are you okay? Do you need to lie down?” Lois asked.

Clark looked over at her. The concern on her face helped so much. “I’ll be fine. There’s just so much here that I didn’t know before. All this stuff about Superman and how he felt about you. He and I must have talked about you more than once. I feel like I know a lot but it’s all vague and fuzzy.”

“I know this is difficult, but anything you can remember would be very important to me.” It was a plea.

Clark would do anything to help her but the details just weren’t there. “I’m sure about how he felt. I remember that for some reason he couldn’t say anything to you. Lois, somehow his not telling you feels like it’s related to me. It’s so strange, the emotions are strong but all confused.”

She reached over and put her hand on his. “Just take your time. I know this must be difficult.”

Clark desperately wanted to go on for her sake. He thought about Lois and how important she was to him. Something about that thought resonated with his newfound memories. Then he thought about Superman and his interest in Lois. That combination seemed to trigger another rush of confused feelings. “Lois, it feels weird but it’s like both he and I wanted to pursue a relationship with you but we couldn’t because of the other.”

As he said those words he was hit by another surge. “I’ve just remembered something else. You said he saw you before going on the Nightfall mission. It was...even more personal than you said, wasn’t it?”

Lois hesitated a second before deciding that getting these memories was worth the price for both of them. “Clark, when he came by...we...kissed. He told me that he had something to tell me when he got back.”

“That surge of memory... It’s strange, in a way it’s almost like I was there. He must have told me what he was planning. I can’t be sure, but it feels like he was going to tell you how he felt. I think he was going to say that he was in love with you.”

Lois barely remembered bolting from the room. Clark hadn’t said anything she didn’t already suspect, but to have him say it like that brought it all to the front of her memory. When it hit her, she had to be alone. She practically jumped out of her chair and ran to her room crying. Hopefully Clark understood that she wasn’t upset with him.

From what Clark had said, if Superman had survived, they’d be together now. She’d always thought there was a connection between her and Superman. She had felt it that first time they flew together. His touch had always stirred something in her that she’d never felt before.

But what was that part about Superman and Clark both waiting for each other? Since Nightfall, Clark had been very open

about his feelings. He'd been the perfect gentleman, but once it was out in the open it'd been easy to notice. Now he said that Superman felt the same way. Not only that, but they knew about how each other felt and that kept both of them from acting.

That made sense if they were best friends. Superman didn't want to betray his friend. While Superman was around, she never gave Clark much of a chance. Lois figured that Superman must have finally given up on waiting for her to notice Clark. That must be why Superman was going to tell her how he felt. Lois had to wonder if Clark would have ever told her how he felt if he hadn't lost his memory. Probably not. She could see him suffering in silence while his partner and his best friend developed a relationship.

Clark and Superman had obviously been very close. She wished she could ask Clark for more details. Based on what had just happened, she was sure that if he did remember anything more, he'd tell her. Clark was that kind of person. She didn't have to badger him to know if he remembered anything more.

If Superman had survived, and they had developed a relationship, what would have happened to Clark? Would he have come to accept it, or would he have moved on again like he did so many times before? The thought of Clark leaving was very unpleasant. He'd become very important to her. She still remembered that kiss the other night. That time they really kissed was – wonderful. It moved her more than any kiss she'd ever had except for maybe when Superman kissed her before he left.

But Superman was gone. He'd waited too long to see if she and Clark would hit it off. Now... Ever since that first night when Clark held her in the hospital, she'd been feeling something. At first, she thought it was a combination of friendship and sympathy. Lois knew that it was time to face up to the fact that it was much more.

She'd wanted to be faithful to the promise of that night before Superman left. Now she knew that Superman had been holding back so that she and Clark could have a chance. Somehow she knew that nothing would make Superman happier than for her to be in a relationship with Clark. Superman was so much stronger than Clark. If she were to have had a relationship with Superman, she was sure that it would have hurt Clark terribly. On the other hand, if things had developed differently and she had started dating Clark, she was confident that Superman would have missed what might have been, but would have been happy for his friend.

Clark was such a sweetheart. It seemed funny now, but once you looked past Superman's powers, their personalities were so similar. The difference between the two men was very subtle. Superman was strong and Clark was sweet. Not that Superman didn't have a sweet side and Clark wasn't strong.

Yes, she finally concluded. Superman would have been very happy with how things had developed between her and Clark. She decided that she needed to spend some time thinking about what was going to make *her* happy.

Chapter 19: Date

Lois woke up determined that the morning would play out as if nothing unusual had happened the night before. She didn't say anything about Superman, and Clark acted as if that part of the discussion never happened. Over morning coffee, she stayed away from the issue of her relationship with Superman.

It wasn't long before the subject turned to Clark's newly recovered memories. Since she couldn't talk about Superman, she pushed the conversation to a safe path. "Are you going to call Dr. Plinkton this morning?" she asked.

"It's the first thing on my agenda when we get into the office," Clark replied. "I still can't believe those memories came back last night. It gives me hope that there are still more memories that I'll be able to retrieve."

"Have you given any more thought to how it happened? It seemed like suddenly you just knew things that weren't there before."

"That's exactly what it was like," Clark offered. "It all started when I was thinking about Lex disliking Superman. Then I wondered what it would have been like if they had ever spoken to each other when they were alone. Somewhere in there it was like turning a key and all these new memories came tumbling out."

"You said last night that they were confused. Has that gotten better?"

"No. I laid awake last night for over an hour trying to fit the pieces together. I can guess at what the images and memories mean but no matter how hard I tried there wasn't any more there. I'll be curious what Dr. Plinkton has to say about this."

Lois wanted to know that also. She didn't know how to tell Clark that what she really wanted to know the rest of his inside information on how Superman felt about her. After last night she was now sure that there was some sort of an agreement about her between Clark and Superman.

At one level she was irritated that she might have been the prize in a contest. When she first thought of it that way last night, she'd been furious for a few minutes. Then she realized that from what she could tell, it was nothing like a contest. There were two friends, both in love with her, and each waiting for her to decide. She'd ended up with a vision of standing in the middle of a field. A White Knight on her left and a farmer on her right. Both were waiting for her to go to one of them. But they only waited. They never competed or tried to be anything other than what they were. It was way over-the-top romantic but it did seem to fit.

She realized she'd fallen into a silent muse. It was time to figure out what to do with the more practical information that had popped out of Clark's memory yesterday. They needed to figure out what to do with this. The first step was to determine who they could tell. "Clark, what are your feelings about sharing the information that Luthor himself was probably behind the sabotage of Superman's Nightfall mission pack?"

Clark took the subject in stride. "I think we need to start with Perry. Then he can decide if we bring in anyone else from the Planet staff. I'd like to tell Fred and Dr. Klein. Fred especially needs to know that our most likely suspect is the top man in his company."

"You're right. As soon as we're in the office, we can set up a meeting. I'd like to do it at the Planet but that will depend on if Fred can get in and out without attracting attention."

When they got to work they brought Perry up to speed right away. He was unsurprised to learn that Luthor would be their prime suspect. He cautioned them that given Luthor's connections and power, they would have to have rock-solid evidence before the paper could run any story that implicated him in anything.

Half an hour later Lois was working on another story. At the end of their earlier meeting, Perry had asked both her and Clark to pick up some regular reporting duties. The Superman investigation was important, but Perry needed them on other things as well. She'd just set down the phone when Clark approached her desk. "What's up?" she asked.

"I just finished talking with Dr. Plinkton. He was just as surprised as we were at my recovered memories. He said that the literature doesn't say anything about that kind of memory recovery. He's been trying to get in contact with one of the doctors that handled the original case. He did say that what happened was reasonable based on how memories are stored in the brain."

"Does he think any more will come back?"

"He thought it was likely. His guess is that there may be other 'key thoughts' that might unlock more memories. Unfortunately, until I happen to think the right thing, there will be no way to

know it's going to trigger anything.”

To Lois, this all sounded both weird and frustrating. “You mean that you might think about eating a childog at a football game and new memories will come flooding out?”

Clark closed his eyes for a second. When he opened them, he smiled back shyly. “Well, that one didn't do anything but that is the idea.”

They ended up scheduling their Nightfall team meeting for noon. Fred was convinced that he'd have no problem getting away at that time and promised that he'd avoid using the main entrance to the Planet. Lois and Clark spent the morning working on issues not related to the Superman investigation.

When the time for the meeting arrived, they kept it small. Perry had decided that only Jimmy would assist from the Planet staff.

“Would there be any value in trying to work through Luthor directly?” Jimmy asked.

“I doubt it,” Perry offered. “There aren't many people that get close to Luthor who talk much about it afterwards. I'm aware of a few people that have had...encounters...with him. Based on what I know, he never lets any conversation get outside the boundaries that he wants. Lois, you've been closer to him than any of us, were you ever successful in getting him to open up?”

“No Chief,” she replied, shaking her head. “I hate to admit it but he's very good at avoiding issues he doesn't want to discuss. You know that the first time I interviewed him, he ducked all but the most fluff questions and turned the interview into a date. The next time I tried, the same thing happened. He never slipped for a moment. He was so good at it that I was getting used to dates even though he never even came close to granting the in-depth interview he promised.”

“That fits,” Perry added. “When your initial interview produced nothing, I asked around. Remember that your original challenge with him was that he'd never granted a serious interview. I did some digging on my own and found that wasn't exactly true. He has granted interviews before, but only a few times and only with attractive females. None of them were able to produce a usable interview with him but there is circumstantial evidence that many of them turned, um, personal.”

Lois looked indignant. “Well, my investigation never turned ‘personal’ in that way, but I didn't get anything.”

Perry looked at Dr. Hanson. “You seem to be our best hope. Do you think you will be able to find out where the equipment went when it left your control?”

“I think so,” he replied. “There are a number of people in my section that have transferred around the company a few times. They have personal contacts that should help. If I ask the right questions, I believe I can find out where it went. I've started asking some questions very quietly but I don't have anything yet.”

“Fred, you need to be very careful,” Clark added. “I regained enough memories yesterday to know that Luthor is an extremely dangerous man.”

Hanson nodded seriously. “I will be.”

Perry looked around the room. “Dr. Klein will continue to work the scientific and EPRAD channels. I'll work my military contacts. Dr. Hanson has LexCorp while Lois, Clark and Jimmy will work the Metropolis street angle while coordinating what the rest of us find. Is there anything we haven't covered?”

When no one offered any more, the meeting adjourned. Lois and Clark spent the rest of the day on their other stories. The city had put itself together enough since Nightfall that the need for regular reporting was too great to ignore.

Lois finished her assignments for the day before Clark did. He had made almost incredible progress this past week but he still had a long way to go before he would be as good and as fast

as he once was. With what he knew the first few days after Nightfall, he would not have been able to get a job at The Daily Planet. Of course, under the circumstances he wasn't held to the same standards that would normally apply.

Those first few days he was little more than half Lois's assistant and half intern. He had been able to provide some help and produced some decent work but nothing like would normally be expected of a Daily Planet journalist. That had changed and he was now at least as good as some of the lesser staff writers. The way he was making progress, he would be very close to his old level of skill in less than a month.

While she was waiting for Clark to finish the assignments that Perry had left for him, Lois couldn't help but think about the about the previous evening. She had lain in bed an exceptionally long time trying to decide what to do. She had been keeping her feelings for Clark at a distance. There were many reasons but key among them was the idea of honoring what had almost been with Superman. With what she now knew, or at least suspected, she was convinced that the one thing that Superman would want would be for her to give Clark a chance.

She walked over to Clark's desk. She stepped behind him and leaned down to look over his shoulder. “How are you doing?” she asked.

“I'm almost there. Would you mind taking a look?”

“Sure,” she replied.

As she started to read over his shoulder, the closeness became impossible to ignore. Lois concentrated and after only a minute she made it to the bottom of the short article Clark had been working on.

“You might want to re-sequence these sentences.” She pointed at the screen. “Otherwise it looks good.”

Clark looked over the offending lines and shook his head. “I see what you mean. This is still so frustrating. When you point something out, it seems so clear. You're sure you didn't do this all the time?” Lois could hear the frustration in his voice.

“Well, something like this can happen to anyone. You've done as much for me in the past.” She barely finished speaking when she caught the skeptical look from her partner. “Okay, you're still making more mistakes than you used to. But, Clark, you know you're getting better. It'll come back to you. The skills are there even if so many of your memories are gone.”

It was only another few minutes when Clark pushed his chair back and announced, “Done.” He looked over at Lois who had returned to her desk. “Are you ready to head out, partner?”

“Clark, I'd like to do something special for dinner.”

He gave her a sheepish grin. “Would you like me to make something special tonight?”

“I'd like to go out.”

“Sure, Lois, there are a few places to pick from on the way home.”

He just wasn't going to get it. It was time for her to spell it out for him. “How would you feel about going out on a date?”

He just stared back at her for a moment. She couldn't help but think he was so cute. It was clear that he had no idea how to respond. Lois knew that only one answer was possible. After all, she had been living with him for long enough. Even so, she couldn't resist a teasing prod. “Well, if you don't want to go out with me, I'm sure...”

“Yes!” he interrupted. “I'd love to go out with you. I just...” He floundered around for a minute and finally composed himself. “Lois, I'm sorry to be so dense, but this is unexpected and... well, it's important that I understand what this means. You know I... I didn't think...”

“Clark, this is what you think it is. But if you're too uncomfortable we can just go home and try to do this some other time.”

Clark's expression fell for only a second and then he got a

determined look. He stepped over to her and reached out to take her hand. “Ms. Lane, would you do me the honor of accompanying me on a date this evening?”

Lois almost missed the slight smile that accompanied that oh-so-formal request. Not letting go of his hand, she took a half-step back. “The pleasure is mine, kind sir.” It was all she could do to keep from giggling as she said the words. She accompanied her reply with a slight curtsy. When she straightened up she found that megawatt Clark Kent smile beaming back at her. She hadn’t seen it at full intensity very much since Nightfall.

Clark seemed lost in thought for a moment. Lois wondered if he was feeling the same nervous anticipation that she was. There was only a very short pause before he asked, “Should I pick you up at your place?”

Clark enjoyed the feel of Lois on his arm as they walked back to his—their apartment after dinner. The evening had been perfect. When Lois had suggested the date, once he got past the excitement of the meaning of a real date, he had been wondering if it would turn into just another evening. He was elated to realize how wrong he had been.

After work, they had gone back to the apartment and made an effort to dress for dinner. Clark had been worried about how to dress. It wasn’t that he didn’t know what to wear on a date; he was concerned that Lois didn’t have any clothes. Since he wasn’t willing to run the risk of embarrassing his partner, he asked her about this ahead of time. It turned out that Lois had snuck in some shopping over the past week and had managed to acquire some nice clothes.

Dinner was marvelous. The setting was romantic and Lois clearly wanted to send a signal that this was personal. She was very open about her background and growing up. Normally she should have expected her date to talk about his past and tell some personal stories, but she was helpful all through dinner at leading the conversation to issues that he could talk about.

As they walked up the steps to Clark’s apartment, he couldn’t fight the temptation for some humor. “Lois, could I invite you in for some refreshment?”

Her expression and posture took on an air of mock indignation. “I don’t know. I don’t normally go into a man’s apartment on the first date.”

Clark paused for just a second. “You’re right, Lois, that wouldn’t be proper. I should never have suggested such a thing. Why don’t I just escort you to your place?”

She couldn’t keep a soft giggle from escaping. “That’s better. You take me home right now.”

Clark opened the door and Lois went in before him. He closed and locked the door then turned to Lois. “May I get you some tea?”

“Tea?” she asked. Her tone suggested that he must be out of his mind.

“Okay, coffee it is.”

While Clark went about preparing the coffee, Lois sat in the main living area. She thought about going to her bedroom and dropping off her coat. However, this evening had all been about form. The fact that she was looking at her still-closed bedroom door meant that the date wasn’t over. Instead of opening that door and ending the dance that was their date, Lois chose to drape her coat over a chair so that she could deal with it later.

She had to laugh when, after starting the coffee, Clark came over and asked, “Lois, may I use your restroom?” He had also sensed the importance of form this evening.

She had to fight to keep a straight face. “Sure, Clark,” she replied. “You know where it is.”

As he disappeared through the door, she couldn’t help but think about how in-tune with each other they were. When she thought back, that had been in case almost since he appeared at

the Planet. Except for that episode with the Toasters undercover assignment, they had always been amazingly in-sync. To his credit, there was no repeat of that error where he interfered with her investigation.

Soon the coffee was ready and Clark served them in the front room. As he sat, she could almost swear his eyes were glowing. “Did you enjoy tonight?” he asked as he settled into his chair.

“Yes I did,” Lois replied with a smile. “This was one of the best dates I think I’ve ever had.”

“Well, I can honestly say this was the best date I can ever remember having. And even though that’s not saying much in my case, I believe I’d say that even if I still had my memories.” He paused for a moment as if trying to decide whether or not to go ahead. Finally, he looked up and broached the subject they’d both been avoiding all evening. “Lois, do you think that it’s true that Superman and I were both waiting for you?”

Lois almost dropped her coffee at that question. Here they were talking about how nice the evening had been and Clark brought up Superman. At first she looked away to try to hide her surprise at a question about a ... rival. After a moment she collected herself. This was still the uncertain Clark that she’d known from before his accident. But now that uncertain Clark was asking very direct questions. She still wasn’t used to that. Just now, the directness of this question had caught her off guard. But Clark had been more direct since so many of his memories were missing. It was the one personality change that she had noticed most. Lois suspected it was his way of trying to find out as much as possible about this unfamiliar world in as short a time as possible.

Well, if he was going to ask, he deserved an answer. “I thought about that a lot last night. I never would have guessed it but I can see now that I wasn’t looking. But yes, I think it was true.”

Clark looked like he wanted to pursue that line but instead steered the conversation back to the safer topic of the Nightfall reconstruction and the still odd but improving weather.

When they finished their coffee Lois looked at the clock and said, “I think it’s time I should be turning in.” They both stood and stepped over to her door. As they reached the door, Lois turned to him and said, “I had a wonderful time tonight Clark.”

“Thanks for asking me out tonight,” he said. Lois could see that he had the look of someone that wanted to say so much more but lacked the words. After only a second, he leaned down for a goodnight kiss.

The emotions Clark felt were so strong that he could hardly stand. Simply noticing Lois lean into him in anticipation of the kiss sent a jolt through him. In the second it took to close the distance between them, Clark had decided that he wanted this to be his chance to show Lois just how strongly he felt. As they came together, he lost himself to the feel of her lips against his. They were as soft as he remembered from their previous kiss. Those thoughts were quickly overwhelmed by the sensation of the moment. Everything seemed to be changing. For Clark, in this moment, the world began and ended with Lois. In that instant, there was nothing else. He found that his arms, almost on their own, were circling this woman that was his universe and he was pulling her into a more intimate embrace.

Lois had always expected this kiss to be something more than she had previously shared with Clark. However, that idea didn’t prepare her for the reality of this kiss. It had started as a kiss. A very good kiss, but in many ways just a kiss. Then there was a subtle but profound change. Her awareness of the world beyond Clark started to fade away. She didn’t notice his arms around her until she felt herself being pressed more firmly against him. In that instant she knew that being as close as possible to Clark was exactly what she wanted. Her arms slipped around his shoulders and it was her turn to pull the two of them even closer together.

This was no longer about a kiss, it was about sharing yourself and being shared and feeling more intensely connected than Lois had believed possible.

After a long minute they both seemed to sense that it was time to end this particular kiss. The looks of their respective face reflected their differing expectations for the kiss. Lois looked confused but in a rather pleased sort of way. Clark wore a megawatt smile that suggested that this kiss was very much along the lines of what he had hoped for.

As they separated Lois found that both of her hands had slipped into Clark's. In this moment, his touch was more than just comforting. There was a feeling of rightness that she struggled to place. It was a wonderful feeling and familiar in a vague sort of way. Between the rightness of his touch and the warmth of his smile, Lois's confusion fled and she could feel her expression morph into a shy smile of her own. This moment felt so 'right' that she didn't want it to end. She spent a long minute gazing into Clark's eyes before she finally released his hands and turned to open her door. She entered her room and turned back to Clark. He was still sporting that same smile. It seemed like there should be something important to say right now, but she just couldn't think of what it might be. She finally settled on the simple solution. "Goodnight, Clark."

"Goodnight, Lois."

His smile never wavered and he was still beaming that smile at her as the door finally closed that last inch.

Chapter 20: Raid

The next morning Lois came out of her room to find Clark preparing breakfast. She was surprised that upon seeing him her first thought was to kiss him good morning. She shook it off and instead walked up to him and put her hand on his shoulder. "Good morning," she said. Even with just a casual touch, she could tell that the special feeling from last night was still present. The feeling of connection and rightness that had almost overwhelmed her during their kiss was still going strong. She reluctantly removed her hand from her roommate and forced her mind onto more mundane matters for the rest of the morning.

Once they got to work, the day was among the least eventful since Nightfall had struck. There weren't any developments in the Superman investigation and Lois spent her day on solo stories. Except for the most incidental interactions, both she and Clark were too busy with separate projects to spend any time together.

Unfortunately, an incident in the late morning added confusion to Lois's day. She'd just been to the coffee station when she overheard two office interns speculating about her and Clark living together. That got her fears going again and she had trouble getting back to work. Naturally, right after that Clark decided to come over to ask her to lunch. Not only was she short in declining his invitation, but when he asked if anything was wrong and reached for her hand, she pulled away. A hurt-looking Clark went to lunch alone and then kept his distance for the rest of the day. While that one voice kept telling her that it was for the best to push him away, another part wanted to pull him aside and apologize.

As the day wore on, Lois was surprised to notice how intensely she missed working with Clark. Every time she almost got up the courage to apologize for her curt behavior before lunch, that voice got loud again. She was happy when the end of the day finally arrived since it meant she'd be able to spend some time with her roommate.

That night at the apartment, Lois was especially aware of how much she enjoyed simply being with Clark. Looking back, she thought he'd been acting strangely all evening. Finally, just before bedtime, Lois realized that Clark was nervously waiting for her to define their relationship. As a result, the evening had turned into an anxious dance of avoidance.

All during the day when she wasn't thinking about pushing Clark away, she'd been thinking about kissing him. Once she realized what was happening, she decided that the only way to deal with it was to meet the challenge head on. Therefore, when Clark escorted her to her door, instead of settling for a kiss on the cheek, Lois initiated a repeat performance of the kiss that ended their date. Clark quickly got over the shock of the unexpected intimacy of the kiss and responded in kind. And there it was again. That sense of...what? Connection? Completion? Perfection? She didn't know. What she did know was that tonight's kiss was just as otherworldly as the one last night.

In that moment she felt her own worries starting to slip away. If only it could be this easy. Maybe this would be the relationship that didn't end badly. But no matter how hard she tried to just go with the feeling, she couldn't quite escape that small voice that kept saying, "What if it goes bad?" and "If you don't let him get too close, he can't hurt you." Despite the voice, Lois was thoroughly enjoying the kiss and would have been happy to have it continue. However, Clark had other ideas. Without warning he moved his hands to her hips and gently but firmly pushed away.

"Lois, what's going on?" Clark asked. He sounded confused, but not angry.

She tried to brush it off. "I thought we were kissing. What did you think was going on?"

"You know what I mean." Now there was a touch of frustration in his voice. "You know how I feel. If our relationship has changed, please tell me."

She should have expected this from him. "Clark, I don't know exactly what's happening," she admitted.

Clark reached out and touched her cheek. "Please tell me that you want to move our relationship forward."

She could hear the longing in his voice. His touch sent a warm feeling through her. "Yes. I... Clark, I want to, but I'm scared. Things changed last night."

"They changed for me too," Clark replied. "Not in what I feel, but... well, I was hoping you might have changed the way you feel."

"I think my feelings have changed," Lois offered. "I'm just not sure what it all means."

"Lois, to be honest I don't see how we can kiss like this and go on just being roommates. At least, I'm sure I can't. If we are going to be ... boyfriend and girlfriend, then that's great. But it doesn't feel right like this."

Lois didn't know what to do. The kiss tonight had been an experiment. She had been wondering all day if what happened the previous evening was a one-time deal or if it would happen again. She had her answer. Clark's kisses did something to her; when she kissed him she felt things she'd never felt before.

Unfortunately, now she was just as confused as ever. Part of her wanted to reach out and hold him as tightly as a moment ago when they kissed. Another part wanted to run away. It didn't help that she knew that holding Clark would make her feel better. It would make her feel a lot better. But unless she was ready to commit to a relationship, that wasn't fair to either of them. She looked up to find Clark waiting expectantly for her to continue.

"Clark, I'm not sure where we are. I guess I needed to know."

"Know what?"

"If last night was a fluke."

"Well, I can answer for me, but I don't think that's what you were wondering." He paused for a moment as if trying to decide what to say. "Did you get your answer?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"Tonight was...great. But, Clark, I'm scared. This all feels too fast. I need time to think."

He looked disappointed, but not too much so. "Okay, but..."

"But what?" she asked.

“As much as I enjoyed it, and I did enjoy it very much, I don’t think we should kiss again unless you decide that you want our relationship to move in that direction. So until then, we go back to just being roommates. Okay?”

He was right. It wasn’t fair to him to kiss like that unless she was ready to go all-in on this relationship. She’d acted like a tease and Clark didn’t hold it against her. He was so good for her. “Yes. I think that is a great plan.”

“Well, then, goodnight, roommate.” He took a small but deliberate step back away from her and her door.

She was through her door before she realized that in many ways they were repeating last night’s scene. As she entered the room, she turned to find Clark still watching her. In a flash, she realized that she remembered that look. The words still echoed in her memory, ‘Don’t fall for me, farmboy. I don’t have time for it.’ Apparently, he had fallen for her anyway. But there was something else there. Now he was waiting for her. Was she ready to believe that he was the man she had needed in her life all along?

“Goodnight, Clark, and thank you.” She hoped her voice did justice to the warmth she was feeling toward him right now.

There was that megawatt smile again. “Goodnight, Lois.”

That added yet another night to the list of those where she had trouble falling asleep due to thinking about Clark Kent.

The next morning lacked much of the personal tension that had filled the air on the previous day. Clark had gone out of his way all morning to play the part of her friend or possibly her brother but not seem like anything more. Lois was of two minds about this. Part of her wanted to throw caution to the wind and give Clark the good morning kiss she’d been thinking about for the past two days. But that voice warning her to play it safe and steer clear of any relationship just wouldn’t shut up. All in all it was very frustrating and left her with a short temper all morning.

They were back on the Superman investigation. Lois had a feeling that something was about to break. Both Bernie and Fred had been working steadily to trace Superman’s mission equipment and try to discover the location of the so-called integration modifications. Bernie had gotten the shipping receipt from the delivery of the equipment from Fred’s lab to the staging area where the EPRAD team took possession from LexCorp. Lois and Clark were able to use that receipt to trace the equipment. They were certain now that the missing extra stop was somewhere in the city of Metropolis. Fred had run into a roadblock when he had tried to trace the equipment from his end. None of his contacts were able to provide any information.

Early in the morning, Fred called Lois to tell her that he was near a breakthrough. He wasn’t willing to say any more over the phone, but said he would report in person later in the day. So for now Lois and Clark worked other, mainly pedestrian stories, while they waited.

The crime rate was still much higher than before Nightfall. Debating the point about whether Nightfall or the lack of Superman was most responsible for the increase in crime had become a popular pastime. Of those that seemed committed to the Nightfall explanation, many seemed to be reading from the same playbook. They consistently argued that Superman hadn’t been that valuable to have around and the world would have been better off if he had never arrived. The first few times she had heard this line of argument, Lois had gone ballistic. It was quickly evident that these people tended to have a connection to a Lex Luthor-controlled company. Given what they now knew about Lex, that wasn’t a surprise. It had become almost a game to see how quickly she or Clark could establish a link between someone arguing the anti-Superman line and Luthor.

However, Lois was beginning to detect a new trend which she found most disturbing. Early on, she’d been able to trace

almost all the anti-Superman speakers back to Lex. But each day there seemed to be a few more public figures joining the anti-Superman camp with no apparent inducement from Luthor. This made Lois more anxious than ever to get the evidence so they could move with the story.

Fred showed up with Bernie Klein in tow early in the afternoon. His excitement was obvious as he practically ran to Lois’s desk.

“Ms. Lane. We need to talk!”

She saw that Clark was already on his way over. “In the conference room,” she said as she stood and started for the meeting room. She led the way with Fred, Bernie, and Clark on her heels.

The door was barely closed when Fred started talking excitedly. “We found it.”

“What do you mean? Found what?” Clark asked.

“Bernie and I were going over the remnants of the survival pack when he asked about a piece of burned equipment.”

Bernie cut in. “The specs for the survival module were very general. Fred’s lab added a number of enhancements.”

Fred picked the story up again. “One of the parts we added was an independently powered location transponder. The idea was to have an emergency backup location system. It would broadcast a locator signal for 72 hours.”

“Hold it,” Lois said. “Why didn’t anyone use this to track Superman after the Nightfall intercept?”

Bernie answered her question. “It was a short range system. More than twenty miles away, the signal is too weak to detect.”

Fred spoke up. “The idea was that if Superman got back and was on the ground but injured, we could use this to find him. We assumed that we’d know his general area. This was a short range, high precision device.”

Then Bernie picked it up again. “The one that was on the mission pack didn’t survive re-entry. By the time we thought to look for that signal, there was nothing to detect.”

Lois was getting impatient. “So what good does this information do us?”

Fred’s turn again. “The transponder was designed to be triggered by an external signal. There were spare parts to everything in the system. We figured that there might be a chance that the backup transponder would be with the rest of the backup equipment. We mounted a transmitter in a Star Labs truck and drove around the city broadcasting the activation signal. In less than half an hour, we were getting a reply. We traced it to what looked like an industrial warehouse.”

“That’s great,” Lois said. “But what good do those parts do us?”

Fred answered immediately. “There was a backup for the security key module. It should have the same set of digital keys as the one that was destroyed. If it’s there then we should be able to listen to that encrypted message we found.”

Before she could reply, Clark cut in. “If Fred’s original spare parts are there, maybe there will be information about the modifications. Even if the key module isn’t there, we might find information that will lead to the people that modified the equipment.”

“And that might lead to the person that ordered the changes,” Lois added. “Okay, I’m convinced. We need to get into that warehouse.” She looked at Fred. “Did you see any people in the area? Any security?”

“No. The area looked completely deserted,” Fred answered.

“I think we should take a look in that warehouse ourselves.” Lois said.

“I’m not sure that would be a good idea,” Clark cautioned.

“Clark, you always say that when I want to bend the rules for a story.”

“But, Lois, this isn’t about a story,” Clark said. “This is about

getting the evidence about what happened to Superman in a way that can convince the world. If you and I bring this in ourselves, some people will say that we faked the evidence. You've always been Superman's staunchest supporter."

"You aren't being fair." Lois's voice carried an element of complaint but she knew that Clark was probably right this time.

Clark seemed to sense that she wasn't going to push the issue and came back immediately. "Maybe not. But this has to be about more than a story. I think we should go to Bill Henderson and see if he can get a search warrant and make this official. That way we have a legal chain of evidence and the critics will have a much harder time claiming bias."

Lois had to concede that Clark was right. This was way bigger than just a story. "So what do we use to convince Bill that this is a police matter?" she asked. "None of this equipment is stolen. What crime can we ask Bill to investigate here?"

Clark looked back at Lois with surprise. "Murder." His tone was deadly serious. "We have the recovered environmental pack. It has traces of Kryptonite and nerve gas. The other equipment may be evidence in the crime of murdering Superman."

"We know that, but without his body we may not have enough."

Clark thought for a moment then his expression brightened. "We have my body. I was exposed to the gas and had my memory erased. That has to be at least good enough for some sort of criminal negligence or something."

She looked at Bernie. "Do you have any samples and notes that we can take to the police?"

"Yes," Bernie replied. "I had a feeling that sooner or later we would have to provide evidence detailing what we've discovered. I have two sets of reports each with samples and test results."

"That's great," Lois said. "Are they small enough that we could bring them to police headquarters?"

"Yes. I picked the samples with that in mind. We've recovered enough of the survival pack that we would produce a dozen report packages like this."

"Then it's time we talk with Bill Henderson," Lois announced.

When Lois led the way into Bill Henderson's office, he was waiting. There had been some trouble getting through security with the samples that Bernie had supplied, but the parts were all small and obviously not weapons. Even so, if she and Clark hadn't been so well known and respected, there might have been even more trouble.

"Lane, Kent, what can possibly be so important?"

Lois motioned Clark to close the door and spoke in a hushed tone. "Bill, we have some very important information. Can we talk in here without being overheard?"

He looked slightly offended at that. "You know we can."

"We need some help to finish an investigation."

"You know I don't help you with stories unless a crime is involved." There was a note of curiosity in his reply.

"Last time I checked, murder was a crime," she deadpanned back.

"Okay, Lois, you have my attention. Who was murdered?"

Now Henderson's voice was all business.

"Superman."

"What?" It was clear that he didn't expect that.

They spent the next twenty minutes going over their investigation. She described how investigating Clark's amnesia led them to the building where they found the equipment and how Bernie Klein had reconstructed the Nightfall mission.

When she was done Henderson was speechless for several long minutes. Finally, in a tone of shocked disbelief he asked, "So you're telling me that someone sabotaged the Nightfall mission to kill Superman?"

"Bill, we know how crazy it must sound but we brought samples of equipment that was on the mission," Clark answered. "Some of these still have traces of the Kryptonite and the nerve gas. There isn't enough to harm anyone but there is enough to detect. We also have the full write up of the analysis."

"What do you want me to do with all this?" Bill asked. "I can see you writing a story, but you must be here for a reason."

"Bill, there was more equipment that didn't go on the mission," Lois supplied. "We think there's a chance that there will be evidence that might identify who was responsible. We were hoping to convince you to get a search warrant and raid the warehouse where the rest of the equipment is located."

His eyes lit up at this. "You know where it is?"

"Yes," she answered. "Bernie Klein managed to trigger a spare locator beacon that led to a warehouse owned by a LexCorp front company."

"What do you expect to find there?" Bill asked.

Lois continued. "We're hoping that there will be records and equipment. The jackpot would be a spare key module for the communication system. There was a message for Superman that played at the same time the poison gas was triggered. It's heavily encrypted and the key module was burned away. Our contact says there was a spare. If we can get that and use it to play the message, we may know who was behind this."

Bill was quiet again. Finally he seemed to have it all straight. "You think you know who is responsible, don't you?"

"Bill, we've already told you this is LexCorp," Lois said. "We have a suspicion but no evidence. Since we don't have the facts to back up our suspicions we'd rather not say yet. Can you live with that for now?"

"I guess." Bill was quiet for a moment. Lois could almost see the wheels turning. A moment later he said, "I think I can get the search warrant. I gather you think this should be done as quietly as possible?"

"Yes, Bill. We know that there is a LexCorp connection. With the links they have to MPD now, we need to do this in a way that won't alert anyone there that might have been involved."

"I understand. I think we should move as quickly as possible on this. Is the place guarded?"

"Not that we could tell," Lois answered. "It looked pretty deserted."

"We'll do this like a drug raid. We can bring that team and tell them that we're going to raid a reinforced drug manufacturing setup. I should be able to make the arrangements for tonight. I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Bill. We owe you," Lois offered.

"Not for this," he replied. "First, if someone really did this deliberately, then the whole world deserves to have them brought to justice. Second, Superman was my friend too." He looked at Clark. "And, Clark, what happened to you was bad enough on its own. Whoever did this cost you the memories of your whole life. I'd support you if that were the only reason."

The whole middle of the day seemed to go in slow motion. Both Lois and Clark busied themselves with other articles and minor investigations. Clark seemed more confident in his abilities now and had gotten reacquainted with most of his contacts. Lois revisited an ongoing check into connections between Lex and The Boss. As had generally been the case with any investigation into Metropolis's crime king, no one would say a word.

Lois took the call from Henderson late that afternoon. "Lois, can you and Kent come by my office? I'd like to discuss the evidence you provided from your apartment building collapse."

Lois knew that the only evidence they had discussed recently had nothing to do with her apartment. "Sure, Bill. We're not busy right now and we'll be right over. I appreciate you following up on that evidence. I know MPD has a lot on its hands these days."

“No problem, Lois. We’re busy but this was a serious crime. There are some developments that I thought you might find interesting for your own investigation.”

“Okay, Bill. We’ll be over shortly.” When she hung up the phone she called to her partner. “Clark, we need to head over to MPD. Bill Henderson has something for us.”

For a second, he looked like he wanted to ask a question but then seemed to think better of it. He simply set down his work, stood up and grabbed his jacket. “I’m ready when you are.”

She started gathering her stuff. “Let’s go.”

In less than half an hour they were in Henderson’s office. As soon as the door was closed Bill spoke up. “This was much easier than I thought. There are several judges that are above reproach and thought very highly of Superman. With the analysis you provided, it was easy to convince one that a search warrant was in order. I’ve hand-picked the team that will participate in the raid. I sized it as if this were a raid on a newly-discovered drug manufacturing warehouse. That will explain why we’re in that part of the city. It also makes a good cover for any leaks that might occur before tonight.”

“Bill, we need to be there,” Lois said.

“That works for me. I need your technology specialists to help me identify evidence that will be important. What I hope we find is some more of that nerve gas.”

“Why that in particular?” Clark asked.

Bill looked intently at Clark. “Because you’re our ace-in-the-hole. It will be difficult to prove much about what happened to Superman based on the evidence we’re likely to find. However, that gas is very hard to come by and Clark was injured by a release of that gas inside Metropolis city limits. That gas provides evidence for a crime where all of the parts are in place. That is the hook that we can use for following up on whatever we find.”

“Bill, I’m surprised. Clark is important...” She looked over at her partner and realized what she was saying. She reached over and squeezed his hand before continuing. “Okay, Clark is very important, but what was done to Superman harmed the entire world.”

“I’m not trying to devalue Superman,” Bill replied. “You know me better than that. If this was just about Clark, we probably would still have been able to get the search warrant. But we wouldn’t have gotten it so easily. And while there is ample evidence that someone tried to kill Superman, the evidence you have shows only a tenuous link to Metropolis. It’s probably more in the FBI’s jurisdiction. The more we can find to tie this into what happened to Clark, the more we can do on our own.”

“You’re right, Bill. I’m sorry,” Lois apologized. “I just want to get to the bottom of all this.”

“The raid is set to go down at 9:30 tonight. I’d like you to be there with Dr. Klein and any other technical experts you think would be valuable.”

“We have one other person that has been working with Dr. Klein on this investigation. I think the four of us will be all we need.”

Clark interrupted. “Bill, can we bring a photographer?”

Henderson thought about the request. “I don’t see a problem with that. You know the rules about this sort of situation. Stay back until we give you the go ahead. Do you have a photographer that you can trust?”

Clark glanced at Lois for only a second before answering. “I was thinking about bringing Jimmy Olsen. He’s been involved in some parts of the investigation and he’s been working to establish himself as a photographer. He deserves to be in on this.”

“Olsen’s a good kid. So you’ll be there at 9:30?”

“We’ll be there,” Lois assured him.

In many ways, the actual raid was anticlimactic. To outward

appearances, it was just another warehouse in an industrial district. Entering the building involved little more than the creative use of some bolt cutters. Henderson had brought the tank-ram vehicle that MPD used to break down walls of fortified buildings, but it wasn’t necessary.

The police went in first. Bill insisted that they do this by the book. He was going to make everyone wait for the entire building to be secure before they entered, but then he got inside and realized how big it was. It would take hours to search if they just looked around. Fortunately, Bernie had brought several pieces of equipment including a small device that could show the precise location of the beacon. Since Bernie and Fred had all the expertise and the critical equipment, the scientists led, escorted by the police.

The tracking device led them to a series of rooms up against one wall of the warehouse. They were generally nondescript but the padlocks on the doors were of a much higher quality than the locks on the building. However, the police had brought plenty of equipment and in moments the first lock was history.

When the light came on it revealed a room full of advanced looking equipment. Fred was right at the front of the group. He took a quick look around the room. “This is it!” he exclaimed. “This is all the backup and spare parts we prepared.” He started moving toward a bench that had several larger pieces of equipment.

Henderson cut him off. “Wait! Please don’t touch anything until we can dust for prints.”

Fred paused and then turned to Henderson. “Some of this equipment is especially important.” He pointed at a bench. “Can you have your team go over these first?”

“Sure,” Bill replied. “I have a forensics team with us. You can look around but please don’t touch anything unless we give you the go-ahead.”

Fred walked over to a large piece of equipment that stood in one corner of the room. He turned back to Bill and then pointed at a small box that was attached to the larger pack. “You need to process this part first. This is the communication system security module. It should have the keys to decipher the message that Superman heard when the gas was released. Bernie and I were hoping to find this and we brought a playback module with the data file. If we can plug that module into our playback system, we should be able to listen to the message.”

“Okay, we’ll work that first.” Henderson stepped outside and in a moment several officers were photographing and cataloging that section of the room. While the team was working there, the scientists were looking over the rest of the room very carefully. From what Bernie and Fred were saying to each other, this was all of the support equipment and spare parts that Fred’s team developed for the Nightfall mission. There were several locked filing cabinets but the contents of those would have to wait until the forensics team could get to them.

A moment later Henderson approached them. “We found something in another room that we would like you to look at.”

They left the room to find that all of the rooms had been entered. The police teams seemed to be making a systematic search of the adjacent rooms. “In here.” Henderson stepped through a door.

This room was almost empty. There was nothing but a series of tanks standing next to one wall. Henderson pointed to the canisters. “Can you tell me what those are?”

Bernie went nearer before suddenly reversing course and backing away. “You need to get everyone out of this room right now. The marking on some of those canisters is nerve gas. You need to bring in a military hazmat team to handle those.”

They exited the room and closed the door. Henderson turned to Bernie and asked, “How dangerous are those canisters?”

“Exceptionally,” Bernie said. “This is the gas that was used to

kill Superman. It's very deadly. It's also the gas that in a trace amount cost Mr. Kent his memory. We should clear the entire warehouse until those canisters are safely removed."

"Then we need to evacuate. Do you know who to contact in the military to take care of this?" Bill asked Bernie.

"Yes. I've made some contacts while researching this. I can initiate the call and let you work out the logistics of this being a police matter."

They stepped back into the room with the Nightfall equipment. "We're evacuating the building," Bill announced in a shout. "Finish what you're doing and get out."

One of the forensics officers stepped toward Henderson. "We finished our work on that first part so we can go now."

Lois, who had been letting the police and scientists do their job, cut in. "Bill, you have to let us take that security module. Your team is finished and we have the playback equipment outside."

"Lois, I can't let you take it. It's evidence in an investigation."

"Then you carry it," she pleaded. "All we need to do is plug it into the playback unit that Bernie brought. You can have it back as soon as we hear the message."

Bill took a moment to think through the options. "Fine. But I carry the module and it never leaves my possession." He looked back at the police technician. "You're sure that you're done?"

"Yes, sir. There were no prints anywhere. I suspect the equipment was wiped down and that anyone that handled it must have worn gloves. We've photographed and cataloged everything in that section of the room."

Bill walked over to the equipment where Fred was already standing. "We're taking the security module with us. Could you disconnect it, please?"

Fred used one hand to press what looked like a locking pin while he pulled the security module off with his other hand. "This is all we need."

Henderson held out his hand. "Please let me carry it. I want to maintain the chain of possession." Then he raised his voice. "Everybody out now!"

It took less than a minute to evacuate the building. It helped that most of the police had already left. They took a minute to account for everyone and then Henderson deployed the police around the warehouse to establish a perimeter.

While Bill was deploying the police, Bernie and Fred had been setting up the playback unit. Finally Henderson was satisfied with the police situation and he came over to the Star Labs van.

"Are we ready?" he asked.

"Yes," Bernie replied. "We just plug in the module, turn on the system and press this button. It will trigger a playback sequence and hopefully we'll get to hear what Superman heard."

Bill took the module out of his pocket. He was handing it to Fred when he suddenly stopped. "Is there any chance your device will damage this... thing? I don't want to accidentally destroy this evidence."

"No," Fred answered. "This is standard military hardware. There's nothing unique here except for the digital keys it carries. They are the only data that can be erased. When Bernie and I designed this playback unit, we made sure that we could play an encrypted message with no chance of destroying the key." Fred's expression turned very serious. "We think this message may be very important. We put a lot of time into making sure we could hear it."

"Okay, I'm convinced," Henderson said as he handed Fred the module.

Fred turned to the playback device. He made sure the power was off before plugging the unit into the empty receptacle. "Ready," he said.

Bernie turned on the unit and looked at some indicators. "Everything looks good." He started to reach for the play button but stopped short of pressing it. He looked at Lois and Clark. "Ms. Lane, Mr. Kent, would either of you rather do this? After all, it was your investigation that brought us all here today."

Clark shook his head. Lois started to say no but on an impulse reached over and pressed the button marked, 'Play.'

Luthor's voice was unmistakable. "Hello, Superman, Lex Luthor here. I wanted to thank you for saving the planet for me. You should know that LexCorp built your survival suit. In fact, I personally helped in the design. From the instant your guidance system signaled that you were no longer needed, your air supply has been laced with Kryptonite and poison gas. You were a worthy adversary, but I always win. Have a nice death. Oh, I'll be sure to be there to comfort Lois Lane when you're gone."

Even after all that they had learned and all that had happened, this seemed too much. The only thing Lois heard was her own voice saying, "Oh my God."

Chapter 21: Downfall

Clark tried to absorb what he had just heard. Luthor had sabotaged the Nightfall mission and killed Superman. To get at the hero, Luthor had risked destroying the world. But, from everything he'd heard and could remember about this man, Luthor probably saw it as a calculated risk. Clark had to admit that even in the light of the mission failure, Luthor had come out ahead.

He had no idea how much time had passed when he heard Bill Henderson's voice. "This is incredible," Bill said. The shock of the news had caused Henderson's voice to take on an unfamiliar tone of surprise. "I always thought Luthor might be dirty, but I had no idea that he was capable of anything like this."

"What do you think you can do with this evidence?" Clark asked.

"We can get a search warrant of other LexCorp facilities including his residence in LexCorp tower." Bill paused in thought for a moment then turned to the scientists. "Is there any chance that this recording will be in the duplicate pack we found in the warehouse?"

Bernie and Fred exchanged a glance before Bernie answered. "It's hard to say. This part of the system was one of the late additions. If the second pack is a complete duplicate of this one, then the data file might be there. However, there just isn't any way to know without looking. I'm sure Luthor wouldn't have wanted this part duplicated, but like I said, if the other pack is a complete copy, then this file might have been duplicated along with everything else."

Henderson thought for a moment. "Did it look like the toxic gas was loaded in the survival pack?"

Fred answered immediately. "No. There was a sleeve designed to hold a complete canister of the toxic gas. It had a window to allow a visual verification of the presence of the tank. I looked. It was empty. The canisters in the other room that had toxic labels on them appeared to be the size to fit that space."

"So it would be safe to bring out the other survival suit?" Bill asked.

"Yes," Fred answered. "Except for going back into the warehouse to get it."

"If that recording is there, I want it tonight," Henderson said. "It's too dangerous to send anyone back in the building. I'll go and bring it out myself. There was a wheeled cart in the room. I should be able to get it on the cart and return with it."

Clark spoke up. "Bill, that pack is too big for you to handle by yourself. I'll go with you."

"Kent, are you sure?"

"Yes. For me this is personal. If that has evidence that can bring some measure of closure for..." Clark glanced at Lois who

still looked to be in a state of shock. "... Superman and others, then I have to help any way I can." As he looked at Lois he realized that he had a more important task first. "Bill, can you please give us just a minute?"

Now that he saw her face, Clark wished he'd been standing with Lois when that awful recording was played. Hearing it was hard and it triggered a wave of revulsion. However, in his case it felt similar to the sense of loathing he had been feeling every time he thought of Luthor. It was as if he already knew that the man was capable of evil of this magnitude. But Lois had been hit hard. She had been shaken by Lex's voice and Clark should have gone to her immediately. He wanted to kick himself for not thinking of Lois first. He moved over to her and put his hands on her arms. "Lois, are you going to be okay?"

When she didn't respond, Clark risked gently lifting her face so that he could see hers. "Lois?"

Her arms flew around him and it was like she was holding on for dear life. She buried her head in his chest and he could hear her crying. Immediately, he put his own arms around his partner. As he applied a gentle pressure, he was sure he could sense her relax just a little. As the seconds dragged by, Clark remembered that he'd promised to help Bill with the backpack. He wanted to stay with Lois and she needed him here but he'd promised to help. He was trying to figure out how to be in two places at once when he saw Fred come up behind Lois.

"You stay with her. I'll help Inspector Henderson," Fred said softly.

Clark started to protest but Fred just shook his head and mouthed the words, "Stay with her." Clark watched as Fred and Bill started back toward the warehouse. After a second, he turned his attention to Lois. A few minutes later, she seemed to be past the worst.

"Lois, are you all right?"

She answered without ever lifting her head from his chest. "I... I can't believe anyone could do something like this. I guess I always knew Lex had a dark side. I had just brushed it off to being in big business. Even with what we've learned this past week, I guess I never really believed it would be him. I know the evidence pointed that way but I kept thinking it would have been some crazy in his organization. Clark, he's responsible for the deaths of millions of people." She paused for a moment as if collecting herself. "He talked like it was some kind of game and I was one of the prizes."

"You can't blame yourself. I don't think you had much to do with this. Think about the way he mentioned you at the end. It was like rubbing salt in a wound. Did he know that Superman had feelings for you?"

Lois barely paused before answering. "Yes. Lex was there when Superman kissed me under the influence of the pheromone drug." She sounded so fragile.

"So think, Lois. This wasn't about you. It was about power. What could Superman have been doing that would have caused him to be an adversary to Luthor?"

She seemed calmer now as she pulled back and looked at Clark's face. "Superman never involved himself with business. No matter what Lex may have done as a businessman, Superman wouldn't have cared. Superman only intervened in natural disasters and crime. As powerful as Lex is, he's not a natural disaster."

"We talked about a connection between Luthor and The Boss. Did it cross your mind that Luthor might *be* The Boss?" Now that he'd voiced the words Clark knew it was the truth.

"Of course." Now her voice gained some strength. "That fits in so many ways. Superman's appearance changed the whole dynamic of Metropolis. If Lex were The Boss, then between that and his business connections, he pretty much owned this city. Superman was a threat to him on both sides. Knowing what I do

about Lex, I suspect that to him this was a game that he would do anything to win."

She seemed more in control of her emotions now but didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave his arms. Clark was also content with her location but it was time to get back to business. "This is your show. We have the story of the century but we need to be careful about running with it. When this story comes out, people will be out for Luthor's blood."

"You're right. But I'm sure Bill will want to arrest him immediately. Before the story can break, Lex will be in MPD custody."

Clark heard the sound of a cart rolling. Suddenly Lois turned her head and looked over to see Bill and Fred with the backup survival pack on a cart.

"Wait here," Lois said as she let go of Clark and went over to Henderson. After only a few minutes, she returned to where Clark was waiting near the front of the Star Labs van. "They're taking everything to the MPD evidence lab," she said. "Henderson will be leaving a senior detective here with enough officers to secure the area until the military arrives. I told Bill that we intend to run the story in the morning paper. He's not happy about that, but his plan is to get the warrant for Lex as soon as they get back to MPD so Lex will either be in custody or a fugitive before our story hits the street."

Lois seemed to have lost the fragile feel that she had earlier. Now she felt like the headstrong reporter that Clark had come to know so well these past weeks. Clark had to fight the temptation to ask if she were sure that she was up to this. He knew her well enough to realize that such a question would only insult her and neither of them needed that tonight. He tried to sound upbeat. "Well, partner, it sounds like we have a long night ahead."

When she replied her smile was forced. "Yes, we do." She looked around to find Jimmy taking close-up pictures of the survival pack. "Jimmy," she yelled, "let's get back to the Planet. We have a front page to make."

The next morning Lois thought of inventing a word that meant more crazy than crazy. Thank goodness for the guards in the lobby of the building. She had never imagined that there would be such a need, but in the light of the Superman-Nightfall-Luthor story, she was relieved that she didn't have to deal with tabloid reporters badgering her for her story on top of everything else. She had been involved in big stories before. In fact, on more than one occasion she had been part of a big story. But this was beyond all reckoning.

They had called in Perry as soon as they got back to the office last night. This story was way too big to leave him out. The paper was already locked for the early edition but they had enough material for a whole special section. Perry had fretted over how to include this story in as many editions as possible. Due to the nature of the timing, some versions went out without the story but adjustments to fit in late-breaking news were all part of the game.

Perry had been uncertain about running a transcript of the Luthor message to Superman until they got the call from MPD that the backpack in evidence had the same Luthor recording as the one recovered from the damaged building. That put this recording in two places, one of which had a solid evidence trail. Bill had also verified that the police lab had run a voice print analysis on the recording and Bill was confident that this would hold up as Luthor's voice.

There had been a brief debate about how to present the story. Lois was torn between favoring, 'Superman Cleared' and 'Superman Murdered' for the lead headline. Perry had immediately vetoed the 'murdered' headline as being too tabloid. They did present the story as well as the transcript of the recording but stayed completely away from making any

statements that would appear to pass judgment on Luthor. Perry had rejected the first two versions of the story that Lois submitted as not meeting journalistic standards.

They were still confused as to why Lex would have left this evidence laying around. He must have known that this backup equipment existed and if it were ever discovered it could lead directly to him. Lois and Clark talked it over and wondered if the death of Nigel St. John didn't play a factor. Luthor was notorious for not involving himself in situations where he could be traced. If Nigel had been responsible for the details of this operation, Luthor might not have known of the existence of the backup equipment. It was also possible that he knew it was "out there" somewhere but when Nigel died, it had gotten lost among the countless LexCorp facilities in Metropolis.

By the time the first edition hit the streets, the raid on LexCorp tower was history. The televised news services had the story of the police raid but they lacked any of the evidence behind the raid. When the police entered Lex's apartment, Lex was gone. He seemed to have disappeared sometime in the middle of the night.

Lois and Clark had already written up most of the supporting material covering the investigation. There were parts covering the damaged equipment that they found in the burned out building. There were sidebars on nerve gas and Kryptonite. They had been reluctant to publish that there was a substance that could hurt Superman but there proved to be no way to write the story without it.

After the police raid, MPD had clamped down on all data about the Luthor investigation. Lois had tried to call Bill Henderson but he either went home to get some sleep or he was ducking calls. Lois thought that they might be able to sneak into LexCorp tower but found it to be sealed tight. Lois and Clark made calls to their contacts but found all their sources blocked as well. It was well into the afternoon that they got a call back from Bill Henderson asking to meet at MPD.

When they entered, it was almost eerie. As soon as they were in the building, it was like a cold, silent wave rolling in front of them. Almost everyone stopped talking and Lois could feel the eyes on her as she crossed the room. As they were going through security, Lois asked what was going on.

"It's you," the officer replied.

"Me?" Lois asked.

"You know, the Lex Luthor – Superman thing."

Lois had to struggle not to react. "C'mon, Clark. Bill's waiting." They went on to Henderson's office and were relieved to see that they would go right in.

"How are you holding up, Lois?"

"Bill! Not you too."

Henderson looked surprised. "What's been happening?"

Lois opened her mouth to respond but stopped short. Instead, she turned to her partner. "Clark, why don't you explain it? Maybe I'm over reacting."

Clark reached out and put his hand over hers in a sign of support. Henderson was only a tiny bit surprised when he saw Lois grasp her partner's hand. Still holding Lois's hand, Clark turned back to Henderson. "Shortly after the story hit the street this morning, Lois began getting interview requests. Perry had to add extra security to fend off the reporters trying to sneak into the building to get her version of what some of them have called the Superman – Luthor – Lois Lane triangle. One jerk got into the newsroom this morning and was shouting across the room. It was both ridiculous and insulting."

Lois cut in at this point. "He wanted to know what it felt like to be responsible for the death of Superman as well as millions of other innocent people."

The fragility in her voice as she said that was unmistakable. Clark certainly heard it as he scooted his chair to be adjacent to

Lois's and put his arm around her. While Clark was changing positions, Bill answered that point. "Lois, we all heard the recording. This wasn't about you. This was about Luthor eliminating his greatest obstacle."

"Thanks, Bill. I know that, but I worry that this is going to haunt me for a long time."

"Well, I have news that I hope will lessen that impact," Bill said. "Luthor must have left his building in a hurry. We found a sub-basement full of stolen artwork. It seems that Lex ran a number of operations from that tower. We found cabinets full of records that point to him being The Boss."

Lois practically jumped out of her seat. "Bill, you have to let us have something."

"Relax, Lois. You're here because... well, throughout this whole Nightfall mess you two have taken some of the greatest personal hits as well as being the source of Luthor's downfall. I have copies of information that I wanted to share." He picked up a manila envelope and handed it to Lois. "It will all be released to the public tomorrow but I've been able to get the go-ahead to share this with the two of you. There should be enough here for your article but the short version is that Luthor was The Boss."

Clark reacted before he realized he was speaking. "I knew it." "Kent, did you remember something that I don't know about?"

Clark looked over to Lois for guidance. "You should tell him about you and Lex," she said.

Clark cleared his throat and then proceeded to explain. "Eventually I remembered some images of interacting with Luthor where he was in some kind of conflict with Superman. I couldn't remember any of the details and I don't remember seeing Superman but it was as if I were in hiding, eavesdropping on their conversation. Lois thought that it sounded like I was working with Superman to do an investigation of Luthor. I don't remember any of the details but as near as I can tell there was no one else involved. Even Lois didn't know anything about it. But ever since those memories surfaced, I've believed that there was something wrong about Luthor that went way beyond personal dislike."

Henderson thought for a minute. "So you think Superman was trying to gather evidence that he was The Boss?"

Lois beat Clark to the reply. "Yes."

"Well, we can hope that Superman will rest a little easier knowing that Luthor is finally being held accountable for his crimes. I'm sure that between the information you have there and your own sources, there will be much more to find out about our former leading citizen."

Bill's envelope extended an already long day and Clark was surprised that he wasn't more tired at the end. He figured it was a sign that he was continuing to recover from his Nightfall injuries.

While there was only a minimal amount of hard information in Bill's packet, there was enough to develop a short front-page story that could be linked to the revelations of the previous night. It was after dark when Perry told them both to go home and made them promise to get some rest.

The evening seemed superficially similar to many of their recent nights. Clark prepared a light meal and they planned to turn in early. They were still at the dining table when Lois asked, "Does tonight feel different to you?"

"So you've noticed it too," Clark replied. "I've been thinking that ever since we got home but I thought it was just an aftereffect of breaking the story."

"There's something different," she said. "I've broken big stories before but this is different. Now I'll admit that they weren't this big, but I know the signs. There is more to it than just the end of an investigation."

Clark thought for a moment before offering, "It's time to

move on.”

“Clark, what are you talking about?”

“Since Nightfall hit, you and I have been working on the Superman investigation. That was all tied into the world-changing event that was Nightfall. But that’s over now. I think we’re both realizing that we need to think about getting on with our lives. I need to find a life that isn’t just investigating Superman’s Nightfall mission. You... I don’t know. Have you contacted your family? I don’t remember you saying anything.”

“I talked with Lucy a few days ago. She said that she’s been in contact with my mom and dad. They’re fine and staying with friends on the west coast. That’s as much contact as I need. My family seems to do better when we hardly talk.” There was a touch of sadness in her voice, but only a tiny bit. It sounded like these were issues that she’d long ago come to grips with.

“I’m sorry, Lois. Before Nightfall, what did you do around Metropolis when you weren’t working?”

“Actually, I don’t have much of a personal life. About six months ago Lucy was staying with me for a while and she commented that I don’t have a personal life. She told me that I didn’t have dates, I had interviews.”

“Well, for what it’s worth, I thought our date the other night was fantastic,” Clark offered.

There was a pause as if both of them were thinking of how to change the subject to a less personal topic. It was Clark that came up with an idea first. “I guess you could start looking for an apartment,” he suggested hesitantly. He really didn’t want her to move out, but it was the next logical step.

She looked like he’d slapped her. “Clark, do you want me to leave?” She sounded hurt.

“No!” It was almost a shout. Then he continued in calmer tones. “I didn’t mean... You know... Well, if I had my way...” He was nervous about saying any more than that.

She reached across the table and put her hand on his arm. “Clark, please tell me.”

He could drown in those eyes. “It’s not fair for me to ... want you to stay, but I do. Most of my old memories are gone for good. I have to accept that. But having you here... Being with you... I can’t imagine that I was ever happier than I’ve been since you’ve been here. I don’t want you to leave.”

To Clark’s relief her expression brightened at this revelation. “I feel the same way,” she replied with energy. “I haven’t lost my memories but these past weeks have been like a different life for me too. It used to be that I’d get home from work and think about the best way to kill time until I could go to bed so I could get back to work. Since I’ve been here, I’ve found that there’s better ways to spend time than trying to kill it. This really has been a different life. Clark, I like this life.”

He was so confused about what to say. But then he remembered that kiss and what happened after. “But Lois, this...” and he waved his arm in a sweeping motion, “...can’t go on the way it has. It’s been wonderful but it’s just like the Nightfall investigation. It isn’t part of the world moving forward. Our arrangement, as much as I’ve come to enjoy it, isn’t real for the long term.” It was difficult to say the words since it might lead to Lois moving out. But he knew it was important that they not get stuck in an in-between relationship.

“You’re right,” she replied. “But what ‘arrangement’ are you talking about? If you mean that we can’t go on just being roommates, I agree. You mentioned our date the other night. It was wonderful and I’m not ready to give up on the chance of there being an us.”

Clark just didn’t know what to say. She’d just said that she wanted there to be an “us.” He was still trying to get his mind around that when she continued. “Clark, how would you feel about me being here a while longer until we see how our relationship develops?”

He managed to shake off the brain-freeze. “You know I can’t say no to that. Lois, if you’re comfortable staying, I would love to have you be here as long as it takes for you to figure out what you want.”

Chapter 22: Distress

Right after the story of the raid on LexCorp tower had first hit the streets, snitches all over Metropolis started buzzing with news about Luthor. Word was out that several criminal organizations had put a price on his head. After all, Nightfall hadn’t limited its killing to the legitimate population. Several highly placed underworld figures had lost family in the tragedy. There were some rumors that helping Luthor could cost a person not only their own life, but the lives of their entire family. The very fact that he, or more properly, his body, hadn’t turned up, led many to believe that Lex had managed to escape the country.

Luthor’s escape had been an embarrassment to MPD. Henderson believed that there might have been a leak from MPD while they were preparing for the raid on his tower. Shortly before the raid, a servant had seen Lex in his penthouse. When the police arrived, he was gone. That same elevator that had taken Lost to his survival shelter beneath the tower had probably been his escape route. Those sub-levels had multiple points of entry to underground drainage and sewage systems. There were any number of jokes going around that as soon as he was revealed for what he was, Luthor ran for the sewers.

Before the news broke, it had been impossible to get anyone to talk about The Boss. Now, instead of struggling to find a source willing to talk, the problem was finding anything new about Luthor worth reporting. He had killed the world’s greatest hero. He had been responsible for the deaths of millions of people. And finally, he had been the most powerful crime lord in the eastern half of the United States. With all that already on the record, almost anything else Luthor might have done paled in comparison. Fortunately, Lois had a fine eye for what was worth pursuing.

Lois had been investigating Luthor’s involvement in weapons systems. It had occurred to her that if he used military technologies for his own purposes when he went after Superman, it was likely that he had misappropriated military systems before the Nightfall incident. By Tuesday morning, she had a handful of leads that she wanted to split with Clark. Between the two of them, they should be able to have a story ready before other researchers even found a clue.

When she was ready to hand off that part of the investigation to her partner, Lois looked up to see Clark staring at his empty desk with an utterly blank look on his face. He held the telephone headset in his hand but his arm was on his desk. It was as if he blanked out and simply forgot to hang up the phone. For a second Lois was afraid that this was some sort of relapse of the nerve gas. The idea that he might have forgotten all they’d been through these past weeks sent a chill of fear through her. Without thinking she called out, “Clark!”

His head snapped up. Good, he was still here. She hurried over to his desk and continued in a more conversational tone. “Are you all right?” she asked. “You looked like you were a million miles away.”

He glanced around and seemed to notice the telephone handset. He returned the phone to its cradle and slumped back in his chair. He looked very tired. “I’m sorry, Lois.” His voice sounded as tired as he looked. “I just got some news.”

She sat down on the edge of his desk. “Can you tell me?”

When he answered, his voice sounded dead. “That call was from the Nightfall relief coordinator here in Metropolis. Right after the asteroid hit, I left my name as the point of contact for my parents. The relief workers just got the official casualty list for Lowell County.” With every word Clark’s voice grew more

strained. “They’ve finished the clean-up work in Smallville. My mom and dad were declared dead yesterday.”

Lois thought that he had already given up on his parents being alive. But looking at him now, she knew that he’d been holding out hope. With those last words, Lois could hear Clark’s hope die. As she had noticed so many times since Nightfall, despite the loss of his conscious memories, underneath he was still Clark. Ever the optimist, he’d found a way to believe they would turn up alive. Having to accept the loss of his parents was taking a heavy toll on him now. She reached out and took his hand in his. “Clark, I’m so sorry. They were some of the nicest people I’ve ever met.”

When he lifted his face to see hers, she was surprised that what she saw was not just sadness, but frustrated confusion. “Were they? I wish I could remember. I have a few images but I’m sure you remember them better than I do. It hurts. It’s not only because I’ve lost my family. What hurts the most is that I’ll never know them. You say they were special people. They raised me but I don’t even remember them.”

“You can’t feel bad for that,” Lois offered. “You didn’t ask to lose your memory.”

“No, I didn’t,” he replied flatly.

His expression suddenly darkened. Over the past days Lois had come to recognize this look. She had never seen it on Clark before Nightfall. Since then there was only one thought that triggered that expression. “You can’t let yourself dwell on Lex,” Lois said.

He looked up at her with that flat and angry expression. “Are you sure I was a nice person before Nightfall?”

“Of course! You still are. It’s always been one of your defining characteristics. When you started, I thought you were too nice to survive in this city. What I didn’t see was the toughness you hide under that friendly exterior.”

Clark looked back down at his desk. “When I think of Luthor, I... I just hate so much it burns. Lois, I want to hurt him. I want him to hurt over and over for what he’s done.”

It was clear to Lois that Clark was more frustrated than angry. This wasn’t about him hurting anyone else, this was about Clark hurting inside. “If Lex were here, what would you do?” she asked in as tender a voice as she could muster.

Clark looked up at her and took a moment to think. “I’d want to kill him.” There was genuine anger in his voice.

“But what would you do?” she asked softly.

That seemed to bust the bubble of anger. When he answered, his voice carried a tone of resignation. “I’d detain him and call Bill Henderson.”

“That’s why you aren’t a bad person. Sure, you can beat yourself up because you aren’t a saint ready to forgive Lex. But I know you. You wouldn’t go after him yourself. Part of what I’ve always liked about you is your innate goodness. The only other man that I’ve even met like that was Superman.”

“And I can’t remember him either,” Clark replied. “I still can’t believe we were as close as you say. I wonder how I ever got to be friends with him.”

Lois shook her head. “In hindsight it’s almost funny. I was so enamored with him that not only didn’t I notice your good qualities, but I also completely overlooked how similar the two of you were. Now that I’ve really taken the time to look, I see how much you two had in common. A few days ago I started to wonder if Superman might have gone to Smallville when he first arrived on Earth. That would explain why Bureau 39 was so interested in your home town. In fact, I bet your parents knew him as well as you did.”

It was a long time before Clark spoke again. “I guess we’ll never be able to ask that question now.”

Lois suddenly realized that she had managed to steer the conversation all the way back around to the issue that upset Clark

and started it all. “I’m sorry, Clark. Do you need to go home?”

“No. I’ll do better if I try to stay busy.”

Lois forced an expression that was more upbeat than she really felt. “Good. I have some leads on another Luthor-related investigation. I need your help in finding out which will pan out.”

Later that day Lois watched as Jimmy tried to talk with him about some of the photos from the warehouse raid. The younger man could see that something was very wrong. When he asked Clark if he was all right, Clark just stared back at him. After a moment Clark said, “It’s personal,” and turned back to what he was doing. Lois cornered Jimmy after that and asked him to pass the word that Clark was having a really bad day.

Later on, when she talked to Clark about their Luthor investigation, Lois asked if it was okay to tell others in the office about his news. “Clark, everyone here is worried about you,” she offered. “I think it would help them understand if I could tell them about your news.”

His look was cold. Not angry, but not much of anything. It was as if a secret light that he’d been carrying all this time had gone out. “That’s fine, Lois. Whatever you think is best.” She couldn’t remember hearing his voice so devoid of emotion.

By the time they got home that night, she had long since given up on Clark snapping out of it. However, she had a plan to get through the evening. As soon as they were in the apartment, she took charge. “Clark, I’m going to change into casual clothes for the evening. What don’t you change too? I’ll be out in a minute. And don’t worry about dinner, I’ll cook tonight.”

It was a sign of how out-of-it he was that statement passed without comment. About ten minutes later Lois came back out of the bedroom. She had changed into a sweatshirt and sweatpants. Interestingly enough, Clark wore the same thing. The only difference was the colors and the college names on their shirts. Lois had considered wearing the Midwestern University shirt that Clark had given her, but didn’t want to risk reminding him of Kansas, so she chose a University of Florida shirt. Clark had gone with the University of South Carolina for his wardrobe.

They had settled in front of the television and Lois was looking for something that was unlikely to make Clark feel any worse. About twenty minutes after they changed, Clark realized that no food preparation was taking place. “Lois, would you like me to make dinner?” he asked.

“No, Clark. I told you earlier that I’m handling dinner tonight.”

He seemed to be struggling for a reply when the doorbell rang. Lois jumped up and hurried to the door. She returned a moment later carrying a pizza box. “Here we go,” she said cheerfully. “Lois Lane cooking at its finest.”

That managed to evoke a tiny smile from Clark. It wasn’t much, but it was the first positive expression she’d seen on his face since that terrible phone call.

They spent the evening watching television. It had the look of most of their evenings together but the feel was different. Clark just didn’t seem to be able to pull out of it. He was hurting way too much to hide. Halfway through the evening Lois realized that she was hurting also. At first, she thought that it was because of the loss of Martha and Jonathan. However, she quickly realized that wasn’t it. She felt bad about their deaths but unlike Clark, she had accepted that they had died when the news of Smallville’s destruction first came in. No, she was hurting because Clark was hurting. It was just that simple. His pain was her pain and there was no way to make it better.

When Lois finally switched off the television, Clark was still in that zombie-like state. When she stood up, he just remained seated staring at the blank television tube. “Clark?” He looked slowly up at her. When he failed to respond, she continued. “We should be heading for bed.”

“Okay. Good night, Lois.” His reply was slow. When he finished speaking he went back to staring at the television.

This was no good. If she left him, he might sit like that all night. She reached down, grabbed his arm and used it to pull him upright. “No way, mister. I’m not going anywhere until you’re bedded down for the night.” She pointed at the bathroom. “Now get your night clothes and get ready for bed. I’m not going to even start to get ready for bed until you are safely tucked in.”

Lois thought she was going to have to put up with another blank stare but was pleased to be wrong this time. Clark stood up and then looked down on her with a shy smile. “Yes, ma’am.” He kissed her gently on her forehead, gathered up his nightclothes and headed for the bathroom.

She waited in the bedroom for Clark to emerge. It was only a few minutes later when Clark stepped out. During his time alone, he seemed to have slipped back into that state of listless depression that had been so dominant all evening. It was clear that drastic measures were called for. “Clark, come here.”

He seemed to have failed to notice her sitting on the edge of the bed. At the sound of her voice he paused and then came over. She could see that he was still out of it. “I want you to take the bed tonight,” she said.

“No. That’s not right. You’re my guest.” He was still speaking in mechanical tones.

Lois was ready for him to argue. With him in this state, this part would be all too easy. “I’ve had the bed every night that I’ve been here,” she pointed out. “You need to get some rest tonight. Clark, you’ll be doing us both a favor if you can get a good night’s sleep to help you work things through.” She reached out and took his hand. “Please, do this for me.” She knew that wasn’t fighting fair but this was a contest that she had to win for his sake.

His reply was less mechanical, but still flat. “All right, Lois. If you’re sure.”

“I am.” She stood up and motioned toward the bed. “Climb in.”

He almost looked like he was going to protest, but for the first time this evening, his listlessness worked in Lois’s favor. He pulled back the covers and got into bed. Once he was settled in, she turned to start getting ready to go to sleep herself. After she had collected her pajamas, she looked over at Clark to see him staring glassy-eyed at the ceiling. She went to the bedside and sat down. Clark looked up at her with that same blank stare that had dominated the evening. “Clark, what are you feeling?”

He thought for a moment before replying. “Cold. Alone. I don’t know, Lois... I just don’t know.” The mechanical listlessness was back.

In a flash she knew how she wanted to handle this. “I’m going to get ready for bed,” she said as she stood up and stepped away from the bed.

For some reason Clark had expected some other reply, but he hadn’t been at any sort of mental peak all day. He watched Lois go into the bathroom. While she was getting ready, he closed his eyes to try to relax enough to go to sleep. He knew he was worrying Lois, but didn’t know what to do. He was struggling with these feelings of being alone. It was almost like his mom and dad were his only personal contacts and with them truly gone, he had no other connections.

Throughout the day he’d been fighting one thought that he didn’t have the courage to share. Over and over his mind wandered back to the thought, ‘If only I’d been there.’ The idea scared him. He didn’t think he wanted to die, but what else could be the motivation for wanting to be home when a chunk of Nightfall fell on his parents? That was part of what had him so distraught. Did he really have so little that he wished he’d died with his parents? Sure, his memories were gone but things seemed to be going so well with picking up the pieces. The idea

that he was harboring a secret death wish had really shaken him.

He was so caught up in his musings that he completely missed Lois leaving the bathroom. He figured she would come over to say goodnight before heading out to the sofa. Clark heard the lights going out first in the bedroom and then in the outer room. He’d been so certain that she would be over. He’d even imagined that they might share a kiss. Instead, when he heard the light switch in the outer room he felt his spirits dip even lower. He was disappointed to find that he could feel even worse than he had.

His train of thought was broken by the feel of movement on the other side of the bed. He felt the sheets being pulled back. His eyes snapped open. “Lois?” There was no response. But the sounds and the motions on the mattress were unmistakable and there was just enough light to see her moving beside him. She was getting into bed. He almost sat up but she was already laying down facing in his direction. He rolled onto his side so he was facing her and asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m helping my best friend get through the most difficult time since I’ve known him.”

“But, Lois... I mean, um, how do you know you can trust me?”

“If I didn’t trust you, I wouldn’t have been staying with you in the first place. Besides, I’m not sure that there’s anything that you’re likely to do that I’ll object to anyway.”

“Lois!”

She laughed softly. “It is nice to hear some of the Clark I know in your voice. That’s the first I’ve heard since this afternoon.” She slid over to him and said, “Now, hold me.”

He was both excited and terrified as he tried to figure out how to meet this unexpected request while lying in bed. Clark slid one arm under Lois as he felt her arms reaching around his neck. He’d hugged Lois before, but nothing compared to the feeling of this situation. Lying here, the feeling of loneliness that had plagued him all afternoon was nowhere to be found. Lois was now close enough that he could see her face when she pulled back just enough to look at him. “Better now?”

“Lois, I...” He wanted to say how much he loved her but didn’t feel like it was the time. He must have done something awfully right at some point to have a woman like this in his life. There was so much that he wanted to say but he was scared to ruin the moment. For all the churning thoughts, it was only a second before he answered. “Yes. Much better.”

“Good.” Even in the low light of the room her smile was dazzling. In an instant he felt her lips on his. The kiss wasn’t chaste, but it didn’t seem passionate either. Whatever it was, Clark thought it was wonderful and far too short.

When the kiss ended, he felt Lois’s arm move and her hand was on his cheek. “Good night, Clark.”

An hour ago Clark wasn’t sure that he would sleep at all this night. Between the pain of the recognition of the loss of his family and the strange thoughts about wishing he had been in Smallville, he’d felt lost. Now he felt... loved. “Good night, Lois.”

Clark thought she would pull away and roll to the other side of the bed. Instead, she settled her head on the pillow beside him. Their arms were still around each other and Clark could feel the gentle movement of her breath on his face. He closed his eyes, feeling suddenly tired. But this was the most marvelous tired he could imagine.

Chapter 23: Catalyst

When he woke up the next morning, Clark thought that his senses must not be working right. The temperature in the bed seemed to be warmer than it should. As his awareness of his surroundings grew, he realized that his right hand wasn’t touching the fabric of the sheets on his bed. A slight movement of

his fingers verified that this wasn't cloth at all, he was touching skin. And it wasn't his.

Clark opened his eyes to find Lois's face only inches from his own. His perfect dream had been real after all. Lois was here in bed with him sleeping in his arms. There seemed to be a few changes from what he remembered last night. They were still in each other's arms but at some point in the night his hand seemed to have worked its way under Lois's pajama top and his hand was in direct contact with the smooth skin of her back. And then there was the positioning of their legs. Clark's right leg was... well, between Lois's. The only description would be that they were intertwined.

All in all it was an exceptionally pleasant position, but what terrified him was how Lois might react when she woke up and discovered their ...situation. He thought about trying to disengage himself, but it only took a few very tentative movements to verify that there was no way out of this without running a serious risk of waking up Lois. So, since there seemed to be no convenient way out, Clark decided that his time would be best spent enjoying the moment. His memory obviously limited his ability to compare this waking-up experience to very many others, but there was no question that this was now his best start to any day.

Clark spent a long moment studying her face. Lois was normally so animated that she didn't hold still long enough for him to get such a good look. She was a very beautiful woman. Her features reflected a strength born of experience that had made her the person so many knew as Mad Dog, but there was a warmth and tenderness showing right now that she normally worked to hide. Clark had seen it that first night in the hospital. He suspected that he had seen that even when they were just partners, before he had lost his memory.

It was only another moment when her breathing changed a tiny bit. A few seconds later her eyes fluttered open. It was fun to watch her go through the same series of recognition steps that he had experienced a few minutes earlier. In only a few seconds, her eyes locked with his. He feared that he was about to discover the consequences of her not being happy about waking up in this position. That lasted only an instant as an amazing smile filled her face.

Clark was thinking about how much he wanted to kiss her, but he was afraid to initiate the movement. Fortunately, there seemed to be a synergy of their minds since at that second Lois moved her head all of six inches and initiated a kiss herself. It was little more than a light peck, but it was on the lips, it was Lois, and it was magnificent.

She quickly pulled back. "Do I have morning breath?" she asked.

"No. At least, not that I can tell." Clark answered. "All I can taste is Lois, and I think you have a very nice flavor. I just hope I taste half as good as you do."

That evoked a mischievous smile from Lois. "Let's see," she said playfully. This was followed by another, much more intense kiss. When Lois pulled back this time, her face was showing a look of exaggerated consideration as if she were trying to think through a tricky problem. "I don't know. You do taste pretty good."

Clark was taken aback by this cheerful woman that he had woken up in bed with. Whatever he knew or thought he knew about his partner, this was something different. Was she always this bubbly and playful in the morning? Dare he ask? Instead of risking the mood of the moment with words, Clark wanted to see if the fates would smile upon him and grant one more taste of heaven. Since his arms were conveniently already around this enticing person, he decided to use them. He applied a tiny bit of pressure to pull her closer. To his joy, she sensed the pressure and did the same. There was nothing tentative about this kiss. Lois's mouth assaulted his with an energy and desire that caught him

totally off guard. He found her tongue assaulting his lips, demanding the chance to interact with its counterpart. This kiss was nothing short of otherworldly. For a long moment, their lips wrestled and their tongues danced. When the kiss finally ran its course, it was more a feeling of a pause than an end.

Lois was now staring at him with a look that he had trouble placing. There was desire there. However, there also seemed to be elements of both joy and confusion. A few seconds later Clark finally broke the silence. "Good morning," he offered with a smile. "You sure beat the heck out of an alarm clock."

This triggered a smile. "As do you, Mr. Kent. Good morning yourself." She moved her head about as if assessing their position. "We seem to have found an interesting sleeping position." Then she looked at him and her expression turned more serious. "How do you feel this morning?"

Clark took a few seconds to reflect on his feelings. "I'm better. I can feel the impact of yesterday, but I don't feel so lost. I don't know what came over me yesterday. Thank you for taking care of me. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"That's okay, Clark. I know you well enough to know you would have done the same for me. Anyway, we need to get ready for work."

"If it's okay with you, I'll go first," Clark offered. "You can wait in bed a little longer while I take my shower. I promise to be quick and then I can have breakfast ready for when you're done in the bathroom."

She smiled and said, "Okay." Clark enjoyed beginning the day spending so much time looking at her face. Of course, getting out of bed meant letting go of her. The puzzle of untangling their limbs was solved all too quickly and he regretfully left the bed.

Just before entering the bathroom, Clark glanced back. When he discovered that Lois was watching him, or more precisely, his rear end, with an intense look as he walked across the room, he felt himself start to blush. He was glad that she seemed to enjoy looking at him. He couldn't help but hope that this wouldn't be the last time he woke up in Lois's arms.

As they rode up the elevator together, Lois struggled with mixed feelings. She wished she'd taken the stairs. Or that the elevator would have been too crowded and she could have waited for the next one. Or maybe Clark could have taken the next one. Or maybe he'd have a flashback to one of his disappearing acts and he'd run off somewhere. Any of those would have been just as good. She wished he were anywhere else but standing next to her.

Her mind was racing at a thousand miles an hour. How could she get into a mess like this? Last night, when Clark was hurting so much, it seemed so natural to stay with him. Perhaps sleeping in the same bed with him was a bit too much, but it didn't feel that way at the time. She just knew that he was hurting and she had to help. She never guessed that they would end up holding each other all night.

What kind of people slept like that? Whatever kind of people they were, Lois Lane wasn't one of them. At least, she never had been in the past. Not with anyone else.

And finally, what in the world had she been she thinking this morning? Lois had always thought that if she ever woke up in bed with a man that she wasn't either married to, or at least seriously involved with, it would be a race to see who could leave quickest and pretend nothing ever happened. But, no. Instead of jumping out of bed and running, she had encouraged him. Joking about morning breath and kissing. Several times, too! What in the world had come over her? She *never* woke up in a good mood.

Now Clark probably thought... She didn't know what Smallville thought, but it couldn't be good. She wished she could have a do-over on the morning where she was out of bed before Clark woke up.

Maybe she could convince Perry that she needed to go alone on a month-long assignment to another country. Anything to avoid having to deal with the consequences of her bizarre behavior this morning. Anything to avoid Clark.

It wasn't that she really regretted last night. She didn't have the excuse of claiming that she wasn't in complete control of herself. They didn't even have beer with the pizza. She slept with Clark all night and nothing happened. She had her pajamas on when she went to sleep and they were still in place when she woke up. All they had done was hold each other all night. How could that feel more like something than any previous encounters with men where much more did happen?

And this morning. As scared as she was, how could she really regret the single most passionate kiss of her entire life? That kiss... It was... She had never kissed or been kissed like that before. That was what a lover's kiss was supposed to be like.

Her mind reeled at that term. 'Stop!' she thought. 'Don't go there, Lois. Do *not* think of Clark and "lover" in the same thought.'

Then her other voice kicked in. 'But he would be great. Being with him felt so right on so many levels.' She wasn't supposed to be thinking these thoughts today. They were supposed to be backing off to find out where they wanted their relationship to go. 'Last night was just a fluke. This wasn't anything more than Florence Nightingale Syndrome. That's right. Those feelings weren't real.'

Once the unending elevator trip was complete, Lois bolted for her desk. Throwing herself into work would make that Clark problem go away. She was still trying to collect herself when she heard a slight thump and saw her coffee cup on her desk with a chocolate doughnut beside it. She looked up to find Clark smiling down at her.

"Lois, I want to revisit the leads you gave me yesterday. I'm sure I'll do a much better job today. I'll go over the work I did yesterday and, as necessary, I'll follow up on those leads. I'm sure I can work through them in a few hours. Okay?"

How could he be acting so normal? She was sure she must look angry. She tried to make sure her voice was all business. "That will be fine. Let me know if any of those pan out."

"I will," he replied.

She was so busy watching his smile that she almost missed his hand reaching toward hers. Before his hand could make contact, she pulled her hand away and said briskly, "I have a lot of work to do today." In a deliberately dismissive action, she turned back to her workstation and when through the motions of work. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed that Clark stood there for a few seconds and then turned away and went back to his desk. She didn't have to see his face to know she'd hurt him. Well, better a little pain now than worse later.

Lois was able to force herself back to work but her mind was stuck in spin mode. This thing with Clark had gotten completely out of control and she felt like she had to do something, but she had no idea what. She found herself sneaking looks at Clark and trying to come to grips with what it all meant. She was simultaneously thrilled and terrified. This sort of thing was supposed to go slower. At least, she thought it was. And what in the world was Clark thinking? Distance between them was definitely what was needed now. A lot of distance.

An hour later she was still sitting at her desk and staring at the screen of her workstation but getting very little work done. She noticed that her coffee cup was empty. She went to the coffee machine to refill her cup and she heard a hiss from behind.

"Okay, how did it happen?" It was Cat.

Lois turned to face her. She considered 'accidentally' spilling her coffee on Cat, but Lois decided that she hasn't done anything to deserve that. Yet.

"Hi, Cat. What are you talking about?"

Cat got one of those I-know-what-you-did looks on her face. "You and Clark. Lois, I read these signs for a living. Was he as good in bed as he looks?"

She should have expected Cat to pick up the signs that something significant had happened. The one benefit of her mind being in turmoil all day was that there was nothing that Cat or anyone else could say today about this which would startle her. "Cat, Clark and I have been rooming together since Nightfall. Why do you think something happened now?"

"I saw the way you both looked last night when you left. As soon as I got in today I... well, I was curious. I've been watching both of you all morning and you two have all the signs. Something big, and I mean really big, happened last night. So, was he as good in bed as he looks?"

In this situation, attack seemed to be the best approach. "I thought you knew."

Cat's expression suddenly changed to a much more somber look. "No, I don't. I actually tried playing with him right after he lost his memory, but he was in no mood for it. In fact, he reminded me that some games come at too high a price. Given how he reacted, I'd have thought he would have told you about our non-history already."

"What?"

"Lois, I made my pitch for him right after he started here, but he was already a lost cause. I just kept wondering why he never let you know how he felt."

What? This was a side of Cat Lois had never seen before. Was it possible that she had more depth than Lois gave her credit for? And how is it that Cat knew how Clark felt before Lois did? Lois shifted to a less combative tone. "What do you know about how he felt? Did he say something?"

"Relax, Lois. Like I said, I do this for a living. He's been crazy about you from the very beginning. If you hadn't been chasing Superman, you would have seen it too. Obviously he remembers how he feels. Does he remember why he kept his distance?"

She seemed genuinely interested in helping. But this was Cat. "Why are you so interested?"

Cat looked almost confused by the question. "At one level, I'm not sure. I see people mess up their lives all the time. Every so often I see people that are genuinely right for each other. When I watch you and Clark, I see that. It's nice to think that every once in a while people that belong together end up that way. So, I answered your question, now it's your turn. Why didn't he say anything?"

There was a genuine caring in her tone that touched Lois. But, the connection between Clark and Superman and the idea that they were both waiting for her to was too much information to share. "We've talked about that. He has some ideas but he just doesn't remember."

Cat's voice took on a very supportive tone. "Take some advice from an old pro. He's special. You have him. If you're smart, you'll keep him."

That should have made things easier. But Cat didn't know that Lois's inner voice had been screaming "run away" all morning. What did it mean when Cat told you that the guy you're involved with, or whatever they were, was a keeper?

The talk with Cat should have made it easier, but it didn't. The next time Clark talked to her, Lois was outright brusque. At one point he started to reach for her hand again but he saw her flinch and didn't finish the motion. He was confused and probably a little bit hurt, but he should be able to figure out that she needed her space today. After that incident, he was all business and never again attempted to invade her personal space.

It was mid-afternoon when Perry called Lois into his office. As soon as the door was closed it started. "Lois, honey, what's up between you and Clark?"

She hadn't really expected the question. They weren't fighting or anything. "What do you mean?"

"Darlin', except for yesterday you and Clark have been working like a well-oiled machine since Nightfall. I didn't think I'd ever say this but he makes you better than you are alone. Ever since you moved in to his apartment after Nightfall, you've both been better than ever. But today the two of you are hardly talking. It's all over the newsroom. Did you have a fight or something?"

This was worse than Lois thought. She didn't think that it had been that obvious. "No, Perry, we didn't have a fight. It's just, well, when I was trying to cheer Clark up after yesterday... There have been some complications."

Now Perry looked very uncomfortable. "Lois, I'm not here to tell you how to run your personal life. But if something happened that makes you uncomfortable to stay with Clark, well..." He paused to clear his throat. "Lois, you know the Myerson family was staying with me. Well, they moved out yesterday. I was originally going to ask if you would like to stay but, well, you seemed happy to stay at Clark's so I didn't want to rock the boat."

"Nothing happened," she pleaded.

"Well, like I said, I'll have a free room and I wanted to let you know that Alice and I would be happy to have you stay with us. Even if you and Clark haven't had a falling out, maybe it would be a good idea to spend some time away from him."

It was almost scary how closely his words matched her thoughts of just a few moments ago. "Perry... Thank you. Clark and I didn't have a fight. It's...complicated. Can I think about it tonight and let your know tomorrow?"

"Sure, Lois. You know I want what's best for you and Clark."

"I know, Perry. And thanks."

The day never got better for Lois. What she felt like she needed was a week away from Clark. But she didn't want a week away from him. At one level, she didn't even want to go a whole day without him being an integral part of it. The truth was that she didn't want to be at work. She wanted to be somewhere that she could hold him and they could talk about her fears. Or maybe she wanted to be on another continent where no one had ever heard of Clark Kent. The confusion wasn't making things any better.

There were two rumors running around the office that she had managed to hear. One was that they had finally slept together and Clark was such a loser in bed that Lois was looking for a way out as quickly as possible. The other was that she had given up on him as a prospect for a relationship and she was moving out anyway. There seemed to be some other variants but the common theme was that the two of them were Splitsville.

Lois had even noticed that some of the more adventurous, or possibly simply more aggressive young women that worked in various roles for the Planet, suddenly developed excuses to talk with Clark today. It was noteworthy that only Cat seemed to have read the clues correctly. Lois could understand the confusion of the other women since she wasn't sure how to read things herself.

By the time the end of the day rolled around, she was genuinely uncomfortable going home with Clark. The idea of moving out and living with Perry and Alice for a while was sounding more and more like what she wanted to do. She liked Clark, she really did. But given where they were at, the only path forward that included both of them was one where 'Love' was part of the package. Did she love Clark? Honestly, she didn't know. She'd certainly never been tempted to say the big 'I Love You' phrase. Of course, she had sworn off those three words years ago.

Dinner was as awkward as the day in the office had been. As she poked at her meal, she couldn't help but wonder how a day could start out so joyfully and then get so twisted around. The

morning was just so weird. Once the magic was past, Lois had spent the entire day trying to bring it into perspective.

She looked up to find her roommate staring at her with a look that reflected an intense concern with a shade of confusion. "Lois, please tell me what's been happening today."

She was tempted to pretend to not understand. But she knew that wouldn't help the situation. "Clark, I don't really know. This morning was great, but then I got to thinking about what it might mean." She paused for a long moment. "I've come to value you as a person and a partner. If we let this go any further, I don't know what I'd do if we didn't work out. In the past...when the 'Claude' thing happened, I only made it because I could throw myself into work. With you being so important to me, if it didn't work out, I don't know how I'd make it this time."

"Lois, after last night, I don't see how we go back."

She looked startled at this. "You know as well as I do that nothing happened last night. If it did, I might not be here at all."

His reply was an impassioned plea. "You're wrong. Everything happened last night. Sure, we didn't have...we weren't intimate last night. But something much more important happened. You told me that you loved me. That's far more important than...sex."

"I never! Clark Kent, if you think I said those words you were dreaming."

"No, you didn't say it with words. You said it with actions. I was out of it yesterday but I remember everything clearly. I remember how you took care of me. I remember how you kept me going. And I remember how you slept with me, with no sex on the menu, to keep me from being alone when the single thing I needed the most was to not be alone. When I woke up this morning and found you there, it was wonderful. But the best part of all was that I woke up with the woman I love knowing that despite her fears, she loved me."

Lois was stunned absolutely speechless by this. How could he interpret her actions this way?

"Lois, do you regret how you took care of me yesterday?"

That was easy. "No," she replied in a strong voice.

"Do you regret what happened this morning?"

That was a little more complicated, but not as hard an answer as she expected. "No," she said softly. She wished she was as sure of this answer as the first one.

Clark paused as if gathering himself. "Lois, will you marry me?"

Lois had no idea where this night was going to lead, but that wasn't part of any development she had considered. "What?"

"I know that may strike you as sudden, but are you really surprised? That was the other half of what I learned last night. The first part, and by far the most important, was that I learned that you love me. I understand your reluctance to say the words, but I believe I know the truth. The other thing I learned is that how I feel for you isn't going to go away. When we woke up this morning...the way the day started...I want to spend every night with you and I want to wake up every morning with you in my arms."

This was impossible. How could he be asking this? She finally found her voice. "But Clark, you don't know me that well."

"How can you say that? Lois, after Nightfall it was like being born anew. When I woke up I hardly knew anything. But the one thing that I did know was you. I've only lost the specifics. I have all these emotional echoes from things that have happened to me since I came to Metropolis. For some of them, I know from the circumstances that you were the cause. There are others that I lack the specifics about, but I just know that you were there."

He paused as if to give her the chance to reply. However, the words just weren't there. After another few seconds Clark continued. "I realize that I'm not a whole person. I have to get

used to the idea that whole sections of my memory are gone forever. I'm ready to move on. Before last night, I knew I wanted you in my life. I knew how good it felt when we were together. I wouldn't have thought it possible but now I want to be with you even more."

There was another pause. This time Clark's expression grew somber. "Lois, Perry told me that he's offered you a place to stay. Are you planning to take him up on that offer?"

So he knew. He knew what was on her mind but he proposed anyway. What did that mean? She waited for him to continue again but it seemed that this time he was going to wait for her to speak. "Clark, I know that you think you feel this way, but...I don't know. I'm confused."

Lois lay in bed trying to decide if she had salvaged her life or ruined it.

After his initial proposal, Clark tried a few more times to get her to talk about their future. But after Lois kept changing the subject every time he tried to talk about the two of them, he finally realized that not only was she not going to accept his proposal, she wasn't even going to talk about their relationship. In fact, she wouldn't even acknowledge that there was a relationship or that he had even made his proposal. At first he'd been patient and polite the way only he could be. Each time she avoided the subject, his spirit had dipped a little more.

Lois remembered the moment when things really changed. For her it was just one more act of avoiding the relationship talk, but Clark's reaction was different. The previous times she'd avoided the topic, he just moved on to another subject. That time he went silent. His face fell and took on an expression of hopelessness. The change was so profound that it was almost as if the lights had been dimmed. He had given up.

It was only a little later when Clark pulled out the linens for the couch and said he was tired. Lois knew he was tired all right. Unfortunately, she was all too sure that the fatigue wasn't physical in nature. Something had been carrying him. Hope... Lois had seen tragic events before, but this time, with this person, watching his hope die was more painful than anything Lois had ever seen.

What they'd done last night and this morning had really affected Clark. He had not only been able to throw off the depression from the previous day, he'd been able to stay cheerful in the face of her keeping him at a distance all day. Lois was sure that he was as moved by last night and this morning as she was.

As she was...

At that moment her mind flashed back over the time they'd spent together these past weeks. In a very real sense, except for the...intimacy part, they had been living as a married couple since Nightfall.

She had to admit that he had become far more important to her than she had expected. He was so...nice. How could someone so nice be interested in a hard case like Lois Lane? The more she thought about it the more she tried to convince herself that he didn't know her well enough to want a relationship. But the fact was that time and again he had proven that memory or no memory, he knew Lois Lane better than anyone. How could he be so perfect when so much of his memory was gone?

But that was just Clark coming through. If there was anyone, anywhere, who might be a candidate for perfect, it would be Clark. Holes in his memory or not, he was still Clark.

What should she do?

If she could ask him, what would Superman tell her to do?

What did she want...in her future? What about for now?

Lois got out of bed and headed across the room. She opened the door to the main living area. It was dark but there was enough light that she could see Clark on the sofa. "Clark, are you awake?"

The speed with which he sat up told her that he hadn't been sleeping either. The lamp next to the sofa clicked on. "Yes, Lois. Do you need something?"

His voice was always so caring. Even after all that had happened this evening. Even after his disappointment, when she got him out of bed in the middle of the night, his concern was immediately evident. "Clark, I've been thinking about...us...and the future." Deep breath, she thought. She could do this. "If I asked you to take the room at Perry's house for a few weeks so I could live here by myself and get my mind straight, would that be okay?"

"Of course, Lois. I'm sure he'll be happy to let me have the room while you sort out what you want to do."

She looked at him somberly. "You realize that I might decide that we don't have a future together. It may turn out that I would rather just stay work partners."

He took a long moment before responding. "I understand." Lois could tell how much he had to struggle to say those words calmly. "But I know that if you aren't happy, I can't be happy either. I want what's best for you. If you feel that your future has to be without me, I have to respect that. I...love you. To me that means that your happiness is paramount." Clark paused as if gathering himself. "Anyway, I'll make arrangements for the room with Perry in the morning."

She looked at him intently. "So, even knowing that I'm likely to break off our relationship, you'd give me your home and move out? Just because I asked?"

"Yes. For you."

Always Clark, she thought.

Suddenly she was sure. Absolutely sure. "Then the answer is yes," she said.

"Okay. I'll pack up before we leave for work in the morning. I'll talk to Perry and as soon as he says that it's okay, I'll move enough stuff for a week or so. I'll still need access to this apartment occasionally, but I won't come in without asking first."

How could he say all that without having his voice sound bitter? That was easy. He could do that because he was Clark. "No, Clark. You don't understand. That isn't the question that I'm answering. My 'Yes' is to your earlier question."

Clark had a look of total confusion. "What question? I don't understand."

Lois waited nearly a minute to see if he was going to figure it out. She wanted so much to smile, but it was no accident that she won at poker as often as she did.

He tried again. This time his voice was slightly pained. "Lois, please... What are you talking about?"

Poor Clark. Okay, this was enough. "Fine, how about this...Clark, yes, I'd love to marry you."

Clark stood up, took one step toward Lois and stopped. She could see the hope in his eyes. But there was fear and confusion as well.

She could see how much he was struggling. She took two quick steps to reach him. They came together in a kiss that overflowed with the pent-up emotions of the day. One kiss led to another and still another. It was several long moments later when Lois pulled back. "And, before we go any farther, there is something else." She had to pause for this one. "I love you, Clark Kent."

That led to another kiss. When they finally separated, it was Clark's turn. "I love you, Lois Lane."

To Lois, the smile beaming down at her seemed to energize her soul. "Now, fiancé of mine, please come to bed. On top of everything else, I think you've ruined me for sleeping without you."

Chapter 24: Together

It was just before 10:00 a.m. Thursday morning and Perry

White was in a bad mood. Lane and Kent were his best reporters individually, and when they worked together, it was pure magic. But even his stars had to show up for work. Given what had been going on the past few days, he wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt, but today was a workday and he needed them here. They weren't in the office and hadn't bothered to call in.

Since Nightfall had struck, everything had been off-kilter, but both of his stars had come through hard trials better than he'd thought possible. Clark losing his memory and then his family over a period of just a few days was bad. For her part, Lois had the double shock of the loss of her home as well as the death of Superman. They had turned to each other and together they had overcome their individual challenges.

Then there was the strangeness of the past two days. First, it was Clark. Getting word confirming the death of his parents had left him walking around like a zombie all day Tuesday. It had been amazing to watch Lois take care of him. Seeing her like that reminded him of the helpful and cheerful young woman he had hired. That woman had disappeared after the Claude business when she was replaced by Mad Dog Lane. It genuinely warmed his heart to see the helpful young woman back again. Perry had been afraid that Claude had killed that person forever.

Then there was the flip-over of behavior yesterday. Suddenly Clark was cheerful and upbeat but Lois was out of it. She wasn't in the walking-daze mode that Clark had shown on Tuesday, but she was off-kilter just the same. She was short with everyone, but the whole office could see that Clark was the source of her irritation. Something had happened the previous evening to change everything around. Perry had heard the rumors running around the office, but he knew better than to attribute any truth to them.

Perry did his best to stay out of the personal lives of his reporters. However, since he'd seen Lois shattered by Claude, he'd kept a special eye on her. In many ways, she had grown to be more like a daughter to him than an employee. She was special. He'd been hoping for years that she would find someone worthy of her. When Clark showed up with that strange mix of strength and compassion, Perry realized he might be the perfect complement to Lois both professionally and personally. He'd teamed them up as quickly as possible and his judgment had proven to be spot on. As reporting partners they complemented each other perfectly. Even Lois came to accept Clark as a work partner.

On the personal front, things would take more time. Perry believed that had it not been for two glaring distractions Lois would have already noticed Clark's potential on a personal level. However, those distractions, in the form of Lex Luthor and Superman, had left no room for Clark's qualities to shine through. Perry had desperately hoped that the one good thing that might come out of Nightfall was that Lois would finally see what was in front of her. That seemed to be happening and Perry's hopes for Lois's happiness were at an all time high. But these kids had reached an awkward point in their developing relationship. One false step now could cause a blowup that could drive one of them away entirely.

Perry looked out over the office again. Where were those kids? Based on what he saw yesterday, they were probably packing up Lois's belongings so that she could move into his spare room. That might be for the best. Clark was good for her, but sometimes you needed some separation for things like this to turn out right. Perry was still looking out over the bullpen when Jimmy crossed his line of sight. "Olsen!" he bellowed.

Jimmy came over and stuck his head in the door. "Yes, Chief?"

"Has anyone heard from Lane or Kent this morning?"

"No, sir," Jimmy answered in an appropriately fearful tone. "I saw you looking for them earlier so I called Clark's apartment.

There was no answer but I left a message on the answering machine. Did you know that they changed the message to say that it's the residence of Clark Kent and Lois Lane?"

Perry didn't care about the message on the machine. He gave the young Mr. Olsen a glare to let him know that he should continue with other information if he had any. Sure enough, after a few seconds Jimmy continued nervously. "Um, right. I called Star Labs in case they were following up with Dr. Klein but they haven't been there either. I also placed a call to Inspector Henderson but with no positive results. I left messages at all of those places to have them check-in here if they show up. I don't know where else to look."

Perry thought for a moment. The only thing that Jimmy hadn't already tried was to check with Alice. He didn't think Lois would show up at his door without talking to him first. If he didn't see them by noon, he'd call Alice just to be on the safe side. "I think you did all you could," Perry said to Jimmy. "Let me know if you hear anything."

"Right, Chief."

It was nearly 11:00 a.m. when Perry looked up to see Lois at her workstation. He was about to call her in to his office when Clark walked up to Lois's desk with coffee. Good, they were both here. He was about to call them over when something happened that convinced him that there had been yet another shift in the personal lives of his favorite reporters. When Clark delivered Lois's coffee cup to her desk, Lois reached up, pulled Clark's face to hers, and kissed him. This triggered a whispered exchange of some sort where their faces were never more than an inch or two apart followed by another kiss. Perry was still trying to absorb this development when Lois happened to glance over in his direction.

As soon as she realized that he was watching them, she leaned toward Clark and whispered something else. Clark looked over at him as Lois stood. Then they both started toward his office. As usual, Lois was in the lead when they reached his door. She opened the door and stuck her head in. "Perry, do you have a minute?" she asked.

He was as curious as anyone but he needed to send the message that he was the boss and he was irritated. He pitched his voice in the most sarcastic tone he could muster. "It's nice that you chose to grace our office with your presence today."

That shook up Clark but Lois knew him too well for that to bother her. "We're sorry, Perry."

Perry didn't think she really sounded sorry.

"It was kind of important," she continued. "We'll find a way to make it up to you."

That was probably the best he was going to get. It was time to find out what was going on. "Well, come on in," he said. "What kept you two busy this morning? Is it anything that I can put in my paper?"

They came in, closed the door behind them, and sat down. "No, Chief," Clark answered. He exchanged a glance with Lois and they both smiled. "At least it's not anything that will end up in the news section."

They were obviously cheerful but this had been a distraction all morning. When their personal lives started interfering with the smooth operation of The Daily Planet, it was his problem. "Kids, I know you've both been under some stress lately and I've been trying to give you space to work things out. But you two are my top reporters and I can't ignore it when you start missing work. Now, Lois, should I call Alice and tell her that you'll be staying with us for a few weeks until you can get a place of your own?"

Lois stifled a laugh and then glanced over at Clark before turning back to face him. "No, Perry. Clark and I will be living together."

"Darlin', are you sure? The last few days seem to have been distracting."

Lois reached out to her side and took Clark's hand in hers. "We know, Perry. We had some issues to work through but we've gotten past that." When she finished speaking, Lois smiled more brightly than Perry had ever seen before.

Perry couldn't keep the smile off his own face. "So, you two have worked out your differences?"

They both laughed before Clark replied. "I think that's a fair statement."

There was something else going on here but Perry couldn't think of a way to ask without crossing the line into the 'none of his business' category. He decided to simply wait and see if they were willing to explain.

Lois didn't leave him hanging for long. "Perry, we're married. That's what we were doing this morning."

Perry was in a state of shock. He barely managed to mutter, "How?"

Lois answered. "Do you remember that just before Nightfall hit there were a series of emergency laws put in place so that people could get their affairs in order before the disaster? One of the changes was that in New Troy the waiting period for a wedding license was suspended. It was supposed to be temporary but the exception was valid for a full month and is still in effect." She looked over and smiled at Clark again. "We took advantage of that and got married this morning. Since Clark doesn't remember any religious affiliations here in Metropolis and I'm not a member of a church, we were married by a justice of the peace."

Perry was still struggling for words. "Um...I don't see any rings."

"We didn't want to wait," Lois's replied. "We talked about having another public ceremony later so our friends and family can be there. We'll exchange rings then."

"Okay. Well, congratulations." Perry leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "Clark, please don't take this wrong but may I speak with Lois alone for a minute?"

"Sure, Perry. I'll go start getting caught up on what we missed this morning." Clark leaned over and kissed his bride before leaving the room. He was careful to close the door behind him.

Perry watched as Lois's eyes tracked her new husband back to his desk. While watching his back, she commented, "He's the best thing that's ever happened to me. I can't believe I didn't see that sooner." She turned back to Perry. "I hope this isn't to tell me you think this is a mistake."

"No, Lois. I wouldn't do that. I'm happy for you, but this seems kind of sudden. I mean, I've always thought you two would be great together but I thought...I don't know...maybe you'd try dating first. Just what happened to trigger this?"

She looked thoughtful for a second but never stopped smiling. "There were a lot of factors. After Nightfall, Clark has been a lot more forthright about his feelings. I've been confused but I finally let myself admit how much I've come to care for him. Also, Clark and I have been on a few dates since we've been living together. But to answer your question, I think you were responsible for us getting married."

"Huh? What did I do?"

"You suggested that I move out and come live with you and Alice," Lois answered, her voice still bubbly. "When Clark got to thinking about my moving out, he proposed. That scared me so much that I almost moved out on the spot. What I did do was think about what I wanted and what he meant to me. I finally realized that I've never been happier than since I've been living with Clark and I want that to go on...forever."

Perry felt obligated to ask the obvious question. "But Lois, honey, do you know him well enough to get married?"

Now Lois's voice turned solemn. "That was one of my last fears. Then I remembered what Rachel, the sheriff back in

Smallville, said about Clark. She said that with Clark, what you see is what you get. Since I've been living with him I've come to understand what she meant. Other guys I've been around put on a certain false front so you have to figure out the real guy behind the façade. Clark is the only guy I've run into that doesn't do that. The nice, friendly man that everyone sees is the same through and through. When you get to know him, Clark is exactly the kind of person that he looks like on the surface. I'm sure he has some secrets and it will be odd discovering them together, but I'm sure of him as a person. And I'm sure that he's the right guy for me."

There was a light coming from Lois when she said those words that made it impossible to argue. "Well, then, I'm happy for you," Perry said. "To be honest, I always had a feeling about the two of you. I started to think he might be the one for you that day you came in with the Godzilla doll from the sewage treatment plant. So, are you going to take a honeymoon?"

"We talked about it but right now we want to keep on working to finish off the leads that have come out of Lex's downfall."

"Well, at least let me give you the rest of the day off today. It's turning out to be a nice sunny day outside. You two should have some personal time to enjoy your wedding day. Did you plan to make an announcement to the office?"

"Yeah. We were going to tell everyone right after we finished talking to you."

"The why don't we get out there and do it so the two of you can get out of here. If we're in here much longer Clark's likely to think I really am trying to talk you out of the marriage."

Perry led the way out of his office. They arrived at Clark's desk to find him reviewing leads relating to Luthor. He was so tied up in what he was doing that he didn't notice them until Lois put her hand on his shoulder, startling him.

Clark's head jerked around. As soon as he saw whose hand was on his shoulder, a huge smile appeared. "Hi," he said to Lois. "I've been merging our story information. I think I have the leads sorted out from most to least promising. We can get started as soon as you're ready."

"Perry wants us to take today off to celebrate," Lois said to her husband.

"And to get settled into your new living arrangements," Perry added. "It sounds like you have the story background all ready to go for getting a quick start here tomorrow morning."

A huge smile crept up Clark's face. "Thanks, Perry. We'd planned to work today but it would be great to have today to ourselves."

"My pleasure, Clark. Now, are you going to make your announcement?"

"I guess it's time." Clark looked around the office. There were enough people here to pull this off. He raised his voice to just below that of a shout. "Excuse me. May I have everyone's attention for a minute?" He must have been loud enough because the room went quiet and all eyes were on him. "At 10:07 a.m. this morning, Lois and I were married." He paused for a moment as trying to think of something else to say. "I think I'm the luckiest man in the world." Clark turned to Lois to find her beaming up at him. "Well, I am." He whispered. And those that had failed to notice their kisses when they first arrived had another opportunity.

Perry couldn't help but think how right he'd been about these two.

For Lois and Clark the rest of the day passed quickly. The first step was reorganizing the apartment. Demolition came first as they removed the temporary door that had been dividing the sleeping area into a separate room. Then it was just a question of dividing drawer and storage space. In the long run, this apartment

would be too small for them but it would be fine for a while.

Then they spent much of the day strolling around Metropolis. The weather was almost back to normal. Since Nightfall there had been an excess of clouds and rain. In many ways Metropolis, and much of the world, had experienced a Seattle, Washington winter. Day after day it had been cloudy and grey. The meteorologists said it was all part of the extra moisture been kicked up from the Nightfall fragments that had landed in the oceans. Now they were saying that the worst was over and weather patterns all over the world were returning to normal. For Lois and Clark it couldn't have come a day too soon. Between the weather and the time spent in the investigations, this was just about the first chance that they had to spend any time in the sun.

For dinner they had gone back to the site of their first date and it had been even more fun than the first time. That first date, like any first date, had carried the burden of nervousness and expectation. This was a very different feel. Tonight, the dominant feelings were of joy and anticipation. Their talks alternated between discussing each other's perspectives on what it had been like living together and considering their new future.

Unfortunately, one negative development marred their evening. At dinner, Clark noticed problems with his vision. Almost everything he looked at had a shadow. It was like seeing double. He found that the harder he concentrated, the worse it got. It never got too bad and he found that relaxing seemed to minimize the problem. Nevertheless, by the time they arrived home that evening, he was fighting a headache.

"Lois, have you seen my glasses?"

"No. They must be around. Are you having a problem with your vision after all this time?"

"Yeah. I told you back right after Nightfall that my glasses didn't seem to do anything. I've been seeing fine without them so I haven't bothered putting them on."

"I noticed. Honey, I think you look good without them. But, you looked pretty good with them too."

It only took less than a minute of searching before Clark found a pair in a drawer. Putting them on made all the difference. "This is much better," Clark said when he put them on.

"Are you near-sighted or far-sighted?" Lois asked.

"I don't know. I don't think either." He took the glasses off and looked around the room. He tried looking at objects at different distances with them on and off. "They don't seem to have anything to do with distance correction. When I take them off, I sometimes see double images. When I put them on everything is fine."

"Really," Lois replied. "Let me see." Clark handed her the glasses and she repeated the same steps that Clark had before. After a minute she took them off and offered them back to Clark. "I can't see that they do anything. You're right that there's no distance correction. For me, everything looked exactly the same with them on or off. When I was wearing them it was like I was looking through flat glass."

"Well, they help me a lot. At least they do tonight. They eliminate those funny double images. We'll need to see if we can find records of my eye doctor."

"I think that can wait for another night," Lois said in a suddenly very suggestive tone. "Don't you, Mr. Kent?"

"I do, Mrs. Kent."

This was their first evening preparing for bed together. The casual relaxation that had present throughout the day was nowhere to be found now.

They never talked about how to handle going to bed, but it worked out that Clark was ready first and it was Lois that joined him in bed. As they moved into each other's arms, Clark was almost overcome by the feeling of love and a general sensation of 'rightness' that he felt when they held each other this way. "Lois,

I love you."

"I love you, too, Clark. And I'm amazed how easy it is to say that."

"Honey," he said. "I'm nervous about...sleeping together tonight."

"Darling, we've slept together two nights in a row."

"But that's it. We've only slept together. I'm... well, I'm hoping that there's more than just sleep on the plan for tonight."

"You can count on it, mister. But come on, Clark. Did you lose all your memories of...other times?"

"Lois, since this morning I've tried to remember but there's nothing there. I would have expected an emotional echo of something as significant as...sex. I wonder..."

"What, Clark."

"Well, either I thought sex was so meaningless that it didn't leave an emotional imprint, which I find very hard to believe, or..."

"Or, what?" she asked.

"Or there were no other times."

"Are you telling me that you're...a virgin?"

"Honey, I don't know. All I do know is that I have no reference and I certainly don't have any memories."

She repositioned herself so she was on top of her husband. "Let's see about making some memories."

Chapter 25: Epiphany

Despite a decided lack of sleep the previous evening, Lois and Clark were actually at work slightly early on Friday morning. Of course, by now everyone in the office knew of their changed status. However, except for a slight increase in personal contact and an occasional kiss, their interactions in the office looked very much like they had even before Nightfall.

That morning, Lois and Clark spent very little time in the office. The notes that Clark had left were waiting when they came in and provided a good, quick start on the day. This meant running around the city on follow-ups all morning and that made for a productive and pleasant start to their day.

Naturally, all of their sources had opinions about Lex. Some thought he was in hiding, working on a plan to regain power. Others thought he had successfully escaped the country. A few reported rumors that he'd been caught and killed by one faction or another. When they put all the stories together, the only thing they could be sure of was that no one was certain about anything.

They stopped for lunch and ate in the park. They had been favored with another nice day and it was a pleasure being out in the sun for the second day in a row. As they ate their lunch, the conversation turned into a review of the leads they had followed all morning and the possible fate of Lex Luthor.

"He's long gone," Lois mumbled around her sandwich.

"Do you really think so?" Clark asked. "I'd expect him to stay near his connections and power base."

"No. Whatever else Lex is, he's smart. Metropolis may be his home, but he knows that he can't stay here. I suspect that he's left the country and is headed for somewhere in either Africa or South America."

"Lois, as usual you're way ahead of me. Why those places?"

"The majority of the damage from Nightfall was in the northern hemisphere and was felt most keenly by the more modern, western countries. He's going to be too notorious everywhere on the northern half of the globe to re-establish himself. He might have been tempted to try for Australia, but there are too many western connections and the risk would be very high. I think the safest thing would be to take whatever assets he can, and I'm sure he has plenty, and set himself up like a king in some remote corner of the world."

Clark mulled that over for a moment before responding. "That sounds logical, but he has so many ties to Metropolis that I

think he'd be awfully tempted to stay."

"Clark, I hate him, but he's a very smart man. I'm sure he'd have liked to stay in Metropolis, but it won't happen. I'll admit that he might have a plan to establish himself in some western country, possibly even the United States. But even if he does stay in this country, I just can't believe it'll be here. There's no way he'll be able to overcome the extra burden he'll carry in this city."

"What do you mean? What extra burden?" Clark asked.

"All over the world he'll be a wanted man for Nightfall. But here, well, this was Superman's home," Lois answered as if she were stating the most obvious thing in the world.

But this didn't explain it all for Clark. "From what I've learned, Superman was loved all over," Clark offered.

"But, Clark, he lived here! Here it was...personal." Her voice caught right at the end. She stopped talking and just stared down at the ground.

Clark realized too late that this was still an especially painful subject. He set down his food and pulled her into a hug. "Honey, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. With my memories of him gone, he's so distant. I guess that even with all that we've talked about I still tend to forget how important Superman was to you."

"That's okay, Clark. I'll be fine. I just have to get used to the idea that I'll...never see him again."

At those words, Lois felt Clark stiffen just a bit. Despite everything, even being married, Lois suspected that her beloved was going to feel insecure for some time when it came to her and Superman. She pulled back enough to look in his eyes. "Clark, I count myself very lucky to have you. With all I've learned over the past weeks, I believe that even had Superman been here, my future was with you. I think that's why he stayed away from me all that time. He knew that my perfect man was already right beside me. I've been lucky enough to finally see that."

Clark pulled her to him and simply held her for a moment. "Lois, I... I love you so much."

"I love you, too, Clark."

The subsequent kisses were a tender expression of two people very happy to be together and in love. The rest of their lunch was substantially delayed.

They returned to the office in the early afternoon. None of the leads had panned out but there was still plenty of work to do. They were holding hands as they got off the elevator. They were less than half way to their desks when Jimmy intercepted them. As he approached, he looked at their clasped hands. "It still seems weird that you two are married. I mean, it's great, but it'll take some getting used to."

Clark laughed. "I think we all have some adjustments to make. For my part, I'm looking forward to making them."

Jimmy did a double take on Clark's face. "Hey, CK, you're wearing your glasses again. I thought you'd switched to contacts."

Clark touched his frames. "No. Something about my accident seemed to have fixed my vision for a while. Since my glasses didn't seem to be doing anything, I stopped wearing them. Yesterday I started having problems with double vision so I dug out the glasses. Whatever the problem is, they fix it, so I'm back to wearing them. Lois says they look okay to her, so that's good enough for me."

Lois smiled briefly at her husband then turned to Jimmy. "You look like you have something for us."

"Yeah. This is for Clark." Jimmy offered Clark a stack of papers. "Elected officials from all around the country have been falling all over themselves to retract their criticism of Superman. This is a collection of press releases of apologies to Superman. Mostly, they're restoring honors that had been revoked after Nightfall. A lot of the people that are local to Metropolis are claiming to have been pressured by LexCorp. Perry wants you to

go through these and figure out how many stories are here and how you think they should be handled."

Lois was frowning at Jimmy. "Is there a reason that you said that was for Clark and not both of us?" Lois asked the young office gofer.

Jimmy pointed at the papers in Clark's hand. "The chief told me that when you two came in I was to give that to Clark and ask you to see him about something else. I'm just following orders," Jimmy said with a don't-shoot-the-messenger smile.

"I guess I should see what he has," she said as she started in the direction of Perry's office. His door was open when she arrived so she stuck her head in. It was only a second or so before he looked up. "Jimmy says you have an assignment for me," she said.

"Yes, I do. Please come in and close the door."

Normally Perry only closed his door to have private conversations or to chew someone out. While both had happened to her rather often, she couldn't guess what the motivation would be today. Could he have learned something about Clark? She closed the door, sat down, and waited.

Nearly a minute dragged by and her trepidation grew as Perry seemed reluctant to bring up whatever it was. "What have you found out about Clark?" she finally asked. The words burst out before she knew what happened.

"Clark? No, Darlin', this isn't about Clark. I, um... I think you should write a statement in response to Luthor's recorded message to Superman."

"What? Chief, how can you ask me to do that! It's not news!"

"Lois, normally I'd agree. In fact, that's why I didn't ask before this. But I've been watching the flow of news and you need to respond. I think this would be best for you. You're right that this isn't news, and we don't need it to help circulation. But you were named personally in the message. Luthor made you part of the story. If you don't write your reply then others will do it for you."

"Perry—I won't do this!"

"Lois, calm down. I'm not asking you to do this as your boss. I'm offering you the chance as your friend. There are already stories circulating that you were playing Lex against Superman. Some have even gone so far as to suggest that if it wasn't for you, then Luthor wouldn't have tried to kill him."

She knew what Perry meant. Lois had seen some of the more sensationalist interpretations of Luthor's speech herself. She also knew that Perry would never ask her to do this just to sell some more papers. The fact that he was pushing her to do it at all meant that he was worried about the consequences for her if she said nothing. "Perry, I appreciate what you're saying. How bad do you think it will be if I don't do this?"

His face took on an expression that was both sad and serious. "You know we'll defend you, and you are respected in our industry. But most people outside of Metropolis had never heard of you until that Luthor recording went public. As of today, three people figure prominently in Nightfall and you are one corner of that triangle. I'm not any happier about it than you are, but that's the way it is."

"I have no idea what I'd say," she offered defensively.

"If I were you, I'd make it personal," Perry suggested. "I've read Luthor's message. He only mentioned you to twist the knife. He killed Superman for his own reasons. I remember you saying that he was there the day Superman kissed you during the Miranda incident, so he knew there was an attraction. I'd suggest you concede that incident took place. But I would emphasize that you've lost your friend. Lois, I know that touchy-feely isn't your style." Perry looked thoughtful for a second. "Lois, have you and Clark talked about Superman?"

Lois was confused for a moment but had a feeling she knew where Perry was going. "Yes, Perry. There's no way we could

have taken the step we did without having that out in the open.”

Perry relaxed at this news. “Then you might want to think about asking him to help with this. I understand that some parts may be difficult, but he’s as good as I’ve ever seen when the story has to feel personal.”

Perry was probably right but Lois wasn’t sure she wanted to bring Clark in on *this* story. “I’d like to see what I come up with first, but you’re right. Clark’s touch could help.” Lois stood and started for the door. As she started to leave she realized that Perry really was doing her a favor. She turned to him and said, “Thanks, Perry.”

For a second Perry’s face took on a fatherly look. Then it turned gruff as he replied, “Just give me something worthy of The Daily Planet.”

Lois had been trying for nearly an hour to frame up some ideas about what to say. Clark had tried to talk to her earlier but she had shooed him away. She did want his help, but she wanted to write the first draft herself and let Clark help with the finishing touches. This was her problem and besides, after what happened at lunch today, she wanted the piece to have the right tone before her husband read it.

She had her basic response on her computer screen and was walking through the points one more time. There was a section about Superman investigating Luthor. Lois offered that as the true basis of the conflict between the two men. She conceded that she, like many other women, had been infatuated with Superman when he first appeared. Then she went immediately into a section describing how Superman had always kept his distance from her and everyone else. She used this as the basis of the idea that he would never allow himself to have a relationship with any woman because it would be too dangerous. Lois included a description of Miranda’s drug and the fact that Superman had kissed her in front of Lex, and how that apparently led Lex to believe that Superman was genuinely interested in her. Finally, she mentioned that she was married to her partner, Clark Kent, and the fact that Luthor thought that there was a potential relationship with anyone other than Clark simply proved how out-of-touch Luthor really was.

“I think you’re close.” The voice right over her shoulder startled her, even though it was Clark. She jumped slightly then turned and gave her husband an, ‘I’m annoyed’ glare.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

She squared up to him with as menacing a look as she could muster. “Please tell me that just because we’re married, you don’t think it’s suddenly all right to read my copy without asking.”

His responding look was apologetic and somber. “I’m sorry Lois, I.. I’ll make sure to be careful about that in the future. And, for the record, no, I don’t believe that our being married gives me the right to invade your privacy or review your work in any way that you feel is inappropriate. Perry told me what you were working on and asked if I was helping with the final draft. I came by to see if I could help. I should have asked before reading your copy.”

She reached out and took his hand. “It’s okay. Just don’t make a habit of it. You know I generally ask you to proof my work when it’s ready. This one was so...personal that I wanted to get it just so before I asked for your input. Honestly, I was going to call you over pretty soon. I think it’s just about ready. What do you think?”

Clark knelt beside her and put his arm around her shoulders as he read the story again. “I think the overall content is about as good as it can get.” Clark shifted his tone to just above a whisper. “Are you sure you are okay with stretching the truth?”

Lois’s reply was also in hushed tones. “Where am I stretching the truth?”

Clark whispered back, “We both know that Superman was

interested in more than friendship with you.”

“I’ve thought about this a lot. I believe he was attracted to me. But I don’t think he was ever going to let a relationship start for the very reason that I’ve outlined here. I’ve come to believe that he was going to tell me that for him no relationship was possible and that I should look...” She reached out and cupped her husband’s cheek. “...closer to home. So, if I am shading the truth, it’s not by much. And to the extent I am at all, I believe it’s for the best all around.”

Clark couldn’t resist kissing the most perfect wife he could imagine. After a brief – but not too brief – kiss-induced delay, they went back to editing Lois’s statement. They were both confident that the combination of Lois’s talent for creative truth and Clark’s omnipresent feel for conveying compassion would result in the definitive last word on the now infamous Lex Luthor message.

Even with the solid foundation that Lois provided, it still took longer than they expected to bring her response to Lex’s message together. It was fundamentally an op-ed piece, but Perry told Lois that he intended to run it alongside the real news of the day.

When they were finally able to leave the office and head home, they spent the early part of the evening in a thorough search of their apartment for Clark’s eye doctor information. Despite their best efforts, nothing turned up and Lois was growing somewhat exasperated. “We’ve found your financial records and lots of personal records but there just doesn’t seem to be anything here about an eye doctor.”

“I wish I could help more,” Clark said. “Do you remember me saying anything about where I got my glasses or who my eye doctor was?”

“No. You were running off all the time and I think you said at least once that there was a doctor, but you never said any names. Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen any medical records here at all.”

“You’re right. I’m beginning to think that before I lost my memory, I’d never been to a doctor in Metropolis.”

“Well, you’ve lived in the city for less than a year. I suspect you aren’t the only man that’s moved into a new city and never bothered to get a doctor. Some time in the next few weeks we need to get you to an eye doctor. Just be careful not to break your glasses.”

“I’ll be careful,” he replied. “But I don’t think that’s going to be much of a problem. I’ve found five pairs. Do you remember me breaking them all the time? There must have been a reason to have so many extra pairs.”

“No, Clark. I don’t remember you breaking them, but you never seemed to take them off. Knowing you, all those extra pairs are just an overabundance of caution on your part.”

Since this was only their second night as a married couple, they hadn’t been together long enough to have an established bedtime pattern yet, but it looked like the beginnings of one might be emerging. The smallness of the bathroom meant that preparations would remain one-at-a-time. As had happened last night, Clark had gone first and was waiting in bed while Lois finished in the bathroom.

In the low light of the bedroom, he wasn’t experiencing any of the double image problems that had plagued him all day. He had noticed that his double vision seemed to come and go somewhat randomly when he wasn’t wearing his glasses. Clark had removed his glasses when he got in bed. At that moment he was able to look around the room with no double image issues at all.

Suddenly there was a crash in the bathroom. The sound was startling in the otherwise quiet room and his head jerked toward the sound of the noise. Lois had dropped a water cup.

Fortunately, it was plastic so there was no broken glass. She was cleaning up the water that had spilled and didn't appear to need any help.

Hold it! How was he looking at Lois? There wasn't any way to see into the bathroom from the bed. It was around a corner and down a short hall. In that moment of confusion, the image of Lois inside the bathroom faded and he was looking at the wall that separated the rooms. How did that happen? He concentrated again, this time consciously trying to see Lois. The image of the wall faded and was replaced with the image of his beautiful wife. Once more he cycled his vision to look at the wall again and then Lois.

Then, with an eerie sense of familiarity, he remembered the inventory of Superman's powers. Superman could see through things. He had just seen through the wall. But he was Clark Kent, he protested to himself. He wasn't Superman.

Or was he? After all, he'd just seen through a wall. Normal people didn't do that. With a sinking feeling, Clark began to think harder. How could he be Superman? He was Clark Kent. That was all he remembered.

But, he'd lost most of himself. He barely remembered being Clark Kent. Now that he thought about it, something felt 'off' about his memories of Superman. He thought back to his Luthor memories. There had been one incident where Superman said, "If you ever need to find me, all you have to do is look up." In his memory, the perspective was wrong. He'd been looking *down* at Luthor when those words were spoken. When he'd spoken those words....

All those conversations with Luthor... all those feelings about Lois...he was remembering them from the perspective of Superman. Clark Kent wasn't hiding nearby or talking to Superman after the fact. Clark Kent was wearing the Superman suit.

The sound of movement from the direction of the bathroom roused him from his reverie. Lois was finished and starting his way.... He hardly thought about it as he watched her through the wall. It was easy now. One thought flashed through his mind: 'She isn't going to like this.'

When Lois came out of the bathroom she expected to find a relaxed and smiling husband waiting for her. Instead, Clark sat on the edge of the bed and looked as scared as she could ever remember seeing him. She went over, stood in front of him and asked, "Darling, what's wrong?"

His reply was somber. "When you dropped your water cup you wiped up the water using the blue towel."

She looked confused. "Was there something wrong with using that towel?"

"No, Lois, the problem is that I know you used the blue towel."

"Clark, you're confusing me."

"When you dropped the cup, it startled me. I looked toward the bathroom and I...could see you through the wall."

"What?!"

"I could see you cleaning up the water. It took a second for me to realize that I shouldn't be able to see you. When I saw that you were okay and relaxed, it was like the wall sort of faded back in and I was looking at the wall again. Then I tried to do it on purpose. When I concentrated, the wall faded back out and I could see you again...through the wall."

Clark watched as Lois put the pieces together. Her initial reaction was shock. She turned and stepped toward the bathroom, then turned to face Clark again. Her gaze grew just a little more intense. It took her less than a second to put the pieces together. She stepped over to where he was sitting and used her hand to press Clark's hair down. Her eyes went wide. "My God, Clark. You're Superman."

Once she was past that moment of surprise, her hand dropped

to her side as her face fell. She stepped back and sat down in a chair so that she was facing him. Her head dropped and she stared at the floor, apparently dumbfounded. After a few seconds she looked up at Clark. "Then who are you? Are you Clark... or Superman? Which person is the real you?" Lois paused. She looked so confused. "Who did I marry?" Lois finally asked. She sounded lost.

Clark wished he knew exactly what his wife was thinking. Was she hurt? Angry? Or was she just in shock? Clark was still too in-shock himself to gauge Lois's reaction. After another second, Clark realized that she'd asked him a question. He stood and took one step toward her. "You married someone who loves you more than he knows how to say." He tried to pour all his love for this amazing woman into the declaration.

She lifted her face slowly to look at him. Clark thought there might be the hint of a smile there. But he just couldn't tell for sure. He struggled for what to do. This was all so confusing.

She'd asked who he was. He wished he knew. Clark's mind buzzed with fragments of images all mixed together. Clark, Superman and Lois. Superman and Lois...together. That was a thought that he had shied away from before. There had seemed to be no point in dwelling on it with Superman dead. But now he concentrated on those fragments to see just what might lie below the surface. There was something there but it was just out of reach.

For a long moment, Clark racked his memories for encounters between Superman and Lois. The breakthrough came when he tried to imagine seeing Lois through Superman's eyes. It was like finding a crack in a door and prying it open. The wave of emotion and memory that hit him was overwhelming. Clark felt dizziness and then everything went black.

Then there was Lois's concerned voice and the comforting touch of her hand. "Clark! Are you okay?"

He opened his eyes and found her holding him. She felt very nice. "What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "You were standing there and then you just collapsed. What do you remember?"

"I found the key. I remember who Superman is."

Clark feared that she would pull away. But whatever she was thinking, she stayed right with him. "Clark...tell me what you remember."

"The key to those memories was to imagine I was looking at you through Superman's eyes. I never tried doing that before. Once I thought that way, it was like being hit by a tidal wave of emotion and memory. I guess I fainted."

"Do you remember much now that you didn't before?" she asked. Along with the curiosity, there was genuine caring in her voice.

"Lois, there's so much that's new. I remember being Superman. I remember who I am and who Superman is. I'd like to explain that first. I think it's important for us."

"Okay, Clark," she said warily. "Go ahead."

"I am Clark Kent. Those images of growing up in Smallville, such as they remain, are real. I found a fragment of a memory of inventing Superman. I hid my special abilities for years until I came to Metropolis. When I got here, I knew I wanted to stay. But I almost got caught using my special abilities. I remembered this phrase: 'Superman is a change of clothes for work.' Does that make any sense to you? Somehow I think of you as being part of that idea."

Lois suddenly looked excited. "Yes! Right after you started at the Planet, before Superman appeared, you got all dirty one day and I told you to keep a change of clothes at work."

"That's right. I remember. That was it. Lois, with that sentence you invented Superman. He's a false-front to let me help, but still have my real life as Clark Kent." Clark paused and then continued in a more somber tone. "I remember kissing you

before Nightfall. I remember...”

“What, Clark?”

“I remember what I was going to tell you when I got back.” Lois motioned with her hands for him to continue. “I was going to tell you two things. I was going to tell you that Superman was really your work partner Clark Kent. Then, if you were still speaking to me, I was going to tell you that I was in love with you.”

He paused for a moment before continuing. “Lois, please say something.”

It was clear that she was still struggling to come to grips with the new information. “I don’t know what to say. How could you pretend to be two different people to me?”

“I don’t remember all of it. I remember a lot more than I did, but there are still so many holes. I have these half-memories about wanting to... hold you and...be with you, but I couldn’t because of Clark. You weren’t interested in Clark. In those memories, it’s like I’m thinking of Clark as if he were someone else. I had some of those memories before I remembered Superman just now. I thought that they were echoes of talks that I had with Superman about you, but I can see now that I was trying to find a way to deal with your attraction to Superman. That couldn’t be. Superman wasn’t real.”

“How can you say that?” Lois pleaded. “Superman is real. In many ways he’s just as real as Clark Kent.” Lois could see he was going to protest but she cut him off by placing her hand over his mouth. “Let me finish.” He nodded and she removed her hand. “Superman isn’t special because of the powers. He’s special because of what he does with the powers. I always wondered what kind of person it would take to have those powers and use them for the good of others the way Superman did. Well, now I know. It takes someone raised in Kansas by one of the sweetest couples I’ve ever met.”

Lois got up off the floor, moved over to the bed and sat down on its edge. She waited a second for Clark, who was still sitting on the floor, to turn and face her. “Clark, why did you maintain the deception? Didn’t you realize it would hurt me?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure I ever really knew. There’s this mass of confused feelings. I remember feeling jealousy toward Superman because I wanted you to look at the real me the way you looked at my false front. I always had an overwhelming desire to be with you. But I was also very confused about what to do. And I was afraid. Lois, I was so scared. I’m so sorry. I... I love you. I’ve always loved you. I’m sure of that. There was just so much else in the way that was confusing everything.”

As he said the words a feeling of ‘rightness’ came over him. Since Nightfall, he’d never consciously lied to Lois about anything. Now that he remembered his earlier deception, he also remembered how wrong it had felt. Of course he couldn’t tell the world that Clark Kent was Superman. There were no pangs of doubt about keeping that secret. Deceiving Lois felt completely different. There must have been a reason for not telling her the truth. Whatever that reason had been, he was glad it was gone now.

But there were still the consequences of that deception. He may not remember the reason... In many ways he wasn’t even the person that had practiced that deception. He was the person that had to step up and accept the consequences of those actions.

Clark stood up and looked at Lois from the middle of the room. “I guess this isn’t exactly what you thought you were getting when you said you’d marry me. I... If you’d like, I can go somewhere else for a while. I can see if Perry still has that room. I know I’ve lied to you, but...please give us a chance.” Lois was staring at him but he couldn’t read her expression. After a second, he stepped toward the archway that led to the front room.

Lois’s voice burst out. “Where are you going?” The question sounded like a challenge.

“I’m not the person you thought you married. I owe you time to decide what you want.”

“Get back here!” It was a shout but there was no anger in it. Clark stopped and took a step back toward the bed. “Now sit down,” Lois said. She shook her head in a motion that suggested exasperation. “I can’t believe you. Running away must be some kind of instinct. Clark, I want you here. Do you believe that?”

He wanted to believe it so badly. But there was a sliver of doubt that terrified him. “Yes,” he answered. He tried to keep the fear out of his voice.

“Good,” Lois said confidently. “Now listen to me. Fine, you aren’t the man I thought I married. What you are, is the man I thought I married and the man I thought I’d lost. Part of me is mad at you for pretending to be two different people but I think I understand your reasons. But think what I’ve gained.” She reached out and held his face with both hands. “Clark, I love you. Nothing that we’ve learned tonight can change that. We have some challenges and our lives just got a lot more complicated, but we’re in this together. Aren’t we?”

With those words, the last of his doubts crumbled. Lois had every right to be angry. At very least he’d expected her to doubt him based on his earlier actions. She’d done neither. She really did want to be with him in spite of the mistakes he’d made before he lost his memory.

“We are,” Clark answered, now confident. “And every day I learn a little more about why I fell in love with you so quickly.”

Lois leaned in and kissed her husband. In only a second, she felt his arms around her as the kiss became a rededication of their relationship.

“God, Lois, I love you so much.”

She held him tight.

“Clark?”

“Yes, my love.”

“Let’s go to bed. There’s more to talk about than we can cover in a reasonable time tonight.” Now her expression took on a suggestive air. “Besides, this is only the second night of our marriage and I still have plans for bed tonight that don’t involve sleep.”

Chapter 26: Powers

Lois awoke the next morning to the feel of lips pressing against her own. She couldn’t help but think how amazing it was that something so new and different could feel natural so quickly. However, she noticed that unlike the previous three mornings, today the kiss was coming from above. At the end of that delicious kiss she opened her eyes to find Clark sitting on the edge of the bed looking down at her.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said.

“Good morning to you too,” she replied with a smile.

“I have breakfast in bed for you,” Clark said.

Lois glanced to the side of the bed and noticed a tray with coffee, toast and the morning newspaper. “Clark, what’s this for?”

“Honey, after last night how can you ask?”

Her smile broadened. “To be honest, I thought you did a very thorough job of showing your appreciation after we were in bed last night.”

Clark could feel himself blushing. He hadn’t really thought about the implications of Lois’s more aggressive personality when applied to a personal relationship. It was both fun and exciting, but it was going to take some getting used to.

Lois pushed herself up to a more seated position and Clark set the tray in front of her. They exchanged a real good morning kiss and Clark headed for the bathroom.

The day was surprisingly normal for a Saturday in the office. Lois spent much of the day ducking calls from both individuals

and other news organizations that wanted to follow up on her Lex Luthor speech statement. The Daily Planet was responding on behalf of Lois that she had nothing to add to the statement she released.

The Lane and Kent reporting team were moving on from the Superman and Luthor stories to regular investigative reporting. Consequently, work consisted of talking to sources—both political and underworld—looking for any lead available.

They waited until after dinner to go into the subject of Superman. They didn't know if their talk was going to take five minutes or five hours, but they wanted to be sure to have the time available. They were sitting together on the sofa when Lois finally broached the subject. "Do you have any idea how you survived Luthor's trap? Based on everything we learned, you should have died."

"Honey, I wish I knew. I think Bernie's version of what happened at the asteroid is correct. I had to have gotten some of the gas. Then once I crashed, I must have been exposed to the poison when the tank burst open. That's when I lost the rest of my powers. I just wish I knew how I got back to Earth."

"Maybe you can hold your breath longer than anyone thought," Lois offered.

"Maybe," Clark replied cautiously. "I just don't know."

Lois thought about that for a moment. "We may never know how you got back," she said. "What else do you remember about being Superman?"

"Very little. You know how little I remember about being Clark, and I was Clark way more than I was ever in the suit as Superman."

"What about Lex? Do you remember anything else about your interactions with him?"

"No. I have an image of him holding a sword at my throat, but I think that was a Clark Kent encounter. Remember that I told you about times I thought I'd been listening in when Lex talked to Superman – well, obviously we now know I was remembering the conversations from Superman's perspective. Unfortunately, I don't remember any more than before. I guess that doesn't matter much since we found the evidence that put him on the run."

"I don't even like to think about what almost happened." Suddenly Lois's voice sounded shaken and unsure. "If you hadn't made it back, I have to believe that there was a good chance I would have accepted his invitation and stayed in his copy of my apartment. Then when my building was destroyed..."

Clark felt the shudder run through her. He leaned over and drew his wife into a hug. "It's okay, honey. It didn't happen that way."

"But it could have." The thought really frightened her. "Luthor was so skilled at hiding the truth and manipulating people. Who knows, I might have ended up with him. Maybe even married him."

"I don't see how that could have ever happened. But fortunately it's not something that you'll have to worry about now."

They just held each other in silence for a few minutes. Finally Lois moved on to a less distressing subject with a question. "Have you been able to figure out any more about the status of your powers?"

"I've tried to use some of them. The X-Ray vision is about like it was last night. Without my glasses, it sort of comes and goes. It's easier to leave the glasses on so I don't have to concentrate so much."

"Have you remembered anything more about the glasses?"

"No. But now we know why there aren't any medical records. As for the glasses, I'm not sure if it's something I thought of or something I remembered, but I think they're leaded glass."

"You mean like lead crystal?"

"Sure. Since I can't see through lead, that would be a good way to keep from accidentally looking through things."

Lois smiled wickedly. "Like the clothes of attractive women?"

"Lois! You know I'd never do that."

Lois laughed at her husband. "What about when you were a teenager? I would think being a teenage boy with boiling hormones would prove tempting even for someone with your upbringing. Do you remember when you started wearing the glasses?"

"Not clearly. But I think it was when I was a teenager." Clark watched as Lois got an I-told-you-so smirk on her face. "That may have been when the powers developed. I don't remember that clearly either, but I don't think I always had them. It feels like they came in during my late teens. I wonder if they're adult traits, like growing a beard."

Lois almost responded that he was the only person that would know. At the last second, she realized that would likely remind him of his parents so she decided to take the conversation in a different direction. "Have you been able to figure out if any of the other powers are working?"

"They don't seem to be. My hearing seems normal. At least I'm not hearing calls for help from the other side of the city. I haven't set anything on fire yet. I'm nervous about that because I don't know how it works. To see through something I look at it and sort of concentrate on trying to see past it. I guess with the heat vision I would concentrate on something getting hot."

"I guess," Lois offered. "You never explained how any of the powers worked. You always just did things." Lois paused for a moment. When she continued there was a note of irritation in her voice. "If I'd done my job we'd have more information now."

"What do you mean?" Clark asked. "From what I've seen and can remember you've always done your job better than anyone."

"Clark, since you arrived, not as Clark but as Superman, I've had two major failings. First, I let Lex Luthor distract me. I wanted to interview him as a lead-in to an investigation. Instead, he diverted me into the beginnings of a relationship. That was ridiculous and I should have known better."

"Honey, he was a master at diversion."

"But I expect to be the best at what I do. Failing to investigate him was a blunder worthy of a rookie reporter. I don't know if I would have been able to penetrate his network, but I didn't even look. I set out to get the definitive interview and I never got a thing. And what's worse, I didn't even notice that I'd been diverted."

"What does all that have to do with how my powers work?"

Lois squeezed Clark's hand briefly. "Darling, I love you, but as blunders go you were even bigger than Lex."

"I don't understand," Clark said, genuinely confused. "As Superman I wasn't trying to draw you into a relationship and I gave you several interviews."

"But Clark, I was so caught up in hero worship that I never investigated. I missed the obvious physical resemblance between Superman and Clark. That's bad enough, but since no one else seemed to be able to see the resemblance either, I'm willing to cut myself some slack on that. But there were other clues."

"Such as?"

"Even the military noticed that you and I seemed to be the way to contact Superman. Since I never contacted Superman, then it had to be you. Somehow, I never noticed that you could find Superman when no one else could. Then there was the fact that you two were never seen at the same time. I realize now that you were using your super speed to appear from one direction just as Superman disappeared in another. Still, you two were never together. There were other things as well but the overall pattern was that I was so busy being infatuated with Superman that I never did the investigation into you that I should have. If I

had been thinking like a reporter I would have asked you details about how your powers worked and what their limits were.”

“I’m not sure I would have answered those questions, even from you,” Clark countered.

“But I never even asked.”

“Sweetheart, would it bother you if I offered at least a partial explanation?”

“Try me.”

“Okay, you were infatuated with the new hero in the cape, and you let that distract you from being a coldly logical investigative reporter. Let me ask you a question. When I carried you back to the Daily Planet after I first appeared, did you feel something? A connection? This?” Clark reached out and took her hand in his.

She looked at her hand in his and felt the warmth wash over her. “Yes. It was like nothing I’d ever felt before. It was...is...magical.”

“It was, and is, for me too. I’ve told you how hard it was to be near you. That feeling made it difficult to think straight when you were involved. I’m pretty sure we were feeling two sides of the same connection. With forces like that in play, it’s no wonder that you may not have been on your A-game as an investigator.”

“You’re sweet. I’m not sure it’s a good enough excuse, but I’ll buy it.” She leaned in and gave him a kiss. “It’s sure nice not to have to fight that connection anymore.”

“You’re telling me!”

“Anyway, the gist of it is that we don’t know much about your powers or how they work. Were you able to experiment much today?”

“A little. We’ve already talked about the X-Ray vision and the hearing. I don’t even know how to operate the heat vision and I don’t think it would be a good idea to experiment inside the apartment. I’m afraid that it might get away from me and burn down the building. I’ll try it somewhere less flammable.”

Lois had grabbed a pad and was jotting notes. “What about super strength?” Lois asked.

“I haven’t really tried anything yet.”

Lois practically jumped off of the sofa. “Try and lift the sofa.”

Clark moved to where he thought he could get a good grip and lifted. The sofa rose off the ground and Clark stood there holding it. “I didn’t think I’d be able to lift it. But it does feel pretty heavy. I don’t think I can hold it here for long.”

“Don’t strain yourself. Go ahead and put it back down.”

Clark returned the sofa to the floor and Lois immediately sat down and looked at her notes. “You’re clearly stronger than a normal person but not really super strong yet.” She looked at her list again. “What about invulnerability?”

“Honey, how do you suggest we test that?” Clark asked cautiously. He was a little nervous about the consequences of a failed test for this particular ability.

“You...um... I don’t know.” It was clear from her tone that Lois didn’t like saying those particular words.

“I guess I could try to burn or cut myself,” Clark offered, hoping Lois would think the idea was as bad as he did.

“No!” Lois said sharply. “You’ve spent enough time recovering from injuries. Why don’t we put that one off until either all the other powers are back or we can think of a way to test it without hurting you?” Lois looked at her list again. “Super speed?”

“I guess I could try to move around the room as fast as I can and see what happens.”

Lois shook her head. “Why don’t you try a simple point to point move first? Stand at one end of the sofa and move to the other end as fast as you can.”

Clark stood and moved to the end of the sofa farthest from Lois. “Say when.”

“Go,” Lois provided.

Clark tried to move as fast as possible to the other end of the sofa but it was clearly just normal human speed. When he reached the stopping point, he sighed heavily. “Even with the extra incentive, that’s as fast as I can go.”

“What extra incentive?” Lois asked.

“Why, a certain lovely woman at this end of the sofa that I hoped to kiss as soon as I got here.”

“Well, I think you deserve a reward for making your best effort,” Lois said. They met in the middle for a brief but pleasant kiss. Then Lois looked at her list again. “That just leaves your freezing breath and flying.” She hurried into the kitchen and returned with a cup of water. “Blow on it and try to freeze it.”

Despite Clark’s best efforts, the water remained liquid and showed no signs of freezing. “I guess Superman still has a long way to go before he’s ready to consider a comeback,” Clark observed. “As for flying, I have no idea how that works. I’d rather not try flying until we have reason to believe the other abilities are back.”

“I agree, Clark. That’s enough testing for tonight. Did you have anything else in mind for this evening? We both have tomorrow off so we don’t need to get to bed early. We could watch a movie or something.”

Clark put his arms about his wife and drew her into a hug. “My vote would be for ‘or something.’ I think we can find a much better way to spend the evening than watching a movie. Don’t you?”

A few days later they reached one of those natural stopping points that happen from time to time. For the moment, they had exhausted all of the story ideas that related to either Nightfall or Lex Luthor. This even included a series of articles on how the legitimate and charitable portions of the Luthor empire were being absorbed into other businesses or the government.

Half-way though the morning when they had approached Perry asking for an assignment, he had kicked them out of the office. They suspected that he still wasn’t completely comfortable with the fact that they had continued working instead of taking a honeymoon. He had almost insisted that they make extra time to spend together.

On the way home they had gone by a park and been surprised by the number of families that were outside enjoying the day. The oddness of the weather pattern had continued. It was almost impossible to predict the weather from one day to the next. Today was bright, sunny and only slightly warm.

“How would you feel about a day at the beach?” Clark asked.

“Swimming? I don’t think I’ve been to the beach in ages. I’m a city girl and I tend to stay out of the sun.”

“Sure, honey. It will be fun. Look.” He pointed to several families with blankets on the expansive lawn in the park. “I have this fragment of memory about lying in the sun for hours. I remember enjoying it very much. There wasn’t a beach in Smallville, but I think I spent a lot of time at the lake. I know you have a bathing suit and...I’ve sort of been looking forward to seeing you in it.”

“Let’s do it then. Besides, spending the day looking at you wearing only swim trunks isn’t exactly a chore either. But we’ll need to pick up some sunscreen. Do you remember if you needed to use it?”

Clark thought for a second. “If my skin can stop bullets and handle the heat of reentry I should be able to handle a day in the sun. We’ll get some for you but I’ll try going without and see what happens.”

They ended up spending a long day at one of the public beaches south of the city. Clark discovered that he was right and didn’t need to use sunscreen. The sun felt good on his skin and he

never even began to burn. Lois took the more conventional precaution of the combination of a large parasol and liberal use of sunscreen.

This ended up being one of the best days they had spent together. In many ways it was a one-day version of the honeymoon they never had. It was clear, sunny and warm all day. The waters were mild and the surf was light. They did everything from playing in the surf to walking along the beach. This was intermingled with periods of quiet relaxation where Lois generally stayed under the parasol and read while Clark napped in the sun.

As the next day was a regular day off for them, they stayed until well after dark and watched the stars come out over the ocean. They had dinner at a beach-side restaurant and arrived back in Metropolis late and went right to bed.

The next morning Lois was by awakened by the welcome touch of her husband. “Lois? Lois?”

She opened her eyes to see a somewhat concerned look on her husband’s face. “Clark, is something wrong?”

“Not exactly.” He rubbed his chin. “I can’t shave any more.”

She sat up with a start. “What?! What do you mean?”

“When I went to shave, the razor didn’t seem to be cutting my whiskers. I changed the blade and tried again – still nothing. I looked at the blade and it was shredded.”

“That’s great!” she said energetically. “I completely forgot that your hair is invulnerable.”

“It is?”

“You don’t remember?”

“No.” He paused for a minute as if trying to think. “I don’t remember anything about grooming or hair care at all. I mean, I have memories of how other people do things and what I’ve seen on television, but I didn’t remember actually doing these things. I sort of went through the motions. I guess we know why I didn’t have a razor in the bathroom after I lost my memory.”

“So you don’t have any idea how you shaved or cut your hair?”

“I cut my hair?”

“Of course, Clark. When you first arrived in Metropolis, one of the reasons that I immediately tagged you as a ‘Hack from Nowheresville’ was that you had a haircut that looked like something from the seventies. A week later, you had settled into the city, you had started to upgrade your wardrobe, and you had trimmed your hair so that you looked like you belonged in Metropolis. Maybe if you had looked like you do now when we first met, I would have been more open to giving you the time you deserved. Anyway, have you tried any of your powers yet this morning?”

“No, not yet. Give me a second.” Clark looked around the room. He found it was much easier to control the X-Ray vision. He also found that he could hear the radio next door. “Both my hearing and X-Ray vision seem to be stronger. Why don’t you start getting ready and I’ll try out those that I can here in the house?”

When Lois was finished in the bathroom, she found Clark standing next to the sofa. “Watch,” he said. Clark leaned over and lifted the sofa over his head. “It doesn’t feel like it weighs anything.” He put the sofa back down and walked over to the kitchen where a glass of water sat on the counter. Clark looked up to make sure she was still watching, and then he blew on the water. The glass frosted over and in just a second or two, the water was frozen. He looked up at her with a look of delight. “Is that how it’s supposed to work?”

Lois took three quick steps and drew her husband into a hug. “Yes,” she said joyfully.

“Now here’s the rest.” Not letting go of Lois, he turned back to the glass. In seconds, the ice had melted and the water was

steaming. He turned back to Lois. “These must be handy to have when I want a cold drink or hot tea.”

Lois answered with a mischievous smile. “That was always my secret reason for being interested in Superman. I needed someone to help me cater parties.” After a kiss of celebration, Lois continued. “What do you think triggered the sudden change?”

“I don’t know. Could it have been the day at the beach?”

Lois grabbed his hand excitedly. “I think I remember reading an article about Superman where the scientist speculated that your powers might come from the sun. Between the way Nightfall has messed up the weather and the fact that you haven’t been out at all anyway, if you do depend on the sun to recharge your powers, you haven’t had a lot of opportunity.”

“Somehow I think that it would have taken a while anyway. I think I had to get over whatever that Kryptonite gas did to my system. Until I recovered from that, I don’t think the sunlight would have made much difference.”

“Maybe, but still, next time something manages to hurt you, we’re going to spend a day at the beach or pool or whatever it takes to charge you up and get you better.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She put her arms around Clark’s neck. “You’ve grown very important to me. I have a lot invested in you and I take care of my investments.” After a few more kisses, she stepped back and continued the inventory. “So what does that leave? Flying and...what, super speed?”

“Yeah. I tried super speed but...well, watch.” Clark let go and stepped back a step. He moved across the living room to the stairs by the entryway.

To Lois, it looked like he moved a little fast, but not too much so. “I don’t think it’s ready yet.”

“Me neither,” he replied.

“And flying?”

“Honey, I don’t even know how. I’ve tried jumping but I have to be careful. With my strength, I feel like I could jump over a house, but there’s no flying involved. I did try to jump and hover or at least fall more slowly, but it didn’t do anything. So I think flying is still on hold.”

“It sounds to me like another day in the sun is at the top of our to-do list today,” Lois offered. “Would you like to head back for the beach or do something else?”

“I think I had my fill of the beach yesterday,” Clark replied.

Lois thought for a moment. “Why don’t we spend the day in the park like those families we saw yesterday?” she suggested. “It’ll be nice and you can spend much of the day in shorts and a tank top.”

“A tank top?” Clark asked.

“Sure,” Lois replied. “...for maximum skin exposure to the sun.”

“I’m not sure that’ll make much of a difference.”

She gave her husband an exaggerated once-over look. “It can’t hurt. Besides, the view will be great.”

Lois and Clark had been lounging in the sun for several hours. Most of their day consisted of little more than watching the people go by. It was about 2:00 in the afternoon when, for no apparent reason, Lois jumped to her feet. “I just thought of something I need to do right now,” she told Clark excitedly. “If I’m not back in an hour, head home and I’ll meet you there.”

He looked at her dubiously. “If it’s important, let me come with you. You can never be too careful.”

“Stay here and get some more sun,” she insisted. “You’re the one that needs it.”

“Honey, if I stay here I’ll do nothing but worry about you.”

“Clark, you worry too much.”

“Lois, when you are involved, worrying too much is

impossible. If you've suddenly had an idea for a new angle on Luthor or something like that, please let me come."

"I'll be fine. It's nothing like that at all. I just thought of something that I want to do and you need to stay here soaking up the sun." She leaned in close to whisper in his ear. "I want both of the men I married back to full health." She gave him a quick kiss, and then stood up. "I promise you that what I'm doing is very low risk. If it will make you feel better, if something crazy happens in front of me, I'll head the other way."

"Thanks, Lois."

"You're welcome. But remember, this is a special offer — today only.."

"I know. I wouldn't expect Lois Lane to promise more. That's not the person I fell in love with."

So, Lois disappeared. He had found it impossible to relax enough to sleep with her gone so he just lazed in the sun and read. Clark's attempts to relax were largely negated by a growing distraction. He was starting to hear things. It started out as conversations in the park around him. Once he recognized them for what they were, he could tune them out. He had a lot more trouble tuning out emergency calls. These seemed to override whatever it was that enabled his hearing system to filter out the more distant sounds. He knew that this ability would be valuable once Superman was back, so he didn't try too hard to filter out the calls. He felt bad that he couldn't help as Superman, but consoled himself with the promise that he would return when he could.

Clark stayed at the park for an hour after Lois left, but without her presence, it just wasn't as much fun. When he got home, he was disappointed but not surprised to discover that Lois wasn't home yet. He decided to take advantage of the time alone to work on familiarizing himself with his library. It was frustrating to learn that he had books in languages that he couldn't read. He wondered if he'd lost the ability to read these languages or if these were languages he'd planned to learn in the future.

He had to admit to a certain relief twenty minutes later when he heard Lois's heartbeat just as she opened their front door. He had first noticed her heartbeat at the park today. Even though he didn't have a clear memory of listening to her heartbeat before Nightfall, it moved him so much that he was sure that listening to it had been a regular pastime. As soon as the door was open she called out, "Clark?"

He set his book down and stood up to greet her. "Hi," he said with a smile.

She hurried over to him. It was clear that she was excited about something. "Did the day in the sun seem to do anything?"

"Yes. I think the powers are getting back to what they were."

"Good!" She was almost shaking with excitement.

"Lois, you've got something that you're dying to tell me. What is it?"

Her reply came out in a rush. "I know how you shave."

"What?"

"I got the idea to head over to Star Labs. I got in to see Bernie and told him that I was putting together a retrospective piece on Superman. I said that I was trying to include as many details about how Superman went about day-to-day activities such as eating, sleeping and ... shaving. It turns out that while you were being fitted for the Nightfall mission suit, one of the scientists asked you many of those same questions. Apparently you were in a talkative mood and in among the other things you explained all about how you shave and cut your hair."

"So tell me!"

"Heat vision." She looked like she had just answered a million-dollar question.

"You're kidding."

"No. They said that you had told them that you stood in front

of a mirror and used your heat vision to burn off the hair."

"And I don't burn myself?"

"I guess your skin is more invulnerable than your hair. Let's go to the bathroom."

When they got there, Lois wanted to watch but Clark was too worried about a stray glance burning her. "I promise that once I get the hang of this, you'll get to watch. But for today, please let me close the door."

She gave him an exaggerated pout. "Party pooper."

It was much easier than he thought it would be and in a surprisingly short time, a clean-shaven Clark Kent emerged from the bathroom. Lois felt his chin. "Very nice," she said in a suggestive tone.

Clark smiled at the promise of more personal activities later in the evening. "So, did they explain how I cut my hair?"

"Yes," Lois answered. "When we were looking around your bathroom for a shaver that first day, we didn't find a shaver but we did find that nice, large hand-held mirror."

"I remember. We moved it to the bedroom dresser."

"Superman told the Star Labs scientists that he used two mirrors to cut his hair. You told them it had taken a long time to master that skill. I'll let you practice that one a few times before I ask to watch. Two mirrors and heat vision really do sound like a recipe for accidental scorching."

Lois didn't know what had woken her up. After her discovery of the secret of Clark's grooming, the rest of the evening had felt like a celebration. Now, as she took stock of her position, she was unsurprised to find that she was lying on top of her husband. She always thought that married couples slept on opposite sides of the bed. If they really liked each other, maybe they slept closely and spooned. She had never imagined that being married to Clark meant that every time she woke up, she was in some sort of tangled embrace with her partner. This had been another of those fabulous and unexpected surprises that had come with being married to Clark.

As she stirred, her leg shifted and dropped from its position on Clark's leg. Instead of landing on the bed it dangled. Her first thought was that they must be right on the edge and perhaps she should see about getting them more centered on the mattress.

As she glanced around, she realized that there was a flaw in that plan. They were already centered on the mattress. Except that it was three feet below them. They were floating!

"Clark." It was barely more than a whisper but it might be enough.

In only a second or so, she felt his arm shift and his hand rubbed against her back. "What, honey?"

"Darling, how do you feel?"

"Hmm. I always feel wonderful when you are in my arms."

Even ninety percent asleep he was still such a romantic.

"Dear, we're floating."

That was enough to startle him. "What?" The fall down to the mattress was more startling. Before they had even reached the bed, Clark had tightened his arms protectively around her. After they hit the bed Clark was wide awake. "Honey, are you all right?"

"Yes," she answered. "It wasn't that far and your being on the bottom cushioned my fall nicely."

"I guess there are unexpected advantages to you being on top."

"Watch it, mister, I can still trade you in."

Once the laughter and kisses had subsided, Clark had a question. "Do you have any idea how someone goes about learning to fly?"

It had been nearly a week since the discovery of the dependency on sunshine and the recovery of Clark's powers. Lois

and Clark had been actively discussing the options for the reappearance of Superman, but so far all of the ideas sounded unattractive. There were going to be questions about what happened at Nightfall and how Superman felt about Luthor. They were also worried about admitting memory loss because that would point directly to Clark Kent.

It was dinnertime after a regular day at work. Clark was preparing the evening meal and Lois was mostly just keeping him company. She almost felt guilty at having Clark cook night after night and she had offered to learn on several occasions. However, he kept insisting that he loved to cook and it was no imposition at all. Lois had a plan to learn to cook eventually – after all, she was sure that the lessons with her private, live-in instructor would be fun on their own – but she was happy that Clark wasn't doing anything to pressure her.

Dinner was almost ready when there was a knock on the door. "I'll get it," she called. When she opened the door she was glad that she had a good grip on the doorknob.

"Lois, what are you doing here?" she heard in a surprised, but friendly voice.

"Martha, Jonathan, what are you doing alive?"

THE END

When the Sky Falls – Final Notes

Well here we are. Who knew so much would come from the simple question of:

Why didn't they use some technology to improve the chance for a successful Nightfall mission?" That was the question that popped into my head over a year ago. That was all I had when I started.

Once more I have to thank IolantheAlias and HappyGirl for their assistance on this story. As I've said a few times along the way, this has been an educational experience. I have had my limitations as a writer made evident. Their help has been incredibly valuable in working to overcome those limitations.

Unresolved Issues: It is my expectation that there will be a sequel. It may be a very small piece or it may be another substantive work. Right now I just don't know. The issues that I would like to cover still are:

1. Where were Martha and Jonathan?
2. Lex Luthor's fate.
3. The Return of Superman

I never intended to include those points in this story.

Clark's Memories: Most of his memories are gone and are unrecoverable. One of the core premises of this story was that his background was as much a hindrance as a help. To rebuild his future he has:

1. His feelings and instincts.
2. Lois
3. His other friends such as Perry and Bill Henderson.
4. And now, Martha and Jonathan

The Elder Kents: I knew right from the beginning that there was no place for them in this story. In fact, in the initial draft they did die. The Fabulous Beverly didn't like that answer and convinced me that all that was really necessary for this story was for them to be missing.

For anyone that made it this far, I hope that the journey was both believable (within the confines of the LnC universe) and enjoyable.

Bob Bartholomew