

Chocolate Lab

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Rated: PG

Submitted: July 2011

Summary: Clark is going to tell Lois his secret tonight. He is. He's finally going to tell her. But Lois has to take care of her neighbor's dog first.

Author's note: This fic is for Bobbart for the 2011 L&C Ficathon.

Dialogue and situations taken from the episode "Whine, Whine, Whine" written by Kathy McCormick & John McNamara; from "That Old Gang of Mine" by Gene Miller & Karen Kavner; and also from "And The Answer Is..." by Tony Blake & Paul Jackson.

This story is set immediately after "Whine, Whine, Whine".

I extend my sincere appreciation to Corrina (Female Hawk) and LynnSM for their beta work. Their insightful comments made this fic much better. Many thanks also to the posters on the LCFic message boards who helped me with various questions about wine, shoes, and chicken.

He was going to tell her tonight. He was. Clark knotted his tie and took a look in the mirror. The charcoal gray suit was freshly dry-cleaned, the white shirt was ironed and starched to within an inch of its life, and the tie was actually quite sober for him. Too bad the man in the mirror looked so worried.

Of course, he wasn't looking forward to the telling. Having to tell his partner and best friend that, ever since he'd met her two years ago, he'd been leading a double life? That Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter at the *Daily Planet*, moonlighted in a blue spandex suit? That when he ran off (which had become a sharp point of contention lately) he wasn't really returning a video or picking up a prescription or buying stamps before the post office closed? No, he was off being Superman.

Lois might not take that all that well. In fact, Clark expected her reaction to be volcanic. Clark had a sinking feeling that her reaction might outdo the genuine volcanic eruption he had encountered last month, where he'd diverted the lava flow while the villagers below had scuttled to safety.

He deserved it. He'd been lying to her for two years now. He only hoped that, once he put the truth – the *whole* truth – out there, that she would eventually forgive him.

In the meantime, he wasn't above manipulating things to get a better atmosphere for what he was already mentally dubbing "The Confession". Nervous tension mixed with burgeoning hope. That afternoon, after Calvin Dregg's court case against Superman had been dismissed, Lois had talked with Superman.

"I think I understand something I didn't before," she had said. "Why I don't really know you. Why no one does. You live... above us, and when we try to bring you down here, we just show the worst sides of ourselves. I've tried to love you but I realized today how selfish that is. You're not *just* here for me... you're here for all of us." Then she reached up and kissed him on the cheek, chastely.

It was a good-bye kiss, Clark had realized. With a sense of ineffable loss, he had watched Lois walk away. She was giving up her crush on Superman, and going off to be with Dan Scardino. Clark had felt so hollow that he almost expected the wind to topple him.

And then, miracle of miracles, Lois came to his apartment. To *Clark's* apartment. She wasn't going off with Dan Scardino. She'd dumped the smarmy, Hawaiian-shirt-wearing, annoying FDA agent.. She wanted to be with Clark. And she'd gone ahead and said the scary words.

"We let ourselves get distracted and we let ourselves get hurt too easily and we work too much and we argue over stupid things... all so we can hide from each other, and I'm sick of it, Clark. Because the only reason we hide is, we're scared."

"Of what?"

"Of this." And then Lois had launched herself at him in a passionate kiss. Of all the kisses Clark had had with Lois, whether as Superman or as Clark, this was one of the best. One of the best because of what it meant. There was hope for him. Hope for him and her together.

"If you want to run away from this, tell me now," Lois had said.

Clark had looked at her and told her the absolute truth. "I won't run, Lois. I'm ready for the next step if you are."

And so that had led to his presence now, getting ready for a dinner with Lois, and mentally preparing for the evening. They'd go to Ciao Amici's, an upscale Italian restaurant. The name meant "Welcome, Friends" and Clark hoped that was a good omen. He and Lois were good friends, right? Maybe they could become something more.

He would buy her the best dinner ever, with antipasti and wine and tiramisu and whatever else she wanted. He would sit there and enjoy looking at her, and enjoy her babble, and enjoy being with her. Then he'd ask her to his apartment, after dinner, and he'd sit with her on the couch and he'd draw a deep breath and then he'd tell her.

"Lois, I'm Superman." No, a little too abrupt. "Lois, have you ever noticed that Superman and I look a lot alike?" No, that was lame, too. "Lois, have you ever wondered why I'm always running off?" Maybe that was a good lead-in. She hated him running off. He hated leaving her. Finally he could tell her why – the truth, and not some stupid excuse.

A tentative knock at the door snapped him out of his reverie. He thought about calling out "Be right there!" but instead he sped to the door.

"Hello, Lois." His jaw dropped at her sheer beauty. She'd put her hair up in some complicated pattern. She'd bought some new shoes (at least Clark had never seen this pair before), sultry-looking high heels that matched her burgundy dress. The outfit accentuated her curves and made her look... more *Lois*.

The way her eyes looked his body up and down made him hope that... well, maybe there was hope for him.

"Clark." As ever, hearing her voice sent a little frisson of excitement through him. She smiled hesitantly. "Ready to go?"

He should compliment her. Instead, frustratingly, the first words that came out of his mouth were, "We could take a cab. You don't have to drive."

"No, Clark. We've got this settled. I'll drive. You'll pay for dinner." Lois had that don't-mess-with-me tone that he'd learned meant business. Then her features softened. "Besides, I want to talk with you without anyone else around."

Clark nodded. He wanted that too. But he wanted to talk with her in his apartment, not in a crowded restaurant, and not when she was driving. Not when she was likely to drive off the road at what he had to tell her. He started mentally rehearsing "The Confession" again, frantically turning over opening lines in his head.

"Clark? You OK?" Lois was understandably confused at his lack of response.

"Fine." Belatedly, he added, "Uh, you look great."

"Thank you." Shyly she added, "You don't look so bad yourself." They stared at each other for a minute, and Clark was

about two seconds away from pulling her into his bedroom and saying, *The hell with dinner, let's stay here and start kissing again.* Then Lois blurted out, “Well, we should get going,” and the moment passed.

“Uh, yes. We should.” They stayed silent as Clark locked his apartment and they went down to the street to get into Lois’s Jeep.

The silence was awkward as they drove to the restaurant. Was this how it was going to be now? They’d admitted that there was something between them – why couldn’t they talk to each other now?

Desperately, Clark began. “So, what happened to Knox?”

“The Omnicorp CEO?” Lois replied. “He was arrested for conspiring to blow up the courtroom at Superman’s trial. Fortunately Superman smelled the bomb in time and got it out of the courtroom before anyone was hurt. The bomber led us right to Knox.” She smiled. “*Daily Planet* exclusive.”

“Well done,” Clark congratulated her. It was well done. Too bad he’d had to be there as Superman. If he could have been there as Clark, it would have been their exclusive, not her exclusive. He had developed a real fondness for seeing the “Lane and Kent” byline on a *Planet* article.

“I think we need to investigate how Knox got to where he was,” Lois said, and just like that, they were talking freely again, bouncing ideas off each other, discussing past cases and how they might use the same techniques, and getting along. Clark loved it.

The dinner was marvelous. They shared a bottle of wine, the food was well worth its high-but-not-exorbitant price, and they didn’t have one awkward silence through the whole evening. Clark didn’t obsess too much about “The Confession”, thinking about it only ten or fifteen times. And there wasn’t one Superman call, for a change. Or perhaps he just wasn’t hearing them, because he was so engrossed. He gave himself up to the sheer enjoyment of being with Lois.

The only deviation from Clark’s plan was that Lois was too replete to want tiramisu. A nod to the waiter ensured that two portions of the dessert got wrapped up to serve at home later. Clark paid the bill, adding a generous tip for the unobtrusive but excellent service.

He held Lois’s coat for her and took a minute to revel in her nearness as she donned it. He drew in a deep breath. Before he could ask, “Will you come up to my apartment after we get there?” Lois broke in.

“Oh, Clark, talking with you reminded me that I left my notes at the *Planet*. You don’t mind if we stop there on the way home, do you?” She had already made the turn that led to the *Planet*, he saw.

“Of course not.” Although he was a little worried that Lois worked too hard. She complained about him always running off. He didn’t complain out loud, but he worried inside. She worked too hard, too much. She didn’t take time for herself. She was always “go, go, go”, never taking a break.

On the other hand, who was he to talk? He worked full time – and being partners with Lois sometimes meant more than full time – and then he had a second job. Pot, meet kettle.

Maybe they should both take some time off. Maybe, after he told her, they could go off to a Caribbean island somewhere, and spend a week on the beach, drinking fruity drinks with little umbrellas in them.

Lois zoomed into the *Planet* parking lot, and Clark thought, *Yeah, right. The beach idea – I don’t think so.* Lois wouldn’t slow down. He loved that about her.

They greeted the night doorman, and took the elevator up to the bullpen. Clark stared at her neck, wondering what would happen if he suddenly began kissing it, right here, right now. NO! He had to tell her first. He jammed his hands in his pockets, curling his fingers into fists. The elevator doors opened and Clark

breathed a mental sigh of relief at the removal of temptation.

Lois went to her desk, the heels of her dress shoes making a click-clack on the bullpen floor. The noise echoed through the empty bullpen, usually so loud and bustling. The late-shift journalists were probably off researching something or chasing a late-breaking story, thought Clark. The night editor was on the floor below, and even the most inveterate workers (like Lois) had long since gone home – not surprising, as they’d stayed at the restaurant well past midnight. She picked up a file folder and flipped through it.

Clark saw something unusual on her desk and came over. He didn’t think someone would have sent her a bomb, but then again, you never knew with Lois. He X-rayed it and couldn’t believe it. “What’s this?”

Lois set down the file folder and looked at the large box Clark pointed to. “Oh! My Double Fudge Crunch Bars came in!” “What?”

“You know Peter from Sports?”

Clark did know Peter, a friendly guy who was the beat reporter for the Metropolis Tigers football team. “Yeah.”

“He passed around a fundraising sheet for his son’s Little League team, and it came on a day that I was out of Double Fudge Crunch Bars, so I signed up for eight boxes.”

“Lois, are you telling me that you have *sixteen pounds* of Double Fudge Crunch Bars here in a box on your desk?”

“Well, yes. I was out, Clark! I needed chocolate! And they’re the special double-dark-chocolate kind!”

“I think you’re all set on Double Fudge Crunch Bars for about the next three years, that’s what I think,” Clark said wryly.

“Clark, I’m thinking ahead. Plus, I’m helping Peter and the kid’s – “

“Petey Junior.”

“And Petey Junior’s Little League team. You should be proud of me.” She looked again at the box. It was big. Very big. A big box full of eight smaller boxes, each smaller box full of Double Fudge Crunch Bars.

“I’ll take them home now, and then I’ll bring one to the office every day. You see, I’ll actually save money, because I won’t be buying them one at a time from the news stand anymore.”

“Wholesale rather than retail?” Clark asked.

“Exactly.” Lois turned to him. “Clark, would you mind carrying them down to the car?”

“You can’t carry sixteen pounds?” Clark asked, just to yank her chain.

“I’m carrying this file folder.”

He sighed and gave up. “Sure.” As he hoisted the box (by a lifetime’s habit making it look like he was adjusting to its weight) he asked, “I’d really like to talk with you. Would you be able to stay at my apartment a little while after you drop me off?”

“Sure... Oh, Clark!”

“What?” said Clark, alarmed at the urgency in her voice.

“I forgot! How could I do that?”

“You forgot what?”

“I forgot about my neighbor’s dog!”

Clark eyed her skeptically. Was this some sort of payback for all the times he’d run out on her? “Neighbor’s dog?”

“It happened this afternoon! Phil – you know Phil from 504, right?”

“I’ve never met him.” Still a little stung, he needed her.

“Lois, I wasn’t aware that you knew your neighbors.”

“Of course I do!” she lied. “Well, earlier today, when I was coming back from your place, the ambulance was at my apartment building, and the paramedics were on my floor. They think Phil had a heart attack. Eleanor, his wife, went to the hospital with him. She caught me in the hallway and asked me if I’d let out their dog tonight and tomorrow morning, till she comes back. And now it’s been six hours and I forgot all about the dog!”

“I think most dogs can hold it for six hours.”

“Well... you’re the one with the farm background. I never had a dog.”

Clark bowed to the inevitable. “Lois, the dog is probably fine. Let’s go there and take him out, and then we can talk. At my apartment.”

“Can’t we talk here?”

Clark lowered his voice. “I was kind of thinking of the talk... with wine... and chocolate... and a comfortable couch...”

“Oh, *that* kind of talk.” The eagerness in her voice heartened Clark. Lois grabbed him by the arm. “You got my chocolate bars? OK, Clark, let’s go.” She marched him to the elevator.

They made the trip from the *Planet* to her apartment in record time. Of course, it helped that at this hour of the morning, there was very little traffic. They entered the building and climbed to the fifth floor.

“Let me go to Phil’s first and take the dog out, and after that I’ll meet you in my apartment,” Lois suggested.

“Instead of that, Lois, how about I put these Double Fudge Crunch Bars in your kitchen, and then meet you at Phil’s?” Clark replied. “We can take the dog out together.”

Lois fumbled in her bag for her neighbor’s key. “Sure,” she replied absently.

Clark opened her apartment door with his key (they had given each other keys to their apartments a few months ago) and set the sixteen pounds of chocolate up on her kitchen counter. Leaving Lois’s apartment door slightly ajar in case she wanted to put on some more comfortable shoes before they took the dog out, he went down the hall to 504. Lois had finished fiddling with the locks and was just now opening the door.

An excited black Labrador Retriever burst out, hysterically jumping up and down when it saw them at the open door. It jumped up on Lois and knocked her down. It came around Clark, sniffed him, and ran down the hallway.

“Lois! Are you all right?” Clark rushed to her. She’d fallen pretty hard. He didn’t worry about the loose dog. The hallway doors were closed, and unless the dog had opposable thumbs, it couldn’t open them to get down the front stairs. They could collect the dog from the hallway later.

“I’m fine, Clark,” Lois said as he helped her up. “That dog always seems so nice when it’s with Phil.” At Clark’s questioning glance, she admitted, “I see them in the hall sometimes.”

The dog in question came up to them, whined happily and sniffed Clark again. “Hey, boy,” Clark said quietly, petting the beast. It tried to jump up on Clark but he gently nudged it in the chest, nipping the behavior in the bud.

“All we have to do is find the leash,” Lois said, entering Eleanor and Phil’s apartment. “Eleanor said it was hanging by the door...” It wasn’t. “Clark, do you see a collar and leash anywhere?”

Clark followed Lois into the apartment. He’d seen so many dwelling places as Superman. This one had the same look – clutter, unfinished tasks, the inhabitants not knowing that today was the day that illness or accident would strike. A large dog bed, covered with shed black hairs, lay on the floor of the living room, right next to the owner’s recliner chair.

They went past the hall to the bathroom and bedrooms, and made their way to the kitchen and back stair. “I think it’s here,” Lois called. “Eleanor should have told me it was by the *back* door.” She pulled a blue nylon collar and sturdy snap-on leash from a hook on the wall. The collar had “MOOSE” embroidered on it, and a jingly ID tag with address and phone number also bore the name. The other tag, indicating Moose had been vaccinated against rabies, had only a number on it. “Well, I guess we know his name now.”

“Moose!” Clark called softly. “Moose!” He took the collar and leash from Lois and walked back through the apartment. Lois

followed him, and they went out into the hallway. There was no sign of the dog, but Lois’s unlocked apartment door had swung open. It didn’t take a Sherlock Holmes to deduce where Moose had gone.

“I’ll lock up here if you get him leashed,” Lois offered.

“Deal.” Clark strode down the hallway toward her apartment, wanting to get this over with. They could finish it in fifteen minutes. *Get the dog, put the collar and leash on him, take him outside, take him back to Phil’s apartment, go over to my place, and then Lois and I can talk.*

He went inside Lois’s apartment and groaned. Things weren’t going to go that smoothly.

Fragments of cardboard box littered the carpet. Moose, tail wagging, had his head amidst a pile of spilled Dark Chocolate Double Fudge Crunch Bars. The dog gobbled up the chocolate bars frantically, gulping down the candy without bothering with trivialities like unwrapping. Moose chewed and then took another ferocious lunge at the pile of chocolate, grabbing another five bars before fully swallowing what he already had in his mouth.

Lois came walking in. “We’re all set, Clark...” She trailed off as she saw the chocolate carnage. “Clark!”

“He must have smelled the chocolate bars up on the counter,” Clark said lamely, striding forward to the dog.

“Clark! That dog ate my chocolate!”

“Yes,” Clark said. “He did.” He put the collar and leash on Moose, who ignored him in favor of making shark-like lunges at the rapidly diminishing pile. Clark pulled the dog back from the debris. Moose whined as he saw the Gates of Paradise closing in his face.

“Stupid dog! You stupid, stupid dog!” Lois cried out. “You ate my chocolate!”

A tendril of memory teased its way through the back of Clark’s brain. “Lois, how many chocolate bars did you have there?”

His urgent question stopped her glare at the offending canine. “Well, I had eight boxes. They’re one-and-a-half ounce candy bars, so each box had twenty-four bars in it.”

“Hold him.” Clark strode forward and gathered up the sad remnants of Lois’s purchase. “There are eight bars left.” His eyes flew to Moose, who pulled hard at the leash. The dog’s stomach looked noticeably larger. “Lois, this dog just ate about fifteen pounds of Double Fudge Crunch Bars.” Clark gathered up the few surviving intact candy bars and put them back on the kitchen counter. He saw Moose eyeing the pile speculatively. Clark changed his mind and put the chocolate inside the refrigerator. He closed the fridge door firmly – it had a tendency to fall open. Moose whined.

“Isn’t chocolate toxic to dogs?” Lois asked apprehensively. Moose had settled down after he saw the Crunch Bars disappear, and now he stared longingly at the refrigerator.

“I think so.” Clark cast about for ideas. Then he remembered something he’d seen on several of his flights above Metropolis. “Do you have a Yellow Pages here?”

“I think it’s in the high cupboard.” Lois took a chance and let the Labrador go. Moose ran to where the chocolate bar massacre had taken place, and nosed through the torn pieces of cardboard. He licked the carpet to get every last little crumb of chocolate that had fallen. Then he sniffed around earnestly, looking for more of that manna from heaven.

By now, Clark had found the Yellow Pages directory. He flipped back to the “V”’s and found what he was looking for. He dialed Lois’s phone.

“Metropolis Veterinary Emergency. This is Shanelle. May I help you?” Shanelle had a pleasant, competent-sounding voice.

“My dog – “ Clark decided not to get into the ownership situation right now. “My dog just ate a whole bunch of chocolate bars. Will he be OK?”

The pleasant voice turned businesslike. “How big is your dog?”

Clark eyed Moose, who was still checking out each side of each fragment of cardboard box and chocolate bar wrapper, and made his best guess. “About eighty pounds.”

“And how much chocolate did he eat?”

“I think about fifteen pounds.” Moose punctuated this statement by sitting down and emitting a tremendous belch.

“Fifteen pounds?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, sir, that is definitely a toxic dose. You need to bring him in here right away. Do you know where we are located?”

“I think so,” Clark said. “Corner of Tenth and Ryan?”

“Yes, sir, that’s it. We’ll expect you shortly. Please bring your dog in right away.” Shanelle sounded concerned.

“We’ll be there as soon as we can.” Clark hung up. “Lois, it’s a toxic dose. We have to take him to the vet.”

“Right.” Clark loved that about Lois. In a crisis, she kept her head. Despite the fact that he *knew* she wanted to kill Moose for eating most of her chocolate bars. “You take him.” She gestured towards Moose’s leash which dragged across her carpet. “I’ll drive.”

They got to the veterinary emergency room in only twenty minutes, again helped by the lack of early-morning traffic. A loud doorbell rang as they entered the facility. The waiting room’s emptiness surprised Clark. A human ER on a Saturday night would be very busy. Shanelle, a twenty-five-or-something veterinary nurse wearing scrub top and pants, gave them some paperwork to fill out, weighed Moose in at eighty-five pounds, and escorted them into a small exam room.

Clark didn’t need to extend his senses beyond human levels to hear the growling and hissing from the cat in the room next door. Curious, he pulled down his glasses and looked over the frames, through the wall. Another veterinary nurse held the cat firmly as a man in a white coat administered an injection. The cat’s protests rose to a yowling crescendo and then died off as the nurse firmly put the cat back into its cat carrier. As she latched the carrier door, a paw came lashing out through the bars. The nurse avoided the sharp claws with the skill of long experience.

Lois raised her eyebrows at the frightening sound effects, but continued filling out paperwork. “Should I put my address, or Eleanor’s?” she asked Clark.

Clark continued looking through the walls. Their room backed onto a large open space with kennels and cages on the walls. Three depressed-looking cats sat quietly in separate cages as intravenous fluids dripped into them. A small terrier with bandages on both front feet lay sedated in its kennel. In a glass cage with an oxygen line running to it, a parakeet perched on its cage swing. Clark could see that the bird labored to breathe. And, over there... was that a *tarantula*?

“Clark?” Lois prodded.

“Oh. I think you should put down your address and phone number.”

Before Clark could say more, a knock came at the door, followed immediately by a middle-aged man in a white coat carrying a clipboard. He shook hands with Lois and Clark. “Hello. I’m Dr. Brown. And this must be Moose.”

Moose eagerly ran to the vet, jumping up. Clark pulled him down before he could plant his feet on the vet’s shoulders. The vet smiled in gratitude and petted Moose on the head after Clark made the dog sit.

“So Moose ate a bunch of chocolate, eh?” the doctor said, kneeling down and beginning a rapid yet thorough physical exam on the aggressively friendly Labrador.

“I think about fifteen pounds,” Clark said.

“Fifteen pounds?” Dr. Brown asked. Apparently the quantity

was something unusual, even for the jaded emergency doctor.

“It was a Little League fundraiser,” Lois said defensively, not admitting that she’d raised most of the funds in this particular instance.

“Ah,” the doctor said. “How long ago did he eat it?”

“Within the last thirty minutes,” Lois replied.

“That’s good.” The doctor pulled out a stethoscope and listened carefully to Moose’s chest. As he returned the stethoscope to his white coat pocket, he asked, “Any previous medical problems on Moose?”

Clark shot a questioning glimpse at Lois. She shrugged. “I don’t think so. He’s my neighbor’s dog. I’m just watching him.”

“Your neighbor’s dog...” Dr. Brown grimaced in sympathy.

“Well, the good news is that Moose looks fine otherwise. The bad news is that fifteen pounds of chocolate is quite a bit. If we don’t deal with it, Moose could get hyperthermia, seizures, heart rhythm disturbances, and death. Now, we’re going to need to induce vomiting to get all that chocolate out of there.”

“OK,” Lois said.

“Then we’ll give him some activated charcoal to adsorb what he’s digested so far. We’ll have to keep him here for the next several hours so we can monitor him.” The doctor had stood up and was writing quickly on the papers on the clipboard.

“OK.”

“I’m going to go and get the medicine ready.” The doctor’s tone turned businesslike. “Shanelle will come in here, and give you a cost estimate and have you sign for permission to treat. You’ll need to leave a deposit, and please make sure we have your contact information, including a phone number where you can be reached tonight.”

“Right,” Lois said.

Doctor Brown bustled out and Shanelle came in. Moose looked up in interest at her hair, which had been put into hundreds of tiny braids with beads. The faint clicking sound as Shanelle moved her head attracted the dog’s attention. Clark assumed it was because Moose was trying to decide if the braids were something he could eat.

“Just sign right here,” she said. “I’ll run a deposit on your card... can you confirm this phone number?”

Shanelle left the room, and a few minutes later, Dr. Brown came back into the room and gave Moose an injection. “This injection is an emetic. I think Moose should do just fine after we get the chocolate out of him. I’ll take him back now. We’ll see you back about eight o’clock this morning, OK?”

At that moment, the door to the outside opened and they heard the doorbell ring. There was a loud commotion in the waiting room. The second nurse knocked on the door and poked her head in without waiting for an answer. “Doctor. We have a hit-by-car.”

“Excuse me,” Dr. Brown said to Lois and Clark. “Shanelle will take Moose to the kennel and get him all set up. I have to go.” He stepped away briskly and headed down the hallway.

“I hope he’s OK,” Lois said wanly. Clark didn’t answer. He had tipped down his glasses and was watching the drama through the walls. He sighed. He spent way too much time in emergency rooms as Superman. Now he got to see it from the veterinary side. The injuries were just as bad and the families were just as upset.

They waited for a few more minutes, saying nothing. Lois was irritated and unhappy. Moose had stopped jumping up and seemed focused on his internal rumblings. Clark didn’t need super-hearing to detect the loud borborygmi emanating from Moose’s stomach.

Loud recriminations came from the next room. “You let him off the leash!” someone shouted. “Well, you left the gate open!” someone else shouted back.

Shanelle came back in. Lois asked her, “Is that dog going to

be OK?”

“I really can’t say.” But Shanelle’s face told them that things looked serious. “I’ll take Moose to the kennel now. Do you want us to call you with a progress report or do you just want to pick him up at eight o’clock?” Shanelle bent down to put a leash on Moose.

Clark dragged his attention away from the excitement in the next room. Lois looked tired – the long day was catching up with her. “Why don’t we just pick him up?” He didn’t tell Lois right now, but he planned on picking up the dog and letting Lois sleep in. She needed the rest.

So much for the big confession tonight. That was one more stress she didn’t need. All of Clark’s preparations were for naught. He had wanted to tell a happy, well-fed, well-rested Lois his secret. Now he had a tired, cranky Lois, and if there was one thing he knew, it was that a tired, cranky Lois didn’t take surprises well.

Irritation rose in Clark. He’d been so optimistic earlier today, when Lois had dumped Dan Scardino and come to him, telling him she was ready to take the next step. The dinner had been perfect, and he’d been so close, so ready to confess and show her all the man he was... Then this crazy dog had decided to eat Lois’s chocolate stash, and, well, here they were, in an emergency room at one a.m., tired as all get-out. And his careful plans had been upended.

He usually liked dogs, but right now Clark was exasperated. “Stupid dog,” he muttered.

Moose responded by standing and bracing himself. Then he vomited up a huge pool of chocolate-smelling liquid, all over Lois’s new shoes.

“This has been the worst day ever,” Lois said angrily a few minutes later. Shanelle, the veterinary nurse, had dragged Moose back to the kennel, and had promised to get Lois some towels for clean-up. Unfortunately Moose had felt so much better after his vomit that he’d pulled the leash out of Shanelle’s hand, gamboled around the room, stepped in the vomit, and then jumped up and put his paws on Lois’s dress.

“Well...” Clark temporized.

“My chocolate gets eaten, the prices here are just short of highway robbery, my shoes are ruined, my dress is ruined – “ Lois broke off, clearly upset.

Clark came over to her, stood behind her, and wrapped her in his embrace. He held her closely and felt her indignant trembling slowly fade.

“You looked really good in that outfit,” he murmured.

“Well, you better remember what it looked like because I can’t wear it again,” she said tartly. But she leaned back into his embrace, and her heartbeat slowed.

“I’m sorry.” He just stood there and held her.

“Those shoes were Prada,” she said despairingly.

“Prada?”

“Well, I know guys who know guys. I didn’t pay full price,” Lois said defensively. “They were still really expensive.” After a minute, she burst out. “I was saving them for a special occasion.”

Clark felt a little inner warmth. If she was saving the shoes for a special occasion, and she’d worn them to dinner with him... what did that mean? He felt hopeful.

Lois spoke up again. “Clark?”

“Yes?”

“It wasn’t really the worst day ever. I really liked having dinner with you. That was... nice.”

“And I liked having dinner with you.” His senses attuned to Lois, he saw that she had calmed. “I’m sorry about the whole chocolate thing. I let the dog go. I never thought he’d go into your apartment.”

“Well, I was the one who opened the door and let him out of

Phil’s apartment,” Lois said quietly.

Clark rocked with her, just a bit, enjoying the closeness of her body and her unique scent. Too soon, he heard Shanelle coming back. He let Lois go reluctantly and said, “I know you keep a spare outfit in the Jeep. Why don’t I go out and get that while you clean up?”

“Yes, please.” She handed him the keys to the Jeep.

Shanelle entered the room, carrying some old bath towels. She’d lost all formality in common feminine sympathy about a date night outfit ruined. She tut-tutted over the condition of Lois’s shoes and dress. “Welcome to the club, honey. You’ve been vomited on.” Shanelle’s cheerful smile made it clear the nurse was used to things like that happening. “At least you didn’t get peed on... Here, let me wipe off those shoes... wow, were those Prada?”

Lois winced at the use of the past tense.

“I’m going to the car to get her a spare outfit,” Clark told the nurse.

“OK,” Shanelle said. “There’s a restroom across the hall if you want to change.” She opened the door and pointed it out to Lois.

“Thanks,” Lois said as Clark left the room.

He got to the Jeep and groaned. Lois must have worn her spare outfit at another time, and never replaced it. Typical of the way this day was going. Clark carefully checked around the parking lot and discovered two surveillance cameras. “OK, then...”

He opened the Jeep doors, which not-coincidentally shielded most of his body from view of the cameras. He slipped into super-speed and made a whirlwind visit to Lois’s apartment. Once he got there he was in luck – Lois had set out a running suit. Clark could almost follow her mental path: *I’m going out to dinner. I’ll have to run it off tomorrow morning.* Whatever her reason, it saved Clark from having to rummage through her sock drawer. He gathered up the running suit, socks, and shoes, and sped back to the Jeep. From the point of view of the cameras, he had never left.

He went back in and handed the bundle to Lois. She’d wiped the worst of the mess off her shoes with the towels that Shanelle had given her. Without a word, Lois headed to the restroom across the hall. Clark waited in the small exam room. Shanelle stopped in once to check on him, but when he indicated that Lois was changing, she nodded and went on.

Lois finally came out, dressed in the running suit and shoes. In her hand, she held a large plastic garbage bag.

“I may as well throw it all away,” she muttered.

“Please don’t,” Clark said on impulse. Somehow he couldn’t bear to see the sad remnant of their evening – their first date, really - tossed aside.

She shrugged and smiled weakly. “Let’s go home.”

Surprising Clark, she told him, “You drive.”

“Lois?”

“Clark, take me home. I’m tired, OK?” And indeed she looked it. Yep, the excitement had gone out of this evening. The champagne had fallen flat.

They silently left the veterinary emergency clinic and got into the Jeep. Lois threw the bag with her dress and shoes into the back seat. She got in the front passenger seat and, after Clark closed the door, laid her head against the window.

As Clark drove toward her apartment, he wondered if she were asleep. He didn’t think so – he knew her heartbeat and breathing in sleep, and this wasn’t it. No, instead it was as if Lois were unutterably weary suddenly. Maybe she was mourning her shoes. Although Clark didn’t know much about women’s fashions (frankly, he thought Lois looked stunning, no matter what she wore), he knew that Prada was expensive. The frugal farm boy in him winced inwardly.

He told himself not to worry. The evening could still be saved, he thought optimistically. They would hang out together at his apartment. He had a good bottle of wine, and they still had tiramisu – Clark had left it in the back seat of the Jeep after they left the restaurant. He'd serve her the dessert, and he would sit next to her on the couch, and then she'd lean into his arm and put her head on his shoulder...

He glanced behind him and groaned. An open cardboard box and crumbs littered the back seat. Adding insult to injury, Moose had eaten their tiramisu.

"Clark? Are you OK?"

"Fine, Lois." He resisted the urge to slam his fists against the steering wheel. Lois didn't need a thousand-dollar repair job on her Jeep.

The trip passed in silence. Clark parked the Jeep and came around to open Lois's door. She roused herself and took his hand as she stepped down.

Clark accompanied her and they went up to her apartment. He handed Lois her keys and stood by as she undid all five locks. He didn't make a joke about it as he usually did.

"Come in," Lois told him, ushering him in and automatically locking the door behind him. "You want any coffee?"

"I don't think so," Clark said uncomfortably. "Are you going to have some?" He didn't think that was a good idea either; Lois definitely needed sleep and not caffeine at this hour.

"No," Lois said.

Their eyes met. The absurdity of the evening struck them at the same time. Clark suddenly was very glad to be with Lois Lane, even if his big dinner date had come to an unwanted and unexpected end. Her lips slowly curled up, and suddenly they both burst out laughing.

"Fifteen pounds of Double Fudge Crunch Bars," Clark said wryly.

"Well, I probably didn't need them anyway," Lois said, a little sadly. "I would probably have eaten a bunch of them every night, and then I'd have to work out more, and I'd be so busy at the gym that I wouldn't be able to go on dates with you –"

"No dates!" Clark exclaimed in the same spirit. "That would be terrible!" He caught her eye and turned serious. "We definitely need more dates."

"Yes," she breathed.

He stepped up to her. "There's a traditional ending to a date, you know."

"Did tonight count as a date?" Lois teased.

"Most of it," Clark said. He moved in closer. She didn't pull away. He reached for her. She molded herself to his body. Their lips met.

The kiss started small, but grew larger. Lois wrapped her arms around him and dragged Clark down with her to the sofa. He felt the quickening of her heartbeat as their passion rose.

"That's, uh, the proper ending, uh, to a date," Clark finally said as they pulled apart. Funny, he was having trouble saying words.

"I think we need to practice the proper endings," Lois said, leaning forward and practically diving into another kiss.

"Um... yeah..." Clark mumbled. Then he gave himself up to the sensation of Lois.

"I had a really nice time," Lois said, uncounted minutes later.

"I did too."

"Up till the end of the evening. That wasn't so much fun," Lois said, leaning back and away from him. Clark figured she had bruised her back on the decorative wood frame of the couch. Lois had the most uncomfortable couches Clark had ever sat on. In fact, Clark thought, he should get her over to his apartment. He had comfortable couches. There'd be none of this breaking-off-a-kiss stuff on his couches.

His mind belatedly caught up to what Lois had said. "Yes.

But I was with you, so the evening wasn't a total loss. In fact, it was pretty darn good."

A tiny smile reassured him that, if he hadn't said the right thing, he'd at least gotten extra points for trying.

He loved that tiny smile. She was so beautiful. He wanted to see her smile again. Maybe he could make her smile bigger next time. Those kisses – wow!

Clark leaned forward again, levitating the tiniest amount. He pulled Lois to him. She didn't resist, and turned her face up to him, knowing he wanted to kiss her again and being perfectly all right with that.

Maybe the evening wasn't a total bust after all. Even though the chocolate-eating incident had been an unfortunate interlude, they were still here together, kissing. He held Lois close to his body and reveled in it. Perhaps he could still tell her his secret. Even though things hadn't gone strictly as planned, even though his elaborate set-up had fallen through, he still had what he had counted on – a fine dinner, privacy, and closeness.

And Lois felt something for him too. Clark knew that. He hadn't missed the way her heart sped up when he kissed her, or how she'd melted into his hug. Long-held fears were stilled – she found him, Clark Kent, attractive. She liked him as Clark, not just as Superman. That moment when they had laughed together had made him realize that he was tired of hiding. He wanted to let her know.

Of course, he still had to say the scary words... His mind raced with possible ways to introduce the topic. Lois detected his loss of total commitment to the kiss, and broke it off. She extricated herself from his grip and sat next to him.

"Thanks for getting me a new outfit," Lois said.

Clark shrugged in an "anything for you" manner.

"How did you get that outfit anyway?" Lois asked. "I didn't think I left my running suit in my car."

"You didn't," Clark said, suddenly nervous as Lois circled the edges of his secret. Time to come up with another story – No. No. It was time to tell her. He had to tell her. Who else could handle the ruin of their evening with such aplomb, and laugh about it later? Who else fascinated him? Who else roused his passion? She deserved the truth. And he'd be lying if he said that the enthusiasm of the kisses didn't have something to do with it, too.

"You must have gotten Superman to get my outfit from my apartment," Lois deduced. "I know I left it on the bed this afternoon, and it isn't there now." Most people wouldn't even consider that a super-powered alien would run errands for them, but Clark knew that Lois believed that Superman did favors for Clark all the time.

Clark swallowed. Why was his heart racing? "No, actually..." he said. "It was me. I rushed back here and got your outfit." He took a deep breath. He forgot all of his carefully prepared openings and plunged in without checking the water level. "Lois, I'm Superman."

Lois only stared at him. "What?"

"I'm Superman."

"Clark, this isn't funny. You're human." She ran a hand across her forehead. "Look, it's been a difficult night and I really don't need your jokes right now."

He winced. He had certainly shattered the romantic ambience. And Lois had put her finger unerringly on his sore spot. Clark forced himself to say something that, aside from his parents, he'd never willingly said to anyone before.

"I'm not human, really. I'm Kryptonian."

Tense silence filled the air. She stared at him for a long moment. Her eyes were wide. He saw the moment she accepted the possibility. She scooted down the couch a little, putting distance between them. She folded her arms, and drew her legs up and away from him. "You're Superman?" she asked. Now her voice quavered.

Clark pulled off his glasses and set them on her end table. He ran his fingers through his hair and pushed it back. She watched him in fearful fascination. “I wear the glasses, but it’s really the behavior change that’s the disguise.”

“But Superman has only been on Earth for the last year.”

“Actually,” Clark began, “I came here – I mean to Earth – as a baby. I just went public last year.” He watched the blood drain from her face, leaving her deathly pale. “Superman is a façade, a costume I wear so that I can use my powers but still have a private life.”

Lois considered this for a long moment. Clark didn’t dare say anything. He gave her a hesitant smile.

She sat up straight and put her feet on the floor. The color was back in her face, Clark was glad to see. “Hah! If you’re Superman, do something super. Right now.”

Clark recognized Defiant Lois, fighting the truth all the way. “You don’t believe me?” he asked mildly.

“Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.”

“OK.” Clark stood up and walked a few feet away from the couch. He turned to make sure Lois had a good view. She awaited him, not smiling. He sighed. This part of the evening wasn’t going as well as he had hoped.

He trembled, just a bit. This was it. There was no going back after this. His heart hammered.

He levitated.

Lois looked positively green.

Clark touched down, and just stood there, waiting. There was a long, long silence.

She swallowed. Her eyes shifted away from his face. After a minute, Lois got her voice. “You... it was you on the Prometheus. You swallowed the bomb.”

“Yes.”

“And when Superman had to move away because of the heat wave... that’s why you left. You didn’t have a job offer at the Smallville paper at all.”

“Right.”

Lois looked even more distressed. The pallor had left her face and now she was beginning to blush. She still wouldn’t meet his eyes. “Oh my God. When you had amnesia that one time...”

“It was because I’d tussled with the Nightfall asteroid and had gotten knocked silly,” Clark confirmed. He moved a little toward the couch. Lois flinched, just slightly. Clark stopped. Inwardly, he flinched too. This was what he’d feared.

“And when Arianna Carlin shot Superman...”

“You took the bullet out of my shoulder. Kryptonite is real, and it can hurt me.” Clark still hated to remember that time, when he’d been so foolishly overconfident. If it hadn’t been for Lois and a generous helping of luck, they would both have been dead. He gave Lois an encouraging smile.

Lois mulled this over. She pulled her legs up and circled them with her arms. Clark had never seen her body language so withdrawn and defensive. Slowly, she said, “Kryptonite can hurt you.”

“Yes.”

“But nothing else can,” she said more quickly. Clark recognized her “making leaps to a conclusion” voice. He knew it well. So often, her hunches had broken their stories. Now she had turned that reporter instinct on him.

“You can break up asteroids. You can survive bomb blasts.” Now Lois met his eyes. “If you’re Superman, then when *Clark Kent* was shot in that nightclub, you weren’t hurt at all.” The even tone of her voice flayed him deeper than any accusatory screaming might have done.

Clark’s hopeful smile slid right off his face. He remembered those fearful days, a few months ago, when the gangsters had shot him in full view of thirty witnesses – and right in front of Lois. “Yes, but...”

“You let me think you were dead for two days. You let me think that my best friend had died defending me. You were Superman and those bullets didn’t even leave a scratch.”

The worst thing was that Lois kept that dead-even tone. Clark had expected ranting Lois, raging Lois, screaming Lois. Only a very tiny quaver in her controlled monotone let him know how much she was holding inside.

“Lois...” he pled.

“Then you came to me with some fairy tale about how ‘Superman repaired the cellular damage’. And I bought it. I believed it. Why not? Because how else could anyone come back from three shots in the chest?” She swallowed convulsively. Her voice finally cracked. “You couldn’t have told me then?”

“Lois...”

She looked up and met his eyes squarely. “I want you to go now, Clark.” That was all she said.

“Lois...” he tried again. Her implacable gaze silenced him. He recognized the futility of further argument. His shoulders slumped and he turned to go. Her heart pounded – Clark could hear it very well. Looking back behind him, Clark said, “I never wanted to hurt you, Lois. I made stupid mistakes.” Then he said the most important thing. “I’m sorry.” He said it very quietly.

Clark was aware of her every heartbeat, her every breath. He heard the tiny snuffle she tried to suppress. He walked quietly away and left her apartment.

She locked the door behind him.

He stood outside her doorway for a few minutes, rehearsing in his head what he should have said, thinking about how he could have handled things better. As he waited, he could hear, very well, her choking sobs as she cried into a pillow.

More than anything, Clark wanted to go to her, to hold her in his arms, to soothe away her sobs. But he couldn’t. He turned on his heel and walked away.

He walked down the stairs of her building, going faster and faster on each flight, until he found himself speeding. He went outside and took off into the night air. The flying didn’t comfort him as it usually did. He sped up, arrowed through the air in a futile attempt to leave his demons behind. He went faster and faster, slicing upward through the atmosphere, past low earth orbit, almost all the way to the Moon. He flew around the earth seven times before he could go back.

The usual sounds of late-night Metropolis, so often an annoying interruption, beckoned to him tonight. Here was something he could do right.

“Help, Superman!” came a cry.

Clark dove toward the plea. He stopped a mugging. He brusquely declined the victim’s thanks and handshake and took off again, to a convenience store robbery.

The criminals of Metropolis had a bad night. Perry would have said that Superman was all over them like a bad rash. Perhaps he’d been too lax lately, Clark thought, as he dumped a squirming would-be rapist at the precinct house. Perhaps he’d been spending too much time with Lois, ignoring others who needed him.

But he couldn’t stay away from her. He hovered over Lois’s apartment, hearing attuned. At least she’d stopped crying. Clark fought a brief battle with his conscience and lost. Using the deep vision, he focused inward on her apartment.

She’d moved from the couch to the bed, he saw. And Lois hadn’t bothered to pull back the covers. Nor had she changed her clothes from earlier. She lay on her bed in her running clothes, curled up, sleeping - no, she wasn’t asleep. As Clark watched, she sat up suddenly. She grabbed the teddy bear that sat on her pillows.

Clark felt a moment of nostalgia. He’d won that bear for her at the Smallville Corn Festival, by competing in a trial of strength. Normally, that would have been effortless. But that

time, he'd been recovering from kryptonite exposure – the first time he'd come across the deadly mineral. And so he'd had to put everything he had into swinging down the hammer to ring the bell.

He'd fully expected Lois to choose the Superman doll. And yet she'd chosen the teddy bear. Later on, in one of their many late nights together, she'd shyly confessed that she'd named the bear "Clarkie". And so, to see her hold it made Clark feel that perhaps all was not lost.

Lois violently threw the bear against the wall.

The seemingly endless night went on. Clark patrolled Metropolis with a new focus and intensity. When he ran out of crimes to stop in Metropolis, he moved his way up the Eastern Seaboard. By now he'd stopped wanting to meet with people, stopped wanting to hear their thanks and good wishes. No, he did all his rescues at super-speed, tying punks to streetlamp poles and crushing muggers' guns in a multicolored blur.

He dared one more look at Lois. She'd finally fallen asleep, still on top of her bedcovers, still dressed in her running suit. The teddy bear still sat where she had flung it. Lois stirred uneasily, and Clark guiltily pulled back the deep vision and flew away.

Seven o'clock finally came. Clark flew back to his apartment and took a quick shower. He'd gotten no sleep this night, but that didn't matter. He could easily go a day without sleep.

He made sure he had his wallet, and then spun into the Suit. This time he kept the speed under the sound barrier. He had an errand to run.

Mindful of the surveillance cameras in the parking lot of Metropolis Veterinary Emergency, Clark scanned the area closely and touched down a block away. He made sure he was in his civilian clothing and briskly strode to the vet hospital.

No one was at the reception counter, despite the loud doorbell. Alarmed, Clark scanned the facility and saw that Dr. Brown and the two veterinary nurses seemed busy X-raying a large hairy dog. He scanned the treatment area – it looked as if the emergency room had had a busy night. Most of the cages and kennels were full.

Shanelle came up to the reception desk and pasted on a tired, end-of-shift smile.

"Clark Kent," Clark said. "I'm here for Moose."

"Moose – oh, the chocolate-eating dog," Shanelle said. "He did just fine. Now, he needs to be on a bland diet for the next two days. And don't be worried if his stools are dark in color – that's from the activated charcoal. We have some written home-care instructions ready for you. Here, let me get his chart..."

She rummaged in a rack and pulled out a folder. "That'll be \$327.16, please."

Clark silently handed over his credit card, astounded at the price. His reporter's mind kicked in then, sheer force of habit making him see the other side. They had been open and ready to see him and take care of his dog at one a.m. on Friday evening, well, Saturday morning really. They'd dealt with his problem quickly and efficiently. No doubt all that after-hours staffing and equipment had to be paid for.

"That's after the deposit?" he asked, just to make sure.

"Yes, sir," Shanelle replied. She ran his card through and gave him a slip to sign, and an itemized receipt. Clark scribbled his signature. It was the least he could do for Lois. After all, he was the one who had left the chocolate out and hadn't kept Moose from entering Lois's apartment.

Besides, even though he made less money than Lois, he had fewer expenses. He didn't need to eat. He hardly ever had to pay for transportation. Yep, Superman could fly everywhere, Clark thought bitterly. Superman didn't need to drive. Too bad that what he enjoyed most was being with Lois, watching her as she drove her prized Jeep, cowing other Metropolis drivers with her

élan.

Shanelle had taken his credit slip, but she didn't meet his gaze. She flipped through Moose's chart with some concentration.

"Is there a problem?" Clark asked. He knew his credit was good – his card had gone through. Now, if he could only get Moose and take the dog to his apartment... He would leave Lois a note, so that in case she did get up to pick up the dog at the emergency facility, she would know that she didn't have to go there and she could go back to bed. He'd thought about knocking at her door to tell her she didn't need to wake up, but realized that was a bad idea in about two seconds.

"Ms Lane?" Shanelle asked.

"She's my girlfriend," Clark said, crossing his fingers out of view. Well, she *was*. Or she had been. And she would be, hopefully, if they could just get this little communication issue worked out.

"Sir, I'm sorry, but Ms Lane didn't put anyone down on the authorized list but herself."

"And that means?" Clark prompted.

"Only your girlfriend gets a copy of the medical record. And she's the only person who can pick up Moose." Despite the fact that she was behind a glass window, Shanelle seemed a little nervous. Did she regularly face irate clients? The video cameras that panned the waiting room and the reception desk seemed to argue for that point.

"But I paid the bill!"

"Yes, sir, thank you. But Ms Lane is down on our records as the owner of the pet, and only she can pick him up." Shanelle was unwavering.

Clark took a deep breath. This day was not going well *at all*.

"We're open twenty-four hours," Shanelle said. "She can come anytime."

"All right," Clark said, giving up. "Thank you." He blamed his upbringing. His parents had ruthlessly forced him to be polite when he felt like screaming.

"You're welcome." Shanelle closed the glass window between them with finality.

The rest of the day went on like that. Clark got called away for a Superman job, and came back to the area at 8:15 a.m., just in time to see Lois driving home from the veterinary clinic in her Jeep, with Moose in the back seat. She looked tired and haggard.

He had to go to work then. He was stuck with Saturday duty this weekend. And then, because he'd been following Lois, he came in late, and got a "just below an official write-up" reprimand from the officious junior editor. If Perry had been there, nothing would have been said – Perry knew that Clark and Lois, although they kept irregular hours, produced the goods. Clark shrugged off the reprimand too visibly and managed to further escalate the junior editor's annoyance.

The editor pointedly asked him if he had his story ready. Clark was forced to admit that no, he didn't, he still had some figures to double-check. So, instead of leaving the office, Clark had to spend a seeming eternity acquiring and collating various statistics from the Metropolis City Budget. And because his editor kept on popping out to check on him, Clark was unable to commandeer a conference room and do the tedious task at super-speed.

It hardly mattered. Clark could barely concentrate. All he could do was think of Lois, and how he'd messed up so badly.

Sirens called him. He pretended he was going to the men's room, but in actuality he sped up the stairs and out the roof exit. The apartment fire didn't take a long time to extinguish, but two people were severely burned. Clark hated that. The people suffered so badly, and there was so little he could do for burns. He cooled the victims' burns with his freezing breath, but even as

he did it, he wondered if that would make a difference. He did fly the ambulance to Metropolis General – it was much faster than having the ambulance inch its way through Metropolis traffic.

He set the ambulance down near the Emergency Department entrance as gently as possible. The driver waved at him with a “Thanks, Superman!” The two paramedics echoed it briefly, their attention quickly turning to the practicalities of getting their patients out of the ambulance and into the ER. The usual crowd of gawkers gathered at the windows. The wide-eyed rubberneckers weren’t the ER nurses and medical personnel, who continued doing their jobs. They all knew Superman by now, and he knew all of them.

He was about to lift off and fly back to work when he heard it. Lois’s heartbeat. Alarm coursed through him. Why was Lois at the hospital?

Clark forced himself to shove down his fear and listen again. Was Lois sick? Her heartbeat wasn’t fast or agitated. He lifted off and hovered above the hospital. He put his deep vision to work, sifting through the top twelve stories before he located Lois on the fifth floor, at the Cardiac Unit. She had just walked up to a middle-aged woman sitting in a waiting room.

Clark focused his hearing.

“Eleanor,” Lois said, “how are you doing?”

Eleanor! This was Lois’s neighbor. Clark felt ashamed. He hadn’t given a thought to Lois’s neighbors. He’d just been exasperated at their dog. Moose’s owner had had a heart attack, and Clark hadn’t cared. He knew he shouldn’t be eavesdropping on Lois, too, but he just couldn’t help himself.

“Oh, Lois,” Eleanor said. “I’m glad to see you.” She stood up and hugged Lois. Clark angled slightly to see – both women looked tired.

“How are you doing?” Lois asked. “How is Phil?” She sat down next to Eleanor.

“He’s been here all night,” Eleanor replied. “They were going to do something - an angioplasty, I think they said - but then they decided that they had to do a bypass. Phil’s in surgery right now.”

Clark saw the expression on Lois’s face. He knew her well. She’d obviously come to ‘fess up’ to Eleanor about the Moose chocolate incident, and then just as obviously she’d decided that Eleanor didn’t need to hear about that right now. Her neighbor had enough on her mind.

“I can’t understand why Phil should have a heart attack,” Eleanor said. “He walks five miles every day with Moose.”

“Five miles?” Lois said, keeping the conversation going.

“Sometimes he does six. Oh, Lois, I don’t know what I’ll do if – “ Eleanor trailed off, obviously thinking the worst. “We’ve been married for forty-two years.”

“Forty-two years!”

“Forty-three on July twentieth,” Eleanor said. “Phil’s always taken care of himself... and now this.”

“I’m sure he’ll be all right,” Lois said reassuringly. “If he walks five miles a day, well, um, you know.”

“I hope so.” The older woman fell silent for a moment. “Lois, you’ve been so good to us.”

“Uh, thanks.” Lois shifted awkwardly in her chair.

“Could I impose upon you to take care of Moose for one more day? I called the kids but they can’t get in till tomorrow – you know, Tom lives the closest and he’s in Chicago.” Eleanor caught Lois’s tiny movement. “Oh, Moose hasn’t given you any trouble, has he? I know he can be rambunctious.”

“Oh, no. No. I mean, yes. I mean, no, he hasn’t given me any trouble, and yes, I’d be happy to watch him,” Lois babbled. “Don’t worry about Moose. I’ll keep him as long as you need me to.” She reached over and took Eleanor’s hand. “Right now, you just worry about Phil.”

From his vantage point above, Clark nodded. Of course Lois would come through in the clutch. She pretended she was a

hardened and calloused newswoman, but she always did stuff like this when it came right down to it. Despite her annoyance at Moose, she would help out Eleanor by taking care of the chocolate-eating canine.

Eleanor squeezed Lois’s hand. “Thank you, Lois. That means a lot to me. Phil will be happy to know that Moose is with you. He loves that dog.”

Lois gave a wry smile.

“Oh, Lois, I don’t know what I’ll do if – “ Eleanor couldn’t complete the thought. She reached inside her bag for some tissues and blew her nose. “We got married when we were both twenty-two and we’ve been together ever since.”

“How did you stay married for so long?” Lois asked, apparently fascinated.

“Well, I must say we’ve had our arguments and our fights, and there are some days when I wondered why I ever married him,” Eleanor admitted. She stared off into space. “But in the end, he loves me and I love him. He’s my best friend.”

“Yeah,” Lois said hollowly.

Eavesdropping from above, Clark felt just as hollow. Had he destroyed his friendship with Lois? His best friend? The *only* friend who knew all of him?

Lois stared off into space for a minute too. Then she took her hand from Eleanor’s and stood up. “Eleanor, I’m sure Phil will be fine.”

“Yes, he will,” Eleanor said, in the tone of one trying to convince herself. She stood too, and hugged Lois. “Thank you, Lois. Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome. Call me if you need anything, OK?” Lois said, extracting herself from the hug and heading down the hallway as she spoke.

Eleanor nodded.

Lois strode down the corridor. Clark saw her punch the button for the elevator, and stand there drumming her fingers while she waited. She rode down to the exit level and came out the door. Clark followed her as she walked through the parking structure.

Decision time. Meet her at her Jeep? Or not?

Another siren in the distance made the decision for him. Reluctantly, Clark sped away.

The day dragged on. Clark continued to labor over boring statistics. His editor loaded him with nitpicky jobs. He was called away twice to be Superman. Both times he told himself he ought not to do it, but he couldn’t stop himself from checking on Lois.

The first time he went out, he saw Lois jogging through Centennial Park. She held Moose’s leash in her hand, and the dog loped alongside her. Clark was startled when she looked up. Did she sense him? He always knew when she was near – did the same hold true for her? He gave up and flew back to the *Planet*.

His second rescue came hours later, in the afternoon. After Clark dealt with another fire (what *was* it with Metropolis and fires today?) he found himself drawn inexorably to Lois’s apartment. His conscience twinged as he focused the deep vision through the masonry. He shouldn’t be following her around like this and he knew it. But for once in his life, Clark Kent didn’t do the right thing.

Clark saw the living room first. Moose lay slumbering on Lois’s white couch, his head on one of her throw pillows. The dog actually snored.

Clark shook his head and moved his vision over to Lois’s bedroom. Apparently she’d been too tired to change out of her running suit, because she lay asleep on top of the covers, still dressed in her jogging clothes. She stirred restlessly.

Clark felt ashamed. It was he who’d ruined her rest. Then he noticed something as she tossed in her sleep.

The teddy bear – the bear he’d won for her at the Smallville

Corn Festival – she clutched it close to her body. She curled around it and murmured, “Clark.”

He closed his eyes quickly, realizing too late that he had no right to see her like this. And yet, inside him, a tendril of hope uncurled. Perhaps he had a chance.

Clark stood in the apartment hallway outside Lois’s door. Nervously, he checked himself over one last time. A quick hand run over his cheeks told him that his very recent shave still held good. His tie was unaccustomedly sober, his suit clean, his shirt ironed and starched. In his hand he held two yellow roses.

He rehearsed his speech. *Lois, these are for you. Yellow roses, for the two of us. For friendship. Because...* Because what? He wanted to be her friend? He wanted more? He was sorry for upending her world?

Clark dragged his mind off that unfruitful topic. His hand lifted. His mouth was dry. It took everything he had to knock on her door.

A barking frenzy erupted. Lois, it seemed, had not yet been able to turn Moose over to Eleanor’s son.

The door opened slightly. Lois stared out at him and said nothing. She’d changed out of the running suit into a blouse and jeans, Clark saw, and she’d put up her hair in a simple ponytail. Behind her, Moose barked a few more times, then jumped up and down excitedly, whining.

“Lois?” Clark said hesitantly. He thrust the hand holding the yellow roses at her.

“I’m still not talking to you,” she said acidly.

“Oh.” This wasn’t promising at all. “Um, I’m sorry, um, for uh, upsetting you. And I, uh, hoped we could talk.” Well, wasn’t *that* stupid. She had just said that she wasn’t talking to him.

Lois only looked at him. His hand holding the roses dropped slowly to his side.

Clark’s mind whirled. At least she hadn’t closed the door in his face. There was still a chance. He grasped at a straw.

“Actually, I came to invite Moose over for dinner,” he said coolly.

That surprised Lois. “Moose?”

“Well, the vet said that he needed a bland diet, so I cooked up some chicken and rice,” Clark said. “Of course, since you would have to drive him over to my apartment, you’re invited too.”

Was Lois trying to hold back a tiny smile? Was there a hint of amusement in her eyes? Clark tried hard to keep his own poker face. Then her face hardened, and he saw a small part of the sense of betrayal that must have washed through her. She was going to say no, he knew it.

The dog in question had been pacing and whining all through their truncated conversation. Suddenly, Moose jumped up again, trying to get to Clark at the half-open door. His paws landed on Lois’s back, and eighty-five pounds of excited Labrador Retriever knocked her down.

Clark caught her. It wasn’t hard. He was attuned to her, always aware of her and the space she occupied. He dropped the roses and arrested her stumble before she hit the floor, catching her with one arm. His other arm automatically wrapped around her, holding her safely. Moose rampaged down the hallway once again, but this time all the other apartment doors were locked.

Their bodies touched. Clark felt her frantic heartbeat, and then the slight lessening of her stiff muscles as she relaxed a tiny amount. Lois’s face almost touched his, and if he leaned forward he could kiss her. She breathed heavily. He leaned forward just a little bit... then he met her eyes. The hurt in them was too great to be soothed by a simple kiss.

He gently set her back on her feet, mourning the loss of contact. “Please,” Clark said. *Please, Lois. Please come over. Please let me talk to you. Please talk to me. Please.*

They stared into each other’s eyes. Lois was the first to look

away.

“OK,” she said ungraciously. “But only because Moose needs dinner.” She turned around and called Moose to her. He’d given up testing apartment doors and had moved on to sniffing Clark’s trousers. “Your apartment. Half an hour.” Her voice hardened. “And don’t follow me.”

“I won’t.” Clark held up his hands in surrender. The two yellow roses lay on the floor by him. Their petals fluttered in the breeze of Moose’s passing. The movement caught Clark’s eye, and he instinctively bent to pick up the flowers. By the time he looked back at Lois, she had already retreated into her apartment with Moose and locked the door.

“I won’t follow you,” Clark said quietly. She *had* sensed him earlier. Or maybe she just knew him well. Whatever the reason, he would honor her request.

He took the roses home with him. He still had hope.

The tentative knock on his door gladdened him. Clark had spent what seemed like an eternity (the past twenty minutes) worrying that Lois would change her mind and not come over after all. But, he realized as he hurried to answer the door, that was doing her a disservice. She had said she would come over, and Lois Lane did what she promised.

He opened the door. Moose, on a leash, jumped up to greet him. “Hello, Moose,” Clark said. “And hello, Lois.” He ushered them inside.

Lois did not answer him, and Clark wondered uneasily how far she was taking this “I’m not speaking to you” thing.

“I have dinner all set up, if you’re ready,” he babbled. Funny, it was usually Lois who babbled. Now Clark scrambled for words to fill the awkward silence. “Would you care for a glass of wine?”

Lois nodded. She knelt and took Moose off the leash. The dog promptly went on an exploration of Clark’s apartment, sniffing furniture and investigating floors. He went into the kitchen, but to Clark’s relief, Moose didn’t try to jump up and eat the food on the counters.

Clark took Lois’s coat, which she silently handed to him. She made her way over to his table in the dining area – they’d spent many a convivial moment there, with Clark cooking or the two of them enjoying takeout. Now she sat stiffly and uncomfortably. Clark had previously laid out place settings and water glasses, and she took a sip of water.

“Is Chardonnay OK?” Clark asked.

She nodded. He poured. She sipped.

“Uh, Lois?” Clark began hopefully.

“Dinner?” she asked archly.

“Oh, right. Dinner,” Clark said, deflated. “Um, let me get Moose settled first.”

He quickly assembled a bowl of boiled white rice and some plain cooked chicken breast. Moose had been watching and whining, and began nuzzling at the bowl even before Clark got it all the way to the floor. The dog finished off the meal in ten seconds, then licked the bowl for another fifteen. Looking hopefully at Clark, and getting no response, Moose then padded over to Lois, sat down next to her, and put his head in her lap.

“Good appetite,” Clark muttered. He hoped Lois would have a good appetite too. He suspected that she hadn’t eaten since their dinner together last night. He quickly served out their dinners – a small green salad, mixed steamed vegetables, and chicken cooked with rice and a creamy mushroom sauce. It was pure comfort food. It brought back fond memories of dinners with his parents. For dessert, he’d picked up another order of tiramisu from Ciao Amicis, the Italian restaurant where they’d had such a nice dinner last night. It sat on his kitchen counter in a decorative cardboard box.

Lois still hadn’t said anything, although she had drunk half her wine already. The awkward silence echoed through the room.

Clark took a bite of chicken.
 Lois took a bite of chicken.
 Clark poured himself some wine and sipped it. In his agitation, he barely tasted it.
 Lois topped up her own wineglass and took another large swig.
 They ate some salad. No one said anything.
 Lois mashed up her rice and ate a large forkful.
 Clark copied her.
 Lois delicately cut up her vegetables. Her mannerly chewing made a faint noise. Clark could hear it, but no one else would have been able to unless, like him, they had super-hearing.
 Clark drank some more wine.
 Lois followed suit.
 Clark's fork clattered against his plate. He looked at Lois. Her eyes skittered away at his glance.
 Moose whined. He wanted more chicken.
 The whining broke Clark's paralysis. He wanted to talk with Lois. No, strike that. He wanted Lois to talk to him. But she wasn't talking to him. How to start?
 "Moose," Clark began, "I don't know if you ever heard my story."
 The dog looked up at hearing his name.
 "I grew up in Kansas," Clark said, ostensibly addressing Moose but actually looking at Lois. "And I thought I was just a regular kid, till I got to be ten or eleven or so. And then I found out that I was getting strong. Really strong. I mean, most ten-year-old kids can't lift up their dad's tractor."
 Lois looked like she wanted to say something, but then held her tongue.
 "And then, as time went by, I found myself able... I got more weird abilities. I mean, you're a dog, so you wouldn't know how abnormal it is to be able to see through solid objects, or set fire to something with your eyes."
 Lois scratched Moose's head. It seemed to be a way for her to avoid meeting Clark's gaze.
 "Do you know how frightening that was? Even when I was ten, I knew something was wrong with me. I knew I had to hide." Clark took a deep breath. "My mom and dad knew it too. They always told me, 'Hide what you can do, Clark, or someone will strap you down in a laboratory and dissect you like a frog.' So I hid."
 He let the words fade away. Another long silence filled the air.
 Lois took the dog's head in both hands and spoke directly to him. "Moose, maybe you don't know about *my* childhood." She wouldn't look at Clark. "When I was ten, my father started spending more and more time away. And when I asked him where he was, he said he was doing medical research. But I found out that he was with his mistress, Mrs. Belcanto. And every time I asked him what he was doing, he lied to me."
 Ouch. Clark didn't let the silence last this time.
 "Moose," Clark said. He sweetened the deal by taking a small piece of chicken off his plate. The Labrador rushed over and gobbled it down, then put his head on Clark's lap. "Well, Moose, continuing my life story, I traveled around the world for a few years. And every time I got settled in somewhere, I had to leave. Because I couldn't not save somebody if they needed it. And then somebody else would see Clark Kent doing something totally inhuman. So I would have to get out before questions were asked."
 "Moose," Lois countered. She offered the dog a bigger piece of chicken. Moose, the pragmatist, trotted back over to Lois. "My mother started drinking when I was five. No, actually, she'd been drinking for years before that, but that's when she really started with the heavy drinking. Every time I would ask her, 'Mom, are you coming to my school play? Mom, will you be there to pick

me up from school? Mom, will you make Lucy and me some lunch?' she would say, 'Yes, of course,' and then she wouldn't come. She was too busy drinking. She would promise me and then she'd break her promises. She was a liar." Lois stared at Clark when she said this.

"I'm sensing a theme," Clark said, forgetting to address Moose.

"Ya think?" Lois replied in elaborate sarcasm.

Clark scurried back to safer ground. Looking directly at the dog, he said, "So I got to Metropolis, got my dream job with the *Daily Planet*, and in walks this beautiful woman, Moose." The traitorous canine didn't come over in the absence of a chicken bribe. No, Moose kept his head lying on Lois's lap, giving Lois an entreatingly puppy-dog gaze. "I wanted to stay, more than anything. I wanted to get to know her better. She was the most fascinating woman I'd ever seen. So I paid attention to what she said and what she did. Now, she didn't pay too much attention to me, but one day she suggested that I bring a change of clothes to work. So I put on a costume."

Lois choked. "*That's* where you got the idea?" Then she realized she'd addressed him directly and looked down and gave Moose a ball of rice. The dog snapped it up, almost biting her fingers.

"Yep, from you. You invented Superman."

"And then, Moose," Lois said, recovering from her momentary slip of addressing Clark directly, "this guy is flying all around town, creating news, and being the best story of the century. And all the time it was my co-worker, and I was too stupid to see it. But he was lying to me, every day."

"You never asked me, 'Are you Superman?'" Clark said defensively.

"Yeah, like that's a question you ask your co-workers every day," Lois muttered.

"Besides, tell me that if I'd told you back then, you wouldn't have turned me into a Pulitzer Prize," Clark said, irritated and wanting to score a point.

"Maybe."

"Yeah, *maybe*. Lois, you know as well as I do that you would have published. And I couldn't take that chance. I *need* to be Clark Kent." He abandoned the fiction of addressing the dog. Willing Lois to understand, he told her, "Lois, Clark Kent is who I am. Superman is what I do."

"Oh." Lois seemed a little taken aback. Clark saw that he'd cut off a nascent rant. Lois turned her attention to her plate and began eating again.

Clark followed suit.

Lois took another sip of wine. Her glass was empty. Clark went to pour more, giving Lois a questioning look. She nodded once, abruptly, and he filled her wineglass. She took another large gulp.

"I'm still getting my head around the fact that all the time, it was you. It wasn't Superman. It was Clark Kent in a costume." Encouraged, Clark leaned forward. "That's exactly it."

Lois picked up her knife and viciously stabbed her chicken. The blade squeaked along the plate, much like fingernails across a blackboard. Clark winced. Lois took a bite of chicken and deliberately, slowly, chewed it. "And all the time I was following you, and asking for quotes, and dropping hints, you were laughing at me."

"No! No! I wasn't!"

"I bet you said, 'There goes Lois again. She must be pretty stupid not to recognize her partner.'" The venom in her voice panicked Clark.

"No! Lois, no." He took a deep breath. "I was happy you didn't recognize me..." He took another, deeper breath. "Well, actually, I had mixed feelings about that. At first I was happy that you didn't recognize me. Because you worked with me the

closest. Your desk is right next to mine. If I could fool you..”

Lois’s high-powered glare made Clark realize he could have chosen a more tactful term.

“I mean, if you didn’t recognize me, given how much time we spent together, it meant that I was safe. Nobody else would recognize me either.”

“Yeah, like I said before, because it’s so common that the guy at the next desk over is a super-powered alien.” She gulped more wine.

“Lois, you’re the smartest woman I know. I live in awe of your reporting instinct, how you put clues together, how you come up with the solution that I could never come up with, not in a million years.” Clark had given up on dinner, and he blatantly forked up a large piece of chicken and offered it to Moose. The dog, always out for the main chance, quickly left Lois’s lap and came over to gobble down the morsel.

“Funny how I missed that big fat anomaly right there in the *Planet* newsroom. Gee, Clark is gone. Gee, Superman is there! You’d think I would have put it together,” Lois said disgustedly. Then her face hardened. “Of course, my partner was deliberately pulling the wool over my eyes!” She put a bigger piece of chicken on her fork and called Moose over from Clark. The dog came running to her and put his head back on her lap after eating the chicken.

Clark flinched. She really wasn’t taking this well at all. Her racing heartbeat and short choppy breaths told him that. “Lois,” he persevered, “I said I had mixed feelings. Yeah, when you didn’t recognize me in the Suit, I knew my identity was safe. But half the time I *wanted* you to recognize me. I wanted you to see the man behind the Suit.”

“For what? Superman taking me flying, giving me scoops, flirting with me – gosh, Clark, you had things pretty good right there.”

“No. I didn’t!” Clark almost shouted. He moderated his tone at Lois’s flinch. “I did all that because I lo – I like you so much that I lost track of who I was when I was in the Suit.” He reached for his own wineglass and tossed back the entire contents. Too bad it wouldn’t affect him. “Superman has to be emotionless. Superman can’t have friends, or a family, or a girlfriend. They’d get used against him, hostages maybe.” He poured himself more wine and at Lois’s slight push-forward of her wineglass, topped hers up as well. “But when I was with you and I was Superman, you paid attention to me. I wasn’t the Hack From Nowheresville.”

Lois paled.

“Yes, I heard that,” Clark said bitterly. He breathed deeply before going on. “When I was in the Suit, you looked at me.” He leaned forward, not letting Lois look away. “So I forgot myself, and let part of Clark Kent show up in Superman. I flirted, and I took you flying, and I gave you scoops, because you paid attention to me when I was Superman. It was all I had.”

Lois finally looked away. Another silence echoed through Clark’s apartment. She drank more wine.

“So it’s my fault for not seeing you despite the fact that you took on another identity, adopted a preposterous costume, lied to me every day, and went to elaborate lengths to keep me from seeing you?” Lois finally asked. Her words scythed through the silence.

Depression coursed through Clark. Her words pointed out the idiocy of his position. “No. Nothing is your fault. If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s all mine,” Clark said quietly. He leaned back, defeated. “I didn’t really think this through. I set up the Superman identity to help people, so I could use my powers openly. I never thought it would get this big. I had no idea.”

“Clark, you call yourself a journalist?” Lois asked incredulously. “Of course a flying man will get headlines. And when it turns out he’s an alien... you’re talking story of the

millennium here.”

“I realized that, later on,” Clark admitted. “Too late. I was the flying guy, and flying, well, it’s normal to me now. I didn’t think it would be that big of a deal. But I’d gone public by then, and I couldn’t undo it. I didn’t think ahead.”

Lois snorted.

“But Lois,” Clark said, trying to put all the sincerity he felt into his words, “You’re right. I started out by telling a lie, and then each lie I told needed fifteen more lies to support it.”

Her heartbeat slowed a little. “So I’m right! You’re a big fat liar.”

“I’m a big fat liar,” Clark echoed. He had to admit it. It was true that he was a liar. The irony almost choked him.

“So why did you tell me the truth now?” Lois actually seemed brighter. It was as if making him admit that he was a liar had relieved some pressure. Her tone was still acid but it was much less bitter. “Did I finally meet your stringent criteria? Am I a member of the Superman club now? Was the moon in a triple eclipse or something?”

Clark brightened slightly. “I’ve gotten to know you, and hopefully you’ve gotten to know me.” He ignored Lois’s softly hooted catcall. “You’re my best friend, Lois.” He gestured to the vase full of twenty-four yellow roses across the table. “That bouquet is for you. It’s for friendship. Because whether I’m playing Superman or I’m being Clark Kent, you’re my best friend either way.”

Lois ignored his deflecting tactic and speared him with her gaze. “So why now? Why tell me now?”

Clark fortified himself with another sip of wine. His hand trembled slightly. “Well, given how we talked about maybe taking this to the next step, um, it was time.”

“Uh-huh. It was time. Time now.” Lois’s heart had started beating rapidly again. “Couldn’t it have been time earlier? Why couldn’t you have told me earlier?”

“Um, well, at first I didn’t know you very well,” Clark temporized. “When you told me that getting a newspaper story was like a war, I got a little shy. Lois, when we first met – in fact, that whole first year – I was afraid that you’d tell my secret and it would end up on the front page of the *Daily Planet*.”

“Hmm.” Lois actually seemed to be considering this instead of leaping to deny it.

Encouraged, Clark went on. “Then, as time went on, I got to know you better. I got to know the Lois Lane you keep under the façade.”

“You’re the only one with a façade in this room.”

Clark decided to ignore that comment. He focused on Lois. “I saw the Lois Lane who cared, the Lois who had passion for truth and justice, the Lois who stuck to whatever she started, the Lois who wouldn’t give up.” His voice lowered. “I saw the Lois who is incredibly loyal to her friends, the Lois who sticks to them through thick and thin.” Clark leaned back, surprised at what had come out of his mouth. But every word of it was true.

He looked at Lois carefully. Was she... was she crying? Was there an actual tear on her cheek? She’d definitely lost her hard-edged anger.

“So,” Lois said, after a long minute. “So...” she pulled out a tissue and blew her nose. She *was* crying. “If I’m such a good friend, if I’m so loyal, why didn’t you trust me? Why didn’t you tell me?” She speared him with a tear-filled glance. “Why did you let me believe that you’d been shot?”

“What?”

“When we were in the nightclub with the gangsters. You got shot. And you let me believe you were dead!” Lois blew her nose again defiantly, and then took another gulp from her wineglass.

“Oh. That.”

“Yes. That.” Lois seemed to have herself under a little more control now. “Why didn’t you tell me then, Clark? Why did you

let me go on believing that I'd led my partner and best friend into an ambush, and that he died protecting me?"

"Lois, I..." Clark trailed off. How to explain the confusion of those days? "I don't know. No, what I do know is that the first thing I should do is say I'm sorry."

Lois sniffed briefly. His apology was obviously not accepted.

"You're right. I should have told you then. But I was so lost myself, so confused. Clark Kent was 'dead' that night – he'd been shot in the chest three times, in front of a roomful of witnesses."

"But you weren't dead."

"Yes, I was!" Clark slammed his hand to the table. It wobbled. Moose whined. "I was officially dead. How could I – Clark Kent – explain surviving three gunshot wounds to the chest?"

Lois didn't meet his eyes.

"So I was grieving too. I thought I'd lost everything.

Everything that made life worthwhile – my life in Metropolis, my job, Perry, Jimmy." His voice lowered. "You."

Lois was looking at him now.

"You'd lost your best friend and partner – well, at that moment, so did I. I couldn't be around Lois Lane anymore. Because Superman doesn't work at the *Daily Planet*. Superman doesn't go to ballgames with Perry and Jimmy. Superman doesn't hear you go off on some weird tangent and secretly love it." Clark willed her to see it. "Clark Kent was officially dead, and Superman was all that was left."

"Yadda yadda yadda," Lois said bitterly. "So Clark Kent was dead. But you weren't really dead. You were alive. You were just faking it. Why not tell me the truth?" Now her tears were overflowing again. "Did you know how much I cried? Did you know how much I hurt? Why didn't you tell me? We could have come up with something to explain it." She wiped them away and tossed off the remaining contents of her wineglass.

"I'm sorry," Clark said. "I'm sorry." Only now did it dawn on him what a horrible thing he'd done to Lois. Her tears made him realize just how badly he'd messed up. His shoulders slumped. This wasn't something that could quickly or easily be forgiven.

He tried to explain, knowing it would sound lame and stupid and unconvincing and heartless. "I was so confused myself... all my life I'd hidden... now, all I could think of was what I'd lost..." All his reasoning, all his frantic speculations from that time were now revealed to be wrong thinking.

He took a deep breath. "You're right. I should have told you then." He saw it now. Clark poured himself another glass of wine and knocked it back, wishing that alcohol affected him. This seemed a good night to drown his sorrows.

Lois was well on the way to drowning hers, based on her wobbly refill of her own glass. She sipped it.

They stared at each other across the table. The air was full of the scent of lost opportunities.

"Lois..." He couldn't let their dinner end like this. Then he heard the sirens. Automatically he cocked his head, triangulating and distancing. "Oh God, not *now*..."

"Someone *needs* you?" Lois asked delicately.

Clark turned back to her, his attention divided. He had to talk with her, he *had* to. But more sirens joined the original set. A tenement fire near Hobbs Bay – already he heard cries for Superman.

Lois didn't wait for his confirmation. Clark saw that she had made the connection. When he got that look on his face, Clark Kent was going to run out on her with a feeble excuse. Except now she knew why.

"That's OK – it's time for me to go home anyway," she said, pushing her half-eaten plate to the center of the table.

"Lois..."

"Go. Go be Superman," she said bitterly. Then, less bitterly, "People need you." She flicked her hands at him. She tried to

stand up and she wobbled.

With a quick burst of super-speed, Clark was at her side. He caught her before she fell over.

"How'd you do that?" Lois asked owlishly. She looked back and forth between him and where he'd been, on the other side of the table.

He eased her down so she sat on his couch. "I told you. I'm Superman." Clark spun into the Suit in front of her. "Lois... please stay here."

Her jaw dropped at his spin-change. Then she collected herself. "Stay here? Why? So you can tell me another fairy tale?"

"No, because you just had about five glasses of wine," Clark felt compelled to point out.

"I'm fine."

"Lois – " the sirens were getting louder, and now that Clark was tuned into the scene, he could hear screams. He had to leave soon. "Lois, you can't drive with all that wine on board." He overrode her automatic protest. "Think about this. If you get pulled over, if you get arrested, you know what will happen to your credibility as a reporter." That was the one card he had to play. He couldn't forbid her to leave – Obstinate Lois would leave, just to spite him. But he could point out the danger to her professionalism.

She considered it for a moment. "OK." The fact that she agreed so quickly told Clark that she also knew she shouldn't be driving.

"Your word? You promise you won't drive home? You'll wait for me to drive you home?" Clark was almost frantic but he had to pin her down. If Lois gave her word, she would keep it.

"OK. I promise," Lois said sullenly.

"You know where everything is. I'll be back soon." He hoped. He left in a whirl of super-speed. With his last glance, he saw Lois staring blankly at the floor.

The fire was just as bad as he'd feared. When was Metropolis going to crack down on landlords and make them adhere to code? It wasn't like they were asking the landlords to retrofit with expensive sprinkler systems. No, all they had to do was put in smoke detectors. *Smoke detectors*, for Pete's sake. And because the landlord of this particular crowded tenement hadn't, ten people were dead and another five were seriously burned.

After the fire, soot covered him, and the trailing end of his cape was scorched. Clark headed home, stopping two muggings in Suicide Slum on the way. "A slow night," he muttered. He averaged six to ten crimes foiled every night in the slum.

He landed in his apartment bedroom and stepped into the living room. Lois lay curled up asleep on the couch, one of his mother's colorful quilts draped over her. She'd kicked off her shoes and they lay sprawled on the floor.

Pointedly, she hadn't cleaned up the dinner dishes. She usually did that when he cooked. The pots and pans still sat on the stove, the half-full plates on the tabletop. At dinner they had finished one bottle of wine and gotten into a second bottle; Clark noticed that Lois had finished off that second bottle.

Moose lifted his head from his sleeping spot on the rug next to the couch, but didn't get up at Clark's quiet arrival. Mechanical voices emanated from the television in a low hum – Lois had been watching one of Metropolis's news channels. Right now, it was playing a clip of him at the fire, descending from the roof, carrying several children.

"After rescuing the people trapped on the roof, Superman assisted the Metropolis Fire Department in extinguishing the fire," the news anchor said. At home, Clark gave an ironic thumbs-up. It had taken him a long time to get the TV people to stop saying, "Superman put out the fire." He knew that all he did was help. Metropolis's Bravest did most of the work. The firemen didn't begrudge him the TV time, but Clark felt strongly that their

efforts needed to be recognized. They were the ones putting their lives at risk.

The scene shifted to a clip of Superman being interviewed by one of the TV station's roving reporters, surrounded by the usual crowd of wide-eyed gawkers.

"Superman, what is the status of the rescues?" the reporter asked.

"I transported two people to the Metropolis General Burn Unit, Colin, and three to Mercy Hospital. You'll have to ask the hospitals for further updates." Clark, watching, noted the subtle straightening of the reporter when Superman called him by name. They appreciated the recognition, and Clark knew it gave the reporter a thrill that Superman knew his or her name. By now, he was acquainted with all the TV reporters in Metropolis. It always amused him that when he was on the scene in his *Daily Planet* reporter persona, the TV crews didn't give him a moment's attention.

"What was the cause of the fire, Superman?"

"The fire marshal will make that determination." Privately, Clark was sure that it was arson. It angered and saddened him. How could anyone put so many other lives at risk? He loved his adopted homeworld, but sometimes he was sickened by some of the people who lived on it. How could someone not recognize the unique value of a life?

Tiring of watching events he'd already lived through, Clark turned off the television. The room darkened – the TV had been the only source of light. It didn't matter to Clark.

He looked down at himself ruefully. Soot-covered and smelly, he would have to shower before he touched anything. He suited the action to the thought. After cleaning up, he thought for a moment about clothing. Normally at this time of night, he'd put on some sleep shorts and go to bed. But, in deference to Lois's presence, he dressed in a dark T-shirt and jeans.

When he returned to the living room, he sat down in a chair near Lois. She hadn't woken up during his shower. He watched her breathe. In, out, in, out – her breaths were slow and rhythmical. Hypnotic.

He loved her so much. So much of his happiness depended on this small, fiery woman. It frightened him beyond all measure to think that she might not want to be his friend anymore. He forced himself to think about the thoughts he'd been pushing away all evening.

Why hadn't he told her his secret when the gangsters shot him? Why hadn't he even thought about doing so? Clark squirmed as he faced the events from Lois's point of view. Her partner had been shot in front of her. He'd fallen down "dead" in her presence. And, from Lois's viewpoint, he had been shot and "killed" protecting her. Clark had told the gangster to back off, to stop bothering her. And Clark had been "killed" for it.

If Lois had been shot – Clark forced himself to consider it, although his mind shrank away – he would have been devastated. He could hardly bear to think of her dying. If she died, he knew, he himself wouldn't want to live anymore.

But he loved her, madly, desperately, ferociously. She didn't love *him*. Clark stirred in his seat as an idea percolated up. Perhaps Lois *did* care about him more than he knew. Lois was good at repressing, at hiding, at disguising what she really felt. He should know that by now. The fact that she was so angry at his revelation – perhaps that really meant that she cared about him. Perhaps she had been as devastated as he would have been if she were the one to have been killed.

Of course, the whole thing had gotten mixed up with her pathologic distrust and hatred of liars. She'd thrown that in his face tonight. Her father had lied to her and her family all the time about his mistresses, about his actions, about where he was and what he was doing.

Her mother, perhaps, wasn't technically a liar, but she was an

alcoholic. Clark had been around enough to know that alcoholics would make promises that they wouldn't keep, because taking another drink was more important than fulfilling their promise. And Lois had mentioned that her mother had been a drinker all through her childhood. No doubt Lois had become inured to broken promises and to ringing proclamations that proved hollow.

And... Lois hadn't mentioned him tonight, but Clark was sure that Claude had come to mind. Claude, the *Daily Planet* reporter, to whom she had given her body and temporarily, her heart. Claude, who had used her and played at romancing her, all in order to steal her prize-winning story. Claude, who had then spread gossip all over the *Daily Planet* newsroom about what an inferior sex partner Lois Lane was.

In retrospect, Clark realized that Lois's walls had gone up, and become thicker and higher with each disappointment, each broken promise, each lie. If she kept the world out, the lies lost some of their power.

Then Clark Kent had come along. He'd shown his affection for her. He'd given her time, had let her get to know him slowly. He'd made no romantic gestures, done no overt flirting, put absolutely no pressure on her. And so she'd learned to like him as a friend. Or, perhaps, she felt for him something more than *like*.

She'd been the one to talk about taking things to the next step. She had dumped Dan Scardino, and told Superman that she wanted him only as a friend. The road was clear for Clark Kent. Even though he was a co-worker, and Lois never dated anyone she worked with after the Claude incident, she'd taken a chance with him.

And then Clark had told her that he had been lying to her from day one. No wonder Lois felt so bitter, so betrayed. No wonder she'd been so venomous.

But... she had come over for dinner at his invitation. She hadn't just ignored him. She had made the effort. One of Clark's mother's sayings came to mind – "The opposite of love isn't hate. It's apathy." Maybe Lois hated him now. But at least she cared. Maybe he still had a chance.

Well, the first thing, Clark decided, was that he wouldn't tell her any more lies. No lies. Not even little ones. Truth only. He would be honest. He wouldn't run out on her with some lame excuse. He would keep all his promises.

And, speaking of that, he had promised to drive her home. Clark would like nothing better than to have Lois spend the night in his apartment, and to make her breakfast in the morning. But she might not be as enamored with that idea as he was. Clark sighed and resigned himself to waking Lois.

But... on second thought, did he have to wake her? Did he have to drive her? Could he take her home another way? He stepped forward, and ever-so-gently lifted her up. Martha's quilt slipped off and Clark left it on the couch. He held her close, feeling her heart beat, enjoying the unique scent of her skin.

She moved a little in his grasp, and Clark stayed absolutely still. Lois squirmed, just a bit. Her head was pillowed against his chest and she murmured, "Clark." She made a few grumbling noises and then settled back to sleep.

His heart almost burst with the fullness of his feeling. He didn't bother to change into the Suit, counting on his dark clothing for concealment. Gently, quietly, he rose in the air and flew out through his skylight.

Clark was afraid that the cool night air would wake her, but Lois just snuggled deeper into his grasp. He flew slowly, enjoying the feel of her body against his. Every flight with Lois was permanently etched into his memory. He'd flown with Awake Lois and Unconscious Lois, but never with Asleep Lois. He wouldn't give up this moment for anything.

It didn't take long to get to Lois's apartment. Clark knew the aerial pathways there, from anywhere in Metropolis. He set her down carefully on her bed, and pulled a spare blanket over her.

She grumbled again, just a little bit, and then slumbered on.

Fanciful thoughts of the Sleeping Beauty came to Clark's mind and he thought of giving her a kiss. But did he want her to wake up now? She hadn't gotten much sleep the night before. He scribbled a note telling her that he would drive her Jeep back to her apartment early tomorrow morning. Reluctantly, he murmured, "Good-bye", and left via her window.

When he got back to his own apartment, Clark groaned. He slapped his head rhetorically. When would he ever learn? Moose had been well-behaved while Lois was in the apartment, even when she was asleep. However, when Clark took Lois home and the dog had been left unsupervised, Moose had taken advantage of the opportunity. The dog had cleaned the uneaten food off the dinner plates. He had eaten the remainder of the chicken and rice, and the salad and the vegetables. He'd knocked the pans off the stove onto the floor and licked them clean. And – Clark groaned again – the dog had gotten up onto the kitchen counter, shredded the cardboard box into a hundred tiny pieces, and eaten the replacement order of tiramisu.

Clark clenched his fists and made himself count to ten. Moose stayed well out of his reach. The dog was obviously familiar with being reprimanded for this behavior.

After a minute, Clark collected himself. He sighed and blurred into super-speed. It took only a few seconds to finish cleaning up the kitchen and dining room. He came out of super-speed and Moose whined at him confusedly.

Hah, this time I'm annoying you, Clark thought. The thought crossed his mind – could he keep the dog overnight? Reluctantly, he decided against it. He had to take Moose back to Lois's. Things seemed fine, but Clark knew that a Superman emergency could come at anytime. And then, Clark would be away from his apartment for an unknown duration.

That was why he didn't have a pet. He liked animals. Growing up, Clark had had many farm dogs and tons of barn cats, and numerous other pets and livestock. But, because he was Superman, he couldn't commit to the reliable care that a pet needed. Heck, Clark had had to be away for four days straight when the last big earthquake had hit China a few months ago.

Besides, he knew that Phil and Eleanor's son was scheduled to meet Lois at her apartment tomorrow and take Moose into custody. And right now, it was Clark's devout wish that Moose be returned to his proper owners as soon as possible.

He checked his apartment for Moose's collar and leash. Lois's shoes, tossed on the floor by the couch, distracted him. And Clark noticed that when he had flown her home, he had forgotten her purse. He took out the Jeep keys and left them in a prominent place so he wouldn't forget to take it back tomorrow morning.

Clark gathered up Lois's shoes and purse and quickly flew back to her apartment. Her sleeping form attracted his attention and he spent a few minutes just watching her. Then he shook himself, saw that Moose's dog bed was on the floor in Lois's bedroom, and made sure that all food in Lois's kitchen had been securely stored away. He dropped off her shoes and purse and went back to his apartment.

Moose greeted him at the window with a happy wagging tail. Unlike Lois, Clark thought cynically, the dog didn't care which way Clark came home. Door or window, it was all the same to him. Moose wagged his tail whether he greeted Clark Kent or Superman.

"Let's get you home, Moose," Clark said. He took out the collar and leash and Moose exploded into a frenzy of jumping. "Oh, you want to go for a walk?" At the word "walk" Moose barked loudly.

Clark could take a hint. He hooked Moose up and took the dog outdoors. It was a beautiful spring night, the full moon illuminating the heavens. It was only a mile or so to Lois's

apartment and it wouldn't take them that long to get there.

Clark took a small detour through a quiet Centennial Park. Strictly speaking, it wasn't on the way to Lois's, but he wanted to exercise the dog. He started a slow jog, and Moose trotted by his side. Despite Moose's annoying food-stealing behavior, the dog was well-trained to the leash. He didn't pull and he stayed right next to his walker.

Moose seemed fit, so Clark gradually upped the speed. He ran around the perimeter of Centennial Park. Moose kept up, and Clark ran faster until Moose was galloping flat-out. The dog lapped along with a grin of canine glee. Clark ran him for about five minutes, and then slowed back down to a trot.

Clark let the dog off the leash, and threw sticks for him. "Get it!" Moose focused on the thrown item intently, and then galloped after it. He quickly retrieved each thrown branch, happily returning to Clark's side and dropping the stick at Clark's feet. The dog definitely had good retrieving instincts, Clark thought. In fact, Moose seemed to love fetching things even more than running.

When Clark finished throwing sticks, Moose tried to continue the game by running away. But Clark used his super-speed and had the leash re-attached to Moose's collar before the dog knew it.

They waved at a few other midnight dog-walkers but didn't stop for conversation. Clark sensed single figures lurking in the shrubbery twice, but they didn't bother him. Perhaps if he hadn't had a dog with him, he might have been the victim of a robbery attempt. But nothing happened, so Clark didn't have to be Superman and arrest anyone.

They came to Lois's apartment. Clark considered his options, and took Moose around to the back alley. Discreetly, he gathered the dog in his arms and levitated to Lois's window. He quietly opened the window and floated in. He knew he had made some unavoidable noises when entering, and he waited for Lois to challenge him.

Nothing. Her breathing stayed steady. The running and fetching had worn down the dog's rambunctious edge. Moose ambled to his dog bed and settled down. The dog fell asleep almost immediately. Clark checked on Lois one last time and exited.

He chewed on an idea – maybe Lois hadn't woken up because, even though she heard the noises in her sleep, the noises didn't alarm her. Because she knew it was Superman making the noises. (After all, who else would come through her fifth-floor window?) And because, underneath, she still trusted Superman.

Or maybe that was just wishful thinking. He should stop ascribing feelings and behaviors to Lois, Clark thought. She always confounded him anyway.

Whatever. He had a plan. He was going to be honest and truthful with her. He would return her Jeep tomorrow morning, and bring breakfast to her apartment. They would share breakfast, he would tell her that from now on he would be honest and truthful 100%, and everything would be hunky-dory.

"Yeah, right," he muttered, and flew through the night.

Light flared through the windows of his apartment when Clark returned from Lois's place. What was this? Clark scanned, and then entered through the window.

"Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad." He went over and hugged his parents.

"Hello, Clark," his father said. Gesturing at the Suit, Jonathan added, "Out on a run, eh?"

"Yes," Clark said, for brevity's sake. Their presence was out of the ordinary. "What are you doing here? Um, I mean you're always welcome, of course, but I didn't expect you."

"Clark!" his mother chided him after she hugged him. "I told you a month ago. We have tickets first thing Monday morning to the Paul McKenzie exhibition at the Metropolis Museum of

Modern Art. You said we could stay with you.”

“Uh... a month ago?”

“Your mother said you got called away on an emergency during the middle of the phone call,” Jonathan added helpfully.

His father’s reminder did the trick. Clark remembered it now. He had extended his hospitality as a matter of course – and he had gotten called away, because of the New Zealand tsunami. By the time he’d gotten back to Metropolis two days later, his parents’ plans and his invitation had slipped his mind.

No doubt if he had made his regular weekly phone call to his parents yesterday, his mother would have reminded him. But he hadn’t called, being preoccupied with other matters.

“Of course. I’m happy to see you both. Just let me get things settled...” Clark spun out of the Suit, rushed into his bedroom, changed the sheets on the bed and tidied the room, and then made sure the rest of the apartment was up to his mother’s strict standards. He deposited his parents’ suitcases in his bedroom. “All ready for you.”

“Thanks, Clark,” his father said. He yawned.

“I thought you planned on being here a little earlier,” Clark said, as more memories about his mother’s phone call floated to the top of his brain.

“We did,” Martha Kent said. “Bad weather – our plane got diverted to Chicago, and then we missed our connection, and we had to go to Atlanta, and we missed another connection, and before you know it, it’s after midnight and we’re still not in Metropolis!”

“I’m getting tired of airports,” Jonathan confessed.

Clark could understand that. Who wouldn’t want to avoid the long lines, intrusive security screening, and cookie-cutter terminals? Especially when all that led only to one shutting oneself up in a pressurized metal tube that had a thousand things that might go wrong? Of course, things usually didn’t go wrong, but Clark had helped enough aircraft in distress to be worried about his parents flying on a plane. He had nothing to worry about on his own behalf, of course. He was lucky. He could fly under his own power.

“I’ll be happy to take you back home when you’re ready, Dad, Mom,” he said. “No waiting. No missed connections.”

His father sighed. Clark knew that his parents hated to “take advantage” of his abilities. The fact that it was no trouble to him, and that he wanted to do things for them whenever possible, did not change their attitude. Clark was surprised when Jonathan said, “We might take you up on that, son.”

His mother yawned.

“Can I get you a drink? Anything?” Clark asked.

His parents looked at each other. “Clark, the only thing we want right now is to go to bed,” Martha said. “Do you mind?”

“Of course not. I was just about to get to bed myself.” And he was. He had not slept at all the previous night. And today had been exhausting – not physically, Clark was rarely physically exhausted, but emotionally.

His mother kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you, honey.” She disappeared into the bathroom to get ready for bed.

Jonathan sat at the kitchen table. “Rough night, son?”

Clark cocked an eyebrow.

“You look tired.”

“A big fire,” Clark said shortly.

“Ah.” Jonathan nodded his head. Clark had unburdened himself to his father many times. He tried to hold back the worst parts, but Jonathan had been a soldier and had seen combat. His father knew that dealing with death and destruction every day took its toll.

Clark thought about telling his father more. *I just told Lois about myself*, he would say. His father would ask, *How did it go?* And he would have to reply, *Not so good.*

Clark opened his mouth to start. How had his father courted

his mother? Maybe he could give Clark some hints. Then Jonathan yawned, and Clark saw his father’s exhaustion. He shut his mouth. They could talk tomorrow.

“Jonathan? The bathroom’s free,” his mother called.

Clark stood up and his father followed suit. Jonathan grasped his son’s arm, held him close for a long moment. His father’s touch heartened Clark. He felt Jonathan’s unspoken support.

“Good night, son.” His father padded off.

“Good night, Dad.” Clark sat back down at the table and stared into space for a few minutes. His father joined his mother in the bedroom, and the bedroom light flicked off.

Clark took a quick shower and then headed back to the couch. He always slept there when his parents visited. It didn’t matter if it was a little cramped for his size – he usually ended up floating anyway.

He fell asleep thinking of Lois.

Clark awoke the next morning with a thump. He smiled – he *had* been floating. He’d slept quite a long time for him, and, unusually, hadn’t heard any calls for Superman in his sleep. The gray half-light peering around the window shades told him that, as usual, he’d woken up just before dawn. He focused his hearing. His parents still slept soundly, although they’d be up soon. Even with their late night, their farm habits would ensure an early-morning awakening.

After some quiet ablutions, he checked his refrigerator. Examination of the contents made Clark frown. He really needed to get some groceries. There was nothing for his parents’ morning meal. Plus he needed something to take over to Lois if he was going to make breakfast for her too.

He played a scenario in his head. He would bring over coffee, and he’d cook her the best breakfast ever. She would be a little cranky, but the coffee would soothe her, and then they’d talk. He could hardly wait to get to her apartment. It was as if they had some sort of bond, where he sensed her presence and her demeanor even when she was far away. He loved being with her.

Quickly, Clark spun into the Suit and headed a few miles away to the twenty-four-hour supermarket. He usually shopped at the corner market three blocks away, but it wasn’t open this early. Not many people crowded the aisles this early on Sunday, and it didn’t take long for Clark to stock up. He paid and briskly walked out the door, heading for the back alley where he could turn back into Superman and fly away.

His head lifted. Urgency coursed through him. He never knew if he heard the call with his ears or with his mind. Lois needed him *now*. Clark arched through the air, leaving the alley so quickly that he didn’t even take time to change into the Suit.

Faster, faster; something told him. Instinctively he knew where to find Lois – at his apartment? Yes, in the open-air foyer outside his door. She wore her jogging clothes and held Moose’s leash in one hand and a runner’s water bottle in the other. Clark shot downward, seeing the bullet only two feet away from her chest. It moved a tiny bit forward and Clark hurried – he was in time, just barely. Things were deathly serious now.

He vaguely registered the presence of others, frozen in quicktime – a man he didn’t know, holding a gun; his parents, angry and wary, dressed in their pajamas and slippers, obviously being abducted at gunpoint, and an older man who looked familiar. The older man held a gun in his left hand, ready to shoot.

First things first. Clark slotted himself between the bullet and Lois. She fell backwards, knocked over by the breeze of his entrance. The water bottle slipped from her hand. Clark dropped the grocery bags and they spilled on the floor. The bullet bounced off his chest. He felt an amazing surge of relief – Lois was safe.

And then, before he could catch the ricocheting bullet, and

far too late to move away to a safe distance, Clark felt the kryptonite.

He crashed suddenly, painfully out of quicktime. Moose barked loudly, and then started nuzzling in the dropped grocery bags. The younger man threatening Clark's parents held kryptonite in his hand. Clark saw the virulent green glow between the man's fingers. Suddenly the younger man staggered. He dropped the kryptonite and put his hand to his belly, where blood welled up. Slowly, the younger man collapsed. The kryptonite rolled from his hand and stopped near Clark.

Clark shuddered and toppled. Pain, weakness – the kryptonite took away his powers, hurt him. He writhed on the floor. The other man began screaming from his gut wound. Clark wanted to scream too but held himself silent. How had the day turned so bad, so fast? This morning, all he had had to worry about was placating Lois. Now their lives were in danger.

Lois crawled to him and bent over him. "Clark!"

"Quite an entrance, Mr. Kent," the older man said. "Or should I say, Superman?" He waved his gun nonchalantly – despite the incapacitation of his partner, he still had the upper hand. Clark's parents stared at the man, at the gun, at him. His father looked on desperately as Clark trembled with the agony of kryptonite exposure. The deadly mineral lay near the fallen man, out of anyone's reach.

"What do you want, Nigel?" Lois asked sharply from her knees. At her words, Clark managed to distract himself from the pain enough to look closer at the older man. His heart sank. Holding them hostage was Nigel St. John, former "butler" of Lex Luthor. In actuality, he was no servant. Nigel had been the evil billionaire's top henchman and accessory to crimes before and after the fact. He looked like he'd fallen on hard times, though – he wore a homeless man's rags instead of the finely tailored business suits he'd worn as Lex's associate.

"What do I want, Miss Lane?" Nigel said. "I want *this*." Barely stopping, he pulled a tiny revolver out of a right pocket. He took a step forward and fired at Clark. The bullet hit Clark in the abdomen.

Clark cried out. There was no holding the scream back this time. The bullet burned. The pain was agonizing. It had to be kryptonite. He felt the poison course through him, his blood boiling at contact. He curled into a fetal position, hands pressing into his gut.

Lois cried out too, at the shot. She moved to get up, and Nigel pointed his left hand, the one holding the automatic pistol, at her. With the same motion, he menaced the elder Kents. Martha and Jonathan froze in their tracks.

The younger man screamed too – in fact, he'd never stopped. "Oh, for God's sake," Nigel muttered impatiently. He stepped back from Clark and sighted on his wounded partner with his left-hand gun. Clark suddenly remembered – when he and Lois had investigated Nigel after Luthor's death, they found that he had worked for a British government counterintelligence department before he was disgraced. The department's internal documents had shown that Nigel was rated "Expert" in many, many ways to kill.

A shot rang out, and the younger man fell silent. Blood ran from a hole in his head. Nigel had just proven himself to be an expert ambidextrous marksman. He'd also shown that he had no compunction about killing anyone who annoyed him. Clark groaned.

"You killed him!" Lois said. Clark thought the same thing – he just couldn't get the words out.

"Yes, Miss Lane. I killed him. And I'm going to kill you." Nigel's cool, controlled voice terrified Clark. "But first, Mr. Kent." The older man took his gaze off Lois and the elder Kents just long enough to fire two more shots into Clark from his small right-handed revolver. One grazed Clark's arm. Both hit him in

the stomach. Blood welled up, quickly soaking Clark's shirt.

Clark's mother screamed. His father gasped. They took a step forward. Nigel threatened them with the gun and they froze. Moose looked up from where he was nuzzling the inside shells of the broken eggs, licking up every possible bit of yolk and white. The dog barked loudly, confused.

Lois, defying Nigel, moved forward to take hold of Clark. He felt her warm hands around him, but the pain in his abdomen overcame even her touch.

"You and Kent ruined my life," St. John said to Lois. "I'm going to ruin yours."

They had ruined his life, hadn't they, Clark thought in between the waves of pain. Their investigations had uncovered Lex's corrupt empire, and because of what they turned up, Nigel St. John was now a fugitive from justice. Bank accounts frozen, face on the "Ten Most Wanted" lists at the post offices, credit cards and passport flagged for detection – yes, Nigel had been ruined.

"If Lex Luthor had known that Kent was Superman... well, things would have turned out differently." St. John tucked the tiny revolver back into his pocket and spoke to Clark. "Too bad you won't live long enough to tell me how you got out of Lex's cage."

Clark groaned in short little gasping breaths. His abdomen was on fire. He shuddered with every heartbeat. But the real pain came from knowing that he had walked into a trap. Nigel was going to shoot everyone he cared about right in front of him.

Nigel menaced Lois, Martha, and Jonathan with his larger automatic. "Lex didn't know that Superman hides among us. But I know."

Nigel even sounded like Lex Luthor, Clark thought muzzily. He'd even taken on Lex Luthor's habit of orating to his victims. "Revenge is a dish best served cold," Nigel struck a pose and gloated. "He will see me kill all of you before he dies."

The world was getting blurry. Moose nosed around him, whining at the blood smell. Clark concentrated on Lois, who had his head and shoulders in her lap. Her arm scrabbled on the floor behind him, seeking and finding the dropped water bottle.

Lois looked up defiantly at Nigel. He laughed and sighted his gun on her.

"Watch carefully, Superman," St. John taunted.

NO! Clark thought. He tried to lift himself up, tried to do anything. But at the slightest move the pain thundered through him. Nigel smiled triumphantly. Anguish rushed through Clark. He had been stupidly overconfident and now he was going to pay. He couldn't save his parents. He couldn't save Lois.

Lois looked at Martha. Their eyes met. Lois nodded.

Martha called out loudly, "Nigel!"

Instinctively, St. John turned slightly at the sound of his name. At the same moment, Lois dropped Moose's leash and threw the half-full water bottle with all her might. "Get it!" she told the dog.

Nigel reflexively caught the thrown object in his right hand. But that spoiled his aim. The bullet which would have taken Lois's life hit the concrete floor. A flake of concrete spalled off and skittered along the floor.

Moose, barking loudly, raced after the water bottle. He jumped up on Nigel. St. John, already slightly off balance, did what Lois had done when eighty-five pounds of Labrador Retriever had jumped up on her – he fell down. But there was no Superman to catch Nigel as Clark had caught Lois.

Nigel's head hit the floor with a coconutty thunk. His left hand relaxed and the gun slipped out. The water bottle rolled away.

Moose ignored the gun and cheerfully grabbed the water bottle. He held it gently in his mouth, his teeth not puncturing the plastic. He pranced over to Lois and brought her his prize. He

stood near her, wagging his tail, not setting down the water bottle, asking her to pay attention and take the bottle from his mouth.

Clark's parents hurried forward. His father picked up the gun and got the drop on Nigel, who hadn't moved. His mother ignored the unconscious assassin and rushed over to Clark.

"Clark –"

"Mom," Clark said weakly. "Lois." His vision was fading around the edges.

"Jonathan, keep an eye on that man," Martha said decisively. "Lois, stay with Clark. I'll call an ambulance." She gathered up the glowing lump of kryptonite and ran into Clark's apartment.

"Lois..." Clark murmured. He wanted to tell her... to tell her... but he hurt so badly he couldn't think of what he wanted to tell her. "It hurts." That wasn't what he wanted to say but that was what came out.

"Clark." She swallowed. "Clark, hang on." She hugged him tightly.

"Lois..." It came to him. "...I'm sorry..." Things were fading out. He was so cold. All he sensed was Lois. Lois, holding him, his body with that one last bit of warmth where she held him, her heart beating fast while his heart slowed.

He thought he heard sirens in the distance. He focused on Lois's touch. Everything went black.

Clark awoke, laboring mightily to lift his eyelids. After five or six attempts, he succeeded. His mind moved slowly, but he worried. What had happened to Lois? What about his parents? Were they safe?

He stared at a plain white ceiling. His mouth was more parched than the Sahara, his throat was sore, and his back ached. Even breathing hurt – he took short little breaths and that helped. But the pain in his belly dwarfed everything else except for his worry.

He thought about changing his position to ease his aches. But tensing his muscles sent a stab of agony through him. He moaned.

"Clark? You awake, son?"

Clark turned his head, very slowly. That didn't hurt too much.

"P...P...Perry?" he managed to grunt.

His editor sat by the side of the bed, looking haggard. But when Clark spoke, a smile worked its way up Perry's craggy face.

"First of all, son, everyone is all right. That crazy guy didn't manage to hurt anyone else."

"...L...Lois?"

"She's fine. She rode with you in the ambulance and waited with your parents while you had surgery." Perry smiled. "Your parents are fine too."

Clark felt a great relief. He'd been unconscious, but all the same he'd had nightmares. Now he could relax. Perry would be straight with him. If Perry said that Lois and his parents were all right, then they were all right.

"...H...h...how..." Talking took so much effort. Now that Clark knew his loved ones were safe, he was so tired. And his throat hurt.

"They sat with you all day yesterday. I came in this morning and I made Lois go home to get some rest and freshen up. That girl doesn't have the sense that God gave a mosquito when it comes to you."

Clark tried to smile.

"And you don't have the sense that God gave a mosquito when it comes to her, either," Perry said. Clark got the impression that their editor was so relieved to see him awake that he was drifting off into proverb territory. "Now, Clark, you just gotta stop doing stuff like this. Getting shot – well, Elvis had a dud record once, but not twice."

Clark tried to make sense of that analogy but he couldn't.

Maybe he was still too woozy.

"Son, I have to go tell the nurse you're awake," Perry said. "You just wait right here, OK?"

Clark almost laughed but it hurt too much. Where was he supposed to go? "O...OK," he managed.

Perry squeezed Clark's shoulder. "I'm glad you're still with us, son." He nodded and headed out the door to the nurses' station.

In two minutes a nurse bustled in. She had spiky black gelled hair and weighed about a hundred pounds. Her badge proclaimed her to be Kelly Smith, RN. She set some items on Clark's bedside table.

"Hello, Mr. Kent," she said cheerfully. "So you're up and awake. How do you feel?"

"T...tired."

Kelly nodded. "I can understand that. Now, Mr. Kent –"

"C..Clark."

"Clark, then. I'm going to elevate the head of your bed so you're sitting up." She fiddled with the bed controls. With a whir, the bed slowly adjusted its position. Next, Kelly poured Clark a tiny amount of water from the pitcher on his bedside table. "You can have a mouthful of water." She held the glass up to his lips.

The cool moisture soothed his parched mouth. Clark swished it around his mouth, letting the water rinse away the metallic taste on his tongue. He swallowed it and his throat soreness subsided a bit. Kelly allowed him another sip before setting down the glass.

"I've got to take your vitals," Kelly told him. She pulled out stethoscope, thermometer, blood pressure cuff, and a watch. As she checked Clark's signs, she made conversation.

"You're very lucky, Clark," Kelly told him soberly. "You were shot three times but you're going to be fine."

Clark remembered being shot. He thought he'd remember that to the end of his days. What was worse had been knowing that Lois and his parents were in danger and that he hadn't been able to protect them. But by some miraculous providence things had turned out OK.

But what had happened after he lost consciousness? At his questioning gaze (a thermometer was in his mouth) Kelly went on. "The surgeon had to take out two inches of small intestine, and fix five holes in your stomach and colon. They thought they might have to remove a kidney because it was bleeding, but they were able to save it." She wrapped up the blood pressure cuff and made a note in Clark's chart. "They had to leave one bullet in your liver – it would have been too dangerous to take it out."

"Left it in?" Clark asked, alarmed. Then common sense kicked in. It couldn't be a kryptonite bullet, because if that were the case he would be dead by now. Nigel St. John must have shot him with regular lead bullets after he was made vulnerable by kryptonite.

"Yep," Kelly said. "You'll be fine. Plenty of people are walking around with a little lead in them." She smiled. "At least, plenty of people here in Metropolis." The smile left her face. "We average three GSW's a night."

Clark nodded in agreement. As Superman, he often rescued those who had been shot and transported them to the Met Gen emergency room. But he never stayed for the follow-up. He'd never worried about what happened after he turned the victims over to the experienced ER staff – they were much more prepared to handle those things than he was. Well, he was sure getting a look at the rest of it now.

The nurse interrupted his musings. "Now, Clark, you're going to be here in the hospital for a few days, until you're well enough to go home." Kelly set her paraphernalia aside and drew the privacy curtain around his bed. She donned a pair of latex gloves and said, "I'm going to check your incision and see how it looks, OK?"

She took his assent for granted. Clark stared at the oncoming

latex gloves in trepidation. The nurse pulled down the bedsheet and matter-of-factly moved Clark's hospital gown aside.

Clark didn't look at Kelly and tried to ignore his embarrassment. No doubt she'd seen hundreds of unclothed men. He was just the latest train wreck on her hospital floor. He looked down at his incision. A neat row of surgical staples bisected his abdomen. Traces of disinfectant and a little dried blood completed the unappetizing panorama.

Kelly checked the wound. She pulled out her stethoscope and gently laid it on his abdomen. After a minute, she removed it. "It looks as good as can be expected. You're doing just fine, Clark." She met Clark's eyes. "Now, on a scale of one to ten, how is your pain?"

Heck, he didn't know. He never felt pain, nowadays. He'd had his share of scrapes as a boy, but in retrospect, they were nothing compared with the agony of kryptonite exposure. He cast his mind back. Getting shot by kryptonite – hmm, that would have to be a ten. But today was running a pretty close second.

"Eight," Clark guessed.

Kelly nodded. "We've got some pain medicine for you." She pointed to a labeled syringe resting in a medication tray. "I'll give that to you. It might make you a little drowsy."

Clark floated. He giggled at the irony. He wasn't floating the way he usually did. His mind floated and his body stayed like a lump in bed. He thought he should be floating all the way. But when he tried to levitate, nothing happened. He couldn't fly! Clark thought about getting upset but he decided to giggle again instead.

"Good stuff," he mumbled. The pain medicine had kicked in quickly, and Clark floated in euphoria.

A noise at the door distracted him from his rapt contemplation of a crack in the ceiling. He turned to look. Had he thought that he was happy already? He couldn't have been, because Lois hadn't been there. And now she was here. Wow!

"Lois! LoisLoisLois!" Clark chortled. He beamed at her.

"Clark," Lois said. She rushed to him. "Clark!" She set down a large coffee on his bedside table and took his hand.

"Lois," he said. He didn't seem to be able to say more than that. He was so happy.

Oh, wait. He had to tell her something. It was important. What was it again?

Before Clark could collect his thoughts, Perry entered his view. He took a look at Clark, who smiled foolishly.

"Son, I don't think you're going to remember this, but I'll tell you anyway, just like I told Lois." Perry stood next to Lois. "I don't want to see hide nor hair of you at the *Planet* for the next three weeks."

Clark felt desolate. Perry didn't want him? Maybe Lois didn't want him either? After all, she'd been very mad at him. Why had she been mad at him again? He couldn't remember.

Perry went on, though, and soothed Clark's fears. "You've got to get better, son. I don't want to see either one of you at the *Planet* until you're up and around, Clark." He turned to Lois. "Thank you for volunteering to stay with Clark."

Lois shrugged.

"Right." Perry nodded with a knowing air. "Now, Clark, don't worry about a thing. Both of you will get full pay while you're out. And the *Planet's* insurance will cover every penny of this doctor and hospital stuff." His words floated past Clark. "I've got to get back to the paper. You stay here with Lois and do what she tells you."

"Sure!" Clark could promise that. He loved doing what Lois said. Except when she was too bossy. Or when she teased him. Or when she asked him questions he couldn't answer. Or when he had to go and be Superman.

Wait. That was what he had to tell Lois. He was Superman.

Or had he already told her that? He couldn't remember. He had rehearsed it so much in his head that he had eight or ten different memories of telling her. No, he hadn't told her, he decided. He had wanted to, but he hadn't told her. He had to tell her now. It was important.

"Lois..." Clark began. But she stood at the door to his room, hugging Perry. The editor walked away. Clark panicked. Would Lois leave too?

Clark tried again, louder this time. "Lois..."

This time she came to him. "Clark? Are you all right?"

The panic went away. Lois had come back! He was so happy. Lois was right next to him. And she was holding his hand!

Clark gave her a sappy smile. "Lois... I have something to tell you."

She squeezed his hand encouragingly. At the last second, Clark's nerve failed him. "I'm floating."

Lois flung back the bed sheet in alarm. When she saw him safely lying in bed, she hissed. "That's not funny!" She brought the sheet back over to cover him.

Clark tried to make sense of her actions. He gave it up. When had he ever been able to understand Lois Lane? He chuckled. "I'm floating. Floating.... Kelly gave me a shot... it was some good stuff."

"Oh, you mean..." Lois trailed off.

What did that expression on her face mean? Clark tried again. Underneath the euphoria was a great urgency to tell her the truth. But on the surface, everything seemed happy.

"Lois... I got shot."

"I know that, Clark."

He stared at her owlshly. "But it really hurt me this time. It's real this time."

"I know that too, Clark," she said patiently.

Driven by the imperative to tell, Clark mumbled, "It didn't hurt the last time I got shot. The bullets bounced off me." It seemed important that Lois understand this. "Usually bullets bounce off me because I'm Superman." There, it was out. "I'm Superman," he repeated. He tried to take a deep breath. The narcotics made him not care about the pain. What was more important was that he had told Lois. What would she do?

Lois laughed, and her laugh morphed into a tiny sob. "I know that too, Clark."

"You do?" Clark said, tremendously surprised. How had she known that? He gaped at her.

"You told me two days ago."

"I did?"

"Yes, you did."

"I told you I was Superman?"

"Yes, you did."

"The Last Son of Krypton? The Man of Steel? The Man of Tomorrow?" Clark said, encouraged by Lois's tiny smile.

"That all goes along with being Superman," Lois said, holding back a chuckle. "I think Perry is getting a little too grandiloquent on the editorial page."

"Anyway, I'm Superman, Lois," Clark said. He loved how she was holding his hand. She felt so warm. She was taking this so well. He thought... well, he worried, underneath the floating, that she might be angry. "I got shot last time and it didn't hurt at all. Because I'm Superman." It was important that Lois know that. Had he told her already? Oh yes, he just had. "I lied about it then. But no more! I'm going to... I'm going to tell you the truth all the time from now on."

Lois smiled sadly.

"I won't lie to you anymore, Lois. I'll tell you the truth one hundred percent."

Lois nodded. Her eyes flickered in interest. "One hundred percent?"

"One hundred percent."

“One hundred percent?” Lois said again. She barely held back a giggle.

Clark giggled too. He loved to make Lois happy. “One hundred percent. Like Horton.”

“Like who?”

Clark regarded her. His muzzy brain wasn’t sure if Lois was kidding or not. “Horton! The elephant!”

“The elephant?” Lois asked dubiously.

“It’s Dr. Seuss!” Clark felt a strong need to explain this to her. “Horton the elephant from *Horton Hatches the Egg*. ‘I meant what I said and I said what I meant - an elephant’s faithful, one hundred percent!’” Clark said. “From now on, no more lies.” He ended his peroration with a flourish. “‘I meant what I said and I said what I meant – Clark Kent will be truthful one hundred percent!’”

Lois laughed a little, but tears welled up in her eyes. It perplexed Clark. Shouldn’t she be happy one hundred percent?

She distracted him by saying, “The only Dr. Seuss I ever read was *Green Eggs and Ham*.”

“That was a good one!” Clark agreed, memory supplying an immediate image of words and pictures. “I know it by heart.” He began quoting. “‘Would you eat them with a fox? Would you eat them in a box? Would you eat them in a house? Would you eat them with a mouse? Would you eat them here or there? Would you eat them anywhere?’”

“I do not like green eggs and ham,” Lois interjected.

“I do not like them, Sam-I-Am!” Clark finished triumphantly. He leaned over and whispered to Lois confidentially. “You know what?”

“What?”

“The guy in the book ended up *liking* green eggs and ham!”

“Really?” Lois asked in the same confidential whisper.

“Really!”

“I think you’re a little out of it, Clark,” Lois said, removing her hand.

Clark felt bereft. “I’m perf... perfectly lucid! Perfectly lucid!” His tongue seemed to get a little tangled on the “L’s”. “You know, Lois...” he asked, hoping to get her to hold his hand again.

“What?”

“I’m green eggs and ham.”

“What?” Lois was startled.

“I’m green eggs and ham.” Clark felt very sad suddenly. He had to tell Lois something he had always worried about. “I’m not really human. I’m not regular eggs and ham. I just look like a human. But I’m not human. I told you I was Superman, right?”

“You did mention that,” Lois said patiently.

“I’m green eggs and ham, and...” Clark thought hard. He was a little confused about where this was going. He wasn’t human, he knew. That was very sad. He looked like a human but he wasn’t. He wasn’t regular eggs and ham.

Then a wonderful idea exploded in his mind. “Hey! Maybe you’re like the guy in the book. The guy that thought he didn’t like green eggs and ham at first, but then he tried them.” Clark quoted the book again. “‘You do not like them, so you say. Try them! Try them! And you may! Try them and you may, I say!’” It seemed so important that Lois understand this. At least she was listening to him today. “So you should go on a date with me. Try me! You might like me!”

Clark barely heard Lois say, very quietly, “I do like you, Clark.”

He pressed onward, desperate to prove his point. “I’m green eggs and ham, and you try me, and then at the end, you’ll be like the guy in the book. ‘Say! I like green eggs and ham! I do! I like them, Sam-I-Am!’” He smiled winningly at her.

“Oh, Clark,” Lois said. She was doing that weird laugh-and-cry-at-the-same-time thing again. She leaned forward and hugged

him.

Clark’s heart jumped in his chest.

“Clark,” Lois said, sitting back in her chair, “we did go on a date. You made me dinner.”

“We did?” Clark asked, wide-eyed. Images floated through his fuzzy brain. He frowned. “Were you mad at me?”

“I was at the beginning.” Lois said patiently. “But you made me a really good dinner.”

“I did?”

“You did. And then I thought about it, and I wasn’t mad anymore.”

“You’re not?”

“No, I’m not. And I have to tell you something really important, Clark.”

“What?” He focused on Lois with all his attention.

She smiled. “I *like* green eggs and ham.”

“You do?” Clark breathed.

Lois took his hand again and squeezed it just a bit. “I do. I like them, Sam-I-Am.”

Lois sat with him for a few hours. The nurse came by several times, checking on Clark, and chatting with Lois for a few minutes. Clark floated in his euphoria. It wasn’t just his pain medication – Lois’s presence made Clark so happy.

They stopped speaking, and Lois just held his hand. She got up every now and then to stretch her legs. Early on, she opened the window blind and looked out at the spring sunshine. As the sun moved through its path, a sunbeam bathed Clark as he lay in his bed. The beam grew stronger as time passed.

Clark murmured happily. The sunlight was great. He began to feel stronger. The fuzzy cotton-wool feeling in his mind slowly dissipated. The pain in his abdomen diminished, although he still had suspicious internal rumblings. Lois drowsed in the chair next to his bed.

“Hello,” someone said loudly at the door. Without bothering to wait, Inspector Henderson walked in.

Lois jerked awake. “What do you want?”

“Nice to see you too, Lane,” Henderson said with his customary dry wit. Then he said in a more serious tone, “I’m glad you’re OK.”

“Well, Clark isn’t,” she grumped.

“I know. That’s why I’m here. I need to get a witness statement from him. I already spoke to his parents – I’m surprised they’re not here.”

“They’re getting a rest right now. They were here all night. I’m staying with Clark.”

“I can see that, Lane,” Henderson said. The policeman advanced to the bed.

Clark groaned. He thought he’d been feeling better. But now his belly hurt again. And his guts were rumbling. Henderson blocked his sunbeam.

“Just a minute, Kent,” Henderson said. He grimaced. “It’s kind of warm in here. Can I hang up my coat over there?”

“Be my guest,” Clark said.

Henderson moved out of the sunbeam and Clark felt good again. He saw the homicide inspector hang up his topcoat near the room entrance.

The cop jerked a thumb at Lois. “Lois, you’ve got to leave the room.”

She made no effort to get up. “Why?”

“Because when this goes to the D.A., I can truthfully say that there was nobody in the room but Clark and me when I took his witness statement.”

Lois considered that for a moment. Then she got up from the chair, walked to the door, and moved one step over the threshold. She didn’t close the door, and it was obvious to all three that she would be able to hear the men’s conversation easily.

To Clark's surprise, Henderson ignored Lois's presence. Instead, he sat down in the chair that Lois had vacated, leaving Clark's sunbeam unimpeded, and pulled out a small voice recorder. He spoke clearly into it, titling this recording with date, place, time, persons present, and reason for interview.

"Please tell me what happened that led up to you getting shot," Henderson requested.

Clark stared warily at the voice recorder. He still felt a little muzzy. He decided to be cautious. "Well, my parents were visiting. I got up early to get some breakfast food. When I came back from the store, two men were holding guns on my parents." It still frightened him to think of that moment.

"Go on," Henderson said laconically.

"Lois was there too, and I... I recognized Nigel St. John. You know Nigel St. John?"

Henderson nodded, then remembering he had the recorder, said "Yes."

Now it was going to get tricky. Clark picked his words carefully. "I thought Nigel was going to shoot Lois, so I... I rushed him."

Henderson didn't raise an eyebrow. Nor did he chide Clark for the seemingly foolhardy action. "Go on."

"He shot me. He was going to shoot Lois but she threw a water bottle at him. Lois had her neighbor's dog with her – " Clark realized he'd gone on a tangent. "Did Lois tell you about Moose?"

"Yes, all about him," Henderson confirmed. Was there a hint of a smile on that taciturn cop face?

"Moose knocked over Nigel when he chased the water bottle. Then I blacked out and I don't know what happened next." Clark congratulated himself for not telling any overt lies.

"What about the other man? You said there were two men."

"Oh. Nigel shot his own partner after he shot me."

"Thank you, Mr. Kent," Henderson said formally as he thumbed off the voice recorder.

Clark was surprised. The interview seemed uncharacteristically quick for the thorough detective. Henderson had hardly asked Clark any questions. Lois moved back into the room, taking the chair on the other side of Clark's bed. She looked a little surprised too.

"Thanks, Clark." Henderson tucked away the recorder into his jacket pocket. "I don't think you'll have any trouble with the D.A. Everyone's witness statements agree, and they make it clear that Nigel and his partner got what was coming to them. This isn't going to come to court. It's a clear case of self-defense."

Clark nodded slowly.

Henderson leaned back and spoke conversationally. "You know, I was shot once."

"I didn't know that," Clark said. What had prompted the normally taciturn detective to open up a fraction? Oh, yeah. Clark had just been shot too.

"It was years ago. I was on the MPD SWAT team," Henderson said. Clark knew that the Special Weapons and Tactics team of the Metropolitan Police Department was an elite unit. They took only the top half of one percent of those who applied. The fact that Henderson had made it onto the squad only increased Clark's respect for the taciturn homicide detective.

"It was a hostage situation gone bad," Henderson continued. He stared into space, reminiscing, with a grim look to his features. "The whole thing fell apart. The hostage was killed. I got shot in the leg. Two other officers were wounded." He shrugged. "After I healed, I found that I couldn't perform up to SWAT team standards." At Lois's slight gesture, Henderson said, "I get along fine in everyday life. It's running and long-term stress on the hip that gets me. So I transferred over to Homicide, and I've been there ever since."

"Homicide is the better for it," Clark murmured

diplomatically.

"Yeah. I still miss the old days once in a while, but I'd be out of it by now anyway – SWAT is a young man's game," Henderson said. "I've done OK in Homicide." He caught Clark's gaze. "So I know what it's like, getting shot. It's no fun."

Clark nodded ruefully. "Right."

"Did you know that Superman saved six members of the SWAT team from getting shot just this year?"

"Uh, I'd heard that." Clark remembered – it was two different hostage situations and one attempted suicide-by-cop that went bad.

"And he saved my life this year too, you know, when those idiots at the Twelfth Precinct didn't search that guy before they booked him?"

Clark remembered that too. The man had been on drugs, had a gun, and had tried to shoot up the Twelfth Precinct. By some miraculous twist of fate, Clark had been there in his Superman identity, dropping off a mugger, and he'd stepped in, caught the bullets, and restrained the perp. It could have been a bloodbath.

Why was Henderson bringing up Superman rescues right now? "Where are you going with this, Bill?" Clark asked. Nervousness chased away the last bits of narcotic-induced fuzziness.

"Glad you asked, Clark," Henderson said casually, spearing Clark with a gimlet eye. Clark had heard Henderson put on that casual tone before and it was usually right before he pointed out the inconsistencies in a suspect's alibi. His gut churned as Henderson said, "We're off the record. I want to hear the real story."

"The real story?" Clark squeaked.

"Yeah. Kent, how did you get shot, anyway?" Henderson had moved from "Clark" to "Kent", Clark noticed.

"There was a man with a gun, Henderson," Lois said sarcastically.

"No, I mean, how did *you* get shot, Kent? The bullets are supposed to bounce right off you."

There was a shocked silence.

Lois, flailing to recover, said, "Is this some sort of joke, Henderson?"

Clark met the inspector's eyes. It was useless trying to lie to Henderson. He sighed. "Don't bother, Lois. He knows."

Henderson nodded slightly.

"How long have you known?" Clark asked. He had to know. He'd kept his identities separate for almost two years, and suddenly, within the space of forty-eight hours, three separate people had penetrated his secret. He was pretty sure Henderson was trustworthy, but it was still a shock.

"It was the first time you got 'shot' by those gangsters", Henderson said, making air quotes with his fingers when he said 'shot'. "That story you gave sounded good, but when you told it to me, I knew you were lying. I asked myself, 'Why would Clark Kent lie about something like that?' and then I started thinking. Then I started watching, and it was pretty obvious."

"Detective Wolfe believed it," Clark said defensively.

Henderson's lips twitched in what might have been a microscopic smile. "Let's just say that Wolfe isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, if you know what I mean. When you spun that story about how Superman repaired the cellular damage using Dr. Hamilton's techniques, well, it was plausible. You didn't have to be galactically stupid to believe it."

Clark caught a glimpse of Lois out of the corner of his eye. Her fists were clenched.

Henderson went on. "But I smelled a rat. And to be fair to Wolfe, he's overworked like all of us in Homicide. So when you turned up alive, Kent, you saved Wolfe a ton of paperwork. He just went on to the next case."

"Henderson, who were those guys that tried to kidnap Clark's

parents?” Lois said, apparently wanting to turn the conversation away from how the detective figured out Clark’s other identity. “I know one of them was Nigel St. John, but who was the other one? Why did they want Martha and Jonathan?”

“Good question, Lois,” Henderson said. “The other guy was Jason Mazik.”

Clark and Lois exchanged blank looks.

“He’s the son of Robert Mazik, the owner of Mazik’s Jewelers, you know, the fine diamonds store?”

“I think I’ve seen their ads on TV,” Lois volunteered.

“Yeah. Well, Robert Mazik recently passed away. It seems that Jason was cut out of his will, totally, in favor of Robert’s other son Jerry. Jerry got the shop, the money, the house, everything.”

“What does that have to do with Clark?”

Henderson raised an eyebrow. “Jason Mazik apparently decided that he would kidnap Superman’s parents so that Superman would steal for him.”

“Superman never would!” Lois said indignantly.

Clark stayed silent. If someone held his parents hostage... if someone had *Lois* hostage... well, he didn’t know what he might do. His ethics might disappear. He loved Lois for her faith in him. Sometimes she had more faith in him than he did himself.

“We never know what we’ll do when someone we love is at risk,” Henderson said bleakly. He shook himself. “Fortunately, the kidnapping didn’t go through.”

Clark thought for a minute. “You know, Henderson,” he said slowly, “how did this Jason Mazik know who I was, um, my other identity?” Even now, Clark couldn’t bring himself to say ‘I am Superman’. ‘I mean, my parents know, Lois knows, you know... but how did this guy know? It’s not like I go around advertising it. And neither Lois nor I have ever heard of Jason Mazik.’ He stared suspiciously at Henderson. “Unless you’ve been going around telling people.”

“Wait a minute, Kent!” Henderson said, lifting up his hands. “I owe you. Trust me, I haven’t breathed a word to anyone about your, ah, moonlighting. I know how to keep my mouth shut.”

“Then why did this guy target Clark’s parents? And how did Nigel get involved?” Lois demanded.

“Ah,” Henderson smiled, “that is a very interesting question. Clark, did you know that when Mazik entered your apartment, he stole your unpublished fantasy novel?”

“I don’t have –”

“I’m *certain* it’s yours,” Henderson overrode him, “because if it were, perhaps, to be considered Jason Mazik’s property, then it would have to be entered in evidence. And given that you talk about your alternate identity in this fantasy novel, Kent – very careless of you, I might add – it’s probably best that you just reclaim *your property* quietly so that nothing need be said.” He pulled a leatherbound journal out of his jacket pocket and handed it over to Clark.

“What did I write in my, um, unpublished fantasy novel?” Clark said, riffling through the yellowed pages and seeing crabbed handwriting. He’d need some uninterrupted time and a better light to decipher that scrawl.

“I’m assuming that the recent trauma you suffered has given you a temporary case of amnesia,” Henderson said. Lois giggled at his unctuous tone. “But I’m sure it’ll come back to you if I remind you.”

“I’m sure,” Clark agreed.

“Well, you’ll recall that you’re writing in the first person, and your point of view character is a fellow called Tempus. This Tempus is actually from the future, which he describes as some sort of Utopia.”

Clark raised his eyebrows. “Utopia?”

“Apparently so,” Henderson confirmed. “Tempus seems to be rather a malcontent – he doesn’t seem to care for the Utopian

lifestyle. ‘Nine thousand channels and nothing on’ is how he describes it.” He took a deep breath. “Anyway, Tempus manages to travel back in time.”

“How does he do that?” Lois asked, interested.

“This is where your novel becomes pretty fantastic, Kent,” the detective said. “H.G. Wells rides a time machine to the future and picks Tempus up.”

“H.G. Wells?” Clark asked, and Lois echoed his surprise.

“The author?”

“H.G. Wells, the author,” Henderson confirmed. “It seems as if *The Time Machine* was more than just a pioneering science fiction novel. Tempus manages to hitch a ride with Wells back to the past. It seems Tempus has a plan. He wants to prevent Utopia from ever coming into existence.”

“How is he going to do that?” Lois asked. Clark would have asked it if she hadn’t gotten in first.

“Tempus planned to go back in time and kill Superman as a baby, right after his spaceship landed on Earth,” Henderson said. He stared at Clark with avid curiosity. Clark supposed that actually reading about his arrival from Krypton would arouse anyone’s interest. He squirmed. Henderson went on, and Clark froze as he heard the detective’s next sentence. “Apparently, Utopia was based on the principles of Superman... and Superman’s descendants.”

There was an awkward silence.

“So then what happened?” Lois asked. Clark silently blessed her for it.

“Tempus’s plans were thwarted. He was taken back in time to the year 1866 and put in an insane asylum in Kansas. There, he wrote his diary,” Henderson said, making a slight gesture at the battered journal Clark held. “Somehow, Jason Mazik got hold of the diary and, uh, found out Superman’s civilian identity.”

Lois pondered for a minute. “That still doesn’t explain Nigel.”

“Ah, Nigel,” Henderson said. “You did us a service by knocking him out, Lois.” He smiled. “The Brits have been looking for him for a long time. And after the whole Luthor thing, we’ve been *very* interested in him too.”

“The connection?” Lois prodded.

“OK. It seems that Tempus had devoted his life to studying Superman. Lex Luthor was Superman’s enemy,” Henderson said, looking intently at both Lois and Clark, “and Tempus seemed particularly interested in Luthor.”

Clark’s stomach churned. Thinking about Luthor tended to make that happen. He’d actively hated the billionaire who had lured Lois to a marriage that Clark, Perry, and Jimmy had managed to stop only at the last possible moment. Luthor had blown up the *Daily Planet* and had committed other crimes too numerous to mention. But what Clark hated most about Luthor was the way the villain had damaged Lois.

“In his diary, Tempus wrote about how research in later years found most of Luthor’s secret hideouts. He wrote down a list.” Henderson grinned savagely. “I managed to get search warrants. Anything regarding the late Lex Luthor is flagged for attention. We found some *very* interesting things.”

“Like what?” Lois demanded. Clark couldn’t speak. His stomach was churning again.

“Like Lex Luthor’s body, frozen in cryogenic suspension,” Henderson said baldly.

“What?!”

“No kidding. You’ll recall that Luthor’s body was stolen from the morgue. Now we know where it went.” Henderson looked grim. “We arrested a woman, a Dr. Gretchen Kelly. She was there too. She told us how she was going to revive Lex Luthor. He would come back and rebuild his empire.”

Lois and Clark both looked on, speechless in horror.

“That won’t be happening now,” Henderson said briskly.

“We’ve got a guard on Luthor’s body and it’s scheduled for cremation tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” Lois whispered. Her hand reached out for Clark’s. He took it and felt her squeeze his hand desperately. They’d never talked all that much about the difficult time of Lois’s engagement and near-wedding. Lois had done a lot of late-night driving, and Clark had done a lot of late-night flying. They’d been awkward and stilted with each other for weeks. But they’d gradually recovered their friendship.

“Um, how does this relate to Nigel and Mazik?” Clark asked, wanting to turn the subject away from Lex Luthor.

“Oh. Mazik did make some notes in the diary, but we don’t have anything from Nigel’s side. Here’s what I think happened,” Henderson said. “Mazik gets the diary, learns your identity. He wants to force Superman to use his powers for Mazik’s personal gain.” Henderson’s tone made it obvious what he thought of such a foolhardy action. “How to do that? Kidnap Superman’s parents. But Mazik isn’t an action guy. He doesn’t know much about kidnapping. So he learns from the diary that Nigel St. John escaped Luthor’s downfall and is probably laying low in one of Luthor’s hideouts. Mazik has a list of the hideouts, so if Nigel isn’t in one, he’s probably in another.”

“OK,” Clark allowed. It all sounded fantastic and improbable, but ever since he’d rocketed to Earth from a doomed planet, his life had been full of the fantastic and improbable.

“Nigel has a personal grudge against Clark Kent,” Henderson said. “Kent, your investigation brought down Lex Luthor.”

“It wasn’t just me,” Clark protested. “Perry helped, and Jack, and Jimmy. You too.”

“You were the mainspring,” the detective said. “But St. John hated Superman more. He knew what a thorn in the side Superman was to Luthor.” He eyed Clark curiously. “Someday you’ll have to tell me all the things that you *didn’t* report in the *Daily Planet*.”

“Uh, yeah,” Clark said uneasily. Even though he was bathed in a direct sunbeam, this conversation was upsetting his stomach. He’d never been queasy before and he definitely didn’t like the feeling. The sunshine should be helping him heal, but something was definitely still wrong in his abdomen.

“So Mazik finds Nigel. From his diary, he didn’t tell Nigel about Su-, about um, your other identity until they were ready to go,” Henderson went on relentlessly. “Nigel leaps at the chance to even an old score, and goes along with Mazik to kidnap your parents.” He fixed Clark with a gimlet eye. “But what I want to know is, why did St. John feel that he and Mazik could actually *get away* with what they planned? You’re – who you are,” Henderson said. “Believe me, I’ve seen you in action enough times to realize how crazy their thinking was.”

“Your point, Henderson?” Lois asked.

“Why did Mazik and St. John think they could be successful? And Kent, how did you get shot?” I’ve seen bullets bounce off you. Heck, I’ve seen you *catch* bullets. And then I get a call that you’re in emergency surgery with a GSW to the abdomen. How did that happen?”

Clark sighed. He couldn’t really keep Henderson in the dark, despite his natural tendency to hide his vulnerability. Besides, the police detective already knew the biggest secret – Clark’s other identity. Finding out about Clark’s Achilles heel was just the icing on the cake. Clark looked at Lois. She agreed without words.

“Kryptonite.” Clark admitted

“Kryptonite?” Henderson echoed. “What’s that?”

In for a penny, in for a pound. “It’s, uh, a mineral. I think it’s pieces of my birth world, Krypton. And I think it came to Earth along with my spaceship.”

Henderson’s eyes flashed with curiosity again at the mention of the spaceship.

Clark reached for Lois’s hand again. “I ran into it in

Smallville. If I’m exposed to it, it takes away my, uh, abilities. It’s radioactive.”

Henderson flinched just a little bit. “Radioactive?” He did not look happy.

“I don’t think it’s harmful to humans,” Clark said. “My dad was around it, and my mother and Lois, too. They seemed okay.” He took comfort in Lois’s hand, warm in his, and in the sunlight. Although his guts seemed to be moving more than they should and he still had some pain, he could feel himself growing stronger by the moment.

“What does this kryptonite look like?” Henderson asked.

“It’s green. A green mineral,” Clark answered.

Henderson got up from his chair and headed to the coat hook near the room’s entrance. He pulled a plastic baggie out of his pocket. He brought it over to the hospital bed.

Clark felt the evil presence as Henderson neared him. Sweat broke out on his face.

“Is this it?” Henderson shoved the baggie under his face. The pain hammered through Clark. Two bloodstained bullets could be seen through the clear plastic. One was normal lead. The other glowed green.

Clark groaned. Pain seized his body. His guts, lately quieted, cramped furiously. A fierce headache roared into existence. His nose began to bleed.

“Henderson! Get it away!” Lois hissed. She got up and came around the bed, and grabbed at the baggie. “It’s poison to him!”

Henderson pulled the baggie out of Lois’s reach. He looked shaken at Clark’s reaction. The kryptonite exposure had undone much of Clark’s healing. Lois danced around the detective, almost herding him away from the hospital bed.

Lois ran back to the bed and handed some tissues to Clark. He slowly wiped his face. Clark panted for a moment, still aching. The sunbeam bathed him and he felt a little better. After a minute, Clark’s headache and nosebleed stopped. He still had abdominal cramps.

Henderson stood worriedly at the door. Clark spoke to the policeman, his voice hoarse. “That’s what kryptonite does to me.”

“Oh.” Henderson shuffled a bit. “I’m sorry, Kent.”

“That’s OK,” Clark said faintly. “You didn’t know. But please don’t bring it near me again.” He was inclined to cut the inspector a little slack. As he said, Henderson didn’t know. Too bad that Clark’s stomach felt like it was on fire again. Clark put a hand to his stomach and pressed inward, trying to stop the pain.

“What’s the matter?” Lois asked. She came over.

“It hurts.” Clark felt the beads of sweat popping out.

Lois turned to Henderson, a frightened look in her eyes.

“Now look what you’ve done! He was healing and you... you shoved that right in his face!”

Henderson actually took a step back in the face of Lois’s anger.

“Henderson, I want that bullet. We can’t have kryptonite out there,” Lois demanded. “We have to destroy it.”

The inspector actually looked sympathetic for a minute. Then his face firmed. “No way, Lois. That’s official evidence. I went to the surgeon and collected what he took out of Clark. I signed for that bullet.”

“But look what it’s done to Clark!” she shrieked.

Clark now had both hands pressed into his abdomen. He clenched his lips against a moan. Even the sunlight didn’t help. The kryptonite exposure and subsequent cramping had definitely stirred something up. Perhaps his internal bleeding had started again?

Henderson’s face softened. “I see it,” he admitted.

“You said that you owed him one,” Lois persisted.

“Yeah, I do,” Henderson replied. His eyes flicked over to Clark. “But it’s evidence, Lois. And I’m an honest cop. I’m willing to bend the rules a little bit” – his eyes flicked to

Tempus’s journal – “but I’m not going to suppress hard evidence that I signed for.” His voice was unyielding.

Clark groaned loudly.

Lois abandoned her argument with Henderson and ran over. “Clark!” She pulled back the top sheet, exposing his torso, and pushed aside his gown. Clark had his hands pressed to his stomach. He felt his flesh moving beneath him. It hurt. He groaned again.

“Lois...”

“Clark, do you want me to call the nurse? Can we get you more pain meds?” Lois dithered. It was very unlike her, Clark thought fuzzily through his pain. She was usually so decisive. He pushed his hands in harder as his flesh writhed. Something was *moving*...

His abdomen stopped churning. With a final burst of pain, the skin over Clark’s stomach burst open. His fists automatically opened to catch the hard lump that came out. He held his hands to his belly, relieved beyond measure that the pain had stopped. Blood speckled his hand.

“Clark, are you OK?” Lois said, alarmed. Henderson came over too. He must have left the kryptonite in his coat that hung by the door because Clark couldn’t feel it. Then again, it was a fairly small piece of the deadly mineral.

“I...I’m better now,” Clark managed to croak out. His hands fell to his sides.

“What’s that?” Lois asked, noticing he held something.

“I don’t know, but it just came out of me,” Clark said. He opened his hand carefully. He should have known, he thought. What else could it have been but Nigel’s bullet?

All three of them stared at the tiny projectile in amazement. Henderson’s eyes widened in wonder. Clark caught a glimpse of Lois; she sat there with jaw dropped in incredulity.

Henderson was the first to speak. “Did you just... *expel* that?” He stared at Clark’s bloodstained abdomen, at the row of surgical staples, at the tiny hole where the bullet had worked its way out.

Clark said quietly, “I...I guess so.” After all, the nurse had said that the surgeon had to leave one bullet in his liver. Apparently his alien body didn’t like that idea. It had worked and worked to push out the bullet.

Lois had a sudden inward hiss of breath. She had that “Lois has an idea” look on her face. “Henderson!”

“What?”

“Problem solved.”

“What?”

“They took two bullets out of Clark, right?”

“Right.”

“You’re putting two bullets into evidence, right?”

“Right.” Henderson got that tiny hint of a smile. He saw where Lois was going with this.

“I’ll trade you,” Lois said imperiously, pointing toward the bullet that Clark still held. “One bullet, uh, removed from Clark Kent. You give me the kryptonite bullet. You still have two bullets for your evidence. The kryptonite isn’t out there, and you’ve paid off your favor to Superman.”

“Lois, you’re leading me astray,” the taciturn detective said. “It’s a deal.” At Clark’s surprised look, Henderson added, “I do owe you, Kent. And that bullet did come from you, so I wouldn’t be lying.”

Clark nodded dully, resting after the pain. He wanted to tell Henderson that the policeman didn’t owe him anything. He would save lives no matter what. He didn’t help the police because he wanted to be paid, or because he wanted favors. He did it because he wanted to help. Saving lives wasn’t something to be totted up in a balance book. Superman’s help was freely given. That was the only way Clark could live with his fearsome and terrible powers. He had to use them to help.

But now, it was Superman who needed help. And Henderson gave it freely. Clark knew that no bribes, no threats could ever have made Henderson bend his strict police procedures. Henderson had chosen to aid Clark out of his own generosity and sense of obligation.

Clark watched, slowly growing stronger, as Henderson directed Lois. His partner donned a pair of latex gloves from the box in Clark’s room, and gently plucked the blood-smeared bullet from his hands. Then Henderson held open the baggie while Lois took out the small kryptonite bullet and replaced it with the lead projectile that had been in Clark’s liver. Henderson re-sealed the baggie and tucked it away in his coat pocket. Lois quickly wrapped the kryptonite bullet in a paper towel and shoved it deep inside her purse.

Lois breathed a sigh of relief when she completed the exchange. “Thanks, Bill.”

“For what, Lane?” the detective said with his cynical smile. “Nothing happened.”

“Right.” Lois shot the inspector an admiring look.

“There is a price, though,” Henderson said, as he and Lois sat down by Clark’s bed. “I want to know what *really* happened with Mazik and St. John.”

Clark shrugged. His stomach had settled down, and he could actually feel himself charging up in the sunlight. “OK. I really did go out for some food – my parents got in late last night and I didn’t have anything for breakfast for them.”

Henderson had that curious look on his face again. “Breakfast for *them*. Do you eat?”

Lois snickered, and Clark could tell she was thinking of a moment in their past. He answered Henderson just like he’d answered Lois months ago. “I don’t need to, but I like to.”

It felt curiously liberating to say Superman stuff while in his Clark identity. He would have never told Henderson his secret voluntarily, but now that the cop knew, Clark wanted to be honest with him.

“What do you live on, then?”

“Sunlight.” Clark gestured, moving his arm through the sunbeam.

“I guess it saves money on grocery bills.” Henderson raised his eyebrows. “Then what happened?”

“I heard Lois call me – “

“How far away can you hear her?”

“Far,” Clark said curtly. He wasn’t going to get into that special connection he had with Lois.

“Go on.”

“Nigel had just fired at her. I got there in time to deflect the bullet. It ricocheted off my chest. I was going to catch it, but the kryptonite’s effects hit me then and I couldn’t.” Clark lowered his voice as he confessed. “I think the ricochet hit Mazik.” It had given him nightmares.

“Ah,” Henderson said. He nodded.

“The rest of it happened just like we said. Nigel shot me.”

“With the kryptonite bullet,” Henderson said. His tone made it less of a question and more of a statement.

Clark nodded.

“I wondered why he had brought two guns,” the inspector mused. “He must have had only enough kryptonite for one bullet. He didn’t want to waste it on your parents or anybody else. That particular bullet was for Superman.”

“Yes.” Clark shivered.

“What I want to know is how Nigel got the kryptonite in the first place.” Lois asked sharply.

Henderson’s eyes went out of focus. “I remember something... when Luthor committed suicide, we investigated his living quarters. We found something very interesting in the wine cellars.”

Clark suspected where Henderson was going with this.

“We found a cage. A human-sized cage. The bars glowed the same green as that bullet.”

The inspector watched Clark carefully, and Clark knew he couldn't deceive Henderson. “Lex Luthor had kryptonite. He trapped me in that cage. I... managed to escape.” Clark said nothing about the hours of agony he'd suffered, the burns on his hands where he'd grasped the kryptonite bars to pull himself forward, the loss of his powers for days afterwards. He said nothing about the anguish he'd felt, knowing Lois was to marry Luthor, knowing that she would fall into Luthor's power, knowing that Luthor would crush her spirit.

“When was this?”

Clark met his eyes. He refused to look at Lois. “Right before Luthor died.” He heard Lois's tiny intake of breath as she put the pieces together. Clark had wondered if he would ever tell Lois about the time Luthor had held him prisoner – and if he would ever tell her how Luthor had lured him in. Clark had hoped never to have to relive those hours.

“Luthor had kryptonite. He must have had some left over after he made the cage,” Clark said roughly. “Nigel was Lex's right hand man. You do the math.”

“What happened to the cage?” Lois interrupted.

“I don't know,” Henderson said. “It's unusual, but it's not illegal to have a cage in your wine cellar.” He raised an eyebrow. “You're not going to have to worry about Nigel anymore, either.”

“Why not?” Lois asked.

“Because he's in a coma. When that dog of yours knocked him down, Lois, he hit his head and got a brain bleed. He's not expected to recover,” Henderson said. “They're looking for some next-of-kin so they can get permission to pull the plug.”

“Oh,” Lois looked shaken.

“Lois,” Henderson said intently, “as far as I'm concerned, it's entirely Nigel's own doing. He tried to kidnap Clark's parents and kill you, and he got what he deserved.”

Clark was a little taken aback by Henderson's ferocity.

The inspector must have seen it, because he addressed his next comments to Clark. “I'm an honest cop, Clark. But I've seen enough bad things to be happy when the good guys make it.” He smiled. “And you're definitely one of the good guys.”

“I try to be,” Clark mumbled.

“Am I one of the good guys, Henderson?” Lois asked.

“Yes – but you're one of the *annoying* good guys.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Just telling it like it is.”

Lois shifted. “Much as I enjoy your conversation, Henderson, would you excuse me for a minute?”

The cop eyed Lois's empty twenty-ounce coffee cup. “Sure.”

“I'll be right back, Clark,” Lois assured him. She took her purse with her as she sought a ladies' room.

Henderson watched her leave. He turned to Clark. “She doesn't give up, does she?” he mused. His tone changed. “Kent,” he said, “let me give you some advice.”

“What?” Clark asked curiously. Henderson *never* offered advice. In fact, he'd spoken with Lois and Clark more this afternoon than he had cumulatively in the entire last year.

“That book,” Henderson said, indicating the leatherbound journal that Clark still held. “Don't read it. And don't let Lane or anyone else read it.”

“Why not?” Clark challenged. “According to you, I wrote it...” He trailed off as the implications of Henderson's advice struck him. “No. You don't want me to read it because you think it's true. You think this Tempus guy is real.” Henderson didn't move. “You think it does tell about the future – about my future.” Clark swallowed. “Does it tell when I die?”

Henderson said nothing.

Clark had a worse thought. “Does it tell when *Lois* dies?”

Henderson's face was a stone mask.

“Oh, God,” Clark said. He thrust the book at the detective. “Please take it.” Suddenly the small book felt like an unexploded bomb. No, worse than that. “Please, Henderson, get rid of it. I don't want it.”

Henderson accepted the book and tucked it away in an inside pocket. There was a long silence. Clark scanned the inspector's eyes and saw a disturbing knowledge in them.

“So did I tell you I got shot?” Clark asked, desperately turning his mind from horrible speculations.

“Yeah, I heard it,” Henderson said, accepting the change of subject. “How long will you be laid up?” Curiosity flared once again in his eyes. “Actually, how fast do you heal?”

“Too fast,” Clark said.

Lois came walking back at that moment. Clark lifted his head and drank in her presence. Her heartbeat, her scent, her vitality – when Lois entered his room the world brightened for Clark.

She set her purse near the door. “What are you two talking about?”

Clark was momentarily speechless. If he said anything about the time-traveler's journal, she would demand to see it. After Henderson's advice, Clark knew that was a very bad idea.

“I was just asking Clark how long it takes him to heal from something like this,” Henderson said smoothly.

“How long did it take you last time?” Lois asked.

“Last time?” Henderson pounced on that bit of information like a cat on a string.

“Arianna Carlin shot Superman in the shoulder with a kryptonite bullet,” Lois informed Henderson sweetly.

“I didn't hear about that. A gunshot wound should have been reported.”

“I asked Lois to keep it quiet,” Clark said. “Not too many people know about kryptonite, and I'd like to keep it that way.”

“I can understand that. But from now on, you tell me these things, OK?” Henderson put the cop stare on Clark again.

Such was his force of personality that Clark found himself agreeing. “OK.”

“Right,” Henderson said. “Don't forget that.” There was a moment of silence. “So how long did it take you to heal last time?”

“Yes, how long?” Lois echoed.

“Two days,” Clark reluctantly admitted. His shoulder had healed quickly but he hadn't regained his powers for two days.

“It took me twelve weeks when I was shot,” Henderson said with a tinge of envy.

“I need your help again, Bill,” Clark said.

Henderson looked at him, surprised at the familiarity.

“I'm healing too fast. How can I keep the doctors and nurses from getting suspicious?”

“Why are you asking me?” Henderson said incredulously. “Lane is right there. She's the queen of plausible stories.”

“Because you've been shot. You know what it's like.” Clark didn't mention that, as long as he had breath in his body, he would ensure that Lois never joined that particular club.

Henderson twisted his lips. “Let me see that wound.”

Clark silently pulled aside his hospital gown. He was glad that the sheet covered him below the waist. Lois and Henderson both stared at his bare torso.

“Okay,” the detective said. Clark readjusted his gown. “It's hopeless.”

“What?” Clark and Lois spoke as one.

“You're healing too fast,” Henderson said authoritatively. “It's not too bad right now, but your nurses are going to be suspicious. There's no way they won't be.”

“Then what do I do?” Clark worried. His father had been right to warn him to stay away from doctors. Once they examined him, his secret would be out.

Henderson smiled. “I'm surprised Lane hasn't told you. Sign

yourself out.”

“I can do that?”

“Kent, the hospital hasn’t arrested you. You’re here of your own free will and you can leave anytime.” Henderson shot a glance at Lois and added, “Of course, they’re going to make you sign an AMA form – Against Medical Advice. Lois should know all about those.”

Lois snorted.

Henderson actually chuckled. “They’ll tell you you’re crazy and they won’t want to let you out. But if you keep on insisting – Lois can give you some pointers on how to do that – they’ll have to let you go home.”

“I’ll call your parents and tell them not to bother coming over,” Lois added.

“Henderson was right,” Clark said as he adjusted his position in the passenger seat of Lois’s Jeep.

“About getting out of the hospital one day after major surgery?” Lois replied. “You can do it if you sign a form releasing them from all liability?”

Clark nodded.

Lois snickered. “The best part was when the surgeon threw up his hands and told you right to your face that you were being an idiot.”

Clark laughed too. “Well, in all fairness, most people wouldn’t want to check out of the hospital so soon after surgery like that. You know, after the surgeon talked to me, he went out in the hall and I heard him talking to Kelly.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘You can’t fix stupid.’”

“There’s a lot of truth to that.”

“Then he made a bet with Kelly that I’d be back at Met Gen within two days with some post-surgical complication.”

“But you won’t be, will you?” asked Lois, shooting him a sharp glance.

“Hopefully not.”

“All better from the kryptonite?”

“I’m still a little sore,” Clark said. He adjusted the seatbelt, smoothing out his bunched-up sweatshirt. “How did you get my clothes?”

“Thank your mother for packing a suitcase and throwing it in my Jeep this morning,” Lois replied, turning onto Fifth Street.

There was a momentary silence.

“I noticed you didn’t say anything about the other piece of kryptonite, the big chunk that Jason Mazik had,” Clark said, changing the subject.

“You didn’t either.”

“Well, before I knew Henderson knew my secret, I didn’t want to say anything, and then he assumed that Nigel’s bullet did all the damage.” Clark saw Lois give a half-smile.

“I’ve got that chunk of kryptonite in my purse right now,” Lois said, surprising him.

“What?” Clark exclaimed in alarm. He looked down at the purse right between the driver’s and passenger’s seats.

“Oh, don’t worry, Clark. Your mom put it in a lead-lined bag. We didn’t want to let it out of our sight. We’re trying to decide the best way of destroying it.” She took a second to glance at him. “The bullet Henderson gave me – I put that in the same bag.” She stopped at a red light.

“Henderson really came through for us,” Clark said musingly. “I never would have thought it.”

“He told me that when the call came through about you, he pulled strings to be sure he took it. And he’s arranging everything so that there won’t be any legal issues for us, you know, what with Jason Mazik getting killed in your foyer,” Lois said dryly.

“Nigel killed Mazik,” Clark pointed out.

“Yeah, but why were they in your foyer? Why were they

kidnapping your parents? A good investigative reporter could find out a lot.”

“Fortunately for me, the best investigative reporter in Metropolis already knows the whole story,” Clark said.

Lois gave him a troubled look. “Clark…”

“What?”

“Am I really galac– “ A car horn honked loudly behind them, ruining the moment. Lois bit off a curse. The Jeep leapt forward, the acceleration pressing Clark into his seat momentarily.

“What?”

“Oh, look, here we are,” Lois said brightly. “My apartment.” She got out of the car, leaving Clark to wonder what it was she had been about to say.

He opened the door and stepped down carefully. Despite his confident words to his surgeon, he would have liked to have spent another night in the hospital. He would have liked another shot of that pain medicine. The afternoon sun continued its work of healing him, but he was far from his usual self.

Lois snagged a small duffel bag from the Jeep’s cargo compartment and came around. “Can you walk this far?” she asked, genuinely concerned. “They made you take a wheelchair when you left the hospital.”

“Yeah, I’m OK,” Clark said. “But maybe we should take the elevator instead of the stairs this time.” Lois habitually took the stairs to her fifth-floor apartment as part of her general commitment to regular exercise. When Clark had gotten to know her well enough to come over to her apartment on a regular basis, he had followed suit.

“All right.” Lois threaded her arm through his. The contact sent a thrill through Clark. They really needed to talk. He’d been thinking about it all day.

He cast his mind over the last two days. He had made dinner for her on Saturday night. He’d gotten called away on a Superman errand and had come back to find her sleeping. He had taken her home, and… the next morning, Sunday morning, she’d come back to his apartment. Had she walked back over to his place because she wanted to talk?

More likely, Clark thought gloomily, it was because she hadn’t driven her Jeep home and it was still parked over at his place. She’d probably come to get her car. And then the whole Nigel incident had happened, and Clark had gotten shot, and then he was in a hospital bed, where there was no time or privacy.

So they really needed to talk. The fact that Lois had sat at his bedside and had been with him all day today gave Clark hope. Plus, she held his arm right now. She obviously hadn’t written him off.

But was she still angry at him? Or hurt? Clark had had time to think about how he’d dealt with Lois when he was in his alternate identity, and he now knew how much he had hurt her. He hadn’t really meant to hurt her, but he had.

They stood in silence, side by side in the small elevator. It wheezed up the five stories to Lois’s hallway. Lois opened the grille gate, and gestured for Clark to step out first. He did, and she followed, letting the outside elevator door slowly spring closed.

Her apartment was only a short distance from the elevator. They came to it. Surprising Clark, Lois didn’t dig through her purse for the keys to her five locks. Instead, she knocked. Clark heard Moose barking inside. Lois’s neighbor hadn’t picked up the dog yet?

His mother opened the door. She saw Clark standing there. Her face collapsed into a teary smile. “Clark!”

He and Lois stepped in, and his mother hugged him. “Clark.”

His father got up from Lois’s couch, and hurried over. Clark stood, both parents hugging him, his mother’s grateful tears wetting the shoulder of his shirt.

Moose bounced up and down, whining and barking.

Fortunately, he made no attempt to jump on Clark.

Jonathan reached out an arm to Lois, who stood there awkwardly, and brought her into the group hug. Clark luxuriated in the touch of those who were closest to him. They were alive. He had failed in protecting them, but Lois hadn't. She had saved his life and the lives of everyone he cared about.

"Son," his father said roughly. Jonathan held him fiercely for one last moment.

Moose settled down and began sniffing everyone's pants.

"You still have him, I see," Clark said, pointing to the dog.

"Your father and I had him at your apartment yesterday," his mother said. "We walked him over here this afternoon after Lois called us from the hospital."

"I've had a hard time connecting with Eleanor and Phil's son," Lois added. "He's been at Mercy Hospital with his parents, I've been with you at Met Gen, and we can't use our phones inside the hospitals."

"I guess I can't complain," Clark said. "He did save the day." He held a hand out for Moose to sniff. Moose obligingly came over but then gave Clark a disgusted look when he realized Clark's hand held no treats. "How does it feel to be a hero, buddy?"

"Thank God he was there," Martha said. "And Lois too." She urged Clark and the others farther into Lois's apartment. "Now, Clark, how are you feeling?"

"I'm still a little sore, Mom."

"Do you have your powers back?" At Clark's quizzical look, Martha added, "Oh, Lois told us that she knows. I'm so glad you finally told her."

Clark's eyes met Lois's, and she gave him a Look.

"It was so nice to talk with her. I've waited almost thirty years to talk with another woman about my boy."

"Mom," Clark said, embarrassed.

"She's going to show me the photo albums next," Lois said, grinning evilly.

"Not the junior high school pictures?" Clark said apprehensively.

"What's the matter with the junior high school pictures?" Lois demanded.

"Lois, I was thirteen years old. I looked like a geek."

"Now, Clark, you've always looked perfectly fine," his mother chided him. Except right now, you look a little pale. Let me take a look at you." She shooed him into the bedroom, leaving Jonathan and Lois in the living area. Moose followed Clark and Martha.

Martha gestured to the bed and Clark obediently sat down. There was a bright sunbeam coming through Lois's bedroom window and Clark took advantage, sitting directly in the light. He felt that tiny tingling he got when he "charged up".

"How are you doing, honey?" his mother asked. She pulled up his shirt. "Oh. You're not healed all the way, are you?" The sweatshirt bunched up at his armpits. "Can you take off your shirt?"

Clark pulled off the sweatshirt at his mother's request and laid it on the bed. Moose sniffed it interestedly.

Martha ran her hand along his incision. "I never thought I'd see you like this," Martha said. "When you became Superman, we worried about so many things – could you keep your identity a secret, would you be happy? But we never thought you'd be shot. You're invulnerable."

"I thought I was too, Mom," Clark said softly. "But I'm not." He took her hand. "What was worse for me was seeing you in danger." He smiled proudly. "But Lois came through."

"She did, all right," Martha agreed. "You father said if you had to tell anyone your secret, you picked the right person."

"What did Lois say about, you know, me being Superman?" Clark asked guiltily. It wasn't really fair to ask his mother to

gossip, he knew.

"Not much, honey, just that you had told her the night before. She went home to think about it and sleep on it." Martha glanced at her son in such a way that Clark knew that his mother suspected there was more.

"Uh, yeah." Clark decided to leave that topic. He directed his attention to his torso, still flecked with blood and surgical disinfectant. "I could really use a shower."

Martha took her hand off his shoulder. "And I should really get some dinner on." That was his mother, Clark thought. In a crisis, her instinct was to feed everyone. "Jonathan?" she called.

His father lumbered into the room, Lois following. "Yes, Martha?" Then Jonathan saw Clark's surgical incision and whistled. "That's quite a... a setup, there, son."

Lois said nothing, but she stared at Clark's chest.

"Jonathan, Clark needs a shower. Why don't you stay here in case he needs help, and Lois and I will run out and get some dinner for us?"

Everyone nodded, mesmerized by Martha's take-charge attitude. "Come on, Lois," Martha said, taking Lois by the arm. Lois jumped a bit and tore her eyes away from Clark's torso.

"Uh, yeah, Martha," Lois said. "Let me get my keys." They left the apartment. Moose trailed behind and whined plaintively when the door closed behind them.

Jonathan turned back to Clark. "Do you need any help, son?"

"I think I'll be OK, Dad. If you could bring in my duffel bag..."

"OK." Jonathan brought the bag which contained a set of clean clothing.

Clark stepped into Lois's bathroom. He'd used it many times before, of course, on his visits to her apartment. But he'd never taken a shower there. She'd set up a special shelf in her bathtub just for her shampoos, conditioners and body washes. Her cosmetics took up the entire medicine cabinet and spilled out onto the vanity top. Clark had always secretly liked the clutter, although in his opinion Lois never needed any artificial aids. She was beautiful just as she was.

He slipped off the sweatpants and sweatshirt, and removed his boxer shorts. It didn't hurt anymore to bend over, so Clark guessed his healing was coming along well. He stepped into the bathtub and set the shower water on "hot".

The steaming water cascading over his shoulders and down his body took away much of his tension. Clark finally allowed himself to think of the horrible moments when he'd been lying there before Nigel, helpless to save his family and the woman he loved. He smiled at the recollection of Lois defeating their enemy. She was wonderful.

He stepped out of the shower spray and soaped himself up, wanting nothing more than to remove the disinfectant and blood on his abdomen. His stomach itched, and he reached down to scratch it. The surgical staples in his incision dropped out of his skin. They skittered along the bathtub floor and the hot water pushed them toward the drain, one by one.

Clark rinsed off and looked down. His unmarred torso told the tale of his healing. It was a good thing he'd left the hospital when he did. Something like this could never be explained.

He tried levitating. No go. He wasn't totally healed yet. A quick run through his other abilities showed him that heat vision was back, but deep vision wasn't, for some reason. Given the expulsion of his surgical staples, it was likely he was invulnerable again, and a quick purse of the lips produced cool air that instantly flashed into fog in the hot humid shower.

Clark felt a little better. He hated being vulnerable. He hated not having his powers. Yes, he'd spent hours agonizing over them when he was a teenager, and they still had their drawbacks at times – a recent example being Clark's need to escape from the hospital before his accelerated healing caused talk.

But becoming Superman had helped him come to terms with his alien abilities. He liked being able to see so far and being able to focus his hearing. The flying – well, that was the best part. And one of the best parts of having the powers was being able to save lives and help people.

“That’s why you became Superman in the first place,” he muttered. He was accustomed to his powers. When they were absent, he felt crippled – he *was* crippled. He hated that.

So, if his powers were returning this quickly, he was doing pretty well. When he’d been trapped in Lex Luthor’s kryptonite cage overnight, it had taken him a long time to recover. A few more hours in the sunlight should help his recovery now. Clark turned off the water, stepped out of the shower, and toweled off. A quick rummage through the duffel bag produced a pair of jeans and a loose shirt, along with socks and underwear. He dressed at normal speed.

As he left the bathroom, he saw that the beam of sunlight still hit Lois’s bed. It tempted Clark.

“Dad?”

“Yes?” His father was petting Moose, who had his head shoved into Jonathan’s lap. The dog moaned happily as Jonathan rubbed his ears.

“I’m going to get a little sun here.”

“OK, Clark,” his father replied calmly.

Clark felt a sudden rush of love and affection for this man who had taken in an alien baby and raised him. His father accepted him and all the weird things that went on around him. Clark swore that he would redouble his vigilance – so far as it was within his power, no one would threaten his father and mother again.

The sunbeam looked bright and inviting. Clark settled himself on Lois’s bed. Belatedly, he took off his shirt. He drifted off to sleep, his skin tingling as he basked in the sun.

Moose woke him. The dog barked as Lois and Martha came in the door. As Martha kissed her husband, Lois came bustling into her bedroom. She threw her purse on the bed and hit Clark.

“Ow!” He said it just for effect. There was still sun – Lois had a great western exposure in this bedroom, Clark thought, and a large window – and now he felt much better.

“Clark! I’m sorry!” Lois belatedly registered his presence. “Are you... OK?” She trailed off as she took in his bare upper body.

“I’m fine,” Clark said, wondering at the look in her eyes. “What?”

He sat up and grabbed the shirt that lay on the bed next to him. He went to put it on, and Lois said, “Wait.”

She came near him and ran a finger down his chest. Clark froze. Fire roared up inside him at her touch.

“You’re healed,” Lois said softly. “The staples are out.”

Clark’s voice choked in his mouth as he tried to reply. Lois, touching him so intimately... he couldn’t speak.

Lois licked her lips, and Clark was almost undone. Lois’s eyes widened and she put her entire hand on his chest, not just one finger. The electricity between them fairly crackled.

“Your bathroom’s in here, Lois?” his mother said brightly, making her way into the bedroom. She stopped as she saw Clark and Lois staring into each other’s eyes, Lois with a hand on Clark’s bare chest.

Martha’s presence broke the spell and Clark coughed. “Um, yes. I think I’m all better.” He went to put on his shirt but his mother stopped him.

“Just a minute, Clark. I want to look at you.” Martha’s tone left no room for argument.

“Uh, I have to go to the bathroom,” Lois said, making a quick retreat. She closed the bathroom door behind her.

Martha ran her hand down Clark’s chest as well, clucking in

satisfaction as she noted the absence of the surgical staples. “How are you feeling, honey?”

Aroused wasn’t the kind of answer he could give his mother. Clark settled for, “Fine.” He rather thought that he hadn’t fooled his mother - Martha Kent was no dummy. But she accepted his answer with a nod.

“Now, Clark, if you’re feeling well enough, maybe you could help us get the groceries out of Lois’s Jeep. That girl – her cupboards are *empty!*” Martha sounded as if the condition of Lois’s pantry was a personal insult. “We bought some things. At least she’ll be ready for an emergency now.”

The thought that Martha’s *emergency* was five extra guests at her women’s club meeting gave Clark a nice little feeling of relief. Superman had *emergencies*. Martha Kent had *inconveniences*. But his mother liked to feed people. That was just who she was. She couldn’t comprehend that Lois wouldn’t have food in her cupboards, just waiting in case of unexpected guests.

“Sure, Mom. I’m fine,” Clark said obediently. He listened for Lois – she seemed to be waiting in the bathroom. Did she want him to leave her bedroom? Well, maybe that would be a good idea. Things were awkward right now. He put on his shirt and stood up. He stood in the sunbeam and tried levitating. No – he wasn’t totally healed yet. Flight was still missing. He didn’t have deep vision. And the hearing was on-and-off – it would come and go erratically.

His mother gave him the Jeep keys. “It’s all in the back.”

As Clark left Lois’s apartment, he saw his father eyeing the takeout containers from Ciao Amicis, the Italian restaurant where he and Lois had had dinner three nights ago. It looked like his mother had picked up the “Italian Dinner For Four”. Clark smiled as he recognized the small box of tiramisu. Maybe he’d finally get to feed Lois her dessert – third time lucky?

He checked the stairwell. No one was there. He sped down the five flights, just because he could. Speed was one power he had regained. All the grocery bags in the Jeep made Clark raise an eyebrow. His mother had gone wild. Clark took the numerous bags and carried them back upstairs.

He piled them on Lois’s kitchen floor – there were too many to put on her counters. Moose came over and nosed at the bags interestedly. Lois came out of the bathroom and looked at the pile with poorly concealed panic. Clark recognized the fear that she might actually be called upon to *cook* some of this someday.

“Do you want me to put it away?” Clark offered.

“Would you?” Lois asked.

“Can you do it quickly, Clark?” his mother asked. “Dinner is almost ready.”

“Sure.” Clark smiled at Lois. She knew, now. He didn’t have to conceal himself from her. It was strange how good that felt.

He shifted into superspeed and began dealing with the contents of the grocery bags. Apparently, his mother had decided that it was her personal mission to stock Lois’s pantry. Rice, beans, pasta, oatmeal, breakfast cereal. Canned fruit, canned vegetables, canned meat, soup, beans, pasta sauce, salsa, split peas, lentils, tomato sauce. Flour, sugar, baking powder and soda, salt, spices – Clark unloaded everything and found space for it all in the cupboards.

Fortunately, Lois had had very little in her cupboards to begin with. She almost never cooked, Clark knew. She got carryout. She had over fifty restaurant takeout menus in her drawer.

He was a little worried about all the fresh fruits and vegetables his mother had bought. Lois tended to let those sorts of things become wilted and moldy. Nonetheless, Clark dutifully ensconced them in Lois’s refrigerator, automatically closing the door firmly. Her fridge had a leaky seal and the door tended to fall open unless one made sure it stayed closed.

He folded up the grocery bags neatly and deposited them in

Lois's closet. Finally, he unpacked the takeout food from the Italian restaurant and set it all on the table. He gave the food a quick warm-up with heat vision. At least that was back now.

When he slipped out of quicktime, Lois gave him a smile. "Thanks, Clark."

He liked getting a smile. People smiled at Superman but it was different. Getting smiled at by someone who knew who he really was... that was a more satisfying smile somehow.

Everyone except Moose sat at the table. He laid his head longingly in Martha's lap, having immediately identified her as "most likely to feed the dog". Jonathan said a short grace followed by, "We're very thankful that we are all here together." Eyes met and everyone nodded at this simple yet sincere statement.

Clark spooned out some fettucine alfredo. "I'm sorry you missed the Paul McKenzie art exhibit, Mom."

"Oh, Clark! I'm just glad you're OK." His mother smiled gratefully.

"It's OK, son. We called the ticket office and we were able to reschedule for tomorrow," Jonathan added. "And Wayne Irig volunteered to look after the farm when he heard that we were delayed."

"I was wondering about the farm, if I should come and help you," Clark said. He caught Lois surreptitiously luring Moose over with a bite of ravioli and gave her a conspiratorial wink.

"I don't think so," his father said. "Wayne has everything under control, and it would look suspicious if you were working so soon after you were shot. You'll just have to stay away from Smallville for a few weeks."

"Perry told me to stay away from the *Planet* too," Clark said. He didn't mention that Perry had told Lois the same thing.

"It looks like you're going to have an unscheduled vacation, son," Jonathan said. "What are you going to do?"

Clark took another bite of pasta as he considered his answer. For so long, he'd been busy. First, he'd hired on at the *Daily Planet*. He hadn't been there long, so he didn't get many vacation days. He tended to use them here and there, mostly to help his parents on the farm.

And then, he'd become Superman. It was extra, it was unpaid, and it was time-consuming. Superman had patrolled almost every day since he'd made his debut. Superman didn't take vacations.

Suddenly, the thought of three weeks off seemed very appealing to Clark.

"I'm not sure, Dad," Clark said slowly. He caught Lois's eye. "I'll have to ask Lois."

"Me?" she squawked.

"Yes, you," Clark replied. "Perry made you my keeper while I healed from the surgery. Well, I'm healed, but I can't let anyone know. Anyone but you, of course." Ideas began to bubble. "Isn't it time that you had a vacation, too? You've been working just as hard as I have over the last two years."

"Well..."

"I'm thinking of chocolates in Switzerland, seeing the whales near Antarctica, lounging on a tropical beach," Clark cajoled.

"It's true," Martha said, amused. "Lois, you know Superman. You should take advantage."

"I'll have to think about it," Lois said slowly. She chewed in silence for a moment, and then smiled as she changed the subject. "Since I know Superman, maybe I can ask his mother questions about his childhood."

Clark groaned.

His father looked on in amusement as Martha started. "Oh, he was such a sweet little baby when he came to us in that spaceship..."

"Are you done quizzing my mother about every single

embarrassing moment of my life?" Clark asked with a smile.

Their dinner was over. It had been homey, and wonderful for Clark – having those he loved best share a meal with him. They had talked for a long time over after-dinner coffee.

His parents had eaten some tiramisu, but Lois had postponed her dessert, pleading a full stomach. Martha had had Jonathan pack away the leftovers in Lois's refrigerator, and they had gotten up to go.

"Take my Jeep, Martha," Lois had said.

"What?" Clark gasped. Lois never let anyone drive her Jeep. Well, he had, once or twice, but it was a rare thing.

"I don't want you walking back to Clark's apartment in the dark." Lois was adamant.

"I could drive them," Clark offered.

"No," Lois said. "You're staying right here. Perry said I'm your keeper till you're healed. Are you healed yet?"

"Yes," Clark said automatically. At Lois's raised eyebrow he looked down and admitted, "No." She knew him well, he thought. He still didn't have all his abilities back.

"Here are the keys." Lois got up and handed her Jeep keys to Martha.

"Well, thank you, Lois," Martha said, casting a knowing eye at her son and his partner. "Thank you for a wonderful dinner." She hugged Lois. "And thank you for everything." Her gesture encompassed what words could not say.

Jonathan came over and hugged Lois too, and then his parents embraced Clark. "You can come over for the Jeep tomorrow," his father said. "Your mother and I are going to get a good night's sleep, now that we know you're OK."

Clark walked them to the door and down the stairs. He took Moose with him. "Good night, Mom, Dad," he said, hugging them once more. Twilight had fallen, and the red wisps of sunset in the west were especially beautiful tonight.

As they drove away, Clark could hear his father over the engine noise. The hearing was back! "Shouldn't Clark come home with us?"

"Oh, don't be foolish, Jonathan," his mother replied. "Those two need to talk. Lois..." Clark belatedly stopped listening as the Jeep drove away.

Pensive, Clark walked Moose around the block. Moose lifted his leg on several fire hydrants and sniffed every tree in the area. They came back to Lois's building and Clark walked back up the five flights of stairs. He felt a little uneasy. He and Lois did need to talk, and so far their record in that department hadn't been entirely good.

He knocked on her door, and she opened it and gestured him inside silently. Clark removed Moose's collar and leash and walked back to the kitchen. "Wine?" he asked. He was nervous. His parents had been a buffer. Now he was alone with Lois. The last forty-eight hours had been... interesting, to say the least, and Clark wasn't exactly sure where he stood with her. Finding that out had become of the utmost importance.

"No thanks," Lois replied. "Clark, I'm serious here. Do you have all your powers back?" She seemed stiff and uncomfortable with him.

He answered her just as seriously. "I still can't fly. Almost everything else is back."

"Then you need more sun." She took his arm and led him into her bedroom. Bemused, he followed her without protest. Lois pointed to the weak pool of evening sun that still bathed half her bed. "Lie down there."

Self-consciously, Clark did so. The sun felt nice. It wasn't as strengthening as being ten thousand feet above Metropolis at noon. But it was nice.

Lois shut the door, keeping Moose from following them. "You stay out there," she told the dog. She took a seat on a chair and addressed Clark. "You can take off your shirt if you want,"

Lois said, not looking at him. “That’ll help you recover faster, won’t it? If you get more sun exposure?”

Clark froze for just a second. The bedroom, the bed, taking off his shirt – what did Lois intend? Whatever it was, it sounded promising. “Yes,” he answered cautiously. “I’ll recover faster.” He sat up and pulled off his shirt. Lois, he saw, was peeking at him out of the corners of her downcast eyes. Her pulse rate went up a little. He lay back down, feeling very self-conscious.

“I have some questions for you,” Lois announced abruptly, still not looking at him directly.

“I’m ready to answer them.”

“Truthfully?”

Clark smiled. “I believe the phrase is, ‘Clark Kent will be truthful one hundred percent.’”

Lois relaxed a bit. “You know, when you told me that, today in the hospital, I could have done without hearing the entire Dr. Seuss bibliography recited to me in chronological order. Book by book. Who knew that Dr. Seuss wrote so many books?” She cast a short glance at Clark. “And who knew that you had read... every... single... one of them?”

“Hey, Dr. Seuss is a great author,” Clark defended himself. “He’s definitely underrated.”

“Right. I kind of liked *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* –

“It’s better if you can see the illustrations and watch how the hats get bigger,” Clark murmured.

“But I really didn’t need to hear the entire *Thidwick The Big-Hearted Moose*.”

“I have to admit that *Thidwick* is a lesser work in the Seuss oeuvre,” Clark conceded. Lois’s pulse rate had gone down, he noted. She drew a deep breath and it went right back up.

“Clark, Henderson said something about a kryptonite cage.” She wasn’t looking at him again, he saw. She stared over the bed, out the window.

The kryptonite cage – Clark hated to remember that. He hated remembering the physical agony of being so close to the poison and lying there overnight on the cold, hard floor. What had been a hundred times worse was the knowledge that Lois was soon to marry Lex Luthor, the cold calculating villain who would break her vibrant personality and turn her into his puppet.

“Lex Luthor managed to trap me,” Clark said. He’d never been able to tell Lois this before, because it had happened to Superman, not Clark. Telling her now was a curiously cathartic experience. “He called Clark and told me you were in danger, and that he had to talk to Superman about you. So I came to Lex.”

Lois looked sick.

“Somehow Lex had learned about kryptonite. He got me down to his wine cellar and a cage with steel bars fell from the ceiling around me. He’d worked out some electrical thing where he could channel the kryptonite radiation into the cage bars. He turned it up to “high” and left me there.” Clark still had nightmares.

“When?” Lois asked. She was very tense now, Clark saw, legs together and shoulders hunched, perched on the edge of her chair.

“The day before you were supposed to be married to him.”

She swallowed. “How did you get out?”

“Lex had left the key in my view but out of my reach, just to taunt me.” Lois gasped and Clark smiled grimly. “That’s the kind of man he was. Anyway, I was able to use freezing breath on a piece of fabric and turn it into enough of a hook to grab the key. I crawled out of the cage and hid behind the wine racks.”

“So all the time I was getting ready, and putting on my dress...”

“Yes.” Clark said nothing about those minutes spent in a fever delirium, hiding, frightened beyond words that Luthor or one of his minions might find him and return him to the cage.

“Henderson came to arrest Luthor and in all the confusion, I made my way back up from the cellar.”

“So that’s why Superman didn’t save Lex,” Lois said dully. “If you can’t fly after you’ve been exposed to kryptonite...” She seemed even more miserable.

Clark nodded. “I didn’t have my powers for days afterwards.”

Lois hunched in even further. “Clark, am I galactically stupid?”

“What?”

“I misjudged Lex, I misjudged you... that’s the reason I was so mad at you, really. I was mad at myself and I lashed out at you. It was easier to be mad at you than to face the fact that I’ve been a fool.” She sniffled. “Henderson noticed it. He figured you out.” A tear ran down her cheek. “You’re my partner and my best friend and you have this whole other side to you that I never noticed.” More tears came. So quietly that even Clark could barely hear it, Lois added, “I mess up everything that’s important.”

He felt a surge of affection and sympathy for her. This was Insecure Lois. Insecure Lois never showed herself in the newsroom – no, at the Planet everyone saw confident, bold Mad Dog Lois. But underneath, she had a soft center.

Clark got up quietly. He came around the bed to Lois, who now had her head in her hands as she tried to hold back her tears. He put his hand on her shoulder. “Lois.” She didn’t flinch away. “Lois.” Wrapping his arm around her, he helped her stand. He stood behind her, holding her closely.

“You’re not galactically stupid, Lois, not in the least.” Her slight form felt wonderful against his bare chest. “I worked hard at making you think I was two different people. I deceived you, really.” Her heartbeat slowed a little. “Luthor... well, I think he worked hard at deceiving you too.”

“I said no, you know,” Lois murmured.

“What?”

“When I was at the altar with Lex. I couldn’t go through with it. I said ‘no’ at the last minute.”

“I... hadn’t known that.”

“Nobody heard it but Lex and the Archbishop. I said it just when Henderson came in.” She leaned back, relaxing a little in his grasp. “I couldn’t marry Lex... because I was thinking about you.”

Clark was flabbergasted. “Really?”

“Really.” He could hear the sincerity in Lois’s voice. “Now I’m going to be truthful one hundred percent.” She stepped out of his grasp and turned to face him. “Will you go and lie down again? I don’t know if I can look at you and say all this.”

Clark nodded obediently and went back around the bed. He laid down in the sunbeam. Lois sat on the bed and then stretched herself out next to him. They lay shoulder to shoulder. She took his hand but didn’t look at him.

“When we had dinner together Saturday night,” she began, “I fell asleep at your apartment. You took me home – I found your note about that later. I woke up in the middle of the night and did a lot of thinking.”

Clark had often had nights like that. He said nothing and let Lois continue.

“I was mad at you, really mad. But... but then I started thinking about things, and how I’ve probably done plenty of things that really hurt you.”

Unbidden, a particular evening and a particular conversation came to Clark’s mind: Lois, wanting to meet with Superman the evening of the day that she’d rejected Clark’s declaration of love. She’d spoken to Superman and told him, *I’d love you if you were an ordinary man, without any superpowers*. She didn’t know that she had just turned down that ordinary man. He wondered if Lois was remembering that moment right now.

“And I thought about how you’re my best friend, and how

you're... you, if you know what I mean." Lois squeezed his hand slightly.

He nodded.

"What I realized, Clark, was that even though you made me mad, I still wanted you in my life. I couldn't imagine not having you in it." Her voice turned a little cooler. "I decided that weeks ago, the first time you got 'shot' by those gangsters. Although it turned out that was a fake."

"I'm sorry about that," Clark said. He figured that if he apologized two or three times daily, he could get a thousand apologies in within the next year.

Lois ignored his apology. "So I walked over to your place on Sunday morning. I was going to tell you that I was mad but I decided to forgive you. And that I was ready to go on to the next step." Now she turned and looked at him. "I walked into Nigel and Jason Mazik kidnapping your parents. Nigel shot at me, and suddenly you were there. You're always there." Her voice trembled. "You saved my life. I don't know how many times you've saved me and in how many ways. A lot, I'm sure."

"I never counted," Clark said honestly. "You've saved me a bunch of times too."

"I have?" Lois asked, curious.

"Let's just say that even though you didn't know he was me, Superman couldn't have been Superman without you."

"All right. I'll take your word for it. You have to tell me later," Lois teased. Then, more seriously, she added, "You got shot. I thought it was like the time in the nightclub, and you were OK, but you were really hurt."

"Yeah." He didn't want to think about it.

"Never do that again, Clark! Never get shot right when I'm about to tell you how much I love you!"

"You love me?" Clark asked incredulously, rolling on his side to face her.

Lois snuggled up to him. "Of course I do, you big lunkhead."

"Really?" Clark still couldn't believe it – all his dreams coming true, right at this moment.

"One hundred percent," Lois confirmed, smiling.

"You'll forgive me for lying to you all this time? Having two identities and deliberately deceiving you?" Clark knew he shouldn't bring up sore points but he couldn't help it.

"If you'll forgive me for saying such mean things about you when I thought you were just the Hack from Nowheresville, and the whole Lex thing, and, uh, everything..." Lois trailed off.

He looked deep into her eyes. "Of course I will. I already have."

"And you won't keep secrets anymore?"

Clark knew the thin edge of a wedge when he heard one. "And you won't keep secrets either? Because we're going to talk to each other, right, Lois? We'll actually have conversations about what's bothering us, instead of you storming off and me coming to visit you as Superman because you don't want to talk to Clark?"

Lois had a momentary expression like she'd bitten a lemon. She put on her game face, though, and then she smiled at him. "All right. We'll talk to each other."

"The truth?"

"The truth. One hundred percent, Clark?"

"One hundred percent." He stared into her eyes, and he had the impression that their relationship had just undergone some momentous change. Already he felt free. He didn't have to lie to Lois anymore. He didn't have to come up with some lame excuse as to why he was running off and leaving her in the lurch. He hoped that Lois heard the sincerity in his voice. "Clark Kent will be truthful one hundred percent."

He leaned forward, just a bit, giving her plenty of time to back away. Slowly, he pressed a kiss to her lips. She met him enthusiastically and what Clark had intended as a timid

exploratory measure turned into a long, satisfying osculation.

They broke the kiss and Clark took a deep breath. "In the interests of one hundred percent truth-telling," he began. He knew his eyes had grown dark with desire, and what was better, so had Lois's.

"Yes?" Lois asked interestedly.

"You're beautiful, you know. I could spend hours watching you." Lois rewarded him with a small smile. "When I first met you in Perry's office, I was knocked flat. I fell in love with you right there."

"You did?"

"One hundred percent," Clark affirmed.

"It took me a lot longer," Lois said shyly. "I couldn't see beneath the surface. It took me a long time to realize that you're the best and truest friend I've ever had." Mischievously, she added, "The fact that you've got a great body is only icing on the cake."

"Um," Clark said incoherently. Lois had begun running her finger up and down his chest and his brain had short-circuited.

"I think we should kiss again, don't you?" she asked.

Clark didn't answer. He just took her into his arms.

The loud buzzing of Lois's doorbell startled them out of their pleasant occupation. Clark heard Moose jump off the couch, race to the door, and begin barking loudly.

"Who is it?" Lois asked irritably. "Who would stop by this late?"

Clark tried to activate his deep vision but failed. It wasn't back online yet. "I don't know." He sighed and got up. "Do you want me to answer the door?" he asked as he put on his shirt.

He saw calculations pass through Lois's eyes. "I don't think so. You look too healthy for someone who just got shot." She got up too, and readjusted her clothing. She strode out to the living room.

"Just a minute!" she yelled at whoever was at the door. Then she groaned, and Clark automatically sped to her.

"Look at what that dog did!" Lois exclaimed.

Torn-up carryout boxes littered the kitchen floor. The refrigerator door hung open. After a minute's thought, Clark deduced that his father hadn't closed the fridge door firmly when he'd put away the leftovers. Moose had come nosing around the kitchen, discovered the open refrigerator, and had taken advantage. And...

"That dog ate your tiramisu *again*," Clark said through clenched teeth. He was bitter. In view of the recent warming of relations between himself and Lois... well, he'd had *plans* for that dessert.

The doorbell rang again, jolting Clark out of his canine revenge fantasies. Clark sprang into action, cleaning up the mess at super-speed. Amidst his rush he realized that he was levitating slightly. Flying was back!

He finished the clean-up. Lois's kitchen sparkled. Clark retreated to where he could see the front door but where he was out of view.

Lois opened the door. Moose went into a frenzy of barking. The dog jumped up and down frantically.

"Now, Moose, calm down," the visitor said. Her voice stopped Moose's barking.

"Eleanor!" Lois said. It was Lois's neighbor, Moose's owner.

"Hello, Lois. This is my son, Tom," Eleanor said, indicating her companion.

"Pleased to meet you," Lois said, shaking Tom's hand. "How is your father doing?"

"Very well, thank you," Tom replied. "He's recovering nicely from his heart surgery. They expect he'll be out of the hospital within the next two days." He spoke firmly to the dog. "Moose, sit."

Moose sat. Clark raised an eyebrow in respect. Tom seemed to have the command voice that worked on Moose. Clark certainly didn't – and he'd tried both the Clark voice *and* the Superman voice.

"I'm glad to hear that," Lois said.

"We've come to get Moose, Lois," Eleanor put in. "I can't thank you enough for keeping him all this time. I know he can be a handful. Did he give you any trouble?"

Clark laughed silently. The events of the past few days tumbled through his mind. It was as if he sensed Lois's thoughts too. The expense and inconvenience of the Double Fudge Crunch Bar episode, the fact that the dog had eaten Clark's special dessert for Lois not once, not twice, but *three* times.... And, on the other side, the fact that Moose had saved all their lives when he'd knocked down Nigel St. John. Maybe it was inadvertent, maybe it was only because Moose was chasing a thrown object, but all the same, he'd saved them.

"No. No, Moose was a good dog," Lois said, with a little catch in her voice. Clark noticed that she *didn't* say that she would be happy to take care of Moose again.

Lois found Moose's leash on the table by the door and handed it to Tom, who managed to corral the excited Labrador and attach the leash to the dog's collar.

"Thanks again, Lois," Eleanor said.

"He already had dinner," Lois said. Clark wondered if he should warn Eleanor about the Italian feast that Moose had just pirated from Lois's refrigerator. He shrugged. So far the only time that Moose had had any intestinal upset was when the emergency doctor had deliberately made him vomit. The dog seemed to have a cast-iron stomach. It was probably a good thing, considering Moose's omnivorous and indiscriminate eating habits.

"Thank you," Eleanor repeated. "We'll see you around, Lois." She smiled at Lois, Tom waved, and they went down the hall to Eleanor's apartment, Moose happily trailing them.

Lois closed and locked the door.

Clark came up and hugged her. "Thank God."

"What?"

"Now that Moose is gone, I might be able to buy you a dessert that you might actually get to eat." Clark sighed. "Do you realize that every time I tried to feed you tiramisu, Moose ate it first?"

Lois laughed. "I hate to tell you this, Clark, but I really don't like tiramisu all that much. I'm more into chocolate."

"Really? All this time I've been worrying about the tiramisu and I was wrong all along?" Clark felt stupid. He thought he knew Lois... and as in so many other respects, he had been proved wrong. She would always be a mystery to him. There would always be something new for him to learn about her.

"Well, tiramisu is OK, I mean I don't hate it... but chocolate is a lot better."

That sounded like a hint to Clark. He spun into the Suit. Lois's eyes widened. Clark remembered she'd seen that only once before, and she'd been half drunk at the time. "Shall I go get you the finest Swiss chocolates?"

"No."

"No?"

"Well, not right now," Lois admitted. "Would you mind putting on your Clark clothes again?"

Deflated, Clark spun back into his regular clothing.

Lois leaned up against him and brought her hands around his neck. She pulled his head down and kissed him.

Sensation rushed through Clark and he groaned.

Lois released him. With a twinkle in her eye, she said, "I don't want chocolate right now, because right now, *you're* my dessert." She kissed him again. "You're better than chocolate."

"Uh, you are too," Clark managed to choke out.

She took his hand and led him back into the bedroom. "Let's finish our dessert."

THE END

This fic was written for Bobbart for the 2011 Ficathon. His requests were as follows:

Three things I want in my story:

1. Clark and Lois
2. A breakthrough in their relationship. (*falling in love is nice.*)
3. Chocolate

Three things I don't want in my story:

1. A bad or negative ending
2. *see (1)*
3. *see (2)*

Preferred Season:

- 1, 2 or *alt-verse.*