

And Then There Was Light

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Rated PG

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Summary: Thinking he was responsible for the heatwave, Superman left, taking Clark with him. Now, two months later, Lois is still struggling to move on alone without both men, a feat made harder when she's kidnapped by Luthor and thrown in a cell with...Clark?

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Chapter 1

Darkness.

Pain.

A foul stench that threatened to choke me.

A low thrumming sound that exacerbated the pain eating away at me.

A sickly sweet taste that sat on my tongue like poison.

My five senses were working—they just weren't working together. I tried to move, to sit up, to look around me, but bindings on my wrists and the cramped space of the trunk I was in prohibited the actions. I was blindfolded too, I decided after a moment, not that there would likely be anything pleasant for me to see. Now that consciousness had been returned to me in all its tormented glory, I could remember what had happened.

They had jumped me just after I exited the Daily Planet building late at night. I hadn't even made it to my Jeep before they had surrounded me, placing the tainted cloth over my mouth and nose. That would explain the headache currently pounding a tempo worthy of any marching band behind my eyes. It would also explain the stench and taste that were working to overwhelm me and send me back to the darkness I had just barely emerged from.

Only when the vehicle I had been tossed into pulled to a stop did I realize that we had been moving. I shook my head, trying hard to snap myself into full awareness. If I was going to be facing... whoever had kidnapped me this time... I would need all my wits about me.

Because no one would be swooping in to rescue me.

Hastily, I shoved the thought—and its accompanying, brightly colored memories—away. There was no time for it now. I needed to focus.

When the lid of the trunk popped up, I was immediately grabbed by at least one man, perhaps two, and roughly yanked up by my arms. I bit back my cry of pain and concentrated on standing upright so they wouldn't see any need to repeat the process.

"Careful with her!" growled a deep voice from near the front of the vehicle. "The Boss said she wasn't to be hurt."

I decided it was far past time for me to pretend I was still Mad Dog Lane. "Who is the Boss?" I demanded loudly. "Why have you taken me? Where are we?"

They were good questions, questions any reporter worth their word processor and press pass would ask, but I wasn't really expecting them to answer. In my experience—and believe me, I've had a bit—villains don't normally tell you who they are or where you are after they've gone to all the trouble of blindfolding you.

"The Boss is the one who calls the shots," the same voice told me helpfully, now a lot closer to me. "We picked you up because he told us to. And as to where you are... why don't we show you?"

Well, this guy was certainly a lot more accommodating than most kidnappers I'd met. Not that the unusual mood lasted all that long. I was jerked forward to the sound of a heavy door being pulled open—the hinges squeakily protesting the movement—and then pushed from behind.

"Hope you enjoy the room," snarled a different man—presumably the one who seemed to think my shoulders were as easily disconnected and reattached as a Barbie's.

Surprisingly, I felt something pull at the ropes around my wrists, and then my hands were free. Before I could take advantage of my new mobility, the door slammed shut with sickening finality.

It's interesting how darkness has varying shades. For instance, locked in the trunk of a car with a blindfold tied around my eyes, I had known it was dark. Yet the minute they shoved me into this cell—even without sight, I had no illusions about where they had put me—I knew the difference between that darkness and the absolute blackness that now enveloped me.

For an instant, I stayed frozen where I was, afraid to move lest I fall off a ledge or stumble into a vat of boiling acid. Trust me, in my line of work, those options weren't too improbable. A twisting snarl of fear was tangled in the pit of my stomach—and not just because no one would even think to be looking for me until noon or later the next day. No, I was paralyzed with the same fear that had been gnawing at me for the past two months.

And I was sick of it.

I hated being weak, feeling vulnerable... missing him. I hated working alone. I hated being so isolated that no one knew where I was.

I hated him for leaving me to work without a partner.

Since when had I needed a partner? I asked myself caustically.

Since him.

Enraged beyond all rational thought at that realization, I tore the blindfold off my eyes—not that it helped me see anything—and beat at the door. "Let me out!" I shouted. "Why are you doing this? What do you want? Who are you working for?"

A rustling sound from behind alerted me to the fact that I hadn't been locked up alone.

I whirled to put the door at my back, squinting futilely into the shadows of the cell. It was impossible to see anything, but I had the feeling the cell wasn't very big, much smaller than the bedroom in my apartment, maybe no wider than the distance between my desk and CI—the desk across from mine.

"I could tell you... but I doubt you'd believe me."

All thought temporarily abandoned me, and it wasn't because of fear. Or not the same kind of fear anyway.

That voice... I knew it. I recognized it instantly. I had been hearing it in my head for the last two months, and before that, I had had the privilege of hearing it for real, speaking new words and phrases and thoughts only he, alive and vibrant and strong, could formulate.

After he had left, he used to call to talk to me, usually only for five or ten minutes because that's all I'd allow. They had been stilted conversations, made awkward by my anger and his... I'm not sure what his emotions were. I never really took the time to ask.

I had preferred the postcards coming from all different corners of the world. They had always boasted a note that tied back to something he knew about me, subtle reminders of the unique partnership that had been ours for such a short period of time. And though I hated the notes for those reminders and the feelings they stirred up within me, I also savored them because I could take them out and touch them and look at them. They were tangible while the phone calls had been transient and elusive, always leaving me feeling as if I had lost another chance.

But both the phone calls and the postcards had eventually dwindled away and stopped. I hadn't heard from him in a month—four weeks, one day, and fourteen hours... well, fourteen hours since I had left the Daily Planet. I wasn't sure how much time had passed while I

was unconscious.

Still, I thought in outrage, those little moments of communication were supposed to have come to a halt because we had drifted apart or because he had met someone else to make perfect cups of coffee for and guide to her destination with a gentle hand on her back and listen to her ramble about whatever tangent she liked and back her wild schemes even when he didn't want to and...

It wasn't supposed to be because he was locked in a dark cell, kidnapped by dangerous men.

It wasn't supposed to be because I hadn't even thought to make sure he was all right.

It was impossible. I refused to believe it.

But it was his voice.

"Who?" I finally asked, my voice ragged and hoarse. I wasn't even sure what I was asking, or why I asked it. Though I didn't care to admit it, I think I just wanted to hear his voice again.

"Luthor."

That was not at all what I had been expecting.

I blinked. "Luthor what?"

The faint chuckle brought light to the cell. I know that sounds stupid and clichéd and impossible, but it's true. His smile had always warmed my heart, and now it did the same for this black cell. A little bit of my past self, shriveled and cold and buried for a while now, actually stirred and brightened.

"You asked who had you kidnapped. I said it's Luthor."

"You think Lex is the Boss?" I asked, then winced to hear the skeptical note in my own voice.

"I said you wouldn't believe me." There was not even a hint of smugness in that I-told-you-so, and while it might have been because we were both locked in a cell with no quick hope of escape, I was certain it was really because he had never known how to gloat. Not once when my hunches had been wrong or my lead had been flawed or my sources had lied had he ever said "I told you so." Not once when his hunches had been right and his lead had played out and his sources had come through for us had he ever said "I told you so." In fact, I was pretty much convinced that he had never learned those words.

"What are *you* doing here?" I held my breath as soon as the haughty question was uttered.

"The same thing as you, I expect," he replied, and I almost broke down and cried right then to hear that familiar teasing note in the voice I had so missed. The postcards had been silent and the phone calls had been too rushed or stilted to produce the warm, jesting tone I had so longed to hear.

But Lois Lane did not cry, at least not in front of partners who had lied to her and then deserted her.

"I meant," I enunciated clearly, as if irritated with him, "why did the Boss want you kidnapped? If Lex really is the Boss, I know why *I'm* here, but what have you done to make him mad?"

"You've made Luthor mad?" The concern evident in that distinctive voice did make a tear slide down my cheek, but he didn't have to know that—sometimes, a bit of darkness came in handy. He was the one who had left; he didn't need to know that I had missed feeling as cherished as I did whenever he fussed over me.

"I've been investigating him," I said with exaggerated casualness.

There was stunned silence. It continued so long that I had to say something, *anything*, just so he would speak to me again and prove this wasn't all a delusion brought on by stress and exhaustion and grief.

"For the past month, I've been following some leads that might tie Lex to the underworld leader. There was a pheromone compound that made people go bonkers with love, and it was funded by Lex Labs. Even though it was only released on a couple secretaries and a fencing instructor in Lex Tower before the police managed to nab the culprit, it made me start thinking about how many crimes can be tied to Lex in some way or another. But I first thought of it because of the nuclear—" I cut myself off abruptly. I wasn't ready to talk about that, especially not to him.

"Do you remember the Smart Kids?" he asked after a moment.

I frowned. "Yes. That's when you first mentioned your suspicion of Lex."

"Why are you calling him Lex?" There was a tinge of irritation in his voice, and I bit back a smile. Odd, I couldn't help but think. For the past two months, I hadn't smiled at all, and I hadn't dared start weeping. Now, only moments after coming face to face—or, well, nearly enough—with him, I had done both.

"What am I supposed to call him?" I retorted.

"Why don't you call him the Boss?" he snapped back.

"I don't have proof yet," I stated defiantly. "Weren't you always the one who said we shouldn't decide anything until we had proof?"

"I have proof."

The quiet claim turned me mute. I pushed my hands against the door behind me, soaking in the chill of its surface to counter the warmth he offered me, vaguely realizing that I was still holding the blindfold in my right hand.

"Luthor blew up that building to test Superman right after his debut," he continued. "He forced those two suicide jumpers to take their leaps. He was the one behind the cyborg boxers. He was in league with Toni Taylor and used her Toasters to buy up the land he wanted. He funded, authorized, and was directly involved in the Mentamide 5 experiments on innocent children. He killed Commander Laderman, Samuel Platt, Antoinette Baines, Dr. Carlton, Max Menken, Thaddeus Roarke, and Congressman Harrington, and those are just a few of the skeletons in his closet."

"And you have proof of all this?" I asked suspiciously. I don't know why. I had been investigating Luthor myself; I was certain his hands weren't nearly as clean as he pretended they were. In fact, just this morning I had told Perry I thought Luthor was working with the Boss. So I really wasn't sure why I pretended I didn't believe it now.

Actually, I did know. I didn't want him to think he could just slide right in and write the story I had been working on for almost four weeks. He wasn't my partner anymore. He had given up that right. I didn't need him or his proof.

"I have eye-witnesses," he said quietly, and for the first time, I registered how weak his voice sounded. At first, I had been too overwhelmed at hearing it again to notice. Now, I could tell that though the voice was everything I had remembered it to be, it was also exhausted and...pained.

Before I even realized what I was doing, I had taken two steps away from the door and moved toward where his voice had been emanating from. Two steps more, feeling him at my feet, and I knelt beside him. I hesitated briefly before reaching out...and then I touched him. No matter how I fought to restrain it, I couldn't stop my sharp intake of air.

For the first time in two months—two months, four days, and some unknown number of hours—I was touching Clark Kent. What had once been an everyday occurrence had now become a luxury beyond words that stunned me with its power to strengthen the hidden me who had been buried very deeply beneath my bitterness and loneliness.

He gasped too, but I didn't think it was in surprise or pleasure. An instant later, when my hands informed me that he was lying slumped against the corner of the cell—he, the perfect gentleman, who had risen to his feet any time I entered a room or neared his desk—I knew his gasp had to be more of pain than anything else.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked. All suspicion and skepticism had vanished from my tone, leaving horror and fear in their place.

"I don't feel well," he said reluctantly.

"Don't feel well?" I repeated, my hands falling into my lap as if burned. "What do you mean you 'don't feel well?'"

"I...don't really know how to explain it. I feel...weak. And disoriented. And ordi—" He stopped and swallowed audibly.

"Clark..." It was the first time I had allowed myself to say his name, and I had to pause and savor the feel of it in my mouth. "How long have you been here?"

“I don’t know.”

I choked back an aggravated sigh. “Has it been hours? Days? Weeks?”

“Days,” he answered, then wavered. “Or... maybe weeks. I’m not really sure.”

“You’re not sure?” I wished I could stop repeating everything he said, but there was a cold lump choking me and weighing heavily in my stomach. A lump that made me blink rapidly and swallow back sobs. I hadn’t spoken to him in a month—a very long month. “How can you not be sure? How often do they feed you?”

“Uh... well, they d—uh, not very often.”

“What’s wrong with you?” I held my breath as I waited for his answer. My tentative probing hadn’t found any blood, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t injured. And if it really had been weeks, I wasn’t sure how much longer he could go without visiting a hospital. How long did it take to die of malnutrition anyway?

“Uh... they keep... dosing... me with... something. Something bad.”

“Dosing you?” There I went again, repeating him. But how was I supposed to make any sense out of his answers? He wasn’t telling me anything! “Something to make you talk?”

Or, I thought suddenly, something to make him compliant? Something to keep him weak and disoriented and unsure—and completely unlike the sharp, intelligent man who had not only been partnered with me but had actually kept up with me? The idea that this drug might actually be rewriting his personality made me almost mindless with panic, so I ignored it.

“Are they trying to find out who your witnesses are?” I asked. “Clark, what do they want from you?”

“I don’t know!”

I stilled. I had never heard Clark sound so... defeated. Even when he had told me goodbye and walked away from me, he hadn’t sounded so worn and tired and despairing. In fact, I hadn’t even been aware Clark knew what despairing meant.

“He just comes and... taunts me. He gloats. And he... doses me with the... stuff. He never asks me anything. He never tells me anything. He just... he just keeps me here. He says it’s...”

“What does he say?” I whispered, not sure I really wanted to hear the answer. Or think too hard about who the “he” was. I had dated Luthor a couple times, after all, before he had dumped me in favor of his fox-like personal assistant. I had liked him, or at least felt drawn to him. Just how bad was my luck with men anyway?

“Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

My breath caught in my throat when I felt his hand reach out and cover mine, so solid, so warm, so... there.

My emotions had gone through some pretty violent fluctuations concerning Clark Kent. At first, I had been too busy trying to save Superman to really spare too much thought to my partner’s absence. Then, when Superman had left Metropolis as well, I had figured that the superhero’s absence would cut so much more deeply, and it was, after all, more prominent. But as I had faced day after day of that empty desk taunting me and the work I had to do on my own without Clark’s teasing remarks and cheerful countenance and small touches, I had been startled to realize that I missed him.

Lois Lane missed Clark Kent.

Instantly, I had been furious. How dare he leave me alone? He was the one who was all for the partners idea, so why had he abandoned me? How could he side with Superman over me?

Gradually, as the phone calls grew more awkward due to my sharp replies and cold shoulder, I had realized that I wasn’t angry so much as I was hurt. I couldn’t understand why he had felt the need to abandon me. Sure, Metropolis had treated its resident superhero badly. Sure, we shouldn’t have tossed Superman out just because of a bit of unseasonable heat. But couldn’t Clark have stayed with me? Couldn’t he have gotten past his hurt and offense on Superman’s behalf and stayed... for my sake?

When apathy, anger, and hurt had all passed, I had finally settled on confusion. Clark had always confused me when he was present;

why should his absence be any different? I didn’t know why he had left so suddenly, or why he had lied about his reasons for leaving, or even why he had started traveling the world again instead of becoming the editor of the small town paper as he had said he would. Above all, I didn’t know why I felt as if he had taken the important parts of me when he left, packing them up along with his belongings in that box he had carried as he walked away from me.

All I had known was that I missed him. And I wanted him back.

And now, unexpectedly, completely out of the blue, he was right beside me. It was almost more than I could comprehend after the day I had had.

“Lois,” he murmured, and the last of my composure fled, shattered by the sound of that beloved—well, appreciated was probably a better word—voice saying my name in just the sweet, intense way he always said it. “I missed you.”

“Oh, Clark,” I stammered. “I... I missed you too.”

He opened his arms, and I fell into them, leaning against the broad chest I had leaned against so many times before and feeling the spasmodic shudders that shook his frame. But no matter how much he trembled or how weak he was, I knew he could hold me together in his freely offered embrace—knew it because he had done it for me before.

And despite our time apart and whatever had been done to him during his time in this cell, he didn’t fail me now.

Chapter 2

Lois Lane does not fall apart, though, certainly not during a mere kidnapping, so after a while, I pulled myself free of his arms and stood. “There has to be some way out of here,” I declared before restlessly moving to examine the confines of the cell by feel.

“If anyone can find it, it’s you,” he said, his voice a bit stronger and more confident.

I ignored the way his words made me feel and continued my blind exploration. The door was made of some kind of metal, heavy and cold and impossible to budge. The walls were brick. If I believed some of the movies I’d seen, we could possibly pull enough bricks from the wall to make a small exit hole; I was of the opinion that that option was pretty far-fetched.

“I can’t believe this is happening!” I exclaimed when I failed to find anything else in the cell except for a bucket in the corner that I refused to think about. There was no cot, no sink, no lock to pick or window to climb out of, nothing save four walls to keep us caged. “Why does this always happen to me?”

“Because you refuse to let the world go by without trying to make it better.”

I froze at the words and turned to look in Clark’s general direction. Simply hearing him had been enough at first, but now I wanted desperately to see him. It had been too long since I had been able to look into his silvery-brown eyes and see his lips curve up in that irresistible smile. Except I had resisted it, quite often in fact. Mad Dog Lane did not melt into a puddle whenever her farmboy partner smiled at her.

“That makes you a lot of enemies,” he added, perhaps thinking I hadn’t understood his comment. But I had understood it. I understood that even though I had let him walk away from me, he still thought the world of me. He thought better of me than even I did, and that was saying something. Or it used to anyway. Now, almost everyone thought better of me than I did.

An image of Superman was seared into the backs of my eyelids, mocking me whenever I was tempted to think too highly of myself.

“Lois?” I realized from the rustling noise that followed the sound of my name that Clark was pulling himself to his feet.

“Don’t!” I rushed to his side, slipping my arm around his waist when I heard him stumble and fall against the wall.

Horror assailed me. I knew the feel of Clark. He had walked me to my place a hundred times, and a few of those times, he had tentatively slipped an arm around my shoulders, relaxing only when I would signal my acceptance of the gesture by looping my arm around his

waist. Due to an embarrassing accident, I knew what Clark looked like without his square suits, and he felt much the same way—solid, steady, firm.

Or he had.

I suddenly knew that no matter how much I had tried to deny it, Clark had been held here for an entire month. He must have been in order to lose so much body mass, to lose so much of his strength.

“Are you all right?” he asked tenderly.

I closed my eyes, suddenly glad he couldn’t see me and the tears sliding down my cheeks. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. He wasn’t supposed to be hurt and locked away. Clark had always seemed too... happy, too cheerful, too full of hope to be confined in one place. His strength had seemed inexhaustible, surviving even after a whole night’s stakeout filled with my grouchy retorts and subtle put-downs.

Why hadn’t I thought to check up on him? Why hadn’t I realized that he would never stop calling me and sending me letters unless I asked him to? Why had I allowed myself to forget just what type of person Clark was? Why had I held onto my anger that he had gone to find happiness without me, helping Superman wherever he had ended up and stealing my place at the superhero’s side?

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, leaning my head against Clark’s chest and trusting his depleted strength to hold us both up. Because even then, even embracing him and feeling how much he had lost, I couldn’t imagine Clark not being strong enough for me. He had always been there, always caught me, always backed me up. He had done such a great job of being my partner that I no longer knew how to work without one. That was why I had spent the past two months scarcely sleeping at all, pushing myself harder and harder to find the stories that used to appear all over the place, to write the articles that used to almost write themselves, to prove to myself that I didn’t really need Clark Kent, the hack from Nowheresville that had subtly changed my life.

“What are you sorry for?” His fingers curled under my chin and tilted my head up, though why I couldn’t say. It’s not like he could see me.

“I’m sorry I let you go. I’m sorry I didn’t look for you. I’m sorry we’re here in this mess.”

“Hey, it’s not your fault.” His thumb gently wiped away a tear, and true to form, since it was him, I didn’t even mind that he knew I’d been crying. “I had to leave, Lois. It was...nobody could have changed that. And how were you supposed to know I’d been kidnapped? That’s your department, after all.”

A watery chuckle escaped me, and I tightened my arms around Clark and buried my head in the cleft between his shoulder and his neck. When his hand tenderly cupped the back of my head, I wondered if I was dreaming. I had played so many scenarios in my head over the past weeks—each one a more improbable reason for him to return than the last—that it now seemed impossible for this to be real.

Even trapped in a dark cell with no civilized bathroom in sight, this moment was better than what my life had become when both Superman and Clark Kent had walked out of it.

“You’ve obviously picked up bad habits while you’ve been gone,” I managed to say with a hint of the teasing tone Clark seemed to produce so easily. “You shouldn’t have left.”

Only when the words had fallen into the still air around us and sat there trembling for a long moment did I realize that I had done it again. Clark offered comfort; I offered criticism.

“Not that I blame you,” I added hastily.

It was a lie, though.

I did blame him. For a while, I had hated him. He had made me need him, and then he had left me alone. Two men had promised to be around whenever I needed them, and they had both walked away without a backward glance regardless of the fact that I still needed them.

“I’m sorry, Lois,” he whispered. His finger drew a gentle line along my cheekbone, and I vaguely wondered how he could touch me so gently and surely in the dark. Had he memorized me so well that he

could still remember every part of me? Actually, he probably had; I had caught him watching me often enough with that soft, endearing light shining behind those glasses of his and making it impossible to feel creeped out by his fascination with me.

“You’re not wearing your glasses,” I observed, not even sure why I said it. It was true, though. I could feel the soft flannel shirt he wore, had felt the denim of his jeans earlier when I had knelt at his side, but though my questing hands had found the beard hugging the contours of his face, I hadn’t felt the frames of his glasses. Funny. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him without them; I couldn’t even picture him without them.

His arms tightened around me, but all he said was, “No. He said I had no use for them anymore.”

A thrill of dread curled insidiously through my body. Clark kept referring to “he” and “him” in a tone that bordered on fear. Fear...and hate. It had taken me this long to identify that second emotion because I had never before heard it in Clark’s voice. I had thought him incapable of it.

Once more, his finger trailed down my face, gently tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “I can almost see you. They’ll be coming back soon,” he told me in a voice barely audible over the pounding of my heart. “He never lets me recover too much before returning. Lois... are you sure you’re real? I’m not just dreaming, am I?”

The thought had occurred to me; I just hadn’t realized that he would have the same fear. But then, he was the one who had been locked in a cell for a month, obviously tortured if this ‘dosing’ took as much out of him as it seemed. Why *wouldn’t* he think this was a dream?

“Do you dream about me often?” I couldn’t resist asking, my tone neutral.

“Always.” The word was little more than an expelled breath, but I caught it, held it close to me, savored it as if it were a rich delicacy. His arms tightened around me, pulling me so close to him that I felt as if surely nothing could hurt me or tear me from his embrace.

That misconception lasted only until the door was yanked open with the screeching of abused hinges and Clark let out a breath that was almost a whimper. He pulled me with him as he backed desperately away from the door, his spine thudding painfully into the corner of the cell, his arms locked around me.

“Ah, Lois, my dear. I had heard you were taking advantage of my hospitality.”

I pulled myself from Clark’s insistent hold and stepped forward to meet Lex Luthor.

“And I heard you’ve been hiding quite a few important facts from Metropolis,” I said coldly.

The light that silhouetted Lex from behind didn’t allow me to read his expression, but the spread of his hands was eloquent. “We all conceal things, my dear. It’s the way of the world, and most certainly the way of big business. You should have taken a few lessons from your partner about hiding important facts.”

“We’re reporters,” I stated defiantly. If ever there was a time for me to reclaim my fearless persona, it was now, standing before my fallen partner. “We don’t hide things.”

“Really?” Lex pretended elaborate surprise. “Guess you never really had a chance for a heart-to-heart with her, eh, Kent?”

Clark said nothing, but he reached out to take my hand and tried to pull me back toward him. It was a mark of how weak he was that I was able to shake his hand away.

“Now, Lois.” Lex turned his attention back to me. I was secretly relieved; even in the dim light and pooled shadows, I could tell there was something almost mad in the way Clark regarded Lex. “If we’re going to be working together, we really should coordinate our stories.”

“Working together?” I repeated incredulously. “You’re loonier than Bugs Bunny!”

“Am I?” The sudden dangerous timbre of Lex’s voice made a shiver run through my body. “Then you will soon be joining me in that 2-D world. Nigel, bring her. Make it an irresistible invitation.”

“As you wish, sir.” The tall, silver-haired Englishman moved forward, a pistol in his right hand that unwaveringly pointed the way to my heart. His left hand reached out to grab hold of me.

“No!” Showing no sign of his previous weakness, Clark pulled me behind him and swatted the gun from Nigel’s hand.

“Ah, Kent, when will you learn?”

Clark froze. Entranced despite the bizarre situation—or maybe because of it—I looked between him and Lex. The business mogul had pulled a small metal box from his pocket and now he played with the clasp, his black eyes intent on Clark. Clark’s attention didn’t seem to be on Luthor’s words, or on Nigel as the pseudo-butler reached out and yanked me toward him; it was focused exclusively on that box. And no matter that darkness cloaked his face, I could read terror in every line of his body.

Enough was enough. I didn’t know what kind of hold they had on Clark, but I wasn’t about to let that open door be wasted. With a quick twist of my body, I kicked Nigel in the stomach and lunged forward to knock Lex down. The billionaire was too quick, though, dancing back out of my reach and jerking his head toward the cell in a commanding gesture.

Lead-en defeat almost paralyzed me when two more thugs—probably the same ones who had thrown me in this cell in the first place—moved forward. Nigel was recovering quickly, and he stooped to pick up the gun.

“Leave her alone!” Somehow, maybe because whatever was in that metal box had been removed from his sight, Clark had regained his courage. Without pausing to even look at me, he tackled one of the thugs, sending him sprawling back into the second man.

No sooner had I moved forward to help, however, than Nigel grabbed my elbow, the gun a cold, sharp point in my side. “I wouldn’t advise it,” he told me sharply. “Mr. Luthor may want you alive, but bullets don’t have to kill. Then again, why not?”

My eyes widened when he swung the gun in Clark’s direction.

“No, wait!” I blurted, flinching when I heard Clark cry out in pain. From what I could see, I didn’t think he was winning his fight. His strength had never been in brute force or street fighting; it was in his integrity and spirit. “I’ll go with you. Just... don’t hurt him.”

“A wise decision.” Nigel backed me out of the cell and raised his voice. “Mr. Luthor, I believe Ms. Lane has accepted your invitation.”

“Well, better late than never,” Lex drawled, as if two of his thugs weren’t brutally beating Clark down against the hard floor of a cell. “Asabi!”

I started when the tall Indian materialized at my side.

Lex smiled at him and handed him the small box that had stopped Clark in his tracks. “Let’s not keep Mr. Kent waiting. I believe you know how the process works.”

Asabi inclined his head and accepted the box before turning toward the cell. His body blocked my sight of Clark.

Nigel dragged me down a long gray corridor that reeked of mold and disuse. Lex confidently led my escort and me through several turns, up a set of stairs, and into a room equipped with monitors, quietly beeping machines, an odd man-sized, egg-like object that was transparent, and a vault set into the back wall—all very high-tech for the dingy warehouse I had assumed this place to be.

“Now,” Lex said as Nigel left the room, “I think you know as well as I, my dear, that there won’t be any brightly dressed superhero swooping you up into his arms in a theatrical, daring rescue, isn’t that right?”

I refused to show any emotion, refused to let him see how much the barb stung, refused to give into the tears broiling beneath my paper-thin façade. Maybe the old Lois Lane would have been able to snap back a retort, but I wasn’t that person anymore. That person had been lost with the disappearance of two men and the mysterious explosion of a gigantic asteroid hurtling toward Earth. That person had been buried along with the few remaining fragments of a crimson cape.

“Yes, well, unfortunately, there are a few other matters to address.

To wit.” Lex turned to one of the monitors and flicked it on.

Grudgingly, I turned my attention to the screen. A gasp was torn from me when I saw Asabi standing over the crumpled body of my partner. I couldn’t see what Luthor’s henchman was doing to Clark—but I could see Clark writhing in pain.

“Ah, don’t worry, Lois.” Lex put a hand as cold as a viper’s eyes on my shoulder. “He goes through this every day. Think of it as...a form of treatment.”

“Treatment?” I repeated, my voice as dry as the weather had been when I let Clark walk away from me. “That’s torture!”

“Oh, my dear, if only you knew.” The clear amusement on Lex’s features threw me briefly before I could shake off my discomfiture. The man had succeeded in hoodwinking an entire city—he could surely manage the appearance of knowing something about my partner that I didn’t.

“Stop it,” I commanded uselessly, my eyes locked on what I could see of Clark. “Stop hurting him! What do you want with him? Why are you doing this?”

“I already gave you my answer, albeit for a slightly different question.” Lex’s breath hissed past my ear as he leaned over my shoulder from behind. “I told you my goal was pleasure. And that...” He used his chin to point to the image of Clark’s agony. “That, my dear Lois, gives me a great deal of pleasure.”

“You’re sick,” I breathed out, tearing myself free of his deadening touch.

“They always say that about the true visionaries.” Luthor’s smile was as cheerful as a corpse’s and far more unsettling. “Now, about my publicity—”

“Oh, believe me, when I tell the world you’re the Boss, you’ll get loads of free publicity.”

“You see, I’m afraid that just is not part of my plan.”

“Well, it is mine!” I snapped.

“And if we go with your plan, your partner will die a very slow, excruciating death.” His eyes narrowed when he noted my sudden worry, and that same cold smile made another appearance. “Even should we make a mutually satisfactory bargain that would allow Kent to go free along with you, I still can’t have you telling the world about my extra business. So, I’ll up the ante—Perry White, Jimmy Olsen, and everyone else you care about at the Daily Planet will also die, along with your beloved paper itself.”

I raised my eyebrows. Some small part of my mind tried to warn me that I was in the middle of a dangerous situation; it didn’t do any good. Suddenly, with something to protect and an enemy to put away—and Clark where I could see him—I felt more like Lois Lane than I had in a long time.

“You’re going to hold a *newspaper* hostage?” I sneered.

“Don’t believe me? Try me, I dare you. The world may not know my true power, but you will see it. You, Lois Lane, great investigative reporter, will have a front-row seat at the exhibition of all I control. The most powerful being in the world—wasn’t that what Superman was called? Yet he is gone and I remain. No one can stand against me, my dear, not you, not your...partner, not anyone.” Luthor’s eyes devoured the image of Clark as if it were his ticket to the power he was raving about.

If I hadn’t disliked repeating myself, I would have told Lex he was insane. If I hadn’t been so terrified by the implacable purpose in his tone, I would have laughed at the very idea that he could do as he threatened. If I hadn’t been so afraid for Clark, I would have told Lex Luthor exactly what I thought of him, would have tried to trick more information out of him, would have attempted to learn his entire plan.

But Clark had fallen very still, and Asabi was moving away. Soon the heavy door with the lock I didn’t have the key to would close. And right now, Luthor was the only one in the room with me.

“Sorry, Luthor,” I said flippantly. “I don’t make deals with crime bosses.”

Then, moving as quickly as I ever had, I lashed out with a high kick that caught Lex squarely in the chest. A blow between the eyes

had him flat out on the ground, bellowing his anger. I didn't have time to look for a weapon or to come up with a plan, but then, I rarely planned these things out. Unlike Clark, I believed "winging it" was a viable option at all times.

Hurriedly, keeping my eye out for Nigel or any other thug Lex had standing around, I backtracked toward the cell. I wasn't sure how much time I had before Asabi closed that door—or how much time Clark had, period. Sick, I shoved that thought away. I couldn't lose him, too, not after everything else.

Not after Superman.

I was halfway down the stairs and only one turn away from Clark when Nigel appeared out of nowhere, that stupid gun clenched annoyingly steadily in his hand.

"Come now, Ms. Lane," he tsked. "You didn't really think you could make it out of here, did you?"

"Nigel, you are to be commended."

I whirled and saw Lex at the top of the stairs, trapping me between himself and his butler. There wasn't any good way out of this, I realized. And yet...Luthor didn't want me dead. And from what I could see, I doubted he'd be pleasant to anyone who dared defy or disobey him. Fear of his displeasure might be just enough to give me an edge.

Besides, Clark was down the stairs, not up them.

I dove toward Nigel and several things happened all at once.

The Englishman moved the gun and fired something that grazed the side of my arm.

Luthor let out a roar that froze the blood in my veins.

My foot missed a step and sent me tumbling head-first toward the ground.

Pain exploded in my body, so much that it took me a long moment to pinpoint the origin of it. My left arm stung with what felt like acid; my sides and knees felt bruised and crushed; sharp glass seemed to be trapped in the vicinity of my shoulder; something thrummed and roared inside my head.

"Now that was extraordinarily stupid. Of course, I have to congratulate you: you never do things halfway, do you?"

The cold, reptilian voice swam in and out of my hearing. The pain encompassing my body tried to drown out the sound no matter how I fought to hold onto it as a way to pull me from the beckoning darkness.

"You know, I once thought you might be the one to eventually bear the name of Mrs. Luthor. Fortunately, the incentive to court you left before I could grace you with my ring and my name. Of course...I am tempted. But no. The very fact that you have no idea who shares a cell with you...well, that seems answer enough as to your worthiness. Don't worry about your wounds, my dear. From what I saw earlier, you'll be well taken care of. That thing in the cell really does seem to have a soft spot for you. A good thing...for me. Every being, even super-powered ones, have their Achilles' Heels. Nigel?"

Something grabbed hold of my arm and pulled. I might have screamed, or maybe it was just my wounds screaming at me. Regardless, I could no longer keep my head above the sea of blackness clamoring to have me, and I fell into smothering unconsciousness.

Chapter 3

"It'll be all right, Lois. Look, your blindfold will work to bind the bullet wound—it only grazed you, thank God. And you say optimism is self-delusion; we're not that badly off. You'll see. Everything will be all right. It'll be okay. You have to be okay."

I had always hated coming out of unconsciousness. I disliked feeling disoriented and confused and ignorant of the situation. But then, I had never come out of unconsciousness to the sound of a smoky voice whispering my name as if it were the rarest of treasures and the feel of strong hands cradling me to a broad chest. If I had always woken up like this, I might have decided it was a very pleasant habit to develop.

That theory lasted until a sharp pain sliced through my shoulder

and sent lights flashing across my vision, though I was relatively certain I had my eyes closed.

"I'm sorry. There, it's done—I just had to reset your shoulder, that's all. I'm sorry, Lois."

I drifted in and out. Every time I halfway woke up, I heard Clark talking to me, his words sometimes blurring together, other times clear and meaningful. Several times, I tried to open my eyes or speak, but I could never make my body do as I wanted it to. Whenever I grew too frustrated with my inability to do as I wished, pain would shriek and scold me and I would fall back into the darkness I was beginning to despise.

I was vaguely aware that I was leaning against something paradoxically soft and firm, something that rose and fell in a comforting rhythm, something that was warm and welcoming. Hands stroked my cheek, or my hair, or my shoulder, never so insistent that I grew afraid, never so tight that I felt claustrophobic, never so impersonal that I felt alone. And the voice...the voice continued to weave a spell around me, convincing me that it was safe to wake up, reassuring me that I was not alone, promising things I had never thought I wanted yet now craved.

"Oh, Lois, please. You don't know how much I wanted to see you again...but not like this. I wish I could get you out of here, but—" I twisted uncomfortably, shaken by the choked harshness of his voice, and instantly his hand smoothed over my cheek and his arm gathered me closer to himself. "It's all right. We'll find a way out somehow. I shouldn't have left you—I know that now. I just couldn't see any other option. Superman was always in the way, and after what happened in Metropolis, there was nothing I could do to change that. Now, though...now, I don't care anymore. I just have to get you out of here. You deserve to be free and happy and safe—I'd do anything if I could give you all those things."

The flow of words continued, bathing me in their dreams of a better tomorrow and wrapping me in the security of his care for me. At any other time, I might have been vastly uncomfortable to hear the blatant emotion in his voice and listen to the dreams so carelessly exposed, but for now, they comforted me and drowned out the pain waiting for me whenever I was foolish enough to drift toward the waking world.

When consciousness finally grew so demanding I couldn't deny it any longer, I cautiously opened my eyes. Surprisingly, I realized that the pain I had been expecting wasn't enveloping me in its dizzying embrace. My left arm ached and my shoulder was sore when I tentatively moved it, but other than that, the agony I remembered from my ill-fated escape attempt had been consigned to the past. Healed by Clark's concern, attention, and words, I realized. He had always been able to affect me in ways that I swore were impossible.

But then, Superman had, too—and I hadn't even bothered to fight those feelings.

"Hey." Clark's voice was soft and gentle in my ear, and only when I heard it did I realize that his chest was my pillow, his arm was my anchor, his jacket was my blanket, and his hand was the pleasurable movement that was sliding my hair back from my face. I had never before woken up beside anyone else—at least, not unless I counted my sister—and I was startled to find that I wasn't intimidated by, enraged at, or fearful of finding him so close to me.

Extenuating circumstances, I told myself sternly. When we got out of this cell, things would be different. I couldn't afford to depend on anyone else too much, not when they might walk away at any moment. I couldn't allow myself to grow close to anyone, not when I had let Superman fly away thinking he was responsible for Lex's crime. Not when I had let Clark rot in this cell just because I couldn't be bothered to ask after him.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Gingerly, I sat up, supported by his hands, and moved my left arm experimentally. "I think I'm all right. The bullet grazed me?"

"Yeah, and you're banged up a bit. Did..." He hesitated, and I wondered at how easily I read him despite the blackness hiding him

from me. I could practically sense his discomfort, his uncertainty, and his overwhelming concern. “Did *he* hurt you?”

“I tried to get away,” I said succinctly. “The stairs weren’t happy when I dived down them to escape Nigel’s bullet.”

“Oh.” The word conveyed a wealth of emotion, too much for me to dwell on without a cup of coffee.

“How long have I been out?”

“I don’t know. They haven’t come to dose me again yet, so it’s been less than a day. Maybe only six or seven hours.”

“That long?” I asked, surprised despite myself.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he pressed, and the tenderness apparent in his voice made me remember in greater detail all the things he had murmured while thinking I was unconscious. Suddenly uncomfortable, I shifted on the cold ground, inexplicably discomfited when his hand warmed my back in a supporting gesture.

“I’m as fine as I can be after being kidnapped and shot,” I said with a shrug he couldn’t see and forced myself to rise to my feet, clutching his jacket to keep it on my shoulders. Again surprisingly, I wasn’t assailed by the dizziness I halfway expected. What was it about Clark that made everything turn out so much better than reality dictated it could? Not that there was anything good about our situation now, I realized dismally.

“They left some food a while ago,” Clark said softly, making me feel guilty for my false bravado. All right, I admitted silently, so he had left me, but we were in a bad place, and I should be more concerned about how we were going to get out of here before Lex decided to dose him again rather than making Clark think I had done perfectly all right without him as a partner.

“Some food?” I belatedly realized that I had fallen back into the habit of repeating everything he said.

“It’s by the door.”

When I bent and cautiously reached outward toward the cold metal, I felt a bowl of something, room temperature, not nearly as heavy as it probably should have been for a full day’s meal. A bit more blind questing revealed a cup of water next to it. I picked them both up, then frowned and turned back in Clark’s direction. The pitch blackness around us made it seem as if we were enveloped by a void, a tiny hole in both time and space that was ours alone.

“They already cleared away your dishes?” I knew the answer, of course, but I wished desperately—for his sake—that I was wrong.

He was silent for a long moment before saying, “That was all they gave us.”

I didn’t know what to say. There were so many options. I wanted to ask him how, as malnourished as he obviously was, he had been able to leave sustenance lying around while he took care of me. I wanted to demand that he stop being so noble and self-sacrificing so that I didn’t have to feel so guilty for leaving him in this cell for so long. I wanted to break down into tears and hug him and tell him that I would take care of him from now on.

But I didn’t do any of those things. Instead, I walked back over to him, gingerly sat down beside him, and said, very slowly and more gently than I had thought myself capable of: “Then we’ll share.”

“Lois, I—”

“You’re not going to go all macho on me, are you?” I questioned, a warning note in my voice.

“No,” he replied meekly. A wise man, I thought with satisfaction; that was something else about him I had missed—his ability to know when to agree with me.

“You eat first,” I insisted.

It was harder than it seemed just to hand over the bowl. The complete darkness that surrounded us, the way Clark’s hands were trembling uncontrollably, and my own awkwardness with the whole situation—it all made the trade-off complicated. But eventually we managed it, and I listened closely to make certain Clark really was eating whatever was in the bowl.

“I know why you wanted me to eat first,” he said after a moment.

“Why’s that?” I tried, unsuccessfully, to peer through the darkness

and make sure he really was eating. Though I still hadn’t caught a good look at him in the light, his hug and the way he had held me as I slept had provided proof enough that he needed the food a lot more than I did.

“You just wanted to make sure there were no adverse side effects to eating it. Kind of your own personal taste-tester.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that teasing note in his voice, the one I would swear I’d hate and yet loved. “That’s right, Kent. And how are you feeling? Any stomach twinges? Choking? Signs of death?”

“No,” he said thoughtfully. “I think you’re safe to eat it.”

“Really?” Accepting the bowl when he handed it back to me, I dubiously used a finger to scoop out a bit of what felt kind of like the oatmeal I cooked and stuck it in my mouth. Immediately, I gagged and had to fight not to spit the food back out. “Yuck!” I exclaimed. “How did you eat this? And you claim this *isn’t* poison?”

“I guess I have a strong constitution,” he said, and I frowned at the hollowness apparent in the tone of his voice.

“Well.” I forced a cheerful tone into my voice—luckily for me, undercover work developed good acting skills. “You must. You’ve actually managed to choke down some of my cooking before.”

“All in the line of duty,” he replied. This time, it didn’t take a mind-reader to realize why he sounded so wistful. Even my cooking and the most dangerous story we had ever chased had to be better than our current predicament.

No matter how awful the oatmeal—or whatever it was supposed to be—tasted, I forced myself to choke back the little bit Clark had left. From what I could feel in the bowl, I was pretty sure he had eaten at least half of it. If I had thought I had a chance of convincing him, I would have tried to make him finish the entire bowl, but I knew Clark was far too chivalrous to ever let me get away with it.

“Here.” I held out the cup of water after washing down the last of the oatmeal. Clark accepted the cup and took a few sips before handing it back to me. “Are you sure you don’t need any more?” I asked, surprised by how little he had drunk.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I don’t need much water.”

“What *are* they dosing you with?” I choked out through sudden dread, abruptly reminded of the awful agony he had clearly been in when I’d seen him in that surveillance video. And if it was stealing his appetite from him... terror suddenly ruled my tongue. “It can’t be good for you! What if it’s killing you?”

“It is,” he told me, his voice perfectly even, betraying no horror at the implications of his own remark. “But Luthor will make certain he doesn’t give me enough to permanently end it.”

The resignation and hatred in his tone almost deafened me, freezing me to the spot of ground on which I sat. Finally, I swallowed to work some moisture back into my mouth and leaned forward. “That’s not what you want, is it, Clark? You’re not giving up, are you?” My own hands trembled almost as much as his as I blindly reached out toward him and clutched folds of his ragged shirt.

“No,” he said quietly. He placed his reassuring hands over mine, pressing them closely to his chest. “Maybe I was before you came. But now... we have to find a way to get you out.”

“I wish Superman were here,” I murmured, clenching my hands into fists beneath his soft touch. “He could get us out.”

Clark withdrew his hands and slowly stood. When he spoke, I could tell that he had his back turned to me. “I wish he were here too, Lois. But he’s not.”

I felt as if he had hit me. It wasn’t the words, or even the fact that he had his back to me—no, it was the awful, crushing disappointment and—humiliation?—evident in his voice. A moment ago, I had marveled at how easily I read him in the darkness; now I wished I could understand what I read. But I couldn’t. It was as if he spoke in a foreign language, the words familiar but incomprehensible to me. Or rather, the words were intelligible, but the motive and emotion behind them baffled me.

“Clark—” I was interrupted by the sound of the door opening and a wash of jagged light that split our cell into bleak shards and stabbed

knives of agony into my deprived eyes.

Jumping to my feet, I moved to stand between the silhouette in the threshold and Clark. I didn't want to see him writhing in pain again, didn't want to feel the madness emerge from behind his compassionate demeanor, didn't want to hear him making those small exclamations of pain. His hands on my waist, trying to pull me back with him, sent a rush of fond affection through me. He was always thinking of me, always trying to protect me, always there for me. Well, this time, I determined, *I* would be there for *him*.

"What do you want?" I questioned harshly.

The silhouette stepped forward and resolved into Luthor. Behind him, a larger form moved into view—I guessed it to be Nigel.

"Oh, I think we've concluded *our* discussions, Ms. Lane." Lex cocked his head slightly as he looked behind me. "I've come to invite Mr. Kent to talk about a business proposition. I think you'll be very interested in hearing what I have to say, Clark."

"No." My denial was useless. Even assuming we had a choice in the matter, I knew it wasn't my decision. And we didn't have a choice at all. The box Lex pulled from his pocket, the gun held in Nigel's hands, the thugs doubtlessly waiting outside the doorway—it all added up to a big fat no-win situation.

Clark's hands fell away from me as he slowly moved toward Luthor. I wanted to grab him back and protect him, particularly when the light revealed that his shoulders were rounded in defeat. But I was powerless, and so Lex took Clark's arm and led him out of the cell. When Clark became nothing more than a shadow, limned in cold, merciless light, I took an impotent step forward only to have the door slammed in my face.

"Clark!" I whispered.

There was no response.

I tried to keep track of the time, but it was useless. Though I still wore my watch, I couldn't see it. That seemed to be the story of my life: things I needed were right next to me, but I could never see them. They were always just out of reach, just out of sight, just out of my understanding. And thus, out of my life. Superman was the only thing I had seen and understood and tried to grasp... and that hadn't turned out well.

Squeezing my eyes shut against the memories of the unbelievable superhero, dreading the inevitable conclusion to those thoughts, I paced back and forth. When I could find no other alternative, I put the bucket to good use, glad the surveillance camera Luthor used had been lit only by the light outside the cell and reluctantly thinking that Clark's absence had one advantageous benefit.

It was surely an hour before I heard voices outside the door again, though I grudgingly had to admit that it might not have been that long. Regardless, it seemed an eternity since Luthor had led a cowed Clark away, and I was terrified about what shape my partner would be in when they returned him to me.

If they returned him to me.

Horrified by that thought—and its likelihood—I pressed myself back against the wall, as far away from the door as I could get. Tears stung my eyes; furiously, I blinked them back.

The door squeaked yet again as it was unlocked and pulled ajar. When it was fully open, the two thugs from earlier stepped forward. They were dragging a body between them. As soon as they had carelessly tossed Clark to the ground, they locked us, once more, in our tiny cell.

I fell to my knees, then bit back a cry of pain when my attempt to roll Clark onto his back reminded me of the gunshot wound in my arm. "Clark!" I cried, finally getting him onto his back. "Clark, are you all right? Please, Clark, please, answer me! Did they dose you again? Is this what always happens?"

"Lois?" His voice was weak, the simple word slurred almost beyond recognition.

"I'm here, Clark," I managed to say past my tears. "I'm here."

"Not a dream," he whispered, and my breath caught in my throat when his fingers lightly skimmed along my cheek. "You're real."

"I am," I breathed, turning my face into his palm. Reminded of the jacket slung around my shoulders, I arranged it into a bundle, then slipped it under Clark's head, trying to make him comfortable in one of the very few ways open to me, grimacing when he whimpered in pain as I moved him.

Clark didn't respond to my touches or further questions, and his head lolled limply in my hands. His skin was cold to the touch, almost deathly so, and the rattling that infused his uneven breaths sent skitters of terror scampering through my veins. Trying to warm him and reassure myself at the same time, I stretched myself out beside him, rubbing at his arms in an attempt to drive the chill from him.

I wanted to murmur soothing sentences, wanted to reveal dreams and stir hope within him as he had done for me, but words had abandoned me. I dealt in words every day, fashioning them into sentences that proclaimed the truth and ensured justice was served and saw that I received a regular paycheck, and yet now, when Clark most needed them, I couldn't think of anything to say. All I had was his name, and I couldn't seem to stop repeating it over and over again, as if it were a talisman that would see us both safely back where we belonged—together at the Planet.

It seemed to take forever before his skin warmed a bit and his breathing steadied. He moved to wrap his arms around me just as he had done so many times before, and yet... and yet this time, his embrace seemed to me to be more of a cry for comfort than a reassuring gesture.

From somewhere deep inside me, I dredged up a few words to give him. "It'll be all right, Clark," I said, and hated that the unsteadiness of my voice made me sound uncertain, tainting the gift of my assurance.

"I wish I could save you," he told me in a pale voice, almost childlike in his simple honesty. "I wish I could be Superman for you."

"It's all right," I told him even though it wasn't. Clark's selfless wish only served to remind me how much I had to answer for.

"You're crying!" The surprised note in his strained voice was my undoing. The tears that had slipped past my control turned into full-fledged sobs. "Lois, please, please, don't cry."

Clark's plea and the way he pulled me into a clumsy hug despite his own weakness and pain only made me weep harder. Lois Lane didn't fall apart, but I didn't think I was Lois Lane anymore. In fact, I was pretty sure Lois Lane had died two months ago and been buried three weeks ago, resting side by side with the remnants of a red cape adorned with a yellow S.

"I'm sorry," I gasped out through sobs. "This is all my fault! I'm so sorry, Clark."

"No, Lois. Shh, it's not your fault."

"Yes, it is!" I insisted, tearing myself free of his weak hold—suffocating because of the undeserved forgiveness it offered me. "It's *my* fault Superman isn't here! *My* fault he left Metropolis! *My* fault he's *dead!*"

Stunned silence was my only reply, and my sobs sounded eerily loud within the confines of the cell.

"Superman's dead?" Clark finally uttered, his voice a pale shadow without the customary confidence or concern that usually imbued it.

And suddenly the timeframe of his disappearance hit me like a load of bricks. Clark had been missing one month, his last call just shortly before the Nightfall asteroid had been discovered hurtling toward Earth in a shower of fire and doom. And Superman... well, we hadn't found his remains until almost five days after the asteroid had mysteriously changed course.

Clark hadn't known.

"Clark..." Now that I could fully explain how much of this was my doing, all my words and confessions had withered away. I put out a hand and moved it across his body until I found his brow, then smoothed the sweat-dampened hair back. "Clark, there was an asteroid. It—"

"I know that."

"Superman knocked it away from Earth."

“How do you know it was Superman?”

My hand retraced its path to rest on Clark’s brow, not surprised it felt hot since he had just asked such a stupid question. He must be even more out of it than I had thought, and I regretted my outburst. He needed me to be strong right now, not break under the burden of guilt I had been carrying for what felt like eternity.

“Clark, asteroids don’t just decide to break in two, then turn around and fly a different direction. The military say they tracked something moving at speeds only Superman could reach, headed toward Nightfall. And then...the asteroid passed us in pieces. But...” I wrapped my arms around myself, chilled from within by the gaping emptiness that had resided within me for so long now. Suddenly, I regretted divesting myself of the comfort of Clark’s jacket, as if the simple fabric of his coat could warm me simply because it was his. “But Superman died doing it. Jimmy found a crater, and all that was left were the remnants of his Suit and a trace of what forensics described as ‘alien tissue.’” “I had to clear my throat and hug myself tighter to finish. “They held a memorial service for him three weeks ago. We buried what we found in Centennial Park, by the fountain.”

“Superman’s dead.” The bleak finality implicit in Clark’s acceptance of that fact brought back my tears. “It’s not your fault,” he added, and what made it worse was that I knew he meant it.

“Yes, it is,” I said tiredly. I had tried to explain it to Perry a dozen times, even tried to tell Jimmy, but none of them would admit what I knew to be the truth. Clark, however...

I wasn’t stupid. I knew Clark liked me—a lot—knew that he had wished for more from me than I had to give him, but Superman had been his friend too. They had been so close that when Metropolis had demanded Superman leave, Clark had left as well, out of loyalty and a desire for justice and empathetic hurt. Maybe if Clark heard what I had done, he would see that it had been my fault. And if *he* admitted it...if *he* hated me, then I wouldn’t have to hate myself anymore. I could let righteous anger and defensive hurt and outraged insult take the place of the guilt and shame and regret that were eating me alive.

“Dr. Goodman called and wanted to talk to me,” I explained in a monotone voice, glad of the darkness that engulfed me in its concealing folds. “But I didn’t go. I was too busy trying to find Superman and looking through old charts of weather patterns. After Superman left and the heat-wave completely disappeared, it just seemed pointless. Yet two weeks later, it was discovered that the Lexcorp Nuclear Plant had a leak that was causing insane heat to rise from the underground aqueducts. And Dr. Goodman had found out about it. If I had just gone and seen her—found out what she wanted—I could have stopped Superman from leaving. And then when Nightfall came, he wouldn’t have had to fight it on his own. We could have helped him!”

“Are you saying it’s my fault Superman’s gone?”

I blinked, astonished by this reaction. Without conscious thought, my hands went automatically to his chest, a pseudo-embrace meant to convince him of my genuine shock. “What? No, of course not!”

“Instead of packing to leave Metropolis, I could have been investigating, too.” Clark reached out and took my hand, his grip so weak that I felt an additional bolt of terror lance through my heart. “I could have gone and seen Dr. Goodman when you were too busy, or I could have looked at the Nuclear Plant, or I could have had Superman stay a bit longer while we double-checked his responsibility for the heat-wave. But I didn’t. So it must be my fault that he’s gone.”

“Don’t do that,” I said with mock-irritation, unable to explain why Clark’s stupid argument made me feel as if a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. “I *hate* it when you throw my own words back at me and make them sound irrational.”

“Usually, you’re brilliant,” he said, the laugh that colored his tone making his voice beautiful. A laugh that was surely as much of a miracle as a rainbow suddenly appearing in our cell would have been. “But every once in a while, I remember there’s a fine line between brilliance and lunacy. And the idea that you’re responsible for Superman’s...death...is definitely insane. You were the one who tried

to save him, Lois. And for that, I will always be grateful.”

“Well, you stuck by him when no one else did,” I told him, clumsy at reassurance and comfort but compelled to make the effort. *Wanting* to make the effort...for him. “That counts for a lot.”

His hand briefly tightened over mine. “Thank you, Lois.”

“For what?” I asked.

“For being you,” he replied simply.

Amazingly, despite my recent bout of tears and the locked cell door and the desperate pain Clark was obviously feeling, I found myself smiling. No one besides Clark had ever made me feel so happy to be myself; it was as if, to him, I could be nothing greater or better than Lois Lane.

And suddenly, like floodwaters released, all my words came pouring back into me. “I didn’t feel much like me when you were gone,” I confided quietly. The void of darkness surrounding us made my voice audible, but I truly believed that even if we had been surrounded by a raucous din, Clark would still have been able to hear the truth lacing my words. “I think...I think I forgot who I was when you left.”

“I didn’t forget,” he said softly. “I could never forget you, Lois.”

“I know that now,” I replied, too little too late. “But I couldn’t forget you either, Clark. In fact, I spent the last two months doing nothing *but* remembering you. Why don’t we agree on something—I won’t leave you if you won’t leave me?”

Clark’s breath caught in his throat, and it took me a panicked moment to realize he was reacting to my offer and not choking as a result of whatever Lex had done to him. “Okay.” It was a whisper—not because he meant it to be, but because it was all he was capable of at the moment.

“Are you feeling any better yet?” I brushed a hand through his hair, startled yet again by the beard and the absence of glasses. I hadn’t yet managed to catch a good glimpse of his face, so I still could only envision him the way he had been before leaving me.

His hand turned cold and limp, as if the reminder of his living nightmare replaced his blood with ice-water. “The dosage will start wearing off in twelve hours or so.”

“What did Luthor want?” I asked, careful to use the right name.

He was silent so long that I was half-afraid he had fallen out of consciousness, but finally he responded. “He wanted me to know just what sort of life I have left.”

A dozen questions sat in my mouth like breath-mints, but I swallowed them all back. Clark didn’t need questions right now; he needed comfort. So I slid down next to him and rested my head on his chest. “We’ll find a way out of here,” I promised, responding to the hopelessness in his tone rather than the words he had spoken. “I’ve had a bit of experience with this kind of thing, Clark. Everything will turn out all right.”

Clark’s arms tightened around me, but he said nothing—no optimistic reassurance, no light joke, no caring remark, nothing. And that, more than anything else in the past twenty-four hours, terrified me.

Chilled, I pressed closer to Clark and willed the sound of his heartbeat to drive all the darkness away.

Chapter 4

“Help me stand, please.”

To the accompanying sound of someone coming toward the door, I pushed my arm under Clark’s shoulder and lifted upward, surprised by how much he weighed despite the body mass he’d lost. Apparently, a day or two without much food was making me weaker than I’d have expected.

“He shouldn’t be back so soon,” I said, more to cover the silence of terror than to say anything. My stomach had contracted into a tight ball of dread at the thought of seeing Clark left even worse off than he was now. Whatever Lex had done to him the last time had, in my opinion, nearly killed him. What glimpses I had caught of him in weak, shuttered light always showed him to be pale and sickly. I knew,

in my head, that Clark had been going through this for the last month, but I was terrified nonetheless that if Lex subjected him to another dose, my partner would end up dead.

This time, I resolved coldly, I would fight for Clark. If nothing else, I'd try to get rid of whatever was inside the box Lex had used to taunt Clark the first time he'd entered our cell.

Though Clark said nothing to my statement, I could feel his frame trembling against mine.

A terrible groaning sound issued from outside our cell, and then the heavy metal door was torn off those loud hinges and tossed lightly to the side.

My jaw was hanging open—not that I cared. My every thought—my entire being—was suddenly afire with hope. There was only one man I knew of who could tear that door off without the use of heavy machinery.

And there he was, standing silhouetted by the light issuing from the corridors behind him and shattering the darkness of our cell. Tall, proud, indomitable, larger than life, his cape swirling about him, his eyes instantly seeking and finding mine.

“Superman!” I gasped.

Clark went rigid in my arms.

“Lois.” Somehow, the light curved around his body to highlight the small smile he gave me, so familiar that my heart stuttered and my breath caught. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, now that you're here.” Without even realizing it, I had pulled myself free of Clark's tight grip and stepped toward my hero—returned to me from the grave.

“Come on, I have to get you out of here,” he said, his voice as stern and strong as I remembered it. “Clark, I'll bet you're surprised to see me.”

I looked behind me to take in Clark's reaction to seeing his friend once more, but the darkness, distorted by Superman's body, had pooled around him, leaving him cloaked in shadows, his expression a mystery.

“I can't believe you're all right, Superman!” I exclaimed when Clark said nothing, wondering if I was really brave enough to touch the caped man before me and risk splintering the beautiful dream.

“And rescuing you—just like always.” He reached out and took my hand to lead me from the cell, his flesh warm and soft, infinitely gentle as he cradled my more vulnerable flesh next to his own.

Superman was alive.

As that fact sank into my being and resurrected Lois Lane from the grave where I had buried her, I found myself completely speechless for perhaps the first time in my life.

A quiet groan from behind reminded me that Clark needed me. Reluctantly, I pulled my hand free of Superman's and turned to support Clark. He looped his arm around me almost too tightly.

Superman looked at Clark and beckoned us both outside the cell. “Most of your kidnappers ran when they caught sight of me; the rest are tied up. However, we should probably leave as quickly as possible. I don't want to risk either of you getting hurt. I'll drop you both off at the hospital.”

I looked up at my partner, frightened by his slow pace. After a month in that cell, he had to be in a rush to get out and yet he shuffled forward in tiny steps. And it wasn't only the effects of the dosing; it was almost as if he were afraid to step out of the shadows. “Take Clark first,” I told Superman.

“No!” Clark's immediate—and vehement—denial startled me.

Superman simply looked at him, his expression indecipherable. “Don't worry, Clark,” my superhero said softly, his voice as gentle as his touch. “I'll protect you—and your parents. It won't take me any time at all to get to Smallville.”

Clark staggered and would have fallen if I hadn't hurriedly braced myself to support more of his weight. “Don't,” he uttered hoarsely, his eyes locked on Superman's. “I'll protect them.”

“Clark!” I snapped, horrified by his repudiation of our friend. Why wasn't he delirious with joy that Superman was actually here—just as

we had both wished—and that he was rescuing us?

“I'm sure Superman will be busy with other things.” Clark's gaze never wavered. A message seemed to pass between him and Superman, confirming my deep-rooted suspicion that the two men had always been closer than either admitted. “Anyway, Lois, Superman's strong enough to take us both to the hospital at the same time.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” I chastised him, caught between awe over Superman's return and horrified confusion at Clark's ambiguous attitude. Once more, I felt as if he were speaking a language I should understand but couldn't, as if I were missing a vital key. “You're hurt far worse than I am, and we're both bruised. It'd be more comfortable if he flew us separately.”

“No.” Clark's arm tightened around me, and I recognized his tone. It was the one he always got the very few times he refused absolutely to let me budge him. I had seen it when he had pretended we hadn't been in my father's office, when he had turned me in at the Metro Club—a particularly fast bit of thinking I hadn't really appreciated at the time—and when he had told me goodbye late one night in the newsroom. I hated that tone of his voice—hated it because there wasn't a single thing I could do to change it.

“It's okay, Lois,” Superman offered politely. “He's right—I can take you both at the same time.”

“It's safer,” Clark added meaningfully, and I let out an exasperated breath.

“Here, Clark.” Superman held out his left hand. My eyebrows rose when I saw what he was offering my partner.

His glasses.

“You might need these,” Superman added.

For a long moment, Clark simply looked down at the frames. Then, oddly, he looked toward me, and I would have given up a hundred front page stories just to be able to brush the shadows away like curtains and see what expression he wore. Finally, he let out a resigned breath, reached out to take the glasses, and slipped them on his face. When he didn't even say thank you, I couldn't help but wonder what had happened to my courteous, polite partner.

My confusion didn't last long, though, not when Superman put his arm around me for the first time in over two months. I literally thought I might die from the excitement and happiness that overcame me.

For so long, I had been haunted by nightmares that Superman had died alone in the blackness of space, fighting an enemy even he couldn't escape from unscathed. I had blamed myself for not saving his reputation and seeing to it that he had the support he needed from the ground. I had feared that truth and justice and the dream for a better tomorrow had died with him.

Yet here he was, one arm around me and the other around a seemingly nervous Clark, all three pairs of our feet dangling as we took to the air. A hole in the warehouse ceiling that hadn't been there before gave us an exit out into the darkening skies. Any other detail was lost to me, drowned out by my hyper-awareness of the spandex beneath my cheek, the feel of the muscled arm around my waist, the sensation of Superman breathing against me, the way the air cradled me.

Superman was alive.

Later—I couldn't tell how much later—Superman descended and set Clark and me down just in front of a brightly lit hospital. I allowed my hands to linger on Superman's chest, prolonging the moment, a sharp contrast to the hasty, staggering steps Clark took to separate himself from the superhero.

Understanding hit me with the recollection of how terrified and antsy Clark had been on the plane trip to Smallville just before he had left me. Of course! Clark must be afraid of heights, or afraid of flying—was that two different fears, or were they the same thing? Regardless, I felt better knowing why Clark had been so reluctant to fly with Superman himself—and why he had wanted me to come with him. After all, he had held my hand the entire flight to Kansas, needing the emotional support.

And if he had needed it then, he would need it even more now.

I knew I should step immediately to his side, but I had made the mistake of looking directly into Superman's amazingly vibrant eyes and now I couldn't look away.

"I'm glad you're safe, Lois," Superman murmured softly as he stepped away from me, moving almost as slowly as I was. "I missed you."

I felt the smile light up my face and basked in the way it seemed to awake an answering brightness in Superman's eyes. "I missed you, too." I hoped he would reach out and touch my cheek as he had done before; that gesture had always reassured me that I, out of everyone on Earth, was special to him.

Instead, he cupped my shoulder with his long fingers. "I'll be watching out for you from the air to make sure no one attacks you."

"Thank you," I said, my voice breathless past the wide smile I couldn't erase or tame.

"Lois." Clark's voice behind me was so pained that I was finally able to break free of Superman's gaze. Hastily, even though stepping away from the superhero was the last thing I wanted to do, I turned from Superman to help Clark.

"I'll be watching from the air," Superman said again, louder this time, his eyes on Clark. "Be careful."

Clark winced then, and I placed my hand on his chest, trying to support him as best I could.

Only when Superman lifted into the air did I realize that I still had so much left to say to him. "Wait!" I called out, gratified when he paused to hover before me, an encouraging smile on his lips. "Uh... I'm delighted that you're back, but... we thought you had died stopping Nightfall. Is that why it took you so long to return? Were you hurt?"

Superman's eyes softened as he traced my features with his gaze. "I wanted to make absolutely certain that I wasn't the one responsible for the heat-wave. I'm here to help, not hurt."

A strangled sound emerged from Clark's throat, but I couldn't let Superman go without asking him the question that had been repeating itself over and over in my mind since he had touched my hand and convinced me he was real.

"Are you staying? In Metropolis?"

His eyes flicked to Clark, then back to me. "Of course. I'm always around."

My heart skipped a beat. Was he saying what it sounded like he was saying? Had he really just promised *me* that he'd never be far away?

Then, with a tiny wave, Superman blurred into the sky and disappeared. Entranced, I stared after him, unable to look away despite the rasping quality of Clark's breath in my ear.

Letting out a sigh, Clark dropped his arm from my shoulders. Surprised, I turned to him, for the first time able to see the beard painting the lower half of his face, the glasses placed over shadowed eyes, the ragged, unkempt clothes that hung so loosely on his spare frame.

The bruises marring his features.

The old, dried blood staining his shirt.

He avoided my gaze and quietly said, "I'll wait for you out here."

I gaped at him, brought back to reality with a crash that jarred me with the knowledge of how badly off Clark was. "What? Clark, you need a doctor! Who knows what long-term effects whatever they were dosing you with will have! For all you know, you're addicted to it after a month of—"

"I'm not addicted to it. And I don't need a doctor. I'll be fine in a while, once it wears off. But if you want to go in, I'll wait for you."

"Clark!" I paused and took a deep breath, suddenly reminded of how frustrating he could be. "You can barely stand up by yourself, let alone walk."

His shoulders rounded even further, and he turned away from me to take a hesitant step toward the cab stand. "I can make it."

"Clark!" I wanted to yell at him that it was okay to let other people take care of him, but he was already several paces away from me,

staying upright by sheer force of his stubbornness. I took a few hurried steps and caught up to him. "Where are you going to go, Clark? You don't have your apartment anymore, and you don't have money for a hotel."

"Then I'll go to Perry's."

That threw me for a minute since it was, after all, a rather sensible suggestion, certainly more logical than anything else he'd been saying since Superman's miraculous return. The terror that seemed to have taken up permanent residence within me stirred ponderously, and I took a moment to examine my partner. He was still making his slow, shambling way toward the cab stand, but his eyes were glued to the ground. His hands, shoved into his ragged pockets, were probably trembling, and I had no idea how he could even think past the pain apparent in his shaded eyes.

"Clark, wait!" I cried, and just as Superman had halted at my call, so did Clark. Only... he didn't turn to look at me. There was something so lonely, so desolate, about his posture and the isolated way he stood, something that tugged at me.

"What is it, Lois?" he asked wearily.

"How are you going to pay for the taxi?"

"I was going to call Perry."

"You don't have any change for the phone."

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, his voice so defeated it felt like a slap.

"What's wrong?" I demanded impatiently. "Why don't you want to go into the hospital? Why were you so abrupt with Superman—you were almost *rude*! And why didn't you want him to protect your parents? I'm sure they'll want to know you're sa—" I stopped, astonished, when Clark resumed walking away from me.

"He doesn't know where they are."

I blinked. "Your parents? Clark, Superman knows a lot of things. You're friends, he mentioned Smallville—he knows where your parents live."

Abruptly—so quickly I wasn't sure how he kept his wavering balance—Clark looked over his shoulder at me. "Did you call my parents any time during this last month?"

Unable to meet his gaze, I looked over his shoulder. "No."

Slowly, Clark faced forward again. "I had them move... once I began... actively investigating Luthor. I hid them."

"Clark, Superman has x-ray vision and—"

Once more, he looked over his shoulder to freeze me with the intensity of his gaze. "Are you saying Superman would spy on anything and everything to find out something he wants to know? Are you saying he'd go behind my back to look for my parents, knowing that doing so might put them in danger?"

"Well, no. Of course not." I hated it when he did that to me—it was so infuriating.

"Then Superman doesn't know where they are." And Clark again began making his tortuously slow way forward. Only, this time, he slipped.

I was there instantly to catch him, ignoring the twinge of pain in my arm. "Please, Clark," I said softly, even more confused about him than I had been when he had left me or when we had been in the cell. "Why won't you let a doctor take care of you?"

At first tentatively and then desperately, Clark slipped his arms around my waist and hugged me close, burying his face in my hair. "Please, Lois," he whispered in a broken voice. "I don't like hospitals. Please, just... help me get to Perry's. I just..." His voice faded until it was almost inaudible. "I need to see the sun."

Confused, afraid, I tried to give him as much comfort with my hug as he had always given me with his. And I tried to remember the last time Clark had ever asked me for anything. I tried to remember a *single* time when he had begged a favor from me. And I couldn't think of one, not one solitary request. Yet here, for the first time, he was pleading with me to help him. Sure, I didn't understand what was going through his mind. I had no idea why he had acted as if he didn't care for Superman at all. I couldn't figure out why a man so concerned

with my safety and well-being didn't care for doctors. But I knew one thing: Clark needed me. And after all the times he had come through for me, I couldn't deny him this single favor.

"All right," I agreed softly. I really wasn't sure the effects of Lex's drug would wear off very quickly or even at all, but I would go along with this until I could think of a way to convince Clark my way of thinking was best. "But if you go to Perry's looking like you do now, he'll insist you see a doctor. Come on. You can stay at my place until...you feel better."

"Lois!" I looked up and couldn't help but smile when I saw a blush putting a bit of color back into my boy scout's face.

"Relax, Clark," I said dryly. "You're hurt; I'm hurt. You're exhausted; I'm exhausted. It won't kill you to sleep in a woman's apartment under these circumstances."

I managed to convince him to sit on a nearby bench while I straightened my appearance and visited the ATM in the hospital entrance, glad I had learned to hide extra ID and bank cards on my person. The cash withdrawal would be a red arrow telling Lex where we were, but with Superman guarding us, I wasn't too worried. Besides, getting Clark someplace where he could lie down had become my number one priority.

It had occurred to me, as I was walking back toward the bench where he was slumped, that Clark had spent a month being tortured, locked away in a tiny cell filled only with pitch blackness. I had known that before, of course, but this was the first time I realized that some people—soldiers, even—never recovered from experiences like that. Imprisonment, isolation, torture...those things ate away at sanity, unbalanced stability, haunted dreams, and altered personalities.

It took my heart a long time to remember how to beat normally after I considered the possibility that I might lose Clark even after finding him again. I had to do whatever I could to help him. No matter how irritating and puzzling his present actions were, I had to be there for him.

So I got him in a cab and took him to my place even though I was convinced he would have been better off at a hospital. I unlocked the doors using the spare keys stashed behind the loose wood of the door frame and ushered him into my apartment even though I wasn't sure what to do with him once he was there. And I convinced him—mostly by brute force—to take the bed and I set up some blankets for myself on the couch even though I was desperate to call the police and Perry and the mayor and anyone else who could make Lex pay for what he had done.

When Clark was safely settled for the night, I sat in a nearby chair where I could keep a watchful eye on him and turned on the news, anxious to prove to the little voice in my head that I hadn't just imagined Superman rescuing us. I wasn't disappointed either; the news was filled with stuttered, disbelieving accounts of appearances by Superman, here in Metropolis, in England, in Africa, even in some country I had never heard of before. It seemed that, now that he was back, Superman was planning to stay and eager to assure the astonished world of that fact.

On one of my frequent glances over my shoulder to check on Clark, I noticed that he was staring at the TV, its images flickering in tiny reflections on the lenses of his glasses and emphasizing the unusual beard tracing the lines of his jaw. Utterly silent, Clark seemed transfixed by what he was seeing.

Superman *was* his friend, I reminded myself, no matter how strange their interaction had been. That was, I realized suddenly with a frown, the first time I'd ever seen them together. Maybe that was the type of friends they were. Or maybe after hearing about Superman's death, Clark hadn't been able to comprehend his friend's safety, his own rescue, and the cessation of the dosages he'd been so regularly exposed to.

Suddenly, as if he couldn't bear to see anymore, Clark rolled over, turning his back on the television.

Something was definitely wrong. Even in the cell, I had never seen Clark so broken, so lost, so hurt. Though I didn't understand what was

going on in his head, I knew he needed me. And even if he didn't, it was my style—the old Lois Lane's style—to intrude where I wasn't wanted. Curiosity—if not friendship itself—demanded my intervention.

Quietly, I padded across the floor and sat on the edge of the bed. Clark didn't move, though I knew he wasn't asleep. "What's wrong?" I asked bluntly.

His eyes gleamed in the muted light as he turned to look at me. Time seemed to freeze as he lifted a finger toward my cheek. Then, abruptly, he blinked, dropped his hand, and turned away. "I'm just tired, Lois."

The way he said my name—caressed it—made me determined to stay at his side till I knew what was going on. "I know something's wrong. How much pain are you in right now?"

"I'm feeling better."

I snorted; sarcasm was safer than despair. "Anything is 'better' than what you were feeling. Can I get you something to eat? You must be starving."

"I'm not really hungry." He paused, then said, almost desperately, "Do you know how long it will be before the sun comes up?"

I frowned at the windows and their view of Metropolis's night. "About seven or eight hours, I'd guess. Why?"

He was silent so long I thought he wasn't going to answer, so I was startled when he conversationally said, "I'd like to see the sun again."

It must be a farmer thing, I thought with an inward shrug. Or maybe his body was craving Vitamin D, or whichever vitamin it was the sunlight gave you. "Well," I said, "I can't make the sun rise any faster, but is there anything else I can get you?"

"Would you mind...turning off the TV?"

I frowned yet again. Frowning so often was another aspect of working with Clark that I'd forgotten. Of course, I also smiled more when he was around so maybe it evened out in the end.

When I flicked off the television, Clark's body relaxed slightly, as if the news of Superman had been bombarding him with pain. "Thank you, Lois."

"Do you want to call your parents? I'm sure they're worried about you." Unlike me, they would have known something had to be wrong for their son to seemingly drop off the edge of the world.

"No." He swallowed, looking so fragile I almost cried. Clark wasn't supposed to look fragile. Seeing him vulnerable was just...wrong. "I can't risk leading him to them."

"Clark." I once more sat on the edge of the bed and tentatively laid my hand on his shoulder, wishing he would look at me. Even when he was at his most infuriating, there was something comforting about his eyes being fixed on me. "I'm sure Le—Luthor is too busy trying to make it seem he was never at that warehouse and covering all his tracks to worry about your parents right now. He's got to be trying to figure out how he's going to wriggle out of this now that both of us can testify against him."

"You're not going to press charges, Lois. Neither one of us are. I'm sure he told you what would happen if we said anything against him."

My eyes narrowed and my hands clenched into fists, fury hazing my vision. "He can't destroy an entire newspaper."

"Yes, he can." The certainty in Clark's voice caused goose-bumps to raise all along my arms. "He can kill Perry; he can set a bomb; he could even buy it if he wanted to. We'd never be able to stop him, not without S—not anymore."

"So, what?" I asked, restraining the urge to grab Clark by the shoulders and shake him, as if that could make him revert to the smiling, confident partner I missed so much. "You think we should give up? Just roll over and play dead?"

"No." Clark's gaze moved past me to rest on the black TV screen. "I want my life back." And then he *was* looking at me, and all my thoughts scattered before the intensity of his silvery-brown eyes and the determined set of his jaw. "But I'm saying that we need to be

careful. We need to gather so much evidence and proof that there's no way Luthor can possibly wriggle out of it on a technicality. We need to make sure that when we take him down, he stays down."

"We can do that," I stated firmly—maybe even desperately, though I would never admit that. "Together—partners again. Right?"

His smile was small, faint, and beautiful. "Partners," he agreed. His finger traced the line of my cheekbone, and against my will, my eyes fluttered closed. I had missed him, missed him so much that part of me had gone with him. Now he was back—tormented or not, he was still Clark—and I knew I would do anything to keep him safe.

"I wish I could protect you."

My eyes flew open at his fervent words, startled by the way they seemed to voice my own thoughts.

"We'll watch out for each other," I told him. "Isn't that what you said partners do? And besides, Superman's back. He'll help us."

"Superman." Everything that I had just watched light up Clark's eyes and birth that breathtaking smile of his now disappeared. "Yes, we do have to remember him."

I watched, helpless and frustrated, as Clark once more rolled over, hunched in around himself as if in pain. "Superman will still be here tomorrow," I said, suddenly thinking I might understand his fear. "It isn't a dream. He's really alive."

"I know." But he didn't uncurl, didn't look at me, didn't smile.

My heart ached with pain for him. If Lex had been standing right in front of me at that moment, I really think I would have killed him for the scars he had given my partner.

My friend. Because, no matter what I said when others could hear me, Clark *was* my friend. Had been my friend almost since the moment I had met him. I just hadn't realized it before. Now...now I realized it. Now I admitted it. And now I knew I needed to be as much of a friend to him as he was to me.

Slowly, afraid he might bolt if I moved too quickly, I slid under the covers next to him and lay down, watching him, hoping he knew he wasn't alone. Though his back was stiff—clear indication that he knew I was there—he didn't acknowledge me in any way.

Finally, when his body relaxed in the rest he so desperately needed, I slept.

Chapter 5

When I woke, the place at my side was empty and cold. I lifted my head, instantly awake and concerned. A smile curved my lips when I saw Clark curled up in the chair near the window, his features peaceful, his color warm and golden as the sun bathed him in its light. It was such a compelling picture that I couldn't move, afraid to disturb him and bring all the pain and fear flooding back into his being.

Even when I did finally rise from the bed, I made certain to remain as quiet as I could. The call to Perry was conducted in whispers; I forbore to talk to myself as I usually did while showering and brushing my teeth and dressing; I tried to keep my small exclamations of pain muffled when I rebandaged the wound on my left arm—though perhaps I wasn't as successful at that last as I had hoped.

"Lois?"

I grimaced but stood and moved into the bedroom where Clark could see me. "It's all right, Clark. I'm here."

"What's wrong?" Though he didn't move—I suspected he couldn't, at least not easily—his eyes, still covered by the glasses Superman had returned to him, studied me intently and carefully, flicking to the gunshot wound and away. "Are you okay?"

My reply was a beat late as I tried to process just how quickly he had come out of sleep...with my safety his first concern. "Just redoing the bandage. You did a good job on it, Clark. The wound's already looking a lot better."

"Good." Content, Clark turned his face once more to the sun. I wondered how many days—or weeks—it had been since he had last seen the morning sky.

"I called Perry," I told him carefully, not sure how he would take the news. "He's coming over. The shower's open if you're up to it, or

you might want to wait until Perry—"

"I can do it," he said hurriedly, and I scolded myself for my tactlessness. Tact wasn't a quality I had ever seen the need of cultivating—reporters didn't get front page stories through diplomacy—but now I wished I had.

I had to clench my hands into fists to stop myself from hurrying across the room and helping Clark as he slowly rose to his feet. Instead of watching him make his torturous way to the bathroom, I moved toward the kitchen. "I'm going to see about some breakfast," I said over my shoulder, and hoped he was too involved in staying upright to hear the emotion trapped within my voice.

From the date on my ATM receipt the night before, I knew I had been held in that cell less than twenty-four hours. Luthor's thugs had picked me up just before midnight, and I had withdrawn money from the ATM at the hospital at ten the night before. From the amount of relief in Perry's voice when I had called him, I gauged that there had been no ransom note—not that I had expected there to be—and that my co-workers had been caught between fear that I had been kidnapped and a suspicion that I had gone undercover to work on a secret story. It wouldn't have been the first time—for either possibility—though both had become rarer in the past two months.

It seemed impossible that so little time—a mere twenty-four hours—had passed since I had first heard Clark's voice again; it felt as if surely a year or more had been lived in that dark cell. And yet, conversely, it felt as if events had hurtled from one point—my kidnapping—to another—Clark's reemergence into my life—and to the best of them all—Superman's resurrection.

That was something I didn't think I had fully processed yet, but that was all right because Superman was still there today, as proved by the muted news I turned on once Clark shut the bathroom door. And the superhero would still be there tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that—"I'm always around," he had said, and even the recollection of those words spoken in his steady voice sent a thrill of elation through my veins.

I had to find some way to talk to him, to touch him again, to reassure myself that the connection I had felt between us from the moment he had flown me from EPRAD to the Daily Planet still existed. That it hadn't been buried with the pieces of his burned-up cape. That it was mutual.

At the sound of Clark emerging from the bathroom, I hastily shut off the news and turned back to my perusal of my kitchen's contents. They were pitifully meager, but luckily for me, I had bought bagels on a whim a week before and I still had a bit of cream cheese in the fridge and honey in the cabinets. Feeling somewhat proud of myself, I set the food out and only then guiltily realized that I didn't have anything for us to drink. I had spent my time pondering Superman instead of brewing the coffee...not that that was unusual.

"Coffee will be ready in a..." My voice trailed off into dead silence when I turned and saw Clark slumped against the partition between the kitchen and the living room.

He was draped in the robe I had gotten as a Secret Santa gift from a reluctant shopper who had apparently chosen the 'one size fits all' and called it good. Its white color darkened his damp ebony hair, made him look even paler than he already was, and seemed to swallow him up in its folds, giving him the illusion—I hoped it was an illusion—of small frailty. A perception aided by the bruises so starkly apparent on his cheekbone beneath the beard, on the bony wrists emerging from the robe's sleeves, on his sharply defined collarbone and descending in a bluish mass lower on his chest and beneath the robe, all of them black and ugly in the light of day and freedom. All of them as much a mute testament of what had been done to him as the haunted cast to his features, the guarded wariness as he looked about him, the painful shadows beneath his bespectacled eyes, the trembling of his hands, and the fact that he couldn't walk the length of my small apartment without growing tired enough to collapse.

"Do..." I paused, my hand outstretched toward him. Tact, I reminded myself. "Do you want me to help you?"

“I think I can make it,” he said, his voice as pale a shadow of himself as his appearance.

As much as I knew he wanted to do things himself, I couldn’t resist hovering near him as he took the three steps to the small kitchen table. My hand brushed his shoulder as he sat, so light a contact it could have been accidental...but it wasn’t. I just couldn’t resist touching him to reassure myself that he was all right. That he would survive. That he was here...with me.

“Do you want cream cheese or honey on your bagel?” I asked him, doing my best to keep my tone light and steady. When I had fallen apart while tied up at the behest of Antoinette Baines, he had remained calm and brave. When I had called him, terrified and shaken by the head and invisible body that had shown up in my apartment, he had come immediately with a teasing smile and eyes devoid of fear. When I had almost broken down after throwing my father to the wolves, he had been there for me with a steady hand and a sympathetic ear. When I had trembled in his arms after seeing him almost die at Trask’s hands, he had held me and calmed me with his touch and kept my hands clasped in his until they steadied. After all that, how could I fail him now?

I couldn’t.

I mustn’t.

So I smiled at him as if it were perfectly normal for us to be eating breakfast at my apartment after being rescued from a grim, life-or-death situation. Actually, I thought with a slight frown, that *had* been somewhat normal for the reporting team of Lane and Kent. What wasn’t normal was the fact that he was sick and tormented and looking lost while I was solicitous of his health and worried about his state of mind and afraid for him. That was almost a complete switch to what had once been normal. I missed those days when he had been the one to hover over me, but I had missed *him* more, and if this was what it took to get him back, it was a small cost.

I sat down hurriedly, idly wondering if that sudden realization was written all over my face.

“Are you all right?” Clark’s brow creased as he studied me, and his hand moved to rest on the table, palm-up.

Restraining the urge to weep at the fact that I could see every bone in his wrist and in each finger, I put my hand in his and smiled brightly at him. “I’m fine. How are *you*?”

His smile was wry. “I’ve been better.”

“Well,” I said, inexplicably cheered by his miraculous smile.

“We’ll have to see what we can do about that.”

“Just being in the sunlight is enough,” he said very seriously. And when his eyes met mine, that light I had thought never to see again—the light that betrayed just what he thought of me—was glittering like the sun, shattering the darkness of my thoughts. “Being with you.”

“You’re just saying that because you don’t want me to go back to being the senior partner,” I replied archly.

“You stopped?” He raised his brows in mock surprise, then tried to hide his wince of pain.

“Well, I let you think I did, anyway.” The flippant comment was made almost by habit as I studied him closely. No matter how much he smiled, I could tell he was a lot worse off than he was pretending.

“I’m just glad you’re *letting* me be your partner again.” Clark looked down at our hands, intertwining his fingers with mine. “After I left you the way I did...I wasn’t sure you would.”

“I’ve gotten used to you.” I shrugged, almost desperate to keep the light mood alive. We both needed it, needed a few moments when we could pretend—no matter how weakly—that everything hadn’t changed. “Besides, I still haven’t learned your trick of guessing the correct codes to locks or finding all the doors with rusty padlocks.”

“Ah, so I’m your personal locksmith, not your reporting partner.”

“You’re both,” I told him, my voice much too serious to sustain our teasing byplay, the staple of our relationship. But as I had already noted, our relationship couldn’t go back to the way it had been. It had to change, evolve, develop into something more. I couldn’t just take whatever he gave me anymore; I had to give something back.

I just wished I knew how.

“So...” Clark looked down at the bagels. “Cream cheese or honey, huh?”

“Yeah.” I squeezed his hand lightly, disturbed by its feverish heat and the uncharacteristic sweat on his brow, before withdrawing to retrieve some plates. “Oh, you like sugar and milk in your coffee, don’t you?”

“You remember that?” His surprised tone might as well have been a slap, stinging all the more because I knew he hadn’t meant it as a condemnation.

“Don’t you remember what *I* take in my coffee?” It was a rhetorical question. I knew, without a doubt, that he remembered everything about me. Hadn’t I been reminded of that fact with every personalized note, every awkward phone call, every touch of his hand and glance my way? In fact, he had once sent me a package from Columbia with all the makings of a cup of coffee, complete with a handcrafted mug and the one packet each of artificial sweetener and non-fat creamer that I took with it, accompanied by a note that said he missed getting my coffee for me every morning.

“Of course,” he answered needlessly, his gaze on his hands, folded loosely atop the table before him. “But...I don’t think I can handle any sugar or milk right now.”

“Are you sick?” The question was so stupid even I winced. “I mean...aren’t you hungry?”

“A little,” he said, but I wasn’t sure that he wasn’t just being polite. Hastily, I turned to the task of getting our drinks before he could see how shaken I was.

“Well,” I said once I was sure my voice would emerge steady. “I still have that box of tea you brought me a while ago. Why don’t I fix you a cup of that instead?”

“Thank you.” His smile was infinitesimal, his words almost inaudible, the wince of pain as he shifted in the chair heartbreaking.

This was not Clark Kent! Clark Kent was...cheerful, and hopeful, and sometimes annoyingly careful, and...and a lot more things that ended in -ful because the truth of the matter was that whatever Clark might be, he was wholeheartedly and completely that thing. He didn’t hold himself back, didn’t compromise, didn’t commit himself any less than a hundred percent. He was...honest. And that meant that whatever you saw, whatever you heard him say...that was what you got.

He wasn’t a shadow. He wasn’t a wreck. He wasn’t a pale imitation of the partner who had left me on behalf of a friend he now couldn’t even seem to stand hearing about.

Why, I thought in frustration, did such a simple, unpretentious guy like Clark Kent always have to be such a mystery?

“Here you go.” I set our cups down and sat across from him. “You never told me what you wanted on your bagel.”

“Nothing. Just...just the bagel’s fine.”

We both reached for one at the same time, and our hands collided.

“I can get it,” Clark insisted quietly, not meeting my eyes.

“Okay,” I said just as quietly. The sticky feeling of honey on my palm made me realize that I was staring at Clark instead of my own bagel, but I couldn’t seem to stop. I wasn’t sure if I was afraid that he would disappear like a mirage or that he would collapse into a boneless heap. Whichever, I didn’t dare look away.

“I’m not going to break,” he said without looking up.

I started. Tact, I yelled at myself. I had to acquire that quality as soon as possible. “Can you read minds?” I demanded suspiciously. “Because it’s a bad habit!”

“I can’t read minds,” he said with a quirk of his lips that faded all too quickly. “In fact...I can’t do much of anything right now.”

“I’m sorry,” I blurted and decided to go for honesty in lieu of tact. “I just...I don’t know what to do here, Clark. Even you can’t pretend you’re physically well—and tact aside, I’m not sure you’re all that well mentally either. I mean, what that monster did to you—lesser men would gibber at the dark for the rest of their life after treatment like that! But I don’t want to hurt you while I’m trying to help. So...tell me

what to do. Should I help you move or let you do it yourself and watch you fall?”

“Lois.” His hand on my shoulder halted my fountain of words. His gaze was open and earnest, everything I was so afraid he could never be again after a month in that lightless cell. “I don’t like this situation any more than you do. I feel just as confused and uncertain and lost as you do—probably a hundred times more. But I do know that we all have to play the hand we’re dealt. And no matter what...permanent... effects I have from my stay with Luthor, I have to figure out how to be the best...whatever I am now...that I can be. Because I really do believe that we’re put on this Earth—or whatever planet we’re put on—to do better than we think we can, to be kind and helpful and generous. And forgiving.”

His voice broke the slightest bit on the last word. I didn’t notice. I was staring at him—flat-out, jaw-on-the-ground, eyes-popping-out-like-a-cartoon staring at him. Because I hadn’t even known people like that existed.

Superman, I reminded myself. Superman was like that.

But Superman had special powers and an extraordinary history and an eye-catching Suit. He was bound to be extraordinary. But my partner? The small-town nobody who stood when a woman entered the room and carried a handkerchief in his pocket and said hello to everyone on the street and would give the jacket off his back to anyone in trouble—who expected *him* to be extraordinary? Or, I thought slowly, were all those little oddities part of what made him so special?

And how had I forgotten that this was the type of man he was?

“Well,” I said tremulously, shaking myself as if from a dream. “I’ll help you, Clark. You do know you can count on me, right?”

“I do,” he said, his voice none too steady. “Thank you, Lois.”

“Yeah.” My own voice probably couldn’t have lasted more than that single word.

We both jumped a bit at the knock on the door. I let out a guilty chuckle—though I didn’t know why—and shrugged. “I guess I’d better see who that is.”

“Yeah.” As he turned a bit toward the sound, Clark’s face went even whiter than it already was, and I suddenly wondered if there were any internal injuries beneath those black bruises.

“Are you all right?” I asked, ignoring the insistent knocking for a moment. “Clark? Clark!”

He swiveled his head to look at me, and I was astonished to see that his eyes had gone almost black.

Concerned, I looked in the direction he had been staring so fixedly, but all I saw were the open windows. When I looked at Clark again, his head was hanging low and his hands gripped the edges of the table tightly. “Clark?” I asked worriedly.

“You should get the door,” he said blankly. “But, Lois...” He caught my hand when I started to walk past him. His eyes were pleading as he looked up at me. “Be careful what we say. Luthor... might have planted bugs in your apartment while you were in the cell.”

“Good idea,” I told him, impressed by the deduction and knowing I should have thought of it myself. I winced as the knocking turned into banging. “I’m coming, I’m coming!”

As soon as the locks were all undone, the door opened on a very worried Perry and a grim Henderson. “I hope you don’t mind that I called Bill,” Perry said quickly. “But I figured he should be here, and as I had originally suspected, you hadn’t called him yourself. Are you okay, darlin’?” I chuckled a bit at his spill of words and didn’t even feel uncomfortable when he pulled me into a fatherly hug. “I don’t know what’s more miraculous—Superman’s return or the fact that you came out of another kidnapping safely.”

“I’m fine, Perry. Clark’s the one who’s hurt. I don’t know what all they did to him, but...” My voice trailed away, and I angrily realized that Perry’s open concern and affection had brought me perilously close to tears. Which was ridiculous. As he had said, Superman was alive again; I shouldn’t be able to stop celebrating long enough to cry!

“Clark—you said on the phone you had found him.” Perry glanced all about, his eyes brightening. “Where is he?”

“He—” I turned and belatedly realized he hadn’t moved into sight from behind the partition wall. “He’s pretty weak, and he’s in pain. He’s in the kitchen.”

“Who did this to you?” Henderson questioned me as Perry gave me a last smile and hurried toward the kitchen.

“Not that I have a lot of proof I can hand you at the moment aside from the bruises I gave him,” I said acerbically, “but it was Lex Luthor. Clark says he’s the Boss.”

“Is that so?” Henderson raised an unimpressed eyebrow, considerably less of a reaction than I had expected to my startling accusation. “You should have given us your statement last night, Lane. Or at least gone to the hospital. What happened to your arm?”

“Clark was hurt.” I had meant to say the words hotly, a defense against the recriminations on my actions, but instead they came out morosely. “He was afraid that Luthor would find us at the hospital.”

“And he wouldn’t find you at your place?” the inspector questioned sarcastically.

“Superman’s guarding us,” I explained, satisfied when Henderson nodded his acquiescence.

“Here, Clark, easy now.”

I turned at the sound of Perry’s gruff encouragement and gasped involuntarily when I saw my mentor half-carrying Clark to the couch. “He tried to stand and fell,” Perry explained tersely while he situated my partner as best he could. Clark’s eyes were tightly shut, his face twisted in a mask to conceal his pain, and one hand clutched his glasses to his face, as if terrified he would lose them again.

“You weren’t kidding when you said he was hurt, were you?”

There was no sting to Henderson’s words, only traces of shock and horror. Before I could reply, he moved past me to sit on the couch across from Clark. Moving almost in a daze, afraid to look away from my partner, I sat beside Henderson, across from Perry.

“You all right, son?” Perry was studying Clark intently, partly out of worry and partly, I knew, because he had missed the young reporter he had been so willing to mentor.

It had been hard, I remembered, passing Clark’s letter of resignation to Perry and seeing the editor’s face fall as he had read it. For several days after that, he hadn’t been able to shout out curt orders or smile when his reporters scampered at his command. After that, he had been even more bad-tempered than usual—trying to overcompensate, I had guessed. Gradually, however, he had gone back to normal; everyone had, even Jimmy, who had been unusually depressed for weeks after his friend had left. I alone had seemed unable to put Clark behind me, and yet everyone thought I had simply because I was working twice as hard. No one but Perry had understood that I was overcompensating just as much as he had been.

“I’m fine,” Clark managed to say, and convinced no one. “I just need to sit here in the sun for a bit.”

Perry indicated a duffel bag I hadn’t even noticed him carrying, dropped by the door. “Well, I brought over some clothes you left in your locker at the Planet, and I thought you might need a few things, so I grabbed some socks, shoes, necessities, a comb, a razor, stuff like that. Unless you like the bearded look.”

The hand holding his glasses drifted lower to skim the beard in question. “No, I...” Clark’s eyes drifted past my shoulder to the window behind me, and his hand fell limply to his lap. “Chief, you know I—I mean, Mr. White, I—”

“Chief’s fine, son,” Perry said, a betraying roughness to his voice.

A tiny smile flickered life into Clark’s eyes. “Chief. Would you mind helping me shave? Razors have always...been a bit awkward.”

“Sure, sure, not a problem.” Perry’s eyes flicked to Clark’s trembling hands. When Clark tried to stand on his own, Perry was instantly there with a shoulder under his arm. “Let me help you, son. There’s no shame in havin’ friends.”

“No.” Clark’s jaw clenched tightly, his eyes suspiciously bright.

“There’s not. Lois, please don’t start telling Henderson about what happened until I get back. And would you mind turning on the news? We might find out where...” He winced and shifted his stance. “Where

Superman is right now.”

I gaped after him as he and Perry disappeared into the bathroom with the duffel bag. “Can you believe that?” I demanded of the taciturn investigator to fill up the silence that fell on us so abruptly. “Last night, he would hardly even let me say Superman’s name, and he acted like the news was pure torture! *Now* he wants to watch it!” Despite my grumbling, I stood and turned on the television, having my own reasons for wanting to catch another glimpse of the caped superhero.

“Lane.” Henderson shifted until I met his gaze. “I know Kent wants us to wait for him, but...how long was he a prisoner?”

“W-why?” I berated myself for the slight stammer.

“Because I’m seeing some signs I don’t like. He doesn’t trust us, for one thing. He’s worried—terrified—about something or other, but he’s hiding it. Pretense isn’t a good thing when it’s coming from a trauma victim.”

I winced to hear Clark so bluntly and cavalierly referred to as a ‘victim.’ “I...I think he was held a whole month, maybe a few days less.”

A muscle twitched in the inspector’s jaw. “Conditions?”

“Bad.” The word was like poison, all the more potent because it was true. “They dosed him with some kind of drug every day. A really painful, really debilitating, possibly fatal drug.”

“They gave you the same treatment?”

“No,” I said hastily. “But I saw them do it to Clark. And I don’t know how much they fed him, but...”

“Not a lot,” Henderson concluded, his eyes flicking briefly to the closed bathroom door.

“And Lex taunted him. Clark says he...gloated and...I don’t know what all else. But it had to be bad—Lex referred to him as ‘that thing.’”

The inspector’s low curse and slow shake of his head made my stomach clench into a knot even Superman couldn’t have undone. Terror turned my limbs leaden and filled my mouth with dust.

“What?” I demanded, heedless of the shards of panic slicing my voice to ribbons.

Henderson sighed as he removed his tinted glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. “I’ve dealt with victims who’ve been held by a madman, Lane. Even when it’s just for a night or two, the trauma is extensive...and it can be very long-lasting.”

“Are...” I had to stop and swallow, suddenly wishing Clark was holding my hand or rubbing my back or whispering soothing words in my ear. But he wasn’t, and this time, *I* needed to be the one strong enough to do all of that for him. Funny—for all that I had taunted Clark by saying he could never make it in the big city, I had never really thought of him *needing* anything. “Are you saying he’ll never get better?”

The inspector met my water-cloaked eyes. “I’m saying it’ll be hard. But if anyone can do it, I’d lay money on Kent. He’s got... something. Some inner strength I haven’t quite figured out. And he still smiles when he looks at you, Lane, so I’d say there’s some hope.”

The lump in my stomach metamorphosed into delicate butterflies that couldn’t seem to find anywhere to land.

“But, Lois, you’re his friend.” Henderson paused, waiting expectantly.

Instantly, I stiffened. “Well, we’re partners.”

“Lane,” he said threateningly.

I heaved a heavy sigh. Old habits died hard. “Fine, of course we’re friends.”

“He’s going to need you, and Perry, and Jimmy, and whoever else can tie him back to the time before his imprisonment. So, be careful with him...and be patient. I know that’s asking a lot, but—”

“I can be patient!” I insisted haughtily. Hadn’t I already been patient? Hadn’t I been kind even though I wanted to shake him and find out why he had been so wary of Superman? I had even made breakfast—didn’t that count for anything?

“Well, try your best.” The wry twist to Henderson’s lips gave him away, but I rolled my eyes anyway. Just because.

“Clark was worried Luthor might have planted bugs in the apartment,” I suddenly remembered. I didn’t think we had said anything Lex didn’t already know, but this was one time where even I wasn’t reckless enough to forget about Clark’s warning. “Can you test for them?”

“Not without a lot more equipment.” Henderson pointedly met my gaze, warning me that what he was about to say was as much a warning for whoever might be listening as it was advice for me. “Lois, I think you and Kent should both stay here. That way Luthor—or whoever’s behind this”—He ignored my indignant ‘I said it was Luthor!’—won’t panic and do something we’d all, hopefully, live to regret, but it also puts you right where my people can watch over you and give you some back-up if they do make a move. I’ll have someone come by later today and check the place over for bugs. I’m also going to send the police medic to document that gunshot wound you’ve got as well as Kent’s condition. Just so when we do catch whoever did this to you, we’ve got it on record.”

“Here we go.”

Henderson and I both fell silent and looked up when Perry helped Clark back into the room and lowered him onto the couch. I couldn’t help gaping; I was pretty sure that I couldn’t have gotten a word to emerge from my throat even if someone had paid me.

With the beard shaved off and hair trimmed, his glasses firmly in place, and himself fully dressed in clean slacks and a black shirt, Clark looked like...Clark. Every time I had envisioned him while he was gone and speaking to me through a phone or a note, each time I had pictured him in my mind while we sat in the cell together...this was what I had envisioned. Minus the bruises and gauntness and guardedness, but still...

Clark looked up and met my wide eyes that widened even farther when he smiled at me. “I must have looked awful before if this is your reaction now,” he teased me.

“It’s just...” I shook my head and forcibly recalled who I was—Lois Lane, star reporter, not a foolish girl who went speechless because of a smooth jaw and a beautiful smile—or, good-looking smile—well, really, just a...nice smile, yes, that was better. A nice smile. A pleasant smile. A *really* pleasant smile. A not-as-nice-as-Superman’s-but-so-close-it-might-as-well-be smile.

“Good to have you back, Kent,” Henderson said, leaning forward to shake Clark’s hand.

“Thank you, Inspector.”

“So, Lois, darlin’, what happened to you?” Perry cut through the awkward silence in danger of falling on us like jagged rocks, his sharp eyes incisive on me.

“Uh, just a second,” Clark interrupted. “Lois, have you seen... Superman...on the news yet?”

I glanced to the television set. “No.” A suspicious frown reshaped my features. “I thought you weren’t too fond of him at the moment.”

“I’d...just like to know where he is.” Clark shifted uncomfortably, then looked at Perry and Henderson. “You didn’t offer them any coffee, Lois?”

“Coffee?” I repeated incredulously. “We need to tell them about Lex so they can go arrest him for what he did to you! You said you had pro—”

“I just think it’s polite to offer guests something to drink,” Clark said hastily. My rejoinder was stifled when I noticed him clenching his hands, his eyes darting about as if he were afraid of something.

“Fine,” I said after a brief pause. “Henderson, Perry, would you like some coffee?”

“Sure,” Henderson said with a warning glance that reminded me I had sworn myself to patience. We could all tell Clark was reluctant to admit to what had happened, or maybe he was afraid to let the memories come spilling back in. Either way, a few minutes of time wouldn’t hurt us.

“Uh, none for me,” Perry said with a worried frown in Clark’s direction. “You know I only drink the newsroom brew.”

While I was getting Henderson his coffee, a news bulletin

interrupted the regular broadcast to announce an earthquake in Indonesia. Perry stood and moved to sit beside Henderson so he could turn the volume up on the TV. Almost spilling Henderson's coffee, I glued my eyes to the screen, eager to see Superman. Intellectually, I knew he was alive and that I hadn't imagined the whole thing, but I certainly didn't mind a bit of extra proof.

"Finally," I thought I heard Clark mutter at the first sign of Superman appearing on the scene. I couldn't help but stare at my partner, utterly puzzled by his manner concerning his friend.

"Who would have ever thought we'd get to see him again?" Perry asked in an awed tone as he watched Superman spin beneath the ground.

"He's something else," Henderson agreed, as close to effusive amazement as I'd ever heard from him.

"So, Lois," Perry prompted as soon as I had torn my own eyes from the news, handed Henderson the coffee mug, and sat down beside Clark. "You were going to tell us what happened to you."

"I'm going to record this conversation, if that's all right."

Henderson pulled out a tiny tape recorder while Perry turned to mute the news again. "And also..." He pulled out a complicated-looking gizmo that blinked red until Henderson clicked a button and switched the light to green. "I didn't want to mention this earlier, but it should block any bugs that might be here—not permanently, you understand, but it's at least a stopgap measure until an inspection team can get here."

"Aren't those extremely hi-tech?" Perry asked skeptically, eyeing the device closely.

"When Superman first showed up and started taking an active role in investigations, I got a friend of mine in the NIA to get me one. Figured I might need it." Henderson smirked at me. "The press can get a bit nosy when there's a hot story at stake."

"Ha, ha," I said, shifting uncomfortably. I had done a lot of things I wasn't exactly proud of when Superman had first debuted, my fervor sometimes eclipsing my sense of journalism ethics. I darted a glance to Clark, but his gaze was locked on his hands; he didn't seem at all reassured by Henderson's safety measure.

Perry looked between Henderson and me, then obviously decided he didn't want to know. "Well, then, all's good. Now...Lois?"

Inwardly giving myself a stern talking to, I snapped back into the present and tore my gaze from Clark. "Two or three thugs picked me up outside the Daily Planet building at midnight the day before yesterday." I paused, half-expecting Clark to interrupt again, but he remained silent, his eyes on his lap. "I was blindfolded and thrown into the trunk of a car, then taken inside some kind of warehouse and tossed into Clark's cell. At one point, Lex took me aside and started raving about how he was more powerful than Superman and that he controlled the city. When I tried to escape, his henchman, Nigel St. John, shot me in the arm. Clark bandaged it before he was taken aside for his own private conversation with Luthor. And then Superman rescued us and dropped us off at the hospital. Neither one of us felt comfortable waiting inside for Lex to find us, so we came here."

"Do you know the address of this warehouse?" asked Henderson.

"No. But I could take you right to it." Being in Superman's arms had been overwhelming, but I had known enough to assess our location.

"It's in the South Side," Clark said quietly. "I don't know the number, but it's on Canter Street."

Henderson's finger hovered over his small tape recorder. "1462 Canter Street?"

"You've already been there?" I asked excitedly. "I should have known Superman would have led you to it last night."

"I wasn't there," Henderson corrected, "and neither were my people. The fire department, on the other hand, was there most of the night. It was such a ferocious blaze that there's nothing left except a pile of drenched ashes. The next warehouse over went up too, but it dealt in chemicals, so the general prognosis is that some of the barrels collided or leaked."

"Or Superman started it himself." Clark's mutter was so quiet that I was the only one who heard it.

I was so shocked that a minute, an hour, or a year could have passed me by and I wouldn't have noticed, wouldn't have been able to do anything but sit there and stare at Clark. Clark, my naïve, idealistic partner who had believed that even Trask had redeeming attributes and that Toni Taylor hadn't been all bad. My partner who had just sounded so paranoid that I was sure he could have been admitted to a hospital ward on that statement alone. How could he hold such xenophobic fears when he himself had pretended to be Superman in order to save the superhero from Bureau 39 and their imaginary rock? What had Lex done to him?

Shrinking under the weight of my shock, Clark's eyes darted up to look at me from beneath lowered brows, but he didn't fully meet my gaze. Though he had never been afraid of my anger, he had never—except when he deliberately provoked it—seemed to like being the recipient of it either.

"Clark? Clark!" Gradually, Henderson's call broke through to both Clark and myself.

"Yes, Inspector?" Clark turned toward the older man.

"Can you confirm Lois's statement?"

"Yes." His voice was almost inaudible.

"Can you give your own statement about what happened?"

Clark folded his arms tightly across his chest, as if he sought desperately to hold himself together. "A month ago, I was visiting my parents on my way to...complete a task. I told them I had proof of Luthor's business dealings. When I returned two days later, I was...confused about something. While they were helping me, we were...threatened...by one of Luthor's men. He must have been following me and keeping my parents under surveillance. I had a...an errand...I had to finish, so I hid my parents where Luthor couldn't find them, and I left. And when I returned, Luthor was waiting for me. I was surprised, and he...subjected me to something painful and took me to the cell. Then, last night, Lois and I got out."

"How did Luthor treat you?" Henderson asked bluntly. "I know this is hard, Kent, but we need to know."

I wanted to reach out a hand and reassure Clark, to quiet the tremors invading his body, to smooth out the torment invading his eyes, to relax the stiffness of his folded arms. But I couldn't. My shock at his accusation of Superman mixed with my horror at what I had allowed to happen to him paralyzed me, leaving me unable to move or speak or breathe.

"He..." Clark swallowed and locked his eyes on the sun, shining in through the two windows facing my living room. "He dosed me with something. Every day. Sometimes more often."

"Do you know the name of this substance?"

"No. I don't know its real name."

"What did it look like?"

"It...was green." Clark spoke only in a monotone, his voice dead, his eyes blank, his body frozen.

"What exactly did it do to you?"

Finally, Clark did move, his eyes turning to look at the TV where Superman was using rubble to build a dam that held back the effects of the ensuing tidal wave. "It made me weak. It made me vulnerable. It made me...broken."

"That's enough," Perry said quietly, shaking his head slightly at Henderson. "Let's, uh, move on to somethin' else."

The inspector didn't argue, but he didn't entirely change the subject either. "Is there anything else you can tell us? I notice you're bruised up—did he have you beaten?"

Clark didn't seem to hear him. Superman's heroic actions were reflected on the lenses of his glasses; the red and blue masked Clark's gentle, tormented eyes from me.

"Those happened when he tried to stop Luthor from taking me aside," I explained, finally breaking free of my paralysis to lay a hand on Clark's arm. Despite the muscle tone he had lost, I could still feel every tendon pulled tight as he fought his way through inward

darkness.

“Clark?” Henderson’s eyes never left my partner, and though intent, his voice still possessed a hint of gentleness. “Were there other times?”

“Sometimes.” The word was torn from Clark, and I shifted closer to him, smoothing my hands over his arm to let him know I was there.

“Did he want information from you?”

“Yes.”

I frowned, certain that Clark had told me Lex—no, *Luthor*—hadn’t asked him questions. He couldn’t be lying—Clark didn’t lie—but what if he had been subconsciously repressing memories?

“What sort of information?” Henderson asked patiently.

“I don’t know exactly.” Clark’s hands tightened into fists, but he instantly relaxed them when I slid my hands down over his. “He just... watched me all the time. Observing everything. Always watching me.”

“I see.” The inspector exchanged glances with Perry. “And you’re sure it was Luthor? You can both make a positive identification?”

“Yes,” I said. Clark contented himself with a jerky nod.

“All right.” Henderson leaned forward. “Well, we have more than enough to charge Luthor with kidnapping and assault, but I warn you that he’ll get off on it somehow or another. These things never stick, particularly when it comes down to your word against his. However, if you hold off on this, we might be able to go after him for something bigger. Without the immediate evidence we need—”

“Why didn’t Superman get the evidence?” Clark asked abruptly.

Henderson, Perry, and I all stared at him. He stirred and looked at each of us. “Superman broke into the warehouse; he said he had tied up all the men who hadn’t run. When he dropped us off at the hospital, he should have gone back to take them to the police. That’s his standard procedure. Or when the fire started—why didn’t he save them? Why didn’t he *stop* the fire?”

“Clark, you saw Superman on the news last night!” I exclaimed. “He was busy with a dozen other emergencies! I told you he couldn’t be everywhere at once!”

“But he left those men tied—bound and helpless—and there was a fire. No matter what other emergency there was, Superman would have felt morally compelled to go save those men first!”

“He probably didn’t know there was a fire,” Perry said soothingly, holding out his hands in a calming gesture.

Clark met his gaze without flinching. “Trust me, Chief. He knew there was a fire. So why didn’t he report it to the police? He always used to try very hard to work with the regular authorities. So why did he just leave? He knew we needed that evidence.”

“I’m sure he got distracted,” Henderson said. “And I’m certain he’ll come talk to me about it as soon as he gets a free moment. It’s all right, Kent. We’ll find out what’s going on.”

“No.” Clark stood, every movement he made almost painstaking in its slowness and yet rife with purpose. “We need to put Luthor away. We need to gather everything we have. I have my own evidence—bank records, witness statements, incriminating photos—but it’s all hidden somewhere I can’t get to at the moment. Lois says she’s been investigating him. And obviously the police have had at least a hint that Luthor’s not the great philanthropist he wants everyone to think he is.” He barely waited for Henderson’s confirming nod. “We need to compile everything we have and see what evidence we still need to collect in order to convict him.”

Henderson stood. “Kent, we’ve been trying to tie Luthor to something we can nail him on for years, but he’s slippery. Do you really think you can get him?”

Clark paused to look down at me and offered me a hesitant smile. “Partners, right?”

No matter how confused I was about his behavior, I couldn’t deny him this, not when there was so much desperate hope in his demeanor. Not when he was begging me. Not when I wanted the same thing just as badly as he did. “Partners,” I told him.

“Then they’ll get him for you,” Perry interjected. “They’re the best I’ve ever worked with.”

“All right, then.” Henderson nodded decisively. “I’ll bring you what we have. We’re going to set up undercover bodyguards and an anonymous perimeter around this building. I’ll give you whatever resources you need, but only the minimum of people necessary will know our real goal. From now on, we’re gunning for Lex Luthor.”

I grinned cockily, reasserting myself as Mad Dog Lane. “He doesn’t stand a chance.”

Only I heard Clark whisper, “Maybe one.” And when I saw his eyes drift once more to the image of Superman, I felt a chill run down my spine.

Chapter 6

“Henderson, can I talk to you for a minute, please?” Clark tried to stand, but the inspector stilled him with a gesture and moved to sit beside him. Our conversation had dragged on longer than was probably good for Clark, but we had needed to map out our strategy for going after Luthor and our plan for the next couple of days.

Perry took my arm and led me to the other side of the room; he knew me too well to think that I wouldn’t have tried to stand close enough to hear their whispers. “What are we going to print in the afternoon edition?”

I grinned up at Perry—he and I had always been something of kindred spirits, the ink in our veins connecting us as closely as if we were truly related by blood. “Well, I don’t want Luthor to think I’m hiding scared, so I’d like to at least run the story of my capture and rescue by Superman. The rest is still under investigation. I’ll write it up and e-mail it to you.”

“All right, sounds good. Now, uh, Lois, you promise me you’ll be careful?” Perry placed a warning hand on my shoulder. “I don’t want to wake up one morning and find out you’ve disappeared to the same place as Elvis.”

“All right,” I said with a mock-reluctant sigh, “but what a story that would make.”

He chuckled obligatorily at my weak joke. “Maybe. But not good enough to risk your life over it. Or Clark’s life.”

I frowned over my shoulder at Clark, who was still whispering to a perplexed-looking Henderson. “Does he seem all right to you, Chief?”

“Lois, honey, I...” Perry looked, suddenly, much older than I knew he was. “People change, Lois, especially when there are outside forces just beggin’ them to.”

“But he’s still Clark?” I had meant it to be a statement; unfortunately, it came out sounding more like a question.

“Yeah,” Perry said with a smile I could tell was forced. “Uh, yeah, he’s Clark. You...you take care of him, all right? He...well, let’s just say he needs you. Just...just be careful with him.”

“I will.” Two simple words, two syllables alone out of the entire English language, but they felt like a solemn promise, one I had already made in a blackened cell.

When Henderson stood and moved toward the door, Perry walked back over to Clark to give him that weird half-handshake, half-hug men were so fond of. “Now, Clark, I know we’re keeping your reappearance under tight wraps, but would it be all right if I told Jimmy you were here? The kid’s been missin’ you somethin’ awful.”

“Sure,” Clark said after a hesitation that was evident only if you were looking for it. And I was. I was looking for anything that might give me the key to unlocking the mystery known as Clark Kent.

“Just don’t let Cat know,” I warned, only partly sarcastically. “Oh, and, Perry, have Jimmy bring over all my Lexcorp research. He knows where I’ve got it stashed at the Planet.”

“Sure thing. You two take it easy, you hear?”

“The medic and tech team will be by in a bit,” Henderson added. “Stay close. We can’t afford to lose you two, not when you’re our star witnesses.”

I didn’t think it was very fair that Henderson gave *me* a warning glare, as if I were untrustworthy or something. I mean, Clark was too weak to even stand on his own—did they think I’d just abandon him to go out chasing leads? The loud thump as I firmly shut the door behind

them gave me a little vindictive satisfaction—and drowned out the quiet whisper in the back of my mind tempting me to do exactly that.

“So,” I said, turning back to Clark. This morning, despite my uncertainty about how to handle his weakness, we had been comfortable with each other. Now, for whatever reason, awkwardness seemed to have made itself an unwelcome intruder. “What do you want to do? I have to write up the story of my capture and rescue, and after that, hopefully, I’ll have my research to look through.”

“Please.” Clark’s mouth tightened, turning almost white, his lips tinged a pale blue. “Don’t mention me in your story. I don’t want my parents to show up while we’re... in the middle of this.”

“We... we already agreed, just a few minutes ago, that we’d keep your presence a secret,” I said slowly, tenderly. “So, anyway, what do you want to do?”

His eyes flickered. “Well, like I told Henderson, I can’t get to my stuff right now, but I can at least make a list of what I do have so we know what we’ve got to work with.”

“Sounds good. I’ll get you a notepad and pen.”

“Thanks.” His voice was faint with weariness, and he slumped back against the cushions as if even holding his head upright was too great a feat for him.

The rest of the day passed in a progression of visitors. Some medic with hands considerably less deft and gentle than Clark’s treated and rebandaged my wound after taking a few pictures of it. He wanted to look Clark over, but my partner, who had been dozing in between jotting down his list of photos and witness names and file numbers, roused himself to flee into the bathroom and even I couldn’t get him to come out until the medic had left entirely.

A team came by and scanned for bugs. They didn’t find any, but Clark still seemed nervous about saying too much. He also refused to let me turn the news off. If one station stopped covering Superman, he’d flip through the channels until he found another appearance. When the superhero wasn’t on the screen, Clark seemed edgy and unsure, constantly glancing out the windows and jumping at small sounds.

Finally, just after dinner—a dinner at which Clark ate even less than he had at breakfast or lunch—Jimmy showed up, his arms wrapped around a box of all my files and disks, his enthusiasm for seeing Clark so real and cheerful that I couldn’t help but relive my own joy at seeing Clark again. It was good to be reminded past my growing bewilderment over Clark’s behavior that it was a miracle I still had my partner at all.

I took the box of research from Jimmy so he could sit next to Clark, the words spilling from his lips so many and so fast that they filled my apartment with their excited tones and animated cadence. Clark listened to him, a smile on his lips that, though small, was genuine and pleased. Every once in a while, he’d murmur a reply, his deeper, slower tone a counterpoint to Jimmy’s rambling words. I watched from the kitchen—I didn’t want Clark to be upset that I hadn’t offered Jimmy a drink—and then from the opposite couch as I sat down to begin organizing the things Jimmy had brought from the Planet.

Finally, even Jimmy could tell that Clark was exhausted and needed some rest, but when the kid stood to leave, Clark roused and grabbed hold of Jimmy’s arm. “Don’t go,” he protested. “I haven’t seen you in so long.”

Jimmy’s face transformed with an enormously pleased expression, and he willingly sat once more. “I know. It feels like years, huh? I’m glad you’re back. The phone-calls weren’t enough.”

“I know.” Clark’s answering smile was drowsy. “Have you gotten your own byline yet?”

“Yeah. Well, Lois helped me, so I got to share it with her. We wrote the...” Too late, Jimmy saw my frantic head-shake. His voice slowly trailed off.

“Wrote what?” asked Clark, completely oblivious.

“Well, I’m the one who found the remnants of Superman’s cape. So we wrote the... you know, the ‘Superman Is Dead’ article.”

“Oh.” Clark opened his eyes fully for the first time since Jimmy had made to leave and he met the kid’s gaze. As closely as I looked, I couldn’t find even a hint of Clark’s recent discomfort with the subject of Superman. “I’ll bet that was hard for you, Jimmy, but I’m sure you did a great job. I always knew you were going places—probably behind Perry’s desk one day.”

“Really?” Jimmy brightened, and I suddenly understood why he had taken Clark’s departure so hard. Clark had believed in Jimmy, had always been there to help him and encourage him to aspire to better things—and Jimmy had needed that. *I* hadn’t done that for Jimmy, nor had anyone else in the newsroom. Though we respected him for the information he could dig up for us and found him useful for running errands, we certainly didn’t look at him and see a future editor-in-chief.

But Clark did.

It suddenly occurred to me to wonder how many others Clark had done that for. Even Cat had seemed different—in a manner of speaking—while Clark had worked at the Planet, and a surprising number of people had immediately noticed his absence. How many of those people who had asked me about him had been inspired to greater and better things while Clark was there?

“I’ll have to read it.” Clark’s voice recalled me to the present, and I hastily looked down at the file in my hands to hide my preoccupation.

“I’ll bring you over a copy,” Jimmy volunteered eagerly. “I tried to make sure everyone knew Superman had gone out a hero—Lois helped a lot, of course.”

“I’m sure she did,” Clark said with no hint of sarcasm. “Lois is very good at helping newbies. She sure taught me a lot.”

“A senior reporter’s job,” I said breezily, but inwardly, I was shaken. The truth was, I had only been able to write the retrospective Superman article because I had learned how to do what I termed the “touchy-feely” stuff from Clark. In fact, I had written a great deal of that article by imagining what he would have said and how he would have said it.

“Well,” Jimmy said, “I should probably get going.”

“Already?” Clark clearly struggled to sit up straight, his gaze moving to the news. “But I haven’t heard about your latest girlfriend.”

“What girlfriend?” Jimmy said morosely, once more sinking back to the couch. “Like I told you before, I haven’t had a girlfriend since Lucy moved to California.”

I bit back a comment and studied Clark over the top of the file I was supposedly reading. It was obvious that he was exhausted, and I was pretty sure he couldn’t be that pressingly concerned about Jimmy’s love life...so why didn’t Clark want him to leave?

My breath caught in my throat. Unless...unless he didn’t want to be alone with me? Maybe my tactlessness had offended him. Or—a much more likely possibility—he was afraid I’d start asking him some serious questions once we were alone.

Clark kept Jimmy there for another ten minutes before I decided that I needed to intervene. “Clark, you need some rest,” I said bluntly. “Jimmy can come back later. We—”

“Actually,” Clark moved his gaze from another news report about Superman to Jimmy, “I needed to ask you something, Jimmy. As you can see, I can’t go anywhere right now, but I need all my records on Luthor, and they’re hidden quite a ways away. You still have your car?”

“Yeah.” Jimmy nodded. “It’s not much, but it can get me places.”

“Good. Do you think Perry would let you leave for a couple days if it were for the investigation? If I gave you written-out directions, would you mind getting my stuff for me?”

“I wouldn’t mind.” Jimmy shrugged. “And I think the Chief can get by without me now that I’m not having to reset his bass and fix the horn on his golf cart all the time. Where do you have the stuff stashed?”

“I’ve written the directions down,” Clark said slowly, pulling a piece of paper out from beneath his leg. “But memorize them, Jimmy,

and then burn the paper as fast as you can. And don't ever read or speak the directions out loud—you never know who's listening. And don't tell anyone where you're going. Can you do all that?"

"But why—"

"Please, Jimmy." Clark turned that same pleading expression he had given me earlier onto the kid. And if I hadn't been able to resist it, I was absolutely certain that Jimmy didn't stand a chance. I was right, too.

"All right, CK. If it's important to you, I'll do it."

"Thanks, Jimmy." Clark shook Jimmy's hand, his smile a bit tremulous. "I've missed hearing you call me that."

"Well, then, make sure you stick around this time, okay?" Jimmy grinned at Clark's slow nod and stood. "I'll see you later, then, CK. Good night, Lois."

"Good night, Jimmy." I stood and locked the door behind him. When I turned back to Clark, I saw him picking up the remote and flicking off the television he had insisted remain on all day.

"Why did you ask him to go get the stuff?" I asked quietly. Out of all the questions boiling up within me, I'm not sure why that was the first I uttered.

Clark stiffened. "Did you want to get it?" he replied.

"No. But why did you tell him he couldn't even keep the directions?"

"Luthor's dangerous, Lois." Clark finally turned to face me, his gaze steady, his expression sincere. "He has resources very few people would guess he has. He's powerful enough to control every criminal operation on the eastern seaboard, and smart enough to keep it hidden from everyone for years. I don't think we should be underestimating him...or his tools."

"Hmm. Maybe so, but I still think you're acting a little paranoid." I crossed my arms over my chest. And yet, inwardly, I was pleased. Clark had always been the more sensible one of our duo. I couldn't even begin to count the number of times he had tried to stop me from doing something a little reckless. He had even, astonishingly, succeeded a few times.

"Please, Lois, just..." Clark sighed and fiddled with his glasses. "Just humor me."

"It's all right, Clark." I crossed the room, sat at his side, and placed a warm hand on his arm, stilling his nervous mannerism. "Le—Luthor scares me too, but we'll get him."

"Thanks, Lois." Again, he smiled at me, and again, I reminded myself that it was a miracle he could still smile at all. But I didn't want this tired, washed-out, polite, weary smile. I wanted his brilliant, blinding, incinerating smile, the one that almost always preceded a delayed chuckle, the one that stemmed from a quiet confidence and gentle grace such as only Clark Kent had possessed. I wanted the smile that reassured me he was just as he had always been.

"Have you finished your list of the proof you have?" I questioned, aware that our silence had stretched out like a strained rubber band.

"Not quite yet; I'm sorry. Did you need help with your research?"

Under the guise of looking at the files I had strewn all across the coffee table, I considered what I should do. Both Henderson and Perry had warned me to be careful with Clark, and I really was trying, but impatience was burning underneath my skin like its own network of veins. I didn't want to be cooped up in this tiny apartment looking at paperwork when I could be talking to Superman.

"Listen, Clark, this stuff can wait until tomorrow. I think I might just take a walk and see if I can't find Superman. I can ask him all the questions you had for him earlier—which I'm sure he'll have an explanation for. It'll—"

"No!" Clark had gone so pale that I instinctively put out my hands to grasp his shoulders, certain he was about to faint. "Please, Lois, don't leave! Henderson said we should stay here. And the bodyguards—"

"Clark, I'm a reporter, not a desk jockey!" Trying to contain the edginess that had been building up within me all day, I sprang to my feet and began to pace. "I can't sit around and let other people do my

running for me! And *Superman*, Clark—he's alive! Do you know what that means?"

"I think I do." His quiet words cut through my arguments and dampened the skitters of impatience sparking through my body. "It means you don't have to blame yourself anymore. It means you're freed of all the guilt you've heaped on yourself. It means your dreams...can still come true. It means a second chance."

"Exactly!" I sat beside him and placed an earnest hand on his knee. "Clark, I *need* to see him."

"I know that." He placed his own hand atop mine, the weight of it sturdy and comforting, the feverish heat of it frightening. "But, Lois...I..." He withdrew his hand to run it through his hair, a nervous habit that was as familiar as it was endearing.

It was time for me to give back to him—hadn't that been my own earlier decision? Hadn't I, just this morning, promised myself that I wouldn't let him down?

Swallowing back my sense of urgency, I smiled gently at Clark and patted him on the shoulder. "You're right, Clark. It's late already, and we've been at it all day. Why don't I put on a movie or something? Tomorrow's soon enough."

Clark's hand dropped to his lap and it was his turn, finally, to gape at me. "What?"

"One night can't hurt anything. And I was just kidnapped, so an evening of relaxation is probably exactly what I need."

"You're serious?" Given my cooperation, Clark didn't seem to know what to do with it. "Are you...sure you're all right with this?"

"Clark..." Once more, I took his hand. Ours had always been a somewhat physical relationship—which baffled me, really, since, post-Claude, I hadn't been all that comfortable around men—but I couldn't remember ever feeling such a need to hold his hand or pat his shoulder or feel his arm near me. Though I didn't want to admit it, maybe I was still afraid of losing him, of turning around and finding that he wasn't really there, of waking up alone again.

"Clark," I said again. "I understand that you don't want to be alone, and it's all right. I promised I'd be there for you, remember?"

"Yes. I do." His smile wasn't as blinding as the ones I longed for, but it was radiant in its own way.

For the rest of the evening, I didn't allow myself to even consider leaving the apartment, or wonder how I could contact Superman, or think about all the questions I wanted to ask him. Instead, I sat next to Clark, and I laughed at the movie, and I luxuriated in the feel of Clark's arm around my shoulders, and I remembered all the reasons I had missed Clark Kent.

When the credits began to roll, I turned my head toward Clark. An involuntary smile curved my lips when I saw him sleeping, his glasses sliding off his nose and a lock of hair draped across his temple. I allowed myself to simply watch him for a moment, stunned by the amount of protectiveness I could feel toward a single person.

"Clark," I finally whispered. I was reluctant to disturb him, but I knew he'd sleep better on the cot the police had set up under a window in the bedroom—the cot he had earlier made me promise would be his. "Clark, wake up."

He stirred and sleepily looked up at me. He'd been weak all day, but it was only since evening had fallen that he had begun to look and act so weary. Whatever drug Luthor had dosed him with was obviously still in his system, and it scared me. The medic had quietly explained to me that if Clark had been consistently dosed with a narcotic, we could be facing a torturous withdrawal. He'd warned me of several symptoms to watch for, yet I was desperately hoping that Clark would exhibit none of them.

"Come on, Clark." I stood and took his hands to help him to his feet. "Time for bed."

I helped him to the bathroom door, then kept myself busy tidying up things in the living room. Every instinct I had was screaming at me to help Clark, but I wanted to let him do as much as he thought he could. Remembering what he had said this morning when I asked him how to help him, I could do nothing but respect his wish to accustom

himself to his own new limits.

When Clark emerged, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt and fiddling with his glasses, I watched him to make sure he got into the cot all right. “You have enough blankets?” I asked him worriedly, trying my hardest not to hover.

“I’m fine. Do you think the sun will shine through this window?”

Despite myself, I chuckled. “I knew you’d ask that, so I made sure of it. What is your deal with sunlight, anyway?”

Pulling the blankets up around himself, Clark shrugged. “I don’t know all the specifics, but...it makes me feel stronger, better, more alive.”

“Well then...” I paused, suddenly realizing that in a bizarre sort of way, I was tucking him in. In all the scenarios I had dreamt up over the last two months of what we’d do if I ever saw him again, this had not even been a possibility.

“Good night, Lois. Thanks for helping me out.” Clark’s words defused my sudden awkwardness. He had always seemed to possess a sixth sense for me, able to instantly detect if I was uncomfortable around him, and he had a real talent for keeping himself unthreatening.

“You’re welcome, Clark. I’ll see you in the morning, all right?”

“Yeah. And, Lois...” He waited until I turned to look at him, his own face cloaked in shadows while I stood in a beam of light emanating from the living room. “Please, be careful.”

I frowned at the unusual good night, though inwardly I was pleased that he cared so much. “Of course. And you...dream of the sun.”

“Always.” It was the same reply he had made when I asked if he dreamed of me, and I had the distinct impression that he considered it to be the same question. That should have made me uncomfortable; it should have scared me into thinking up a way to get him out of my apartment. Instead, I found myself smiling as I walked back to the living room.

I don’t know why I was surprised. Clark had always had that effect on me.

Chapter 7

I tried. I really did. I cleaned up all my research and made sure it was ready to be looked through in the morning. I rearranged a couple items of furniture to make it easier for Clark to move around and situated a chair close to one of the windows in case—or rather, *when*—he wanted to soak in some more sunlight. I even washed the coffee mugs used by all our visitors. But in the end, I just couldn’t stay inside. Lois Lane had been resurrected such a short time ago, and she was much too alive now for me to hold still.

Slinging on a jacket, I made certain to lock the door carefully behind me. With any luck, Clark would sleep deeply and never know I had briefly left. With even better luck, I’d be able to find Superman. I didn’t allow myself to consider just how much astronomical luck I’d need to get more than just a moment with the superhero.

The bodyguards Henderson had assigned me were probably around somewhere, but I didn’t waste my time looking for them. If I ended up just taking a walk around the block, they could follow me; if Superman actually made an appearance, they could take a break.

“Superman?” I called quietly, little louder than a whisper. He had promised he would be around, and Clark had seemed to think he could hear a fire in a Metropolis warehouse even while answering emergencies out of the country, so...okay, maybe it was a stupid idea, but it was the only one I had. He had, after all, told me himself that he had good hearing. “Superman?”

“Good evening, Lois.”

I whirled and found myself looking up at Superman, hovering a foot in the air, his cape swirling about his shoulders. Awe choked me for a moment, and all I could do was smile mutely up at him. When I finally got my voice back, I managed an intelligent, “Superman!”

“You called?” The nearby streetlights illuminated the flash of humor in his dark eyes.

“I...yes, I did.” I straightened, furiously trying to get a hold of my

dignity. “I wasn’t sure it would work, but I...I needed to talk to you. *Wanted* to talk to you,” I amended a bit breathily. Every time he left, I swore I’d be more calm and collected the next time I spoke with him, and every time I saw him again, I broke that promise. It was even worse now, when I had, for so long, thought him dead.

“Well, this is a bit conspicuous.” Superman glanced over his shoulder—probably straight at the bodyguards I hadn’t yet caught a glimpse of. “Why don’t I give you a lift?”

My breath caught in my throat. He couldn’t possibly mean...could he? “A lift?” I repeated. “You mean...”

His amused smile was rare and even more amazing than his usual stern expression. “I mean...a lift.” And his arms lifted me from the ground and collected me close to his chest.

And I was flying.

Delighted by his gesture—and an excuse to loop my arms around his neck—I ignored the sight of Metropolis falling away beneath my feet and stared up at Superman. I wanted to memorize every one of his features—I *had* memorized them all, poring over every newsclip and photograph available—but he was different in the flesh. More real, more stunning, more...just *more*.

“Wow,” I said aloud, doing my best not to appear too awed. The flight was amazing, no question; he, however, was enough to amaze even the most jaded individual. “This beats taking a cab.”

Superman’s chuckle rumbled through his chest, making his amusement a sensation I felt as well as heard. “I’m rather fond of it myself.”

“You are?” I winced, but it was too late. The words had already winged their way out into the skies cradling our bodies. “I mean, it’s...well, natural for you, kind of like walking is for us, you know? So, well, I just wasn’t sure you thought of it as—”

I could have kissed him when he interrupted my nervous rambling. Actually, I could have kissed him, period. “I enjoy the small pleasures as well the large, Lois.” His voice caressed me; his eyes enflamed me.

My stomach dropped out from under me, lost to the night’s mist behind us. Even an explosion going off right next to us couldn’t have gotten me to look away from him at that moment. It would be so easy to believe that we were the only two people in the world, that the moon and stars were shining just for us, and that he was telling me so much more than he was saying. But I had just barely gotten him back after thinking him gone forever. That was enough of a miracle for me to try to comprehend...at least for now.

So I found breath enough to form a small laugh, and I tore my eyes from his piercingly intent gaze. “I should have known. Clark said you were probably just like us, that without the flying you could be an ordinary person.”

“No.” Superman drew me a little closer to himself, his skin radiating a warmth almost enough to counteract the January chill around us. “I am different. But there are some things that are the same.”

Idiot! I raged inwardly at myself. He’s staring right at you, taking you out for a flight, and you can’t even get yourself to form a single coherent sentence! Wake up! Show him—and yourself—that you can be a competent reporter again!

“Uh...” I had to swallow to give myself time to come up with a few more intelligible words. “Clark also said that you...he was...have you spoken to Henderson?”

“I did. Why?”

“Did he mention that the warehouse where you found us was burnt to the ground last night?”

“Yes.” Superman met my questioning eyes, his expression grave. “Trust me, Lois: had I known there was a fire there, I would certainly have protected those men.”

“I know.” Daringly, I reached up and ran my hand down his neck and along his shoulder. “You were saving innocent people—and, well, I know you don’t presume to esteem one life above another, but...you were doing what you always do—saving the world.”

“Still...I—”

Oddly, his downcast expression reminded me of Clark. “You were doing what you thought best,” I told him, feeling a bit more confident. It was strange how emboldening it was to realize that Superman could use encouragement just as Clark or Jimmy or myself could.

He arched a brow in an almost sardonic expression. “Henderson said Clark sounded like he thought I left them there on purpose.”

“He’s not well yet,” I said quickly in Clark’s defense. No matter how confused his attitude made me, I didn’t want Superman to lose Clark as a friend, not when it seemed he was his *only* friend. “He just needs a few more days to get acclimated to freedom.”

“Clark’s been through a lot,” Superman remarked in a somber tone. Beneath us, the clouds parted to reveal a glittering reflection of the skies, marred by the slithering movement of waves. “I don’t know if you realize just how much he endured. It would be hard for anyone to recover from the things done to him, let alone for someone as innocent as Clark.”

“He’s strong,” I assured us both. “He’ll get through this—I know he will.”

“I hope you’re right, Lois.” There was something incredibly deep and profoundly sad in Superman’s expression, and he turned his face away from me as if realizing I wasn’t ready to see the truths written there.

“He will be okay,” I insisted stubbornly. “He and I are already working on proving that Lex is behind all this.”

“Luthor?” Superman shifted me in his arms so he could peer into my face

“Didn’t you see him at the warehouse?”

“No. Is he the one responsible for hurting you?”

I let out a scoffing breath. “He’s responsible for most of the crimes in the city. Clark and I are investigating him so we can expose him to the world. We’re going to see to it that he pays for his crimes. You could help,” I added, visions of working side by side with Superman flashing before my eyes like an irresistible temptation.

“If I can,” he replied succinctly, the tiniest hint of a smile lifting the right corner of his mouth. “I am kept somewhat busy with emergencies.”

“I know.” I smiled warmly. The feel of his arms holding me free of gravity, the warmth of his body so close to mine, the sensation of his breath skimming past my cheek, it was all making me forget my decision to accept his miraculous return without wanting more. “I’ve been watching you on the news all day.”

“Have you?”

“Yes. Clark will hardly let us turn it off. He likes to be able to see you. I don’t think he quite believes any of this is real yet.”

“And you?” Superman asked, his voice gone soft and low. “Do you believe this is real?”

“I…” I swallowed, then gave a tiny laugh. “Some moments are easier than others.”

“How about now?” Superman looked upward, and I followed the direction of his gaze as we flew straight up though a bank of clouds. And there, unrolled before us was the moon, huge and shimmering and whiter than I had ever before seen it. The clouds lapped at Superman’s waist, unable to pull him back to the Earth, unable to claim him fully as their own.

“It’s beautiful!” I gasped. “And,” I added softly, my hand tightening on his neck, “this moment seems more like a dream than real life.”

“I am real, Lois.” Superman wasn’t looking at the awe-inspiring scenery around us; he was gazing intently at me. “I’m not just a figment of imagination or a disguise that fades away when you look at it too closely. I’m here to stay.”

Furiously, I blinked back tears. Language escaped me, as did the skill of moving my mouth to shape words. I could no more have spoken in that moment than I could have flown without Superman’s capable help. It was my fault Superman had been run out of the city thinking he was responsible for the heat-wave—though I had later

cleared his name, the vindication had come too late. But now Superman was back… and joy suffused me with a glowing thrill that rivaled the moon behind us.

“Are you cold?” he asked gently.

Until he voiced the question, I had been unaware of the temperature, conscious only of the fact that I was being held in the arms of a living, breathing miracle, but now that he had broken the spell, chills began to shiver along my skin. My coat did little to counter the fridity stirred by the shifting clouds through which we were wading.

“A little,” I admitted, afraid that if I said more, he’d take me away from this small, infinite pocket of air that seemed to be his world.

“Here.” Holding me securely with one arm, he reached back and gathered his cape, then wrapped me in its warm, red folds.

If I hadn’t already been madly in love with him before, I would have fallen for him again right then. He might claim he was real, but there was so much about him that could only be described as “too good to be true.” I couldn’t begin to understand why he had singled me out among all the reporters swarming around the shuttle launch, or why he held me so much more tenderly during a rescue than he did anyone else, but I was extremely grateful for it. The awed crush birthed the moment he had smiled at me after swallowing a bomb had grown into so much more when he had cupped my cheek in his long fingers and promised me I would always be special to him. And now… now I wouldn’t hesitate to call it true love.

“I come here a lot,” Superman explained quietly, finally looking away from me to survey the magnified stars around us. “Between the stars and the Earth, not part of either one—this is where I belong. It’s quiet up here, serene, and yet, looking down at the cities below, I can see how much I am needed. I have the might, which means I have the right to do what I can to help people.”

“It’s an enormous responsibility,” I remarked, filled with a boundless admiration for this so-powerful man who used his abilities only for good. He was like all the stories of knights in shining armor and prince charming and angels put together… and yet he was real. I could feel his heart thumping steadily beneath my hand, could feel his chest rising and falling with his breaths, and was warmed by my proximity to his skin.

Superman half-shrugged. “It’s my place.”

“But…” I glanced around me to take in the emptiness of the sky, the sight of the earth below impeded by the engulfing clouds. “Don’t you ever get lonely?” I inwardly winced even before the question had been fully asked, my thoughts tainted with panic-tinged horror. Out loud, it sounded even more like a come-on than it had in the instant before I spoke it.

The night air caressed us with silken fingers as cold as Luthor’s eyes had been when he threatened to slowly kill Clark. Silence—as heavy as the gravity that couldn’t conquer Superman—covered us, cloaking the air in a pall of emptiness. Superman stared at me silently, as if he weren’t quite sure what to make of my thoughtless question.

“I mean,” I added hastily, my mind racing in an effort to make the question seem innocent. “Well, don’t you have anyone that helps you? Or that you can talk to? I mean, I know you and Clark are friends, but you haven’t been able to talk to him for a month.”

Tact, I thought mournfully. Tact and patience—harder to acquire than a Pulitzer, but, boy, did I need them, and fast!

“Friends?” Superman repeated. He spoke the word slowly, as if he were mulling it over, considering it from every angle.

“Well, yeah.” A tiny pang of disappointment pierced the haze of awe surrounding me, mixed in amongst the cloud’s vapor. Why did Clark and Superman cling so tightly to the ridiculous façade that they hardly knew each other when they had to know I had figured out just how much of a lie that was? “I know you used to talk to him—you treated his apartment like it was your home too. And when he called you at his place while Alan Morris and I were there, you acted like you spoke to him all the time. But… who do you talk to now?”

Superman’s eyes darkened, and his fingers spread over my back as

if to encompass the whole of me. “I’m talking to you.”

“Yes.” A giggle escaped me—well, *not* a giggle! I did *not* giggle. It was more of a... a strained chuckle. Yes, that was it. We were very high up, after all, and the air was thinner than I was used to. “You are.” When he said nothing, his eyes devouring me, swallowing me whole in their fathomless depths, I finally managed to regain enough coherence to add, “I want to help you, Superman. You can talk to me whenever you want.”

“Thank you, Lois. That means a lot to me.” He ducked his head, and for a searing instant, I thought he was going to kiss me. My stomach dropped out of my feet and fell toward the ground; my thoughts scattered in a dizzying whirl and left me with only the sudden realization that I was thousands of feet above the earth, held aloft only by a pair of arms; my entire body went completely motionless, unable to move an iota.

But Superman only adjusted the cape around me, drew me closer to his chest, and began to descend back toward the Earth. Broken from my breathless anticipation, I felt almost sick, knowing that I had only minutes left with him, that any moment now he would be setting me down and stepping back, taking with him the comfort of his embrace, the security of his hold, the warmth of his cape, the enthrallment of his presence.

Slowly, trying not to draw attention to the fact yet hardly caring if he noticed, I snuggled in closer to him, sliding my hand up his shoulder toward his neck, turning my face into his chest and closing my eyes. Every sensation, every breath, every instant—I burned it all into my memory. Even if this was the only time I ever flew with Superman and experienced such a personal moment with him, I would have this night to treasure and remember.

But I wanted so much more than one flight, one moment, one secret.

I wanted a *lot* more.

“I’ll set you down on the street,” Superman murmured in my ear, his voice pitched low enough to send a shiver down my spine. “It’s better if Clark doesn’t see us.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, reluctant to open my eyes or lift my head from its comfortable perch, knowing that his sensitive hearing would pick up the words anyway. “I can’t imagine how hard it is to get your friend back only to have him...”

“Dislike me?” Superman finished for me.

Jarred by a flash of how awful it would have been if Clark had treated me as he was Superman, I stirred myself to meet Superman’s shadowed gaze. “I’m sorry,” I said again, hating the uselessness of the words yet willing them to mean something. “I’ll try to talk to him, Superman, get him to realize that you’re still his friend.”

Though he gave me a small smile, Superman said nothing, and I knew he didn’t think talking to Clark would do any good. And really, I didn’t either, but I refused to just give up.

He set me down on his feet, and I bit back my protest when his cape dropped away from my body and left me exposed to the elements. “Well, good night, Lois. Remember, I’m watching.”

“My own guardian angel,” I teased, rewarded with his quiet chuckle.

“I forgot my wings at home.” He reached out his hand but curled it around my shoulder rather than my cheek.

“You don’t need them,” I told him. “The cape is more than enough.”

An almost childlike grin changed the superhero’s entire demeanor. “I like it, too.” He sobered quickly, however. “I’d better be going. I’m required elsewhere.”

“Good night.” I wanted to add something personal, like the notes in Clark’s postcards, but before I could think of anything, he was gone, a blur and a whoosh that faded away and left me standing alone.

I almost floated back into my apartment building and up to my floor. Fortunately, I came back to the earth in time to remember to be quiet as I unlocked the door and entered. I made certain to turn the locks again behind me and moved toward the bedroom, shedding my

coat as I went.

Moving in the dark, I nonetheless looked over toward the cot, reassured of a fear I hadn’t even known I possessed when I saw the silhouette of Clark lying beneath his blankets. Oddly, he was still wearing his glasses, the lenses marked by the lights reflecting off the glass. No doubt it was another aspect of his long imprisonment—perhaps having been without the glasses so long, he was afraid to set them aside—and I shrugged it aside as I tiptoed toward the bathroom.

“Are you all right?” Clark’s voice—worried and helpless—startled me and I jumped a good foot into the air.

Trying to convince my heart that it wouldn’t do any good to escape my chest, I stepped to Clark’s side. “Yes, Clark, I’m fine.” Surprise made me sound more irritated than I had intended—well, surprise and exasperation. I was an exceptional reporter and a very good snoop, if I did say so myself, yet I never seemed to be able to get one over on Clark.

“Lois.” Clark’s voice was incredibly hesitant. Usually, his natural politeness was tempered by the confidence that seemed so inherent to him; now, however, that confidence was hard to detect. “You should be careful with him.”

“With who?” I asked innocently.

With a sigh, Clark obliged me. “With Superman.”

“Why?” I demanded, belatedly realizing that the tone of my voice was probably not what Henderson had meant when he warned me to be patient and exactly what he had meant when he doubted I was capable of that patience. “Superman’s saved both our lives—not to mention the entire world!”

“Lois, you don’t know anything about him!” Finally my own irritation must have gotten through to Clark because, for the first time since he had told me to call Luthor the Boss, his voice rose with frustration. “You don’t know his motives or his whereabouts or his... his... well, he could be married for all you know!”

“Married?” I repeated incredulously. “Superman? Clark, that’s ridiculous—” Abruptly, I paused. Clark knew so much more about the superhero than I did, but he would never betray confidences. So... what if Clark knew something I didn’t and was trying to warn me? But if that were the case, why had he once told me Superman might just be afraid to reveal his true feelings? Maddeningly, Clark’s expression was concealed in the darkness. “Did he tell you he was married?” I asked cautiously.

Again, my emotion was reflected in Clark’s voice. “W-what do you mean?”

I shrugged, impatient with the deflection. “When we were flying, he mentioned that he talked to you.”

“He took you flying?” There was a bleak, yet oddly wistful, note to Clark’s voice that paused me and dampened my frustration. I hated this. Why couldn’t Clark just be happy with friendship? Why did he always have to compare himself to the superhero? Why couldn’t he understand that he was perfect just the way he was and that he didn’t need to fly to be special in his own way? Why hadn’t I understood that before now?

“Yes,” I answered shortly. “Anyway, Clark, I know you guys are friends and—”

“What... what makes you think that?”

“Are you saying you’re not?” I asked bluntly.

“Lois, the man you were flying with, he isn’t—” Clark went silent as suddenly as if someone had clamped a hand over his mouth. By the dim light emanating in from the light in the bathroom, I saw his head tilt toward the window beside him. The shadowed lump that was Clark seemed to shrink and curl in on itself. His voice was shuttered when he spoke again. “I don’t know him all that well. I just think you should be careful.”

Incredibly, I softened. It wasn’t my usual tactic, but Clark had been so lost recently that I couldn’t help it. And as always, he was only looking out for me. “I’ll be all right, Clark. I know he’s a superhero, and I know he belongs to the whole world. In fact, that... was illustrated to me pretty clearly tonight. Don’t worry. I won’t let my

expectations get too out of hand, all right?"

"Lois, that's n—" He cut off as suddenly as before, then sighed in dejection. "All right. Good night."

"Good night, Clark." I watched him a moment longer, but when he made no further move, I turned and went into the bathroom. I readied for bed as quickly and quietly as possible before slipping under the covers. The mere thought of sleeping seemed impossible, not when my mind was jumbled with images of Clark and flashes of being held aloft in Superman's arms and snippets of conversations with both men and the cold, harsh memory of Lex threatening all that I loved and held dear.

Yet as impossible as it seemed, I did sleep. And as could be expected with that shifting collage of thoughts and memories, I dreamed a nightmare.

I was standing on the ledge of a tall building and looking at Superman, who hovered in the air before me as if the ledge extended another two feet. He was gazing at me with the same expression he had worn when I woke in Clark's apartment to find Superman watching over me while we were investigating the Golden Boy Barnes story.

Later, after waking, I couldn't remember what was said between us in the dream, but I knew that Superman and I were talking, one trapped by gravity, the other unhindered by any constraint. And then, suddenly—as happens in dreams—we were embracing, and I was holding fistfuls of his cape clenched in my hands as I pulled him closer to me.

We were about to kiss, I was sure of it—only, in my dream, I was much more confident about it than I had been adrift in the clouds. As he bent his head and moved his mouth close to mine, I felt the cape in my hands being pulled and stretched. Superman was slipping away, I realized, falling toward the far-away ground, prisoner to all that had once been unable to claim him. I called his name and tried to hold onto his cape, tried to pull him onto the ledge with me, but he was too heavy, too ponderous. And all the while, as I screamed his name and pulled at his cape, he said nothing, only stared up at me with an awful, crushing, sorrowful disappointment.

For one, breathless moment, I held him suspended in the air...and then he dropped.

"No!" I screamed. "Clark! Clark!"

But Clark didn't come and Superman was gone, swallowed up by distance and mist. And when I fell to my knees at the edge of solidity, bowed beneath the weight of grief and regret, I blinked my tears away to see what I held clenched in my hands. It wasn't Superman's cape anymore.

It was Clark's glasses.

"Clark," I whispered, and abruptly realized that it wasn't Superman who had slipped away from me—it was Clark. And he hadn't been torn from me—he had left of his own free will.

And in the curious way of dreams, I knew that if I jumped off the ledge out into open air—jumped to certain death—I would find him. So I stood at the very edge of solid ground to look out at the perilous drop, Clark's glasses clasped tightly in my hand, and...I couldn't do it. I couldn't jump, not unless Superman would catch me.

I had failed him. I was too afraid, too wounded, too human to rescue him, and so he was gone, left abandoned and desolate and haunted by shadows.

"Lois? Lois, please wake up. Shh, it's all right. It's okay. It's okay."

"Clark!" I wasn't sure whether I said the name in my dream or because I became aware that I was awake and that he was perched on the edge of the bed, holding me in his arms. I didn't care which it was. All that mattered was that he was still there, that he was holding me together, and that his whisper stirring my hair reassured me that it had all just been a dream.

"Clark," I said again and, ignoring the twinge of my sore shoulder, threw my arms around his neck. I didn't care what he thought of me or that Lois Lane wasn't supposed to fall apart; I just wanted him to hold

me. I just wanted to hide the tears trickling inexplicably down my cheeks. I just wanted to erase the pain of seeing Clark and Superman both slip away from me.

"Shh, it's okay. It's okay." Clark continued to repeat his soothing whispers, holding me tighter as I desperately clung to him. He was warm, single-handedly combating the chill that sought to pervade my body. He was solid, driving away the phantoms of my dream. He was alive, calming newly-awoken fears.

My breaths were more like shuddering gasps. I couldn't even bring myself to imagine pulling away from Clark, not yet, not for a hundred more years. It was as if all the trauma and fear and horror and stress and relief—all the reaction I hadn't allowed myself to feel earlier—were crashing down on me. I had been strong for Clark; I had been calm for Superman; I had been determined for Perry and Henderson; I had been confident for Jimmy. Now, however, in the middle of the night with only Clark as witness—surrounded by a darkness made softer than the cell's pitch blackness by the dim light glowing around us—I could drop all my masks and just be myself.

"Were you dreaming about Luthor?" Clark asked, worry and fear turning his voice to sandpaper.

All I could manage was a short shake of my head.

"Your kidnapping?"

"No," I whispered, burying my face even deeper into the cleft between his shoulder and his neck. I didn't want to try to put my dream into words, didn't want to try to explain it, didn't want to do anything but forget it. Seeming to read my mind, Clark stopped talking and simply held me, rocking me slightly back and forth until the shudders drained from my body and the tears evaporated and sleep once more began to tap on my shoulder.

"Here." Clark moved to lower me gently back to the pillows. Instantly, my entire body tensed and I held onto him with a death-grip, selfishly forgetting the bruises covering his flesh.

"Don't leave me." I pulled back just enough to look into his eyes, his expression finally revealed by the bathroom light, concern and tenderness limned in gold. "Please, don't leave me."

"Okay, I won't," he promised me, and I relaxed. Because Clark didn't lie, and if he promised me he'd stay, he would. Till the end of time.

Forcibly, I banished the memory of him walking away from me, disappearing behind the Planet's elevator doors.

"I'm right here," he murmured soothingly. "I'm right here."

Daring to loosen a hand from around his neck, I pushed the blankets aside so he could slide in beside me, then rearranged them over him when he settled himself next to me.

I had already curled up next to him, my eyes squeezed tightly shut, when I realized that I wasn't really being fair to him. It had been a well-known fact among the Planet's grapevine that Clark had a crush on me; I myself had recognized that since at least the second or third day I had known him. I should pull away, chuckle and say I was fine, let him go back to his own cot and save us both from future embarrassment.

But he had promised he wouldn't leave me.

And I didn't want him to go.

I needed him, and right now, he needed me. We had slept together in the cell without a second thought, and in a way, we were both still prisoners, both still locked away from the rest of the world and the future—he imprisoned by fear and I consumed with guilt. Both of us still trapped in that pocket of black void, frozen in time.

Besides, he felt so good and so safe, as if nothing could hurt me while he was protecting me. So I muted my inner argument, and I pressed closer to Clark, and I relaxed when he tightened his own arms around me, and I slept.

If I dreamed again, the dreams vanished into obscurity.

Chapter 8

Bruises ringed Clark's wrist.

They had probably been there the entire time I was in the cell with

him. Certainly, they had been there yesterday—in fact, I had even noted the fact that he was bruised over a significant portion of his visible body. But yesterday, I had had the relief of our freedom to counter the effects of the bruises. Yesterday, I had had my elation over Superman’s return from the grave. I had had my resolve to see Luthor put away for good and my confusion over Clark’s altered behavior.

Today, I had nothing.

Today, I woke with my head pillowed on Clark’s chest, my hand resting near my face, his hand lying reverently over mine, and the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was the black bruise adorning—scarring—his sharp wrist. Like pieces of darkness torn from our cell to rest beneath his flesh with the appearance of inescapable manacles.

And it was my fault.

No, I hadn’t been the one to beat him or menace him with a green drug or gloat over him. But I had let pride and work and anger stop me from doing what I was best at—investigating. What would it have taken to realize Clark was in trouble? Surely after not receiving a call from him after Nightfall’s destruction—to make sure I was all right, to hear me rave about Superman’s astonishing heroism—surely then I could have called his parents. And when I found out they were gone... well, wouldn’t that have jumpstarted me on a road that might have led to that tiny cell?

One phone call.

One phone call that had never happened, and now the sunlight Clark so craved fell in a wide swathe across the bedroom to shine a spotlight on what he had suffered as a result.

I didn’t, as I had halfway expected, feel embarrassed to wake up in the arms of my colleague and friend.

I felt ashamed.

I felt physically sick.

How could Clark not blame me for, if nothing else, at least the duration of his imprisonment? As nice as he was, as much as he liked me, didn’t human nature itself *demand* that some part of him—no matter how small and neglected a part—hate me for what had happened to him?

And yet, just as Superman said nothing about the heat-wave or my belated article proving his innocence, Clark had said nothing to indicate that he blamed me for anything that had happened to him. He didn’t say anything about how I had fought—no matter how uselessly—to keep Superman in Metropolis and yet refused to raise a finger to stop him from leaving. He didn’t breathe a word about the fact that I could have started a search for him weeks ago.

Instead, he tried to comfort me. He soothed my fears and chased my nightmares away. He gave and gave and gave, stark contrast to my suspicions and frustration and stubbornness. And I wondered if the darkness of that cell was actually encased in my heart even more so than in Clark’s flesh. His bruises would fade and disappear, banished by the light; mine might fester and grow in shadows.

Everyone was so concerned that Clark wouldn’t get over his captivity, but I hadn’t, frankly, seen that the forced imprisonment had changed Clark’s basic character all that drastically. But what about me? Would *I* ever be able to heal?

As smoothly as haste allowed, I slid free of Clark’s arms—cringing when he stirred in his sleep and whispered my name, relaxing fractionally when he calmed—and ran to the bathroom. When I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror, the dark circles under my eyes looked too much like Clark’s bruises, and I was abruptly, violently, ill.

I only wished that bitter failure was as easy to wash away as the taste of vomit.

Two men in my life—one a hero, the other a friend—and I had failed them both. Yet even Henderson had recognized the fact that Clark didn’t seem to have changed his opinion of me at all. And Superman...

For whatever reason, Superman seemed to hold me in high regard. I don’t know what I had done to deserve it—he had seemed to feel the same toward me even before I had introduced myself to him just

before our flight to the Daily Planet—and I don’t know why he had never seemed to revise it. Last night, he had looked at me with the same approving gaze he had given me since my first glimpse of him; he had spoken to me with the same level of openness and trust as when he had assured me I would always be special to him; he had shown me a new side of himself in a way that I had, quite honestly, never really expected.

But I didn’t deserve that level of consideration from either of them.

And with that dark realization, the joy of the day before disappeared, leaving bleak resolve in its place.

I showered and dressed out of habit, almost perfunctorily taking care of my gunshot wound. I was careful to avert my eyes from my reflection lest I once again be reminded of Clark’s pain. I made some toast and cut up some apples for breakfast, and I actually remembered to brew the coffee and set some water on the stove for Clark’s tea. And then I sat down in the living room and began going through all my intel on LexCorp. I couldn’t allow myself to be distracted by daydreams about Superman or worry for Clark’s mental and physical condition. I didn’t dare think about the past lest I find Lois Lane once more buried beneath a mountain of guilt and self-recrimination. I simply concentrated on the daunting task of bringing down Metropolis’s largest crime-lord.

“Lois?”

“Good morning, Clark.” I allowed myself a glance at Clark and instantly regretted it. The sight of him drooping and confused in the threshold to the bedroom was like a punch in the gut. He looked so vulnerable! Still! When would he be better? Would he *ever* be better? “There’s toast and apples in the kitchen. Please, eat some. You need the proteins, or vitamins, or whatever it is that food gives you.”

“Really?” The wry humor apparent in his voice stole my breath, but I dared not look away from the file in my hands.

“Yeah. Oh, and where did you put the list of what evidence you have? I’d like to look it over. Henderson’s supposed to send over copies of what they have later today.”

“It’s still on the notepad.” Though he gestured to the coffee table, he didn’t look away from me, and his brow was furrowed, as if he were trying to read my mind. Which scared me a little—he was so good at seeing everything I fought so hard to keep hidden.

“Call me if you need help with anything,” I said. It sounded more like a dismissal than a helpful offer.

“All right,” he said uncertainly.

Only when the bathroom door closed behind him did I lower the file and squeeze my eyes shut. What was I doing? Just because he was a reminder of all that I was seeking to atone for didn’t mean that I had to push him away!

When he emerged from the bathroom dressed and looking a tiny bit steadier on his feet, I managed to dredge up a smile for him. “Are you feeling any better?”

“I think so.” He said it confidently, but I wasn’t sure how far I could trust his assessment of his own condition since he had, after all, tried to tell me he felt fine the same night Superman rescued us.

“You didn’t shave,” I observed.

Almost nervously, he reached up and adjusted his glasses. “I...I wasn’t sure I’d be able to.”

“You’ve been shaving for a while now,” I observed dryly. “Surely it’s gotten easier over the years?”

“Well, I...” Again, he adjusted his glasses, and this time, I noticed that his hands were still shaky. Clark shifted his weight uncomfortably, a shadow darkening his expression.

“Let me do it,” I offered impulsively.

Clark froze. “I...I don’t think...”

“It can’t be that hard,” I interrupted, setting aside the papers and standing up. “Come on.”

Shaving his stubble wasn’t exactly taking down Luthor, but it was something that Clark needed. Something I could do for him. I knew Clark well enough to know that he would never countenance the idea

of me working to pay off a debt to him, but that wasn't what I was doing, not really. I just wanted to show him that I was willing to be his friend despite what my inactivity had cost him. I wanted to reassure him that he wasn't alone.

In my dream, both Superman and Clark had been torn from me, yet it was Superman who had given me that disappointed look. I hated analyzing myself or my dreams, but I couldn't shake the thought that Superman had been the one to be disillusioned because Clark knew me well enough not to expect anything more. He hadn't expected me to look for him in the month he had been captured. He had known I hadn't called his parents to find out what had happened to him. He had been surprised to realize that I possessed any incidental knowledge of him—such as what he took in his coffee.

But I *wanted* Clark to expect more from me. I wanted him to know without a doubt that I would stop him if he tried to leave again, that I would look for him if he disappeared, that I would never let anyone hurt him again. Helping him shave was just a symbol of my silent promise to him.

Clark stayed utterly still and strangely quiet while I erased the dark hints of stubble from his face. His eyes never left my face, which could have been discomfiting. Could have been...but it wasn't. Instead, I kept my own expression open and friendly, though it did flicker with surprise when he ducked away from my attempt to remove his glasses.

"I'd rather keep them on," he said quietly.

"All right," I agreed slowly.

I finished in silence, my movements slowing when I took a washrag to wipe his face dry. He was quiescent beneath my touch, his eyes almost painfully intent upon mine. And suddenly I couldn't help wondering how many times he had broken the silence of his cell to beg me to search for him. How many times had he prayed that I was coming for him? How many times had his voice echoed in the confines of that black cell only to fall on deaf ears? Was that why he was silent now?

My hands shook, and I hastily lowered the cloth, turning away to hide my shattered expression from Clark.

"Lois." His voice was as gentle as the hand on my arm freezing me in place. "You're not still blaming yourself for Superman's exile, are you?"

That was close enough to my thoughts that I promised myself I'd never again believe him when he said he couldn't read minds.

"No," I said shortly. "You're all done. You need to eat something."

"It's not your fault, Lois. You can't take responsibility for other people's actions or crimes."

"I know." I faced him, forcing a smile that did nothing to smooth out the crease in his brow. "I'm just...I'm eager to find something on Luthor. He's probably laughing right now, thinking he's gotten away with kidnapping just like he's gotten away with everything else."

"He probably is," Clark agreed far more evenly than I could have in his place. "Just remember that he's the one behind everything. He was the one who framed Superman for the heat-wave, not you. He's the one who—"

"He *framed* Superman?" I gaped at Clark, staggered by the revelation.

"Well..." A strangely panicked expression washed the concern from his features. "You...I read your article that proved it was LexCorp Nuclear Plant that had been causing the rise in temperature. That Superman was innocent."

"It was," I said impatiently. "But...it wasn't an accident? I mean, I suspected that Luthor knew his Plant had problems and covered it up, but...you think he did it intentionally?"

Clark seemed to shrink in on himself. "That's what he said. He...he liked to brag about how he had pulled Superman down from the skies."

"Something else I should have investigated," I remarked, bitterness tainting my tone.

"Please, Lois, don't do this." Clark stood to place his hands on my

shoulders. "Did you take responsibility for the Messenger's explosion? Did you blame yourself for the fires started by the Toasters? Did you confess to complicity in your father's work? Just because you report on the stories—or don't know about them to report them—does not mean they're your fault. This was all Luthor's doing—let *him* take the heat for it!"

It was hard to see him; his features blurred as if I were looking at him through water. And I was—tiny drops of salty water. "But...you were his prisoner for a *month*, Clark! I could have gotten you out! I *should* have gotten you out!"

"Shh, it's not your fault." Clark pulled me into a hug as naturally as if we were simply shaking hands—more naturally, even. As soon as his arms were around me, holding me close to his too-slight frame and comforting warmth, I felt tension drain away. My bones threatened to collapse in a trembling pile; my muscles relaxed with a single touch; my emotions calmed and settled, allowing his convincing arguments to echo and rebound within my head.

"I am sorry, Clark." I lifted my head to look up at him, though I didn't step out of his embrace. I didn't think I was yet strong enough to stand on my own. Which was odd, considering the fact that he was the one who wavered on his feet. "I understand, in theory, that your captivity is not my fault. But...I'm still sorry that I didn't look for you."

"And I'm sorry that I left you." His smile was only an imitation of the ones he used to give out, but it was a smile nonetheless, and for now, it was enough. "So, no more apologies? No more beating yourself up over things that aren't your fault?"

"I guess," I said, pretending casualness in order to conceal just how much his open forgiveness was affecting me. "Just make sure you eat something—you look like you're going to blow away," I added as I reluctantly took a step away from him. A flicker of something—disappointment?—passed across his face when his arms fell back to his sides.

I walked with him to the kitchen and made sure he was eating before I returned to the research on Luthor. Strangely, I was even more determined than before to see Luthor sentenced to life in prison.

Clark's forgiveness should have allayed my terrible impatience for justice; instead, it only seemed to make it stronger. Clark was so good, so open, so...so undeserving of the things Luthor had done to him.

And Superman...Superman deserved justice for being driven from his home. I could still remember the crushing pain he had tried to hide the day he had said goodbye in the midst of that crowded hallway in the courthouse. It had devastated him to think he had been responsible for the heat-wave; it had almost destroyed him to be asked to leave the city he had adopted as his own. I could only imagine how hard it must have been to travel constantly from city to city, country to country, always moving lest he bring down the sun's heat on those around him, never able to use his powers to allay the suffering he encountered.

All Lex Luthor's fault—not mine. Clark was right. Luthor was the monster, and it was up to me—and Clark—to take that monster down.

Henderson himself came by to deliver the MPD material as well as some forms we needed to fill out in order to file a formal statement. I greeted the inspector distractedly and listened only well enough to register how little the police actually had managed to get on Luthor. Clark's list of proof was a bit more impressive, including copies of actual files that proved Luthor had implemented his plan to build his own space-station *before* the Messenger had been sabotaged, witnesses who claimed that Luthor had funded the development of the Toaster weapons and the Mentamide 5, transcripts of phone conversations between LexTower and known terrorist groups, and photographs of a blurry Luthor confronting Roarke and Congressman Harrington the night before they turned up dead from an alleged "botched mugging."

"How did you get all this?" Henderson asked incredulously after he had skimmed the list. I wasn't sure I had ever seen the laconic inspector so impressed before.

Clark shrugged. He was ensconced in a chair by the window where he could soak in the sunlight. "I realized almost from the moment I

came into town that Luthor was corrupt, so I started investigating him right away.”

Henderson shook his head. “If you ever want to become an inspector, just let me know. I’ll have the paperwork ready.”

Slowly, Clark’s eyes moved to me, though I pretended not to notice. “No thanks, Bill.”

“Well, I’m already feeling much better about leaving this investigation to you two.” Henderson shot me a warning glance. “Just be careful, please. Luthor’s sure to have a way to explain away seventy or eighty percent of what we have. You two as witnesses, however, that’s what’ll tip the case.”

“Superman’s looking out for us,” I assured him.

The inspector nodded, clearly relieved. “Good. I was hoping he’d keep an eye on you. All right. I’d better leave. No need to draw more attention your way than absolutely necessary. You’re looking better, Kent.”

“Lois is taking good care of me,” he said. For some reason, he seemed more subdued than he had a moment earlier.

“It must be the sunlight,” I said with a puzzled frown. “You’d almost think it had healing powers the way you sit in it all the time.”

“Whatever works,” Henderson interjected.

As soon as the inspector had left, I returned to my obsessive perusal of our proof. Clark was going through some files, too, but out of the corner of my eye, I noticed him dozing off a few times. The medic had said it was a good thing if he got a lot of rest, so I didn’t disturb him.

I wasn’t aware of how much time had passed until my stomach growled in dissatisfaction. Surprised, I glanced up and realized that the noon hour had come and been replaced by early afternoon. Guiltily realizing that I hadn’t bothered to see that Clark ate any lunch, I glanced over at him. He was slumped over in the chair, a file resting in his lap, his head propped up against the back of the chair as he slept. In the sunlight, his skin looked almost golden, and I dared to hope that it had permanently lost its ashen tint.

Promising myself that when he woke, I’d make sure he ate something, I ignored my own hunger and turned back to the research. Maybe I couldn’t solve this in a day, but I was determined to give it my best effort. I wanted Clark to feel safe again. I wanted Superman to feel welcome again. And I... I wanted closure. I wanted to put this chapter of my life behind me forever.

“Lois?”

Startled out of my intent focus, I looked up. “Clark!”

He set a hand to the coffee table as he bent to look at me, but otherwise, he appeared much steadier than he had just that morning. “Lois, I think you need a break. You’re working *way* too hard.”

“I thought you were the one who said we needed to put Luthor away.”

“I did, but I didn’t mean you had to do it all before tomorrow. Please, Lois. It’ll be good for you to get out.” I had just opened my mouth to protest when Clark glanced back toward the sunlit window. “Besides, I haven’t been outside for a long time. I’d love to take a walk in the park myself, if you don’t mind.”

“O-of course not!” Hastily, I jumped to my feet, wincing when files scattered across the floor. “Do you have a coat or a jacket?”

“Perry brought me one. I think he must have raided his sons’ closets.”

“Where is it? I’ll grab it when I get my coat.”

“It’s with the rest of the stuff he brought.” Clark moved toward the door. He walked slowly but steadily; all in all, I was amazed at how much better he seemed. It was hard to be sure in the late afternoon shadows, but I was relatively certain that the bruises had faded somewhat from his face.

“Great way to take care of him, Lane,” I muttered to myself as I opened the closet and pulled out my coat, then ducked into the bedroom to grab Clark’s jacket from the duffel bag Perry had left. “Just forget all about him and make him beg you to take him outside—that’s sure to make him feel better!”

The minute I came into view around the corner, Clark’s eyes met mine. “You’re not blaming yourself for things again, are you?”

My step checked. “What? No, of...of course not. Why would I do that?”

The sight of his restrained grin stole the breath right out of my lungs and left me literally incapable of taking another step forward. “No reason.”

“Good,” I managed to say. “Then...then let’s get going.”

Luckily, Jimmy had brought my Jeep back when he had visited, so I was able to drive us to Centennial Park. Not that I wanted to go to Centennial Park, but Clark did, and no matter that I had avoided the place since they erected Superman’s memorial, I didn’t have the heart to deny Clark’s request, not when he was obviously taking so much pleasure in being out and about. The piercingly sharp winter sun fell across his lap in a gold-and-carnelian bundle that gave him the illusion of having more substance and fewer bruises as he drank in the sight of everything we passed.

As soon as I parked, I jumped out and hurried to help Clark out of the Jeep, but he had already slid to his feet. For a long moment, he didn’t move at all, just looked around at the sights, his gaze pausing first on a cluster of trees, then on the benches set near the perimeter of the park, then on the groups of people strolling along the green pathways. I didn’t turn to see everything else he looked at; I just watched him. I had never known anyone to take as much pleasure in the small things as Clark did, as if he delighted in normality and thrived on the ordinary. Once, I had scorned that quality; now, I envied it.

“You ready?” I finally asked, careful to keep my tone patient. Ha! I thought triumphantly. Wouldn’t Henderson have been surprised if he were there?

“Yes.” Clark turned his face up to the sun, then smiled down at me. I could have sworn the dark bruise perched on his cheekbone had shrunk before the warm light. And was it my imagination or was he standing straighter than he had since before I woke to his hand on my shoulder and watched him walk out of the newsroom with his shoulders slumped?

When my hand settled in the crook of his arm without any conscious direction, I tried to tell myself that it was just because I didn’t want him to stumble and fall as we walked toward the fountain set in the center of the park. But that was a lie. The truth was that even before he had left me, even before I had known him a full two weeks, I was already taking his arm proprietarily. I had always told myself it was just to keep him out of Cat’s clutches, but the gossip columnist was nowhere in sight now.

The delighted smile Clark gave me in response to my gesture scattered my thoughts so completely that I forgot I needed to justify the physical closeness.

“Hmm.” Clark glanced around us at the steady stream of people passing us in both directions. “Why is it so busy here?”

I paused, abruptly reminded of the reason I had avoided this park for the past month. “Don’t you remember, Clark? I told you this is where they buried Superman. Well,” I hastily added with a glance up to the sky to check for any hint of a red and blue flash. “Not Superman—just his cape. It’s usually much busier than this, but I guess the news of his return has made the memorial seem a bit...I don’t know, unnecessary?”

“Superman’s memorial?” Clark fell completely still, his arm beneath my hand turned suddenly slack, his gaze fixed on the tip of the Superman statue visible in the distance.

“I suppose he’ll probably visit it himself and make some sort of statement,” I said thoughtfully. “He’s always been good about stuff like that. But he has been awfully busy all over the world lately.”

Clark gave me a sidelong glance. “He has to build up good will... secure his place.”

I scowled at him, unable to bite back my irritation on Superman’s behalf. “I think Superman helps because he cares.”

“Superman does, yes,” Clark agreed carefully. “Lois, would you...

would you mind if we visited the memorial? Or...or do you not want to?"

After a slight hesitation, I shrugged. "It's all right. Now that I know he's alive, I don't think it'll be near as painful."

The closer we got to the memorial—the more Clark's steps slowed and his expression closed down—the more I wondered if this was such a good idea. Clark already seemed to possess some inexplicable hostility—or, at the least, mistrust—of Superman; what would the sight of the life-size statue of Superman and the plaque at its base do to his mental and emotional state?

Clark's step checked when he caught sight of the memorial and the carpet of flowers, tokens, and cards that lay at the steel feet. As if in a trance, Clark moved forward until he had to crane his neck to look up at the superhero's silver eyes, fixed on their stern perusal of the city before him. I kept close to Clark's side and was glad of that when his knees buckled. Quickly, I helped him to the bench placed where visitors come to pay their respects could sit and gaze upon the statue as they remembered the myriad ways Superman had influenced their lives.

"So much admiration," Clark murmured, almost as if he spoke only to himself. His eyes roved over the multitude of items left behind by well-wishers from all over the world. "So much acceptance...not alienation. Not fear. Not distrust. And yet...what good is it now? He's stolen it from me." The last sentence was whispered so softly I convinced myself that I had heard him wrong.

"Clark." I hesitated, then placed a hand on his shoulder, determined to help him even as I reeled in confusion over his seeming ambivalence toward his friend. "What's wrong? Why do you..." I trailed off, unable to even explain his strange moods. "Don't you like Superman?"

"I do like Superman," Clark said softly. When I followed his gaze, I saw that he was now staring directly at the S symbol engraved in steel. "He was always there when he was needed, able to save lives, able to safely do things no one else could. He got to see hope birthed in people's eyes, got to see them realize that the world possessed more than just darkness, that it contained good and hope and light as well. When I was absent, or late, or just...not enough...he was there. He was what everyone wanted, what the world needed. What *I* needed." Abruptly, Clark turned his head and looked straight into my wide eyes. "He saved your life a dozen times, Lois—and that alone makes him worth it all."

"He saved your life, too," I pointed out eagerly.

"Has he?" Clark looked away as his hands clenched into tight fists.

A shiver that had nothing to do with the cold bench on which we were sitting passed up my spine and traveled through my body in spreading ripples.

A stray memory floated to the forefront of my mind. Clark, depressed after covering a drive-by shooting, sitting next to my desk and bitterly asking what good Superman was if he couldn't save everyone.

Suddenly, with the speed of a lightning bolt that left one electrified with shock, I thought I might understand why Clark distrusted Superman. Why he seemed to fear him one moment and idolize him the next. Why he couldn't stand to talk to him yet wanted to know where he was at all times.

I had been blaming myself for Clark's prolonged captivity; it had been Clark himself who had assured me that it wasn't my fault. And yet...he had said nothing to indicate that he didn't fault *Superman* for it.

Was it possible? Could Clark, even if only subconsciously, be blaming the superhero for not rescuing him earlier? Did he think it was because he was Superman's friend that he had been captured by Luthor and tortured?

And if that was the cause of Clark's ambivalence...what could I possibly do to change his mind? How did you undo a month of torture? How did you downplay four weeks of pain and isolation and terror? How could you possibly expect a man—even a man like Clark

Kent—to set aside his nightmares and give a smile, a handshake, and unequivocal forgiveness?

"Clark," I asked, already dreading hearing his answer so unmistakably spelled out yet needing to confront it. "If you could ask Superman one question—*any* question—what would it be?"

Clark shifted, then gave me a forced smile. "Is this an interview?"

"No," I replied softly. "I just...I just want to know."

"Okay." His brow creased slightly as he considered his answer, the emotion in his eyes diffracted by the lenses of his glasses. "I would ask him...is he happy?"

"What?" I blinked, caught off-guard.

"I'd ask him if he's happy being Superman. If being rescuer, savior, and world icon is enough for him. I would ask him if a...a half life...is enough to sustain him. Because I think that's something he needs to know. Something *I* need to know, now more than ever."

My mouth was open, but I couldn't get a single word to emerge.

Clark angled his body slightly toward me, as if to block out the sight of the statue. "So, Lois, if you could ask Superman one question—*any* question—what would it be?" The shift in his position had shaded his glasses from the direct glare of the light, and now I could see cautious hope warring with uncertainty in his soft eyes.

If he had asked me that question before I had heard his response, I don't know what I would have said. Maybe a question about what Superman did when he wasn't making rescues or attending emergencies or flying me above the clouds. Maybe I'd have asked him how he could be so good as to give up so much in order to save so many.

But after hearing the concern inherent in Clark's answer, I knew there was only one thing I could say. And not only for his sake, but for mine as well—because I now badly, desperately, wanted to know Superman's answer.

"I think," I began slowly, "I would ask him why—when he was there countless times to save my life—why wasn't he there to save *you* from harm?"

Astonishment eclipsed all other emotion in Clark's face, his expression disbelieving yet touched.

"Why didn't he save you?" I asked again. "Where was he? You were so loyal to *him*, Clark—leaving your dream job and your friends to traipse after him from country to country. I know it wasn't for your career—every time I received one of your postcards, I would look up the local news of whatever city it came from. There were always reports of minor miracles, lives inexplicably saved, small catastrophes averted, all done quietly and carefully before you both moved on and I'd receive another card from yet another city. Yet you didn't write a single one of those articles—you didn't capitalize on the fact that you were Superman's companion. You simply went with him because...I guess because you hate injustice and because you didn't want him to be alone. So why, after all that, was *he* not there for *you* when you needed him most?"

"Nightfall—" Clark began with an unsteady voice, but I interrupted him.

"I know." I smiled and looked down, slightly uncomfortable with the amount of emotion I had unveiled. "I know he was saving the world. And I respect him for that, and I admire him, and I'm extremely grateful. But...that's the question I would ask."

"You know," Clark began consolingly, his fingers curling under my chin to tilt my face upward. "I wasn't as bad off as you seem to think."

"What?" I gasped disbelievingly.

"I mean, sure there was the Kry—the dosing. And, occasionally, Luthor would come with his men and..." Nightmares flashed through Clark's eyes, their potency undiminished by his glasses, before he banished them to some dark corner of his mind with a smile and a glance my way. "But...most of the time, I was just left in the cell." The care with which he chose his words was a dead giveaway to the fact that he knew he was putting an insanely positive spin on things. "Lois, I was so used to seeing everything and hearing so much and

always having to be somewhere, always needed by someone. But... well, in the dark, it was quiet, and...and I wasn't always needed, wasn't constantly being bombarded by sensation."

"Except by pain," I interjected, thinking that his description of his conditions sounded a lot like sensory deprivation—in other words, like torture, particularly for someone as sociable and friendly as Clark.

"I wasn't used to the pain," he admitted, abruptly standing, as if afraid of what his face would give away. "But I could ignore it. I could escape it by fleeing into memories. I'd remember my parents—how much love they gave me, how much unconditional acceptance. And my friends, people I've met all over the world. And the Daily Planet—Perry and Jimmy, even Cat. And I'd remember you." The genuine smile he gave me was close to his old smile but not quite there. "After all, Lois, it's impossible to be depressed while thinking about you."

"You know, Clark," I began, trying and failing to hide that I had a lump in my throat, "I think everyone knows that the dark side of the moon has never been touched by light, but I'll bet you could find a bright spot even there."

"I could if you were standing there." As soon as the words left his mouth, Clark blushed, his eyes dropping from mine, and he began to stammer out a clarification...or a retraction I didn't want to hear. So I stood and pulled him into a hug, holding on for dear life to keep him from evaporating. If willpower alone could have granted me one wish, then my touch would have taken away all the pain Clark had endured.

"I'm so glad you're here," I told him without lifting my head, the next plea falling unbidden from my lips. "Don't leave me again."

His arms held me together while his hand pressing my face to his shoulder grounded me to this reality. "I'm not going anywhere," he promised fiercely.

And without doubt or hesitation I believed him.

Chapter 9

We were halfway back to the Jeep, walking through lengthening shadows, when Clark's returning strength ran out. My first sign that he wasn't as well as he had been was when he stumbled and almost fell. Only his arm around my shoulders kept him upright.

"Clark! Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," he said, the weakness of his voice belying his words. "I guess maybe I...maybe I got an overdose of sunlight today."

Despite the fact that I was supporting half his weight as we made our stumbling way to the Jeep, I couldn't help but smile. "An overdose of sunlight, huh?" I repeated. "You always have had a way with words."

He didn't make a reply until I had leaned him up against the side of the Jeep so I could fish out my keys and open the door. "I didn't know you thought that," he said quietly.

"Thought what?"

"That I had a way with words."

My hands froze, the key inserted into the lock yet unturned. "I wouldn't have let you be my partner if I didn't," I finally settled for saying. It was such a weak response, so much less than I wanted to say, so much paler than the truth, and yet it was the sort of comment I was comfortable with making. Whereas the truth...that wasn't nearly as comfortable.

And yet...didn't Clark deserve a little encouragement? Shouldn't I be building him up instead of sticking to the teasing repartee at which we were so skilled?

I opened my mouth to tell him seriously just how much I admired his writing when I caught sight of...it.

It was blinding. It was brilliant. It was incinerating.

It was his old smile.

His lips curved upward. He ducked his head when he thought I wasn't looking, and he allowed a grin to make his—admittedly handsome—features even more beautiful, and he swallowed back a chuckle.

It was the old Clark.

I had first witnessed that sight in the reflection of the elevator

doors as they closed after I had given him a thoroughly scornful speech meant to assure him I was way out of his league. After that moment, I had witnessed it a dozen or more times, and strangely enough, despite the fact that he was obviously laughing at me, I never felt as if he were making fun of me. Rather, it was as if he saw through my bluster to the person I was underneath, as if by smiling at the façade he was assuring me that he was in on the joke and by hiding the smile he was promising that he wouldn't give me away to everyone else. It was as if it were a secret solely between the two of us, and I could trust him to keep it that way and never to think the less of me for it.

So, in the end, I didn't add anything to my statement; I just grinned up at him, savored the easy smile I received in return, and helped him into the Jeep.

"I'm sorry," he murmured when we finally, painfully, got him situated in the passenger seat. "I should have had us turn back sooner. I didn't mean to—"

"Don't worry about it," I instructed him softly, aching inside to see the drowsiness already taking the edge off the sparkle in his eyes. The day we had been at Smallville's Corn Festival, Clark had walked and danced and helped set up tables and erect tents, and yet at the end of the day, he had still been alert and ready to do it all over again. Seeing him so depleted after a simple walk in the park—far shorter than the route he had walked from his old apartment to the Daily Planet every day—was agonizing.

Even after I had climbed in the driver's side and started the Jeep, I couldn't stop casting sidelong glances at him. Sudden guilt assailed me when I remembered that I never had gotten him any lunch. Not, I realized, that I had any food at home to feed him.

"We should probably stop off and get something to eat," I recommended, ignoring the blaring horn sounded by a driver that must have been new to Metropolis because that light had obviously been yellow when I started across the intersection.

"All right," Clark agreed complacently. If he hadn't spoken, I would have thought he was already asleep; his eyes were closed and his head drooped forward.

"And you need to eat more," I added, hating the mother-hen tone in my voice, knowing it was necessary. "There's no way you're eating nearly enough. That medic left me a list of things you should be eating, but I'm not sure how many take-out places serve that kind of food. Maybe a place that sells soup. Surely chicken noodle soup was on that list. If it wasn't, it was probably because of an oversight. So obvious they didn't think it needed to be written down, maybe."

"I'm fine," Clark interrupted with a small, tired smile.

"Are you?" I retorted quickly. "I'm worried about you, Clark."

His eyes gleamed in the early evening sunlight when he turned to meet my gaze. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault!" I pulled into a parking spot in front of a deli I knew carried soup. "Luthor's the one who did this to you."

His smile was tiny even as he closed his eyes again. "I thought you called him Lex."

"I thought you told me not to," I replied.

"I thought you didn't listen to me."

The smile that curved my own lips was born partly out of relief. "I thought you knew better."

"I thought you tried to keep me guessing."

"That comes naturally—I don't have to work at it," I said with a grin. "Now, do you even like chicken noodle soup?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"I don't," I said with a grimace. "But wait here a minute while I get us some."

As if sensing my impatience, the line in the deli crept forward, slowing in direct proportion to my haste. When I finally got to the front of the line, I bit back the impulse to rant about the server's lack of speed and ordered enough soup to ensure I wouldn't have to come back for a while. I also grabbed a couple sandwiches. After all, I wasn't eating any of the chicken noodle soup, and if Clark would eat

more of a sandwich than he would the soup, I certainly wasn't going to refuse him.

By the time I finally made it back out to the Jeep, Clark was sound asleep, his neck cricked in what looked to be a painful position. Despite that, I didn't want to disturb him so I was extra careful with my driving. The three honks I did get didn't even stir my sleeping partner.

Unfortunately, that meant I couldn't easily stir him either.

"Come on, Clark." I left the food, knowing that coming back for it would be easier than trying to juggle it while also supporting Clark's weight and managing the doors. I went around the Jeep and opened his door for him despite the fact that he hadn't yet moved. "Clark! Clark, we need to get inside."

He rolled his head toward me when I set my hand on his shoulder. The immediate smile that sprang to his lips when he blinked up at me was, astonishingly quickly, replaced by a bleak sadness that felt like a punch in the gut.

"I'm sorry, Lois," he slurred as I reached across him to undo his seat belt. My hands stilled when his finger stroked the edge of my jaw. "I'm so sorry. You think we're free, but we're not."

"Oh, Clark." I set my hands on either side of his neck to steady him. "It's all right. You're safe now."

"No." A desperate look contorted his features and sent uneasiness skittering along my spine. "We're still in the cell, Lois—it's just bigger now."

"Clark—"

A sudden whoosh was the only warning I had before a warm hand landed on my shoulder and a smoky voice sounded in my ear. "Can I give you a hand, Clark?"

Clark's expression went suddenly, awfully blank. His hand fell limply from my cheek to lay unresisting in his lap. "Superman." There almost seemed to be a question mark at the end of the appellation.

"Oh, Superman, thank goodness you're here." I gestured to Clark and stepped out of the superhero's way. Perhaps this was just what was needed to make Clark realize that Superman was trying to make amends for the lateness of his rescue. "I let Clark do a bit too much, and now..."

"Let me help." Superman set a hand on Clark's shoulder. "I'll carry you up to the apartment."

"No!" Clark batted Superman's hand away. Hostility was the only word for the naked emotion exposed on his face.

Superman's expression remained neutral, but when Clark set his feet to the ground, the superhero stepped aside. I wanted to protest, wanted to point out that there were a good ten or so steps up to my apartment building's front door, wanted to shake Clark until he expunged Luthor's brainwashing from his mind and greeted his caped friend as he deserved to be greeted.

Instead, I said nothing. I, of all people, understood pride; I knew how much it could burn to have others think you weak. And Clark's speech from breakfast the day before was still fresh in my memory. So I said nothing, and I stood at Superman's side, and we watched Clark make his slow but dignified way up the steps. When he finally made it to the top, he paused to lean against the wall, his head hanging as he caught his breath.

When I made to move to his side, Superman's fingers wrapped around my arm just above the elbow. His breath was warm against my cheek as he bent his head toward mine. "Please be careful, Lois. If Luthor is the enemy as you say, then it's not safe for you to go out. I'm protecting you now, but I could never live with myself if any harm came to you."

"I won't let Luthor make me afraid to live my own life." I stiffened a bit, more to counter the impulse to melt at Superman's touch than because I took offense at his concern.

"I know that." Superman's smile was breathtaking, and it was just a tiny smile. I could only imagine how much effect a full grin could have on me. On second thought, maybe it was best he kept his smiles small for the time being—I wasn't strong enough to face the full blast.

"Don't worry." I assured him, astonished by my hand's boldness when I saw it spread itself over the yellow and red S. "We'll be fine."

"I hope so," Superman breathed. He ducked his head again, but this time, I knew it wasn't to kiss me. I wouldn't make the same assumption I had when he had flown with me. No sirree, this time I knew he was just—

His lips brushed my cheek.

My stomach hit the pavement at about the same time as my heart hit the clouds currently roofing the sky.

A silly smile painted itself across my face. I wracked my mind desperately for something—anything!—to say and came up empty.

With a smile that conveyed both amusement and tenderness, Superman took a step away from me. I almost cried out when his dark eyes moved from me to Clark. "Good night, Clark."

Clark said nothing, though his gaze was locked on us, his hand clenched over the doorknob so tightly I knew his knuckles would be sickly white. His mouth was twisted as if he felt sick.

"Thanks for stopping by," I managed before Superman floated upward into the air and disappeared as abruptly as he had come.

If I had been alone, I might have stood there and stared after him for a moment, but Clark was waiting by the door and I had no illusions about how real his show of strength was. Remembering to wipe the adoring smile from my face, I turned and quickly walked past Clark to unlock the door. I moved to support him as we headed for the elevator, but he walked forward alone, determinedly resolute, as if to prove that he didn't need Superman.

I felt ready to explode with everything I was containing within my body—my elation over Superman's appearance and the kiss he had given me, my frustration with Clark's mental state, my startling compassion for his hurt and sense of betrayal, and my similar empathy for Superman over receiving so little from Clark—yet somehow, I managed to contain it all.

Clark collapsed into a chair as soon as we got into my apartment, and yet I took comfort in the fact that his coloring hadn't reverted back to its wan pallor. Though he looked tired, he no longer looked sick, so I refused to regret the—perhaps—ill-advised excursion.

"I hope you're hungry," I announced when I returned from my second trip to the Jeep to retrieve the food. "Because I'm going to make sure you eat every bite of this."

"I *do* feel kind of hungry," Clark said, sounding almost surprised. He refused to meet my gaze when I handed him the soup I had dished out for him.

"Here's some water, too." I set the glass down on the coffee table in front of him. "Do you need anything else?"

"No." The word was sharp, almost brusque. From anyone else, it would have simply been an answer; from Clark, the shortness of it practically screamed anger.

Stung, I remained frozen in place. Count to ten, I advised myself. Stop and think what he's been going through. Remember how betrayed you felt when Clark left you—Clark must have felt even worse when Superman failed to show up. He needs time; don't blow up at him.

I had just taken a deep breath to let loose the retort my little pep talk was doing nothing to discourage when Clark visibly relented.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. When he raised his eyes to meet mine, I was taken aback by the maelstrom of unidentified emotions evident within his eyes. "I didn't mean to snap at you. I...I'm sorry."

Forcibly, I set aside my frustration and managed a fake smile. "I'll forgive you if you eat that bowl of soup and forget to tell the medic that I let you go without lunch."

"Deal."

We didn't say much as we sat there and ate dinner, yet it slowly transformed itself into a companionable silence, the kind Clark and I had shared numerous times when he had still worked at the Planet. The kind I had missed more than seemed possible in the two months he had been gone.

Clark actually ate all of the soup and a piece of buttered bread, and he drank a glass and a half of water. That, coupled with how well he

was looking even near the end of the day, made small seeds of hope begin to plant themselves in my mind. Maybe things really weren't as bad as they had seemed. After all, hadn't I myself thought that Clark made things turn out better than they should? This might just be another example of the same.

Clark dozed off and on through the movie I picked out for us; I had meant to work some more on our story as the movie played, yet I found myself watching Clark. I was haunted by the idea that if I looked away and looked back, he'd be just as sickly and pale and bruised as he had been the night we argued outside the hospital. It was a ridiculous fear, utterly absurd, and yet I couldn't shake it.

At the sound of the video automatically cycling into rewind, Clark stirred. He smiled sheepishly up at me. "I guess I wasn't much company, huh?"

"That's all right." I shrugged. "I never like it when people talk through movies anyway."

Relief pervaded his countenance, and yet I couldn't understand why. Clark had always been a bit of a puzzle to me despite my claim that I had him figured out, but he had never seemed as perplexing as he did now. And the thought persisted that if only I had the right puzzle piece to click into place, everything he did and said and thought would make sense.

Shaking off my inner musing, I stood and held out a hand to him. "Come on. I expect your help in researching this story tomorrow, so you need your rest."

"It'll be just like old times, huh?" he asked. His hand was warm in mine, and soft, his long fingers curling around mine as he stood. For some reason, his proximity unnerved me, though why I couldn't say. It had never bothered me before.

"Sure. But you'd better be good," I warned him with a stern glance he didn't believe for an instant.

As before, I let him get ready for bed first; I made sure he was safely settled on the cot before I ducked into the bathroom. My reflection didn't have any dark circles to remind me of bruises; in fact, there was a sparkle in my dark eyes that hadn't been there for a while.

Slowly, reverently, I brushed my fingers over the spot on my cheek where Superman's lips had so briefly rested. I had never heard of the superhero being so affectionate with anyone else, not even with that date who had outbid me at the charity auction. He had allowed *her* to kiss *his* cheek—something that had sent hot flames of jealousy spiking through my mind—but he himself had remained aloof at all public appearances. The closest he had ever come to kissing me was...when I had almost collapsed into his arms after he had burst through the wall of that bank vault.

You will always be special to me, Lois. You're the first woman who ever-interviewed me. I was even more certain now than I had been then that he had meant to end that sentence differently, and I would have spent another day in a cell if I could have heard his original thought.

With my mind full of Superman, it was impossible to feel tired. I knew Clark was still awake, too, because he turned his head to watch me as I exited the bathroom and slipped under the cool covers on my bed.

"Good night, Lois," he said softly.

"Good night," I replied, my voice sounding a bit dreamy as I recalled the way Superman had twice told me good night now.

Memory after memory of Superman wrapped themselves around me like a quilt, worn with use, comforting and comfortable. I found myself tossing back and forth, unable to settle, moving this way with this memory and that way with that recollection.

"Do you have insomnia?" Clark's question pierced the darkness and allowed a breath of cooler air to slip past the quilt of memories.

"What? No." I bit my lip as soon as the answer was uttered. Now I had to have a reason for why I was keeping him awake with my restlessness, and it was sure as the Planet's status as the number one paper in the world that I couldn't admit to him the true reason I was still awake. "I...I'm not really used to sleeping in the same room with

someone else. It's a little...unnerving."

That was stupid, I told myself acerbically. For one thing, this was our third night together in the same room—or fourth if you counted the cell. For another, it meant that Clark immediately sat up and said, "Do you want me to move to the living room?"

"No, don't!" I exclaimed. I'd never live it down with Henderson if he found out that I made Clark sleep on a tiny loveseat half his size on the same day I had forgotten to feed him lunch. "Please," I added, already regretting my lie. "It's just different, that's all."

Slowly, probably doubting my sincerity, Clark lay back down.

"You know," I began, desperate to keep him in place—more desperate than if I had simply been worried about a lecture from Henderson. "My sister and I used to share a room. We'd talk into the morning hours about little things and dreams of the future, exchanging secrets that were ours alone. Not that Lucy had that many secrets," I said tartly. "Her life was pretty much an open book. But we'd tell each other things we wouldn't tell anyone else and laugh about things we might have cried over alone. It was...nice. Sometimes I miss that."

Hearing the nostalgic tone creeping into my voice and wondering why I was confiding—*again!*—in Clark Kent, I hastily added, "Of course, then I remind myself that she always borrowed my clothes and tried to tell me how to live my life—despite the fact that she's younger than me—and made me feel guilty about things that I didn't need to feel guilty about—well, maybe some of them I did—and then I don't miss it as much."

Wincing at my own babbling, I clamped my mouth shut. Why did Clark have to be such a good listener? If only he'd shift uncomfortably every once in a while, or surreptitiously roll his eyes, or *something* to make me realize that he really didn't want—or need—to hear every detail of my life story! But no, even tired and hurting, he had to listen so patiently and attentively and compassionately—it was really his own fault that I told him so much.

"Exchange secrets, huh?" he asked quietly. Perhaps he wasn't as much of a mind-reader as I had thought this morning.

"Yeah," I said. In contrast to my earlier flow of words, I couldn't think of anything to say now. Which was good, I reminded myself. We were supposed to be sleeping, after all.

"I had amnesia once." Clark's words, spoken rapidly and abruptly, were sudden and almost too loud in the quiet that had descended.

I rolled my head in his direction. "You did not."

"I did," he asserted a bit more confidently, his voice smoothed out slightly.

"People don't really get amnesia," I informed him. "It's only on television shows and novels. And, Clark, you don't have to make up secrets to tell me. It's all right, really. I mean, how many secrets can you accumulate in Smallville anyway?"

"It's terrifying not to know who you are or how you fit into the world," he continued, as if he hadn't heard my teasing. So much for being a good listener. "And confusing to know more about mundane details like how to drive or what a post office is than any fact, large or small, about yourself. It made me feel lost and disoriented...and afraid. But my parents helped me. And I could remember...one thing...and the more I remembered about that one thing, the more I remembered about myself."

What thing? I wondered.

"How long did you have this amnesia?" I asked doubtfully, then blinked in surprise. That hadn't been the question I was thinking.

"A day," he answered.

"That's not very long," I heard myself say. Why couldn't I ask him what one thing he had remembered? Ask it, I commanded myself, and opened my mouth. "How did you get this amnesia?"

He took a very long time to respond, and I sensed him looking over at me, as if his answer was more important than it seemed. "I hit something very hard and very fast."

"It must have been *very* hard and *awfully* fast," I said, infusing my voice with skepticism. So what if I didn't ask him about the one thing he remembered? It probably didn't mean much anyway; in fact, it was

most likely his parents. I had seen firsthand how close he was to them, how much he loved them. Despite my thoughts, however, I couldn't quite convince myself. There had been something in his voice when he said he remembered one thing, a quality in his tone that usually appeared when he talked to or about me—that certain thing.

"It was," Clark confirmed, recalling me to our conversation. "I was lucky that I was able to get to Sm—uh, that... I was near my parents when it happened."

Deciding to humor him, I turned on my side to face him in the imperfect darkness. "And when was this? You never mentioned it before."

"It was after I left Metropolis." He turned to face me, too, as if reflecting me back on myself. He cleared his throat, and I frowned at the quiver suddenly affecting his voice. "It was during Nightfall."

My eyebrows rose. "You had amnesia while an asteroid was headed our way about to destroy all life on the planet?" I wasn't sure why I suddenly believed him—I mean, come on! Amnesia?—but I no longer doubted him. And accepting this story made me suddenly swallow, hearing again the way he had described his state while his memories were hidden from him.

"It made it worse," Clark confessed quietly, confiding in me as I had confided in him. It made me feel special to know he trusted me. As friendly as Clark had always been, he was also very private. It had always seemed there was a boundary within him that no one could cross. The closest I had ever come was the short time we had spent in Smallville; and now, today, he was allowing me another glimpse over that wall.

"Worse?" I asked softly.

"Yeah. To face the end without even knowing what had brought me to that point? It was frightening."

"I'm sorry." I didn't know where the words came from—this was one thing that hadn't been my fault—but the emotion in them made me abruptly uncomfortable.

"It's okay." I felt Clark smile again, though how I couldn't explain. The darkness still enfolded us in shadows. "Like I said, I remembered pretty quickly."

Eager to bring things back to normal, I shifted positions yet again. "Well, I've never had amnesia. Not that I'm saying I believe you." As soon as the sentence was uttered, I regretted it. For one thing, it was a lie. For another, it made Clark go suddenly still.

"It's true." His statement was almost inaudible.

"Yeah," I agreed at a matching volume. "I mean, I've never known you to lie."

The apartment went so quiet any intruder would have thought it was empty. I don't know what Clark was thinking, but I was frowning and trying hard to remember if I *had* ever heard Clark lie. The closest thing I could think of was when he had done me the favor of covering for my father. And even then, he had hardly been able to look Perry in the eye, squirming guiltily and sticking to sentences that *were* true. Well, and then there was the whole undercover thing with Toni Taylor.

"I have lied," Clark blurted suddenly.

"Wh-what?" I sat bolt upright and glared over at Clark. I felt as if the world had suddenly turned into an alien, unknowable place; I couldn't have been more shocked if...if...well, if Superman had admitted to being a fraud!

And that confused me. I knew everyone lied—it was an inescapable fact of life. It was a lie that had started this whole conversation to begin with! So...why did it hurt so much to know that my honest partner was capable of altering the truth?

"I try not to," Clark added hurriedly, and everything reverted to normal. Of course, I thought with vast relief. In order to be as kind and polite as he was, Clark surely had to lie a few times.

"Everybody lies," I said, lying back down and rearranging the covers. "We all tell lies to make ourselves look better, or to avoid hurting someone's feelings, or to get out of things, or—"

"It's something like that. Something I did—didn't do." Clark sounded so guilty that I couldn't help but smile fondly. If not for the

fact that he had swiped some evidence while we were investigating the Smart kids, I would have written him off as an irredeemable Boy Scout.

Then I frowned. "You're not talking about that night with Cat, are you? Because your story and hers never did agree."

Clark heaved what sounded like a weary sigh. "I never lied about that."

Feeling strangely reassured, I relaxed again. "Hmm."

"It's more about things I had to do, but then...well, I make excuses. Little lies—but I always try to do what I said anyway, so it's not as much of a lie."

"Clark," I interrupted. "You're talking about white lies. Those almost don't even count."

Clark paused, then murmured, "It's that 'almost' that has me worried."

Terror invaded my system and set every cell afire. I jumped from my bed and crossed to Clark's cot in two strides, perching on the edge so I could feel his forehead for a fever. "Clark, you're fine. You have to be fine. You're not going to die, all right? There is absolutely no need to confess any sins—you're going to be fine."

For some reason, I couldn't stop touching him, resettling his covers, brushing back a strand of hair, straightening the collar of his t-shirt. He was staring at me, an indecipherable expression illuminated by the glow of city lights outside the windows.

"I don't want to hear any more talk like that, okay?" I added sternly, not sure I could take another scare like that. "You're going to be okay because I need you. And your parents need you. And the Daily Planet...well, it doesn't *need* you, but...it's better with you there." Trembling, I voiced the question I hadn't yet been brave enough to ask. "You...*are* coming back, aren't you? When all of this is over?"

His hand on my cheek was as cool as a breath of fresh air, as gentle as a slight breeze, and as reassuring as the sight of a sunrise. "Yeah," he whispered, his voice dry. "I'm coming back."

"Good!" Relief replaced terror, and I found myself hugging him spontaneously. His hands cautiously rested on my back as he returned the hug. Suddenly embarrassed, I pulled away and gave him a self-conscious smile. "So, you're feeling okay?"

He nodded, his eyes wide as he stared at me.

Needing distance, I stood and took a step toward the bed before looking over my shoulder. "No more midnight confessions, right?"

"I guess not." Inexplicably, he sounded *disappointed*.

With a sigh, I resigned myself to the fact that I would *never* understand Clark Kent.

Chapter 10

I was, needless to say, very surprised by the sight that greeted me when I emerged from the bedroom the next morning. Clark, dressed in sweat pants and a t-shirt and already shaved, was planted squarely in the center of the sun bursting through the windows—not that that was surprising. In fact, that had become pretty much par for the course in the past two days. No, what was surprising was that he was doing push-ups under that golden spotlight. And he looked...good. Not old-Clark-from-before good, but oh so much better than seemed possible after a measly fifty-six hours away from Luthor's cell. I didn't see any sign of bruising, and he was more filled out than the paltry amount of food he had been eating could account for.

A terrible thought invaded my mind, an unwelcome intruder I nonetheless couldn't repel.

Had Clark found more of the drug? Had he dosed himself with it? Had his awful symptoms been withdrawal rather than the direct effects of the dosing?

Disgusted with myself, I hurled the thought away and slammed the walls closed against it. That was ridiculous. I had seen Clark after Luthor had dosed him with whatever the drug had been; he had been in pain, weak, suffering, barely coherent. Another dose wouldn't make him better; it would make him worse and undo all the good these past days of freedom had granted him.

Thus assured, I leaned slightly against the door and watched Clark, content to salve the wounds of my heart with the sight of him.

He finished his push-ups, then folded himself into a cross-legged position, his head tilted back, eyes closed, mouth slightly open as he drank in the sun. The lines of tension, the marks of stress, the hints of fear, the moments of irrationality—they were hidden, dissolved away by the sun pouring into him, seemingly imbuing him with everything that made him the man I so respected and admired and...liked.

Not just tolerated as I had tried to convey to the Daily Planet staff, but really, truly liked. Maybe better than anyone else in the world. Even Superman...well, though I was certain I loved him, he was too amazing to merely *like*.

Clark rolled smoothly to his feet, moving with the grace that had been so characteristic of him and so pointedly missing since his captivity. Then he turned in my direction, his eyes unerringly finding mine, and he smiled.

The brilliant smile.

The incinerating smile.

The smile I had scoffed at, doubted, cursed, ignored, or missed, depending on the day. The smile that had made Toni Taylor take time out from her bid to rule West River. The smile that had charmed Antoinette Baines before she tried to kill us. The smile that really, really should *not* look so good.

“Good morning, Lois,” he said. There was not even the slightest stain of weariness, pain, or fear tainting his voice.

“Good morning.” My own, on the other hand, was somewhat hoarse. “Are you sure you should be doing all that?”

“All what?” He blinked innocently. The man was *daring* me to admit that I had stared at him while he exercised! Well, he could just keep hoping—there wasn’t a chance in the world I’d accommodate him.

“Standing in the direct sunlight,” I said with a smirk. “You said you got an overdose yesterday. You can’t be too careful.”

He chuckled. “I’ll be sure and watch my intake.” He stepped to my side and took my hand—a perfectly ordinary movement and gesture, one that had been enacted between us a dozen times. There was absolutely no reason for my heart to start pumping at a hundred miles a minute or for the temperature to suddenly feel a bit warm. Honestly, there must have been something wrong with that sandwich I’d eaten last night. Or maybe even the smell of the chicken noodle soup had been enough to contaminate me.

“Here, I made breakfast.” Clark tugged my hand to lead me to the kitchen. He didn’t seem to notice my predicament, which was a relief. I didn’t want to worry him, after all; he had enough on his plate. “You’ve been doing everything for me the past couple of days—I figured it was my turn.”

Using the very few ingredients my kitchen boasted, Clark had turned out a surprisingly good breakfast of French toast with cinnamon, sugar, and honey; the coffee he had brewed somehow even managed to taste better than mine. He still drank his tea, making me very glad that I had never gotten around to throwing out that box he had given me, complete with a swallowed back chuckle of amusement, after the night I had burst into his apartment in a fury and he had recommended a soothing herbal tea.

“Good enough?” Clark asked after I had taken my last bite.

“It was very good. Too bad for you,” I said with a careless shrug. Clark’s brows rose. “Oh? Why is it a bad thing?”

“Because proving that you can cook a meal out of practically nothing—and one that’s edible besides—means you automatically get all the kitchen chores. Congratulations.”

“I’ll cook,” he agreed easily, his eyes sparkling with good humor. “But that means you have to do the dishes.”

“Ha!” I scoffed. “You’re not even paying rent—that automatically means you’ve got to earn your keep.”

“Earn my place here, you mean?” Something flickered in his eyes, some emotion I couldn’t recognize, and though he tried to hide it with a smile, the attempt was so weak that I saw right through it. “Well, you

know, I’m sure Perry would let me stay with—”

“Clark!” I narrowed my eyes, replaying the conversation in my head to try and make sense of what had so suddenly doused his playful mood. “I was just teasing. Henderson said it’s best if we’re both in one place.”

“I know, but...” Clark shrugged uncomfortably. “I *am* better now, and I don’t want you to feel like I invaded your space.”

“Clark.” I reached out and put my hands over his, stilling their nervous skittering across the surface of the table. No matter how much better he looked, the feel of the fragile bones in his fingers and wrist—as well as the abrupt reversal of his mood—was proof enough that he was far from completely recovered. “I *want* you here. All right? Now, what do you say we get to work?”

His eyes drifted closed, his expression reverting to what it had been when he drank in the sun, and I had the sudden impression that he was taking as much strength from my words as he had been the light. “I’d like that a lot,” he finally said.

“Then let’s get to it.”

Clark had changed, there was no question about that, just as there was no doubt that I, too, had changed a great deal from the person I had been when we were first introduced. And yet it was somehow the easiest thing in the world to slip back into working together. Much as I had once hated to admit it even to myself, Clark was incredibly good at what he did, and he complemented my own work habits and writing style perfectly. I wasn’t sure how much of that was natural and how much was purposeful, but regardless, he seemed to have lost none of it. He read much slower than he had before, and he wasn’t quite as focused, but he knew the material intimately, backward and forward, which evened things out.

After two months of trying to prove to myself and to the world that I didn’t need a partner, I found myself immeasurably happy—yes, that was the word—*happy* to have him back. I no longer had to pause and remind myself that I wouldn’t need to discuss that with Clark, or look over toward his desk and find myself jolted from my focus at the sight of its emptiness, or start to scribble a note to have Clark look into something and have to catch myself and furiously erase it. Instead, I could ask him where a piece of information I remembered seeing earlier was, or tell him to remember a certain fact so that he could quote it to me later, or just pause to stretch and see him working industriously, meeting me halfway, picking up what I missed, encouraging me with a well-placed word or a silent smile or by virtue of his simple presence.

“Clark,” I said abruptly during one of these pauses. “That night when we were working on the boxing scandal—were you really staying late to work on something? Or were you there in case I wanted to ‘share my problems?’”

“I...” He set down the file he’d been holding and fiddled with his glasses. “I was finishing up a few things.”

“Uh-huh.” I didn’t look away.

“I...might have been waiting. To see if you needed anything.”

“Uh-huh,” I said again just because it was kind of funny seeing him squirm. “Hmm. Well then...thank you.” And I turned back to my own pile of files, leaving him staring at me in puzzlement. It was far past time to give him a taste of his own medicine, I thought with an inward grin. After all, someone needed to keep him on his toes.

As fun as it was to work with Clark and tease him, though, it was hard to believe the picture of Lex Luthor being formed by everything I was learning about him. The man I had chased for months in pursuit of a story—a story I had, coincidentally, never gotten—the man I had actually dated and allowed to kiss me, the man who had claimed to be my friend as he asked for an extra spoon to the ice cream, and the man who had saved my life from Max Menken, was actually a criminal in a league surpassing Capone and approaching Hitler.

Deception on a city-wide level.

Sabotage.

Kidnapping.

Experiments on children.

Wanton destruction of property.
Framing others for his crimes.
Cold-blooded murder.

Manipulation of public opinion...and of me.

That night he had come to my apartment and complimented me on my singing, he had told me not to look any further than Toni Taylor—he had flat-out manipulated me to keep me from probing past the blonde crime-boss and finding him. The way he had set up Menken and pretended to rescue me...for what? To make me think I could trust him? So I'd tell him what stories I was working on, keep him apprised of any of his criminal endeavors that might be in danger of becoming public? Just to gloat over how easy it was to deceive an award-winning investigative reporter?

And torture, I silently added to the list with an involuntary glance to Clark—that crime above all was impossible to forget. I closed my eyes and clamped my lips over a whimper at the memory of the two thugs throwing Clark back into the cell and the coldness of his skin, the stuttered rhythm of his breathing, the despair when he had wished Superman were there to save me. The way Luthor's eyes had gleamed as he watched Clark's suffering, freely admitting that it gave him immeasurable pleasure.

I stood abruptly, heedless of the fact that I was scattering papers. "You know what, Clark? I could use a walk. You want to get out of here for a while, maybe find some lunch or some groceries?"

Clark blinked but didn't hesitate in setting aside his own work and coming to his feet. "Okay."

Words were trapped behind my dry throat and parched mouth, so we remained silent until we were half a block away from my apartment building. The temperature was colder than it had been the day before, the sun hidden behind snowy-white clouds—excuse enough to loop my arm through Clark's and press close to his side. He willingly allowed me to cling to him, simultaneously comforting me with his warmth and reminding me of everything I had just tried to flee with the feel of his strengthening frame.

"So where are we going?" Clark asked conversationally when we neared an intersection.

"I don't know." I shrugged, regretting the movement when it pulled me away from Clark. I settled myself closer to him, gratified when he finally wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "I just needed to get out of there for a while—get some fresh air."

"I know what you mean." Clark's voice was quiet, but the gentle way he rubbed my arm spoke louder than anything he could have said. A shared understanding passed between us as surely as warmth, a mutual acknowledgement of how much it hurt to be exposed to the kind of evil Luthor dealt in.

Again, I shivered, and again, I pressed closer to Clark, feeling colder now than I had when Superman had taken me toward the stars.

"No snow cones, today, huh?" There was a hint of laughter feathering the edges of Clark's voice, and it warmed me.

"What?" It was hard to think past the sight of his old smile and the sound of his old laughter.

"During the heat-wave, remember?" Clark gestured with his free arm toward a sidewalk vendor we were passing. "We got snow cones and ate them while walking to an interview."

"That's right." My brow creased as I tried to remember the specific occurrence. Clark and I had walked a lot of places, bought snacks or lunch at a dozen different kiosks, and ate together four or five times a week. "I meant to pay for them, but you ran up and gave the man a bill before I could open my wallet."

He shrugged that specific aside. "You had the red flavor and I had the purple. I still can't figure out if you did that on purpose or not—did you know I liked the purple better?"

I didn't answer for a moment, unwilling to tell him that, more than likely, I had taken the red because it had reminded me of Superman; I didn't want to bring up the superhero's name and possibly ruin Clark's good mood. So, finally, I just said, "How do you remember all that?"

"I have a photographic memory," he admitted in a low voice that

reverberated through his chest. "And like I told you, I remembered a lot of things...in the cell."

What was I supposed to say to that? I wasn't sure, so I simply reached up and took hold of the hand resting on my shoulder.

"So how have *you* been, Lois?"

"What?" My brow creased in puzzlement.

"We've talked about me a lot—too much." He shook his head as if putting that topic behind him. "But what about you? There was a whole month I didn't get to talk to you. I suppose you won another Kerth or two?"

"Not exactly," I scoffed. "Superman's dea—disappearance and the fallout from Nightfall's destruction took up most of my attention. I did take a couple days off to relax at the Lexor hotel."

"Relax?" Clark pretended to stagger in surprise. "Lois Lane? I leave for a couple weeks and the whole world turns upside down!"

"Well," I drawled, "I did end up looking out the window and witnessing something that led to the story on Roarke and Harrington's death."

"Aha! I knew it. You can take the reporter out of the newsroom, but you can't take the newsroom out of the reporter." Clark's eyes sparkled with amusement as he grinned down at me. And I couldn't help but smile back, couldn't help but laugh aloud, because Clark was back. *My* Clark was back—unchanged, unaltered, unaffected by the awful things that had been done to him. He was my partner, my friend, the rock I could lean on. I wasn't alone anymore.

And then Superman descended from the skies and landed before us...and the moment ended.

Clark's smile disappeared, all emotion shuttered behind his eyes. His body tensed, causing him to stumble slightly as he pulled us to an abrupt stop. His hand tightened over my shoulder; I wondered if he was trying to protect me or seeking some assurance for himself.

A flash of some indecipherable emotion passed across Superman's face as quickly as his own shadow flashed across city streets.

"Superman," I greeted him. For myself, I was always happy to see the superhero, and I couldn't help the thrill of excitement that coursed through me at the thought that he might have come just to see me. But for both Clark and Superman's sake, I felt uneasy. There was no denying the heavy tension that simmered between them like its own form of electricity.

"Hello, Lois, Clark." Superman nodded politely. A small smile graced his stern features briefly as he gazed at me; it disappeared when he looked to Clark. "Are you sure you should be out walking the streets? Your bodyguards are looking a bit anxious."

"Bodyguards?" Before I could think better of it, I found myself craning my neck to try to spot them. Whoever Henderson had picked, they were good. I hadn't yet caught a glimpse of them. Feeling a bit foolish—and as a result, bristling a bit—I turned back to Superman. "But we have you watching over us. Besides, Luthor thinks we've caved into his threats—why would he need to target us and stir up a lot of controversy? We're fine, really."

"You should still be careful," Superman chided gently. "I'd hate for anything to happen to you." His gaze moved once more to Clark, and I instantly softened. Of course the superhero would inflict himself with a burden of guilt over what had happened to his friend. It was only natural that he'd become overprotective. Once again, my fledgling tact had failed me.

"We will be," I promised. "We're not going far."

"Clark..." Superman hesitated, his expression so decidedly neutral it was almost painful. "We should talk. Can...can we go somewhere?"

For a long moment, Clark said nothing. With growing despair, I noticed that his face had grown once more ashen-hued, the hint of bruising now discernible against the paler complexion. I opened my mouth to intervene when he abruptly clenched his jaw and straightened, his arm falling from my shoulder. "You're right, *Superman*. We should talk."

"That's a good idea," I said encouragingly, thrilled beyond measure by this hopeful sign. "I'm sure you have a lot of catching up

to do.”

“We do,” Superman confirmed with a short nod. “And they are things best discussed soon, before anything else can happen.”

Clark’s eyes narrowed, and he took a small, almost confrontational step toward the superhero. “What else could happen, *Superman*? With you watching over us, we’re the two safest people in the world. Isn’t that right?”

I winced at the blatant accusation in Clark’s tone, hating the forced neutrality of Superman’s expression. “Clark!” I snapped, and his gaze switched to me, softening and mellowing. “Just talk to him, please. Whatever’s going on between you... I’m sure it can be straightened out.”

“Please, Clark,” Superman added, arching his brows.

His shoulders drooping a bit, Clark took a deep breath, the fire that had so briefly filled him seemingly doused, leaving him looking small and frail. I was struck by the sudden feeling that he was slipping irretrievably away from me, which was ridiculous. I above all others *knew* that Clark and Superman needed to have a good talk.

Superman was a hero, not just because of his superpowers, but because of his manner in regard to others and his dedication to saving others—Clark had to see that the superhero would have saved him if it were at all possible. And Clark was a good man, the most forgiving person I had ever met—one of the reasons he was able to be my partner, I would have to admit if forced to total honesty — and he would surely get over his irrational anger. They were like two brothers, at odds with each other and both too stubborn to sit down and work it out. Therefore, a conversation alone, where they didn’t have to speak in code or guard their words, had to be just what they needed.

“Go,” I said, tugging on Clark’s arm to push him toward Superman. He didn’t budge. “I can go shopping and pick up some groceries, then I’ll head home. Superman, you’ll give him a lift back, won’t you?” Not until after the question was out did I remember Clark’s fear of flying.

“If that’s what he wants,” Superman agreed easily. “See, Clark? Everything will work out fine...if you come talk to me.”

“I’ll listen,” Clark conceded woodenly. He turned his head stiffly toward me, and the semblance of a smile that twisted his lips was so dark and un-Clark-like, so different from the one he had given me just a moment ago, that I couldn’t help but flinch away. “Are you sure you know what groceries to get?” he asked. The effort it took to imbue his voice with that teasing lilt was readily apparent, and yet the very fact that he was even trying in front of Superman was enough to reassure me that he really was on the road to recovery. “I am the one with cooking duties, remember.”

“I’ll manage,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I have faith that you can come up with some kind of meal out of whatever I get.”

“I hope you’re right.” His eyes caressed me one last time, and then he turned to face Superman. Without me right there beside him, with the tall superhero before him, he looked small and alone.

“Superman,” I blurted, delaying the moment when Clark would leave, stalling for him even though I couldn’t explain it even to myself. “I’ve been meaning to ask...you haven’t given anyone a statement about where you’ve been or why you came back now. Would you be willing to give Clark and me the exclusive? We could tell it better than anyone else.”

I was rewarded by both Clark’s tiny, real smile and Superman’s full attention, the force of his dark, vibrant eyes nearly staggering me.

“I wouldn’t give it to anyone else,” he promised me, and I felt as if the whole world exploded with color and promise. Superman stepped up behind Clark and placed his hands on his waist in preparation of their ascent. Clark didn’t make a sound, his eyes dropping to his shoes, his hands clenched into fists. “Perhaps tomorrow?”

“Definitely,” I said, perhaps a tad too eagerly. Guilt stabbed me as Clark winced when he and Superman began to slowly lift into the air. “But, Superman, please be careful. Clark doesn’t like flying.”

Two identical expressions of surprise were turned on me, one obscured by glasses, the other unveiled. Clark quickly looked away

again while Superman tried to conceal the hint of a grin. “I promise to be careful,” he said wryly.

And then he flew up and away, Clark held securely in his arms, and I was left alone on the street. For an instant, I was jealous of Clark, wishing that it was me Superman had asked aside, longing to be the one flying with him. But Clark needed this time, I firmly reminded myself. He needed to have his faith in Superman restored, needed to remind himself that the hero was his friend, needed to see for himself that Luthor had lied about the caped superhero.

And I needed to stock my kitchen.

Clark was right, naturally, infuriatingly, about my unfamiliarity with a lot of grocery items. Luckily, I remembered enough about the list the medic had given me to collect a reasonable amount of ingredients for meals Clark should be eating. At least, that was my sincere hope. The whole ordeal only took me a little over half an hour, so I was able to get back to the apartment fairly quickly.

My intention was to get back to work, but I found that it was now so hard to piece everything together. Something had changed in the past hour, something that had taken away the ease with which the facts had flowed through my hands earlier.

Clark.

He wasn’t there, and suddenly investigating wasn’t so fun. Suddenly I was remembering the long months when he had been gone and I had struggled just to write the ordinary stories, let alone the Kerth-worthy articles. The long months when I had lived for the phone calls and postcards I pretended to only tolerate.

I was glad for the excuse to stop working when the phone rang. When Henderson’s voice snapped in my ear, however, I was tempted to revise that opinion.

“What do you and Kent think you’re doing?” the inspector growled. “Do either of you have any inkling what the words ‘low-key’ mean? I shouldn’t be getting calls from my officers saying you’ve been gallivanting all across the city!”

“Gallivanting all across the city?” I repeated sarcastically. “Yesterday, we went to Centennial Park—which is six blocks away—and we took a walk down two streets this afternoon. I hardly think that’s setting up a huge neon sign announcing our presence.”

“It might as well be,” Henderson snapped. “Luthor’s got eyes everywhere—he owns over half the businesses in Metropolis in some way or another! I expected this from you, Lane, but I thought Kent was smarter than that.”

Frost edged my tone. “Clark’s the one who wanted to go out, Henderson. He’s been confined for a month—I didn’t think I was supposed to exchange his old cell for my apartment. Should I get the living room fitted for some chains?”

“Don’t get hysterical, Lane,” Henderson commented, and I could swear he was smiling. “I didn’t say anything after your first midnight trip because I knew you were with Superman, but it’s not a good idea for you both to be parading yourself around, particularly Kent. We still don’t know what exactly Luthor wanted from him, and it’s a safe bet that Luthor will try to take your partner out before letting him testify. So, all I’m saying is—be careful.”

“Do you know how many times I’ve heard that?” I exclaimed, throwing up a hand in frustration. “Does everyone think I run out and jump in front of every gun I see? I can—”

“Lois.” The seriousness of Henderson’s tone and the fact that he used my first name bought my immediate silence. “I’m not doubting that you can take care of yourself. If you couldn’t, you’d have been dead a hundred times over by now.”

“Wow, thanks,” I began to say, but he interrupted me again.

“But Clark isn’t so lucky.”

I froze, the phone clutched tightly in my white-knuckled hand.

“My medic might not have gotten a really good look at him, but in his professional opinion, Clark doesn’t look too good. He’s still weak and suffering who-knows-what from coming off whatever Luthor was feeding him—and that’s without the trauma of being kept in a hole for a month. So, this isn’t about you—it’s about your partner. Superman

gave me his word he'd keep a close eye on him, but that won't do a lot of good if you drag him with you on one of your wild goose chases."

"Those 'wild goose chases' usually end up solving a couple of your cases," I observed acerbically before relenting. "But... I see what you mean. I'll be careful. Clark's with Superman now, so... you don't have to worry."

"Thanks, Lane." Henderson paused, and I had the impression that he had more to say, but he just sighed. "All right. Keep working."

"And have a good day yourself," I muttered when the dial tone sounded in my ear.

Somewhat chastened—and *hating* that feeling—I returned to my research, but I didn't get very far. I kept glancing in between the door and the windows, looking for Clark. By the time two hours had passed, I was about ready to hire a helicopter and go out looking for him and Superman. Where could they have gone? I had wholly agreed with the need for a conversation, but two hours? Seriously? And men complained about women talking for hours!

I had repeated the sequence of grabbing my jacket in preparation of going outside and then hanging it up again about four times when I finally heard something in the hall outside. Ignoring the possibility that it was a neighbor returning home, I yanked the door open and stepped into the hallway, then froze when I caught sight of Clark sitting on the floor, propped up against the wall, his head cradled in his hands.

"Clark?" His name fell from my lips without me having to consciously will it spoken.

He looked up, his hands dropping into his lap. "Lois." The smile he gave me was so faint it was practically invisible.

"Clark, what are you doing out here?" Cautiously, oddly afraid that he'd startle away like a frightened animal if I moved too quickly, I stepped closer to him and knelt at his side.

"Just... thinking."

When he didn't add anything more, I arched my brows. "Can't you think *inside* the apartment?"

"Yeah." With none of the grace he had displayed just that morning, he rose to his feet. Maybe it was vertigo; he was still recovering from the flight and its effects on him. But much as I tried to convince myself that was the reason for his disconsolate air, I knew, with a sinking sensation, that the conversation with Superman hadn't miraculously solved everything.

"Did everything go all right?" I asked when I had shut the door safely behind us both and turned the locks.

"Uh... yeah. I guess." Clark sank into the chair beneath the window, heedless of the fact that clouds curtained the sun and captured the sunbeams before they could reach him. "Everything went just as he planned."

For once in my life, I was able to bottle up my curiosity. Whatever had happened, I was pretty certain that neither Clark nor Superman would readily tell me, and for some strange reason, I didn't want to have to *coerce* the information out of them. So, instead, I gestured toward the kitchen and said, "Well, it's closer to dinnertime than lunch now, but the cooking chores are still yours. If..." I hesitated, grasping for tact, then shrugged. "If you think you're up to it."

"Hey, fair's fair. If you got the groceries, I can certainly manage to cook." Clark came to his feet. "Uh, Lois?"

"Yeah, Clark?" I responded quietly.

"Would... would you mind helping me? Keeping me company?"

"Of course not." I pretended surprise. "You didn't think I was going to do all the investigative work while you lazed around in the kitchen, did you? But one warning, Kent." I held up a stern finger. "I will cut vegetables, set the table, and maybe even retrieve certain ingredients for you—but I will *not* be cooking anything. Got it?"

His expression was so tender, yet so grateful, that I had to swallow back a sudden lump. "Got it."

Clark was mostly quiet as he looked over what I had bought and decided on a meal, then set me to cutting up some vegetables for the stew he was making. I was afraid to say too much, knowing that if I started talking, I'd just end up babbling; when I did speak, I tried to

keep it light, tried to hide how worried and curious and frustrated I was, tried to reassure him that he was safe.

Finally, when we were both setting the table, he began to relax a bit. He actually smiled at me—not nearly as beautiful as his earlier grin, but enough. A few moments later, as we waited an interminable amount of time for the stew to be done, he ventured a joke, and soon one might be tempted to believe that he was fine.

But I knew just how faulty that assumption would be, and I couldn't help remembering Henderson's warning about pretense coming from a trauma victim.

"You promise this doesn't taste like chicken noodle soup?" I asked dubiously when he spooned out my portion of stew. The smoke that rose from the milky surface carried a scent so delicious that I wasn't too worried about the taste. My stomach rumbled quietly; it was definitely dinnertime now.

"It's nothing like it," Clark insisted. "This is stew, Lois. It's completely different from soup."

"It looks very similar."

"Taste it," Clark dared me with the hint of a grin. "If you don't like it, you can take over the cooking chores."

"Oh, very nice," I retorted, unable to bite back my own smile. "I can already tell you that I love it."

"Uh-huh. You haven't tasted it yet." His eyes avidly watched me as I lifted a spoonful, blew on it, and then popped it in my mouth.

"Wow," I murmured after chewing and swallowing. "It's delicious, Clark," I said honestly. "Thank you."

He ducked his head and dipped his spoon into his own bowl. "It's my mom's recipe; all I did was follow it."

"Right, so simple," I said sarcastically.

"Not simple," he countered. "It takes attention, focus, and patience."

"If you brought out chocolate, you'd have my attention. If you mentioned an interesting lead for an article, I'd be totally focused. And if this were a stake-out with a front page article on the line, I could fake the patience. But for a meal..." I pulled a face. "Take-out's so much easier."

My lack of patience—and cooking skills—was totally worth the laugh that escaped Clark, bringing back the sparkle of amusement that Superman's appearance had banished. "That's why *I'm* cooking," he replied as he took a bite of the stew.

"Clark." I looked down at my bowl, spooning up a piece of potato. "This morning, why did you get so serious when I mentioned earning your keep? What did I say wrong?"

His expression flickered. "Nothing, Lois. You didn't say anything wrong."

I nodded. "Then why did you stop smiling?"

I had a feeling I already knew the answer, but I wanted him to say it aloud. The bit of research I *had* managed to get done while he was gone had been on the Internet, acquiring information on trauma victims and how to help them. One major component every single site had mentioned was making the victim talk about what had happened, refusing to allow them to isolate themselves and hide behind a façade.

Clark shrugged uncomfortably, his eyes tight. "Luthor... he said I..."

"What?" I asked gently. With my free hand, I reached out and curled my fingers over his. "What did he say?"

"Why do you want to know?" He met my gaze without flinching, his hand slack beneath mine. "What good does it do to talk about it?"

"I want to know because it matters to you. And that means it matters to me. What did he say to you, Clark?"

He turned his hand and threaded his fingers through mine, staring at our intertwined hands as if they were more fascinating than Perry's poker games. "He said I didn't belong here. That I had to earn my keep. Buy my way into acceptance. He said I'd never... that I was an al—too different."

"He was wrong," I told him softly. I dropped my spoon and laid my hand on Clark's cheek in the same gesture he had made for me

numerous times. “You do belong in Metropolis, Clark. Perry wouldn’t have hired you if you weren’t a great reporter. Jimmy wouldn’t idolize you if you weren’t a great person. The only thing different about you is that you’re a good man through and through—that, I admit, isn’t exactly normal.”

“I know he’s wrong.” Clark closed his eyes. “But...the memory’s there.”

And he had a photographic memory, I realized with the beginnings of despair. What did I know about dealing with a trauma victim? Did I really think that a couple words from me could undo days of torture, pain, and verbal abuse? Or was I just kidding myself? Jumping in without caring that the water would swallow me whole and suck me under?

Clark reached up and placed his hand over mine, holding it against his cheek. His lips didn’t curve up at all, but the way he looked at me...it was still a smile. “But memories of you are better. I’m already getting more than enough to use in place of memories of Luthor.”

“Good,” I managed to say. “Then let’s finish eating.”

The rest of the evening passed much as had the last one. We put on a movie that neither one of us really watched. I managed to get a bit more work done, though the next step was pretty much beginning to write the article, something we really weren’t ready to do, not until we found more solid proof. Wherever Clark had hidden his own evidence must have been far away because Jimmy still wasn’t back yet. I’d have to call Perry in the morning and ask him to get in touch with a few of my snitches, see if they couldn’t dig up anything.

It had been a pretty unproductive day, as a whole, which never failed to make me feel even more tired than the exciting days that filled me with adrenaline. So, as soon as the credits to the movie started rolling, I stood up. “I’m heading to bed,” I stated.

Clark had looked up the minute I moved, but now he looked down at his lap. “I’m going to stay up a while more.”

I frowned. “You sure? You’re not too tired?”

“No. I’m feeling much better.” The assurance was made by rote and sounded it. Still, I couldn’t force him to go to bed. “I want to write a few ideas down.” As if to back his claim, he leaned forward and picked up a notepad and pencil from the coffee table.

“All right,” I agreed reluctantly. “Good night, then.”

“Good night, Lois.” I felt his eyes on me as I walked toward the bedroom, but when I paused on the threshold to look back, he was scribbling something down on the notepad.

Readying for bed, crawling underneath the cool covers, and lying staring up at the obscured ceiling didn’t get me any closer to sleep. It wasn’t even thoughts about Superman keeping me awake this time; in fact, I had scarcely spared a thought for the superhero since Clark’s return. Which made me feel slightly guilty, but not enough to distract me from worry over Clark.

I tossed and turned for twenty or thirty minutes before giving up and throwing the covers back. When I padded into the living room, I was surprised to find Clark still awake. He was staring into space, the notepad balanced on his knee and the pencil laid neatly down on the table.

“Come on, Clark.” I reached out and took the notepad, setting it aside. Absently, I noticed that the top page was blank.

He looked up at me, seemingly recalling himself from somewhere far away. “Lois?”

“Come on,” I said again. “You need some sleep, Clark.”

“Clark.” His smile was bleak. “That’s who I am.”

I sank to my knees beside him, my hand clenching spasmodically over his wrist. “Yes, you are.” My own tone was dazed and numb. *Trauma victims will, in rare occurrences, disassociate to such an extent that they find themselves losing hold of their own identity.* The articles I had found on the Internet swam through my mind, causing ripples that upset all other thoughts in my head.

“I always wanted to be Clark.” He swallowed painfully. “And now that’s all I am.”

“That’s enough, Clark,” I said slowly, meaning every word. What

more could he be? How could he improve? He was everything he needed to be. Or he had been, anyway. I wasn’t sure how much of that man Luthor had left me.

Clark’s smile turned softer, warmer, more hopeful. The sensation of his fingers feathering across my cheek was all that kept me from weeping in grief. I couldn’t cry, I instructed myself sternly. If I wept for Clark, it’d be like admitting that the man he had once been was forever gone. And I wasn’t ready to do that.

His thumb traced the edge of my jaw. “Lois, I...” His voice trailed off, but his eyes finished the sentence for him. It was almost frightening to realize how much he needed me, how much he wanted from me—yet I never backed down from a challenge. And though I couldn’t be everything to him that he desired, I could be a friend on whom he could rely, someone to connect him back to the life Luthor had tried to steal from him.

“Come on.” I helped him stand and took his hand. As we turned toward the bedroom, I caught a glimpse of finely shredded notepaper in the wastebasket—paper filled with bits of Clark’s handwriting.

“Lois?” Clark began to look toward where I was staring.

Hastily, I pulled him forward with a smile to distract him from my interest in his trash. “We haven’t exchanged our secrets yet,” I said quickly.

“Oh? Were we going to do that every night?”

Heartened by his banter even though I knew how transient the mood might be—*Trauma victims will often exhibit abrupt, severe mood changes and emotional fluctuations*—I grinned. “Well, if you have that many secrets.”

He sobered. “Not anymore, Lois. Not anymore.”

While he ducked into the bathroom to change, I straightened his bed. When he emerged and settled himself on the cot, I couldn’t resist perching at his side for a moment, reluctant to leave him without at least a hint of hope.

“So, Clark, come on,” I cajoled. “You must have *one* big secret.”

“Actually, I do. A very important one.” The lamp left us in a silken pool of light, but shadows lapped at my feet, emphasizing the serious intensity of Clark’s gaze, though the glasses obscured the specifics of his expression.

“Well?” I prompted.

“Would you turn the TV on?”

I let out a disappointed sigh. So much for that conversation with Superman having *any* effect. *A trauma victim may suffer extreme paranoia, living in a constant state of terror, panic, and edginess, projecting their fear onto other things or people, even those totally unconnected to their situation.*

Determinedly, I shook the thought aside and, responding to the implacability of Clark’s request, turned on the TV. I flipped through the channels twice, but there was no sign of Superman. When I looked back to Clark, though, I realized he was watching me instead of the television.

“What’s your secret?” he asked softly. There was nothing of expectation in his manner, just a terrible patience that extended to more than one aspect of his life.

“Well.” I hadn’t really considered mine, but after hearing what Luthor had told Clark while he was in the cell, I knew there was one secret I should have told him a long time before. “My secret is...that I’m sorry, Clark, for stealing your story. And even though I said I didn’t, *I do* like having you for a partner.”

“Wow.” The word was little more than an expelled breath. “I...I don’t think you could have any other secrets better than that one.”

I laughed, made a bit uncomfortable by the amount of sincerity in his voice. “You don’t have much of an imagination, do you?”

Clark gave a half-shrug. “It’d be like reaching for the moon to dream for anything higher, Lois.”

But his eyes never left mine. His hand cradled mine as if it were a treasure. And I knew: he did wish for more.

A lot more.

Sirens dimly penetrated the silence that had enveloped us. Tearing

my eyes from his unveiled heart, I looked to the TV. The sirens continued, but the local news didn't mention a Superman appearance.

"Lois." Clark tugged my hand and reached up to pull my head down near his lips.

I tensed with surprise, hating to reject him, suddenly terrified that this moment would ruin our friendship and destroy our partnership. But instead of trying to kiss me, he put his lips near my ear and whispered: "My secret, Lois—you remember how Trask said there was a meteorite called Kryptonite that could kill Superman?"

I gave a tiny nod, his hand still buried in my hair. "I named it."

His lips quirked. "I think *I* named it. But regardless...it's real."

"What?" I pulled back in shock, then had to lean near once more to hear his next words.

"I know firsthand, Lois; I was there. It takes Superman's powers away. It hurts him. It...it can kill him."

"No," I whispered in useless, desperate denial, my thoughts dazed and numb. "Superman is invulnerable."

Clark's eyes bored into mine; he enunciated each word separately. "It makes Superman ordinary, Lois. It makes him—just—like—me. It's a stone that glows green. And Luthor has it."

My skin turned cold as goose-bumps sprang into existence on my arms. Clark, I thought through my panicked horror. Clark needed me to be strong, to reassure him. "It's all right," I told him, my voice growing stronger as I contained my terror. "We're taking Luthor down anyway. We'll find the Kryptonite and hide it—*destroy* it. We won't let Luthor hurt Superman again."

"Thank you." Relief and gratitude suffused Clark's expression. And I knew—this was my sign of hope, my proof that he would be all right. Despite whatever he might hold against Superman, Clark was still worried for his safety, still looking out for him, still putting everyone else's needs above his own. He was, despite all the damage, still Clark.

It was not the first time I had had the realization, but I welcomed it nonetheless.

With the secret now given to me for safekeeping, Clark seemed able to finally rest. His body relaxed, and within moments, he slept. I sat beside him the whole time, offering no excuse, just holding his hand and watching him. When I heard his breathing deepen, I pulled my hand free of his. "Clark?" I whispered. Only when he made no response did I rise to my feet and head purposely into the living room.

The wastebasket was filled with what looked to be three or four pages filled with whatever Clark had written on them. They were shredded into several hundred tiny strips, yet the scope of the task before me didn't faze me. I had followed harder trails for front-page stories and this was so much more important than any mere article.

I dumped the contents of the wastebasket on the kitchen island and started separating out the strips. Even after I had gotten rid of everything that didn't have Clark's handwriting on it, I still had a formidable pile of what might as well be puzzle pieces. In more ways than one—I needed the key to unlock the things Clark told me. One piece of information, I was convinced, and surely everything he did and said would make sense. It had to. I refused to believe that Luthor had been able to destroy Clark Kent. My partner was much too stubborn to be defeated so easily.

It took me three hours of back-breaking, eye-watering, extremely frustrating work, but finally I had two and a half pieces of paper taped back together.

And after I read them, I hid what had turned out to be a letter, and I crawled into bed and huddled beneath all the blankets and still shivered with bone-deep, mind-numbing cold.

And the darkness engulfed me.

Chapter 11

Sleep didn't come for a while, and when it did, it was filled with dark shadows and frustrating mysteries and secrets that danced just out of reach. I was dimly aware that I tossed and turned and whimpered, unable to still myself or hold back the tiny exclamations of frustrated

grief. Finally—hours later, minutes later—a hand slipped into mine and a low, husky voice whispered in my ear. A calm, strengthening presence lent itself to me, and I quieted and stilled, as if I could not help but respond to him.

When I finally woke in the morning, I had to squint against the light piercing through my otherwise-dark room. Though it was bleary and unclear to my tired eyes, the clock revealed that I had slept later than I had the last few days and yet not nearly enough to catch up on the sleep I had lost piecing Clark's letter back together again.

Clark's letter.

Instantly, I was wide awake, sitting bolt-upright and looking toward the cot by the window.

It was empty and neatly made. I didn't hear any sign of Clark.

<Do you know why I'm up before you almost every day? Do you know why I can't sleep without being able to see you?>

Forcibly, I shoved the memory of his written words out of my mind. I didn't want to remember it all. I didn't want to revisit the simultaneous awe and terror that had been birthed within me while reading the secrets of his damaged heart.

Trying to achieve strength and resolve by faking them, I threw the covers back and stood. I hadn't quite made it to the bathroom when Clark peeked his head into the bedroom.

"Good morning," he said tentatively.

I opened my mouth to return the greeting, but no sound emerged.

<I'm really not trying to hide things from you, Lois.>

"There's breakfast when you're ready," Clark said after an awkward moment of silence. Then he retreated, and I was left alone.

But then, even when he was in the room, I was alone, wasn't I? Alone in sanity, anyway. Clark was lost, lost to whatever Luthor had done to him. And yet...even lost, he was still more...human, more caring, than anyone I had ever known.

Wishing I could simply stop thinking—wishing I had never read that letter—I quickly washed and dressed. Sight of the razor Perry had brought for Clark, lying so innocently by the sink, made me realize that a shadow of darkness still marred Clark's chin this morning; he hadn't shaved again. What so scared him about that simple act?

<I dream about you, Lois...dream that all the things Luthor threatened to do to you are really happening. And I can do nothing. I'm just as powerless as I—>

I clapped my hands over my ears, hating that his paranoid, beautiful words were trapped in my head, emitting light, casting shadows, going round and round so that I didn't know what to think anymore. Clark had always confused me, but never like this. He had never made me feel as if I didn't know him, as if he were so far beyond me I could never reach him...as if I didn't even deserve to try.

Clark seemed to realize that I couldn't have spoken to save my life, so he just gave me a friendly smile when I entered the kitchen, and he set a plate of hot scrambled eggs, sausages, and honeyed toast before me with a cup of steaming, aromatic coffee.

He even remembered exactly what I liked for breakfast.

<I could never hurt you, Lois. It's impossible for me. I care too much.>

"Thank you," I managed to whisper, my voice hollow and dry, little more than an echo. I dared not look toward the wastebasket where I had rearranged strips of torn, handwriting-covered paper over the top to hide that I had stolen his secrets from him.

Almost hovering, Clark watched me eat my breakfast. I would have sworn that I wouldn't have been able to eat more than a few mouthfuls, but it was so delicious—and Clark looked so hopeful—that I couldn't help but finish it all.

"I'll do the dishes." Clark pounced on the chores before I could do more than blink; he seemed to have forgotten that he had told me I would have to do the cleaning up in exchange for his cooking. But I knew he hadn't forgotten. It was just his way of caring for me. He cared for me so much, in fact, that it had been Luthor's key to unhinging his mind.

<He's stolen everything from me.>

“You, uh...” Clark gave me a hesitant smile, as if unsure how I would receive it. “You wanted to call Perry this morning, remember, and ask him to get in contact with some of your snitches.”

“Right,” I said, forcing a short nod. “I’ll see if they’ve got anything on Luthor.”

“Tell them to be careful, though. Luthor’s dangerous.”

I fled the room before the words beginning to slowly boil up from within me erupted to wipe the smiles from his face and the patience from his eyes.

<But I’ll hope, Lois. That’s something I can never stop doing.>

It took me ten minutes before I regained enough composure to dial the familiar number; it took only the sound of Perry saying hello to bring me right back to the verge of tears.

“Hello? Who is this?”

“Perry...” I managed before my voice gave out once again. It was as if Clark’s written words had stolen my own voice from me, consigning it to the shredded state his letter had been in before I had unwisely put it back together.

“Lois? Darlin’, is something wrong?” The panic that threaded Perry’s voice gave me back the power of speech.

“Everything’s fine,” I assured him hastily, tasting the bitterness of the lie. “I just wanted to ask you to get in touch with some of my sources and see if they can dig up something on Luthor.”

“You sure they won’t spook if they hear from me instead of you?”

“They have to know already that something’s wrong—I’ve only written two articles in the past week. I’ve told them enough in the past so they should know they can trust you.”

“All right, then. I’ll get right on it.” Perry hesitated, and I held my breath, unable to decide what I wanted him to do or say at that moment. “Uh, Lois, honey...are you okay?”

“Yeah.” My voice again crumbled into dust.

“Is it Clark? Is he all right?”

The irony of the Chief’s question was like a physical blow. The only thing that stopped me from breaking down into sobs was the fact that I knew Clark would come rushing in at the sound of them.

<At worst, you’d think I’m crazy—as if I could disprove that one the way I am now! At best, you’d accuse me of—>

My grip on the phone tightened until it was a physical pain, ripping me from the memory of the words seared into my mind. “I’m scared for him,” I whispered into the phone. “He’s so different, Perry. Luthor...changed him.”

But had he? I wondered. Or had I simply never realized just how deep Clark’s feelings ran? Had I blinded myself to what he was really feeling and thinking? Had I ignored what I didn’t want to face?

“Lois...” Perry fell silent, and I could picture him behind my closed eyelids, sitting hunched over his desk, cradling the phone against his ear, his face caught between concern and uncertainty. “I’m sorry you have to go through all this. Do...do you need me to come over?”

For a moment, I was seriously tempted. Maybe I could even get Perry to insist that Clark stay at his place so that I could have some much-needed distance. Maybe Perry would be able to cure Clark, coax him out of his delusions, calm him from his terrors, cajole him from his fixations. Maybe I would, after a few days of distance, even be able to pretend that I had never read the letter Clark had written and then decimated. Maybe I could go back to the person I had been before witnessing the desperation of Clark’s private hell.

<Do you know why the only day I got up later than you was because I was holding you in my arms and knew you weren’t dead? I need to remind myself, sometimes.>

“No, that’s okay, Chief. Thanks for the offer. I just...had a bad night, and I’m a bit grumpy this morning. Really, everything’s fine.”

“You sure?” There was a fair bit of suspicion lading Perry’s tone.

“Yeah. We’re getting pretty far on the investigation on our end. Any problems on yours?”

“Not particularly. We’re playing it safer than a black cat hidin’ in a shadow. You make sure you’re doin’ the same, you hear me?”

“I hear you, Chief.” I couldn’t, for the life of me, have said from where I managed to dredge up the cheerfulness infusing my voice. “Let me know if any of my sources come through.”

I could almost see Perry’s relief. “Hey now, who’s in charge here? You watch yourself.”

With a fake laugh, I told him goodbye and hung up the phone. Which meant it was just Clark and me again. Just me...and a man who cared for me far too much and believed lies about Superman.

<The man you think is Superman is an imposter.>

The conversation with my mentor gave me enough strength to walk back into the living room, offer a small, pale smile as a reluctant gift to Clark, and sit on the couch across from him. The intel we had on Luthor had all been sorted, but today, we needed to begin using it all to build a case against him. Henderson was limited in what he could do without tipping off any politician that might be in Luthor’s pocket or even bought men among his own officers, so we needed to do what he couldn’t.

“Lois?” Clark said my name slowly, uncertainly.

<If I tell you, Lois, you’ll die.>

“I’m just tired, Clark,” I said quickly without looking up from the file in my hands, though I couldn’t have said what was written across its white surface. All I saw were Clark’s neat letters, swimming in front of my eyes, blotting out everything else.

The sight of Clark’s hand taking the file away and holding my own hands between his sent the words scattering. In fact, it sent every thought I had flitting away, and I remembered the touch and whisper that had allowed me to sleep through the night. Not a dream, I was suddenly sure.

“What is it, Lois?” His eyes were so intent that I couldn’t help but look up and so soft that I couldn’t look away. “Is it something I said?”

<I can just hear you chiding me, telling me to keep to the point, stick to the facts or let you write the piece.>

“No.” I spoke so quietly he must have read my lips.

“Are you afraid of something?” He studied me so closely that I was sure he could have described every minute detail of my expression.

The urge to confess slammed into me like a freight train, knocking the breath out of me and leaving me wide-eyed and gasping. Confess, I told myself. Tell him you saw his letter. Tell him you read it. Tell him you don’t know what’s going on. Tell him you want the old Clark back with no complications, no expectations, no implications. Tell him...tell him you’re afraid—both *for* him and *of* him.

“Please,” he prompted gently, kneeling there before me, completely at my mercy. I could let him know that I had read his letter and now knew him to be, truly, a *victim*. I could inform him that he needed professional help. I could trample all over his heart and take away the hope he clung to so tenaciously.

<It’s the only power I have left.>

“Clark,” I began, turning my hands to clasp his more tightly than the loose grip he had instigated. “I...”

“What is it?” He was so totally trusting, looking up at me with shining eyes and open expression. He trusted me. He needed me. We were partners. Partners...and friends. I should tell him. He would listen to me. He would do whatever I told him. Even if it killed him.

“Clark, I need to tell you something.” But I could not, for all the front page bylines in the world, decide what that was. There was so much that *should* be said and so much that *could* be said...but what *would* I say?

The tiny, infinitesimal smile that curved Clark’s lips and made the gleam in his eyes explode through the lenses of his glasses was my undoing. “You can tell me anything, Lois.”

“I know,” I said very quietly. “But can *you*?”

He froze, his hands in mine suddenly very still. “I’m trying,” he finally whispered back.

<I *can’t* tell you this, Lois. You have no idea how much I want to, which is why I’m writing this letter.>

“Just tell me,” I commanded Clark. “Tell me the exact thought

you're thinking right now." Surely he was thinking about the letter. Surely that was all *anyone* could think of at the moment.

He swallowed, looking more afraid than I had ever seen him before, even in the cell when Luthor had pulled out that tiny box. "I can't."

Disappointment covered me like a second skin. "Why not?"
"I'm afraid."

<Yet still I can't resist dropping hints.>

"You don't have to be afraid," I told him. Pulling one of my hands free of his, I laid it against his cheek. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

"I think you would if I told you what I'm thinking at *this* moment," he admitted with the hint of a self-deprecating grin. "It's not something you exactly welcome."

And with a start, I realized that Clark was *not* thinking about the sentences that burned like coals within my mind. He was thinking of three little words that weren't exactly a secret. Three little words I couldn't bear to hear right now, not at this moment, not like this, not when I didn't know him as well as I thought I had.

Abruptly, I pulled my hands away from him and clutched them protectively in my lap. My eyes fell away from Clark's, but it was impossible to miss his flinch of disappointment and the way he shrank in on himself. I should have just told him what I had originally planned, I thought dismally. It would have hurt him far less.

"Clark," I said again, then paused when he did not look up to meet my gaze.

"It's all right," he said hurriedly. He stood and moved so that his back was to me, hiding his expression from me as he had never been able to hide his heart. "I guess we should...get back to work. Right, partner?"

<But I'll never get you to believe me.>

Making a sudden decision, hoping I could undo the damage that rounded his shoulders and tightened his eyes, I stood. "Clark, about last night...you and Superman and the I—"

The knock at the window forestalled my confession. Clark hunched even deeper in on himself while I looked to the window and saw Superman floating there, tips of skyscrapers brushing the cold-blue sky his otherworldly backdrop. My immediate impulse at seeing him was to smile, but somehow, the expression could not form itself on my face.

"You'd better get that," Clark said dully. "We need the exclusive, right?"

Wincing away from the bitterness I expected to hear in his voice—and yet, strangely, did *not* hear—I moved to the window and pulled it open. "Superman." I couldn't help the breathy quality that automatically pitched my voice a bit higher. The man was flying, after all—it was hard not to be affected by that!

"I promised I'd give you the exclusive," the superhero said with the hint of a smile as he floated into my apartment and touched down on the floor. His eyes flicked to Clark, behind me, then moved back to meet my gaze. "Is this a good time?"

"Uh, yes, of course." The smile finally broke through to reshape my features. I ignored the prickling sensation at the back of my neck, caused by the feel of Clark's eyes on me. "Did you want anything to drink?" I remembered to ask as I gestured Superman toward one of the couches.

"No, thank you." His eyes tightened a bit when Clark sat beside me, though Clark's expression remained decidedly neutral.

<The man you think is Superman is watching us—watching *me*. He's doing all of Luthor's dirty work.>

"So," I said brightly, feeling more uncomfortable than I ever had in my life. I wished I could scrub Clark's insane accusations from my mind. "You were gone a long time—two months."

"Yes." Superman crossed his arms over his chest, his cape wrapped around him.

I waited a moment more, then said, "What were you doing?"

"Until your article clearing my name became public knowledge, I

was traveling the world, moving from city to city, convinced it was unsafe for me to stay in one place for very long."

Clark tensed beside me; he could not have been more rigid if he had been made of steel.

<He's playing us. He's the jailor in our prison—>

"Couldn't you return to your home planet?" I watched Superman closely, afraid of his answer, suddenly realizing that I had never before dared to think about Superman leaving my world.

The superhero's vibrant eyes flickered slightly. "That is impossible for me. This world is mine now, so I remained."

"And after it was discovered that you were innocent?" I prompted, leaning forward to grab a notebook and pencil off the coffee table in order to conceal the depths of my soul-shaking relief.

Superman shrugged. "When I read your article, I was ready to make a public appearance. However, with the realization that Nightfall was headed our way, I had no choice but to delay my return to Metropolis."

A cough erupted from Clark, but I was certain without even glancing toward him that it was made more out of derision and disbelief than anything. The assertions from his letter tried to pry their way back into my mind, but I refused to allow them entrance, focusing instead on Superman's earnest gaze.

"Was it hard stopping the asteroid?" I asked in concern. It hadn't been so long ago that I had thought Nightfall had killed Superman—and that I had been partially responsible for him having to face it alone.

Strangely, Superman's gaze moved to Clark. "It took a lot out of me. That's why it took so long for me to...return."

I looked between Superman and Clark for a moment, about ready to grab them both and shake them until they started giving me some straight answers. But they wouldn't, I was sure. Once again, I ignored the memory of Clark's haunted message.

"Superman." I leaned forward. "Were you hurt? Were you alone? Why didn't you ask anyone for help?"

It wasn't until I heard my own voice uttering the questions that I realized I was asking as much for Clark's sake as I was for my own curiosity or desire for a story. I had told Clark that if I could ask Superman any question, I would ask why he had not saved Clark. Surely if Clark realized that the superhero had been hurt saving the world, he would realize that it was not Superman's fault he had not been able to help him.

"I was not hurt," Superman replied.

Again, I waited for an illuminating reply that was not forthcoming.

"But you said it took a lot out of you," I commented, biting my tongue to keep from letting loose an irritated retort. Why had I never before realized just how...evasive...Superman was? Had he always been this close-mouthed? I had to admit that the lack of a mask, the openness of his persona, the air of integrity that surrounded him—it had made me—it had made *everyone*—think that he had nothing to hide. Were we wrong?

<He's Luthor's puppet.>

"It did. I had to recover my strength." Superman smiled at me, and I had a hard time keeping *any* coherent thought in my head, let alone the snatches of sentences Clark had written.

"And where were you while you were...recovering?" Clark asked, startling both me and Superman. His dark eyes, shaded by the glasses, were intent on Superman. He gave no sign that he noticed either my puzzled frown or Superman's close study of him.

"I prefer not to say," Superman answered after a pause. "Even I need a safe place to recharge without being mobbed."

My vague suspicion melted away. The hero was so alone, I marveled. So aloof, trapped in the sky while the rest of the world remained on Earth—a planet alien to him. The only planet left to him now, for whatever reason. And yet he never seemed to waver or to doubt that he was doing the right thing.

"That's understandable," I murmured with a soft smile that made Superman seem to relax a bit. "So..." I cleared my throat and shifted

to break the suddenly intimate moment. Clark looked away, a muscle ticcing in his jaw. “Do you have any plans now that you’re back?”

“I will do what needs done,” he replied simply, starkly. “There is nothing else for me to do.”

“And,” I began cautiously, remembering the question Clark had wanted to ask him. “Is that enough? Are you happy?”

Superman cocked his head, a puzzled expression sitting unnaturally—and yet, somehow familiarly—on his features. “Happy?”

Clark leaned forward, intensity caged within him. “Do you ever feel like there should be more? Isn’t there something missing? What do you do when you’re not making rescues?”

Superman’s smile was almost grim as he locked stares with my partner. “You should know that better than anyone, Clark. Are *you* happy?”

Clark went suddenly and completely white. He wavered, looking as if he might collapse at any moment. His mouth was so tightly shut that white lines crimped his jaw.

I stared between the two men uncertainly.

“I am happy, Ms. Lane.” Superman looked away from Clark to meet my gaze. “I was made for a purpose, and I am fulfilling it.”

“Made?” I repeated slowly, assaulted by yet another line from the letter.

<...when Superman was first created...>

A smile heightened Superman’s already-amazing looks. “Created. Born. We each have a purpose.”

“Destiny,” Clark said, his hands clenched tightly over his knees. “You believe that certain things are fated to be? That there’s nothing we can do to change them?”

“I believe that we should each find our place in the world—and accept it.” Superman shrugged, though his tone was anything but casual. “I believe that...everything works better when we each know where we should be.”

“An interesting viewpoint,” I interjected quickly. “Of course, lots of people believe very similar things. But getting back to the focus of this interview...were you ever threatened while you were...away?”

The merest hint of a frown crossed Superman’s features. “No.”

“But you were in disguise, right? I mean, how else would you have been able to quietly move from city to city? I don’t suppose you’d tell me what alias you were using?” I shot a sidelong glance to Clark, who was shifting somewhat uncomfortably. I was sure that he knew the answer to this question already and equally sure that he would never betray it, regardless of his suspicions.

Superman hesitated a long moment. “Let’s just say that I was careful to avoid inciting mass panic. Back then, it was still believed that I conducted and attracted the potent energy of the sun.”

“I see.” Trying to hide my disappointment and tamp down on my curiosity, I straightened. “Well then.” I looked once more at Clark as he studied Superman closely. “Superman, how much do you know about the Kry—”

Clark made an indeterminate sound that turned into a delayed groan, which was, I had no doubt, simply a ploy. Superman started a bit, then gave Clark a puzzled frown. I clenched my hands into fists, thoroughly sick of this whole evasion routine.

“Are you all right?” I asked my partner dutifully.

“Uh...” Clark swallowed, looking incredibly guilty. So much for the lies he supposedly told all the time—the man couldn’t tell a lie to save his life! “I have a headache, I guess.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” I said with false sweetness. “And you were feeling so much better. Superman, why don’t you carry him into the bedroom and put him on the cot? You do need your rest, Clark.”

“Of course, Lois.” Superman stood so quickly that Clark had time only to toss me a betrayed look before being picked up by the superhero and carried farther back into my apartment.

I couldn’t bring myself to follow the two men into the bedroom, feeling a tiny bit remorseful for the petty revenge. It was just all so frustrating! Superman’s evasions, Clark’s irrationality...my own confusion about both of them. I had been in love with Superman from

the moment he flew me in his arms, but Clark was right—I didn’t know that much about him.

And Clark? I hardly knew what to think of him. Each time I saw him, the letter consumed my every thought. I had thought he was an open book to me, but the letter proved that there were whole chapters I hadn’t even realized existed. And what was I supposed to do with this newfound knowledge?

Aimlessly, I picked up the notebook I had held earlier, though I hadn’t written anything in it. I should start scribbling ideas on how to write an article with what little Superman had given me, but...it was useless. All I could see were the sentences Clark had composed while sitting alone in the dark.

“Lois?”

I turned, trying to control the suddenly racing beat of my heart. Superman stood near the door, the light from my fish tank casting an ethereal glow onto his skin. The stillness of his posture did nothing to help me regain my composure, which had vanished with the sound of his low voice.

“S-Superman,” I managed to say, not quite intelligently. I tried a smile to distract him from the slight stammer. “Is Clark all right?”

Instead of replying, Superman took two steps nearer me, his cape floating lightly around him. The sight of him filled my mind so there was no room left for anything else, not even Clark’s letter. “You seem sad, Lois. Is there anything I can do?”

His kindness threatened to send me flying apart, but if I let that happen, I would have to explain why I was so on edge. I would have to tell him about the letter. And that wasn’t his secret—or mine, truthfully. It was Clark’s. And no matter how paranoid he was acting, I couldn’t betray my partner. So I smiled, and I gestured toward the window that led to the fire escape.

“It’s just this investigation,” I lied as I stepped out onto the cold metal, followed closely by Superman, whose warmth seeped into me even at the careful distance he kept between us. “I hate hiding. I’m not used to sitting still. I want to see Luthor dealt with already so Clark and I can move on. It’s not fair to him to stretch this out so long.”

“I understand.” Superman looked up at the sky. When I followed his gaze, I saw the first snowflakes of a winter storm spiraling down from the large gray-white clouds. Like tiny fairies, they danced and spun until descending to my level and alighting on my hair, my cheeks, my nose, my opened palms.

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered.

He heard me and stepped closer, his eyes more captivating than I had ever before seen them. Slowly, gently, he raised his hand and brushed his fingers across my brow, my cheek, my chin, stroking away the snowflakes and igniting sparks to take their place.

“Th-thank you for giving us the interview,” I said, my voice shaky and as soft as the snow.

“I would give you anything, Lois.”

My mouth dropped open in surprise.

And Superman kissed me.

Another woman might have frozen in astonishment, might have melted away in a burst of vapor, might have gaped up at him foolishly. But not me. I was Lois Lane, and I didn’t let any amount of surprise stop me from sliding my arms around his neck and kissing him back. I had dreamed of kissing him before, but this was the first time those dreams had ever transmuted themselves into reality, given substance and form that were, ironically enough, almost dreamlike.

It was over far too quickly, and yet not really because Superman kept me in his arms, pulling back just far enough to talk to me. “I care a great deal for you, Lois.”

“I...care for you, too,” I responded, a very weak statement considering all that I wanted to say and do. But he was Superman, and that he had kissed me at all was enough out of character that I wasn’t surprised when he let his arms fall to his sides and took a step back.

“If I find anything on Luthor, I’ll let you know,” he promised intently. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Thank you.” I dared to reach out and put my hands on his arm,

eager to make up for the vicious accusations that had—even if they hadn't originated from me—been swirling through my mind throughout our entire interview. "I'm glad you're back, Superman. I know it must seem that we—the world—rejected you on a theory that didn't have a lot of proof to support it, and that we accepted you back for...selfish reasons. But...most everyone is very happy you're here. Especially me," I added softly.

His hand cupped my shoulder for a brief instant. "I don't need acceptance—I'm doing what is right-but thank you for the thought."

When he began to float into the air, I reluctantly stepped back. "I'll see you around?"

"Of course." His smile was almost a grin, nearly childlike in its simplicity. "I get around fast."

It seemed an odd thing to say, but I smiled anyway just to see the glimpse of this more relaxed, happier Superman. And then he was gone, the snowflakes rioting in his wake.

I'm convinced that I was actually floating as I ducked back inside the living room. If I was, I was quickly brought back down to earth by the sight of Clark standing in exactly the same place Superman had stood just moments earlier. Only, the glow of the humming water beside him cast shadows across his face rather than giving him an otherworldly air.

"Why didn't you want me to ask him about the Kryptonite?" I questioned him, struggling to keep my voice neutral even as I panicked, wondering how much he had seen of my interlude with Superman. Just because I didn't feel for Clark as he did for me didn't mean that I wanted to rub his face in the fact that I loved Superman. I mean, sure, before he had left, I had mentioned it quite frequently, using it somewhat as a deterrent against the crush I knew Clark had on me. But now, after the letter, after the conversation we had had just before Superman's arrival...it seemed inordinately cruel.

"Why worry him about something that we've decided to take care of for him?" he responded, his voice quiet and...tired. "Are you hungry? It's almost lunch time."

"Sure." I wasn't, actually, not after the big breakfast he had given me, but one rejection in a morning was more than enough.

The sandwiches he fixed were delicious, naturally, as was the cut fruit he served on the side. I managed to eat half the sandwich and a bit of the fruit, not wanting to irritate him and not having any idea what to say. He didn't say much either, not during lunch and not during the afternoon as we silently worked on the piece. But I didn't get the impression that he was angry. Rather, it was as if he were...focused. As if he had made a decision and now was determined to see it through.

Which frightened me. Because, with the memory of his letter annoyingly fresh in my mind, how could I know what that decision was?

How could I know that it didn't involve Kryptonite and a private meeting with a man he no longer believed was Superman?

And how could I ever assimilate what that letter had said with my unassuming, kind partner?

"I don't know how to tell you this, Lois. I *can't* tell you this. You have no idea how much I want to, which is why I'm writing this letter. I know I can't give it to you, but if I don't do *something* to warn you, I'll explode.

"The thing is, even if I did tell you, you wouldn't believe me. At worst, you'd think I'm crazy—as if I could disprove that one the way I am now! At best, you'd accuse me of jealousy. You've done it before when Superman was first created, and again when I tried to warn you about Luthor.

"Jealousy.

"I hate that word—hate it because I cannot honestly say I don't feel it. Even more so now than ever before.

"He's stolen everything from me." That line had been crossed out, I vividly remembered, but not so heavily that I hadn't been able to read it.

"I'm really not trying to hide things from you, Lois. I want to tell

you, but...Luthor made it very clear what would happen to you if I did.

"Do you know why I'm up before you almost every day? Do you know why I can't sleep without being able to see you? Do you know why the only day I got up later than you was because I was holding you in my arms and knew you weren't dead? I need to remind myself, sometimes.

"I dream about you, Lois...dream that all the things Luthor threatened to do to you are really happening. And I can do nothing. I'm just as powerless as I wished to be so many times.

"If I tell you, Lois, you'll die. And not pleasantly, if any death can be said to be such. No, you'll die, horribly and alone.

"Yet still I can't resist dropping hints. And I know he knows it. Which means...I don't know what it means. Will he *not* kill you? There must, after all, be something of me in him. And I could never hurt you, Lois. It's impossible for me. I care too much.

"But if he won't kill you—I wonder if I can take advantage of that. I've tried already, but...it's so hard to talk to him.

"Enough rambling. I can just hear you chiding me, telling me to keep to the point, stick to the facts or let you write the piece.

"But you can't write this one.

"The man you think is Superman is an imposter. He's Luthor's puppet. He's playing us. He's the jailor in our prison—a prison you can't see, with locks formed of threats and chains made out of helplessness.

"Luthor told me the rules of this game just before he let us out of that cell and into this one. The man you think is Superman is watching us—watching *me*. He's doing all of Luthor's dirty work.

"But I'll never get you to believe me. How could I? It's not like I can prove any of this. Not now. Maybe not ever again.

"And how can I even think of telling you at all? How can I endanger your life just because I feel dead inside when you smile at him?

"I can't. So I'll destroy this letter. I'd burn it if I still had the ability to do so.

"And I'll say nothing.

"But I'll hope. That's something I *can* do. Besides...it's the only power I have left."

Chapter 12

Talking to Superman had allayed the vague fear I hadn't even admitted to myself—the fear that Clark was right about the superhero. After seeing the sincerity in Superman's eyes, and hearing his answers—even if they were a bit evasive—to my questions, I was reassured that paranoia was the only explanation for Clark's unthinkable assertions. I had to admit that the kiss hadn't exactly hurt matters for Superman either, but that was really beside the point.

Anyway, I felt badly enough about sending Clark alone into the bedroom in the grip of a man he feared that I was ready to give him a bit of a peace offering. I ignored the tiny whisper in my mind that said I was trying to make up for the fact that I was pretty certain he had seen me kiss Superman—or Superman kiss me, rather. Whichever, it hadn't helped Clark's mood any.

Though he hadn't shown any signs of anger, his mute withdrawal had lasted all day, and even my teasing during dinner couldn't do more than draw a handful of responses from him and the slightest shadow of a smile he clearly forced for my sake. So, when he settled into bed for the night, I waited until he had pulled the blankets up around himself, then moved to sit at his side as I had the night before.

He didn't seem surprised, merely looked up at me and scooted over a bit to give me more room. The clouds had cleared up during the evening, so the moon shone clearly through the window and cast a spotlight across Clark's face. "I'm sorry I wasn't better company today, Lois," he offered before I could say anything.

I shrugged, not exactly eager to follow that topic. "We all have our off-days."

"Still friends?"

I froze, unable to decipher the emotions straining his voice. “Of course, Clark. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

A flicker of something passed across his features, illuminated by the glow of the moon. Belatedly, I realized that my ‘rejection’ this morning had made it seem to him that he *could* get rid of me fairly easily. But I couldn’t go there, not right now. Not ever. I was in love with Superman, after all.

I hated that I had to remind myself.

“Okay,” I said, making it clear through my tone that I wasn’t moving until he obliged me. “Time to exchange our secrets.”

He looked away, gazing out the window, probably not incidentally hiding his expression. The shadow of the stubble he had never shaved seemed out of place on his jaw. “I...don’t really have anymore, Lois.”

“Well, I have one,” I said, refusing to be deterred.

“Lois.” Clark shifted uncomfortably, the blanket sliding off his shoulders and revealing that, beneath the t-shirt he wore, he had regained a bit of his muscle tone. He must have done a couple more push-ups than I had realized, I thought numbly. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I want to,” I assured him, shaking off that weird feeling and meeting his eyes. Something in them—something deep and beautiful and extremely compelling—drew my hand toward him. It settled on his shoulder; I wasn’t quite brave enough to bury my fingers in his hair as he had done to me while confiding a secret. Then, as if this were the reason I was touching him, I leaned close to whisper in his ear, now purposely mimicking his position when he had told me of Kryptonite.

“Here’s my secret. When you kissed Toni Taylor...I was jealous.” I pulled back to study his reaction.

On the one hand, I knew this could seem cruel, as if I were taunting him or leading him on. And yet...I couldn’t forget the way he had flinched away from my physical withdrawal that morning. I couldn’t forget the way he had turned his back on me. I couldn’t forget the defeated tone in his voice. Maybe I was wrong, maybe I was being selfish or foolish, maybe I just wanted to do anything to keep him fixated on something besides Superman...whatever the reason, this was the secret I knew I had to tell him.

I just wasn’t sure he would appreciate it. So I held my breath as I studied him.

Almost unconsciously, his hand rose to cover mine, still lying on his chest. Almost invisibly, the same gleam as from this morning shone through his glasses. Almost unbelievably, the hint of a smile was hiding in the corners of his mouth. “Well,” he said slowly. “To be perfectly honest, I was pretty jealous of all the time you were spending with her brother.”

I grinned, immeasurably relieved. “Well,” I copied him again, still repeating his words back to him, just as I had ever since hearing his voice slice through the darkness of a cell. “To be perfectly honest, I served drinks once—*once*—to him, seven or eight of his lieutenants, and Toni. Not very intimate.”

Clark hesitated. “I guess I do have a secret, Lois.”

“What is it?” I was suddenly hyper-conscious of the warmth and weight of his hand atop mine—warming rather than stifling, comforting rather than suffocating. It was hard to focus past that and on his words. What was wrong with me? Superman had kissed me just hours earlier—why did that now seem so...unimportant?

“When I threw you in that dumpster...I kind of enjoyed it.”

Unexpectedly, I started to laugh, but he wasn’t done, his voice dropping a little lower and unfurling a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“But when I sent you to the Sewage Reclamation Facility...I *didn’t* enjoy that.”

“Neither did I,” I told him with a chuckle to disguise how off-balance I felt. “But I’m glad you did it, Clark. Both times.”

“You are?” His brow furrowed. “Why?”

I moved my hand to stroke the hair from his forehead, more to dampen the feelings evoked by his touch than because I had miraculously become any braver. Unfortunately, touching his hair

seemed addictive, and I found that I couldn’t pull away. Clark’s eyes, wide and filled with—awe?—never left me.

“Well,” I said softly as I was enveloped by the same feelings of trust that I had felt in the cell. “Because the first time, it made me respect you as a journalist. It made me stop and see you. And the second time, because...well...” I laughed self-consciously. “You had been so perfect up till then. Always saying the right thing, doing the right thing, always knowing what to do and handling everything—me—so well. It was kind of nice to see you be a little...vindictive. It made you seem more human.”

He stiffened. This time, I recognized the signs—the change in demeanor, the flash of nightmares in his eyes, the way he looked away—and I brought up my other hand to hold onto his shoulder and force him to look at me. “And you *are* human, Clark, no matter what Luthor may have told you,” I said firmly. “In fact, I think you’re the most human person I’ve ever met.”

“And you’re the bravest,” he whispered, his finger stroking my cheek so lightly that I almost wondered if I imagined it. “You amaze me with all that you’re willing to do.”

“I don’t always feel brave,” I told him carefully. At that moment, in fact, I felt like a coward because what I really wanted to tell him was that I was sorry for hurting him that morning, even if only inadvertently.

“And I don’t always feel human.” His voice was so soft I was surprised that I caught the words, so sincere that I blinked.

“That’s why they’re secrets,” I said quietly. “Only we can know. You and me against the world.”

“Us against the world,” he agreed, and this time I knew I didn’t imagine the touch of his hand on my face. Hearing my words spoken back to me, I suddenly wondered if I wasn’t feeding his paranoia, but...he seemed so much happier. So much more confident. And he was smiling again. Surely that was not a bad thing. It couldn’t be. I wouldn’t allow it to be.

“Good night, Clark,” I told him, cheered for some reason I didn’t choose to examine too closely. When I stood, his hands fell back to the blankets. My own, hanging at my sides, felt strangely empty and cold.

“Good night, Lois.”

The short conversation didn’t make the letter go away, but it did make it easier to sleep that night. It made me feel a bit better about the Superman exclusive we had sent to Perry. It made me a little more hopeful about Clark’s chances of recovering from Luthor’s brainwashing. It made the world seem like a better place.

It was a good thing I wasn’t troubled by nightmares that night because Perry woke me with a phone call far too early the next morning. I was still half-asleep when I answered the phone, already hushing it even before I picked it up and put it to my ear.

“Shh!” I hissed. “Hello?”

“Lois, darlin’, is that you?”

“Shh,” I commanded again, blearily looking in the direction of Clark’s cot. Sunrise had painted the window pink and orange and cast golden shadows across Clark’s still form. “Clark’s still asleep!”

“Oh?” A touch of surprised disbelief tinged Perry’s voice, and he hesitated a moment before continuing. “Well, I’m sorry then. I didn’t realize a bit of beauty sleep was more important than this little tip I just got from some dame callin’ herself Long Legs Lulu. Should I call back at a more convenient time?”

“Long Legs Lulu?” I repeated in a hushed tone. “She called you with information? On Luthor?”

“Well, she says she has the word on the streets about who they think the Boss might be.”

“The Boss?” I sat up excitedly, almost knocking the covers off completely in my haste. Worried and thinking I had seen him stir out of the corner of my eye, I glanced toward Clark; the light reflecting off his glasses made it impossible to tell whether he was awake or not. “She knows who the Boss is? Does she have proof?”

“She said it was worth your while.”

My heart, already beating at a reasonable pace, sped up even more.

“Really? She doesn’t say things like that lightly. I’ve got to see her. Did she say where to meet?”

“An alley down in the Red Light district. Lantern and Days Blvd. But, Lois, you’re not thinkin’ of goin’ down there, are you?”

“Of course I am,” I whispered incredulously, already hunting for the sneakers I knew I had kicked under my bed a while ago. “This *is* why I had you ask them to be hunting up clues for me.”

“It could be dangerous,” Perry worried. “The Red Light district isn’t the nicest place. What if—”

“I’ve got bodyguards following me around, and Superman’s promised to keep an eye on me from the sky,” I interrupted. “The only way I could possibly be safer is if the National Guard came along.”

“I’d feel better if they did,” Perry said, but I could tell I had won him over.

“Oh, Chief?” Once more, I looked toward Clark. He might have shifted positions slightly, but it was hard to tell with the blankets all bunched up around him. “Do...do you think you could come over for a while? I just...I don’t know that Clark should be alone.”

I bit my lip as I waited for his reply. It wasn’t like we were anywhere near the lunch hour, and Perry hated leaving his newsroom for even that inconvenience.

“Uh...sure.” Perry’s acquiescence was a bit delayed but no less sincere for all that. “I can be over in about forty minutes, is that all right?”

“Perfect. I’ll be gone before then, but...I’d just feel better if you checked in on him. I’ll leave him a note explaining things.”

“Okay. Well, then...you be careful, darlin’, all right?”

I rolled my eyes, my tone fond. “I promise. Thanks, Chief.”

The minute I hung up the phone, I had rolled to my feet and was tiptoeing to the closet to grab some jeans, a t-shirt, and a lightweight coat. Ten minutes after that, I was slipping out the door and locking it quietly behind me with a silent prayer that Clark remain asleep until Perry arrived.

I didn’t see my bodyguards, though I assumed they were following me closely, probably calling Henderson to see if he could explain why I was out for an early morning drive to the bad side of town. The inspector would doubtless have another condemning speech ready for me when I got back home, I knew, but that didn’t change the fact that I had to see this source. I was more than ready to put Luthor behind bars for what he had done to Clark and Superman.

As a precaution, I parked the Jeep a couple blocks down from Long Legs Lulu’s office, then slowly jogged forward. The fairy-like snow from the day before had turned into a thin layer of mush, mud-colored and soggy, and the neighborhood wasn’t exactly the kind in which one took an early morning run, but I tried to pretend that was precisely the reason for my presence.

There was no sign of the long-legged prostitute in the alley, so I slowed my pace, hoping she would show up before anyone else did. I wasn’t exactly comfortable in the Red Light district, being in a profession very different from Lulu’s, and I didn’t want to attract any attention. The last thing I needed was a proposition before breakfast.

Though I had been doing this on my own for the past two months, I found myself wishing Clark were there beside me. It had always been...comforting...to have him along.

The sound of a low voice touched by a familiar accent caught my attention. Glancing around once, I flattened myself against the edge of the alley and crept forward in the direction of a garage that gaped open into the dark interior of a warehouse attached to one of the buildings. My eyes, adjusted to the sunlight, peered ineffectually through the darkness as I peeked around the corner of the opening.

“That’s right, Mr. Bender. Mr. Luthor doesn’t like complications, which is why he has need of your immediate services.”

My insides twisted with excitement and the beginnings of fear when I recognized Nigel’s smooth voice. Through the shadows, I could just make out that he was speaking into a cell phone, his back to the open door.

“Of course, Mr. Bender. I look forward to our meeting with

pleasure.” The click of the cell phone closing corresponded exactly to the prickling at the back of my neck that let me know I was *not* alone.

With exaggerated casualness, I turned around and found myself facing two men, both bulky though one was shorter than the other, both dressed in black, both looming over me. Both very familiar. They were the two thugs who had kidnapped me and thrown me into Clark’s cell, I realized with widening eyes. The two men who had supposedly died in the ferocious fire that had turned that cell into crumbling brick and dark ashes.

“Good morning!” I chirped merrily as I edged sideways in an effort to sidle past them, my instincts coming to my rescue. I was feeling almost sick despite the fact that I knew Superman would come the instant I called for him. “Nice day for a run, huh?”

The two men closed in on me, any possibility of escape disappearing quickly. Suddenly, sticking around didn’t seem like a very good idea.

Twisting my body to slide through the narrow opening between them, I darted forward, knocking one aside to make an avenue I could fit through. He stumbled slightly but used his momentum to lurch forward and wrap his arms around me from behind. I lashed out with a high kick that caught the thug in front of me in the chest, then planted my feet and rolled my body forward to throw my captor over my shoulder. Before either could recover, I started running toward the mouth of the alley.

Nigel stepped from the darkened garage just in front of me, that same pistol as before clenched in his hand and pointed straight toward my heart.

“That is getting really irritating,” I told him with false bravado.

“I had a feeling you might decide to drop by,” Nigel said, a smug smile twisting his lips. “How fortunate for us.” Using his gun to gesture toward the garage’s interior, he added, “We’d just like a word, Ms. Lane.”

I had just opened my mouth to do what I should have done from the beginning and call for Superman when one of the thugs from behind hooked his arm around my neck and jerked backward. Black spots swam in front of my eyes as I futilely gasped for air, my hands scrabbling vainly at his arm.

“Bring her inside.” Nigel glanced behind him and jerked his chin toward the taller man. “Make certain we’re not disturbed.”

Only when we had been enveloped by darkness did my captor allow tiny sips of air to be intermittently delivered to me. It wasn’t nearly enough air to clear the spots from my vision, but I took what I could get and desperately tried to think of a way out of this latest predicament.

“Now, Ms. Lane. You seem to have forgotten the agreement you made with Mr. Luthor.”

I gaped at Nigel, muscles tense from holding myself as far away from my sweaty captor as possible. “What agreement?” I choked out through the stranglehold he had on me.

The Englishman’s silvery eyebrows rose in assumed surprise. “Why, the agreement to write what he tells you to write. It’s always such a disappointment to him when people back out of their agreements.”

“I never made a deal with him,” I said boldly. One more taste of air, I promised myself, and I would be able to shout for Superman. Even if he was busy on the other side of the world—which seemed likely since he hadn’t yet stepped in—my more human bodyguards would be showing up any minute. I just had to hold on a moment or two longer.

Pain exploded with all the force of Independence Day firecrackers when Nigel unexpectedly rammed the butt of his gun into my stomach. I doubled over with harsh, racking coughs that made a thousand more fireworks dance through my nerves system. The thug let go of me, and another glancing blow, this time to the side of my head, wiped away any thought of calling for anyone as I fell to the concrete.

Nigel was saying something more, but I couldn’t understand him, couldn’t focus on the words to differentiate one word from another.

Snatches of his voice wove through the haze of pain that enveloped me as surely as the garage's shadows did. Something about articles, and Luthor, and favorable appearances.

"Superman," I whispered, only aware that I was bleeding when the barely audible utterance of the superhero's name allowed salty liquid to dribble inside my mouth. The hot taste of it roused me from the agony encasing me in red-hot sparkles and black nausea.

"Please, Ms. Lane, don't embarrass yourself." Nigel leaned down over me, his face swimming before me even as his voice echoed strangely through the ringing in my ears. "You're a strong, intelligent woman—no need to cry for help. Just promise to write the articles Mr. Luthor wishes you to write."

"No." I clenched my hands into fists, bracing myself for the unfavorable response that reply was sure to elicit.

Instead of striking me again, Nigel merely shook his head. "Tsk, tsk. Mr. Luthor will be very disappointed. In fact, he might think it's time to visit a few of your friends. What *did* he offer you in exchange for your services?"

"No!" I said again, but this time, it was a terrified plea, not a mark of defiance. The man behind me hauled me abruptly to my feet, and if I hadn't recognized him before, the careless way he yanked me around would have reminded me of where I had last encountered him. My surroundings blurred around me and I felt so sick that I swallowed repeatedly to keep from vomiting right then and there. I couldn't give in to this—I had to be strong. I had to ignore the nausea roiling through me with all the force of a spring storm and keep myself focused on the immediate present.

With a dramatic gesture, Nigel threw a folder down on the ground at my feet. Photos slithered from between its pages and slowly coalesced within my consciousness to thrill me with anguished terror.

Perry and Jimmy walking down the street outside of the Daily Planet building. They were laughing, Perry's hand resting for a frozen instant on Jimmy's shoulder.

The Daily Planet building itself, its metal globe sparkling in winter sunlight.

My sister locking an apartment door behind her, her expression caught in an unguarded moment.

Clark. Walking beside me. His arm around my shoulders. His lips just beginning to curve upward in that wonderful smile. His eyes still sparkling with the light that Superman's appearance in the next moment had doused.

"Your partner enjoyed our hospitality once before," Nigel said conversationally. "I'm certain he could be persuaded to become our guest once more."

An inarticulate sound of distress tore itself free before I could catch it. I clenched my jaw tight, refusing to give into either my fear or the pain threatening to send my mind exploding in a hundred different directions. "Superman will stop you."

The corner of Nigel's mouth quirked upward. "Really? That's your defense—an alien will stop us?"

"Yes." I willed myself to believe that. Painted over the mental image of Clark writhing in agony as Luthor smiled gleefully with the image of Superman tearing the door from the wall and allowing splintered light to cut darkness into shreds. And I took a deep breath and shouted, "Superman, help! Superma—"

A hand clamped itself over my mouth from behind. Nigel stepped up close to me, the smile gone from his face, the gun hanging from one hand even as the other rose toward me. "Be quiet," he commanded, and his hand dug into the gunshot wound on my arm.

A half-scream was torn from my throat and dampened by the suffocating hand covering the bottom half of my face. For a moment, every thought I had scattered before the pain, whimpering mutely as each sought refuge from the overwhelming agony. Fiercely blinking away tears, I forced myself again to focus on the moment; I could give in to the pain later. Much later.

"Superman will not help you, you fool," Nigel told me in a cold voice, all hints of false congeniality wiped from his demeanor. "Your

only hope—your *partner's* only hope—is to cooperate with Mr. Luthor."

Fear obliterated the awareness of pain as my eyes darted involuntarily toward the pictures of my life strewn at my feet like the flowers and gifts thrown before the feet of Superman's statue.

Clark was all alone at the apartment, I realized with growing, sickening dread. My bodyguards hadn't shown up—anything could have happened to them...and to his. He was defenseless, completely alone—and he would never call for Superman.

"Well?" Nigel demanded.

I couldn't let Clark be captured again. I couldn't bear it if I was once more responsible for him being caged in the darkness. Clark was meant for the light; he needed to see the sun, to bathe in it, to drink it in. He needed to be free. He needed to be able to smile. Luthor had already done so much damage to him—I couldn't allow him to hurt Clark any more.

I needed him in my life.

At an impatient nod from Nigel, the thug lifted his fingers from my mouth, allowing me a gasping breath of refreshing air. I took advantage of it while I had it, knowing that I had to do what Clark wouldn't. "Superman! Help!"

The thug let go of me when Nigel drew back and hit me in the stomach, and I crashed helplessly to the cold, hard ground. I wanted to call again for Superman—wanted to let him know by the urgent panic in my tone that Clark was in danger, that I was hurt, that we needed him—but the breath had been driven from my lungs, and for a long, panicked moment, I couldn't draw in air no matter how hard I fought.

Dimly, I was aware that the thug guarding the opening was calling something. Even more distant was the sound of the beeping warnings sounded by a delivery truck reversing. Nigel moved toward the guard, irritable words winging their way over my head.

This was it, I realized. The thug over me was distracted, Nigel was pointing his gun elsewhere—I wouldn't get another chance like this. I had to get to Clark, had to warn him, had to save him.

I shifted on the ground, resettling my weight, knowing it would attract the attention of my captor. When he turned toward me, I pulled my legs back and rammed them into his chest. Then, scrambling to my feet, cradling my left arm close to myself, I took off running. The front of the garage was guarded by Nigel and his remaining henchman, and even should I get past them, the alley was blocked off by a large white delivery truck backing down the alley, so I ran deeper into the shadows of the garage, frantically searching for a door into the connected building.

Shouts from behind motivated me to run faster; the pain in my arm, the agony thrumming through my head, and the burning ache in my stomach slowed me down. A loose board under my feet sent me tumbling headfirst to the ground. I tried to roll with the impact, but the move jostled my gunshot wound and I screamed.

A foot on my back stopped me from rising, and I froze when Nigel leaned closer to point the gun at my head. "Don't move, Ms. Lane."

Defeat filled my limbs with lead and my mind with fog.

The two thugs—my captor having risen to his feet—were near the opening of the garage, watching the truck make its slow way past. Nigel loomed over me, making escape impossible. "Most unfortunate —" he began.

Whatever else he might have had to say was cut off by the crash of the delivery truck veering against the side of the garage and bringing dust and rubble down on the two thugs. Nigel's foot pressed painfully down on me as a man, dressed in white coveralls, climbed from the passenger side of the truck.

My bodyguards, I thought abstractedly. It had to be them. Why else would a truck come out of nowhere to effect a rescue?

But where was Superman?

"Superman!" I called out, wincing as I broke into a fit of painful coughing.

"Lois!"

Elation threatened to rob me of what little coherence I had

retained. I focused past the pain to look all around me for the caped superhero I was sure had arrived...but there was only the deliveryman hurrying toward me, white cap pulled low and shading the glasses that could not conceal the panic written across his face.

Glasses?

“Clark!” I cried out. Instinctively, without thought, as if I had forgotten where I was, I tried to rise and flee to the safety of his embrace. Nigel’s foot and the feel of the gun pressed against the back of my head pulled me up short.

“Ah. Mr. Luthor thought you might make an appearance.” I couldn’t see the Englishman’s expression, but from the corner of my eye, I could see him reaching into his pocket with his free hand, pulling out a small box, and flipping its cover open. There was something about the box that seemed familiar, something that tugged at the edges of my fraying consciousness, but when I reached for the memory, it slipped away.

An appallingly loud noise echoed through the garage...and with a strained cry, Clark crumpled to the ground.

“Clark!” His name passed my lips with no conscious forethought. I was wholly unable to move, unable to think, unable—*unwilling*—to make the connection between the gun in Nigel’s hand and the abrupt, terrifying way my partner had dropped as if his strings had been cut.

For a timeless moment, I was transported back to that moment in Smallville when Trask had pointed his weapon at Clark, when I had frozen in horror, when a gunshot had sounded like thunder.

My stillness must have convinced Nigel I was helpless, for he removed his foot from my back and took a step toward Clark.

Clark stirred.

The world crystallized around me, every detail painfully sharp, each instant crisply realized, my pain submerged beneath the awareness of everything around me.

Clark was alive.

Nigel was moving toward him, that box—the one with which Luthor had menaced Clark in the cell, I realized with my newfound clarity—opened and held ready in his hand.

One of the thugs was rising from the debris at the opening of the garage.

“No,” I whispered, then yelled, “Stop! Leave him alone!”

I reached out with groping hands in an attempt to stop Nigel from moving nearer Clark, but the Englishman shook me off impatiently, a sneer on his face as he turned and kicked back at me. Fire erupted in my left arm when his foot knocked against the gunshot wound. A whimper slipped from my throat.

“Lois!”

Ripped from the overwhelming pain by the sound of Clark crying my name, I looked up, that crystalline clarity still bringing the world around me into sharp focus.

Pain twisted Clark’s expression—pain...and grim determination. He forced himself up onto his hands and knees, moving slowly toward me, twisting so that he would be between me and Nigel. “Don’t touch her,” he ordered, an astonishing note of command infusing his voice with strength that overshadowed the pain giving it a ragged edge.

A chuckle, cold and mirthless, escaped Nigel. He slipped the gun into his pocket and raised that small box threateningly. “I believe you’ve forgotten something.”

A flicker of fear washed across Clark’s features yet quickly gave way to that stern resolve. He tried to stand, stumbled, fell to his knees, tried again. Agony played itself out on his face, but still he tried to force himself to his feet. I couldn’t see the blood on him, couldn’t tell where he had been shot, but the sound of the gunshot still echoed through the contours of my mind.

When Nigel took a step nearer Clark, my partner groaned and fell to the ground.

Terror and my own brand of determination eclipsed everything else.

Filled with a strength I had never realized I possessed, I crawled forward and grabbed Nigel’s ankle, then yanked savagely backward

while chopping at the back of his knee with a flattened hand. The Englishman toppled to the ground with a yell that cut off disturbingly fast when his head hit the concrete. The tiny box tumbled out of his hand and rolled nearer Clark.

With a small exclamation, Clark curled in on himself, his face so pale I immediately looked again for any sign of the blood I knew he had to be losing.

“Clark!” Ignoring Nigel, I scrambled forward to kneel at Clark’s side. I almost broke down into tears when I touched him, the instant so reminiscent of that moment in the cell when I had first set hands to him and felt him flinch in pain.

“Hey!”

The shout was totally unexpected and viciously loud within the vast closeness of the building. The rapid tempo of approaching footsteps was followed by the appearance of one of the thugs. I instinctively covered Clark’s body with my own, flinching away from the thug, but he showed no interest in me. Instead, he knelt beside Nigel, scooped up and closed the small box, threw a frantic look over his shoulder at the sound of more footsteps and another shout, and took off running toward the back of the building. An instant later, the sound of a slammed door joined the rest of the fading echoes crowding around us.

I glanced toward the second set of footsteps and saw a man—dressed in white coveralls identical to Clark’s—approaching with a worried expression. Dismissing him as a threat, I looked back down at Clark. He seemed to have relaxed a bit, but he was still curled in around himself. His cap had fallen to the ground and his glasses had been pushed askew, giving him a disheveled, abandoned look.

“Clark? Clark!” I gave him a tiny shake before realizing that might just be hurting him. I gentled my touch, running my fingers down along his cheek, his neck, his shoulder, his arm, knowing it wasn’t helping, unable to stop. “How bad is it? Where were you hit?” I looked toward the stranger. “A doctor! Call 911!”

Straightening a bit, Clark finally met my gaze, his expression smoothing out, the pain fading, the fear disappearing, that strangely familiar sternness melting away to be replaced by soft tenderness and quiet hope. “No! I wasn’t shot, Lois. I’m fine.”

I gaped at him, my mind literally incapable of comprehending the words. “But...I—I heard the...the gunshot. You fell.”

“There was no gunshot. It was just Harv”—he nodded toward the man standing over Nigel as if to guard him—“closing his door. The echoes...” He trailed off when I pushed on his shoulder, rolling him over so that I could see his chest. Unsatisfied, still feeling that at any moment blood would start seeping from a wound he didn’t yet realize he had, I tore open his coveralls and stared disbelievingly at the t-shirt beneath.

There was no blood. No wound. No holes. Needing to convince myself, I ran my hands over his chest again and again before finally realizing that he had not been shot.

He was safe.

He was unharmed.

He was alive.

Letting out a tiny murmur—no words, just an unintelligible exclamation of vast relief—I bent over him, my forehead resting on his shoulder. His hand came up to stroke my hair, his other hand resting lightly on my shoulder.

“You’re okay,” I whispered—to him and to myself. “You’re okay.”

And only then, with his hand caressing my hair, did I finally believe. And only then did the world recede and the shadows disappear in a blaze of light.

Chapter 13

I must have blacked out for a moment because it felt as if I were awakening from a deep sleep when a soft hand touched my shoulder, long fingers curled around my arm, and that so-familiar voice cajoled me from the darkness into the light. “It’s all right, Lois. Everything’s fine, really.”

“Hey, are you all right?”

I blinked and squinted against the unexpected glare creeping in around the contours of the delivery truck. The man dressed in white coveralls was peering at Clark and me from his self-appointed post over Nigel.

“I’m fine,” Clark assured his friend—and me, I suspected. “Lois, this is Harv. I met him when we were investigating the South Side fires. He used to be one of my sources, but today, he let me borrow a uniform and hitch a ride with him.”

“A doctor,” I commanded the man. Serrated shards of light and darkness were alternating within my head and embers burned in my left arm; the only way to distract myself was to focus on what we needed to do. “We need a doctor. Clark—”

“I’m fine,” he said yet again. He even stood up, as if to prove his point, rather shakily offering me a hand to pull me to my feet as well. “I don’t need a doctor. But you...” The shadows seemed to gather in his eyes as he studied me. “You’re bleeding, Lois.”

It was true. My gunshot wound had, unsurprisingly, broken open, and I could feel the stickiness of dried blood on my temple. Still, that was inconsequential next to what could have happened to Clark. “It’s nothing,” I said with a shrug that made me immediately wince with pain, belying my statement.

“Then no doctor.” Clark’s voice was filled half with command and half with a plea.

“Fine,” I acquiesced. Then I glanced toward the unconscious Nigel. “Police. We need to call the police. Or take him to the police.” I shook my head, trying to clear out the gauze that wrapped my mind, probably protecting me from the full extent of my injuries.

Clark wrapped his hands around my arms, but looking up at him, I wasn’t sure whether he was steadying me...or himself. “Lois—”

“Clark!” I exclaimed, a ray of light suddenly piercing through the mental haze. “Do you know what this means? We have Nigel! If we can get him to testify against Luthor, we...we could be almost done with this.”

His smile was slight, as if he didn’t comprehend how close we were to seeing Luthor behind bars. Well, he’d realize it soon enough, I determined. It was far past time to close this horrible chapter of his life forever; time for him to move on. And I would help him. Soon, everything would go back to normal, to the way it had been before he and Superman had been forced to leave me.

As if my thought had summoned him when my cries for help couldn’t, a whoosh preceded Superman’s hasty entrance into the warehouse. His step checked briefly as he took in the scene. A strange expression reshaped his features, but when he met my eyes, I saw only aloof neutrality.

“Superman.” I turned toward him even as I wrapped my uninjured arm around Clark’s waist, not quite sure he was able to stand on his own. “You’re here!”

“What happened here?” Superman looked straight at Clark. “How did Nigel—”

“I’ll tell you later,” I promised him impatiently. “We have to get him to the police right now. And,” I added when Clark wavered unsteadily, “I need to get Clark back to the apartment. A taxi! Harv.” I turned to Clark’s friend and had to say his name twice more before he was able to tear his gaze from the larger-than-life superhero. “Get us a taxi, would you? We can take Nigel to the—”

“I’ll take him,” Superman offered. “It looks like I was...too late... for the original rescue. So, the least I can do is drop him off for you.”

“Oh, thank you!” I sagged a bit in relief. A long stay at the police station filling out papers and repeating our statements was something I was more than happy to avoid. “There’s another man unconscious by the opening. Tell Henderson we’ll be by later today to give our statements. Right now, we just...”

“Of course.” Superman smiled, but it seemed much more distant than the smile he had given me after kissing me the night before. Not that I was in the best shape to analyze his expressions; not that I could tear my attention from Clark’s quickly dwindling strength and warm

touch to focus on the superhero.

“Thanks,” I said again when Superman bent and hoisted Nigel up. I forced a smile for him, feeling a bit bad that I couldn’t spare him more attention. But he performed rescues all the time, I assured myself; he surely understood that there were more important things to attend to at the moment.

“I’m glad you’re all right, Lois.” Superman smiled again—I couldn’t summon the strength needed to compare this one to any of the others—and moved to pick up the other thug. He looked back toward us, shadows blanketing his form. “Clark. We’ll talk later.” Then, with another whoosh and the fluttering of his crimson and gold cape, he disappeared into the sky.

Though he stiffened at Superman’s words, Clark betrayed no other reaction.

Instead of watching Superman until all sign of his trademark colors had faded, as I usually did, I turned back to Clark. “All right,” I said softly. “Let’s get out of here.”

Harv had a taxi for us in short order. Clark tried to apologize for any damage made to his vehicle, but Harv waved it off with a remark that he’d been meaning to get an overhaul done on that truck anyway. I gave him my own absentminded thanks before getting Clark settled in the seat.

We didn’t say much as we made our way back to the apartment; Clark was slumped back against the seat, his face turned toward the sun, and I was trying to order my thoughts and push away the pain beating out a jarring tattoo in my head and stroking tiny blades along the wound in my arm.

“I’m sorry,” Clark mumbled when I had to support him on our way up the steps into my apartment building. “I thought I was done with this.”

“Hey, it’s okay.” I smoothed my hand over his chest as I leaned him against the wall in the elevator. “You’ll be back to normal again after a bit of rest.”

He nodded and closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the wall.

“Clark.” I kept my eyes fixed on the elevator doors, my voice small. “Thank you. For coming after me.”

His fingers curled around mine in a gesture so much more comforting than could be explained through mere words. “You’d have done the same for me.”

But I hadn’t, I thought dimly as I helped him into the apartment and guided him to my bed instead of the cot. He was too drained to even notice—or at least to protest—and he pulled off the coveralls and stretched himself out without a murmur.

For a long month, Clark had faced the kind of treatment I had gotten such a small taste of today...and I hadn’t come for him. I hadn’t even looked for him. Luthor might have been the one who imprisoned and tortured Clark, but I was the one who had let him stay there.

Yet Clark, who had been free for less than a week, had dared to follow me into a situation that could have easily seen him back in a cell...or dead. He had even tried to place himself between me and his captor, no matter that Nigel had been holding that box.

All the terror I had pushed aside came surging back inside my mind like a flood, knocking aside everything else and filling up every crevice and niche. I couldn’t seem to stop touching Clark, reassuring myself that he was well, that he was alive, that he was here with me.

“So,” I said, desperate to distract myself from the image that kept replaying in my head—the image of Clark crumpling lifelessly to the ground. “How did you know where I was?”

A slightly guilty expression painted itself across his face. “I overheard you talking to Perry.”

“You overheard me,” I repeated, at first surprised before remembering that there were several instances when Clark had demonstrated that he had remarkable hearing. “Oh, Perry—”

Clark’s hand on mine stopped me from rising. “I called before I left and told him I was fine and that he didn’t need to come check up on me.”

“And he believed you?” I asked dubiously.

“No.” His tiny chuckle drove back some of the shadows still flooding my heart. “But I think I convinced him to hold off on coming until the lunch hour.”

“So he’ll be here any minute,” I realized with a glance to the clock. “Great. He’ll never pass on a message from a source to me again.”

Aside from a tired smile, Clark didn’t reply. He kept staring at me, though I was surprised that he hadn’t fallen asleep again. Something took my heart in a tight hold as I stared back at him, something that made colors seem brighter, edges seem sharper, and days seem both longer and shorter and altogether infinitely more worth living. Something that made it hard to breathe and stilled the dizzy swirl the room seemed to want to travel around me.

“You shaved,” I whispered, reaching out to stroke the smoothness of his face.

“It was easier this morning,” he said, as if that explained anything. His jaw clenched as he looked away. “I don’t know that it’ll be as easy tomorrow.”

“But there’ll *be* a tomorrow for you!” The fierce words were out and shivering between us before I had even realized that I was speaking.

Clark studied me a moment in silence, his expression evenly divided between concern, curiosity, and hope.

“I thought you were shot,” I admitted numbly. I splayed my hand over his chest, still amazed that he was unharmed. Only when I felt liquid warmth on my cheeks did I realize that the flood within me was leaking out into the open by way of tears that seemed even more distant than that old Lois Lane who didn’t cry and wasn’t afraid to investigate tips and only tolerated her partner.

“I’m fine, Lois. Really.” Clark smiled up at me, one hand rising to cradle my face next to his palm. “I wasn’t shot.”

“But you fell,” I insisted, uncertain why I couldn’t just let this go. Uncertain why I was looking at him as if I had never seen him before. But I hadn’t, had I? I had never before realized just how much of a hero my partner was. I had never before allowed myself to recognize just how much courage and integrity and brilliance hid beneath the Midwestern exterior.

“It...” Clark hesitated and looked away. “It was just a...shadow of an old pain.”

The box. Whatever was in it—more of the drug they had dosed him with, I guessed—scared him. The simple sight of it was enough to pause him. And yet...he had still forced himself forward. Still come to me.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” I asked him softly, my voice little more than a breath.

For the first time, Clark allowed me to see a hint of the uncertainty he felt. For an instant, his fear was unveiled behind his glasses. “As long as you’re real, Lois...I am.”

Compassion—overwhelming, unfamiliar, all-consuming—seared away the flood of terror within me and filled my mind and heart with a soothing, healing, cleansing warmth.

“Oh, Clark.” Without a second thought, I stretched myself out beside him and took him into my arms, resting my head on his chest. “I’m here,” I whispered in his ear. “I’m really here. I’m not going anywhere. This isn’t just a dream. I’m here.”

All the words I hadn’t been able to give him in the cell...now I had them. Such simple words, just an affirmation that I was there with him, that he wasn’t alone—and yet they seemed to do wonders. Clark’s arms tightened around me even as he relaxed under me. I couldn’t see him, not with my head pressed against his shoulder, but I swore that I could feel the darkness of the cell retreating from around him, reluctantly relinquishing some part of their hold on him.

One of his arms kept me held tightly to himself while the other drifted upward to cup the back of my head. It was the same way he had hugged me after he had almost been shot by Trask, the same way he had hugged me after rescuing me from that bank vault—

I frowned suddenly. That hadn’t been Clark. That had been Superman. He had crashed through the thick, reinforced walls as if they had been paper and caught me before I could fall. He had carried me outside into the cool air and set me down on my feet only when he was convinced that I could remain upright.

Clark hadn’t been there that day.

And Superman hadn’t been there the day in Smallville when I had suddenly—as sudden as the sound of a gunshot—realized just how much Clark meant to me, not just as a partner, but as a friend. When I had seen how close I could come to losing him and ran to him and taken him into my arms because I knew, then, that I did not ever want to be without him.

I had tried to erase that memory in the two months he had been gone, but in doing so, I had lost so much of myself and left Clark buried in darkness.

But now he was back. He was here...with me.

“I’m here,” I continued to whisper to him, a calming stream of words and promises and assurances that dulled the agony flaring through my arm and slowed the pounding tempo in my head. “I’m really here. I’m not going anywhere.”

When his hand in my hair loosened slightly, I pulled back and tilted my head upward, moving automatically. I had almost brought my lips to his before the feel of his breath feathering across my cheek jolted me from my thoughtless move.

Shaken, disturbed, I resettled my head on his shoulder as if that had been the reason I moved at all. Clark’s arms didn’t tighten around me, he didn’t say a word, his eyes were closed as he held me—I dared to hope that he didn’t realize what I had almost done.

How *could* I have almost done that? Something fluttered through my stomach, something akin to the ethereal pixie dancing through my heart and disturbing its even beating. My thoughts had scattered in a drunken whirl as soon as I realized what exactly I was about to do.

I had almost kissed Clark.

Worse, I had almost done it without even thinking, as if it had been an automatic move, as if it had been as natural as...as breathing!

But I loved Superman! He had kissed me just the day before! I had been in his arms! He had told me he cared for me! What was wrong with me? Kissing Clark would have been unfair to all three of us—Superman, Clark, *and* myself!

“Thank you for being here, Lois.” Clark’s quiet murmur startled me. “I just...I don’t...just...thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said in a voice as dry as autumn leaves.

Don’t worry about it. I was doing the opposite myself, but I knew it wouldn’t do any good. Just leave it, I advised myself. I had a head wound, after all, and had just gone through a somewhat traumatic experience. The almost-kiss had only been a byproduct of the fact that I had been thinking about Superman, that was all. If I had been dazed enough to confuse Clark and Superman in my memories, then it was obvious that I could have done the same thing in the present moment as well. Clark had saved me when I called for Superman and Superman had left in a hurry just as Clark had been prone to do—clearly, the distinctions between the two men had blurred, but once I got some sleep and maybe some Advil, I’d be fine.

By the time I managed to talk myself into shrugging off the incident, Clark had fallen asleep, his embrace strong and sure around me despite the weakness that had been evident in his steps. For a long while, I couldn’t resist studying him, my head tilted upward on his shoulder, my thoughts gradually slowing their frenetic pace and drifting toward sleep.

Finally, with a deep sigh, I burrowed closer to Clark and slept, falling into a dream where Clark cradled me in his arms and took me flying through the skies, his glasses casting bright sparkles of light until I took them off with a laugh and tucked them protectively close to myself as the wind caressed us with cool fingers.

The strident ring of the phone jolted me from the strange dream. Groggy and disoriented, I tried to shake off the effects of the dream—which had obviously been influenced by that strange lack of

distinction between Clark and Superman—and slipped as gracefully as possible from Clark’s arms to grab the phone. A hiss of sharp pain slipped from between my teeth when I unthinkingly reached out with my left arm.

“Hello?” I asked into the phone while trying to convince my body that curling up into a ball wouldn’t make the pain go away.

“Lane!” Henderson’s voice was so full of surprise that I almost missed the note of relief also imbuing it. “You’re home?”

“Of course. Where else would I be?” Spotting Perry’s distinctive handwriting on the notepad beside the phone, I tilted my head to read the note he’d left behind.

Lois, didn’t want to wake you two, but I expect a full report on what in the Sam Hill happened today. I’ll be by this evening. And I hope you don’t expect me to ever believe you again when you say there’s nothing to worry about. -Perry.

I glanced at the clock, surprised to see that Clark and I had slept a good four hours.

“Where else would you...!” Henderson took a deep breath.

“Maybe where I am—or someplace worse.”

“Didn’t Superman tell you I’d be by later to give my statement?” I scowled. Though my head was no longer aching, I already regretted pulling myself away from Clark’s warm embrace to listen to another lecture from the irascible inspector.

“Your statement?” Henderson repeated. “Superman? What are you talking about? You’re sure you’re all right?”

“What are *you* talking about?” I retorted. “Shouldn’t you be trying to get Nigel to testify against Luthor?”

“Nigel?” The inspector paused for a moment. “Lane, I’m at the hospital. I rushed down here as soon as I got word that the protective detail I gave you was here. They’re in surgery right now. One of them woke up long enough to inform me that while following you toward the Red Light district, their car was inexplicably hurled toward the side of the street and into an oncoming semi-truck. The officers left behind to watch Clark were attacked by some rough characters that look like they came straight from Gotham’s alleys, all of whom insist they were paid off by some gang lord they can’t—or won’t—name. So...why don’t you tell me what *you’re* doing?”

I sat down on the side of the bed heavily, the phone clutched to my ear out of sheer habit. No wonder my bodyguards hadn’t come out of nowhere to save me this morning.

But...there was something missing in Henderson’s sharp report.

“Nigel,” I said aloud. “Are you saying you never...Superman said he’d take him straight to you.”

“Lane.” There was a warning note in Henderson’s voice, similar enough to Perry’s when I went off on a tangent that I snapped back into the present.

“This morning, Perry passed on a tip from one of my sources. She claimed she knew something about the Boss.”

“And of course you went to meet her.”

“Yes,” I said, choosing to ignore the sarcasm dripping from Henderson’s voice. “She wasn’t there, though. I don’t know if Nigel paid her off or...well, I didn’t see a body, but...Nigel was there. He—”

“Was Kent alone in the apartment then?” Henderson cut in.

I couldn’t help but glance back at Clark, relieved to see that he was still sleeping, his glasses sitting incongruously on his nose. The late afternoon sun immersed him in its almost-liquid glow. “No. He came after me.”

“So there was no one at the apartment?”

“No,” I said with an irritated scowl.

“All right. I’m coming over with a team. They might have bugged the place again. Stay put, and don’t say anything you don’t want a certain someone else to know.”

“Bring a medic,” I said with another look to Clark and cradling my injured arm closer to myself.

Henderson didn’t bother to make a reply—unless an aggravated sigh counted as a closing remark.

Hanging up the phone, I turned once more toward Clark. A line

had appeared to crease his brow, and his hand twitched over the side of the bed I’d been sleeping on. The confessions he had made in his letter about the nightmares Luthor had left him were still starkly clear in my mind, so I sat next to him and reached over a gentle hand to caress his cheek.

Instantly, he quieted, his brow smoothing. “Lois,” he whispered drowsily. A slight smile chased the fear from his features.

I froze, then quickly withdrew my hand.

I had thought my emotions had fluctuated wildly concerning Clark when he had been gone, but that had been nothing compared to now. It terrified me how much he seemed to depend on me. And yet it amazed me how strong he was even after everything that had been done to him. Half the time I felt only the protectiveness one should feel for a partner; the rest of the time, I was trapped between frustration, awe, and an inexplicable feeling that left me unable to clearly see anything but the softness of his eyes and the warmth of his smile and the way he seemed to exude a light that shattered the shadows his absence had birthed.

The letter had thrown me. Its astonishing accusations, its blatant confessions, its startling statements...I hadn’t known what to make of it. It had left me feeling as if I couldn’t know the man who had written it because there was so much more passion and boldness within its words than Clark ever allowed me to see when I looked at him.

Yet the letter didn’t really change anything, I realized with an inward start. Clark was the same person he had been before. It was only I who had changed. I who had grown with the realization that Clark didn’t fit into the nice, neat label I had given him upon our first introduction. He didn’t slide into any category I had assigned him-in fact, he seemed to move between them, partner and friend and brother and—

A shudder passed through my body like the precursor to an earthquake.

A brother?

When had Clark ever acted like a brother?

Never, I thought, and a lump appeared in my throat. It would be easier if he had, easier if that was all he meant to me, easier if I could leave it there and turn my attention back to Superman.

And maybe that was what had so scared me about that letter. Not his absurd assertions concerning Superman’s allegiances. Not his revelations about the things that had been done to him. Not the confusing statements that were impossible to understand without some ambiguous piece of information he had neglected to write down. No, what had left me unable to speak to him and barely able to look at him had been the—*the love*; I forced myself to think the word—the love that infused each word and every sentence.

Clark loved me.

And that was why I had been bouncing back and forth between holding him at arm’s length and snuggling up beside him at night. That was why I went from kissing Superman to telling Clark that I didn’t like seeing him with other women. That was why I sat here at his side, unable to move, barely able to breathe as I watched his chest rise and fall just hours after I had thought him dead.

Clark—the best man I had ever met aside from Superman—loved *me*.

It was such a blinding revelation that I was left hunched in on myself, shielding my eyes from the brilliant, burning light. As much in the dark as before...and all alone.

Chapter 14

I was almost relieved when I heard a knock at the door, though I hadn’t yet looked in the mirror, washed my face free of the blood, or ran a comb through my hair. With a sharp intake of air when I jostled my arm standing, I moved to the door and let in Inspector Henderson and what seemed to be about a dozen men. Numbly, I moved to one of the couches, sat down, and waited for the storm of busyness to subside.

“You all right, Lane?” Henderson sat on the couch across from me

and leaned forward, his eyes intent on me from behind the tinted lenses. He nodded to someone out of my line of sight, and the same medic as before sat beside me. After I nodded my permission, he rolled up my sleeve and began attending to my wound.

Gritting my teeth, I looked away and concentrated on Henderson. “I’ve been better, I’ll admit. Nigel gets a bit grumpy when things don’t go his way.”

The inspector opened his mouth, then glanced at the officers checking for bugs and visibly forced back his questions.

I was grateful for the reprieve. There was a bigger question on my mind at the moment, one that had hit suddenly and without warning. One that made me remember every chilling comment Clark had ever made concerning the returned Superman.

What had happened to Nigel?

Superman had promised he’d take him to the police—I was sure of that. My headache hadn’t been so bad that I’d forget something like that. And yet...Superman didn’t lie. He told the truth. So if he had dropped off Nigel...where was the Englishman now? What could have gone wrong?

And was Superman all right?

Clark had told me Kryptonite was real. He had insisted it could hurt Superman—that it could kill him.

And if anyone would have thought to get himself a chunk of Kryptonite, it’d be Luthor, I was sure of it.

It was terribly unfair, I couldn’t help but think, that the only options I could think of had Superman either hurt and dying...or a traitor.

“So, Lane?”

At Henderson’s quiet prompting, I looked up, surprised to realize that most of the officers had packed up their equipment and left the apartment. The medic was just finishing up with the bandage on my arm.

I shook my head slightly, then waited for the medic to look at the bump on my head, dab it with some chemical that made me wrinkle my nose, and give me a pill to counter the pain throbbing its slow, steady way through my arm. Only after he asked a few final questions, gave me some last-minute instructions, nodded to his inspector, and left the apartment did I feel ready to talk.

“You sure you don’t want him to look Kent over?” Henderson asked as soon as the door clicked shut behind the man.

“Clark wouldn’t let him anywhere near,” I said briefly. Reminded of my sleeping partner, I glanced toward the bedroom. I was certain he hadn’t slept through all the commotion and even more certain that he was hiding in the bedroom until he was certain the medic was gone.

“So...” Henderson readied his tape recorder, then leaned back with exaggerated casualness. “Your bodyguards are in the hospital following a very strange accident; you’re all banged up; I’m assuming Kent isn’t that well since he hasn’t showed yet; and you mentioned Superman bringing Nigel to the police—something I couldn’t prove. I assume you’ll explain eventually.”

“It’s not that complicated,” I said.

And then I stood up and did something I couldn’t explain even to myself.

I turned on the TV and watched for any mention of Superman.

Only when there was a sound bite mentioning that he had been sighted in Ecuador at a large mudslide did I turn back to Henderson and blurt out the whole story. “I followed a tip, went to an alley, overheard Nigel on the phone arranging a meeting with Bender—I’m assuming Sheldon Bender, Luthor’s attorney—and quickly realized it was a trap due to the sudden appearance of the same men who grabbed me just a week ago, which is itself interesting considering that we thought they had died in that fire. Luthor still thinks I’m going to write the stories he wants me to write—or at least, that was the excuse given.” I frowned thoughtfully. “Though it seems a bit flimsy if you ask me. I mean...attacking a journalist in broad daylight with some pretty clear intimations of letting her go afterward isn’t the smartest thing to do. It’s almost as if...” Once more, I found myself glancing

toward the bedroom. “Almost as if he’s baiting Clark.”

“Interesting theory.” Henderson cocked his head. “You have anything to back it up?”

“No.” I stood and began to restlessly pace, a habit that allowed me to think more clearly. “Sometimes I get these inexplicable feelings... these thoughts, ideas that don’t necessarily make sense right away. Clark calls it intuition. Sometimes they’re right; very occasionally, they’re not. Anyway, it just...just seems that Luthor has some kind of personal vendetta against Clark. He follows him to Smallville, threatens his parents, kidnaps him, keeps him for a month, throws me in a cell with him, then just lets him go free? It doesn’t add up.”

“He didn’t ‘let you go free,’” Henderson pointed out. “Superman rescued you.”

“Yes, but Luthor hasn’t come after us! It’s almost as if he’s daring us to prove anything. As if he’s toying with us. With Clark.” The idea scared me so much that goose-bumps rose up along my arms.

“Then the big question,” Henderson said slowly, “is what Kent did to make himself Luthor’s obsession.”

“I existed.”

Henderson and I both turned to watch as Clark entered the room, slumping down beside me as if the trek across the apartment had taken all his strength. He offered me a wan smile that I returned, though his words did nothing to make me feel any better.

“What do you mean?” Henderson asked cautiously. “No offense, but why would Luthor concern himself with a reporter, even one as good as you?”

“I recognized him for what he was right away,” Clark said with a small shrug. “He knew I knew.”

“How?” I interrupted.

Clark shifted a bit. “I...confronted him. Not the smartest thing, maybe, but I thought it might limit him if he knew someone was watching. I’d hoped he would reconsider his position. Instead, he took it as a challenge.”

“Men in his position usually don’t hear anything else.” Henderson turned his attention back to me. “So, Superman rescued you from St. John, then?”

“No. I called him, but he didn’t get there in time.” The statement, spoken aloud, paused me. The only other time Superman had been too late—in fact, had never shown up—was the time Trask had almost killed Clark in Smallville.

And the day Luthor captured Clark.

With a slight shake of my head, I recalled myself to the conversation and finished filling Henderson in on what had happened, giving as many details as possible. Clark explained again how he had come to follow me there, adding the recommendation that Harv not be charged for the damage inflicted on the warehouse.

“And Superman said he’d bring Nigel and the other man straight to you,” I finished firmly, pointedly not looking at Clark, hoping he wouldn’t say something else to trample the bit of composure I had managed to bring to my thoughts. “I don’t understand what happened.”

“I think I might know.” With a heavy sigh, Henderson leaned forward again. In a pointed movement, he removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “As was said before, we’ve had inklings that Luthor isn’t the philanthropist he appears to be. One of the reasons we’ve never been able to prove it—and a large part of why you two are being allowed to spearhead this investigation—is because there have been instances where cops have sold out.”

“You think that’s what happened here?” I asked doubtfully. My skepticism, I knew, was in large part due to the relief I felt to realize that there was an explanation for Superman’s seeming failure...an explanation aside from Clark’s unthinkable assertion.

“I called the precinct on my way here to ask if St. John had been processed. It seems two officers went missing this afternoon. I knew both of them—neither one has any immediate family in the area. If I had to guess, I’d say Luthor got to them and Nigel’s now free because of it.”

I didn’t even have to look at Clark to know he didn’t believe

Henderson's story. I, on the other hand, grasped hold of it as a drowning man grabs the first piece of wood he sees, no matter how flimsy it might be.

Henderson tilted his chin toward the TV where the news was replaying clips of Superman in action. "Superman showed up at those mudslides just before one o'clock this afternoon—just a little bit after he met up with you, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes," I answered, a wealth of emotion evident in my voice. I couldn't restrain the bit of smile that wiped the last vestiges of doubt from my features. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Clark's jaw clench as he looked away. "He must have been in a hurry to respond to the cries for help and just left Nigel with the first officers he saw."

"That's our assumption. Of course," Henderson looked straight at Clark, "I'll be looking into it."

"And we'll be looking into getting Nigel back," I stated decisively. "He said he was looking forward to meeting with Bender—that Luthor had need of his attorney's services. If we watch Bender, we're likely to catch sight of Nigel or some other lackey of Luthor's when they meet up with him."

"Let's hope it's Nigel," Henderson said. "With your testimony, we'll have more than enough against him to book him."

"We'll conduct the stakeout," I warned the inspector. "This is still our investigation. Besides, if you have cops on the take, we can't risk word getting to Luthor. This is our best lead without Nigel already in custody."

"Agreed," Henderson said, complying so easily that my jaw dropped open. "This is why I allowed you two in on this from the beginning."

"Allowed?" I sputtered. "The only reason you have a case at all is because of us! In fact, so far I haven't seen that your people have done much besides lose us our key witness!"

"Lois." Clark's voice was soft, kind, and it instantly quieted my defensive anger. He turned to Henderson. "Thank you for helping us, Bill. Please, pass on our well-wishes to the officers who were hurt while protecting us."

A seed of remorse tangled within me, choking off the apology I should have offered. Clark's gentle hand on mine provided reassurance instead of condemnation, his words making it seem as if the condolences he gave were as much from me as from him.

"Thanks," Henderson said brusquely, slipping his glasses back on and shutting off the tape recorder. "We'll have to find out where Bender's keeping himself. If he's heard about today's events, he'll probably be laying low."

"Yeah," I said quietly with a regretful look that Henderson seemed to accept as an apology. He offered his own tight smile in return.

Another knock at the door distracted all three of us from our conversation.

"It's probably Perry," I said with a glance at the clock. "He said he'd drop by this evening."

As soon as I pulled the door open, Perry pulled me into an exuberant hug, though, tellingly, he didn't jostle my wound at all. "Darlin'! Are you all right? Clark, son!"

The next few minutes were pretty much a repeat of the last as we filled Perry in on the events of the day. However, he had his own surprise up his sleeve.

"Bender!" he exclaimed. "Cat just mentioned to me that the high-profile attorney had gone into hiding. Apparently, he claims that he's had too much media exposure and wants to get away for awhile."

I rolled my eyes, reluctant to accept any piece of information that came from Cat. After all, she was just a rumor-monger, not a real journalist.

"Does she know where Bender's hiding?" Clark asked, a spark of interest evident in his eyes. I couldn't resist scowling at him, though I comforted myself with the knowledge that he had given me his word nothing had happened between him and that floozy.

"She said something about the marina, but I'll check it out and get a more specific location," the Chief promised. "In the meanwhile, I

expect you two to both rest up. Judas Priest, you both look like you just got through wrestlin' with a pair of wildcats!"

I glanced at Clark, seeing him with new eyes and realizing that Perry was right. Though he didn't look nearly as bad as he had just a few days before, Clark had lost a lot of color, dark smudges had returned to linger along portions of his face, and the air of energy and life that had gradually returned to his presence had vanished once more. Yet there was that same look of determination in his eyes as had been there since we'd interviewed Superman. That manner of having some mission he alone could—and must—complete.

It was reassuring to know he wasn't giving up; it was disconcerting to think of what he might be planning.

Clark didn't seem aware of the considering gazes Perry, Henderson, and I were all giving him. His own gaze had locked on the window, a muscle ticcing in his jaw. When I followed the direction of his stare, I was somehow not surprised at all to see Superman floating just outside the apartment.

"Superman," I greeted him as soon as I had pulled the windows open wide enough to allow him to float into the living room. "Are you all right?"

Mud was sloughed over much of his suit, obscuring the blue and weighing down the cape so that he seemed shorter than he usually looked. His brow was lined, his eyes narrowed, his mouth tight, and his hands clenched into fists; if he had been anyone else, I would have said that he looked as if he were in pain. He remained floating an inch over the floor to keep the mud from staining the wood.

"I heard what happened," he said without answering my question, his glance taking in all four of us, lingering longest on me and almost entirely skipping over Clark. "I wish you to know that I did hand Nigel St. John over to the proper authorities. I was not aware that the—"

"It's all right, Superman," Henderson offered quickly. I observed with interest the slight flush adorning the inspector's cheeks. "This is the fault of my people, not you."

Perry stood abruptly, his weathered features pulled into a slight frown. "Let's not get confused here. This is Luthor's fault. We're doing what we can to bring him down—we're not the bad guys. Gettin' bogged down in misplaced blame isn't doin' anyone a lick of good."

"Regardless," Superman stated intractably, "I give you my personal word that I will do anything you need to bring this monster down." He met my gaze. "Earlier, you asked if I would help you in your investigation. Now, I give you my answer—I will not rest until this matter is settled."

I should have felt infinitely relieved, even ecstatic, already certain of victory with Superman on our side. Instead, I felt only immeasurably tired, a thin layer of weariness covering a soul-deep resolve to see Luthor pay for his crimes.

Henderson and Perry thanked Superman and began filling him in on the investigation in broad terms. Despite his evident tiredness, Superman listened attentively enough, nodding every once in a while, his eyes narrowed with concentration. It was a conversation that I would have dominated eagerly just the day before, yet now I felt distanced from it, as if it were happening somewhere far away.

My roving gaze fell on Clark, sitting alone and seemingly forgotten on the couch, his eyes locked on Superman. There was an oddly vulnerable, almost wistful expression casting a slant to his features, one that pulled me from my exhausted disinterest and tugged me forward to sit beside him. Immediately, he turned to me, that pensive expression still lending him a sad air even as he gave me a small smile.

"So..." I said, not sure why I had sat beside him in the first place. Not sure why I had more attention to spare for Clark than for Superman. Desperately, I cast about for a valid topic. "That disguise you wore today—I almost didn't recognize you."

He shrugged, the hint of another smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Disguises have always worked well for me."

I nodded before realizing how absurd that statement was. "Wait a

minute! What do you mean, disguises always work for you?” I scoffed with a spontaneous grin. “That Charlie King persona was ridiculous! I recognized you right away!”

A real smile made the shadows congregating about him skitter away and hide in shame. “Oh, yeah?” he retorted. “If I recall correctly, Charlie King was a lot more effective than Lola Dane.”

“Only because Charlie King turned out to be a Benedict Arnold!” I replied quickly.

“Charlie King might have betrayed you,” Clark said, his words suddenly charged with some tension I refused to identify, his hand placed carefully, tenderly, over mine. “But Clark Kent never would.”

If I tell you, Lois, you’ll die.

I could never hurt you, Lois. It’s impossible for me. I care too much.

The phrases ran through my mind like a mantra that soothed, a litany that promised things I had first realized I wanted while listening to careless words dropped so tenderly as I restlessly slept in a blackened cell.

“I know that,” I heard myself saying—promising him. There was a tension almost matching Clark’s in my own voice, one I couldn’t explain, one that made flames leap to life in his eyes.

“Clark.” Superman’s stern voice broke the moment as abruptly as if we had been splashed with cold water.

All expression vacated Clark’s face as he turned to the hero. His jaw was clenched so tightly that I wasn’t surprised he didn’t say anything.

“I’d like to talk to you for a moment. Privately.”

“I was waiting for you to ask,” Clark said, his voice monotone. He paused, then swallowed, that wistful expression reappearing. “Are we... flying?”

For the barest instant, Superman’s features...softened, turned more malleable, more understanding. Almost pitying. “Yes,” he answered shortly, quietly.

“Then let’s go.” Moving stiffly, Clark rose and stepped up to Superman. The superhero nodded his farewells to Perry and Henderson, paused to offer me a tentative smile, then flew my partner out the window.

Henderson adjured me to caution one more time, gave me a last warning glare, and let himself out with the excuse that he had to look into the two missing officers. Perry stayed a while longer, doing his best to make me laugh, and even succeeding a time or two. In fact, by the time he left with a last fatherly hug, I was feeling much better. Not only had Clark smiled at me—one of the real, bright smiles—but he had actually seemed almost willing, in a resigned sort of way, to talk with Superman, who had given me his own, private smile.

Best of all, and maybe a key contributing factor, was the fact that the pills the medic had given me had actually kicked in, dulling the insistent burn in my arm and smothering the tempo in my head. Their effect was doing such a good job of convincing me that pain was a thing of the past that when Perry left, I felt awake enough to turn to the papers and files stacked in inconspicuous spots throughout the living room and start looking for every mention of Nigel St. John.

About an hour after he had flown out the window, Superman returned with my partner. Strangely, Clark’s eyes were sparking with anger, an emotion he had shown only a handful of times before. I was as surprised to see it now as I had been the first time I realized that he could get angry—when he snapped at a cop who had demonstrated a callous sense of humor over a dead man.

I kept my arms folded over my chest as I met Superman’s gaze. The urge to throw myself into his arms was almost overwhelming—the same urge I experienced every time he grew near me—but it was tempered by Clark’s presence and the tiny, niggling feeling at the back of my mind.

The feeling that said that mudslide in Ecuador had come at an extremely opportune moment.

And the fact that I could even entertain such a suspicion made me horribly angry at Clark. He was, after all, the one who had planted

such awful thoughts in my mind, the one who was now standing in the middle of the room and watching Superman and me with narrowed eyes and clenched fists.

Superman seemed unaware of Clark’s angry glare; he stared into my eyes as if we were alone in the room. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you, Lois.”

“You can’t be everywhere at once,” I told him, the niggling feeling coiled within me loosening and retracting the slightest bit. “You’re the world’s superhero, not mine.”

For the first time since his return, Superman lifted his hand and traced the edge of my face, ghosting along the bruise adorning my temple, compliments of Nigel. “Still... I don’t like to see you hurt.”

“Well,” I forced a smile for his sake. “No harm done. Clark was there.”

Superman’s hand dropped to his side. I wanted to turn and observe Clark’s reaction, but the intensity of Superman’s powerful gaze stole my breath and my ability to control my muscles. “Next time,” he promised, “I will be there for you.”

“I know that,” I replied, then could have kicked myself when Clark turned abruptly and walked into the kitchen. I had used the same words, I realized dismally, the same words I had used with Clark in that quiet moment between the two of us—and I had given them to Superman as easily as if they meant nothing.

Superman curled his hand around my shoulder one last time, half-moved forward as if to kiss me, then stopped and cocked his head in a gesture I could have sworn I’d seen several times before.

“What is it?” I inquired, intrigued by the realization that he was hearing something that could have easily been as far away as another city.

“He’s calling me.” Superman stepped toward the window, his hand dropping to his side.

“He?” I repeated as I stepped after him. “Who’s ‘he?’”

He tilted his head again, his entire countenance filled with impatient anxiety. “I have to go. He needs me.”

“But who—” My hair fluttered across my eyes, the curtains billowed with a cold wind, and Superman was gone. Slowly, trying to sort out the plethora of emotions filling me up and pushing aside rational thought, I closed the window, shivering from the chill that leaked inside, wishing for a bit of warmth.

Almost reluctantly, I looked toward the kitchen. Clark was clearly visible, his back toward me, his shoulders hunched as he concentrated on his task at the counter. Tact and patience, I reminded myself for no other reason than that it gave me an excuse for my sudden self-consciousness as I joined him.

“Clark?”

He was cutting up some sort of meat, I observed. A pan was already sizzling with butter or grease or some other unfathomable ingredient, and it threw off sizzling sparks when Clark placed the meat inside and set a lid over it.

“I thought I’d make us some dinner,” he explained, carefully avoiding my eyes. “We missed breakfast and lunch.”

“Are you mad?” I asked bluntly, giving up on trying to catch his eye or read his expression.

He stilled, the profile of his face as solemn as if etched in stone. “I’m not mad at you, Lois. I’m... I’m tired of this. I don’t... I thought I was done feeling this way. But...”

“Dinner will help,” I offered when his words seemingly ran out. “Skipping a meal always makes me a bit grouchy.”

He chuckled, a sound so surprising that I bumped up against the kitchen island. “Is *that* what it is?”

“I don’t miss that many meals.” I made a face at him that he must have caught out of the corner of his eye because he laughed.

“Here.” He handed me an assortment of vegetables. “Could you cut these up for the salad?”

“If you provide detailed instructions,” I returned pertly and was rewarded with another laugh.

Dinner was as delicious as all the other meals he’d made for me; I

was quickly realizing that giving him the cooking chores had not been the way to keep a trim figure.

“No dessert,” I warned him when I finally gave up on finishing the portions he had dished out and pushed my plate away.

“No dessert?” he repeated playfully. “I thought I was talking to Lois Lane.”

“Well, there can be dessert another time,” I conceded. “But only if it involves chocolate.”

“I promise.” He held up his fingers in the scout’s salute.

I stood to take my plate to the sink, but Clark stood at the same moment, and our hands collided on my plate. Suddenly, it was impossible for me to look away from the sight of his hand over mine—impossible to think past the warmth of him so near to me. It always surprised me when I realized how tall he was.

“I’ll do it,” he offered, and strangely enough, there was nothing different about his voice or his expression. As if he didn’t notice how close we were, how well our hands fit together, how short my breath had suddenly become, how the kitchen had seemed to shrink in around us. As if moments like this were such a commonplace occurrence for him that he had learned to function normally during them.

“Thanks,” I offered weakly, then surrendered my plate and hurriedly sat down. Idiot! I raged at myself. If I continued this way, he was sure to think I had a concussion after all! I had to pull myself together and stop confusing Clark for Superman.

The silence was unnatural after the easy banter that had peppered our dinner. I stared at Clark as he began washing the few remaining dishes and cleaning off the counters, inwardly urging myself to find some topic of conversation that didn’t involve asking him what had transpired between him and Superman that had left him so angry.

“I can’t believe we lost Nigel!” I exclaimed before I could think better of it. Of course the only topic I could come up with was the one that weighed so heavily on my mind, I thought exasperatedly. “It’s unbelievable that even the police are in Luthor’s pockets.”

“We’ll get him back,” Clark said calmly, though the set of his shoulders gave away the tension he exhibited whenever Luthor’s name came up.

“We shouldn’t have to!” I proclaimed hotly, feeling all the anger that the pain and the pills had earlier kept at bay. “He was more than enough to get us a warrant, but now, thanks to a couple officers’ greed, we’re back to square one!”

Clark was silent as he drained the dishwasher and carefully arranged the washrag over the sink. Finally, he turned and looked at me, his tone painfully casual. “It’s curious that Superman didn’t pick it up.”

“Pick what up?” I asked cautiously, certain I wouldn’t like the answer.

“That the officers were corrupt. Even a man used to betrayal would surely feel a bit of anxiety when planning to double-cross Superman, and his hearing easily picks up heartbeats.”

“Everybody’s pulse races when Superman shows up,” I commented dryly. Stubbornly, I refused to allow myself to really listen to Clark’s warnings. Superman, I reminded myself, had been saving lives from a mudslide.

“There’s a big difference between excitement and guilt.” There was such sureness imbuing Clark’s voice that I couldn’t help but believe him. And, since he was the foremost expert on Superman’s abilities, it was hard to argue with him.

“That’s why he’s promised to help us catch Nigel again,” I finally settled for saying. “He probably feels as badly about it as we do.”

Clark said nothing, and the descending silence was heavy with the beginnings of a blanketing tension I didn’t like, one that left me in the dark as to what he was thinking. A tension very different from the invisible cord that had bound us just two hours earlier.

“So…” I began desperately, wanting to break that silence, wanting to banish the feeling of being isolated from Clark. “What about that interview yesterday? You didn’t say much.”

If I could have, I would have taken the question back. Why, oh why, couldn’t I find a topic that didn’t include Superman? It was

almost as if I were asking Clark to fill my head with even more irritating, paranoid fancies!

Clark’s brow wrinkled, and he studied me closely, probably as curious about my new topic as I was. “What should I have said? You told me a long time ago that you asked the questions. It’s not like you were interviewing me.”

“You know him better than anyone!” I blurted out. “And tonight, he—”

“Do I?” Clark shook his head and dropped into the chair across from me. “He’s hard to talk to, hard to reason with. He seems to keep everything to himself. You must have noticed that he didn’t tell us much.”

Something within me snapped—probably my strained patience. Or maybe I just hated squirming beneath all the doubts his words stirred up.

I straightened in my chair and glared at him across the table. “You know, Clark, I have tried to be patient with you, but you have got to stop with this anti-Superman spew! It’s not as if his life has been a bed of roses! He said he could never go back to his planet—he’s all alone here, the only one of his kind! He could use someone to lean on, someone to depend on, someone to come to after long days or hard rescues that don’t turn out well. He could use a…” I paused, abruptly aware that I was revealing more of my own fantasies than I had meant to. “Well, a friend. I know he wasn’t there when you needed him—and I know there’s obviously some sort of bad blood between you now—but I am asking you, for my sake, to just give him the benefit of the doubt.”

Clark studied me a long moment, turmoil evident in his eyes. When he did speak, his voice was tight and strained. “All right.”

Remembering the bleak mood of his letter and the hurt implicit in his posture when he had walked away earlier this evening, I softened. Superman, I realized, was not the only one who needed a friend.

“Clark, speaking of someone to talk to…are you sure you don’t want to call your parents? Or write them a letter—”

“No!” His response was immediate, almost panicked. He cast a quick glance around the apartment, as if expecting an enemy to leap out from behind the potted plants. “No,” he said again, marginally calmer. “I can’t risk leading him to them.”

“Clark.” I spoke slowly, enunciating each word, reaching out to grip his forearm. “Superman is protecting us. He wouldn’t let anything bad happen.”

“Like he did earlier today!” Clark snapped. Remorse instantly darkened his features, and he brought up his opposite hand to place over mine on his arm before I could even open my mouth. “I just… I don’t want them in danger, Lois. I can’t… I can’t let anything happen to them.”

“All right,” I agreed with a short nod. Why was it so hard to stay mad at him? “Besides, when we write our major expose on Luthor—with your name prominently featured after mine—I’m sure they’ll see it.”

“Yeah.” His tone was contemplative as he stared at my hand, cradled between his.

“Anyway.” I shrugged uncomfortably and pulled my hand free, wincing when my arm twinged in numbed discomfort. “It’s… getting late.”

“Are we exchanging secrets tonight?”

I paused in my rise from my chair, trying to interpret the emotion infusing his voice. Clark was, unbelievably, even harder to read than the aloof Superman. “Do you want to?”

He met my eyes without hesitation. “Aren’t you really asking if I have enough secrets to continue to exchange?”

I couldn’t help but smile, relieved to be back on familiar ground. “You did say last night that you didn’t have anymore.”

“Well, I haven’t written a romance novel,” he said with a mischievous grin, that teasing lilt to his voice making me smile automatically, which really took the sting out of my “Hey, that’s a secret!”

“Sorry,” he said, though he didn’t look all that guilt-stricken.

“That’s all right,” I granted imperiously before smiling.

“Although, I will say that you’re the only person I’ve ever admitted that particular secret to.”

He grew somber, his gaze intent on me as if he were hearing so much more than I was really saying. “I’m...honored...that you trust me so much.”

“I do trust you,” I said seriously, refusing myself the coward’s way out of shrugging it off with a laugh and a joke. I owed him, after all—both because he had saved my life and because I had hurt him tonight, even if only unintentionally. “Probably more than I should. Even from the beginning...there’s just...something about you that...makes sense to me. That makes me want to trust you.”

“You have a lot of faith in my integrity.”

“Faith is believing in something you *can’t* prove,” I told him, relishing the chance to edit *his* copy. “This isn’t faith—it’s confidence.”

Clark looked...well, flabbergasted.

I bit back a smile, pleased that I could confuse him almost as much as he could confuse me. “So, anyway, that’s my secret. What’s yours?”

“I could say that I trust you too, but I don’t think that’s a secret.”

Barely restraining a snort, I contented myself with a shake of my head.

He nodded, paused as if to gather his thoughts, then blurted out, “I found something in Trask’s warehouse—a file detailing where Superman’s ship landed.”

“What?” I bolted to my feet and stared down at Clark in shock, but he didn’t give me time to snap out my questions.

“I also found his ship—it had his S-symbol on it. And there was a tiny globe that responded to Superman’s DNA. When I touched it, it warmed and changed from a map of Earth to a map of Krypton.”

Krypton. Superman himself had told me that had been his home planet.

“I didn’t see *any* of this!” I sputtered.

Clark stood and held out placating hands. “I know. I’m sorry.” Remorse flashed across his face as he confessed, “I took the globe with me and hid it.”

“Where is it?” I looked around, which was silly, since the globe wouldn’t miraculously appear out of thin air.

Clark’s smile was oddly triumphant, his gaze centered on the windows behind me. “I thought it should be somewhere safe. Superman had it put in his Fortress of Solitude.”

“His what?” I repeated, stunned by yet another revelation.

“His Fortress of Solitude.” Clark’s stare became uncharacteristically intense. “You should ask him about it sometime.”

I wasn’t sure if he meant the globe or the Fortress, but I said, “I will.” I paused a moment, then, cursing the fragility apparent in my tone, asked, “Why didn’t you show me this globe, Clark? Why did you hide it from me?”

“I...” He looked away. “I didn’t know if it was in Superman’s best interests.”

I gasped. “You didn’t trust me?”

“No, Lois!” His tone was tender, his eyes caressing me, his hand on my cheek reassuring me. “I *do* trust you. It’s just...” He grimaced. “I panicked. And it wasn’t only my secret to tell.”

“Hmm.” As I studied Clark’s face, I wondered, not for the first time, why he had been the one to become Superman’s confidant. We had both covered Superman’s first stories, but Clark had been granted so many confidences while I...hadn’t. But then...Clark was a good friend—the best—and he’d never betray secrets, not even for a story. I wouldn’t now, but I wasn’t so sure that I wouldn’t have earlier. After all, I hadn’t thought I’d ever steal another reporter’s story either.

“I’m sorry, Lois.” Clark’s thumb brushed across the edge of my cheekbone. “I’m telling you now.”

“Yeah.” I smiled up at him, suddenly content. Superman might not trust me with his secrets, but Clark trusted me with his, and that was special all on its own.

The moment seemed to stretch out into infinity, the kitchen around us shrinking to enclose just the two of us in a tiny patch of light. Suddenly, it was impossible to catch my breath, as if Clark’s proximity was sucking all the air out of the room.

“Well,” I said, shifting a step away. Why did the fact that his hand slipped from my cheek suddenly seem like such a loss? “We’d better get some sleep. We have a lot to do tomorrow.”

I turned to go but stopped when Clark said my name.

“Lois, you really should ask Superman about this. Ask him what color the globe turned when it changed. Ask him where his Fortress of Solitude is.”

I studied Clark for a long moment. He was trying to catch Superman in a lie—even doped up and exhausted, I could tell that—trying to prove the superhero wasn’t as good as everyone knew he was. But what would he do when Superman passed this test?

“All right,” I agreed, more than ready for Clark to realize that he was wrong about this. And he *was* wrong. Superman was the good guy. “What color *is* the globe? Just so I know beforehand.”

“Red and blue,” he answered.

“And the Fortress? Where is it?”

Clark shrugged, something almost predatory in his sudden smile as he looked toward the windows. “The North Pole, of course.”

Chapter 15

I was tired of playing games. That was the thought I woke up with, and it only rooted itself more deeply as I showered—wincing away from the hot water pouring over tender bruises, sore muscles, and the gunshot wound—and dressed. Clark already had breakfast ready when I left the bedroom, but my own wakening hunger couldn’t distract me from the sudden impulsive plan that had brashly leapt into my mind.

“Can I look at your wound first?” Clark asked, pulling the chair out for me. “I can clean and bandage it for you.”

“I already cleaned it,” I told him, ignoring my slight shiver when his hands brushed across my skin as he rolled up my sleeve. “The bandage proved a bit more painful, though.”

Clark, I decided quickly, could have been a doctor. His hands were far gentler than the medic’s and seemed to possess a healing power all their own. It took him hardly a moment to gingerly bandage the wound and pull my sleeve back down.

“Thanks,” I said after swallowing heavily.

“Sure.” His eyes were tight as he sat down. He had shaved, but a few nicks on his cheeks testified to the fact that he still wasn’t quite back to normal.

“This looks delicious,” I observed, looking down at the plate already set out for me, filled with some sort of blueberry casserole.

He shrugged self-consciously. “I was up a bit early, and cooking always relaxes me.”

I was silent at this reminder of his nightmares, unsure what to say to heal him of Luthor’s lingering effects.

We spoke little as we ate, but both of us seemed content with the companionable quiet. I don’t know what Clark was thinking, but for my part, I was formulating my plan.

“Clark,” I began authoritatively a few moments later, setting down the crust of toast on my otherwise empty plate. “I think I’m going to go out for a while, okay?”

He didn’t respond, and I was already rising from my chair and heading for the closet to grab a coat. The one I had worn the day before was currently puddled at the bottom of my bathroom wastebasket, stained with blood and bad memories.

“Is there anything I can do to help you?”

I turned, Clark’s quiet question infusing a minute’s worth of patience into my purposeful edginess. He was standing near the table, his hands hanging empty by his side, his eyes locked on me. As I stared at him, one of his hands raised nervously to his face to adjust his glasses.

“Just wait here for Perry to call with Bender’s location,” I finally settled for saying. There was no way to explain that he confused me.

That his mere presence unsettled me because it had, in the past several days, taken to leaving me with some of the same feelings I had before felt only around Superman. That the knowledge of his love for me sat like a large, extremely awkward elephant in whatever room we were in. That his paranoia and frustrating hints concerning Superman were driving me to distraction.

No, I decided. Better just to say nothing and work it out on my own. He wanted me to test Superman—fine, I'd test Superman. And whatever the outcome, I'd be ready to face it.

That was easier planned than accomplished, however. The last time I'd tried this particular stunt, Superman had arrived after I had spoken his name only twice. This time, I had walked five blocks and called his name several times—receiving some very strange looks from passersby—and still he hadn't showed up. I was beginning to think that maybe this plan had been as ill thought out as some of my others and had just turned to head back to the apartment when I thought I heard the familiar rush of air that always accompanied his arrivals and departures.

"Superman?" I turned to look in the direction of the elusive sound, my face taking on a hopeful look of its own accord.

There was no one there.

Trying not to feel like an idiot, I grimaced and began walking back toward my apartment. Maybe trying to find Superman so I could ask him Clark's questions and reassure myself that he was the same superhero he had always been had been a silly plan, absurd in its simplicity. Then again, simplicity was something I was craving at the moment. Things had been complicated ever since Clark and Superman had left Metropolis—far *too* complicated—and I was more than ready to go back to the way things had been before. If that was even possible.

"Lois?"

My heart jumped to my throat as I whirled to find Superman descending from the frosted skies. His expression was mildly curious, the beginnings of a smile lightening his features, his cape flared out behind him so that he seemed like some kind of benevolent angel.

"Superman," I greeted him, and inwardly winced to hear that habitual breathiness lighten my tone. The effect he had on me was ridiculous, I told myself sternly. It was far past time that I got over a little bit of the awe his presence always engendered. Of course, that would be easier if he wasn't still floating a good foot or two off the ground.

"Did you want to see me?"

"Yes," I said, gratified when I managed to sound at least partially professional. "I need to talk to you about something."

He quirked an eyebrow. "The investigation?"

"Well, not exactly. Unless you've found something new?" I couldn't help the hope that leapt to fiery being within my chest. It would be so much easier to simplify things if Luthor was out of the way.

"Not yet," he replied with a slow shake of his head. "Shall we fly?"

"No!" I took a step away from him in an effort to escape the temptation. I needed to ask him several serious questions, and flying would only throw me off-balance.

Superman's eyes narrowed before he glanced around at the people staring at us as they walked by. "This isn't exactly inconspicuous, Lois. Word of it could very easily get back to Luthor."

"Oh." I blushed and looked down at my feet. "Right. Okay. Then...sure. Let's go someplace else."

But, I sincerely hoped, not to a fixed point in the midst of the skies. I'd never be able to get this interview done while hanging among opal clouds in a sapphire sky with Superman's arms wrapped around my body.

All thought temporarily abandoned me when Superman swept me close to his chest and ascended toward the sun, my purposeful plans left behind on the ground, too heavy to survive the ether. My heart rattled irrationally inside me, made even faster by the thought that

Clark had said Superman could easily hear heartbeats. The wind cradled my form and whipped at my hair, as if trying to separate me from Superman, though the strength of his hold made that impossible.

"I changed my mind," I whispered as I stared around me and below at my city, falling away like the reflection in a lake.

"About what?" Superman's voice rumbled through his chest and sent shivers pulsing through my body.

Despite my scattered plans and Clark's suspicions, I couldn't help laughing in the face of conquered gravity. "Once, I asked Clark if he'd rather be invisible or fly. He chose flying, but I said I'd rather be invisible." I paused to take in the whole of the surroundings enveloping me in a cold, silken atmosphere. "But I changed my mind. Flying is infinitely better."

"Yes." His own grin was that strangely childlike one he had displayed only once or twice before. "I like flying. Almost as much as I like you."

My stomach dropped away to join my thoughts and plans, discarded on the ground and left to languish in the heavy gravity. I could not look away from Superman, as if I thought that if I gazed at him long enough, I'd be able to peel away all his complexities to reveal the man beneath.

"Here." Superman pointed toward some landmark with his chin. "This should do."

I had not been watching the earth beneath us, so I had lost track of where we were, but it was obvious we weren't in Metropolis anymore. We landed on the slope of a hill layered with crystalline snow and peppered with the last leaves that had survived the autumn's rain of greenery. In the distance, I could see another mountain rising to stroke the bellies of clouds and descending toward a valley that might have led to the coast—and Metropolis.

In only minutes, we had traveled a long way from my city. Awe threatened to rise again, but I throttled it back. Though I had to turn my back on Superman to achieve it, I forced myself to remember everything I had left behind for such a short time. Clark needed closure, I needed simplicity, Superman needed friends—the best way to accomplish all three of those was directness.

"Superman, do you have a Fortress of Solitude?" I held my breath after voicing the question, surprised by my own bluntness.

"Yes. I told you I needed a safe place to rest, recover, and recharge. The Fortress of Solitude gives me all those things."

Emboldened by his straight answer, I turned back to face him. "And where is it?"

His eyes narrowed, as if confused by the question. "This shouldn't be public knowledge, you understand, but...it's in the North Pole."

A triumphant grin threatened to peek out from behind my professional mask, but I shooed it away. "Clark told me that he found a globe from your spaceship. He said it turned into a map of your world."

"Yes." Superman nodded. "Krypton is a red and blue planet with large land-masses."

Tension drained from my body, so much of it that I was surprised I couldn't see it shivering in a puddle at my feet. My shoulders slumped a bit as I gingerly sat on a fallen log. I was shivering, but from relieved anxiety, excitement, or the temperature, I wasn't sure.

"Here." Superman gazed at me and the log very intently and ripples of warmth spread out from his eyes, enveloping me in heat and causing steam to rise from the wood beneath me. A delighted smile sprang to my lips, and this time, I didn't fight it. Clark might not believe me when I told him, but at least I knew Superman had passed the test.

"Thank you," I murmured, moving over a bit to give him room to sit should he choose to do so.

"Lois." Superman settled himself beside me, his proximity almost as heated as his gaze. "Why did you ask me these things?"

"Clark doesn't trust you," I told him gently. "I think he might blame you a bit—for not being there for him. Superman, I can tell that something happened between you two, something that meant you

weren't there when he was captured. What did you two fight about?"

"Fight?" Superman repeated, his voice blanked of any emotion. He stared out at the landscape before us, and I wondered what view *he* saw. "What makes you think we fought?"

I rolled my eyes. "Come on. Neither one of you can be in the same room without throwing off enough electricity to light up half the city! You never seem to know what to say to him, and Clark is either angry or depressed every time he talks to you. Obviously, some kind of argument made him go back to Smallville while you continued wandering the world."

"There was no argument," Superman said slowly. "I went to my Fortress because Clark wanted to visit his parents. I even dropped him off there. That was before...before his captivity." He took a deep breath and straightened, as if bracing himself for whatever my reaction might be. "Lois, Clark never distrusted me before. He never grew angry at me. He never avoided me. In fact, he always accepted me, always treated me as if we were, as you say, friends. But since Luthor, he's...changed. He's broken, Lois. There's nothing left of the old Clark in him."

I was on my feet, I realized belatedly, backing away through the trampled snow. "You're wrong," I said numbly. "He hasn't changed. I mean, sure there are a few differences, but underneath it all, he's still the same person."

Superman's eyes were immeasurably sad. He clearly already mourned Clark, already thought him gone, had already consigned him to the past. "Think about it, Lois. He was held for a month by a madman who stopped at nothing in order to toy with him and crossed every line possible in order to twist his mind. He was tortured daily and subjected to Luthor's seductive, poisonous words while all his power was stolen from him. He was trapped in the darkness with no rejuvenating light to break the monotonous torment. He was alone with only the voice of Luthor as his companion and fading memories that weakened more with each passing day. After all that, do you really think he could just slide back into normal life as if nothing happened?"

"Stop," I commanded him uselessly, holding up a hand before me to ward off the sentences spoken so bluntly, so solemnly, so inescapably.

"He was brainwashed, Lois—brainwashed to hate and distrust me...and to do who knows what else. For all we know, he might still be carrying out Luthor's ends. Clark's only a puppet now, filled with darkness and driven by powerlessness, all at Luthor's command. His treatment of me is only a sign of what else is hidden within him. I'm sorry, Lois, but the man you knew—the man who was your partner...he's dead."

My panic fled even as I planted my feet, my jaw firming, arms crossed over my chest. "No. You're wrong, Superman. Clark is still very much the same man he's always been. I mean, sure, he can be a little weird, and sometimes he says odd things and does strange things—but when it comes down to it, Clark is the strongest man I know. He's not...he's still..."

I shook my head. The words—there were none suitable, none that could possibly encapsulate all that Clark was. It was an impossible task, and yet I tried anyway, spurred on by Superman's obvious lack of understanding. "You mentioned all the things that have been done to him, but that dark cell couldn't change him—Luthor couldn't change him—because he's stronger than all of that." I paced back and forth, frustrated by how little this verbal explanation conveyed. "He has...something...some inner strength, some kind of quiet heroism. You should know that, Superman—you're his friend! Clark is...well, he's just untouchable. Luthor can't hold a candle to him! Everything he does to Clark is like water running off a duck's back—maybe it leaves an impression, but it doesn't last."

"I admit that I've taken a lot from Clark," Superman began slowly, reaching out to take my hand, "as you obviously have. Yet in the end, much as you might dislike it, Clark is an ordinary man."

"No." Again, I found myself contradicting Superman, tugging my hand free of his momentarily insistent grip. It struck me as ironic that I

had to defend each of these men before the other. "Clark is one of those rarest of souls, Superman. He's one of the very few people who is extraordinary—not because of anything he does—but simply because of who he is."

And, I admitted to myself as I fell still, it was one of the greatest achievements in my life that I could count him as my best friend. How could Superman not think the same thing? How could he dismiss Clark so easily?

"I—" Superman suddenly grimaced, his head and shoulders bowing as if under a great weight, though I could not imagine a weight large enough to stagger the superhero. His mouth tightened and his eyes squeezed shut, his hands moving toward his face.

"Superman!" I stared at him dumbly, shock turning me into a statue. "Are you all right?"

Slowly, he turned his head to look at me, his hands falling back to his sides. Even more slowly, he straightened with a shake of his head as if to shrug off that invisible burden. "I...I just got distracted."

"Oh." I glanced around at our surroundings. Courtesy, common sense, and compassion all demanded that I instantly tell Superman to go deal with whatever crisis—large enough to affect him so violently—was occurring, but I didn't exactly relish being abandoned in the middle of a frozen wilderness.

"I'll take you back," Superman offered before I could tell him to leave me.

We didn't dawdle on the way home, that was for sure. It had taken ten minutes before—a very long flight for Superman—yet this trip lasted less than a full minute.

Superman seemed to have lost a portion of his urgency as he set me down on the street outside my apartment, so I risked delaying him with a hesitant smile. "Thanks for coming," I told him. "And for answering my questions. Maybe one day I'll get to see this Fortress of yours."

Superman stiffened. "Actually...it's a very private place among Kryptonians. A place of solitary reverence."

"Oh." I flushed. "I'm sorry."

"It's forgiven." Superman reached out a gentle hand. Despite my fading irritation with his dismissal of Clark, I closed my eyes in anticipation of feeling him cup my cheek, then snapped them open in disoriented surprise when he set his hand on my shoulder instead. "Goodbye, Lois."

And he was gone.

Without a doubt, Clark knew I had gone to meet with Superman, but I still wanted to do something to lessen the blow when I returned. It had occurred to me with this morning's newfound purposefulness that the reason Clark hadn't been eating much might have had to do with the choice in foods. He was a great cook, but I well remembered what he had stocked his cupboards and fridge with. So, taking a quick detour, I picked up a couple bags of cookies, pastries, pies, Twinkies, and another box of tea.

When I entered the apartment, laden down with the groceries, Clark straightened from zipping up the duffel bag Perry had brought him. He stepped forward and took the bags from me with a raised eyebrow. "More groceries?" he asked. "I don't need to eat that badly, Lois."

"Ha, ha," I said, shrugging off my coat. "I picked those up for you. I thought you might be ready for a change."

He peeked into the bags and warmed me with his immediate grin. "Are you trying to fatten me up?"

"Just a little," I admitted. "Besides, it might be nice to have something to munch on if we have a long stakeout ahead of us."

"Oh, Perry called." Clark hefted the paper bags and took them toward the kitchen as I trailed along after him. "He said Bender is at the marina, staying on his yacht. Fortunately for us, Perry has a friend who owns a place on the docks. During his lunch hour, he'll bring over the equipment we need, as well as the directions and key to this place."

"Great!" I exclaimed. "I just hope we haven't missed the meeting already."

“Even if we did, Bender might still give something away,” Clark said with his customary optimism. It seemed only the slightest bit forced. “I made us an early lunch, though, so we’ll be ready when Perry gets here. And I called Henderson to let him know what was going on.”

“Always prepared,” I teased, unable to understand how Superman could so cavalierly claim that Clark—my partner and friend, this man who smiled so engagingly at me—could be some brainwashed tool of Luthor’s. “You must have been the Boy Scouts’ prize student.”

“Would it surprise you if I told you I was an Eagle Scout?” he asked.

“Nope.” I laughed and sat down to lunch.

We were both packed for an overnight stay and were ready to go when Perry came by with the camera and recording equipment. He helped us load it all into the back of a taxi—we were leaving my Jeep behind to allay immediate suspicion—then gave us the name of Bender’s yacht and wished us luck.

I wrinkled my nose a bit at the dust stirred up when we entered the small dockside hideaway. It obviously hadn’t been used for a while. Still, a bit of exploring revealed that, aside from the dust, it wasn’t in too bad a shape. The bedroom was musty, but clean linens in a closet made the bed passable; the living room was a bit dark, but sunlight cascaded through the window facing the yachts, which was enough to satisfy Clark.

We set up everything quickly, adjusting the equipment with the ease of long practice. Bender’s yacht was in direct line of sight of the window, something I hadn’t even dared hope for. And cracking the window open dispersed the dust and the musty scent, leaving the interior feeling fresh and smelling clean. Once again, Clark’s mere presence seemed able to make any situation turn out better than it would have otherwise.

By the time everything was situated and we had surveyed the area around our temporary home so we knew how to get around in a hurry, it was getting dark. The winter nights came early, but I wished the sunlight could last a while longer for Clark’s sake.

“How about some dinner?” I asked when the sun dipped below the sail-tipped water outside. “My treat.”

“Your treat?” Clark repeated with a smirk. “This I can’t pass up.”

“Watch it, Kent,” I warned him playfully. “I can dial takeout places better than anyone else.”

“I don’t doubt it,” he promised solemnly.

I couldn’t quite explain why, but we were both much more relaxed than we had been at my apartment. Maybe we had been getting a little stir-crazy; maybe it was the fact that we were on a stakeout again, together; maybe it was the knowledge that we were finally doing something proactive to take down Luthor; maybe it was a combination of all of these or something else entirely. Whatever it was, I couldn’t deny that I felt a bit giddy, almost dazed with a sense of freedom. Judging from the sparkle in Clark’s bespectacled eyes, I wasn’t the only one.

Since I was actually hungry—I hadn’t eaten much at lunch—I chose a takeout place near us, a Chinese restaurant called Ralph’s Pagoda. Still, I dug out a couple snacks for us to munch on while we waited for the food to arrive. When it came, I paid the delivery-boy and carried the cartons to the table in front of the couch.

“I haven’t had Chinese in ages,” Clark said casually, but he took only one bite before making a face. “This is awful.”

I tentatively tried a bit, then frowned at him and took another bite. “I don’t taste anything different about it. Not as good as some other places I know, but—”

Clark shook his head and wrinkled his nose on his second, smaller bite. “I don’t think we should eat this, Lois. It tastes rancid.”

I wasn’t really convinced, but the last thing Clark needed was to get food poisoning on top of everything else. Besides, the Twinkie I had eaten had taken the edge off my hunger. So, with a shrug, I set my own carton next to his. “Fine, but are you sure you just don’t want to admit that I can make a good meal too?”

“You didn’t *make* the meal,” he contradicted, scooping up the cartons and dumping them in the trash, as if afraid I would eat some when he wasn’t looking. “But if you’re still hungry, we can order something else.”

“Nah.” I gestured toward the snacks we had brought. “We’ve got plenty of junk food if I get too desperate.”

“Are you sure?” He seemed as worried about me as I should have been about him.

“Yes. So.” I scooted farther back into the voluminous couch and pulled a knee up to my chest, facing Clark as he retook his own seat at the opposite end. “When you left the Daily Planet, you said you were going to become the editor of the *Smallville Post*.” I purposely emphasized the last word.

He raised his eyebrows. “You remembered the name?”

“Well.” I chuckled, pushing back a strand of hair. “Someone edited my copy.”

He laughed, a sound that made me stare at him, something uncoiling in the pit of my stomach. “Only when it needed it.”

I shrugged off the strange feeling and gave him a warning look but let his comment go since I didn’t want to be distracted from my topic. I had tested Superman, and now...well, I wasn’t *testing* Clark, but I wanted some answers from him. “So, why didn’t you go to *Smallville*?”

Suddenly unable to look me in the eye, Clark shrugged uncomfortably. Then, as if coming to some inward decision, he met my gaze. “I couldn’t stay in one place, Lois. I...I had to move around—or I thought I did anyway. It was...” Again, he looked away, this time staring intently out the window, clearly tense.

I didn’t want to pressure him, not when I was trying so hard to be the kind of friend he had always been to me. Not when Superman’s cold words still had the power to suck the warmth from my flesh. So I smiled as I said, “So, where did you go? I mean...” I swallowed painfully before admitting, “I got your postcards and your calls, but...I wasn’t really listening to you then.”

Hesitantly, Clark reached out a hand to briefly touch mine. “It’s okay, Lois. I understand. I left you even after I promised you I wouldn’t.”

Hearing him voice my complaint made me realize how childish—almost petty—it was. “You’re your own man, Clark. It’s not like you owed me anything. You didn’t have any ties to me.”

His gaze was frighteningly direct, astonishingly powerful. “Do you really believe that?”

No, I didn’t. Especially not after reading his letter. After realizing just how much he cared for me. But I wasn’t ready to acknowledge that elephant, so I looked away. The dim glow from the lamp beside us left us in a pocket of void all our own, just as we had been in the cell—only this time, it was a space defined by light instead of darkness.

“Anyway...” I shrugged. “What were your favorite parts of your journey?”

“I didn’t want to leave,” he assured me as if he hadn’t heard my question.

“I know you didn’t,” I told him honestly, my voice as hushed as his. “And I know you had important reasons for going. And I don’t blame you. Anymore,” I added for the sake of honesty, lessening its sting with a tentative smile. “Besides, Clark, you can’t *always* put someone else’s happiness above your own.”

“Why not?” His question, combined with the blatant heat in his eyes, was enough to take me aback.

I blinked. “Because if you’re always making others happy at a personal cost, you’re not going to be happy yourself. And it’s hard to make others happy when you’re missing something inside.”

“It’s not impossible,” he insisted stubbornly.

“No,” I was forced to concede. “But it is hard. And it’s easier—more fulfilling—when you’re happy yourself. Believe me, Clark, I know.”

He opened his mouth as if to reply, then seemed to think better of it and looked away.

“So,” I said yet again. “Even if leaving wasn’t your first choice, you must have enjoyed some part of your travels. Come on.” I patted him on the chest. “Give me the highlights. I’m listening now.”

“Well,” he began, shifting to more fully face me, his knee brushing against mine. “I did enjoy Ireland. You mentioned once that you had been there before?”

“Yes, I was part of an exchange student program,” I answered, wondering at how skillfully he continued to turn the conversation back to me. It was something he had done from the beginning of our partnership. I had assumed it was because he genuinely wanted to know my answers. Now, while I was sure that was part of it, I realized that it was also a good form of evasion. He was able to turn questions back on me so that I ended up forgetting he hadn’t answered them himself.

“And?” Clark prompted, his expression open and earnest. “Did you like it?”

“I developed a crush on a boy there,” I said with an embarrassed grimace. “He was older and didn’t really think much of me, so that kind of colored the rest of my time there. But, yes, I did enjoy it. You?”

“I did,” he said with a warm smile that almost distracted me from the fact that he continued to say “I” instead of “we.” Hadn’t Superman been with him? “I stayed in a very small town called Gray Stone. They had a mountain there.” He paused, then grinned with the charm I was slowly realizing he had always possessed—even beaten and drugged in a pitch-black cell. “It was actually a hill that I walked over in about an hour. It was a beautiful path, hedged on one side with bushes that produced very tasty berries and on the other by a steep, eroding drop-off that led straight to the sea. I walked to the ‘big’ city, Bre, and shopped at some small local stores. The bookstore sold mostly Gaelic books; the owner was very happy to learn that I could read it. He had a son who had opened a bookstore in Kansas City, which is interesting because when I was in Taiwan, there was an older woman who...”

I couldn’t stop staring at Clark as his poetic, empathetic words washed over me. He had a way of describing places that made me able to picture them effortlessly, and no matter what country he described, the main focus of his stories was always the people he met. People he invariably liked; people he had taken the time to get to know; people he remembered.

I had initially pegged Clark as a barely literate farmboy, naïve, gullible, and unsophisticated. And yet, gradually, I had come to understand just how well-traveled Clark was, how intelligent, how... not worldly, but certainly a man who had seen the world and yet knew there was still more to see. He was naïve because he chose to be, innocent rather than gullible because he didn’t want to linger on the bad things in life, and vastly more sophisticated than I could have believed upon our first introduction.

Superman had claimed that Clark was nothing more than the shell of a man, a brainwashed husk occupying the body of the man who had been my partner. But there was nothing mindless about the man sitting so near to me that I could feel the warmth of his body-heat, nothing empty about the smoky voice welling up over me to lap at my soul with beautiful words, nothing broken about the light in his eyes and the emotion in his smile and the poetry of motion in the hand gestures accompanying his stories.

And as I watched Clark, I suddenly realized that I was unabashedly staring at him, seeing him in an entirely new light. I was—as amazing as it seemed—star-struck.

Once, when my fascination with Superman had been at its height and he had just revealed that he came from a far-away planet, I had amused myself with a wordplay I still remembered. I had described myself as star-struck—struck by this man from the stars whose own star had, inexplicably, sent him across the galaxies to me.

But Clark... Clark was an ordinary man, normal and dependable and staid. Or so I had thought. What, I asked myself now, was ordinary about Clark? What other man had I ever met who was so trustworthy and steady and honest...and so wholly in love with me?

Clark might not have been sent from the stars, but he had given me those stars. He had punctured the darkness of my life with tiny pinpricks of light that never failed or wavered in their courses. He had brightened my world as if he were the moon—no, I corrected myself. Not the moon. Clark was the sun, bright and vivid and fixed and never to be outshone by another. Others might look at him and see only a single glowing star, but I was close to him now—close enough to realize that what to one person was a star was to another the brilliance of an anchoring sun.

Such romantic thoughts, I scoffed at myself, suitable for the melodramatic romance novel I had admitted I was writing to only one person. And yet...I could not tear my eyes from Clark and the love burning in his own eyes as he looked back at me.

Superman took me flying...but Clark made me feel as if I could fly.

Superman gave me the world...but Clark could very easily *be* my world.

Superman saved my life...but Clark made me believe that my life was more precious and valuable and important than anyone else’s.

I loved Superman...but Clark loved *me*.

The thoughts—so traitorous to the undying love I had silently sworn to Superman—made me waver. I put a hand to my head, convinced I was burning up from such close proximity to Clark.

“Are you all right?”

His concern only prompted more thoughts in the same elaborate vein, and I felt disoriented, thrown off balance by the shaky feeling undermining everything I thought and felt and believed. Only when his hands on my arms steadied me did I realize that I had closed my eyes for a moment.

“I think I might have a slight case of food poisoning after all,” I said weakly. A ridiculous excuse considering the fact that I had only eaten a couple bites of the food.

But Clark didn’t seem to notice the gaping hole in my logic. “I’ll get you a glass of water,” he promised and was gone before I could tell him that I didn’t want to quench the fever currently raging within me.

He was back an instant later, kneeling before me, steadying me with one hand and using the other to hand me a cup of cold water. I took a drink, closing my eyes against the revelations swirling through my head, the coil untangling itself to tickle the insides of my stomach, the sight of his concerned, tender eyes boring into me.

“Thank you,” I managed to say.

Without a word, he set the cup on the table, then moved a pillow behind me, his hand on my back guiding me into a lying position. “You’ve taken such good care of me,” he whispered as he adjusted another pillow to make me more comfortable. He set a warm hand on my stomach and began to rub it gently. If I had really had a stomachache, I was sure I would have been healed immediately. “The least I can do is try to return the favor.”

“You know, Clark,” I murmured quietly, afraid to even move lest the sudden mood be broken or I wake to find we were still in that cell. “Sometimes, it seems like I don’t even know you. You’re always surprising me.”

A shadow might have passed across his features, or maybe it was only the dim lighting. “Well, we all have masks. Isn’t that what you told me when we were investigating the invisible man? We all like to meet expectations.”

“Whose expectations do you try to meet?” I asked curiously. Clark was one of the most quietly confident people I had ever met; he had never seemed to worry about what our co-workers thought of him.

“Well,” he said, his voice a bit dry. “My parents’ expectations. I want them to be proud of me.”

“I’ll bet they are.” I smiled up at him. “The Boy Scout without a flaw.”

“And yours,” he continued, the two words spoken with breathtaking meaning.

“Mine?” I considered it quite an accomplishment that I was able to get the single syllable out past the sudden earthquake in my soul. His

hand on my stomach was as hot as a brand, and yet it was a warmth I craved even more of.

“Well, I try anyway.” He gave the hint of a lopsided grin. “You set a high standard.”

I paused but could not hold back my next question. “And are you wearing a mask now?”

He met my gaze without any hesitation. “No. The mask always has to come off sooner or later. Although,” he added, withdrawing his hand as if *I* had burned him, “most people only show their true selves when they’re passionate about something. Like when they’re angry and fighting.”

“Or when they’re in a life-and-death situation.” As if we were magnetized, my hand was drawn to his cheek. “Do you know, Clark, that even when you’re asleep, you smile if you hear me speak or feel my touch? You can’t fake that. And you risked your life for me—another thing that’s hard to fake. But then...you’re lousy at pretending or wearing masks.”

“But I do,” he whispered urgently. “I do wear a mask.”

I cocked my head slightly, my thumb tracing a pattern over his skin. “More of those expectations you have to meet?”

He blinked, clearly surprised, as if he had expected me to retreat at his confession. “Yes.”

“You know...*I* don’t like meeting expectations.”

“You don’t?” For a change, he seemed to be the one repeating my words, his own voice no stronger than mine.

“No. I like to exceed them.”

And before I even realized what I meant to do, I raised myself up and brushed my lips over his. The contact was fleeting, ghost-like, ephemeral...hypnotizing, entrancing, utterly compelling.

I slid my hand from his cheek to meet my other behind his neck and play through his hair, felt his arm slip around my spine to support my weight, his hand cupping my neck as his thumb sparked tiny lightning bolts along the edge of my jaw.

And then he moved his mouth back to mine, and thought was obliterated. I was no longer able to catalogue a specific touch or movement; all I knew was that I felt as if I had come home, as if I belonged there, as if warmth and light and hope had all been personified in the form of Clark Kent.

A moment, a year, a century passed before we both pulled back at the same moment. Yet I could not move away completely, and he seemed possessed of the same thought, so we remained in our close embrace, our foreheads touching. Amazement and shock reeled through my system—a shock touched by fear and a tiny trace of guilt.

I had not even thought of Superman as I kissed Clark. Not once. Not at all.

Clark’s fingers insinuated themselves even deeper into my hair, the touch of his skin on the back of my neck sending shivering tingles down my spine. His arm supported my weight as I leaned on him. And Superman was obviously the furthest thing from his mind.

“Lois, I love you,” he murmured.

The sentiment had been so obvious, the look in his eyes so self-explanatory, the message his every touch conveyed so clear that at first the words barely registered. They were, after all, hardly a revelation.

But slowly they sank in. Slowly, they penetrated the fog encasing me in this tiny place and time. Slowly, they grew to dwarf everything else.

He was confessing his love—I was wondering what Superman would think.

“I know you do,” I whispered. Tears pooled in my eyes, then fell when I closed them, savoring the feel of his tight, supporting embrace and his temples resting against mine and the softness of his hair beneath my fingers. Then I pulled back to look at him, pierced to the quick by the sight of the burning, radiant blaze of hope exploding from his entire being. “But you deserve so much better.”

And I tore myself from his grip and ran to the bedroom and slammed the door shut on his stunned silence. Running from myself—running from him—running from the scarcity—the enormity—of

Superman in my thoughts.

Clark knocked. He said my name. He apologized. He finally fell depressingly silent.

I sat on the bed, and wrapped my arms around my middle, and trembled in the shadowed cold.

Chapter 16

A long sleepless night passed, stretching out so interminably that I was ready to scream. Finally, however, whether guided through the same fixed orbits by the pull of the sun or by sheer willpower on my part, morning arrived to shine dimly through the tiny windows high in the bedroom wall. And now that morning had finally arrived, I found myself conversely wishing that time would stand still, would go backward, would have paused in the pre-dusk dark so that I didn’t have to open the door I had slammed, walk back out into the room I had left so abruptly, and face the man I had fled.

I delayed the inevitable moment as long as possible, taking my time dressing in warm, comfortable clothes and packing up my things. I even gritted my teeth past the pain caused by my inept handling and changed the bandage on my wound myself. I couldn’t bear to let Clark do it, not when I’d have to look at him and see just how badly I’d hurt him. Not when I’d have to sit there, quiescent and seemingly unmoved, as his hands drifted over my skin and tempted me to forget all the reasons I had slammed a door between us.

When I could stall no longer, I stepped in front of the door, took a deep, shuddering breath, and set a trembling hand to the doorknob.

Then I pulled my hand back and paced out a few, short lines.

Coward, I named myself silently. That was enough, fortunately, to galvanize me into action. Nobody called Lois Lane a coward—not even me.

So I set my hand decisively to the doorknob, twisted it with a flick of my wrist, and yanked the door open. For my bravery, I was awarded the sight of Clark’s back.

He was standing at the window, his skin turned golden by the morning sunshine, his eyes fixed in the direction of Bender’s yacht. For some strange reason, he had his glasses pulled down low on his nose while he squinted at something or other. He stayed in that pose for a long moment before finally letting out a tiny sigh, his shoulders drooping, and pushing his glasses back up. Then, almost reluctantly, he reached down and picked up the binoculars Perry had loaned us.

My foot scuffed the edge of one of the tables book-ending the couch, and Clark started, lowering the binoculars and turning to face me with wide eyes.

“Anything yet?” I asked before he could make any mention of the night before. My voice came out sounding strained and nervous, but at least it came out. I hadn’t been sure it would when I first caught sight of Clark’s expression metamorphosing from surprise to a mixture of characteristic concern, painful wariness, and that ever-present hope.

“No,” he replied quietly in that distinctive voice of his. “Nothing yet. Bender’s up, though, and he’s been kind of active. He might be getting ready for a meeting. I’ve got the recorder set for voice activation.”

“Good,” I said hoarsely, unable to tear my eyes from him, unable to look at him, the result being that I darted glances of him out of the corner of my eye, as if he were too bright to face full-on.

And he was.

I had thought that the way last night had ended and the terrible, downward-spiraling thoughts that had filled my midnight hours would have doused the brilliance I had seen in him. I had been sure that the early-morning light would be shining brightly enough to make Clark seem no more radiant than usual. I had assumed the star-struck tendencies that had taken hold of me last night had been nipped in the bud by my realization that I had betrayed either Clark or Superman by kissing him.

I had been wrong.

Clark still shone. He still seemed every bit as amazing and perfect as he had seemed the night before, maybe even more so because,

though he watched me so carefully and hopefully, he selflessly let me pick the conversation, let me speak only of work-related topics, let me pretend that I had been unaffected by his unconscious charm. He still drew me toward him, so much so that it was almost impossible for me to keep the coffee table between us.

Think of *him*, I reminded myself sternly, repeating the conclusions I had come to the night before. He *was* amazing—I wasn't arguing that—amazing enough to deserve someone who loved him for himself, someone who put his needs above her own, someone who wanted, above all else, to make him happy.

Not someone who was selfish enough to kiss him just because she loved that he loved her.

Not someone who confused him in her mind with his estranged best friend.

Not someone who could think of another man a breath after kissing him.

Not me.

So, no matter that I wanted to smile at Clark and step close to him and throw myself into his arms—carefully, because he still looked a bit off-balance—and let him hold me and maybe kiss me again...no matter all of that, I had to remain professional and aloof...and alone.

I had promised myself that I would be the friend he needed, that I would give back to him, that I would take care of him. Now was the time to fulfill that silent promise.

"We're picking up sound all right?" I asked when I became aware the moment of silence had stretched out too long.

"Yes," he replied minimally. He swiveled in place to follow me with his eyes as I wandered the room aimlessly. My steps threatened to inch nearer him, but I brutally restrained myself. "Do you need me to look at your arm, or bandage it again?"

"No. I got it." The bandage I had managed to tie was a bit bulky and had restarted the slow burning in the wound, but I wasn't about to admit that to him. I couldn't, even though he was staring at me with such soft eyes and an earnest expression that tempted me to confess my every thought. To steel myself against him, I forced myself to remember the condition he had been in when I had been put in the cell with him. The way he had flinched when I pulled my hands out of his after imploring him to confide in me. The way he had turned his back and left the room after I had given Superman the same words I had so intensely given him.

Just as I had given Clark a kiss even more moving and powerful and wonderful than the one I had shared with Superman.

I don't think I had ever had a lower opinion of myself than in that moment, not even when I had thought I was partially responsible for Superman having to face Nightfall alone.

"I didn't have anything to cook for breakfast," Clark said hesitantly. "We might be able to order in something."

"Oh, no, that's okay." I waved my hand in a vague gesture. "I think I brought some honey buns or some kind of pastry. That should do in a pinch. Of course," I manufactured a laugh, "I'll have to move into the gym for a month when this is all over."

Something flickered in Clark's expression. Whatever it was, I wasn't sure that I was coherent enough or awake enough or enough myself to try to interpret it. Besides, I hadn't had any luck figuring him out since the night he had woken me at my desk and stunned me with a letter of resignation and a kiss goodbye; why should now be any different?

"Lois," Clark began with a deep breath, and I tensed. I couldn't let him mention last night, couldn't let him talk to me in that kind, tender voice, couldn't let him get close enough to reach out and draw a finger along my cheek...or I would succumb. I knew I would. And I couldn't, not until I had straightened everything out within myself. Not until I could decide what I felt—really, truly felt—for him. Not until I was sure that I was done hurting him.

"You're sure you haven't seen anyone arrive yet?" I moved toward the window, vaguely aware that my movements were stilted and unnatural. Too late, I realized that I had gotten so desperate to find a

distracted that I had forgotten I wasn't supposed to draw so close to Clark.

"No," he said simply, though he would have been justified in pointing out that he would surely have mentioned it if he'd seen anyone arrive at Bender's yacht. "Here."

I froze. His hand—the same one that had traced the contours of my face with such gentleness—was held out toward me as he offered me the binoculars. His eyes—the same eyes that still glowed with the same light that had compelled me to kiss him—were intent on my face. His voice—the same that had woven such spells around me the night before—was strained and patient as he repeated my name.

"Thanks," I choked out and took the binoculars, careful to avoid physical contact.

It seemed almost impossible for the moment to get any more awkward, so I was relieved beyond measure when the phone rang, though the volume of its sudden chime made me jump. Clark started as well, but he only looked away, so I set the binoculars down and moved to the phone.

"Hello?" My voice trembled on that single word, so much so that even I wasn't able to recognize myself in the greeting.

"Lois?" Perry asked, a frown evident in his tone.

"Perry." I forced a smile in Clark's direction. He formed his own fake smile, then turned back to the window, raising the binoculars to his eyes, masking whatever emotion he was too polite to show me.

"Lois, I think you should sit down."

"Why?" I asked suspiciously. Something took my heart and squeezed in a grip as tight as Luthor's thugs had held me. I was almost afraid to hear Perry's answer—no, I *was* afraid of what he had to say. I didn't think I could take anything else at this moment. I was so tired, tired of what Luthor had made of my life, tired of my own confusion and guilt and bewilderment.

Perry hesitated, stammering a bit before finally saying, "Lois, you said Luthor had threatened the Planet if you didn't do as he demanded, didn't you?"

I sank blindly to the couch, my hand turned numb on the phone. "Yes."

"Well..."

"What happened?" I demanded, bolting upright though I had just sat down, my eyes sparking with fire. Luthor had already taken my partner, had tried to take my hero, and was keeping me from my job—there was no way he was taking the Planet. No way in the world.

"It's nothing definite yet," Perry warned, the note of fear that threaded his words belying his own reassurance. "One of the boardmembers passed along a warning that...well, our advertisers seem to be jumpin' ship. And ever since Clark and Superman left...well, for a while now, we've been...our circulation's been just a bit low. The recent exclusive with Superman has been helping, but...my friend says the board's about to meet with our creditors. It's...it's just not lookin' good. And with what you said about Luthor's threats, I thought..."

As if dragged by a strong magnetic pull, my eyes were drawn to Clark. When I had insisted that Luthor could not hurt a newspaper, Clark had retorted that the Planet was infinitely vulnerable. *He can kill Perry; he can set a bomb; he could even buy it if he wanted to.* His warning echoed sonorously within my head, blotting out the sound of Perry's flat assurances.

"No."

I hadn't recognized my voice when I answered the phone, but this single denial...*this* I recognized. For perhaps the first time since Clark had walked away from me, I sounded like myself. Mad Dog Lane—I had been pretending I could still be her, but she had become nothing more than a façade, a show of bravado to hide just how lost and uncertain I was without my partner.

But now...that determination, the will to fight against any odds, the stubborn refusal to accept defeat—it was me. *This* was me. *This* was who I was.

"This is not going to happen," I sternly instructed Perry. "We can't let him get the Daily Planet. I won't let him win, Chief."

“Of course not.” There was a resolve in Perry’s voice that hadn’t been there a moment ago. “We’ll stop him.”

“You need to find out everything you can. Use whatever contacts you have to see what made the advertisers—”

“I’ve been around the block a coupl’ a times,” Perry interrupted. “I think I know how to handle myself. You and, uh, your friend, in the meantime, need to get us the exclusive on Luthor. That’ll boost circulation.”

“Among other things,” I said grimly, my eyes still fixed on Clark, whose stiff shoulders indicated he was upset about something. Probably the tone of my voice.

“Don’t worry, Lois. You take care of your end of things, and I’ll hammer out the details on this side. No two-bit millionaire is going to get the better of us.”

“That’s more like it, Chief,” I said with a grin that felt unfamiliar on my lips.

“Lois!” Clark turned from the window and beckoned me to his side.

“Got to go, Perry!” Not waiting to hear his goodbye, I hung up the phone and hurried to the window. Clark handed me the binoculars and turned to flip the switch that allowed us to hear the words spoken on the yacht.

My sharp intake of air marked the moment when I saw Bender gesturing Nigel forward, glancing about so furtively that any passerby would be sure to take notice.

“Nigel!” I exclaimed. My hands tightened over the binoculars, anger surging up in my heart in tandem with the waves lapping against the yacht’s hull. “Quick, Clark—call Henderson.”

Clark stepped to the phone, but I didn’t concentrate on his hushed conversation with the inspector, instead focusing my attention on the words relayed through our equipment.

“Let’s make this quick,” the short lawyer was saying in his customary fussy voice. “I can’t afford to be seen with you.”

“You’re behind the times, Sheldon,” Nigel said congenially, helping himself to the cup of tea Bender had sitting on a nearby table. “There’s no longer any reason to worry about the so-called law. Ever since Mr. Luthor acquired his newest employee, things have been looking up for all our interests.”

“He’s using *him* for *this*?” Bender squeaked, his eyes bugging out. “I thought that wasn’t working out as well as hoped.”

“Well, there are still a few bugs to be ironed out.” Nigel shrugged and looked casually around the docks, a glance that took in his surroundings with a cold, seasoned eye.

I couldn’t help but take a tiny step backward, my gunshot wound clamoring with remembered pain. Clark’s warm hand on my back as he rejoined me at the window strengthened and reassured me. Determinedly, picturing the Planet in my mind’s eye, I looked through the binoculars again.

“Despite those minor flaws,” Nigel continued after a careful sip of tea, “LexCorp’s worldwide business dealings have already doubled in profit. Having muscle that is intimidating, quick, and above reproach works well for Mr. Luthor. However, the reporters continue to be a problem, which is why I’ve come.”

“Of course I’ll represent Mr. Luthor at any trial that should occur.” Bender sounded slightly more confident now that the subject had turned, though he kept glancing fearfully up at the sky.

Frowning, I turned to Clark to ask if he had any idea what they were talking about. My frown melted like vapor at the sight of Clark’s jaw clenched painfully tight, his eyes flashing anger to match the expression he had worn when Superman had returned him to the apartment two nights before. His hands were balled into fists, and it was a good thing he wasn’t the one with heat-vision considering how intently he glared in the direction of the yacht.

“There won’t be a trial.” Nigel’s voice, emanating from the equipment behind us, jolted me and snapped my attention back to him and Bender. “That’s the entire point of this meeting. When Mr. Luthor called you a week ago, you promised him you would carry out his

instructions to the letter.”

“And I did!” Bender exclaimed, holding his hands up in a warding gesture. “I hired the men to follow that photographer just as he asked.”

“Jimmy!” The name slipped from Clark’s lips, and I glanced up at him, disturbed when I saw that the color had drained from his face. “I thought he should have been back by now.”

“Then tell me, Sheldon.” Nigel stepped so close to Bender that he loomed over the smaller man. “Why has Mr. Luthor not been informed that this task has been completed?”

Bender backed away. “It has been! I told you over the phone—they’ll be on their way back to Metropolis with proof they’ve completed their end of the bargain as soon as they let the kid lead them to whatever he was sent to find.”

Clark shook his head. He looked so unsteady that I set down the binoculars and took hold of his arm to ground him, temporarily allowing the murmur of Nigel and Bender’s conversation to become nothing more than background hum.

Clark’s eyes were wide and worried when he met mine. “I spent so much time trying to counter the major threat that I completely forgot about more ordinary ones. And Luthor must have been counting on that. Jimmy—”

“Is a smart kid,” I told him, meeting his gaze forcefully and refusing to show a hint of the doubt tickling along the edges of my mind. “He knew that what you were asking him to do was dangerous. He’ll be on his guard.”

“*Did* he know?” Clark looked to me, searching my face for some sign of reassurance, which I gave him willingly.

“Clark, you made him memorize the directions, told him not to repeat them aloud, and sent him off to who-knows-where in the middle of the night—I think he knew it was dangerous. But he knows his way around. Trust me—I’ve seen him get in some places even *I* had trouble breaking into.”

Finally, a tiny smile broke through Clark’s guilty fear. “Oh, well, in that case...”

I smiled back at him—because, really, it was impossible not to—and then gestured back to Nigel and Bender, whose conversation had degenerated into an argument over Bender’s allegedly shoddy work for Luthor. “Besides, with the conversation we’re recording, we’ve practically got Luthor nailed.” But impatience and impetuosity had been resurrected along with Mad Dog Lane, so I grabbed Clark’s sleeve and pulled him after me. “Come on. We’ve got to stall Nigel until Henderson and his men get here.”

“But the protective detail he assigned—”

“We’ve already lost Nigel once thanks to bought cops!” I snapped, tossing Clark his flannel jacket to throw on over his t-shirt. “I won’t let it happen again. Perry said Luthor’s moving in on the Planet.”

Clark’s head snapped up, and his compassionate expression made me swallow hard. “I’m sorry, Lois.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” I stated firmly. “The Planet’s going to be fine—we all are. We just have to bring Nigel in.”

For the record, fear, impatience, and bravado don’t lead to the wisest decisions. It was not until the cold wind slid past my form to tease Clark’s clothes and hair that I realized I was dragging him after a man who had helped terrorize and torture him. A man who had hurt him just the day before.

“Clark—” I turned, ready to reluctantly tell him he could stay behind if he wanted to, but the sight of him turned me mute. His visage was pure determination and grim resolve; fear might as well have been an alien emotion for all that it seemed to be affecting him.

“So, what’s our plan exactly?” Clark asked quietly, his hand on my arm the only point of warmth in the winter air. He was, I suddenly perceived, just as ready to see this over and done with as I was.

“Plan?” The cocky grin I threw him made him smile even as his eyes narrowed with worry. “Obviously, you’ve forgotten a few things about working with me. We’ll confront him, delay him long enough for Henderson to arrive with the handcuffs. It shouldn’t take him long to get here.”

“He was waiting for our call,” Clark confirmed. “But I told him to bring as many people as he could—the more witnesses around, the likelier it is they can’t all be silenced.”

“Good thinking,” I congratulated him. Then I tugged him forward, grateful for his comforting presence, his hand on my spine, and his unwavering support. Our footsteps sounded hollow and loud on the dock, the wood giving slightly beneath our weight. Mist rose from the waves around us, stirred by the crisply cold winter air.

“Nigel!” I called out, darkly satisfied when he and Bender turned to face me, one coolly displeased, the other horrified. “You didn’t really think you could get away with this, did you? You’re even dumber than you look.”

“Insults, Ms. Lane?” Nigel’s silver brows rose in artificial disbelief as he set down the teacup and moved to the railing. “Don’t you think that’s a bit unwise in your current situation?”

“*My situation?*” I repeated haughtily, crossing my arms over my chest. “This situation is completely under control. You’re surrounded by the police. Inspector Henderson’s here.”

Bender jumped and looked all about nervously, but Nigel only sneered. “A nice ploy, Ms. Lane, but patently false. If the police were really here, they’d never let you confront me with only a broken man at your side.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Clark flinch, and explosive rage snapped into being within me. My voice emerged as pure steel. “The police don’t ‘let’ me do a lot of what I do. And Clark is not ‘broken.’”

“A cripple, then.” Nigel turned to Bender, his movements focused and economical. “Come on.”

“What?” Bender gaped as the Englishman hurried toward the ramp leading to the dock. “What about Luthor’s newest asset?”

“One of those bugs we need to fix—now move!”

I exchanged a startled glance with Clark before settling into a combat position. No way was Nigel getting away from me again. There were no police here now—good or bad—and this time, it depended on me to apprehend Luthor’s henchman.

Bender scrambled after Nigel, and the two came barreling down the dock toward us. Anticipation fizzed within me, bubbling up to send sparks of adrenaline racing erratically through my veins. My Taekwondo lessons sped through my mind in a blur, my muscles coiling and tensing in response to each recollection.

“Lois, he has a gun!” Clark shouted, and shoved me aside.

I hit the dock on my wounded arm and felt the sky explode to lodge sharp, burning stars beneath the bandage I had so clumsily tied. Blinking away tears of pain, I looked up to see Clark reaching out a hand and claspig Nigel’s wrist, grappling to keep the gun aimed at the sky. With his other hand, he landed a blow on Nigel’s face.

The Englishman seemed to move back with the punch, absorbing its force, then brought up his other hand stiffly and chopped it into Clark’s stomach. Moving fluidly, Nigel’s hand kept traveling upward and smashed straight into Clark’s chin, snapping his head back.

Gasping for air, Clark stumbled backward, a final blow sending his head slamming into the mooring post. A sharp crack sounded loud through the rising vapor and dulled the pain shrieking for my attention.

Bonelessly, Clark’s body tumbled off the dock and hit the frigid water.

His glasses, knocked aside, lay only a foot away from my slack hand.

“A pity Mr. Luthor isn’t done with you yet,” Nigel said as he looked down at me.

I had no time to spare for him, his words fluttering their callous way far above me. My hand closed over the glasses.

For an instant that stretched into eternity—paused lest I be forced to realize what had just happened—I could only lie there on the cold wood and stare at the glasses that rested so innocuously in my hand. How many times had I seen those glasses? A hundred times, a thousand, and yet always before they had been lit from behind by dark eyes that sparkled with some inner brilliance.

Now, they were lifeless and dark...and alone.

Like me.

“Clark!” The utterance of his name snapped me back to clarity, and in one move, I darted to my feet and knelt at the edge of the dock. A glance to the right proved that I had been motionless for only a second or two. Nigel and Bender were just reaching the end of the pier, escaping yet again.

It didn’t matter. They were inconsequential. All that mattered—all that registered—was the sight of the ripples that marked the place Clark had fallen fading away and vanishing.

“Superman!” I screamed out to the cloudy skies, more out of habit and dying hope than anything else. “Please, help!”

Without another thought, I dropped the glasses aside and sucked in a deep breath. Then I dived beneath the lapping waves.

Cold such as I had never known—a temperature so cold it could no longer be defined by that word—enveloped me. Each wave sent by the current sheathed me in another layer of ice that threatened to steal all mobility from my limbs, all thought from my mind, all breath from my lungs. In fact, I almost sucked in a mouthful of water when the bitter cold first engulfed me in its frigid embrace; only the thought of Clark’s limp body sinking so quickly—unbelievably, terrifyingly quickly—under the fog-touched surface of the water kept me from sucking the ice into my lungs.

It was dark—so dark that if I hadn’t spent a day in a lightless cell, I would have said nothing could possibly be any blacker. The light of the sun was sucked into the waves and then slaughtered by the cold, falling still and lifeless so that the water around me could clutch its frozen bounty to itself. As my eyes—my limbs, my heart, my every molecule—screamed and screeched impotently against the surely subzero temperatures, I despaired of being able to pierce through the blackness around me to find any hint of my fallen partner.

I flailed my arms about, hoping against hope that he would still be close enough to the surface to be reached by my delayed grasping. Even if I had not been holding my breath, I would have been breathless—panic and a fear so deep it astounded me and shook me to the depths of my soul were erasing any and all intelligent thought from my mind.

Only when an emerging sob reminded me that I hadn’t breathed in far too long did I struggle free of the ocean’s jealous, frostbitten embrace to pull in a breath that tasted of winter and cut like shards of glass. Tears trickled down my cheeks—summoned by the cold, noticeable by their so-temporary heat against my frosted skin. One more breath, cutting deeply and burying hailstones deep in my chest, and I forced my mutinous, torturously slow body back under the black waves.

I dove deep, water and current streaming against my cheeks, the cold gathering my heat as zealously as a thief collected jewels. I peered uselessly through the dark liquid, salt trickling into my mouth and tasting as bitter as the fear taking the place of blood, cold and slow within my veins. Only one thought survived the airless surroundings: *Please, don’t die. Don’t die. Don’t die. Please, don’t die.*

Despair, as leaden and deadening as the temperature, made as if to sink me when my hands hit the sand that lined the bottom of the world. I had dived as deeply as possible, yet I had caught no sign—sight, sound, or touch—of Clark. I needed air badly, but I couldn’t bring myself to head back toward the surface, not yet, not until I found him.

I could feel my body slowing to a dangerous crawl, my mind shutting down, the last thought I had managed to hold onto beginning to slip away, abandoning me in favor of elusive warmth.

My hand closed over stiffened fabric. Cold flesh. Frozen hair.

Bubbles tickled my temples as I let out air I should have preserved. I buried my hands deeply into the flannel shirt Clark was wearing and pulled upward with all my draining strength.

He was so deep, so heavy, so unresponsive. His shirt tangled itself around my fingers, wrists, and forearms, but the rest of him was stubbornly anchored to the bottom of the sea. More breath escaped me as I tugged at him, panic encroaching and sending a burst of hot, serrated adrenaline into my system.

Clark's body finally lifted, buoyed up by the waves that lent their aid now that they knew exactly whose life was at stake. I strained for the surface, glad now for the bubbles escaping from my mouth, following them like breadcrumbs to the surface, to air, to warmth—a concept that now seemed foreign.

Please, don't die. Don't die. Don't die. Please, don't die.

We broke the surface of the water with a splash. My body almost went into shock at the change in temperature and the sudden presence of oxygen. Gasping, crying, shivering, I struggled to keep Clark's head above the water. His skin was so pale—almost corpse-white—his flesh so cold—my own doing nothing to warm it—and his eyes were shadowed and closed—making me realize that it was possible to feel even *more* terrified.

The arctic water tugged at me from all directions, trying to draw me ever downward. My body was rebelliously tired, refusing to obey the simplest of commands, and I had to constantly blink droplets as cold as ice-chips from my eyes.

"Clark! Clark, please!" The shivers pervading my frame made the words almost unintelligible, and the lap of the ocean against the dock—so dauntingly far away—almost drowned out the sound of my voice. "Clark, w-wake up! Please, wake up!"

Please, don't die. Don't die. Don't die. Please, don't die.

It was a litany that wouldn't shut off, given frightful substance by the feel of Clark's still, heavy—how could he be this heavy?—form.

"Clark!" My breath ghosted over his cheek, and miraculously, his hand rose to his face, as if to catch the relative warmth. My muscles turned into liquid themselves, transmogrified by the depths of my relief and residual terror.

Clumsily, slowly, he began to tread water, and just the feel of him moving beside me was enough to instill within me a faith in divine providence. "L-Lois?" His own voice was even weaker than mine.

"Clark, h-help me," I commanded breathlessly. "Help me!"

The cold sapped our reserves of strength, and I felt the water around me grow stronger, feeding on me and everything that made up myself. Clark's arm around me was all that kept me upright, and yet I could feel myself helping *him* stay afloat, as if we supported each other, remaining above the water only so long as we remained partners in survival even as we were in reporting.

"Lois, I'm s-sorry!"

"W-what?"

"I'm s-sorry I hurt your arm."

If I hadn't been so involved in living long enough to learn anew what warmth was, I would have stopped right there and laughed until I cried.

"It's all right," I managed to say as my hand closed over the wood of the dock. "I'll l-live."

It was an agonizing ordeal to drag ourselves onto the pier, but finally, Clark managed to pull me up onto the wood. My hand fell on Clark's glasses, and I felt tears squeeze their way past the ice built up over flesh, burning whatever they touched, turning into ice themselves.

"Here." I offered the glasses, Clark's fingers awkwardly, stiffly bending to hold them. My own hands moved from the glasses to run over his chest, his arms, his neck, his face, moving of their own accord, traveling under commands I was too numb to consciously give.

Clark hesitated a long moment, his own eyes intent on me, before he finally reached up a trembling hand and slipped the glasses back on. Some part of me noted that this was the first time I had seen him in the light without his glasses, but it was such a small, inconsequential part next to the realization slowly dawning on me—the realization that he was okay. That, once again, I could reassure myself that he was alive, still breathing, still able to speak and smile and take my hand. It was a habit I had fallen into, this reassuring myself of his well-being, and it was one I would do almost anything to have every reason to break.

"Nigel!" Clark's gaze moved from me to the dock perpendicular to the one which soaked in the water we dripped over it. My iced frame quaked with the shudders of cold and terror that refused to let go of

me, but Clark's own shivering seemed to abate the instant he caught sight of Luthor's henchman.

"Clark—"

"The Daily Planet," Clark exclaimed. "Jimmy. My parents."

And he was up and stumbling into a shambling run after Nigel and Bender, their proximity proof that we hadn't actually been in the water as long as it seemed.

I wasted a precious moment gaping after Clark with complete incomprehension.

"And he calls *me* reckless!" I muttered before forcing myself to my feet.

Bender, looking back to see Clark behind him, swerved madly to the edge of the dock, almost toppling into a nearby boat, but Clark ignored him, intent on Nigel.

Fortunately for me, Bender wasn't a great runner by any means. I really didn't mean to tackle him and send us both sprawling across the docks, but my entire body was on the verge of a complete lockdown. With a bit of extra effort, I managed to turn the move into an attack, stiff-arming him down onto his back.

"Don't move!" I commanded him in a voice that sounded as cold as the water. The boat Bender had almost fallen into provided rope near enough for me to grab. My fingers, however, were too stiff and swollen to make tying his hands behind his back an easy chore.

Bender was gibbering something I couldn't make out over the roaring in my ears. It didn't matter. As soon as his hands were tied, I ignored him, my fragmented attention turning to Clark.

My insane partner had pulled Nigel around to face him and had gotten in a few good blows. Nigel, oddly enough, seemed almost nervous as he faced Clark, as if something about Clark's manner or expression unsettled him. Despite that, he fought back, his age doing little to slow his trained reflexes.

Clark refused to give up, though, even after Nigel punched him in the stomach hard enough to make him double over. I almost cried out when he teetered on the edge of the pier. I knew without even thinking about it that I would never survive another dip in the arctic waters, yet I also knew that if Clark was once more submerged, I would unhesitatingly jump in after him again. So different from my dream when I hadn't been able to summon enough courage to leap off the ledge. And yet...was it courage when I knew I couldn't survive without him in my life?

Recognizing my inattention, Bender squirmed beneath me. Ruthlessly, I shoved him into the dock with a knee in his spine. "Don't even think about it," I warned him, urging my abused hands to grab more rope and tie his ankles together. "Do you have a gun?"

He stammered out a long answer that boiled down to a "no." Shoving him aside and using the momentum to rise to my feet, I rushed forward. Clark wasn't a fighter—not trained, anyway—and he was taking a beating from Nigel. Yet, surprisingly enough, Clark was able to keep standing, able to take the blows the Englishman rained down on him with only occasional grunts of pain to give away how much it hurt, able to keep Nigel in place with a fast grip on his coat.

I opened my mouth to call Clark's name but closed it without making a sound—the last thing Clark needed was a distraction.

Nigel seemed to realize that he needed a fast way out. Sweeping at Clark's ankles with his foot, he managed to gain a yard of distance and an instant of time, which he predictably used to pull out the gun from its side holster.

My eyes widened, but Clark didn't even hesitate, stepping in close and knocking the gun aside just as he had in the cell while protecting me. The gun skittered to the side, demanding and receiving my immediate attention. My hands protested my continued demands, but ineptly closed over the weapon.

When I stood once more, I almost exclaimed in frustration. Clark and Nigel were too close together. If I tried to pause Nigel with a threat, he'd simply grab Clark and use him as a hostage. And if I actually pulled the trigger, there was no way I'd be able to aim well enough to hit only the Englishman, particularly with the violent

shudders tearing their way through my body.

“Where are you, Henderson?” I gasped out under my breath, and raised the gun.

Whether Clark saw me out of the corner of his eye or simply needed a moment to take a breath, he staggered back several steps and granted me the opening I needed.

“Nigel!” I snapped, and shockingly, my voice emerged with crystal clarity. “I dare you to move and give me a way to pull this trigger with a clear conscience.”

Nigel froze, his blue eyes darkening with emotions I was too cold and tired and hurt to interpret.

Clark dropped to his knees, his head bowed as he curled in around himself, catching his breath and conserving body heat.

I kept the gun, unwavering, on Nigel, Bender visible in my peripheral vision.

I wanted nothing more than to run to Clark and take him in my arms, feel his arms envelop me, his heart beat steadily within his chest, his breaths whisper through my hair. But I couldn’t risk letting Nigel move, not when I was afraid that Clark would once more go after him should he run again.

“Clark,” I said after a moment. “There’s rope in the boat behind me. Tie Nigel.”

It took him a long moment to make it back to his feet and to the boat, an even longer moment for him to force Nigel’s hands behind his back. He had just finished awkwardly pulling the knot tight when I heard the sirens.

A moment later, uniformed cops were spilling onto the wooden dock, surrounding us, swarming around the boats and yachts, taking Nigel and Bender into custody, fading away into obscurity for all the attention I paid them. I simply dropped the gun to the soaked wood and staggered forward.

Clark’s arms were already opened to receive me, and when I fell into them, he willingly closed them around me and blotted out the rest of the world.

Chapter 17

The cold had burrowed its way deep within me to lodge itself in my bones, turning them brittle enough to shatter should I make one wrong move. The only thing that kept me connected to my surroundings was the heated form at my side, the warm arm enfolding me, the sun-touched breath that whispered past me from time to time. Had Clark walked away, I was convinced that I would have lost what tiny measure of coherence I yet retained.

As it was, everything passed me in a blur that dimmed with every recollection, snatches of images or sensations less defined than the dreams that had been afflicting me.

I remembered uniformed men and women peppering the docks. I remembered someone insisting on looking at my wound, the pain of which had been turned mute with shock the instant I dove into frigid waters. I remembered convincing Clark with a single glare to let someone else bandage a gash on his temple and another on his right cheekbone just below his eye. I remembered the blankets they piled around us, the portable heater they set up in front of us, remembered the sun peeking shamefacedly from behind the dispelling clouds—remembered that none of those external forces were able to warm me half as much as Clark, who didn’t seem nearly as affected by the cold as I was, perhaps protected from the full extent of the low temperatures by the emotions doubtlessly rioting within him at the sight of his tormentor’s arrest.

I remembered Nigel’s deadened eyes fixed on Clark and me as he was escorted away to the rhythm of Bender’s panicked legal chatter.

And somewhere in the middle of all of that, Henderson showed up, his expression as stoic as if he regularly invaded the marina with what seemed to be half of the MPD.

Halfway expecting a lecture on the foolishness of my confrontation with Nigel—and already feeling bad enough about what came of it—I forestalled whatever he had to say by snapping, “What

took you so long?”

His gaze was even. “It took us eight minutes to get here, Lane. And considering the location of this little get-together, that’s not too bad.”

“You should stay with Nigel,” Clark interrupted, his tone urgent. “And keep several men with you at all times.”

“Relax, Clark, I’ve got it covered.” Henderson held up his hand in a conciliatory gesture, his tone much more compassionate than it was when he spoke to me. “You explained it all over the phone. Besides, after what happened the last time you two ran into St. John, we’re covering all our bases. Still, as much as possible, we’re also trying to keep it under the radar until we’re sure we can get St. John to testify against this Boss. The last thing we need is for Luthor to run.”

“No, we don’t,” I agreed, more vehemently than I had intended. Despite the chills wracking my body, I snaked a hand out from the blankets to wrap around Clark’s waist. He tightened his own hold on me in response.

“Bill...” Clark paused with a glance toward me, then took a deep breath. “About what we discussed a couple days ago—”

“Not here.” The inspector glanced around. “Listen, I’ve got to be there when they bring St. John in, but I’ll come by after talking to him. We’ll go over our options, all right?”

Clark hesitated as if he wanted to press the issue, but when he looked down at me, he only nodded and moved to wrap his other arm around me. I welcomed the extra warmth, craved even more of it, longed to draw all of it into my own form in order to sear the ice from my bones.

Our bodyguards were more prominent on the drive back to the apartment than they had been since we’d first been assigned them, surrounding us, driving us through Metropolis, giving clipped instructions.

Someone must have grabbed our things from Perry’s friend’s hideaway because when they escorted us back home, the bags were sitting just inside the door, propped up against my fish tank. One of the officers—or maybe she was a paramedic—gave us more advice on how to warm up. Another offered to stick around until she was sure we were all right. Tellingly, Clark didn’t even argue, just steered me toward the bathroom and whispered his own directions in my ear—which might, truthfully, have been the same things the woman had said, but *his* voice actually managed to penetrate the frost-edged fog accompanying me.

When Clark’s arm slipped away from me and the bathroom door closed between us, I suddenly felt all the energy left to me dwindling away, sinking from the top of my head to the soles of my feet and staying trapped in the shadow cast behind me. It took a long moment for me to remember how to move, to strip and step into the shower, to keep the temperature slightly cooler than my frostbitten skin felt that it needed. I might have stayed in there forever, but the sound of the water and the feel of it on my skin only reminded me of how close Clark had come to dying in very different water.

Heat began to slowly work its way back into my body, softening translucent skin, loosening stiff muscles, uncoiling closed thoughts. By the time I stepped out of the shower, my spasmodic trembling had finally stopped, though a shudder occasionally ripped violently through my frame. I wrapped myself in a robe, then tentatively stepped into the bedroom.

It was empty, the door to the rest of the apartment closed. Quickly, reminded that Clark still had icy blood trapped in his veins, I chose out the warmest pajamas I owned and dressed hastily. Opening the bathroom door had evaporated the warm mist summoned by my hot shower, and the room seemed cold now in comparison.

When I opened the bedroom door and walked into the living room, I was a bit surprised to see that Clark had somehow convinced everyone else to leave. He smiled at me, the blankets draped around his shoulders making them look broader and stronger rather than giving him the fragile air I would have expected. We exchanged a few words, and then he disappeared into the bathroom with a bundle of

clothes and clean towels.

While he was gone, I stood in the middle of the apartment, at a loss as to what I should do next. Lois Lane never stopped moving and always knew what the next step should be—or at least pretended she did—but I was so tired. It had only been nine days ago that I'd been kidnapped, and since that time, I'd been in danger more often than even I was used to. More, I had found everything I thought I knew to be true about myself being altered and had begun questioning things that had before seemed as immutable as the sun and moon. I was tired of being strong, tired of being what everyone around me needed, tired of trying to unravel the secrets that I could swear were swarming around me—or, rather, around Clark and Superman.

I started violently when Clark's hand tenderly brushed my shoulder, then willingly fell into his arms. His fingers wove through my wet hair, pressing my head to his shoulder, and I could have stayed like that forever, but we both wavered on our feet. So, softly, slowly, we moved in tandem to the bedroom. When Clark made as if to retract his arm and step to the cot, I tightened my grip and tugged him to the bed. He made no protest, just sat down on the edge of the bed and stared up at me as if seeking to memorize me all over again.

Of its own volition, my hand rose to brush across the gashes on his face, the bandages removed and the wounds exposed to the air. I watched as if the hand belonged to someone else when it moved higher to stroke back through his damp ebony hair. His own hand lifted to fold itself around mine.

"Lois," he said. That was all, but it was enough. He could say more in the simple utterance of my name than I could in a hundred articles.

I dared not speak and break the spell surrounding us, so I merely reached out and pushed on his shoulder, getting him to lie back. He watched me as I pulled the covers up around us, and when I stilled, he opened his arms and allowed me to curl up beside him, attaching myself to his warmth. A moment passed before I could even think about anything but relief that he was there for me.

"You don't need your glasses right now," I murmured, the words slurring together. It was shocking how quickly I was slipping toward sleep.

"I..." His voice trailed off, but he made no move to draw away when I stirred to reach up and remove his glasses. An image of them lying abandoned on the dock jolted me to a halt before I forcibly shook the memory away and set the glasses almost reverently on the nightstand.

Clark's eyes were wide as I regarded him, studying him intently. He could have died earlier, yet here he was—lying beside me, his arms around me. Contentment such as I had never known before took the place of the earlier cold, reshaping the contours of my entire form, melting things that had been hardened, awakening things that had been dormant.

It was a metamorphosis too large to dwell on at the moment, so I rested my head on Clark's shoulder, pleased when he shifted to more fully embrace me, and I allowed the returning warmth and the inherent sense of safety that Clark imparted to lull me into an exhausted, healing sleep.

It seemed an entirely new day—a new era—when I was stirred by the feel of Clark moving beneath me, his hand rising to his chest to slide his fingers over my palm. Drowsily, I tilted my head on his shoulder to look at him. His own expression—lit, as it was so often, by the early evening light, as if the sun sought him out as avidly as he sought its warmth—was sleepy and not quite focused. He was smiling, his heavy-lidded eyes tracing my features.

"Hey." I offered him a smile that was so immediate I didn't even have to think about it, and twisted my hand to weave my fingers through his. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm dreaming again," he answered unabashedly. "I think I've been dreaming for over a week now."

"Good dreams, I hope." I had been kidnapped, shot, beaten, threatened, confused, doused in frigid waters, and nearly drowned in

the past nine days, but Clark's obvious joy and the smile that was, seemingly, untouched by his own past traumas made all that seem unimportant and distant.

"The best." The slightest flicker of uneasiness ghosted across his face. "The kind I never thought could be real."

I slipped my hand free of his in order to turn his face toward me. "This *is* real, Clark."

"I hope so. We'll see." Ever so lightly, his finger brushed my cheek. "I didn't get a chance to say this before, but...thank you. For saving me. You..." His voice turned rough, the emotion in his very being so strong it outshone the sun pouring through the windows. "You came after me. You...you saved me."

I opened my mouth to speak my automatic response—a teasing remark about needing him to do the cooking—but I couldn't say it. I couldn't shrug off the amount of gratitude and...awe...molding his features into an expression that touched something very deep and indispensable within me.

"That's what friends do, isn't it?" I bit my lip and closed my eyes. It still sounded so weak, so pale, so...not enough. Not a lie, just...not the whole truth. But what truth could I speak? How could I tell him that he meant so much more to me than just a friend when Superman had already admitted to me that he cared for me? How could I *not* tell him that thinking he was going to die had hurt more than hearing the news that Superman had probably died stopping Nightfall? Whatever I said, I would hurt one or the other, and yet I knew I needed to say something more, something a little closer to the truth.

"You know," I said quickly, "last night, we, uh...we never exchanged our secrets."

His expression closed, but he didn't pull back, didn't look away, didn't rise to his feet.

"Or, well, you did." I laughed self-consciously, involuntarily reliving the instant of our kiss and Clark's ensuing declaration. Not that it had been that much of a secret. "But I didn't."

"Lois, you—"

"You're one ahead," I said with a warning note. As I had expected, the characteristic competitiveness made him subside. "So...you know the night we started this little tradition? I told you I couldn't sleep because you were in the room? Well," I grimaced. "That was a lie."

Clark wisely kept his amused smile almost indiscernible. "To tell you another secret, Lois—I kind of knew that."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not surprised. But..." I swallowed, suddenly afraid of confessing this, afraid of what it might change. "The reason I couldn't sleep...it was...well, it was because I was thinking about Superman."

Clark's hands, one resting on my waist and the other on my shoulder, slackened a bit. He made a tiny grimace, not disgust, but maybe disappointment. And hurt—expected, but painful nonetheless.

"I couldn't sleep last night either," I added hurriedly, wanting to erase that look from his eyes.

"I wasn't in the room," he observed quietly.

"I know." I refused to let him look away. "That's *why* I couldn't sleep."

A sense of purpose suddenly infused Clark's being, shining outward from his expression as he shifted to face me more fully. "Lois...there's something I need to tell you. It's about...why I left Metropolis with Superman. He and I...well, you see, he's my—"

I could have screamed in frustration when the sound of someone knocking on the door cut Clark's confession off mid-word. His expression turned panicked, and he glanced hurriedly to the window.

"Clark?" I asked quietly, determined to ignore the banging on the door for as long as it took.

He didn't say anything for a long moment. Finally, he sighed and slumped in defeat. "That's probably Henderson. He might have news about Luthor."

"Yeah." I echoed his sigh and slid to my feet. Losing the warmth Clark had exuded made the apartment seem abnormally cold. The sun was hidden behind clouds, casting the apartment into shadows.

Clark moved into the living room as I unlocked and opened the door. Henderson swept in without so much as a “hello,” his steps clipped and intent. I exchanged a puzzled glance with Clark as we sat down side by side on the couch; Henderson took a seat across from us, hands clasped in his lap.

“Well?” I demanded. “Is Nigel going to turn Luthor over?”

“Eventually.” The inspector scooted forward in his seat, perching on the very edge. Impatience was a trait I recognized immediately, and I realized that this, rather than anger or some other emotion, was the cause of Henderson’s abruptness. “It may take a lot of explaining, some concessions, and no small amount of legal blackmail, but I’m confident that he’ll soon realize helping us is in his best interest.”

“How long?” I asked, leaning forward myself. I would have jumped up and paced, but Clark’s solid, steady warmth beside me was so tempting, so alluring, that I couldn’t bear to draw away.

“Depends on how long it takes to convince St. John we can protect him from Luthor’s wrath, but I’d think we should be able to get a warrant tomorrow. Can you two get everything you have ready for me tonight? Without the proof you claim to have, Kent, I need everything else I can get—that, Nigel’s statement, and your testimony might be enough to do it.” Henderson paused to study Clark. “Have you heard from the friend you sent after the evidence you’ve accumulated?”

“No.” A muscle flickered in Clark’s jaw. “We overheard Nigel and Bender talking about him. They said they’d sent men after him.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I interjected hastily. “Jimmy’s the most resourceful person I’ve ever met. Trust me—nothing can keep that kid down.”

“But you haven’t heard any word from him since he left?” Henderson looked between us.

“No,” I said when Clark swallowed and stared down at his hands. “But he’ll turn up.”

“Hmm.” After a moment, Henderson nodded. “All right. Well, then, I’ll come by in the morning to pick up what you do have.”

“Are you sure that’s safe?” Clark’s tone was decidedly—almost painfully—neutral, his gaze staggeringly intense.

“I’ll send three cars over,” the inspector replied evenly. “He won’t move against us with so many witnesses around.”

“I don’t know.” Clark’s hands tightened over his knees, the knuckles turning white. “Luthor’s using him in his criminal organization now. It’s only a matter of time before word of that spreads to the entire criminal underworld. Once that happens, no one will dare move against him.”

“I can’t start spreading rumors myself.” Henderson stood. “I need proof of what you claim. Do you have any?”

The shadows that had arrived with Henderson seemed to collide with one another as they fought to cloak Clark’s eyes. “No,” he finally said.

“Then we’ll just keep doing what we’ve been doing. If what you say is true, I’m sure we’ll hear of it.” The inspector turned to me, finally deigning to acknowledge that I was in the room with them. “Lane, can you get everything ready by tomorrow?”

“Of course,” I huffed, the response automatic. I knew they were talking about Superman, of course—I wasn’t an idiot—but I was reluctant to speak and break the spell that bound Clark and me together. Right now, I was his friend and ally; the minute I spoke to defend Superman, I would be lumped in with Henderson in his eyes, an outsider he had to carefully and painstakingly convince of his veracity.

Besides, I had my own questions for Superman. Questions such as: where had he been earlier? Why didn’t he ever show up when Clark was in danger? How had he let Nigel get away? Why wasn’t he doing more to help us bring down Luthor? Where was he now? And—the question I had been wrestling with since visiting Superman’s premiere memorial—how had Luthor managed to capture Clark in the first place when Superman should have been guarding him?

Questions that had been asked and answered only halfway, if at all. Questions I was sure had valid answers that might lower Superman

from godlike proportions to merely heroic in my eyes but would, I was sure, nonetheless prove he wasn’t a villain. Questions I was afraid to ask because everything in my life had been turned upside down in the past several months—in the past year, actually—and I wanted, *needed*, at least one thing I could depend on.

Unwillingly, my eyes were drawn to Clark. I wanted *him* to be the one thing I could lean on, and he *could* be that thing... except for his unreasoning fear and suspicion of Superman. I had questions for the superhero, yes, but Clark... Clark had accusations.

“Well, I’d better be getting back.” Henderson moved toward the door, his stride hurried.

“Bill, wait.” Clark stood and took a directionless step toward him. “I know you... have a hard time believing me, but... you need to be very careful here. Luthor is surely growing tired of this game, and when he’s done with it... who knows what his next step will be.”

“I understand you have concerns,” the inspector said, almost gently. “And trust me—I’m taking suitable precautions. Everything’s going to be fine, Clark. *You’re* going to be safe, both of you.”

The half-nod Clark gave was more resigned than confident. “Thanks.”

“Good night,” I added as I shut the door behind the inspector. When I turned back to face Clark, he was looking out the windows, his expression tight and closed. Impatience—perhaps imparted by Henderson—and tense frustration prompted my next move. “Just a minute, Clark. I forgot to tell Henderson about Perry and the Daily Planet.”

Without waiting for a reply—or the knowing glance he’d probably give me—I ducked out into the hall, pulling the door shut behind me. “Henderson, wait!”

His salt-and-pepper brows rose as he turned, already halfway down the hallway. “What is it, Lane?”

I waited to speak until I was standing just in front of him, close enough so that I could lower my voice. “Henderson, when Clark asked to speak to you alone that first day he was free... what did he talk to you about? What were you two discussing just a minute ago?”

“How to keep everybody safe,” he replied tersely and moved to walk away.

I caught hold of his sleeve, moving to stand in front of him, blocking his path. “No. What did Clark talk to you about? What warning did he give you?”

“It was told me in confidence.” Yet there was a hint of hesitation in his reply, enough of a mark of weakness that I pressed the attack.

“Please, Henderson—I just want to help him. I want to understand him.”

He wavered. “I don’t know. If he had wanted you to know, he would have told you.”

“Unless he thought it would put me in danger,” I pointed out. Then, when he hesitated again, I added, “I know he thinks Superman is working for Luthor.”

A sigh lifted Henderson’s shoulders, then carelessly dropped them. His mouth tightened before he gave a half-nod and began speaking. “He doesn’t think *Superman* is working for Luthor—he thinks the imposter *posing* as Superman is working for Luthor. He’s convinced that the superhero flying around in a cape is actually a trick, though how he thinks Luthor could accomplish that, I can’t begin to guess.”

“And...” I had to swallow in order to work enough moisture into my throat to continue. “And how likely do you think it is that Clark is right?”

Henderson rubbed his forehead with a hand, and I abruptly realized that he looked exhausted. The last week hadn’t been much easier on him than on me and Clark. “When Clark first mentioned his concerns to me, I considered it. I’ve been watching Superman closely, studying his public appearances and observing his reactions and dialogue when I talk to him, but...”

“But what?” I demanded. Panic was beginning to encroach along the edges of my mind, nibbling away in tiny, torturous bites. Superman *couldn’t* be what Clark claimed! If he was... if he was, what was there

left in the world to believe in? What good could triumph? What hope was there for *me* in a world so dark?

“Superman has been acting a bit... harsher... since his return.”

“Not violent,” I insisted. The gentleness of the superhero’s touch, the way his hand could curl so softly around my shoulder, the tenderness of his eyes and voice—I hadn’t imagined those.

“No, not violent,” Henderson agreed. “Just... more abrupt. Less patient. He doesn’t give interviews, he rarely sticks around long enough to talk to the police, he doesn’t give the criminals a chance to turn themselves over, he’s quicker to tie them up and leave them without a word.”

“Those aren’t crimes,” I heard myself say. Wincing, I bit my lip. Clark believed Superman was a criminal; by fighting so hard to disprove that belief, was I betraying Clark? Or was I being loyal to my friend? And when had the world gotten so complicated? When had the clear-cut answers and simple solutions I had once taken for granted disappeared?

“No, and if you ask me, they could just be the result of the circumstances surrounding Superman’s departure. We threw him out of our city at the first hint of trouble, Lane! We tossed him out and then just accepted the fact that he saved our world from an asteroid! And only then, only when we were sure we were safe from his purported effect on us, did we let him back in.” Henderson shook his head slowly, bitterness turning his voice ragged. “How many of us stood up and let him know—*really* let him know—that we appreciated what he did and didn’t want him to go? What have we done to thank him for saving our world? No, we’re lucky he came back at all, lucky he helps us, lucky he does anything for us.”

I looked away, not sure anymore what I was feeling—guilt, relief, agreement, or something entirely different. I felt... tired. And that wasn’t me. What had happened to the fragment of myself I had regained while talking to Perry over the phone? What had happened to all that fire and resolve and fighting spirit? What had happened to *me*, period?

“Anyway.” Henderson straightened. “I don’t think his actions are anywhere near enough to condemn him as an imposter.”

“So you think Clark is wrong?”

“Clark is one of the few truly good men I’ve ever met, but...” The inspector’s hands curled into fists before he stuffed them unassumingly into his pockets. “People think they know what powerlessness is, Lois... but they don’t. That awful feeling of total helplessness, the sickening realization that there is nothing—not one single, solitary thing—you can do to change your situation or alter your fate, the utter hopelessness of having pain inflicted that you can’t stop... that’s something that doesn’t go away easily. And it’s something Clark endured every day for weeks. I think he needed Superman... and for whatever reason, Superman wasn’t there. And I think Clark is still trying to work through that.”

The fear I had felt thinking Superman might be a traitor was as nothing compared to the terror invading and consuming every cell in my body at the thought that Clark might be permanently damaged by Luthor’s torture. But I was tired of being afraid, tired of dancing around subjects I didn’t want to face, tired of avoiding truths I wasn’t prepared to hear, tired of pretending my problems away.

“Do you think...” Even with my newfound, forced determination, I had to push the words out past a barrier, all the articles on the Internet about trauma victims once more swirling through my mind, clogging up what little rational thought still remained to me. “Do you think he’ll have to be hospitalized?”

Henderson blanched, looking toward my apartment door, before forcing his expression back to his normal, stoic mask. “I’m not a psychiatrist, Lane. I can’t make that kind of decision.”

“But he’s getting better,” I told him, as if he had doubted it. “He wasn’t afraid of Nigel—I don’t think he’s afraid of Luthor, and he... he...” I trailed off, unable to finish by saying that he no longer mistrusted Superman. Because he did. In fact, he almost seemed *more* afraid of Superman now than before.

There was a moment of silence as Henderson inspected his shoes. Finally, he looked up at me, glanced around the hallway, and reached out to tug me closer to him, closer to the wall. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Lois... did Clark tell you about Kryptonite?”

I felt myself pale and wavered on my feet. Henderson’s hand on my arm steadied only my balance, doing nothing to ground and stabilize my soul as Clark’s touch could do. “Yes,” I whispered. “He told me.”

“He told me as well—told me about the existence of a stone he claims can steal Superman’s powers, hurt him, and eventually kill him, a secret presumably told him in confidence. Lois... *why* did he tell us?”

“No.” I shook my head, suddenly calm—the unnatural, sickly calm one felt while teetering on the edge of a drop so perilous the mind could not allow it to be comprehended. “He wouldn’t. Clark couldn’t hurt a fly. No matter what he thought about Superman, he would... he wouldn’t!”

“Right.” The word was affirmation; the tone was so neutral it was like a slap in the face.

“He wouldn’t,” I said again. “Clark would never hurt anyone. He might talk like he distrusts Superman, but you didn’t hear him when we visited the memorial—he *admires* Superman.”

“He also thinks this Superman took the place of the old one,” the inspector pointed out.

He’s stolen it all from me. Clark’s words whispered hauntingly through my mind.

“No,” I said again, hoping that sheer repetition could convince everyone of Clark’s innocence. And yet... hadn’t I myself wondered what plan had given Clark such purposefulness over the last couple days? Hadn’t I also made the connection between Kryptonite and the wordless decision he had made?

“Fine.” I straightened and glared at Henderson. “I’ll ask him. I’ll ask him why he told us about the Kryptonite. If he gives a satisfactory answer, we’ll know he’s okay. If he doesn’t... well, we’ll help him. No matter what it takes.”

The look Henderson gave me was almost pitying. “I don’t think it works that way.”

“It does,” I proclaimed desperately. “It will. Clark is my partner. He always...” My voice went mute before I had finished that irrational, impractical, illogical sentence. My expression crumbled as I fought to hold back my tears. Ironically enough, I felt that only Clark’s embrace—the hugs he offered so freely and spontaneously—could cure me of this sudden, irritating weakness.

“Uh, Lane...” Henderson sounded uncomfortable, the hand with which he awkwardly patted my arm tentative and unsure. “Listen, I’m sure I was... well, Clark hasn’t been free that long, and several stressful events have taken place in that time, so... that’s probably why I sounded so pessimistic. Time will probably be the answer.”

His reassurances, half-hearted and shallow as they were, served well enough to stem the flood of tears and return substance to my voice.

“Right,” I managed to say with the semblance of a smile. When I stiffened my spine to give the appearance of straightening, Henderson’s hand fell back to his side. Relief flickered across his expression.

“Look, Lois... I don’t know how to say this without embarrassing us both, but... well, Clark’s not the only one having a difficult time this last week and a half, and I just... well, I wanted to say that you’ve really stepped up to the plate and—”

I cut him off before he could trot out any more obscure sports metaphors. “You’re right, Henderson—you’re embarrassing us both.”

“Right.” His smile was almost back to his usual smirk as he folded his hands back into his pockets. “Well, I’d better get back down to the station. I don’t want to leave St. John alone too long, and I’ll try to talk to Bender again without eliciting a lawsuit.”

“Good luck with that,” I said with a wan smile. “Oh, and, Henderson?”

He paused and looked at me over his shoulder.

“Thank you. For everything you’ve been doing.”

His eyes slid behind me to the apartment. “He’s my friend, too, Lane.”

Emotions, thoughts, memories, and an overriding confusion rioted within me, a veritable mob that threatened to overwhelm me and turn my mind to total anarchy as I entered the apartment. Only one thing kept them in any kind of order at all—the conviction that I had to stop dancing around my fear for Clark’s mental stability and confront him directly. Maybe my fixation with tact had been the wrong idea, I thought, only halfway mockingly; maybe I should have stuck to my strengths all along.

“Clark, why—” The question sitting on the tip of my tongue shriveled and blew away at the sight of my partner looking up from the research on the coffee table to me. His eyes lit up, his expression softened and opened and lightened all at once, and his entire frame seemed to strengthen and straighten.

“What?” I asked hesitantly as the door closed behind me with a click.

“N-nothing.” Clark hastily looked away, but not before I caught sight of his small smile disappearing and the shutters once more closing over his eyes.

“What?” I demanded, taking a step toward him. This wasn’t the question I was supposed to be asking, but I was pathetically grateful for any reprieve.

“It’s just...” He shrugged, one hand rising to fiddle with his glasses in that nervous mannerism of his. “The way you came in...it just reminded me of...”

“Yes?” I sat down beside him on the couch, taken aback yet again by how bright and warm and solid he seemed, by how much comfort I derived from his proximity. “You can tell me—our secret, remember? Us against the world?”

“Well...it reminded me of when they brought you to the cell.” Clark’s eyes tightened, but he met my gaze steadily enough. “I was so...happy...to see you again that I couldn’t speak at first. I had...missed you so much. And then to see you—well, in a manner of speaking—after so long...I felt...” The hint of a flush adorned his cheeks, but he didn’t look away. “I felt like I had been brought back to life.”

Henderson was wrong, I found myself thinking as I smiled warmly at my partner. Superman was wrong. Even I was wrong. Clark was so much stronger than we all gave him credit for, so much more stable and healthy than we feared.

“Lois.” Clark angled toward me on the couch, his knee brushing mine and eliciting a spark of electricity between us. “I’m...I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” I repeated, confused. “For what?”

“For being happy that you were in that cell. I mean, you were in danger. You had just been kidnapped and thrown into a prison. Obviously, I shouldn’t have been happy! I should have been scared for you, or—”

“Clark, I didn’t like realizing you were in a cell, either, but I was still glad to see you. That’s not a crime.”

“No.” His smile was slow and did funny things inside of me. “It’s not. I just...I can’t let Luthor hurt you, Lois. I can’t let him—”

“He won’t,” I said quietly, my hand falling on Clark’s arm, stilling his nervous gestures. “He won’t hurt either of us. Never again.”

Clark’s dark eyes were veiled from me when they slid closed, drinking the moment in, and yet his expression was piercingly transparent. So relieved, so hopeful, so wary, so full of longing.

And I suddenly realized—it didn’t matter if I ever asked him my question or if he never gave me a satisfactory answer. I wouldn’t let Clark be caged again. I would never let anyone take him away from me. No matter what it took, as long as I had breath in my body, I would protect him. I would save him from any threat or danger or crime-boss that neared him. For my sake, but most of all for his—for his integrity and spirit and brilliance—I would do everything I could to ensure that the sun was never stolen from him again.

“So,” I said in an effort to hide from him the depths of my reaction

—to hide from him that I had even momentarily wondered if he belonged in a padded cell. “Any secrets tonight?”

“One,” he stated, calmly enough for all that his hands tightened over the papers. When they crinkled, he relaxed, smoothed them out, and set them carefully on the table.

“What is it?” I prompted him.

“I’m afraid, Lois.” He shrugged self-deprecatingly. “I’m afraid that one day, I will tell you something, and you will hate me. I’m afraid that I’m going to lose you. I’m afraid because I don’t think I could...” He cut himself off, also afraid of pressuring me, and cleared his throat. “Anyway, that’s my secret.”

“Then here’s mine.” I paused an instant to marshal my thoughts, flashing back to memories of a Corn Festival and line dancing and a family so full of love that they couldn’t stop smiling or hugging or touching one another. “Remember that story we did in Smallville? The one where you pretended to be Superman?”

Clark shifted a bit on the couch. “Yes.”

“Well, I think that was the best time I’ve ever had in my entire life.”

“Seeing me get beat up?” he asked with a lift of his brows.

“No!” I hit him lightly on the arm. “Seeing you with your family. Seeing you...just be you. Having you include me. My family’s not the greatest, as you know, and it was nice to see a family that...well, actually acted like one.”

“You are family,” Clark returned seriously. “I talked about you so much that Mom and Dad probably felt like they knew you even before they met you.”

“Oh, good,” I said with mock-relief. “That means insulting them *wasn’t* their first impression of me.”

“First impression?” Clark repeated, as if mulling it over. “No, their first impression of you was when I told them that the best reporter in the business actually joined her name with mine.”

I stared at him for a moment before forcing myself to realize that, of course, he meant the byline on our story, not...well, not the other option for combining our names.

“I miss them.” Clark’s voice was almost inaudible. “I always talked to them, always asked their advice, always...depended on them. I feel...incomplete...without them. Without...” Once more, he fiddled with his glasses.

Carefully, feeling an alien wash of tenderness flow through my veins, I rubbed my hand down his shoulder and arm. “A couple more days and this will all be over, Clark. Then you can talk to them again. But,” I added impulsively, “until then, and even after...you can depend on me.”

His gaze carried an actual, real heat as he met my eyes, so much so that I was surprised his glasses didn’t melt beneath it. “I do depend on you, Lois. You’re the—best friend I’ve ever had.” The slight pause between words was a dead giveaway to the fact that he had started to say something very different, something I was pretty sure I could guess without any problem.

I wanted to tell him that I depended on him too, but he had already turned back to the research spread out over the coffee table. The moment had passed, and preparing everything we had on Luthor and LexCorp for Henderson soon demanded our full attention. But the next time a moment like that came, I promised myself, I would *not* let it slip away unused.

Chapter 18

Working steadied me, banished the confusion that had become so prevalent and formed a barrier that didn’t allow it entrance again. Clark and I managed to get our case against Luthor ready fairly quickly, seeing as how we’d been working on it all week. We readied for bed silently, but I didn’t think I was alone in thinking that the room seemed colder and the blankets more necessary now that we were once again in separate beds.

When I woke the next morning, things seemed clearer, sharper, everything cast into greater and more defined detail. For the first time I

realized that we were so much better off than we had been for months. Nigel was in custody, Luthor's primary lawyer had been arrested, we had a mountain of evidence to throw against the Boss, and I was sure—stubbornly sure—that Jimmy would arrive any day with the proof needed to irrevocably connect Lex Luthor to the Boss.

And Clark... Clark was free. And he was healing. He was better. He had stood up to Nigel twice, played a pivotal part in capturing him, and—though I had forgotten this the night before—already made it clear why he had told me about the Kryptonite. He had wanted it dealt with and destroyed so that it couldn't harm Superman, which was proof enough that he was on the mend. Whatever lies Luthor had dumped into his mind, whatever fantastical reasons for Superman's absence Clark had come up with himself, they were slowly being eclipsed by the reality he was beginning, once more, to believe in.

A gust of wind swept my hair back when I stepped out of the bathroom, dressed and ready for the day. It was a cold wind, a winter breeze, and I frowned, perplexed, as I moved into the living room.

Clark was standing next to the window, his hands gripping either side of the frame, his face tilted upward. The low murmur of his voice reached my ears by way of another breeze issuing in from the open window, swirling the white curtains around Clark so that he seemed engulfed by mist. A flash of red and blue hanging just outside the window confirmed my suspicion.

Without a word, I moved farther into the living room, not averse—with my newfound clarity of thought—to eavesdropping on the two men in an attempt to find some clue as to the nature of whatever argument stood between them.

"That's not true," Clark was saying, his tone as stubborn as it used to get when I tried to convince him to lie for a story. "Age and power don't matter. What makes Superman is what he does *for* others."

"I do what is necessary—it is you who doesn't understand that."

My brow creased in surprise. Without being able to see both men, it was suddenly clear that their voices were almost identical. Superman's was a bit deeper, more controlled, less inflected, and Clark's rang with more passion, but their pitch was the same.

"I—"

"Later," Superman said tersely. "I hear something."

A whoosh coincided with a last violent billowing of the curtains, and the red and blue colors disappeared, leaving the white behind to shine undimmed and undiluted. Clark stayed motionless for a long moment; I was now close enough to see that the window frame was straining under the tightness of Clark's hold on it.

"Clark?" I said, surprised when he made no response, as if he hadn't heard me. "Clark! What was Superman doing here?"

Slowly, moving as stiffly as if he were frozen, Clark pried his fingers from the wood and swiveled in place to face me. His expression was blank. Terror and confusion threatened to slip past the widening chinks in my wall, but I stubbornly refused them entry.

"Clark," I said again, a bit louder. "Why was Superman here?"

"Superman," he repeated hollowly.

"Are you all right?" I stepped right up next to him, vastly concerned by how out of it he seemed. He had always seemed angry with Superman, or afraid of him, but now... now, he seemed more... defeated. As if he could no longer summon the energy needed to distrust and dislike Superman. I briefly wondered if that was a good sign before deciding that anything that left Clark looking and sounding like this could *not* be a good thing.

"Lois." Finally, Clark met my eyes and the force of it almost drove me back a pace. "Do you ever feel like you're invisible?"

I raised my eyebrows. "I've found that I don't like being invisible, despite how handy it could potentially be."

He looked back toward the window. His hand rose slowly, inexorably, to his glasses. "Do you ever feel like people never look at you at all—or, worse, that they look at you and see right through you? I keep thinking that one day, they'll finally look and really see me and I'll know I'm not invisible anymore. But it's taking so long, and what if..." Carefully, almost fearfully, Clark pulled his glasses off his face

and stared down at them, sheltered in his palms. "What if the fact that everyone looks at me and never sees what I thought was hidden inside me... what if that's a sign that I'm really *not* who I thought I was? What if I really am just what everyone else sees?"

"I..." I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. Clark without his glasses looked a lot like... like Superman. I had, of course, noticed that they had several physical similarities, but it had never bothered me before. After all, one of the women who worked in the Daily Planet's publicity department looked almost exactly like my sixth-grade teacher, yet I knew for a fact they weren't related. Superman was a Kryptonian, Clark a human—I had always dismissed their similarities as a genetic oddity. But with the glasses removed... it was a much more pointed resemblance.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said belatedly when I realized Clark was still waiting for an answer to his rambling question.

"I know." His smile was almost bitter. "Believe me, I know."

"But," I added, determined not to let this moment pass if it was the one I was waiting for. "I *want* to."

The dark bitterness faded and vanished from his face, replaced by a shadowed desperation. He reached out a hand toward me, the glasses dangling from his fingers. "Lois, am I crazy?"

I blinked, stunned by his choice of topic. "What?"

"Am I crazy? I know some people—Henderson, Perry, probably Jimmy... you?—think I'm paranoid, traumatized, unbalanced, and delusional. But... what do *you* think?"

"I'm not a psychiatrist," I temporized, wincing to hear my own voice utter Henderson's weak excuse.

"Lois, please." Clark's eyes begged me for something he was lacking, something he needed, something he had received all the time from his parents—reassurance, guidance, advice, acceptance... love. "If *you* tell me I'm crazy... I'll believe you. And then I'll do whatever you tell me I need to do. Just... please. Tell me."

"I think," I began slowly, knowing of a certainty that Clark's future would be shaped around my answer, conscious of my promise that he could depend on me for the support his parents had once given him so freely. "I think your time in the cell affected you, and we'd be stupid to try and ignore that."

His eyes—so open and exposed without the cover of clear lenses—fell closed to hide his shattered expression. "You *do* think I'm crazy."

"I didn't say that!" I snapped, stepping even closer, invading his personal space, startled again—or still—by how different, how familiar, he looked without his glasses. "I said it affected you... but it didn't change you. You are who you've always been." I smiled at him, laying my hands flat against his chest. "You're the kindest man I've ever met, and you have unbelievable quiet strength and gentle grace and incredible selflessness. You're the man I admire more than anyone else in the entire world. And," I continued, swallowing before forcing these last words out. "You're the only person I'd be... okay with... losing the Pulitzer to."

All trace of any emotion except hope, happiness, and amusement were gone from him, crushed and swept away. "Wow. That's big."

"Big?" I repeated incredulously, my hands dropping from his chest before he caught them and held them close to him. Which made it hard to finish my exclamation. "That's *enormous*, Kent! That's world-shattering!"

The sound of his laughter, the sight of the bright sparkle in his eyes, the feel of his hands curved around mine—it softened something inside of me and sent fluffy dandelion seeds dancing through my stomach. "So, what do you think, Clark? Do *you* think you're crazy?"

"I think I'm the luckiest man in the world to have you in my life," he answered tenderly. It was the smoothest, most beautiful evasion I'd ever heard.

"Well." I smiled to hide my sudden self-consciousness and astonishment over how much like Superman he looked with that half-smile curving his lips upward. "That just proves that you *are* crazy. But," I smiled back at him, the warmth and gentleness of my own

smile surprising even me. “It’s the kind of crazy you’ve always been. The kind of crazy I don’t want you to lose.”

“I won’t,” he said, his voice turning the two words into a vow. I was distracted from that, however, by the feel of his fingertips settling themselves over my cheek. “Some lunacy is considered brilliance, after all.”

“Exactly!” I pronounced breathily, my heart trembling as I tilted my face upward. “And I should know!”

“Lois.” Whatever else Clark was about to say—or do—was preempted by the sound of a knock at the door. If physics allowed wood to shrivel beneath an angry stare, my door would have been melted slag on the floor. It didn’t budge beneath my glare, however, and Clark dropped my hands and slipped his glasses back on, banishing the disconcerting resemblance to Superman.

Fighting the urge to sigh heavily, I stalked over to the door and pulled it open.

The hapless policeman who stood on the other side actually pulled back a pace at the force of my glare. “Uh, Inspector Henderson sent me. I-I’m here to pick up—”

“Yeah, yeah.” I waved my hand dismissively and allowed him to step inside.

“You came alone?” Clark asked before I could even make a move toward the papers we had prepared. His eyes were narrowed as he studied the man. “How do we know Henderson sent you?”

The officer blinked. “Well, here’s my badge, and a cell phone if you want to call Henderson.”

Clark ignored the proffered objects. “No. This isn’t right. Henderson said he’d be here.”

I looked between Clark and the officer. For an instant, I wondered just how paranoid Clark was—but only for an instant. Clark was my partner; more, he knew intimately how dangerous Luthor was. And he was right—Henderson would never have sent a single officer we didn’t recognize on sight.

“Don’t move,” I told the man, sliding to the left in order to block the doorway. “We’ll just call Henderson and get this all straightened out.”

“I don’t understand.” The man’s pale eyes darted between Clark and me as he sidled farther into the living room, closer to Clark, who didn’t budge from his spot, his hands clenched into fists. “The inspector said to come up, grab the stuff, and get right back.”

“What happened to the three squad cars?” I asked skeptically.

“Three?” The man shrugged. “I guess they got tied up.”

“Guess again,” I said coldly. Belatedly, I noticed his hand sliding into his pocket, his attention moving to Clark.

“Hey!” I tackled the man, sending us both crashing to the floor. Luckily, I saw both his hands splayed against the rug—empty. He hadn’t managed to retrieve whatever weapon had been stashed in his pocket.

Clark pulled the man to his feet and held him still while I rose and brushed myself off. “Did Luthor send you?”

I froze and stared at Clark. Never before had I heard him sound so...menacing. No, menacing wasn’t the word—resolute. Resolve shone pure and undimmed through every particle of Clark’s being, blinding the man in his grip and capturing my immediate attention.

The man clamped his mouth shut, though his eyes were wide.

“He must be getting a little desperate to resort to this,” Clark continued, unfazed by the man’s silence. “What happened to his newest ‘employee?’ Is his convoluted plan backfiring on him?”

“What’s going on here?”

I whirled to find Henderson standing in the doorway, several officers arrayed behind him.

“There you are!” I exclaimed. “This man claims you sent him to pick up our...research. I think he has a weapon in his pocket.”

“Is that so.” Henderson gestured commandingly, and a few of his men entered the apartment to take the man from Clark and handcuff his hands behind his back. They frisked him—ignoring his sullen stillness—and pulled something small and square from his pocket.

When they handed it to Henderson, I crowded in next to him to examine the object.

It was a box made of metal, perhaps lead. It looked sickeningly familiar. It was a bit smaller than the one Luthor and Nigel had flaunted, but it almost certainly carried the same thing within it. Dread and curiosity mixed in equal parts within me.

Worried, I glanced up to see Clark still watching the man as he was led out of the apartment. He didn’t seem to have yet noticed what we had retrieved from our prisoner.

“Luthor used this to scare Clark,” I murmured quietly to Henderson, angling my body to hide the box from Clark’s view. “I don’t know what’s inside.”

Narrowing his eyes behind their tinted lenses, Henderson flipped the latch and folded open the lid of the box. A malignant green glow spilled from the opened box to suck the light out of the room. The poisoned light emanated from a tiny chip of rock contained within the lead box, confined to the darkness until the lid was opened and allowed it to seep outward.

“What *is* that?” I asked in a voice that sounded as if it came from far away.

“My guess?” Henderson shook his head, his eyes locked on the alien stone. I knew what he would say even before he spoke. “Kryptonite.”

He was right. Clark had said the rock that could hurt and kill Superman was green. Somehow, though, I had not expected the stone to *glow* green. It clearly marked it as alien, the noxiousness of the color a clear sign of its deadly capabilities.

“We need to destroy it,” I said firmly, decisively. And I reached out and closed the box, then latched it with finality. “We have to get rid of it. We can’t risk Luthor getting hold of it again.”

Henderson’s pause was so brief it was almost non-existent.

“You’re right. I know someone I can trust, someone very smart and familiar with melting things down. I’ll see if I can get him to destroy this permanently. We owe Superman.”

“Just don’t tell him what the stone does,” I warned.

“Of course not.” Henderson looked insulted. “I trust Dr. Irons, but this is Superman’s secret.”

“Right.” I nodded and turned toward Clark as Henderson slipped the box into the pocket of his coat. One look at Clark, however, and I knew that, despite my precautions, he must have caught sight of the box.

His face was white, his eyes tight, the gashes inflicted the day before seeming darker and deeper, and he wavered unsteadily on his feet. Before I could do more than take a step toward him, he staggered backward and sat down heavily on the couch.

“Clark?” I sat beside him, slipping my arm around him. “I’m sorry. I tried to make sure you didn’t see it.”

He forced a fake smile but didn’t open his eyes. Leaning back slightly, he tilted his head up toward the beams of sunlight allowed to pour back into the room now that the Kryptonite had once more been hidden away. The effect of the simple sight of the stone on Clark was amazing—and horrifying. Somehow or other, Luthor had managed to make Clark as terrified of the Kryptonite as if it affected *him*.

I suddenly felt sick—not with nausea, but with the beginnings of a foreboding understanding.

Reluctantly leaving Clark for a moment, I showed Henderson what he needed to take and helped his officers pack it up. Then, wringing a promise from the inspector to call us the instant he got the warrant, encouraged by the news that Nigel was negotiating a deal with the police, I closed the door behind our visitors.

When I turned to face Clark, I was disturbed to see him leaning back against the couch, dark smudges stained beneath his eyes. His hands shook when he half-heartedly raised them to his glasses.

“Clark?” I asked, and blinked to hear the amount of worry coloring my voice and tainting my tone.

“I’ll be all right,” he said quietly. “It wasn’t too bad. Just...startled me, that’s all.”

“Hmm.” I bit my lip, not reassured, until he opened his eyes and turned his head to smile at me.

“Really. I’ll be okay. It was only for a second. I think I’m starting to get used to it.”

Only a second...yet it had completely discomfited him. More, it had seemed to *hurt* him. *Physically* hurt him. It had sucked the light and warmth out of his body and left behind this wan, weakened husk.

The world threatened to shake itself to pieces beneath my feet and send me spiraling out into open space with no caped superhero to save me. The answer was there, just out of sight, but reaching for it would mean endangering everything I had managed to build between myself and Clark. Did I really *want* to do that?

Could I afford not to?

I had never before hidden from answers in my life. In fact, I had made it my life’s work to ferret out the truth and tell it to as many people as possible. So why was I hiding now? Why was I avoiding the truth? Why was I content to let this secret languish in the dark without even attempting to bring it into the light?

For whatever reason, however it worked, that Kryptonite—unfettered by lead—*had* physically affected Clark. There was no other explanation. It had caused him pain and even now left its mark on him.

Why had it affected him?

“Don’t worry, Lois. Even without the rest of what I have, what we gave Henderson should be more than enough to take down a lot of Luthor’s operations.”

Shaken from my dazed, whirling thoughts, I slowly turned my head to look at Clark. The sight of him, weak and yet still optimistic, made me realize he thought I was worried about sending the stuff off with Henderson. And I should have been, really, but the realization that Kryptonite hurt Clark loomed over my impatient anticipation.

“It was great investigative work,” Clark added. His expression was earnest and sincere, proof that he believed what he said. “The research you collected, linked with the MPD material, will certainly end some terrible operations, places like LexLabs—”

He continued, but I couldn’t hear him over the roaring noise in my ears, the blood rushing to my head and making the room swirl crazily all about me.

LexLabs.

The Mentamide 5 experiments had proven the lengths to which Luthor would go just to find anything that would give him and his company an edge. He had perpetrated, endorsed, and controlled those ‘scientific’ experiments, looking for the next big thing or a way to control more power—and that had been on innocent children to whom he had no direct connection. How much further would he go when his victim had directly challenged him and refused to be swayed by his tainted charisma or broken beneath his twisted menace?

What had Luthor done to Clark while he was his prisoner? What awful experiments, what inhumane tests, had he conducted on my defenseless partner? Would Clark even know if Luthor had manipulated his DNA or altered his blood chemistry? Perhaps he retained only flashes of memory, snippets of moments he thought merely nightmare. Maybe his fixation with the idea of an imposter Superman was rooted in half-buried, fragmented memories of what Luthor had attempted to make of *him*.

I contemplated this terrible idea, this horrific theory, even as I forced a casual response to Clark’s compassionate reassurance. It was, perhaps, the most awful idea I had ever come up with, and yet I knew the whole time that it was merely a distraction, a false, patently untrue theory I had fabricated in order to keep my mind busy. I could not help but know—as I sat beside an already strengthening Clark and began working with him on the beginnings of our exclusive—the truth behind Clark’s vulnerability to Kryptonite. The truth behind his once-frequent quick exits and prolonged absences, the multitude of Superman stories he had seemed to come across so fortuitously, the reason for his departure from Metropolis coinciding with Superman’s, and his recent hatred and mistrust of the superhero.

But it was a truth so enormous, so terrible, so radical, so mind-

blowing, life-altering, and heart-shattering that I could not think it, could not dwell on it, could not allow myself to connect all the pieces. Because the minute I accepted this truth—the minute I allowed that it was reality—I would also have to acknowledge that everything I knew about Superman and Clark was a lie. And that would, in turn, mean that basic facts I accepted about myself were also false.

And...I wanted to hang onto that feeling of contentment I had felt since lying beside Clark the afternoon before, still damp from the warm shower that had done less to erase the icy cold than Clark’s simple touch.

So, for a while longer, I avoided the truth, escaped reality, hid in the dreamworld I had been occupying since a handsome man dressed in a strange costume strode toward me and consumed a bomb, and I simply enjoyed working with Clark—the Clark I knew, the Clark I was comfortable with, the Clark I was becoming increasingly drawn to.

But then someone knocked on the door and rudely interrupted my stay in the world as I had thought it to be.

When I opened the door—muttering darkly about what Henderson could possibly have forgotten and why he couldn’t use the phone like an ordinary person—I found myself gaping at the visitor, his arms wrapped around a battered cardboard box and a grin adorning his dark, cheerful features.

“Hey, Lois! Did you miss me? Boy, you guys wouldn’t believe how much trouble I had!” Jimmy would have said more—probably would have spilled the entire story of his trip, complete with every sordid detail—but Clark had pushed himself off the couch and stumbled to the doorway.

“Jimmy?” The relief, concern, and happiness warring for dominance within Clark showed clearly when he pulled Jimmy forward, clapping him on the back, half-hugging him, heedless of the box making every move awkward. “Jimmy! You’re all right! I was so worried about you!”

“Hey, it’s all right, CK, really.” Jimmy met Clark’s eyes for a long moment, and despite the awkwardness of our positions, something was communicated between them, a message of understanding that Clark had asked something dangerous of Jimmy and a forgiveness of that request and what might have come of it. It was a remarkable moment for all that transpired in it, and I found myself taken aback by Jimmy’s growing maturity.

“Well, are you going to come in or just stand in the doorway all day?” I finally asked, mock-irritation coating my voice.

With laughter from all three of us, we stepped into the living room; I bolted the door behind us. Jimmy set down the box of—I presumed—Clark’s long-discussed proof. Though he was doing his best to hide his Kryptonite-induced weariness, I made sure that Clark sat down as well. No need for him to strain himself unduly.

“How did you get here—by way of Antarctica?” I asked at the same moment as Clark said, “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Jimmy’s brows rose as he looked between us. “I followed CK’s directions, and I’m fine.”

At the sight of Jimmy’s confusion, I decided to take pity on him. “We overheard Nigel St. John and Sheldon Bender discussing the men they’d sent after you.”

“Ah.” A strange medley of emotions played itself out over Jimmy’s mobile features. “So, I was right! Those men *were* after me. Wow, I...whoa.”

“What is it?” I asked, my brow creasing.

“Nothing. I just...I thought I was just being paranoid.”

“What happened?” Dread suffused Clark’s being—evident in his tone, expression, and posture—as he awaited Jimmy’s reply.

“Not much,” Jimmy hastily assured him, and I felt a warm rush of affection for the younger man. Jimmy had always been a good kid. He was the only one besides Perry who had ever braved conversation with me, his cheerful attitude seemingly making him impervious to my standoffish manner, and as a result, he had often been able to elicit a smile from me in those days when few besides a big lead or a prominent page-one article had excited me.

“I noticed a car following me,” Jimmy began to explain. “But—”

“Just a second.” Clark shifted and turned toward me tentatively, as if afraid I might explode at his suggestion. “Uh, Lois, do you want to make—”

“Some coffee,” I finished for him. My tone was resigned, which didn’t explain why I willingly flipped on the television as I headed into the kitchen. Behind me, I heard Clark give Jimmy some unconvincing explanation about him looking tired. Jimmy did appear a bit worn, and it was easy by looking at him to see that he’d been traveling, but his eyes were alert, his shoulders straight. Truthfully, he looked better than Clark did.

Hastily, I shoved that thought aside and focused on making the coffee.

Superman didn’t show up on the news—in fact, I hadn’t heard any news about him since before I had tested him with Clark’s questions—but even Clark knew we couldn’t delay forever. Jimmy was impatient to tell his story, trying to get a word in edgewise and looking between us with a perplexed expression when we continued to interrupt him. I myself couldn’t help wondering at my own uneasiness and the worried glances I kept throwing the TV.

Finally, Jimmy set down his coffee mug and met Clark’s eyes. “What’s going on here?”

Clark froze with a deer-in-the-headlights expression that made me smile.

“We’re just a little nervous,” I supplied when he said nothing.

“Quite a few things have happened in the last couple days, and we’re waiting for Henderson to call with the news that he has an arrest warrant for Luthor.”

“We’re that close?” Jimmy brightened. “Smooth! I thought this was the type of investigation that would go on forever! But, CK, you’ve got a ton of hard proof—how come you never brought it before?”

“I…” Clark gave me a sidelong glance. “I was waiting until I was sure it couldn’t be refuted. And then…then it was too late.”

“All right, Jimmy.” I focused my attention on the younger man, trying to distract all three of us from the nightmares seeping through Clark’s short explanation. “What *did* happen to you?”

“Well, I’d been driving for about a day when I realized that I kept seeing the same car behind me. I thought it might be following me, especially when it kept showing up over the next two days. So, finally, I stopped in a town, called 911, and reported a car with their license plates as stolen. I thought maybe I had just caused some innocent people no end of trouble and was feeling kind of guilty about it, but if…if they really were from Luthor, then I’m glad I did it.”

“That stopped them?” I asked dubiously.

“It seemed to.” Jimmy shrugged. “I told the police right where they could find the car, and I made sure I didn’t leave before they got there to take the two men into custody just in case they would take off after me. By the time they would have straightened everything out, I was long gone. But, really, that was all the excitement I had. I followed the rest of the directions, picked up the stuff, and came straight back here. Clark, why did you send me to so many different places?”

Clark smiled self-deprecatingly. “I was hoping it would stop anyone from following you. Plus, I was afraid that if you went in a straight line, Luthor or his employees would be able to guess where you were headed. But that was quick thinking, Jimmy. Good job.”

“Well…” Jimmy shrugged self-consciously and took a sip of his coffee.

I looked to the box Jimmy had brought with him, my fingers itching to look through the evidence Clark had compiled. I had read the list of what Clark had, but it was very different to actually see and feel the research. “Shall we look through this and organize it for Henderson?” I asked eagerly.

“Sure.” Clark’s smile was somewhat amused; he knew me so well.

“Hey, do you think we could order a pizza while we do this?”

Jimmy asked, his tone plaintive. “Coffee’s good, but pizza’s better.”

“Of course.” I stood quickly, tossing Clark a triumphant smile.

“Today, I’ll cook.”

“That’s not cooking,” Clark said with a laugh as I picked up the phone. “And don’t order from Ralph’s Pagoda!”

“We’re ordering pizza, not Chinese,” I said haughtily before quickly turning and allowing my hair to fall forward and hide the blush in my cheeks as memories of that night at the marina poured through my mind like a verdant rainfall.

Soon, the living room was decorated with the semi-orderly chaos of papers, photos, tapes, files, plates, and pizza boxes. Though Jimmy had looked at the stuff as he had boxed it up, he hadn’t understood the full scope of what Clark had on Luthor. I was in the same position—I had heard Henderson’s awe over Clark’s list of proof, but I hadn’t realized just how much work Clark had put into this investigation.

And he had done it all on his own.

Though…how had he managed to get these pictures of Luthor with Roarke and Harrington when he had been in a different country? How had he taped a conversation between Luthor and known terrorists when he hadn’t been in the city? How could he have researched the files on LexCorp so thoroughly while he traveled from continent to continent?

The proof he had on Luthor was irrefutable; his method of obtaining it was incredibly suspect.

But then…I thought I could make a guess on how he had managed to get to Metropolis so quickly and so often—maybe even explain how he had so quickly realized that Luthor wasn’t the philanthropist so many thought him to be.

“What is this?” I frowned as I pulled a small, smooth globe bearing the familiar green continents of Earth from the bottom of the box.

Jimmy looked over his own mountain of evidence to see what I was talking about. “Oh, that. I wasn’t sure if you needed it, CK, but it was right next to the rest of this stuff, so I grabbed it just in case. I hope that’s okay.”

“Sure, Jimmy.” Clark’s answer sounded absentminded; his aside to me was much more pointed. “It’s the globe I told you about, Lois.”

“What gl—” I cut off abruptly, suddenly reminded of exactly what globe he had told me about—in whispers, in the dead of night, a secret between only the two of us. “I thought you gave it back to him,” I observed, proud of how neutral my own voice sounded.

He matched my tone. “I don’t remember saying that.”

Jimmy looked between us, but he knew enough not to interfere.

I fingered the globe, caught by its heavy, almost dense feel. An alien feel. Suddenly resolute, I straightened and carefully set the globe aside. “Jimmy, where did you find all this stuff?”

“Didn’t CK tell you?” he asked innocently.

I grit my teeth. “No, he didn’t.”

“Oh, well, I was pretty surprised actually. Clark’s directions led me all over the place, which of course added a lot of traveling time, and when he made me zigzag through three different states, I—”

“Jimmy!” I snapped.

His eyes widened, as if he weren’t sure why I was getting after him. “It was in Smallville.”

“*Smallville?*” I repeated incredulously, turning disbelieving eyes to Clark. “You kept all the evidence needed to connect Luthor to the international crime-lord—the evidence needed to condemn Luthor as a monster—in *Smallville?*” My voice was rising. “Clark! *Everyone* knows you came from Smallville—that joke made the rounds through the whole city when you first started working at the Planet! You couldn’t think of any place more original?”

Clark shrugged. “Would *you* have guessed where it was?”

My mouth agape, I stared at him a moment longer.

“I wouldn’t have,” Jimmy volunteered, earning a wrathful look from me that had him throwing up his arms in a warding gesture. “Hey, it was pretty hard to find anyway. Those trees all looked alike, and even with the directions, I almost didn’t find it. I mean, at one point, I was actually counting my own paces—hoping that my paces

were the same as Clark's—from a wagon wheel! It took me forever just to *find* that wagon wheel!"

I narrowed my eyes, not sure I wanted to hear the answer. "And just where did he have them hidden?"

"In his tree-house," Jimmy answered promptly.

"A tree-house," I repeated dumbly. The most crucial information in a case sure to be big enough to rival Watergate, and Clark hid it in a tree-house? He was right—absolutely no one would ever have guessed it. In a way, it was almost ingenious, not that I ever, *ever*, planned on admitting that to him, secrets or no secrets.

"And, CK, I love the name of it. Did you come up with it yourself? How old were you?"

"About ten or so." Clark's eyes were intent on me, as if even though Jimmy was the one asking the questions, he was really giving the answers to me.

"Wow." Jimmy shook his head. "Kansas kids really *are* different. Those are way bigger words that I ever would have used at that age."

"It seemed appropriate," Clark murmured quietly.

"What is the name of this tree-house?" I asked, almost on autopilot. I could feel my dreamworld, my careful oasis of fantasies, collapsing around me, crumbling into dust and sifting around my feet.

Clark looked straight at me. He said nothing.

"The Fortress of Solitude!" Jimmy exclaimed, completely oblivious to the electricity suddenly crackling between Clark and me. "Can you believe that? Of course, I guess you were the only kid on the farm and the next door neighbors were about two or three miles away—well, you know that, Lois. We were there before."

I forced a grimace that loosely passed as an affirmative smile, but I couldn't tear my eyes off Clark. And then the next moment, abruptly, I couldn't bear to look at him. I felt as if I were going to hyperventilate, and so I forced myself to take deep, steady breaths just to counteract the effect. But it wasn't enough to blot out the truth I could no longer deny.

"He told me it was in the North Pole," I whispered.

"I knew that was what he'd tell you," Clark said, singularly unhelpful.

"The North Pole?" Jimmy frowned at us. I had thought he was unaware of the tension, but at the concerned look on his face, I suddenly knew that he wasn't unaware, that his abundance of words and chatty answers were merely an attempt to smooth out whatever was wrong between Clark and me. How was he supposed to know that the real problem wasn't Clark and me, but Clark and *Superman*?

"You're not sending me *there* next, are you?" Jimmy joked when the silence stretched out into awkward infinity.

Clark managed a thin smile and turned his gaze to our friend. "No, of course not."

A gasp escaped me at the sight of the smile he was giving Jimmy—it was Superman's smile.

I bolted to my feet and almost slipped on the dust and ashes of my dreamworld. "I need a drink!" I blurted, then winced. "I mean, I need something to drink—uh, coffee! Definitely! Yes, more coffee. You need anything else, Jimmy?"

He shook his head warily, as if thinking that might be the wrong answer.

"Clark?" I held my breath as soon as the name—the question—slipped from my lips.

"Yes." His reply was so weighted, so intent, so deliberate, that I knew he wasn't saying he wanted more tea. He was answering my question, trying to tell me that he was, despite what I was learning about him here, still Clark.

Unable to acknowledge that—unsure how it could possibly be true—I escaped into the kitchen. Leaning there against the counter, I squeezed my eyes shut and focused on my breathing.

It didn't help.

All I could think about were the identical expressions Clark and Superman could wear. The similarities between their features. The matching colors of their eyes, their hair, their skin tone. The

harmonizing pitch of their voices. Clark—Superman—could it be? I couldn't believe it.

And yet...it all made perfect sense.

"Hey, Lois, you in there?" Jimmy edged a step into the kitchen, his coffee mug held like a shield in his hands. And yet there was genuine concern in his dark eyes as he looked at me. "I thought I might take a bit more coffee, after all."

"Okay." I simulated another smile and took his cup from him.

"Uh..." Jimmy rubbed his hands together and looked around. "So, should I take the stuff down to the MPD? I could stop by on my way to the Planet. I have to get down there and make sure Perry hasn't given my job away."

"No." I hastily turned back to the coffee when Clark entered the room and leaned against the partition wall. My voice was somewhat muffled when I continued. "I think you should call Henderson and get an escort. Luthor might have seen you arrive with the stuff. And you might want to stay at Perry's until this is all over, just in case."

"Good idea," Clark said quietly. His eyes never left me; I could feel them on my back. If I had turned to look, I was sure they would have been pleading with me, but I wasn't certain what he wanted from me. Actually...I did know. I just wasn't certain that I was ready to give him an answer yet.

"Here, Jimmy." I turned, carefully avoiding looking at Clark—his pleading was much easier to ignore than deny—and handed Jimmy his mug. "And...I'm glad you're back, and safe."

"Me, too." A pleased smile brought a glow to Jimmy's face. "I'm just glad I could help. I'd do anything to take Luthor down after what he did to—after what he's done."

"Me, too." I paused, but when Jimmy moved to return to the living room, I stepped forward and called his name. He turned back curiously. Clark watched silently. "Jimmy...was there a ladder built into the tree-house?"

A slight, puzzled frown crossed his face. "No, actually, there wasn't. I had to break into your parents' barn to find a ladder—hope you don't mind, CK. No one seemed to be around to ask."

The breath froze in my lungs. His answer was hardly the deciding factor to tip the theory running circles through my mind from hypothesis to near-certainty, but it was enough to make it seem suddenly real.

"The tree-house was in good shape, though," Jimmy continued, trying to fill up the silence in the apartment with innocuous words. He glanced at Clark—easily, smoothly, making it look effortless, as if anyone could do it. "Your parents must usually keep it up, huh?"

"They look in on it every once in a while," was the ambiguous reply, answering without giving anything away. The type of reply at which Clark excelled.

Of course his parents looked in every once in a while, I found myself thinking acerbically. They had to make sure "Superman's" globe was safe!

Jimmy moved back into the living room, but Clark stepped closer to me. I turned all my attention to the coffee I was pouring into my mug, hunching my shoulders in around myself.

"Lois," he began, his voice so soft and worried. Just like Superman's. The touch of his hand on my shoulder was just like Superman's, too. I shrugged it off, scorning the warmth and weight of it.

"You'd better go sit down," I said in a detached voice. "You still look a little shaky."

"Lois—"

"Go, Clark!" I snapped.

And he did. And I didn't look at him as he went. But somehow, I knew he winced away from my dismissal, and I knew his shoulders were slumped with dejection and his eyes possessed only a sliver of the hope usually beaming outward from him in all directions.

But I had so little attention to spare for that; all of my attention was turned to the task of assimilating this new truth, this revelation, this secret of all secrets that had dominated every confidence Clark whispered to me in the glowing darkness. There could be no more

denying it, no more hiding from it, no more explaining it away with a hundred other perfectly logical, *human* explanations. No, now I had to accept it. Now I had to face it.

The last of the contentment instilled in me the day before slipped away.

My hand formed into a tight fist, crushing Clark's teabag within it.

Chapter 19

Henderson was busy getting the arrest warrant, but he sent two squad cars to pick up Jimmy, this time complete with a password and a badge number to avoid another mix-up with Luthor's men. Jimmy's absence made the apartment seem twice as large, ten times as stifling, and as silent as a cemetery. I was too confused and shocked to speak, and Clark didn't say anything unless I asked him a direct question about the article we were outlining in preparation of Luthor's arrest. I felt bad for the slump of his shoulders and the sadness in his eyes, but I couldn't wrestle free of the morass of confusion within my head to reassure him.

And how *could* I reassure him? I had just discovered that he had lied to me—that Superman had lied to me—and though there were obviously a lot of extenuating circumstances, I needed time to come to terms with the truth, with the world as it really was. When I could look at him without flinching away from the similarities between him and Superman, then I could confront this revelation. Until then...well, I needed something to distract myself, and the exposé on Luthor was enough to keep my attention.

At least at first. But slowly, even that was circumvented by this revelation, large enough, it seemed, to wipe every other thought from my mind. All the pieces were slowly being fitted together, each ambiguous statement, circuitous reply, evasive answer, revealed secret, and veiled memory coming together to form a picture that left my stomach in knots and my heart in shocked stasis.

I had finally found the piece that would unlock Clark to me, and yet, instead of making everything he did understandable, it only confused me more.

<I do wear a mask,> he had confessed to me, yet he had also told me that the masks had to come off at some point. And I believed him when he had said he wasn't wearing a mask that magical, star-struck night. No matter what lies had been told, what evasions had been habitual, I knew that Clark *did* love me.

I did believe that he was who he said he was.

And yet...he was so much more in addition to that. The most human person I knew, I had told him, but he was also Kryptonian. The most honest person I knew, and yet he possessed a secret larger than any other I had ever discovered. The gentlest man I had ever known, and yet he had at one point possessed enough strength to almost single-handedly shove an asteroid away from Earth.

"Lois?" Clark's voice was so hesitant, so careful, so tentative. As if he had not once commanded such great strength that no human weapon could harm him. "Is it all right if I look at your gunshot wound? We haven't checked it since last night."

Maybe it was a test—to see if I would still allow him to come near me—or maybe he was just concerned about me, but I studied him... and knew that I could trust him. And that wasn't even a revelation; hadn't I trusted him almost since the moment he had entered my life?

My mouth was a parched desert, so I simply nodded wordlessly and rolled up my sleeve.

He kept his eyes fixed on the bandage as he unrolled it and the wound as he tended it. His hands were soft, his touch so light I scarcely felt it at all. I stared at him, unable to look away from his familiar face. The face that had barely registered when I blew into Perry's office that first day; the face that had grinned at me when we were made partners; the face that had looked at me with such unabashed interest that I had thought it best to warn him away; the face that had been painted with startling sadness the night I woke at my desk and watched him walk away from me; the face that had stared at me so compassionately when he forgave me for leaving him trapped

in a cage.

I looked for echoes of Superman, reflections of the hero I had worshipped, but all I could see was Clark.

I had thought Luthor had stolen so much from him before, but now...now I did not think I could wholly understand just how much he really *had* taken from Clark.

<I couldn't stay in one place, Lois. I...I had to move around—or I thought I did anyway,> he had said when I asked him why he left Metropolis, left his job, left his friends...left me.

<It takes Superman's powers away. It hurts him. It...it can kill him, he had said of Kryptonite. *It makes Superman ordinary, Lois. It makes him—just—like—me.*>

My breath caught in my throat as that memory assaulted me with a brutality far exceeding Nigel's. Trask had hurt Clark with Kryptonite, I now realized, but Luthor had dosed him with it every day for a month. *But I'll never get you to believe me. How could I? It's not like I can prove any of this. Not now. Maybe not ever again,* his letter had admitted.

Were Clark's powers gone forever?

And if they were...was that why Superman thought the Clark he had known was dead? Why he had looked so sad when he told me I could never understand just what Clark had endured? The reason for his look of pity when Clark asked if they would be flying?

It was shocking enough to realize that Superman had a brother—that Clark had a brother; to try to puzzle out their obviously complex relationship was almost too much. And yet I had to try, had to figure it out, had to make sense of the deluge of confused memories and ambiguous statements and oblique conversations drowning me in their heavy, enveloping depths.

How did two alien brothers—one who thought of himself as human, raised by human parents and living a human life; the other, I assumed, older so that he had held himself aloof and hidden until he could unveil himself behind a Kryptonian symbol—how did they face the changes that had occurred in their lives?

Superman couldn't flee from the fact that Clark no longer had powers; regardless of whether the Kryptonian sanctuary really existed or was nothing more than the agreed-upon answer to keep people from finding out that the iconic superhero passed his time hanging out with Clark at his apartment or in Smallville with the Kents, even that arctic Fortress wasn't far enough away to hide from what he had not been able to stop from happening to his brother.

<He was held for a month by a madman who stopped at nothing in order to toy with him and crossed every line possible in order to twist his mind. He was tortured daily and subjected to Luthor's seductive, poisonous words while all his power was stolen from him. He was trapped in the darkness with no rejuvenating light to break the monotonous torment. He was alone with only the voice of Luthor as his companion and fading memories that weakened more with each passing day.> Superman's voice had been resigned, defeated, when he had described what Clark had gone through. And then he had told me, <Yet in the end, much as you might dislike it, Clark is an ordinary man.>

But he shouldn't have been, should have been so much more than ordinary, should have been *extraordinary*, and Superman could not let go of that fact.

And Clark?

<I do like Superman. He was always there when he was needed, able to save lives, able to do safely things no one else could. He got to see hope birthed in people's eyes, got to see them realize that the world possessed more than just darkness, that it contained good and hope and light as well. When I was absent, or late, or just...not enough...he was there. He was what everyone wanted, what the world needed. What *I* needed.>

<The man you think is Superman is an imposter.>

I frowned abruptly at the two conflicting memories, my breath catching in my throat, and Clark paused in the midst of rewrapping the bandage before I gave him a tiny shake of my head to reassure him

that he hadn't hurt me.

Suddenly I knew—Clark thought his brother was dead.

The pointed questions he had asked during the interview, his fixation with the idea that Superman was missing something, the way Superman had implied that Clark was missing just as much as he was.

But *why* would he think Superman was dead? *Why* couldn't he accept Superman as his brother?

<I will do what needs done,> Superman had said so bluntly it might as well have been a cliff-edge.

<He's Luthor's puppet.>

My throat closed up when Clark finished securing the bandage and reluctantly let his hands drop away. "There you go." He sounded hoarse, his eyes pleading with me yet dropping away when I stared straight at him.

"Thank you," I managed to say, my voice so dry and withered that the two words were almost lost.

"So..." Clark looked to the laptop on the coffee table where we had been preparing the exclusive we would write as soon as Luthor was arrested. "Is there anything else we need to do?"

Work, I couldn't help but think. Whenever something upset me, I always turned to work, and Clark knew that. He was even trying to help me, supplying me an easy way out. But I didn't *want* to work right now. I wanted to look at him and reassure myself that the man I had thought I could depend on was still the man I had thought him to be. I *believed* that he was—but, as I had told Clark during one of our midnight secrecy-exchange programs, that was faith. And I didn't want faith in him; I wanted unshakable confidence.

It took me a long moment to fight off the memories—to shake off the realization that every time Clark had disappeared during an emergency, he had likely been calling his brother to my rescue—to gather enough strength to utter words that were not a hail of accusations or a storm of questions, but when I finally did speak, my voice was brisk and cheerful.

"No," I said, standing and moving—not to anywhere specific—just to put a tiny bit of breathing room between myself and Clark. "We've done as much as we can until the story actually breaks. I guess there's nothing left to do but wait for Henderson to call, right?"

"He should be getting the warrant soon," Clark agreed mildly. He watched me pace, keeping me in his line of vision, making no move toward me, just as he had done the morning after I had kissed him. It struck me that Clark treated me almost like a wild animal he was afraid of scaring off, a creature of unfathomable beauty that enthralled him, a being he wished to draw to himself and yet despaired of ever touching. It was a fanciful image, but it lodged itself in my mind.

<I don't always feel human,> he had confessed quietly. And it suddenly occurred to me to wonder just how much it affected Clark to know that, though he wished to be human, he was in fact an alien. Luthor had certainly taken advantage of that chink in Clark's armor. <He said I didn't belong here...he said I'd never...that I was an al—too different.>

But how had Luthor figured out that Clark was Kryptonian? How had he discovered that Superman and Clark were connected? Bitterness and regret alchemized in my stomach to form a twisting sickness. No doubt Luthor had seen what I had missed and connected the dots when Clark and Superman had left Metropolis simultaneously. Or perhaps he had stumbled upon Clark's invulnerability when he had threatened the Kents. However he had discovered the secret, he had certainly taken advantage of it.

I came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the living room.

Luthor had taken advantage of this secret.

<He's Luthor's puppet.>

<...I had no choice but to delay my return to Metropolis,>

Superman had claimed, and then, looking straight at Clark, had said, It took a lot out of me. *That's why it took so long for me to...return.* And then, that stark answer: <I will do what needs done. There is nothing else for me to do.>

Clark was saying something, but I couldn't hear him, couldn't

focus on the words, couldn't do anything but finally admit to myself what I had so determinedly been avoiding.

Superman was working for Luthor.

He had saved those thugs from the fire—perhaps even *started* the fire, as Clark had intimidated.

He had let Nigel go.

He was allowing Luthor to use him as a means of intimidation among the criminal world.

He was guarding Clark and me; the jailor in our prison.

Dimly, vaguely, I realized that Clark was touching me, that he had taken hold of my arms and turned me to face him, that he was peering at me with worried eyes. I stared up at him and remembered the terror I had felt when Nigel threatened to bring Clark back to another cell. I remembered my earlier fierce resolve to never again let him be caged.

And I knew exactly how awful it must have been for Superman to see his brother powerless and trapped in darkness.

And I knew, then, that Superman had made a choice to save Clark—a choice he was even now paying for.

<I do what is necessary—it is you who doesn't understand that.>

With all these truths frothing up within my mind, I suddenly had to ask Clark a question, had to confirm everything that had just snapped to reality within my mind...had to stop hiding Mad Dog Lane away from the world out of fear of being abandoned yet again.

"I'm fine," I said, not needing to have heard Clark's words to know he was asking if I was all right. His hands on my arms were warm, solid points that grounded me, anchored me to this world that had, perhaps, changed with this revelation.

The *world* had changed, but Clark...hadn't.

"You're sure?" he asked, regarding me with a look that would have set fire to my blood and given wings to my heart if I had not been so caught up in the answers pouring through my thoughts.

"Yes. I just...stumbled. Clark, can I ask you a question?"

"Anything." Was there a trace of eagerness in his voice? He had been trying so hard to lead me to this truth. <I'm really not trying to hide things from you, Lois. I want to tell you, but...>

But how did I ask him if he hated Superman for selling out to the enemy in order to protect his brother's life? How did I ask him if he had been so shocked by Superman's decision—so disappointed in the moral betrayal—that he had convinced himself his brother had died?

"Clark...do you think that if...if Henderson can't get a warrant...do you think we should agree to do what Luthor wants in order to save our friends and families and the Daily Planet?"

Shock made him slow; his hands dropped away from me as if he were moving through molasses. I did not break his gaze, did not move away, did not say another word—I was frozen in time, waiting for the answer I already knew he would give me.

"Henderson *will* get the warrant," Clark finally said, and his brow wrinkled as he studied me, his perusal so intent that it seemed he would have peeled back the edges of my skull and peered directly into the brain if he could. And, I thought belatedly, he had once been able to—able to fly through the skies under the liquid sheen of golden sun—able to brave any danger without fear of harm—able to see the vastness of space or the intricacies of DNA on a mere whim...but all that had been ripped away from him.

"I know," I said, my mouth moving even while my mind was distracted. "But...if Luthor managed to wriggle out of it somehow or other—if he threatened us again—do you think we should give in to save the lives of everyone we care about?"

"No." Clark shook his head, but his eyes never left mine, wondering, disbelieving, mystified. "Of course not, Lois. We need to protect them, yes, but giving in is not the way to do that. If we give in, we're only inviting more brutality, more demands, and ultimately promising even more concessions. What we have to do is keep fighting—there's always a way out, Lois, always a way to be strong, even when it seems like there's only darkness left. It's our job to find that way out, to find that light, and make it even brighter."

It was naïve. It was idealistic. It was beautiful.

It was Clark.

As I looked at him, his face naturally falling in earnest, sincere lines, I knew that even if Superman hadn't accompanied him on his travels around the world before they had come to Metropolis, there would still be records of miraculous rescues and "guardian angel" sightings wherever Clark had visited. The innate goodness and evident compassion that had first attracted me to Superman were so obvious, so unmistakable, so blatant within Clark now that I wondered how I had not been blinded by them from the first moment I walked into Perry's office and interrupted Clark's interview.

But I couldn't focus on that right now. I needed to focus on Clark's relationship with Superman.

So I said, "You sound like Superman," as if I were merely observing a fact.

Clark didn't seem to realize the trap I was setting for him, still preoccupied with his astonishment over my question and the passion he felt in response. "Superman, more than anyone, needs to remain uncompromising and uncompromised! The world made him into a beacon of hope—even you called him that, Lois—and that means he has to live up to that. He has the privilege—and the responsibility—of being someone that everyone can look up to. He needs to be there, needs to do what is *right*, to stand for truth and justice, as he claims. Because if he doesn't do that...if he lets go of that...what does he have left?"

<Age and power don't matter,> I had overheard Clark telling his older brother as he hovered before him. <What makes Superman is what he does *for* others!>

"Clark..." I stared at him wonderingly, stunned by both the confirmation of all my suspicions and this revelation that challenged my theory that Clark had willingly chosen a human life. "You *want* to be Superman." It was half a question, half a statement.

"W-what?" Clark stammered, his earlier confidence and assurance vanished like mist beneath summer sunshine. His gaze fell away, dropped to the floor, and his hand half-rose toward his glasses.

"Everyone wants to be Superman at some point in their lives," he finally said, and I flinched because if there was any point in Clark's life when he had wanted the powers, it surely had to have been in that empty, black cell. It had to have been when he was rescued by a brother he felt he no longer knew and realized he would never again fly on his own. It had to be when he woke up every day and had to learn anew how to shave and walk and interact with others—had to learn who he was without the abilities he had possessed his entire life.

With that thought, I broke free of my paralysis and reached out a hand to rest it on Clark's arm, to grasp it hard enough to make him look at me. "But you're super just as you are," I told him, softly lest Luthor be listening through his bought "employee," firmly lest Clark think I was only trying to console him. "Clark, you don't need to fly or see through walls or bounce bullets off your chest to be special. You just...have to be you."

"But..." His voice dropped to an almost inaudible level, so quiet that surely I did not hear him, but rather interpreted the vibrations that traveled from his hand to mine. "What if being me...isn't enough?"

<I would ask him if a...a half life...is enough to sustain him. Because I think that's something he needs to know. Something *I* need to know, now more than ever.>

I moved my hand to intertwine my fingers with his. "It's enough for me," I whispered.

And I wasn't lying when I told him that.

But he *had* lied to me, and I was only now beginning to realize just how much I *didn't* know about him, how much he had concealed from me, how much I had so blithely missed. And I needed time—time to figure out how I felt about that, what I thought about all the clues he had so purposely been dropping, all the ramifications this secret would have on me. And he was staring at me with *that* look, the one that made every thought reluctant to form, and every muscle in my body go on strike, and every nerve ending beneath my skin turn to chilled fire—and it was so hard to think when he did that.

So I pulled away from him—pulled away from the intimacy of the moment and the secret that *I* might have just revealed—and took a couple aimless steps away from him. I almost collapsed in relief when I was saved by the ring of a phone from having to think—despite his bone-melting, heart-stilling, thought-stealing gaze—of something else to say that would break the seriousness of the moment and possibly ruin the reassurance I had just given him.

Both Clark and I jumped slightly at the ring, as guilty as if we had been caught doing something illegal.

With a sharp glance over at Clark, I picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Lane, this is Henderson. I just wanted to let you know I've got the warrant. We're heading to Lex Tower now to pick him up."

"We'll meet you ther—"

"You'll stay right where you are," Henderson barked. "We've already cut enough corners on this case—everything about the arrest has to be clean-cut and completely by the rules. Besides, you two are pretty much still bait. If you head for Lex Tower, you can bet he'll catch wind of it and abandon ship. So stay right where you are. I promise, you'll have the exclusive."

"But—" I forcibly silenced myself. He was right, but that wasn't what made me give up so quickly. What cut off all my arguments even before they began was the memory of Clark's fear and hatred of Luthor and the knowledge that I had already dragged him into danger twice. Could I really ask Clark to confront the very man responsible for everything bad that had happened to him?

"Lane?" Henderson sounded a bit worried. Did he really think, I wondered irritably, that I would have left in the middle of a phone conversation to rush out and nab the exclusive? On second thought... yes, he probably did.

"Fine," I said abruptly. I might be conceding, but that didn't mean I had to be gracious about it. "You'd better call the *minute* you have him in cuffs! And *no* other news outlet gets this story, you understand?"

He chuckled. "Understood."

"Good." I bit my lip, then angled away from Clark and lowered my voice. "Henderson...did you already get rid of the Kryptonite?"

"Yes. I thought it best to destroy it as quickly as possible. Why?"

I sighed, confused by my conflicting feelings of relief and regret. "No reason. You'd better hurry, Henderson. I won't wait forever for that exclusive. And you don't want to give me time to write an article about the slowness of MPD response times, do you?"

I could almost hear him roll his eyes before he hung up the phone.

"They're going after Luthor?" Clark questioned as soon as I turned toward him.

"Yes," I said quietly.

He nodded, his face absolutely blank.

"You could probably call your parents now," I offered, though I already knew what he would say.

Despite his slight hesitation, he regretfully shook his head. "No. Not yet. Not until it's safe."

His parents. That was something I hadn't even considered yet. Even without meeting his parents during our trip to Smallville, I had known their names and general personalities. It was impossible to know Clark without hearing about them, after all, and meeting them had only confirmed my half-conceived ideas about them. They had been a bit more technologically savvy and sociable and...well, fun... than I had expected, but one look at them with Clark had been enough to prove how much they loved him.

They loved him enough to lie for him, to hide his origins, to look me straight in the face and spin a tale of allergies and nobly assumed identities and handcuffs that hadn't latched all the way and a fire that had gone out because of improperly applied gasoline.

And Clark...he had been lying, too. He had, in a sense, betrayed me, and I still didn't know what I thought about that.

And it was so *hard* to think it through when he was right there, looking just like the partner I had liked having, the friend I had missed more than I had thought possible, the man I had been beginning to

know all over again over the past week and a half.

“Umm, Clark?” I strode to the closet and grabbed out yet another coat. I didn’t even know what had happened to the one I’d been wearing when I dived into the water after Clark. “I, uh, need some air, okay? I’m going to take a walk around the block or something.”

“Lois, Henderson said-”

“Please, Clark, I need some space, all right?” That, I was sure, would silence his protests; he had been so worried about crowding me.

I already had my hand on the doorknob when his quiet, broken voice froze me as solid and as motionless as a statue. “Please, Lois... don’t go.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and *willed* myself not to succumb to the familiar, smoky voice, not to turn and flee into his open embrace, not to wonder what he must be going through at this moment. “Clark, I promise I’m not going to Lex Tower. I just need some time to think, time to process everything that’s been happening, time to...to decide what I feel about everything.”

“What answers do you think you’ll find out in the street, Lois?” A bit of desperation leaked into his voice, darkening it with the weight of liquid fear. “Forgetting for the moment the fact that Luthor’s targeted you and going outside is incredibly dangerous...what answers can you find out there, all alone?”

“What do you want me to do?” I asked in a drained voice. “I can’t just sit around and *wait!*”

Stubbornly, I refused to turn and look at him. I knew he needed me at this moment, needed me to be the friend I had promised him I’d be, needed me to sit with him while we waited for news of his tormentor’s arrest...but if I looked at him, I would forget that he was a Kryptonian, forget that he had a brother, forget everything but the kindness of his smile and the warmth of his gaze and the sincerity of his voice.

“Then we’ll find something to do,” was his quiet answer, and I had to wonder if there was any question that could stump him.

“Like what?” I demanded, finally turning to face him, anger making me strong. He was standing in a shaft of sunlight that fell from the two tall windows facing my living room, his hands spread loosely at his sides, giving me that same impression of him seeking to befriend a wild creature that might run from him at any moment. And yet, despite that, the image of him standing in my apartment...it looked—*felt*—right. “We’ve already written as much of the story as we can!”

“Like...” He shrugged. “Play board games.”

“Board games,” I repeated flatly. “Clark, if you don’t think I’ll find any answers outside, what makes you think I could possibly find them in a *board game?*”

He tried a tiny smile and another, smaller shrug. “At least in Trivial Pursuit, the answers are all typed out on the card.”

A surprised chuckle slipped from me, and with it, the remaining remnants of my panic and fear and confusion. “All right,” I gave in gracefully, and only then realized that I really didn’t *want* to leave Clark, that I would have taken any excuse to stay he had given me.

“Do you even have any board games?” he asked, probably to disguise the radiant glow that had sprung up around him from the moment I took my hand off the doorknob.

“Yes.” I scowled and gestured to the closet. “I think Lucy left a couple behind when she moved out, and she gave me one for my birthday once. Oh, and I got Scrabble as a Secret Santa gift, though, really, don’t you think that’s a stupid gift? I mean, she didn’t even know if I liked it! And how did she know I didn’t have it already, anyway?”

Clark laughed, though it seemed born more out of relief than genuine humor. “She knew she drew your name, didn’t she?”

“Watch it, Kent,” I said sarcastically as I pulled open the closet door and allowed Clark to stretch up and pull the dusty boxes from the top shelf. “Now I’m not going to go easy on you.”

His dark brows arched in disbelief. “You mean, you were thinking of it before?”

“Not a chance.” I smirked. “You seem like one of those people who play to play; I’m one of the kind that play to win. So we’ll both

be happy.”

He laughed again and cleared an empty space on the table. I helped him, easily and instantaneously moving to make room for the items he took off the table and stacking the other games to the side. We both reached for the same game—Scrabble—at the same time. As we set up the board and arranged the tiles, I blinked rapidly to clear the mist from my eyes.

Clark and I worked so well together. More than that, we...fit...together. What would I do if I lost him again?

“Clark?” I bit my lip as soon as I uttered his name, but it was too late to take it back.

“Yes, Lois?” He knew me so well, gazing at me intently, ready to answer whatever I asked him.

“We *are* friends, aren’t we?” A stupid question, I chided myself. I had already realized—in fact, never even doubted—that his love for me was real. But right now, I needed to know if he was still that one thing I could depend upon, that rock I could lean on, that point of stability in a life that constantly fluctuated and changed. I needed to know that, secret portions of his life or not, he was still there for me.

Clark stared at me, seemingly stricken. “Of course we are,” he said raggedly. “You’re the best friend I’ve ever had—the *closest* friend I’ve ever had.”

“Me, too,” I managed to say, though a lot of my attention was centered around not crying. “I just...I don’t want to lose that, Clark.”

“You won’t.” For a single instant, a shadow darkened his expression, a sense of vast loss, yet it was quickly erased as he reached out to place his hands over mine with a slight smile. “You never will, Lois. I’ll be your friend forever.”

“Forever?” I repeated, inwardly shaken by his promise. What if I wanted more than friendship? I knew *he* did, which was, I belatedly realized, why he seemed so sad to accept the role of best friend. He thought he had lost me to his super-powered brother...and yet he was willing to give me what I wanted. Willing to be whatever I wanted him to be.

“As long as you want,” he returned, stubbornly refusing to let go of one last tendril of hope.

“And partners?” I continued, now, strangely, much more confident.

“Assuming you’ll take me back.”

“Well, I do want this story on Luthor and you’re the one with the inside track,” I began to say teasingly, then stopped, unable to treat this moment so lightly. “Of course we’re partners,” I said instead. Then I took a deep breath and relinquished my fears and doubts. “And whatever else might come up? Are we that, too?”

Clark’s breath noticeably caught in his throat. “Whatever else? What...what else is there?”

I couldn’t come right out and say it—I wasn’t *that* brave, or quite ready yet, truthfully—but I couldn’t leave it there either, so I said, “We’ll just take it one day at a time.”

“One day at a time,” he agreed, his voice a mere whisper.

“I get to go first, right?” I said with a quick grin, brandishing a tile to break the intimate moment.

“If you want,” he replied, and I would have had to have been blind to miss the subtext of that brief exchange.

Both Clark and I were on edge as we waited for the phone to ring with news of Luthor, so I was surprised to realize that I was having fun playing games with him. Scrabble ended in a draw—Clark claimed he won, but that was only because he insisted on disqualifying every one of my good words. I won Monopoly fair and square; truthfully, I wasn’t sure how Clark managed his real bills after the way he lost all his money so quickly. Clark, however, won Trivial Pursuit—I would never understand why he memorized all those useless facts that no one could care less about it and that would never be written up in an article. And Chess...well, that was a draw, too, because it was incredibly hard to concentrate with Clark smiling at me from across the board, and Clark seemed equally distracted every time I laughed or teased him or gestured with my hand or spoke or...well, just about anything. Not that I minded. In fact, just knowing that he was

fascinated by my slightest move made me relax, my every gesture becoming slower and more designed, my laugh more languorous, my speech less planned and more natural

When the phone call finally did come, I had almost managed to forget what was happening in a tower across town. Clark and I were finishing a light dinner, and we both stared at the phone as if it were a snake we had only just realized was sharing the room with us.

“That should be Henderson,” I said quietly, needlessly.

Clark swallowed. “Yeah.” He glanced to the TV that had been on since Jimmy’s arrival that morning. Superman had not yet splashed his colors across the screen; in fact, he hadn’t been seen since he had flown with me two days before.

Finally, feeling oddly reluctant, I lifted the phone to my ear, silencing its imperious screech. “Hello?”

“Lois, he’s gone. We don’t know where he went. We picked up Mrs. Cox and his Indian servant, and they claim Luthor was in the building, but...we can’t find him. He’s gone to ground.”

I couldn’t say anything, could only stare at Clark, his expression so blank, so grim, that I halfway wondered if he could hear Henderson’s voice from where he sat.

“We did find something else, though,” the inspector continued, not waiting for me to find my voice. “In a vault in his office—there was Kryptonite, a huge chunk of it, easily three times as large as the piece you and I found.”

Something suspiciously close to a whimper escaped my throat, and I found myself looking toward the television, vainly searching for a hint of blue and red.

“There was also something else.” Henderson paused—not waiting for a reply, but steeling himself to finish. “One of Superman’s Suits, torn up, mangled, missing the cape. There’s no blood on it, but beside it, we found a vial of what forensics thinks will match the alien tissue we found on the remnants of that cape your paper discovered after Nightfall.”

“He staged Superman’s death?” I questioned hollowly.

“Maybe.” Henderson’s tone was perfectly noncommittal, but I saw it for the lie it was. “Listen, I’m assigning an extra protective detail to you and Kent. And this time, they won’t be hiding; if Luthor comes after you two, I want you both safe. We’ve got every available man looking for him, but...I’m sorry, Lane. I’d hoped this would go smoother.”

I shrugged, the move made on autopilot. “Luthor’s slippery. But he’s also arrogant and he likes to have the last word—I’m sure he’ll turn up soon.”

“Yeah. You and Clark be careful, Lois, all right?”

“Yeah.” The click the phone made when I set it down sounded like a death knell. The entire world seemed, suddenly, fraught with peril and uncertainty. A shudder passed through my body at the thought of Luthor hiding out in the street or waiting in the hall outside my apartment.

Clark’s hands were clasped in front of him. He met my gaze evenly. “Luthor got away?” he asked matter-of-factly.

“Yes.” I did my best to match his tone but only partially succeeded. My foolish, incautious gaze fell on the television screen. “Did you know he faked Superman’s death after the Nightfall asteroid?”

“No. Not until you told me.” That muscle flickered in his jaw, and I had to hold onto my own hand to keep from soothing it away with a tender finger.

“Clark...” I summoned up strength from some deep place inside of me, drawing it up out of the depths for his sake. “Henderson has the Kryptonite.”

He betrayed no emotion. “All of it?”

“Well, he destroyed the piece we got earlier, and he found a large chunk of it now, so...it seems likely.”

His hands clenched into tight fists. He squeezed his eyes shut, his head tilted up to the last, disappearing rays of twilight’s muted sun.

“And,” I did my best to sound cheerful, “they’ve arrested Mrs.

Cox and Asabi.”

He flinched the tiniest bit. Unbidden, the memory of Asabi moving to loom over Clark as Luthor led me away from the cell rose to the forefront of my mind, and another shiver rippled through me.

“Oh, Clark.” Instinctively, willingly, I stepped up close to him, pulled him to his feet, and wrapped my arms around his neck in a hug. I felt...safe, whole, accepted...when he closed his own arms around my waist, clinging to me as if I were all *he* could depend on. “I’m so sorry, Clark,” I murmured. “I wanted this to be over for you.”

“For me?” He cupped the back of my head and pulled back just far enough to regard me with surprise. “He hurt you, too, Lois.”

“Yes, he did,” I replied soberly. “He hurt me every time he hurt you.”

Too much to interpret—emotions too strong for anyone but Clark to safely contain—passed across his face like wind-tossed clouds, and he hugged me tightly to himself. I rested my head on his shoulder and willed all my strength to be imparted to him, willed my embrace to be as comforting and healing as his always were for me. I couldn’t help but flinch with empathetic pain when a shudder tore itself through his frame.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured again as tears dripped from my eyes.

“Don’t apologize for him!” Clark’s fierce admonition stuck in his throat when he tilted my head up and caught sight of the tears. “You’re crying?” His tone was thunderstruck, awed, reverential. His hand spanned the side of my face; his thumb tested the texture of my tears. “For *me*?”

“Yes,” I choked out, splaying a hand over his cheek. “For everything he stole from you. For what he took from you.”

He went so still in my arms that, save for the warmth permeating everywhere his body touched mine, I might have been holding a mannequin. A few more of my tears splashed against his thumb. “You *do* know about that?” he finally breathed out.

“I do,” I whispered with an attempt at a smile.

“And you don’t...” He searched my eyes carefully, his arm tightening around my waist, his breaths short and clipped. “You don’t hate *me*?”

I let out a breath that might have been a sob and rested my head on his shoulder to hide the emotions I was sure were splattered across my features. “How could *anyone* hate you?”

“I wanted to tell you,” he whispered, his head bent over mine.

“I know. I know.” A few more tears escaped me, squeezed out of me, the last dregs of all that resided within me, everything else already drained away. “I just wish I could give you back everything he took from you. He stole so much, Clark!”

“He didn’t steal *you*.” His smile was like a burst of fresh sunlight after too long a time in the dark. A burden seemed to fall from his shoulders when I gave him a watery smile. “That’s all that matters.”

His smile was sincere, joyous, completely uninhibited. His eyes sparkled with hope and love and stars that shone as brightly as suns. His arms around me were strong and sure and welcoming. His words caressed me and filled me up and undid all my tears.

And I knew then—knew without a single doubt or question—that I loved him.

Not as a brother.

Not as a friend.

I was *in* love with him, a love strong enough to make his happiness more important than the lies he had told, a love powerful enough to make me willing to give up my own fears and doubts and questions in favor of protecting him, a love faithful enough to ensure I never again confused him with Superman.

Lois Lane loved Clark Kent.

I sank deeper into his embrace, held onto him more tightly, enveloped in the safety of his arms and love. And I squeezed my eyes shut and savored this feeling, this moment, this instant when nothing and no one else mattered. I wanted to remember this for the rest of my life, wanted to be able to close my eyes at any given time and recapture all the feelings imbuing this ethereal moment with all the

magic that brought a warm glow to the room around us.

“No more secrets, Lois,” he whispered in my ear, and despite the fact that Luthor had escaped us, he sounded happy, almost exultant. “I don’t have any more. You know them all now.”

I smiled against his shoulder and breathed in the scent of him. I only had one secret left, but I couldn’t yet reveal it to him, not until after I talked to Superman. But contemplating that conversation was a minefield I didn’t want to think of, not now, not wrapped in Clark’s embrace. So I simply held onto him and said, “And I’ll never give them away. They’re mine—*ours*.”

“Us against the world,” he agreed, and laughed.

The carefree, joyous sound banished darkness and turned even the shadows into sunbeams. And I basked in the light.

Chapter 20

We pretended to work a bit on the story, but very little was actually accomplished. I couldn’t stop throwing glances at Clark, couldn’t stop reaching out to brush my hand over his arm or his hand or his chest, couldn’t stop smiling at him and marveling all over again that he could be so different than I had assumed and yet still be so much the same. In return, he watched me ceaselessly, his lips curved up in a smile that never wavered, his quietly hopeful eyes unhindered by the glasses he had taken off and never put back on, as if he flaunted his familial resemblance to Superman now that he no longer had to hide it.

Finally, we both decided—without words—that it was late enough to stop for the night, and we set aside the computer and our notes, and we headed into the bedroom. Nervousness sent a dull fluttering to tickle through my stomach, and my hands actually trembled. It was strange, I thought, that the only night I was really uneasy about sleeping in the same room as Clark was the night I finally knew the real him.

Clark slipped into the bathroom first, and when he came out, dressed in shorts and a t-shirt that revealed the muscle tone he had reclaimed, his eyes shining as they unerringly sought me out, I couldn’t help but swallow, rooted to the floor. Only when he smiled at me and moved to the cot did I find the momentum necessary to carry me into the bathroom.

I readied quickly—dressing in a nightgown rather than the casual pajamas I had been favoring lately—but then paused and looked at my reflection in the mirror. For a long moment, I studied the dark-haired woman with wondering eyes and tiny smile that looked back at me. She was almost unrecognizable, so different from the cocky reporter who had scorned her partner, from the lost and abandoned wreck who had pretended she was fine without anyone, and even from the determined, scared woman I had been just days before, hiding from myself and the truth and a world that was a lot smaller—a lot bigger—than I had thought. The woman who stared back at me had all of those things inside her, but she also had something more—a secret, a friend, a person to lean on—that made her stronger and better and more... whole... than I had ever been before.

The Lois Lane I used to be *had* disappeared. But she hadn’t been buried; she had been transformed, like a changeling that took on a new, better, more durable shape.

Self-consciously, I ran the brush through my hair one more time, straightened my pajamas, and went back out into the bedroom.

When I stepped fully into the room, Clark turned from making up his cot to face me...and then froze. His hands were poised in mid-air, the blanket held slackly between his fingers, his dumbstruck expression lit by the lamp beside my bed.

“Clark?” I asked uncertainly. The way he was staring at me left little doubt that he was struck by *me*, but I still felt a thrill of nervousness. The realization that I loved Clark—that I had loved him for so much longer than I had thought—was dwarfing everything else—every other revelation—and the sight of him moving slowly toward me—so slowly, seeking once more to calm that untamed, beautiful creature before him—left me trembling and shivering with fear and anticipation and joy and so many other wild emotions that they all

blurred together into one bright, glorious feeling.

“Lois,” he whispered, and the world disappeared in a shower of intensity and heat, banished by the spell he wove with those two reverently spoken syllables. His hand rose in slow motion toward my face; my eyes fluttered closed when his fingers traced a line from the fading bruise on my temple down past my eye, along the curve of my cheekbone, around the edge of my jaw, and back through my hair to rest on my neck. The gesture was so slow, so meaningful, so delicate that my breath caught in my throat and my eyes flew open.

He flinched backward when I met his gaze, and blinked rapidly, as if the sight of me was too much for him to take.

“What is it?” My question barely touched the close, enveloping atmosphere that wrapped its magical arms around the two of us.

He closed his eyes, then opened them again to drink me in. “You’re so beautiful.” His palm pressed a bit tighter against the skin of my neck, and I couldn’t stop myself—didn’t even try—from reaching out and sliding my hand down his free arm, his wrist, his palm to fit my fingers between his. The touch of his skin was intoxicating, and I wondered how I had never noticed it before. Or perhaps I had; perhaps that was the reason I had touched him so often and so familiarly, as if some hidden part of me had recognized the truth long before I did.

I gave him a small grin, emboldened by his hesitant silence. “Well, you’re not so bad yourself.”

He returned the smile as if by reflex—as if he couldn’t help but smile at the sight of *my* smile—but his manner struck me as somewhat somber. “Lois...” He let out a breath and hung his head a moment, seemingly frustrated by the elusiveness of words, before meeting my gaze once more. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. And that makes me afraid I’m going to lose you. Luthor has been having fun playing his game with us, but now it’s him or us, and he’ll come after us. I know he will. He hates to lose. And I’m not strong enough to stop him anymore—”

“Clark.” Reassuringly brushing my thumb over his hand, I smiled up at him again, hoping to see him return the favor. I had taken his smile for granted so many times, but I wanted to see it, wanted to *savor* it, tonight. “You’re not going to lose me. I’m right here. Henderson’s going to get Luthor, and everything will go back to the way it was.”

“It can never go back,” Clark said with a shake of his head before tossing a glance over his shoulder toward the window—a glance that was almost resentful, certainly far from brotherly. “If Luthor sends *him*, I...I won’t be able to—”

“Clark!” I interrupted again, scared of the desperate resolve shading his tone, eager to slice through his degenerating fears, to mute the spine-chilling proof of Luthor’s effect on him, to cut off the reminder that Superman was working for the enemy. “You can’t give up, all right? You didn’t give up in that cell—haven’t given up yet despite everything Luthor’s thrown at us—and you can’t give up now. What would your parents say if they were here?”

His posture relaxed, relieved of some of his tension, and he leaned his forehead against mine. “They’d tell me not to give up hope. They’d tell me that I would find a way to protect you.”

I decided to ignore the fact that he thought he had to protect me, and I smiled at the sentiment, touched yet again—*still*—by the depths of his love for me. “Exactly. Clark...these last couple of weeks have been some of the hardest days of my entire life, and yet...they have also contained some of the *best* moments I have ever lived. And that’s because *you’re* here...with me.”

The one secret I still possessed hovered just behind my lips, eager to leap out into the open, but I knew I had to give Superman the courtesy of telling him first. And yet I couldn’t just say nothing, so I brought up my free hand to rest on Clark’s shoulder and closed my eyes. “I would do anything for you, Clark. I hope you know that.”

“Lois, please don’t be mad at me, but...” I was shocked by the timidity, the fear, the sheer dread, lurking in his voice, and I pulled back to blink up at him. “But...*why?* *Why* are you here with me now?” His hand ghosted along my cheek again to emphasize the closeness of

our embrace. “Is it...it’s not because of my secret...is it?”

I gaped at him, caught between hysterical laughter, incredulous anger, and staggering regret. “What?”

He didn’t say anything; the doubt lurking in his eyes, lit by moonlight’s silvery beams, was eloquent enough.

Yet how could I explain to him the love that had been sneaking up on me for so long when even *I* didn’t understand it?

Finally, I opted for simplicity and shrugged. “I didn’t know your secret when I dived into the ocean after you.”

His relief outshone the moon.

He opened his mouth, doubtlessly to apologize if I knew him at all, so I slid my hand over his lips.

“Don’t,” I whispered, but the rest of my words dried up, the feel of his mouth against my fingers summoning up vivid memories of the kiss we had shared. Actually, I told myself sternly in an effort to break free of the hold Clark had on me, it had been our third kiss. Not that it mattered—just so long as it wasn’t our last.

I dropped my hand as if he had burned me and felt a blush stain my cheeks at that thought. “Good night,” I said quickly.

For a long moment, he said nothing—at least not vocally, though his eyes blazed with emotions and thoughts and dreams, and I was relatively certain my own expression gave away just as much. Finally, he smiled and stepped back, pulling his hand free of mine. “Good night, Lois.”

But when he turned toward his cot, I found that I couldn’t let him move away from me, not yet, so I hurriedly reached out and tugged on his arm. He instantly turned back to me, watching me patiently.

“Clark...you’re a good man,” I told him quietly. “That’s why I’m here, now, with you.”

A line appeared to mar his brow. “What if...what if I’m not? Lois, you said I didn’t give up in that cell, but...I thought some very bad things while trapped there. And I think...I think I *hate* Luthor.” He spoke the word “hate” with such hesitance that it almost seemed a foreign word to him. As it was, I realized anew. “And though I might not actually act on any of those dark thoughts, I do know that I would do *anything* to stop him—to stop *anyone*—from hurting you.”

“That doesn’t make you a bad man,” I stated unequivocally, ignoring the chill invoked by such a grim promise spoken by the forgiving, compassionate Clark Kent. “In fact, knowing that you’re willing to risk yourself to protect others makes me even more convinced that you’re exactly the opposite.”

I wasn’t sure he entirely agreed with me, but he smiled at me anyway. “Only because I work hard to meet your expectations.”

The sight of his smile made me chuckle. I wanted to keep talking, to exchange words and jokes and observations all night long, to hear his smoky voice fill the room with his presence, but I knew the signs of his exhaustion well enough to recognize them now. It was, I reminded myself, only that morning that he had been subjected to Kryptonite yet again.

So, in lieu of anything brilliant to say, I repeated myself: “Good night, Clark.”

And I reached out, placed my hands on his shoulders, and pulled him into a hug. Even that wasn’t enough, though, not feeling the sweet intensity with which he returned the embrace, not with the reaffirming realization that I loved him—loved him so much I wondered how one was supposed to contain a force so strong. So I dared to tilt my head upward and place a soft kiss on his cheek, lingering a moment against his clean-shaven skin, delighting in his unique scent, before I forced myself to pull back and flash a shy grin.

His own grin was surprised, delighted, and exultant all at once, and I couldn’t help but laugh as we separated. Romance had always scared me, yet somehow it didn’t seem strange at all that Clark made it seem safe and beautiful and wonderful...and obtainable.

Despite his obvious joy at my overture, Clark was tired and fell asleep only moments after settling into the cot and arranging the blankets about himself.

I found myself watching him, studying him as if I had never seen

him before. Curiously, I tried to remember my initial impression of him the first time I had seen him, my first thoughts upon meeting him, but all I could remember was my fixation on a story and my irritation with his intrusion into my life. I thought I might have been taken aback by Clark and the way he treated me—standing when I entered the room, opening the door for me, trying to help me with my coat—thought I might have noted the dark, gentle features of his face, thought I might have been a bit curious about what the others in the newsroom would make of him...but I couldn’t remember for sure, couldn’t decide whether I really remembered those impressions or had only shaped them into thoughts after the fact.

No matter what my initial thoughts had been, I could never have known then that he was actually an alien with a heart of gold, that he would make himself my friend...that I would fall in love with him.

Some part of my mind whispered at me that I should be thinking back on every day with Clark, every encounter with him, every excuse he had ever given me for running off—that I should be integrating the Clark I knew with the Clark that had been hidden—yet I couldn’t focus on that. There was something...different...about him that he hadn’t mentioned the first day we met, yes...but his place in my heart seemed so much more important than that secret.

I knew Clark—not the make-up of his DNA...but the makings of his heart.

Not the planet of his origin...but the qualities that grounded and shaped his personality.

Not his family tree...but the beauty within him that made so many strangers into friends.

Not the details of his childhood...but the depth and devotion of his love for me.

Not all the facts...but everything that mattered.

And I had almost lost him without even knowing just how much he meant to me.

I tugged the blankets up higher around my shoulders to counter the chill brought on by the sudden thought of Luthor. Memories—nightmares—ran through my mind like marauding insects, sickening, insidious, chilling, shaped to the mold of a cell buried so carefully away from the light.

And Superman...he had sold his soul to buy Clark’s freedom. A truth I hadn’t yet come to terms with. A truth I wished I could deny. A truth that made me feel alone and horrified and grateful all at once.

Alone because the man I had thought was a paragon of virtue was, in the end, not as untouchable and unimpeachable as I had imagined him to be.

Horrified because Superman in the hands of a criminal—the tool of a man like Luthor—was so terrifying as to be incomprehensible.

And grateful because Clark was the most amazing person I had ever known and he had grown to occupy such a large, necessary part of myself that I could not—*would* not—imagine my life without him...and Superman had saved his life at the cost of his own morality and integrity. It was a decision I had been asked to make but never had to accept. Superman, though...Superman had been forced to accept it. Forced to live it.

My thoughts had turned a dark corner, yet when I allowed my eyes to once more wander to the darkened form across the room, feasting on the features lit by the silver-and-crystal moon, a smile automatically curved my lips and determined resolve buried itself deeply within me. I couldn’t let Clark be hurt again—not by Luthor, not by myself, not by anyone.

A tapping on the window in the living room interrupted my thoughts and wiped the smile away. My heart leapt into my throat, and my gaze flew to Clark, relieved when he did not stir. The Kryptonite had drained him more than he had been willing to concede—and he had not been completely well even before the encounter—but I found myself almost grateful for that now. I did not want to erase the peace, the happiness, the confidence that had imbued his every thought and expression and word since I had revealed to him that I knew his secret.

And I was certain that seeing Superman floating outside my

window would certainly be enough to banish whatever measure of contentment he had found.

Quietly slipping on a robe, I shut the bedroom door behind myself and padded across the living room. Pausing briefly to take a deep breath and gather my scattered thoughts and tangled emotions, I pulled the window open and stepped out onto the fire escape.

“Superman,” I greeted him, startled the slightest bit by the coolness of my tone. There was nothing of awe, or breathlessness, or shyness in my manner, no desire to have the superhero wrap his strong arms around me, no compulsion demanding that I cling to him. Instead, I felt only...wariness, disappointment, and an odd, contradictory kinship with this man who would sacrifice so much to save Clark.

Reminded that I hadn’t finished my greeting, I folded my arms over my chest against both the chill and the man before me. “Where have you been? No one’s seen you in almost two days.”

Except Clark, I thought silently.

Superman studied me for a moment that seemed poised over a perilous drop into eternity. The night molded itself to his face and form so that it seemed his colors were black and gray rather than crimson and royal blue, the moonlight too preoccupied with Clark’s form to attend to the superhero.

Finally, he gave a tiny shake of his head and looked away, out over the city sprawling to every side of us. “There were some...bad things...happening, Lois. I wanted them to stop.”

My eyebrows rose in skeptical surprise; my tone made my next words a challenge. “There was nothing on the news.”

“Not that kind of bad thing,” he corrected, casting a sidelong glance at me. He set his hands on the metal railing and curled his fingers around it, oblivious to the frost marbling its surface. His eyes, deep pits of blackness in the night-dark air, stared forward. Toward Lex Tower. “A different kind of bad thing. Things like you getting hurt, Lois—that was never supposed to happen. He said it wouldn’t.”

“And you *believed* him?” I exclaimed incredulously, ignoring his ensuing flash of surprise. “He’s a liar!”

Superman studied me a long moment, processing the fact that I knew he worked for Luthor. I stared back confrontationally, angrily, and he belatedly looked away—acknowledging his shame?

“I know that now.” His tone was so flat, so bleak, that I was momentarily silenced. Finally, however, he seemed to realize his own emotion, and his voice rose a fraction. “But he’s all I have, Lois!”

My eyes narrowed as I studied him in an attempt to follow his change in subject. “Clark?”

His cape shivered down its length as he cocked his head, the shadows congregating around him like a pack of dark followers. His face had become very blank, a mask that hid unknown, untold depths behind polite aloofness, as if he were trying to figure out just how much I knew about his connection to Clark.

I hesitated for a brief instant, the sound of Clark’s name—even spoken by myself—reminding me, once again, of how easily I could have lost him forever in the past month. Annoyed by the moment of weakness, I shook it aside and frowned. “Superman, you don’t know how glad, how relieved, how unbelievably thankful I am that Clark is alive. And...and sometimes, I almost don’t even care what you had to do to keep him safe—” Again, I paused, this time remembering what had happened to our first protective detail, and realizing with that recollection that, yes, I *did* care. “But you can’t do this!” I insisted, hotly to counter my own guilt. “You’re not *Superman* when you do these things for Luthor—”

“You don’t understand!” Superman blurted out, his expression desperate, almost panicked, his features a collection of harsh lines and jagged shadows. “He’s family, Lois! That’s all I was ever taught—loyalty to family. It’s all I’ve ever known!”

I took a moment to tamp down on the hot flash of fury blazing through my veins. This was my hero, the man I had admired so much that Clark had gotten lost in the mirage’s glare...yet here he was, afraid and flawed and so much weaker than I had thought. The entire

world had placed their trust in Superman...and he had betrayed them. Betrayed us. Betrayed *me*.

For Clark.

How could I forgive him for his crimes?

How could I blame him when I knew full well just how much I would give up for Clark? When I had just told Clark that his willingness to sacrifice for others made him a good man?

“I understand,” I said tightly. “Believe me, I *understand* that you love Clark and would do anything for him...but you don’t have to do this anymore! Henderson is on the verge of apprehending Luthor—his henchmen are already arrested! It’s over, Superman! You can help Henderson catch Luthor—help *us*!”

“How important is family to you?” Superman asked directly, his eyes still locked on Lex Tower. “How far would *you* go to keep your family safe?”

“Stop this!” I commanded him angrily. “Stop living in fear! You can end this all! Family *is* important, so—”

“So what?” he interrupted, whirling to face me full-on. “What would you do in my position? Tell me what to do, Lois!”

“Do what *he* wants you to do!” I told him with a gesture to the apartment behind us, and to Clark, sleeping—I hoped—obliviously. Innocent, untouched, and so infinitely, immeasurably precious to me.

Superman’s shoulders slumped, the vibrancy of his eyes dimmed by the darkness. Or maybe it had never been there at all and only my imagination had made it seem that it was. “I *am* doing what he wants,” he said softly.

“No, you’re not!” I snapped, bristling at the mere thought of Clark condoning the things Superman had done in his name. “Clark said there’s always some light, some hope. You have to *find* that hope, Superman.”

His meaningful gaze set me back a pace. “Lois. You...*are*...my hope.”

“Yes,” I said, straightening under that burden of responsibility. Luthor had gotten away—could be watching us even now, waiting for his chance at revenge—but Clark and I had ensured that he could never walk free again. All that remained was making his inevitable stay in Metropolis’s maximum-security prison a permanent one. Yet maybe, I thought slowly, Superman just needed a bit of reassurance that the case was almost closed, proof that his nightmare was almost over. “We *are* very close, Superman,” I told him gently.

He gave a tiny grimace, as if impatient—as I was—to see this put behind him forever. But then, strangely, he nodded reluctantly, and looked away, once more closing his hands over the cold railing.

I found that I had nothing more to say, no other words to give him, no pressing questions to ask him. Later, after he was gone, I was sure I would think of a million things I could have said, but for now, all I could do was look at him and marvel over how much had changed within me. Even if Superman hadn’t been working for Luthor, I knew that I would not have looked at him in the same, idolizing way as I once had...because he wasn’t Clark. And that...that changed everything.

He seemed almost unaware of my scrutiny, his own eyes peering through the crystalline-clarity of the winter-sharp air to peruse the city he had made his own. His cape fluttered behind him, its color darkened by the night.

And no matter that words had fled me, I knew there was one thing I still had to tell him. One thing I had almost told Clark—*wanted* to tell Clark. One thing I needed to tell Superman before anything else happened. I had kissed him, after all, made him think that I loved him; now I owed him an explanation, maybe even an apology.

And then I would be able to tell Clark what I had so recently discovered myself.

I opened my mouth to utter the fateful words, but my own frailty sabotaged my efforts, and no sound emerged. I turned my face away, looking up toward the sky as I rummaged deep within the detritus of my heart for some courage. The words had almost spoken themselves when it was Clark who stood before me; when it was Superman

standing there, however, they cowered and hid away in fear.

A streak of silver-white painted a spark at the peak of the sky and gave me an opening gambit.

“Look!” I pointed toward the now-obsidian heights. “A shooting star.”

“What?” Superman glanced upward with an innocent skepticism.

“A shooting star.” I shrugged, uncomfortable with how long this conversation was taking. Suddenly feeling unaccountably guilty, I looked behind me nervously. I knew what Clark would think if he woke to see me standing out in the cold to talk to the man he so distrusted, the man he thought I loved—knew what conclusions he would, perhaps justifiably considering my past behavior, leap to. And I had promised myself I wouldn’t hurt him...but I hadn’t yet told Superman my secret and so I forbade myself from fleeing. “Whenever you see one fly across the sky, you’re supposed to make a wish. Supposedly, if you do, your wish will come true.”

Superman studied the night sky for a long moment, then angled his body to face me. “I can make you a hundred shooting stars, Lois—a thousand—whatever you want.”

I blinked, stunned by the obviously romantic offer and the way his hand cupped my shoulder. Hastily, shooting another glance toward the apartment, I stepped backward, twisting away from Superman’s touch.

His hand fell back to his side, and a flash of surprised distress painted itself over his face.

“I don’t want a shooting star,” I said gently, seizing the opportunity before the moment passed. I wished, longingly, selfishly, impossibly, that Clark was standing beside me, lending me a measure of his strength and courage. “They look and sound magical, but they’re only there for an instant, appearing and disappearing far too quickly.”

Besides, I thought with yet another glance in Clark’s general direction, who would want the stars—cold, impersonal, and distant—when a blazing sun waited with open arms outstretched?

Superman flinched, as if I had struck him. His hooded eyes sought the stars. “Barely alive before fading away,” he murmured despondently. “Dying alone in the dark.”

“Superman.” Despite my best intentions, my eyes were glazed with a thin veneer of tears. He had lost so much already—I hated to add to his pain. And yet...I couldn’t lead him on, not anymore. I couldn’t pretend to something that no longer existed. I couldn’t keep denying the depth and power and strength of what I felt for Clark. “I think I’m finally beginning to realize what’s been staring me in the face for so long, something you tried to tell me so many times. You said you belong to the sky—that your place is far above us, removed from day-to-day life. If I tried to bring you down to my level...it’d be like trying to reach out and snare the shooting stars with my fingers.”

At his closed expression, I swallowed hard, then smiled to distract from the tears I could not allow to fall. “Superman, I will probably always need you, and I will always be your friend, always be there if you need someone to talk to. But...Clark needs me. More than that...he *wants* me.”

I paused then, struck anew by that fact. My father hadn’t wanted me at all, finding disappointment in my very existence; my mother had needed me, but had little use for a daughter she had no idea what to do with; my sister had once needed me to be there for her, to look out for her, to protect her, but then she had grown up; Claude had needed a story badly enough to pretend he wanted me; and Luthor had obviously needed me as a diversion, a scare tactic, and bait. But who had ever voluntarily, willingly, freely *wanted* me? Who...besides Clark?

“He wants me,” I repeated aloud, which gave me the strength to finally say the wonderful words aloud, to release my tight hold of this secret. “He *loves* me, Superman—loves me just for being me. And I...I love *him*.” I let out a breath. In the end, those words were the easiest words I had ever said, the truest, the most miraculous, so much so that I said them again, sparking a burst of jubilation to sizzle and dance within me. “I love him. And I want to be there for him just as he has been for me.”

“Lois...” Superman gave one slow shake of his head. “Don’t do this.”

I stiffened and tilted my chin defiantly. “I’m sorry, Superman. Clark—”

“Please!” Superman took a hasty step closer, and I had to restrain the urge to press back against the hard bricks beside the window. “Lois, I...I *need* you. I need you to save me.”

“Save you?” I repeated blankly. “You’re *Superman*.”

“No, I...” His hands clenched into fists at his side, and he turned his face away. His voice was little more than the whisper of the wind. “I wanted you to tell me—”

My fear vanished when he cut himself off, replaced by an energizing wave of curiosity. I leapt forward to grab hold of his arm when he made as if to fling himself aloft and soar away from me. “Tell you what?” I demanded. “What do you need to be saved from?”

He stared so hard and so long at my hand on his arm that I let go, nervously clasping both my hands behind my back. A move that made him look up to meet my gaze.

I swallowed and stumbled backward in shock—I could read nothing from his expression, not neutrality, not anger, not sadness. His features might as well have been carved from granite, less revealing than the face of his statue in Centennial Park.

“Superman?” I whispered though a dry mouth.

“Thank you, Lois. You’re right. Clark...deserves you.” He straightened, suddenly looming over me, his shoulders broadening, his hands unclenching themselves. “I wish I hadn’t disappointed you, Lois. I wish I could have been...what you thought I was.”

Guilt seared through me, twisting and writhing like cut electrical wires flapping in the wind. I had held high expectations of him, it was true—yet Clark had struggled to meet my expectations, not apologized for failing them.

Superman stepped close to me, wrapped his hands around my shoulders, and bent his head over mine. I don’t know if he would have kissed me on the mouth or if I was merely being paranoid; regardless, I turned my head so that his cool lips landed on my cheek. The kiss was short, yet it seemed to last forever; smooth, yet it seemed stilted; unreal, yet it weighed unnaturally heavy; familiar, yet alien.

As soon as Superman dropped his hands and lifted to hover in the air, I moved back to the window, grasping a fistful of curtain in my hand. “Good night, Lois,” he said softly, and was gone before I could drag my voice out from wherever it was hiding to make a reply.

Moving as if I were simply following a list of choreographed instructions, I ducked back inside the apartment, pulled the curtains from the grips of a breeze, and closed the windows. Then, slowly, definitively, I locked it and the identical window beside it. I turned to face the empty, dark apartment, and I wondered at the distinct lack of strong emotion within me. Shouldn’t I be feeling regret? Sadness? Disbelief? Doubt?

I had just locked Superman out of my life—shouldn’t I be feeling *something*?

Maybe this was a dream. Maybe I had fallen asleep just as quickly as Clark and had only imagined the tapping at the window and the heated argument I had held with the superhero and the metaphorical door I had closed on him—on *us*—and the final kiss he had bestowed upon me.

Testing that theory, I brought my hands up to my face, then flinched back from the ice that had somehow laid itself out just below my skin, too vivid and painful to be a mere dream. Pulling my fingers back away from my already-cold cheeks, I stared at my hands, shocked to realize that they were trembling.

Numbly, I walked back into the bedroom with the intention of retrieving a blanket, but I was caught in mid-stride by the sight of Clark. He was still asleep, wrapped in a couple blankets, lying on the narrow cot, a lock of ebony hair decorating his brow.

And suddenly, I *did* feel something. I felt relief, excitement, exhilaration, anticipation, and more, individual feelings that I had no experience with and no name for, emotions that grew stronger and

rooted themselves more deeply as I stepped to Clark's side to brush his hair back, relishing the feel of it against my chilled fingers.

I couldn't doubt my love for him, not when he touched my entire life so acutely. My past was defined by his absence, my present illuminated by his presence at my side, and the future already filled with him. Because even should he walk away tomorrow, I knew he would still be the most important person in my life—for how he had influenced me, the ways he had changed me, the metamorphosis he had elicited and encouraged and so obviously enjoyed being a part of.

Without him, there would still be a Lois Lane...but she wouldn't be someone I wanted to be.

With him... I almost couldn't keep my feet on the ground at the mere thought of a lifetime of waking up to his smile, dressing to the smells of his cooking, snatching sweet kisses on the run, working together all day, sneaking light caresses and weighted looks and inside jokes, bantering over dinner, playing board games or pretending to watch movies before heading for the bedroom where there'd be only one bed.

That sort of mundane joy, that everyday paradise, that simple heaven had been something I'd pretended I didn't want for so long. Yet the mere thought of it now left me more deeply shaken and more filled with yearning than a flight to the stars with Superman.

No, I didn't regret what I had done, or doubt the decision I had made. I only wished that I could tell Clark now, shake him on the shoulder, lean down over him, and whisper into his ear the same declaration I had made to Superman. My hand even ghosted to his arm before I could stop myself. He was tired and weak, I reminded myself, and I wanted to be able to savor the look in his eyes when I finally gave him my last secret. For once, *I* wanted to be the one that brought light into *his* life. And I wanted him to bask in the warmth of the sun as I told him, wanted to enjoy the look of his skin in the golden beams, wanted to delight in the laughter I was sure he would grace me with. Besides, we had a lifetime—a lifetime for me to show him just how much I loved him.

So I caressed his face one last time, then slipped into my own bed, curled up on my side where I could watch him. A formless time later, I fell into sleep and dreamed that Clark wrapped me in a scarlet-and-gold cape to keep me warm, smiled tenderly, sweetly down at me, handed me his glasses, and said, "You know all our secrets now, Lois...but do you know *his*?" And I turned my face away, and wrapped myself tighter in Superman's cape, and could not answer him.

Chapter 21

I woke with a start, and was, for a moment, wholly unable to recall what day it was, or figure out why the room was still coated with night's shadowy fingers, or tell what had woken me so abruptly. Belatedly, I felt a weight on my shoulder and looked to it. The moon had changed position since I had fallen into dream-touched sleep, but a sliver still held tightly to the edge of the window; that and a light I didn't remember having turned on in the living room were enough to illuminate the long-fingered hand shaking my shoulder, the tight blue sleeve that led up to broad shoulders made even broader by the cape sliding like falling water behind him, and Superman's face, his expression grimly intent as he whispered my name.

Superman?

I was suddenly very much awake, trying to sit up and finding Superman's firm grip halting the movement. "Clark!" I exclaimed.

It seemed impossible, yet Superman's features fell into even sterner lines, a strange, almost arrested expression painting itself over his face. "What did you say?"

"Clark," I repeated in a hushed tone. Finally managing to brush off his now-slack hand, I sat up and looked frantically in the direction of the window. "He can't see you here, not like this, not now. You have to le—"

My voice withered and blew away in brittle shreds. My heart's steady beat stuttered. My breathing turned ragged and uneven. My body lost all independent motion.

The cot was empty. The blankets were twisted and rumped; one hung over the edge, its limpness giving it the impression of death.

"Clark?" I said again, then louder, "Clark!"

"Lois?"

"No." My hand on Superman's chest shoving him away from me wasn't nearly strong enough to budge him, yet he fell back several paces nonetheless. I stumbled to my feet and moved to the cot, as if mere proximity would make Clark suddenly appear out of thin air. The blankets were cold, all the warmth leeching away.

"Lois, he's—"

"Nightmares," I interrupted Superman again. He was only a brightly colored haze in my vision, an obstacle to my comprehensive glance across all of the apartment I could see from my current position. "He has nightmares. He gets up and cooks. He's probably making breakfast. In the kitchen."

Except that it was terribly early—more like late at night than early in the morning.

Except that I couldn't hear him, couldn't feel his presence, couldn't imagine him staying away when he knew Superman was in the bedroom with me.

Except that Superman was looking at me with a terrible expression, a chilling knowledge in his hooded eyes, an implacable purpose evident in the set of his shoulders and the corded tension of his muscles.

My mind catalogued those facts, but I couldn't stop myself from hurrying out of the bedroom, darting a quick look around the living room, and jerking to a disappointed—terrified—halt in the kitchen.

The *empty* kitchen.

"Clark!" I called again, louder, careless of any neighbors that might be light sleepers, knowing only that I had to find him—that his absence could mean nothing good.

"Lois!" Superman tried to get my attention, his voice deeper, sterner, than I'd ever heard it, but I called Clark's name several more times, unable to admit that he was not in the apartment.

That he had left me. Again.

Finally, when all other options were exhausted—when even my strange desperation could no longer let me ignore the fact that Superman was trying to tell me something—I turned to the superhero. "Where is he?" I demanded.

"Lois, calm down." Superman held up conciliatory hands. The cape flaring behind him in the breeze let in by the open windows—the windows I had closed and locked just two or three hours earlier—ruined the calming effect he was trying to exude. "Clark isn't here."

"Where is he?" I asked, and shocked myself with the coldness of my own voice. "What did you do to him?"

Surprise flittered across Superman's face as I advanced on him. "Lois, please. I need your help."

"*You* need my help?" I repeated incredulously. Then, annoyed with myself, I shook my head. "Where is Clark?"

"He's gone to Luthor."

"*What?*" I gasped, all the blood draining from my body, leaving me white and empty, deprived of all life and light. "How did Luthor get him? Where were *you*?"

"Luthor didn't take him, Lois. Clark went to him. Voluntarily."

I couldn't help it—I laughed. "That's ridiculous. Clark hates Luthor."

"Lois." Superman stepped forward and would have placed his hands on my shoulders if I hadn't hastily moved back a pace. "After I left you, I thought about what you said. And I came back to talk to Clark about what had happened. I wanted to tell him...to tell him that I had tried. And I had failed."

I blinked, suddenly struck by the image of Clark and Superman standing side by side, leaning against the ledge of a skyscraper, and looking out over Metropolis as they discussed...*me*? "You talked to Clark about what I told you?" I asked. It was a silly concern, nowhere near as important as the absurd assertion that Clark was meeting with Luthor, and yet it was enough to momentarily pause my panic attack.

“He wouldn’t listen to me,” Superman said. He was staring into the distance, almost unaware that I was still in the room. “He commanded me to stay away from you, said that he would do whatever he had to in order to protect you from me. And when I left, he left, too.”

Now that I had a mystery to solve, an investigation to conduct, a lead to pursue, I was able to stave off panic and exhaustion both. My mind fell into easy, ordered lines. “You don’t know that he went to Luthor,” I said calmly even as I tried to translate his ambiguous statements into a progression of events I could understand. It was hard, practically impossible, to imagine Clark leaving me all alone without even a word of explanation, even harder to imagine him voluntarily and solitarily going to meet the man who had held him captive for long, painful, nightmarish weeks.

“Luthor’s the only one who has what he wants.”

“And what does he want?” I questioned, puzzlement creasing my brow.

Superman raised his eyebrows, as if he thought I should have figured this out already. “Kryptonite. I know he told you about it.”

Despite myself, I let out another disbelieving laugh. “Clark can’t touch Kryptonite. It would hu—”

“He can if it’s sheathed in lead.”

I stared at the superhero before me, noticing for the first time the intensity and urgency trapped within him. He shifted his weight, his hands clenching and unclenching, and his voice was just the slightest bit frayed. His expression was distant, distracted, detached.

“Clark wouldn’t leave me,” I stated quietly. It wasn’t one of the questions my reporter’s mind was putting forward, or even that good of a defense... but it was the one thought running through my mind. Clark had promised he wouldn’t leave me again. And I believed him. I did. With an effort, I shoved aside the image of my partner walking out of the newsroom with his belongings all packed up, his gentle, caring face disappearing behind the elevator doors.

Superman only looked at me, his head cocked slightly. And this time, it was I who looked away.

“How would he even know where to find Luthor?” I demanded irritably after a moment. “And how do you know all this?”

“Because...” Superman paused and swallowed. “Because the last time I flew away from him after arguing about you, something very bad happened. And I didn’t want that to happen again. So I came back. And I followed him away from the apartment, watched him take directions from some man I’ve never seen before, and listened when he bargained with Luthor for a piece of Kryptonite.”

“Why?” I burst out. “*Why* would Clark want Kryptonite?”

Feeling small and alone—abandoned—I wrapped my arms around my middle, huddled in on myself in a vain attempt to recapture the feeling of Clark’s embrace. I was unable to recall it, however, not with the doubt soaking in from every pore to consume me. Had Clark seen me with Superman last night? Had he seen the superhero kiss my cheek? Had he gotten the wrong impression? Didn’t he know that I loved him? I wanted to cry out in despair.

But how could he? The thought struck ice through to the very center of my being. How could he know that when I hadn’t told him? I had told Superman instead of him, given the brother he no longer trusted the words I was sure Clark wanted more than anything else in the world.

“That’s why I need your help,” Superman explained, jolting me from my self-absorbed thoughts. He sidled a couple steps nearer the window. “He told me he would do anything to protect you. And he thinks you need protection from *me*.”

“Clark would never hurt anyone,” I retorted with false confidence. Inwardly, however... inwardly, I was trying my best not to remember what Clark had told me just the night before. <I do know that I would do *anything* to stop him—to stop *anyone*—from hurting you.>

Superman let out a small sigh. “He thinks I’m an imposter, Lois.”

Every cell in my body blazed with terrified flames, transformed into a million, billion sparks that set my very soul alight. Henderson

had wondered why Clark had told us about the Kryptonite. And the night Clark had told me the secret of the deadly stone, he had seemed unusually intent, severely purposeful, and disproportionately relieved when I believed him.

<...I would do anything to stop him—to stop *anyone*—from hurting you.>

“But Luthor will kill him,” I whispered, suddenly unable to speak any louder. “Clark’s brought down his empire—Luthor will destroy him.”

“Clark offered him a deal.” There was no hint of emotion, no nuance or inflection in Superman’s voice, no sign of the betrayal he must have felt. *If* he were telling the truth. “Luthor would leave you completely alone, and Clark... Clark would rid Luthor of Superman. Luthor hates Superman—he would do anything, even ally himself with Clark, to rid himself of the alien. For all we know, he even encouraged this action while Clark was his prisoner.”

“No.” I shook my head and backed up farther, distancing myself from Superman’s assertions. My back thudded into the partition wall separating the kitchen and living room. “This is wrong. You misunderstood or... or something. Clark would never hurt anyone—and he certainly wouldn’t meet with Luthor to accomplish it!”

“Lois, you asked if Clark and I had argued before Nightfall,” Superman said, the barest hint of impatience feathering his tone. “The truth is that we did. We argued about you... and only days later, he was imprisoned away from the sun. And, last night... last night, we argued about you again.”

He didn’t have to spell out the rest. It was there in what he didn’t say, there in what Clark had said, there in the subtle changes in Clark.

Superman gentled his voice, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. “Lois, he thinks that by getting rid of me, he’ll be helping the ‘real’ Superman come back.”

That statement so shocked me that I simply stared at Superman for a long moment. The “real” Superman? I had assumed that Clark thought the “real” Superman had died saving Earth from the Nightfall asteroid. Part of the reason, if I were completely honest, that I had resisted the idea of a “false” Superman so strongly was because I had not wanted to go back to the world I had occupied for a month, the world that had possessed no superhero to right wrongs and avert tragedies and stop evildoers. But if there *were* another Superman...

“I need your help, Lois,” Superman continued, his soft, hypnotic voice weaving its way through my astonished musings. “I need you to get the Kryptonite away from him before he hurts either me or himself. Please, Lois. I need you. *Clark* needs you.”

Clark. Yes, he did need me. No matter where he had really gone—because I knew he would *never* have willingly met with Luthor—no matter whether he possessed an alien rock or not, I knew that he needed me. *I* needed *him*. We were partners; we were supposed to be together.

So I hurriedly threw on a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt. Unable to explain the action, I also rummaged through Clark’s belongings and found one of his old sweaters. He must have left it behind in his Planet locker, hanging there for Perry to find and bring back to him, and it still smelled of him, the scent I had grown so used to that I had no longer noticed it. Until it was taken away. Until it was no longer there for me to breathe in and savor and confirm that I wasn’t alone.

I pulled the sweater on, rolling the sleeves up, and then headed back out into the living room. Superman was standing as close to the window as he could get. His stance painfully reminded me of Clark standing there just the morning before. When he turned to look at me, his expression was even almost identical to what Clark’s had been—blank, giving nothing away save the painful grip he held on his emotions.

“Ready?” Superman asked quietly.

I nodded, finding it impossible to speak past the myriad thoughts running laps in my head. Superman scooped me into his arms, cradling me close to his chest, and took to the heavy-clouded air beneath a

now-obscured sky, but those were facts that passed me by. My mind—my heart—was full of Clark. His awestruck expression when he had stepped close to me and told me I was beautiful. His hand on my cheek, caressing me in that tender, caring gesture only he made.

Only he made...

The “real” Superman...

There was something there, something that tugged at the edges of my awareness, something that was begging for attention like a puppy dancing around the heels of a preoccupied owner.

I tensed in Superman’s arms, peering all about in an effort to see where he was taking me. Not that the destination really mattered—not so long as Clark was there—but I couldn’t believe that Clark had really gone to see Luthor. No matter what he had said about protecting me—no matter what Superman claimed—I knew that Clark didn’t believe in giving concessions to the enemy, not for any amount of dark promises or dire threats.

Superman shifted me in his arms slightly, as if compensating for my restless movement, and my hand fell on his chest. The wind whipped at my hair and made a rushing noise about us, but I could still clearly feel Superman’s heartbeat. It was irregular, almost erratic, certainly much more unstable than it had been during our last two flights. With a frown, I glanced to Superman’s face, but he was looking straight ahead, once more expressionless save for a tiny crease in his brow that matched the one Clark had exhibited when doubting his own integrity.

A memory danced around me, teasing me, pestering me: stone walls turned to gray rubble, a desperate, terrified expression darkening already-dark eyes, a long hand spanning the side of my face.

“Superman,” I said quietly, hating the way the wet clouds enveloping us smothered my voice and made it sound small, afraid, lost. “Was Clark scared? When he faced Luthor?”

Superman kept his gaze fixed straight ahead. “It was a confrontation he knew had to occur eventually.”

A tremble passed through my frame. “But was he—”

“Here we are.” Superman straightened and descended to touch down on the steps leading to an enormous factory with a stylized S over the entrance. Smoke rose from the foundry within to join with the clouds in concealing the stars and the moon. I remembered Perry assigning the story of this Steelworks’ construction to Diane just a week or so before the heat-wave had driven Clark away. Though its scope seemed to say otherwise, I knew that the factory had been built in a very short period of time. The owner, an African-American by the name of John Henry Irons, had built it with the stated intention of making his life count for something after being rescued from an accidental fall by Superman.

“Why would Clark come here?” I asked dubiously with an expansive look all about just in case I would be able to see him.

“If there were another Superman,” the superhero said slowly, “he would need a place to dispose of the extra body.”

I gaped at him, a chill pebbling my flesh despite Clark’s sweater. Complete disbelief enveloped all else within and around me. I didn’t care what Superman thought he had heard; the grisly acts he was imagining were entirely alien to Clark’s very essence.

Superman met my gaze, seemingly oblivious to my shock and doubt. “There’s a smaller door around the side that will lead us straight to him. I’ll follow you inside, but I can’t get too close to the Kryptonite.”

The reminder that Clark was—supposedly—near obliterated what little bit of caution I had managed to dredge up. Without hesitation, I followed Superman’s softly spoken directions and strode down a small path to an employees’ entrance along the west side of the massive building. I don’t know if it was locked; Superman pulled it open smoothly, but he could have easily torn the lock open with as little effort.

Despite my eagerness to reach Clark, I couldn’t help but pause when I took in the vast, labyrinthine interior, a maze of metal ladders, grated landings, concrete floors, tools designed for large construction,

and all of it presided over by a bubbling vat of melted steel that glowed molten red, flaming orange, and brash yellow, all glinting with occasional hints of silver. Sparks occasionally bubbled over; the smoke that rose through the carefully designed roof was painted over with fiery shades. The blazing hues were garish and almost painful to my eyes, accustomed as they were to the cooler black and white night sky. The heat was like a tangible presence, a wall that tried to stop me from entering.

Forcibly, I shook aside my qualms and stepped farther into the building that seemed to breathe solid heat. Ignoring the mysterious, overwhelming surroundings, I looked for any hint of my partner. “Clark? Clark!”

I jumped when Superman’s hand fell on my shoulder, then scowled at him. Wasn’t he supposed to be waiting outside until I signaled that it was safe? “Be careful, Lois,” he advised me, the deep timbre of his voice traveling easily through the black and red atmosphere. In an odd movement, he moved his free hand to his back, hidden behind his cape.

Feeling hemmed in, I irritably shrugged his hand off my shoulder. “Lois?”

At the quiet, surprised, pained utterance of my name, my attention snapped straight to a shadowed corner beneath stairs leading upward to a platform. There, in the darkness, hunched against the metal as he had once been hunched against the bricks comprising his cell, was Clark. The shadows held him jealously to themselves, clasping him tightly in their cold hands, wincing away whenever the boiling steel flashed lurid hues through their intransient bodies.

“Clark!” I gasped in relief—in astonishment that he was actually here—and rushed to his side, half-falling, half-kneeling beside him. My hands instantly moved to skim over his neck, shoulders, chest, and arms, and I almost wept to catch a glimpse of his gaunt, haunted face.

“Lois, what are you doing here?” he exclaimed in a weak whisper. His gaze went past me—to Superman—and turned into a glare. “You promised! You promised me she wouldn’t be hurt!”

“And she won’t be—I made sure of that,” Superman assured him, his hands now hanging at his sides, one clenched into a fist.

“What are *you* doing here, Clark?” I retorted over Superman’s reply. “How did you get here? Are you all right? Tell me what happened!” My exploratory touch had found no injuries, and yet the weakness, the defeated resignation inherent in Clark’s posture, seemed to speak for themselves. Had Luthor dosed him with the Kryptonite before he had handed it over?

If he had come for Kryptonite at all, I firmly reminded myself. Clark had lied in the past, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t Superman lying now.

“Lois.” Clark lifted his hand as if it weighed more than it should and settled it on my shoulder. “He’s lying to you. He’s dangerous. He’s going to hurt you.”

<...I would do *anything* to stop him—to stop *anyone*—from hurting you.>

My eyes fell closed in terrible dread I tried to fight off. How could this be happening? What could Superman have said to make Clark resort to such drastic measures?

Or...was I missing something? Something about Smallville, and Trask, and the reason Superman had never yet appeared to save Clark when he was in danger.

“Superman says you want to hurt him,” I said abstractedly as I reached out and placed earnest hands on either side of Clark’s face. “But that can’t be true—you wouldn’t do this. Please. We’ll go home. I’ll stay with you. I’m not going to leave you. Please, Clark. Please, let’s go home.” I dropped my voice to a murmur. “Just tell me if there’s Kryptonite here.”

Clark’s hand tightened on my shoulder. “*He* has it!”

I met his gaze, refused to let him look away, mutely begged him to explain things to me. I had thought the mystery all solved, and yet...it wasn’t. I had thought I had taken the leap over that perilous edge to catch the answer to all the confusion surrounding Clark and Superman

—yet now I wondered if I wasn't still hanging by a thread over that eternal drop.

"How can he have the Kryptonite?" I asked him. "You told me it hurt Superman."

"Yes, Lois." Urgency coated his voice just as soot coated the sides of the vat. "It hurts *me!*"

"I know," I replied. A "*real*" Superman... the thought drifted incongruously through my mind, casting shadowed light. And Superman, bursting through the concrete wall of a bank vault... Clark, soaking wet and bruised from the beating inflicted by Trask, taking me into his arms.

"Lois... you said you knew my secret." Clark searched my face, a trace of panic evident in his eyes. And his hand moved from my shoulder to cradle my cheek in his palm, the tips of his fingers playing with the ends of my hair.

And the breath caught in my throat as time came to a screeching halt around me.

And the answer came to me in a blinding flash of light.

"Lois." Clark's whisper was all that managed to pierce the bright, frozen moment. "That man cannot be Superman... because Superman's real name is Clark Kent."

Two images flashed into being before my eyes with stark, blinding intensity: Clark cupping the side of my face as he kissed me goodbye. Superman reaching out to brush his palm along my cheek as he told me I was special to him.

And suddenly I wasn't staring at Clark anymore. I was staring at Superman through the lenses of a familiar pair of glasses, his infinitely strong hand on my face, his aloof expression tight with pain and desperation, his red and blue Suit replaced by a black shirt and gray slacks.

A thousand memories replayed themselves through my mind so quickly that all I could presently comprehend was the reordering of my very existence.

Then I blinked and Clark was once more before me, silently pleading with me. "Please," he whispered with hope that was clearly fading. "Please believe me. Believe *in* me."

Believe in Clark? It had been so long since I had done otherwise that it now seemed impossible to even contemplate it.

The Kryptonite.

The pretender hiding behind that familiar S.

I knew this would hurt Clark, knew it would devastate him, but I had no other choice. For his sake, I *had* to do this.

Slowly, for the first time realizing just how deadly Superman—or a man with Superman's powers—could be, I turned my head to regard the figure cloaked in shadows. He stared back, every muscle in his body tense, his fisted hand placed over a nearby shelf, his eyes narrowed as he tried to read my mind. I had never been more grateful that telepathy *wasn't* one of Superman's abilities.

Once more, I met Clark's eyes, willing *him* to read my mind now. "Clark... Superman is right beside me." I deliberately enunciated each word as clearly as possible, pressing my fingertips into his chest. "You have to trust me, okay? Trust me."

"No." Anguish flared within Clark's eyes, and his hand fell to his side. "Please, Lois!"

"Trust me," I said again. Then I stood and faced the man who had flown me here. "You're right," I said, picking my words with extreme caution. "Superman—he needs help."

His expression was covered with darkness, but I could feel him studying me closely, warily. "Luthor's broken him," he said yet again, but there was a hint of doubt coloring his tone. Or so I thought. But I had been so wrong about so many things that I was no longer sure I could trust my own perceptions.

I inched nearer the caped man before me, noting that his hand had dropped from the shelf at his side. Instantly, my attention was split between the edgy superhero and the collection of items on that shelf. I took another step forward, aching inside at the feel of Clark's tormented eyes upon me and the sound of his anguished utterance of

my name.

"We have to get him away from here," I murmured, as calm and soothing as if I were the one taming a wild animal now. "We should take him home. We'll figure everything out then."

Slightly, I spread my hands and lifted them into the air. I dared not look away from the superhero's masked eyes, dared not break the moment of intense study. A gleam of fiery light reflected off a small box—silver, the perfect size to slide into a pocket, placed among the shelf's clutter. Only one step more and it would be mere inches from my right hand.

"And then?" questioned the stranger dressed as Superman, tilting his head. "What will you do then, Lois?"

I shrugged, the movement not incidentally allowing my hand to brush against the shelf. "We'll play it by ear."

And I drifted my hand forward, felt the lead beneath my fingers—and then let out an exclamation of pain when the imposter's hand blurred to grab hold of my wrist in a too-tight grip.

"Don't touch her!" Clark blurted from behind me.

The stranger's familiar eyes, illuminated by a burst of orange and red, widened in surprise, and he looked down at where he held my hand before releasing me. "You shouldn't have done that," he said, his voice resigned.

There was a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach that grew larger as I stared up at the man I had thought to be Superman.

The imposter.

Behind me, the real Superman struggled to his feet, his glasses reflecting light to pierce the shadows.

The imposter's attention went to him. "Don't move!" he ordered harshly. "You promised you'd stay there."

"And *you* promised that Lois would be safe!" Clark retorted, but he fell still.

Ignoring the questions that smothered my mind beneath a haze of confusion, I took advantage of the distraction, reaching again for the lead box Nigel had once carried.

"Don't!" The imposter's voice rose with aggravation, resounding strangely through the shifting surroundings, and he used the back of his hand to casually swat me aside.

I hit the shelf, sending myriad items tumbling, then crashed into nearby stairs and lay, dazed, for a moment, sprawled across the grated steps. The darkness and muted sparks floated incessantly through my vision as I hastily scrambled back to my feet.

"No!" Clark cried, reaching out a hand to his double. "You said you wouldn't hurt her!"

"I didn't mean to!" the imposter exclaimed, a note of helplessness threading his voice—so similar to and so different from Clark's.

"I warned you to be careful," Clark instructed frantically despite the fact that his body was trembling—with exhaustion, pain, terror, or something else entirely? "Your emotions can get in the way and rupture your concentration."

The imposter grimaced and looked down at his hands as he clenched and unclenched them. "This is so hard," he muttered.

Breathing heavily, I stared between the two men. Taking their words at face value, I might be tempted to think Clark had some measure of control over his double, but looking at them seemed to dispel that possibility. Clark leaned heavily against a railing and watched the imposter carefully, warily, uneasily. The imposter stood purposely between Clark and myself, careful to keep the door always behind him. And he seemed to be waiting for something.

My guess was Luthor.

So, instead of standing there and watching Clark and the imposter's stand-off, I tentatively stepped forward, my eyes searching through the gloom for the lead box I had knocked to the floor. A glint of silver pierced the hellish darkness, and without waiting another instant to assess the situation, I dived for it, knowing only that Clark would be safer the instant I got rid of the Kryptonite.

My hand closed around the harsh edges of the box, and a surge of triumph flashed through my system before being seared to ash by the

feel of strong—terribly strong—hands wrapping around my arms and giving me a sharp, violent shake. Clark was shouting something in the background, words that blended indistinguishably together as I caught sight of the anger swirling across the imposter’s features.

“I told you not to do that,” he growled—and he sounded nothing at all like Clark or Superman. In fact, he sounded—looked—wholly like a stranger, all the attributes that had drawn me to him really only mimicked, copied from Clark. “I tried to warn you before!” Something akin to desperation, to panic, to caged haggardness was briefly lit within his eyes by the shifting flames. “I asked you what I should do!” he exclaimed, giving me another shake that rattled every bone in my body and scattered my thoughts to dust. My feet dangled over the floor. “You said family was important—you said I had to do what he told me!”

“But Clark *didn’t* tell you to do this!” I retorted as my hands scrabbled worse than uselessly over his. His grip didn’t hurt—not yet—but the unbalanced edge to his voice didn’t exactly fill me with confidence.

“Clark.” The word was a snarl, and the imposter tossed me harshly to the side. “Always it’s ‘Clark, Clark, Clark!’ I wanted you to help me—and instead you threw me away! I told Father I wouldn’t do what he wanted unless he kept you safe—and still you *betrayed* me!”

A familiar pain blazed through my left arm, and I stumbled, unable to push myself to my feet. I rolled onto my back, blanching when I saw the super-powered being advancing on me.

“I-I didn’t know!” I gasped. “Who is your father?”

As if I didn’t know, I thought despairingly. As if a torrent of sudden revelations and a haze of belated understanding weren’t drowning me in their shock and astonishment and confusion.

Clark, terrified desperation painted across his face, grabbed at the imposter’s shoulder, but he shook my partner aside seemingly without effort, his attention fixed solely on me. Again, Clark reached for him, and this time the man wearing Superman’s Suit cuffed him on the head. Clark was flung atop the steps, halfway to the next landing, and though he struggled to stand again, he was clearly dazed.

I had been in more life-and-death situations in my twenty-six years than most people experienced in a lifetime, yet fear was an emotion I rarely experienced, protected from the full extent of any approaching danger by adrenaline, focus, and purpose, not to mention the once-often, fortuitous arrival of Superman. But now, with this man whom I had so long thought to *be* Superman looming over me—so strong I couldn’t hope to fight him off, so fast I couldn’t hope to outrun him, so unknown I couldn’t even begin to figure out how to talk to him—now, fear struck hard and deep, brutal, overpowering, so omnipresent that there was no way to escape it.

But I refused to face it lying down. So, ignoring the feel of the wound in my arm and the fear-inspired weakness of my muscles, I painfully picked myself off the floor and canted my chin defiantly upward.

Something—something soft, something completely at odds with his hostile behavior—stirred within the imposter’s eyes, giving him back the slightest resemblance to my partner. As quickly as it had appeared, however, it vanished, replaced by cold stoniness, enforced neutrality.

My stomach dropped out of my feet, and I squeezed my eyes shut, shrank away from the touch I knew was coming. “No,” I whispered, a useless protest, a hopeless denial. All my resolution to protect Clark, and I could do nothing for him. I hadn’t even realized he had been kidnapped out of the same room I was sleeping in, had almost believed the lies the imposter had told me, and now I had done nothing to see him freed from this lightless prison.

Despair met fear, mixed with it to become something even more sickening, more all-pervasive, more draining.

“Father said I had to,” the imposter pleaded even as his long fingers curled around my arm...began to tighten...verged on becoming painful—

“No! Get away from her!” The familiar, beautiful voice split the

dark fate closing in on me. And then Clark, standing twenty feet away and leaning heavily against a railing, sucked in a deep breath and blew out.

A cold wind—as cold as the waves that had hidden Clark from me and then delivered him to me—raced past me, causing me to shrink away, wrapping my arms around my head. The imposter staggered beneath the onslaught of arctic breath, his cape flared out behind him, an arm thrown up to his own face in a warding gesture that did nothing to stop him from being flung backward against the wall.

Finally, the breeze died away; in its absence, the air felt unnaturally still and cloyingly hot. Shock flowed like quicksilver through my veins as my eyes met Clark’s. The memory of Clark’s—Superman’s—hand on my cheek had revealed his real secret to me, but it was something else entirely to see Superman’s powers emerging from my so-human partner, glasses still perched impossibly atop his nose.

Ironically, Clark looked almost as surprised as I felt; awed astonishment was written all across his face.

“Clark!” I exclaimed, though where I found my voice was a mystery. “Your powers—they’re back!”

He swept my body with a gaze, then grimaced in seeming disappointment, his voice filled with an encompassing concern. “Not all of—”

“Look out!” I screamed with an out-flung hand.

The warning came too late.

The imposter stood menacingly before the door, all trace of doubt or reluctance erased from his demeanor. In the shadows, his eyes glowed red. Heat flared hotter, as if the air itself had turned molten.

Clark let out a gasping cry and staggered backward, clutching at his chest, a tendril of smoke slipping from between his fingers to fade into darkness. The smell of burnt flesh tainted the air.

I stared at Clark, horrified. Never before had I seen heat-vision used in such a way. Never before had I felt such frantic terror. Clark’s name was torn from me, but it was covered by the sound of his second cry of pain as the imposter’s eyes once more gleamed a red as malevolent as the green glow of Kryptonite.

The Kryptonite!

Snatching random, panicked glances of Clark, I desperately searched through the gloom. The lead box hadn’t been moved since I had last gone for it, so I found it almost immediately. Yet how could I reach it? The instant I made a grab for it, I knew the imposter would be on me—and this time, who knew how far he’d go?

Clark seemed to read my mind, or perhaps he simply grew abruptly tired of being beaten. Straightening, his shirt still smoking, he tore the glasses from his face and stared intently at the imposter. For a breathless moment that stretched like elastic, nothing happened. And then, so suddenly it seemed a spell was broken, Clark’s own eyes shone with a ruby light. The imposter’s face shifted in surprise, but he sent out his own burst of heat-vision. A fireball exploded into existence halfway between the two super-powered beings.

But Clark was sweating with effort, and the next time a flame sparked in mid-air, it was nearer Clark than the imposter.

Dropping to my knees, I scrabbled through the clutter on the ground and closed my hand once more around the lead box. Curling my body around it, I looked up, and as suddenly as that, there was no more room for fear or horror or desperation, only for action.

Clark was slumped back against the railing, but still gamely glaring back at the imposter...and yet a long, red line down his forearm revealed that his miraculous strength was all but gone.

“Clark,” I whispered.

“You *are* inferior,” the imposter proclaimed, almost disbelievingly. “But you said he lied.”

“He did,” Clark panted. “That’s all Luthor knows how to do. Didn’t he lie about hurting Lois? Didn’t he lie about who—what—you are? About what’s happening to you?”

“Don’t!” the imposter snapped. “You have no idea what you’re talking about!”

Then, completely unexpectedly, he let out a groan and bent forward, his hands gripping the sides of his head. With a jolt of recognition, I realized that I had seen this before—the day he had flown me to a mountainside location so I could relay Clark’s cunningly planned questions. I didn’t know what was happening to Luthor’s minion, but I wasn’t about to let the opportunity slip by.

“Clark!” I hissed, capturing his immediate attention. I tilted my hands to reveal that I held the Kryptonite. “Get out of here! Quickly, while he’s still distracted!”

His eyes widened. “No! I won’t leave you—”

“Go!” I commanded raggedly. “I can’t use it if you’re here! *Now*, Clark!”

A flurry of emotions passed across his face and across mine in return, an entire conversation played out completely through expression and clash of wills. We each knew the other so well that no words needed to be uttered, and no time for them anyway. In the end, Clark made his torturously slow way to the door, easily evading the imposter’s belated, uncoordinated grab for him.

As soon as the door closed on the comparatively bright, freshly cool exterior and on Clark, I flicked open the latch to the box. The imposter tried to reach me. My hands shook—but not enough to stop me from flipping open the lid.

Green pierced the darkness, stabbed the shadows, and effortlessly felled the man wearing Superman’s Suit. He writhed on the ground, whimpers torn from his clenched jaw, the crimson cape twisted and torn beneath him, his skin turned sallow and vulnerable. I stood over him and looked down at his suffering, and I felt only grim anger.

“How could you let them do this to Clark?” I questioned in a jagged, severe tone that sounded nothing like me. “How could you hurt him so much?”

“Well, I must say, this isn’t working out the way I’d hoped. How very disappointing, Lois.”

My heart leapt to my throat and covered there even as I whirled to look up. There, far above and staring down at me, stood a man who, even drenched in shadows, was immediately recognizable. And, I realized with a shiver, he had been watching us the entire time.

“Luthor!” The name fell from my deadened lips and even the darkness quivered at the sound of it.

“Father!” The imposter stretched a pleading hand up toward Luthor as the crime-boss began to descend the stairs. His expression, mingled hope and apprehension, resembled a child’s, lost and afraid. “Help me! It... *hurts!*”

“The weak deserve to perish,” Luthor replied pitilessly. “Only might makes right—and so far, *son*, I haven’t seen much might.”

The words were so harsh, so cold, so cruel, that I was half-tempted to close the lead on the Kryptonite and let the imposter deal with Luthor. Only... I was pretty sure the imposter wouldn’t raise a hand against his “Father.”

I backed up a pace, disconcerted by Luthor’s approach, so smooth, so purposeful. Dismissing his creation, he stepped past him and reached out to me. “Close that box,” he ordered, almost conversationally.

“I’ll nev—” The sight of the door behind Luthor cracking open and Clark peeking inside silenced me. A spark of irritation scampered through my body; couldn’t he just *once* do what I told him? Reluctantly, flicking a glance down to the imposter, I bit back my reluctance and pretended to concede. “Fine,” I muttered, and snapped the box closed.

The effect wasn’t an instantaneous cure, but the imposter’s body did relax, more proof that the Kryptonite had been bombarding him with pain just as it had done to Clark.

A blur at the edge of my vision jerked my attention from the imposter to his “Father,” and I managed to duck away from Luthor’s lunge just in time to avoid him. Fury rained sharp hailstones through my soul, and I lashed out at Clark’s tormentor. I had asked the imposter how he could have let Clark be hurt, but Luthor was the one who had masterminded that torture, the one who had doled it out. And

I hated him for it.

My foot snapped his chin back; another kick sent him stumbling backward, the air knocked out of him. He was expecting the next kick, however, and he grabbed my leg and tugged sharply forward. Off-balance, I skidded toward him, horrified when he wrapped an arm around me in a pseudo-embrace. With a low tsking sound, he clamped his hand around my wrist and squeezed agonizingly tight.

The lead box fell to the floor.

Ignoring pain, I tore myself free of Luthor’s hold, snapping back the hand he held and managing a glancing blow to his cheek. He let out a yell of outrage, which only fueled me—that, and the knowledge that Clark might have already come back inside, closing his escape route behind him.

I made to punch Luthor again, but was stopped by familiar—alien—long fingers catching hold of my forearm and easily holding me still. With a gasp, I looked behind me and saw the expected red S on its yellow and blue background. Fear began to trickle slowly down my spine, drop by agonizing drop.

Luthor held his hand to the emerging bruise on his cheek, and he smiled at me—a black and chilling smile. “A valiant effort, my dear, but in the end, a vain one.”

“Let go of me!” I demanded of the imposter, beseeching him with my eyes. “Please!”

He did not look at me; he looked straight ahead. His hand was not tight around my arm, but it was immovable.

“Ah, quite a useless task, I’m afraid.” Luthor snickered, then, and I was suddenly very certain that whatever tenuous hold on sanity he had once held was now only a distant memory. “My son is quite loyal to me.”

“Your son?” I repeated skeptically. Inside, I quivered at the memory of a starlit flight, a kiss that had physically moved me, confidences shared that had, I now realized, been later relayed to Luthor. “There isn’t much of a family resemblance,” I added sneeringly. Every fiber in my body refused to reveal how terrified I really was. Carefully, not wanting to give him away, I chanced a glimpse over Luthor’s shoulder in the direction of the door. It was closed; there was no sign of Clark.

“Not in physical appearance, perhaps,” Luthor allowed patronizingly. “But I created him. Quite simple, really, if one has possession of the correct tools—and, of course, the correct genetic material. Which your partner so obligingly provided.”

Disbelievingly, I stared up at the... clone? “He’s just a copy,” I realized aloud. But why should I be surprised? I had already come to the conclusion that everything attractive about him was simply the reflected glory of Clark.

“Not ‘just,’” Luthor corrected. Leaden defeat paralyzed me when he bent and scooped up the shielded Kryptonite. “He is *better* than the original, aren’t you, my son?”

For the first time since Luthor had made his presence known, the clone dared to glance at me. He bore a helpless, almost arrested expression, and no matter what had transpired only moments before, I couldn’t help but feel pity for him.

Luthor played with the box, holding it up to the flickering light and studying it as if it were a priceless work of art. Knowing him as I now did, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he *did* view it as such. “But I must admit, my dear, you have disappointed me. Quite irrevocably, in fact.”

I shrank back when he stepped closer to me, trapped between the clone’s chest and the egomaniac before me. Clark’s double was the one who possessed strength enough to kill me with a single touch, a single glance, a single breath, yet I instinctively knew that he was safer than Luthor.

“I made my son study everything your *Superman* did and said and thought,” Luthor explained as if enlightening me. “I was sure that if given a choice between the superhero you so publicly idolized and the bumbling, inconsequential partner you had once had, you would choose the superhero I fashioned for you. In fact, it was a wager I

made with your *Superman*.” He gave a careless shrug, seemingly oblivious to the lives he had ruined. “I don’t think he took me seriously, not until I invited you to stay with him. Then…” A cruel smile played along his narrow lips. “Then I think it became frightfully real. Didn’t it, *Kent*?” Luthor whirled to face the shadows near the door.

I swallowed to force my heart closer to its rightful place and to work some moisture into my mouth. “If you had been paying attention earlier,” I said acidly, “you would have seen that Clark left.”

Luthor sneered at me so condescendingly that I actually moved to slap him. The clone easily caught my hand, now holding both of them. And still he did not look at me, his eyes locked on the man he knew as his father.

“Trust me,” Luthor stated. “My credo is: know thy enemy. And Kent’s major weakness is his *morality*, his appalling sense of ethics, his pathetic desire to be *normal*. Without those, he could rule the world, have all the power he wanted, force the world leaders to kneel before him, possess everything he wants—he could have simply said the word, and you would have been his, wouldn’t you, my dear?” He didn’t even pause to enjoy my discernible flinch away from the truth of his words. “But his *integrity*—his wish to be nothing more than a mere human—won’t allow that! And he does seem to love you, Lois Lane, though frankly, I question his tastes. No, Kent would never leave you. He’s here, biding his time, waiting, trying to outthink me.”

“That shouldn’t be hard,” I observed sarcastically. It was dangerous, but, well, when had I ever let that stop me before? And Clark would need the distraction if he really did plan on attacking Luthor.

For a second, though, I wondered if I had pushed the crime-boss a bit too far. His eyes narrowed dangerously, and he moved so near me that even the clone took a tiny step backward. Was it my imagination, or did the clone actually almost pull me protectively behind him?

“*You* betrayed him as surely as anyone,” Luthor told me slowly, emphasizing each word, speaking loudly enough that Clark, no matter where he was hiding, would hear. “All those months he followed you around so pathetically while you ignored him in favor of his more brightly attired identity. And then, when I offered that hero to you on a silver platter, you threw aside your ‘partner’ and fled into the arms of my son. You might have eventually revealed your fickle nature by throwing aside even the superhero for the nobody he portrays, but make no mistake—you betrayed Kent every time you believed my creation over him.”

“I believed ‘your creation,’” I said coldly, blinking away tears before they could fall, “only when he spoke the words Clark would say. When he did what Clark would do. When he touched me the way Clark does. When he pretended to *be* Clark! Your clone isn’t Superman—he can *never* be Superman. And, no matter what method you choose to attain that goal, *you* will never be Superman either. It’s not the Suit. It’s not the powers. It’s not even the DNA! It’s something you’ll never have—*character*. To be Superman, you have to care about something...something other than yourself. You have to *be* Clark Kent.”

Casually, thoughtlessly, Luthor backhanded me. The tears I had been restraining fell, wetting the clone’s fake S. His deceptively gentle hands tightened—not painfully, almost comfortingly—over my wrists.

“Stop it, Luthor!” Clark stepped out of the shadows, and at the sound of his voice—so strong, so determined, so resolute—the light fled to his form, armored him in illumination, fed on his inner light to brighten the whole of the interior.

“No, Clark!” I cried.

Aside from a reassuring look to me, Clark did not turn his attention from the man who had tormented him. “Your fight is with me, Luthor. You said you wouldn’t hurt her if I followed your rules. You promised she would be safe while we played this *game* of yours.”

A victorious gleam glinted coldly in Luthor’s obsidian eyes. “All’s fair in love and war, and believe me, Kent”—his voice turned as hard as titanium, his expression as unyielding as the firm body just behind

me—“*this —is —war!*”

And he flipped open the box of Kryptonite.

Clark staggered beneath the eerie light but managed to stay on his feet. The clone, however, released me and fell to the floor with an inarticulate scream. I jerked myself free of his deadweight and stood on shaky legs.

“Father, please!” the clone begged. He stared up at his father, but Luthor had no attention to spare for him.

“*Superman!*” Luthor exclaimed derisively as he plucked the green stone from the box and tossed the lead container away. He shoved the stone nearer Clark, and my partner let out a tiny whimper and slipped to his knees. “I don’t need you, Kent. The world has no longer need of your services at all! And your clone—what need have I of a puppet Superman when you both proved so weak! *I* am more powerful than you both! I can have anything I want—and that’s without *superpowers* at my beck and call! I already own more congressional seats than anyone would suspect—I control the criminal world—I can have whatever I want!”

Luthor lowered his voice, bending forward as Clark was forced to the floor, agony twisting his beloved features into an unrecognizable mask of pain. “I had Lois already, even without my son. She dated me, you know...kissed me. When Superman failed her, she turned to me. And when I was not there, when her Superman failed her again, she turned to you. You come last in her estimation, Kent. You—”

“You talk too much,” I growled and lunged forward. Luthor turned startled eyes in my direction, but I had already snatched the Kryptonite from his hands and was running as fast as possible up the stairs, mapping out the quickest route to the large vat of boiling steel.

Luthor roared out his rage like an animal. His footsteps on the metal landings were frighteningly loud, unbelievably fast, indescribably deadening. I would never reach the vat in time, and so I came to a halt, pulled back my arm, and threw the Kryptonite as hard as I could toward the melted metal. Luthor tackled me just as I let the alien stone go. He fell atop me painfully hard, but that wasn’t what made me freeze in defeat.

The Kryptonite had fallen short of its mark. In fact, it had fallen almost in the clone’s lap.

I saw Clark reach out a weak, boneless hand toward the clone I had thought was his brother. “Throw it to me,” he rasped. He was closest to the vat, and we thought so similarly that he had reached the same plan of action I had. “Give it to me. Let me destroy it.”

I missed the clone’s response. Luthor grabbed my shoulder and rolled me to face him. He was unrecognizable as the urbane, charming man I had agreed to date in order to get an interview; he was mad. Stark, raving mad.

“You think this will stop me?” he shouted into my face, landing a blow on my left arm that obliterated rational thought and clear vision and hope that I’d get out of this alive. “*Nothing* can stop me! This is my *destiny*, can’t you see that? We don’t need aliens to show us the way—I will lead us into the future! This is *my* world!”

Somewhere in the middle of his insane spiel, he had hit me again. His knee was digging painfully into my ribcage. And now...now, his hands were crawling around my neck, his fingers like spiders, and he was tightening his grip. Tighter, tighter, so much tighter that his face blurred in my vision, his words blurred in my ears, and reality blurred around me.

Everything was going black; even the dim sparks thrown by the boiling steel faded away. But one thing grabbed for my attention—leapt for it, reached for it, and caught it. Slowly, panicked, I managed to pry one of Luthor’s hands free of my throat and then, almost unable to feel the pain the movement caused, I turned my head as far as possible and looked down through the grated steps to the floor so far below.

Clark. Even tortured and beaten, he was beautiful. He was on his knees, pleading with the clone, who was himself curled up in a small ball. The Kryptonite sucked in the light from its place so near the clone’s hand. Desperately, Clark looked up at me, and for a timeless

instant, our eyes locked. There was such concern evident in his gaze, so much love and fear and desperate determination no matter his own plight.

His lips were moving and I almost fancied that I could hear him, that the vaulted ceiling echoed his words back to me. “You said you loved her,” he was pleading with the clone. “You said you would do whatever you could to save her—you said you wanted to be Superman for her. Well, *try!* Give me the Kryptonite!”

And amazingly, enspelled by the same qualities of integrity and honor and empathy that had also drawn me to Clark, the clone grabbed hold of the Kryptonite, let out a gasp of pain, and tossed it to Clark. In a smooth movement that concealed just how much it must have cost him, Clark caught the alien stone, swiveled in place, and threw the Kryptonite. It curved through the air, seemed to pause at the height of its arc—all the world holding its breath—and then it descended with a traitorous grace and fell into melting steel.

Strength surged through my limbs, stemming the tide of encroaching darkness, and I shoved Luthor off me and against the railing. I knew I should attack him immediately, before he could recover his balance, but all I could do was curl up on my knees and cough and gasp for air. The heat was so intense this far up that it felt as if I inhaled liquid fire with each breath.

“Help me!” I heard Clark urging the clone, the tenor of his voice slicing through all else to reach my ears. Luthor was ranting about something or other, and I knew he had come to his feet, but I could not seem to stand.

“He’s my father!” the clone cried.

“He cares nothing for you!” Clark retorted furiously, and with this proof of his indomitability, I managed to make my way to my own feet to once more, waveringly, face Luthor. “Please!” Clark continued. “You...you’re like my brother! Please! Help me! Help her! We’re each the only family the other has right now.”

I don’t know if Luthor was even aware of what they were saying, or if he simply thought the clone utterly incapable of turning against him. All I know is that he seemed maniacally obsessed with me, perhaps because with the Kryptonite destroyed, I was now the only way he knew of to hurt Clark.

I wanted to do nothing more than beat up Luthor, but I didn’t think I was quite strong enough for that. So I ran. It was galling even then to turn and flee from this single man, but the hatred, the madness, in his eyes was more terrifying than anything I had ever faced before, and it was compounded by the debilitating weakness I was feeling, as if I had been the one affected by the Kryptonite.

I ran across a landing and hit more stairs, more fell than walked down them, and started across another landing. I had drawn perilously near the searing vat and the heat was enough to dance flecks in front of my eyes.

A sob of fear and defeat escaped me when Luthor hit me from behind.

“Lois!” I heard Clark cry. But he was on the ground-floor, so far away he might as well have been on another planet. “Luthor, no! Stop! I’ll do whatever you want—just let her go!”

“Oh no, Kent!” Luthor’s hands crawled along my face, pulling at my hair to tug me toward the vat containing a piece of hell, choking the breath from me, his touch erasing all sensation other than *hurt*. “Our game is over, and I...I never lose.”

“Lois!” Clark’s cry was more anguished than I had ever before heard it.

And then I heard nothing more. All sound faded like mist before sunlight. I was left in a tiny pocket of nothing but blurred sights, as if the movie continued to play even after it had been muted. Luthor was still on top of me, his hands wrapped around my throat, and I could feel him, but only dimly, the sensation far removed from me.

I wished I could hear Clark, wished I could see him again, wished I could reach out and run my hand through his hair and down his neck, wished I could tell him that Luthor was wrong about me, that I hadn’t really betrayed him, that I had only been confused but that I did love

him, had loved him for so long, would never stop loving him...

A blur of red and blue sped past me.

The hands were torn from my throat.

I felt myself falling, falling, falling.

Something hurled me through air. Something heavy grounded me, shielded me.

Breath was gone.

And then...so was all light.

Eternal blackness claimed me.

Chapter 22

Darkness.

Pain, muted and distant.

Flames burning the air with their scent.

The sound of a soft, smoky voice whispering my name over and over again.

The taste of lips on mine and the air he breathed into me.

After a formless, dreamless time, my five senses suddenly, convulsively culminated into one overwhelming awareness of *being*, and as quickly as that, darkness receded, replaced by fire that surrounded us, merged with shadows to consume us, trapped us in one tiny hole of air.

Us.

For Clark was there, his body curled around mine, his hand on my face tilting my head, his the mouth that had breathed life back into me, his the voice that called my name and insisted I come back to him. Only gradually did I realize that I hadn’t been breathing and that the darkness which had claimed me could have easily been death.

“Clark!” I half-gasped, half-mumbled, but it was enough for him, superhearing or no.

Relief poured from him, and he let out what might have been a sob before gathering me tightly to himself. His murmurs faded incoherently, and then, his vibrant eyes catching the light, he ducked his head and kissed me.

All the Christmas magic and birthday presents and surprise parties I had never received—and had given up expecting—suddenly burst open within me, as solid and real as the feel of Clark’s body protecting mine from the unstable flames and tiny explosions going off behind him. For an instant, I thought that surely there was nothing in the world that could take this feeling away from me.

And then, succumbing to the need for oxygen, I pushed him away from me...and saw a flicker of hurt trace the contours of his face...and felt the feeling his touch had evoked withering away.

Clark.

Superman.

One and the same.

But what had happened to the clone?

“Come on.” All sign of whatever emotions had pummeled their way through him only instants earlier were now erased as Clark adjusted his feet beneath him and half-lifted me upward. “We have to get out of here. I blew toward the explosion, but the Kryptonite weakened my strength.”

At first, I couldn’t get his words to make sense, no matter how hard I tried to force them into rational understanding. It was hard enough trying to stand, trying not to pull Clark—who looked as bad as I felt—down with me when my knees gave out. Only when he scooped me, not without discernible effort, into his arms and turned to stumble down stairs that were half melted away did I begin to put all the pieces together.

That blur of red and blue hurtling above me and the feel of Luthor’s hands being wrested from my throat—the clone must have been able to summon enough strength to fly, or at least leap unbelievably high to slam into Luthor. But...my wandering, numb gaze moved past Clark’s shoulder to where the vat of boiling steel had once rested.

All that now remained were the twisted, searing remnants of the bottom of the vat. The interior of Steelworks was a mess of untamed

flames, smoldering embers, melted metal wherever the liquid steel had hit, and smoke that tainted every breath save the ones Clark had given me.

The weakened clone must have fallen into the vat, which had been the catalyst for an explosion. I was too numb, too weak, too exhausted to figure out what I thought of the clone's demise. I dared not look back and see if there was anything left of him or of Luthor on the landing or where the vat had once been.

But... a slow frown briefly twisted my lips, jarred out of existence by the jolt of pain slicing through my arm when Clark staggered upon reaching the ground-floor. Fire roared around us, and the ground shook with what might have been another building explosion. One we wouldn't survive—just as I shouldn't have survived the last one. So how had I? How was I still alive, still unharmed, still in the dark?

As Clark's arm tightened around me, as my hand slipped from his chest and fell to the hand he had curled around my legs in order to carry me through the danger threatening on all sides, I remembered the sensation of falling and the sight of a darker colored blur, and I remembered the feel of something heavy anchoring me, something that had taken the brunt of the heat and the forceful concussion of the explosion. Something that had—I now realized thanks to my slightly more ordered, coherent thoughts—felt a lot like Clark.

Bile rose in my throat. I took advantage of the way Clark shifted me in his arms so he could open the door and half-stumble, half-fall out into open air, and I looped my arm once more around his neck... and I slid my fingers down his back.

A trembling gasp escaped him and he shuddered away from my touch, but not before I felt strips of cloth and liquid as warm as his body, sticky, clammy, and not yet dried.

Blood.

A tiny sound was torn from me. Clark instantly mumbled an apology, gathering me once more close to himself and finding more unbelievable, incredible, otherworldly strength, enough to stand, enough to stagger forward, enough to cradle me close to him in hands burned by the Kryptonite when he had thrown it, enough to carry me away from danger as I trembled in the grip of dazed shock.

The blaze that was the interior of Steelworks was just barely still visible on the horizon when Clark finally fell to his knees on the side of a quiet road. In the distance, sirens pierced the early-morning air. Closer, a chilled, moist snowflake drifted from fat clouds to land on my nose.

"Clark?" I whispered.

"It's all right," he gasped weakly. "Earlier, when I left you alone with the clone, I found a phone. Henderson should be coming. He'll... he'll get the fire department."

"Clark, are you all right?"

What a ridiculous question, I mused, as if it had fallen from someone else's lips. Anyone who even caught a glimpse of Clark would have called the ambulance for him, or would have driven him straight to the hospital themselves, or would have wondered if they were seeing a dead man walking; they certainly wouldn't have allowed him to carry them to safety.

At that thought, I pulled myself away from Clark's arms, then contradictorily almost cried out when he mutely let his hands fall to his side. We both slumped there on the cold ground, abstractly, numbly regarding one another as more wet snowflakes fell from the skies to dust our hair, our skin, our clothes.

The thought of clothes made me realize Clark was shivering with cold. And his back—I hadn't yet caught a good look at it, but I knew from the amount of blood and his audible reaction that it had to be bad. But chances were—I prayed—that he'd heal much faster than the average person, and I knew he would hate to be forced to go to a hospital.

And I was wearing his sweater.

"Here." Slowly, moving as leisurely as if I were in a dream, I brought my hands to the hem of the sweater and struggled to pull it up and off.

"Lois!" Clark sounded half-strangled.

"Your sweater," I explained tersely, mechanically. "You're cold, and it'll cover the wounds on your back so no one will see them."

He began to halfheartedly protest, but I had already managed to pull the sweater off, and I now offered it to him. Despite the long-sleeved shirt I wore, the cold bit deep, compounded by the frozen, melting liquid decorating all within its purview.

Clark let out another slight gasp of pain when he pulled the sweater on, and my hands instinctively flew toward him. I let them drop, however, so when the sweater was past his eyes, he only saw me huddled there before him. He hadn't answered my question about his well-being, I suddenly realized, and spared a thought to wonder why my mind seemed so numb, so hazed, so uncomprehending when only moments earlier I had been able to puzzle out recent events.

Clark—he wasn't touching me anymore. His arms were hanging at his sides; his hands were loose and empty; he crouched a foot away from me. That, I knew without a doubt, was why everything seemed so detached, so distant, so hard to grasp and process and comprehend. All I had to do to correct the problem, then, was reach out and touch him, take him into my arms, stroke his cheek.

Aside from the shudders brought on by the winter air, though, I didn't move.

And I didn't even know why.

"You..." His hands clenched into fists against the cold ground and frozen grass, as if he were once more gathering his strength. "You need to get warm. I-I'll get us a taxi. S-stay here. Just a m-minute."

And he began to rise to his feet, began to move away, began to leave me.

"No!" As impossible as it had seemed to bridge the gap between us an instant earlier, it was now impossible to remain still. I threw myself into his arms, knocking him off-balance so that I ended up in his lap. And yet his arms instantly came around me, warm and comforting and solid. Suddenly I didn't care that he was hurt, that he was Superman, that he was probably in more pain than I was; I only wanted him to keep hold of me, to never let go, to bury his face in my hair and murmur my name with *that* tone in his voice and tighten his hold around me in such a way that my own form was defined by the feel of his embrace... just as he was doing now.

"Stay with me?" I begged him quietly, my voice muffled by his chest, my face nestled against his neck, my eyes squeezed shut to blot out the rest of the world. The only sensation to penetrate my single-mindedness, aside from Clark, was the feel of the tiny flakes peppering my hair and skin.

"I'm not going anywhere," he promised. Amazingly, he sounded stronger, as if my need for him had done what our entrance into the night air could not.

"Hold me?" I asked, needing to feel him near me, needing to know that he did not believe what Luthor had said about me, that he would not abandon me.

"Shh, it's all right. I'm here." He tightened his embrace still further, not painfully, just solidly enough that I could have no cause to doubt his presence. "I won't let go."

My voice dropped still lower as I uttered my last, most daring, most important request. "Love me?"

"Of course I love y—" He was abruptly silent, the form that enveloped me falling abnormally still. Finally, he whispered only one word, uncertainly, tentatively, split evenly between fear and hope: "Lois?"

I momentarily resisted his attempt to move me where he could see my face before succumbing and opening my eyes to behold his shell-shocked expression. I opened my mouth, but for the life of me, I could get no words to emerge. Terror—greater even than when Luthor had been strangling me—engulfed me. What if he said no? What if he pushed me away? What if he didn't believe me? After all, Luthor had explicitly spelled out all the ways I had failed Clark—in both his guises.

"I do love you—how could you not know that?" Clark whispered,

one arm pulling me closer to himself, the other skimming along my cheek. “I think I’ve loved you from the moment I met you. I can’t help it—but I want to, anyway. I...I love loving you.” He gave a sheepish shrug, his eyes now avoiding mine. “I love you, Lois. I’m sorry.”

I gaped up at him. Had he just...*apologized*...for loving me?

“But, Lois.” Clark’s hold briefly tightened before loosening, as if he were preparing himself for the moment when I would slip away from him. “I can’t be Superman right now.”

Dread squeezed my heart in a viselike grip.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to be Superman again. What Luthor did to the name...and the Kryptonite...I...I just don’t know.”

A tear slipped down my cheek to join the clinging snowflakes, then another, then another, then a blinding torrent that threatened to drown out Clark.

“I’m sorry, Lois.” A thread of panic and deep, unknowable pain laced his voice. “I wish I could be Superman for you. I...I know you love him. But...”

I gripped Clark’s sweater tightly in my fists, fighting to control the impending sobs, rising in tandem with the memory of his words long hours before: <Why are you here with me now? Is it...it’s not because of my secret...is it?>

“I wish...” Clark swallowed. “Even if I could be him, Lois, I couldn’t *just* be him. I’d have to be *me*, too. I can’t—”

My hands moved to either side of his face and my lips met and merged with his, cutting off the rest of his agonizing, recriminating, selfless apology. “Shh,” I murmured between kisses he accepted as if in a dream. “Stop it. Stop apologizing. I don’t care if you’re Superman. I want *you*, Clark. I love you. I love you.”

“You...” His eyes were wide and...disbelieving?

A gaping hole opened up somewhere inside me, threatened to swallow me whole. He didn’t believe me. And why should he? Luthor had been right, after all. I had betrayed him. And yet...and yet I could not stop myself from spilling the rest of my words before him, from fighting for him, from trying to make him see just how worthy of love he—Clark Kent *or* Superman—was.

“I love you,” I repeated. Even the sensation of tears and snowflakes trickling down my cheeks faded away; all that remained in my consciousness was the man before me...and the desperate state of my heart. “I think I’ve loved you for a long time, but I...I was afraid, too afraid to admit it, even to myself. And I’m sorry.” My breathing grew shaky as my body sagged, supported only by his trembling arms. “I’m sorry because now you’ll never believe me when I say I love you regardless of superpowers. You’ll never be able to trust me after what your clone—”

“No.” Clark studied me as if I had granted him his every wish, one finger moving to caress my cheekbone in a move so poignant my eyes slid closed in sheer bliss. “I do believe you. I...wondered earlier tonight, when you cried for me, when you wished you could undo what Luthor had done. And as you said—you dived into the ocean after me. And...” A smile played along the edges of his tempting mouth, and I was infinitely surprised that all the snow collecting along every surface wasn’t instantly vaporized by the sheer heat in his eyes. “You believed *me*, Lois. ‘Superman’ was standing right there, and you believed...*me*. So I believe you.”

And he leaned nearer me and framed my face in his hands and rained tiny, delicate kisses down on me, on each tear, on every inch of my face. “I love you, Lois,” he murmured in between those tantalizing kisses. “I love you. If only you knew how much I love you. I—”

“I do know!” I exclaimed, fisting my hands in his sweater to claim him as my own, daring to risk fate by smiling, unable to contain it any longer at the sight of his growing comprehension and joy. “You’ve proved it a hundred times over. And,” I added mischievously, “you don’t lie.”

Something, some shadow, passed across his features, but the next instant, he was pulling us both to our feet and guiding us toward the crossroads where the headlights of passing cars could be seen, and I convinced myself that it was a shadow brought only by the clouds

scudding across the sky, obscuring the setting moon and the rising sun and any shooting stars that might have dared to fly.

“What do we need a taxi for?” I finally thought to ask when Clark tried to flag one down. “You said Henderson was coming.”

Clark shrugged, his eyes on his feet. “I don’t have my glasses. And I don’t know how much is left of—well, I don’t know what they’ll find back there. It’s always best to play ignorant and let them tell you what happened before making up your own story.”

“Oh.” I was suddenly struck by how many times Clark had done that—arrived too late, or showed up with some vague excuse, or simply appeared with no explanation and let me or Perry or Jimmy or anyone else come up with our own reasons for it, goaded on by his innocent, clueless look.

With a sidelong, almost guilty glance to me, Clark’s shoulders rounded and he stuffed his hands in his pockets. We stood there in silence several moments more, he trying to get a cab to stop for us, me realizing exactly how much I had missed where Clark was concerned.

The fifth taxi Clark waved at finally stopped, and we both gratefully sank into the back seat. For once, I was glad of the concealing darkness since it hid just how shaken I felt, just how much guilt twisted within me, just how badly I wanted to erase what Clark had endured. Reminded of his pain, I gently reached over and took his hand in both of mine. The sight of the burns seared into the flesh by the Kryptonite sickened me.

Clark watched me, but said nothing, and the rest of the ride passed slowly.

When we finally reached my apartment building, I had to pretend to a healthy strength I didn’t feel and walk upstairs to retrieve money for the fare. Then I casually slipped my arm around Clark’s waist to cover just how weak he really was from the departing cabdriver. As soon as the taxi turned a corner, however, Clark slumped heavily against me.

The sun wasn’t up yet, but I still wondered at how long it was taking him to recover. Unless...unless there were flecks of the Kryptonite lodged within his wounds. He had, after all, thrown the Kryptonite in the liquid silver before it had exploded outward to burn him, and who knew how much of the Kryptonite had been seared into his hands.

As soon as we got inside the apartment, I directed Clark to the bathroom, handed him some clothes from the duffel bag, and ordered him to take a shower. Curiously withdrawn, he made no response other than to painstakingly shamle into the restroom, and another thrill of fear stroked white-hot trails through my mind. I darted a glance to the window in an effort to consciously will the sun above the horizon.

While Clark was in the shower, I collected a couple supplies for him, changed into warm, dry pajamas, checked the wound on my arm, and ran a comb through my damp hair. I meant to make hot tea or coffee and to shut the windows the clone had left open, but I couldn’t summon the energy. As soon as I had pulled the comb through my hair one last time, my hand fell limply to my lap. Only when the bathroom door opened and Clark—dressed in sweat pants and a t-shirt, his hair wet and tousled, his hands held gingerly at his sides—took a tentative, weary step into the bedroom did I manage to rouse myself and stand.

For a long moment, we only looked at each other. I wasn’t quite sure what had happened. Less than an hour earlier, we had been exchanging fantastical kisses and confessing soul-shaking love. Now...now, we both seemed afraid to move, afraid to touch the other, afraid that it had all been a dream or the results of coming down from an adrenaline rush...or a mistake? Could Clark be thinking that?

A shudder rippled through my frame, and as quickly as that, Clark stepped forward and opened his arms to me. Unashamedly, unabashedly, unhesitatingly, I fell into them and clung to him.

But weariness was stronger than us both, and when we both wavered and almost fell, I let out a tiny chuckle to cover the multitude of emotions stirred within me. Then I tugged on his hand, and pushed on his shoulder to get him to sit down on the bed. He made no protest, but he kept fast hold of my hand, as if afraid to let go. I willingly sat

beside him, but gently slipped my hand free of his to turn and sort through the supplies I had set on the bedside table.

Though I assumed—hoped—the rising sun would heal his wounds, I still took a tube of antibiotic and twisted off the lid. Then I took his hand in between mine and smoothed the cream over his burns before bandaging what I could. He didn't wince away, or even let out a single whimper; instead, he watched me, his vibrant, radiant eyes tracing my features with a depth of feeling that made mischievous fairies take restless flight in the pit of my stomach.

When I finished with his hands, I wordlessly pushed on his arm and made him turn so that his back was to me. Then, trying to ignore the intimacy of what I was doing, I pulled his t-shirt up so I could see his back.

Horror assailed me at the sight of the damage. My hands trembled as I gently, tenderly anointed every raw wound, the flesh of his back treated as much by my tears as by the antibiotic. I would have bandaged as much as I could with my dwindling first-aid supplies, but Clark twisted away. He turned to face me, pulling his shirt back down to its proper place, and met my gaze.

His expression was so ambiguous, his body so still, his eyes so blank, his thoughts so shielded that I wondered for an instant if the Kryptonite had affected his mind in some way. I had never seen Clark so closed down before, not during the heat-wave, or in the cell, or even when I had first reached the Steelworks factory.

"Clark," I whispered, my voice scarcely audible. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Not that there weren't a hundred things wrong with the situation as a whole. Not that he didn't have more than enough justification for his guarded manner. Not that I myself couldn't have come up with an answer for him. But I was trying so hard to see Clark *and* Superman when I looked at him, trying to reassure both of us that I had meant what I told him under the coldly weeping clouds, trying to convince myself that he didn't feel betrayed by my past actions or disappointed by my blindness, and so I asked the question anyway.

For a torturous moment, Clark said nothing, remaining mute so long that I picked up a damp washcloth to wipe my hands clean, swallowing at the sight of his blood staining my fingers. Then, abruptly, he spoke softly: "It's over, Lois." And then, his voice breaking and hope and fear and endearing, heartbreaking vulnerability now evident on his face, he added almost inaudibly, "Isn't it?"

"Yes, Clark," I replied, my own voice none too steady. "It is."

He remained still an instant longer before his mask began to crumble and his body began to shake and his scarred hands rose to his face to cover his eyes as he finally began to comprehend and accept and understand that his long nightmare was over. Before he could cover his face with his hands, though, shutting me outside the solitude of his thoughts, I was there, slipping my arms around his neck, pulling him into me, running a hand through his hair as he bent his head and buried his face against my neck, feeling him hold onto me as if I were all that kept him from drowning.

We were both wordsmiths, and our relationship had always been characterized by strong wordplays and conversational sparring and verbal double meanings, but somehow, Luthor or the clone or the situation or the professions of love or the intimate moment or all of those combined had drained us both dry of words, leaving us silent.

Much as words had once flowed between us, though, there had also been moments when we hadn't needed them. When a glance or a hug or the touch of a hand had said all that was necessary. This, I knew as I enveloped Clark in a sustained embrace, was one of those moments.

Finally, when Clark's shudders eased and he sagged minutely in my arms, I drew back a bit, ran a hand across his cheek—dry, as if the moment was too overwhelming, too all-encompassing, too *big* for mere tears—and then pushed against his shoulder to get him to lie down. He did, settling on his side, but reached out to take my hand and tug me toward him. Eagerly, freely, I stretched out beside him. We fit together, just as we always had, as if we had been destined for one

another. He tentatively slipped his arm around my waist, and I rested my head on the pillow beside him and my hand on his chest as all the physical exhaustion and mental weariness and emotional fatigue I hadn't had time to feel came crashing down on us both.

As the beginnings of a cloud-drenched dawn began to peek shyly through the windows, Clark fell into what I hoped was a healing sleep. I had intended to stay awake and decide what our story would be when Henderson eventually called, but it was only a moment before I, too, slept.

The room was lit with bright sunshine that fell in gleaming bands across the bed when I found myself gradually coming awake. Not sure what had roused me, I tilted my head a bit and found myself gazing at Clark. He was still fast asleep, and though his arm tightened around me when I shifted, he showed no signs of waking up. A smile traced my lips even before memories of the night before came pouring back into my mind.

A knock at the door—a pounding that indicated it wasn't the first time whoever it was had knocked—answered the question as to what had woken me. Strangely, I didn't feel impatient to find out who it was or nervous about who it might be. Maybe, I thought as I gingerly extricated myself from Clark's drowsy embrace, it was because I knew Luthor—and his fake Superman—were gone.

I straightened my clothes, glad the flannel bottoms and long-sleeved shirt I was wearing could pass as casual wear, and stepped into the living room. I closed the bedroom door behind me so the visitor wouldn't wake Clark—or catch sight of his wounded, exhausted form.

"Perry!" I exclaimed in surprise when I unlocked and pulled open the door.

"Lois," my editor replied carefully. His sharp eyes were intent on me, a quick glance taking me in from head to toe. I belatedly hoped nothing of my encounter with Luthor and the clone showed.

"What are you doing here?" I asked cautiously.

He cocked his head. "Henderson called. He said you and Clark weren't answering the phone and he was worried about you both. I said I'd check on you. So?"

"So?" I repeated, drawing the syllable out. "Why did Henderson call?"

Perry's eyes narrowed. "Do you want me to discuss this out in the hall?"

Tamping down on my nervousness, I realized there was no way I could avoid this encounter. "Come in," I invited, hoping I wouldn't regret it. I shot a quick glance toward the bedroom, but knew there would be no help coming from that quarter.

"Where's Clark?" Perry asked bluntly, seemingly unwilling to take a seat, instead standing in the center of the living room. "Is he all right?"

"Well..." Another glance toward the bedroom steeled my nerves. "He hasn't been feeling well since yesterday morning when Luthor's man tried to pass himself off as a cop. He got sick during the night; I've been taking care of him. We were both sleeping this morning, however, which is probably why we didn't hear Henderson's call."

Ha! I thought triumphantly, my worry and nervousness about lying for Clark's enormous secret disbanded. There was quite a bit of truth in my statement—in fact, everything I had said was, strictly speaking, true—something I thought Clark, with his disapproval of even white lies, would probably appreciate. More, I had managed to spin the story without once shifting my weight or pausing to choose my words or looking stubbornly off into the distance, a feat Clark himself couldn't manage.

"Hmm." Perry nodded. "Very interesting. I'll be sure to let Henderson know what's going on, of course, and tell him what you said."

"Okay," I said, a bit mystified by the Chief's completely matter-of-fact tone and his apparent lack of interest in the page-one story we had "missed" by sleeping through Henderson's call.

"I guess I should let you get some sleep." Perry took a step past me, then paused and lifted a finger as if he had just remembered

something, his other hand digging into his coat pocket. “Oh, I should probably give you these. He might need them.”

I froze at the sight of Clark’s glasses in Perry’s hand. The lenses were cracked and stained with soot; one of the arms was melted and deformed.

“Of course,” Perry continued musingly, smugly confident that he had my full attention, “the story about how I found these here glasses is quite interesting. You see, when Henderson called, he thought you and Clark might have been caught in a weird explosion in the Steelworks factory that also, coincidentally enough, involved Lex Luthor. Well, naturally, I ran right down there to see what was going on. Since Jimmy’s staying at my place, he decided to come too. A good thing, actually, seein’ as how he caught sight of this particular pair of glasses in the ash of an active crime scene. Well, Lois,” he spread his hands out innocently, “you know the laws against swiping evidence, but Jimmy thought Clark might want his glasses back, and I was...well, inclined to agree. So...” His eyes sharpened still further as he offered the glasses to me. “Care to try again tellin’ me where you were very early this morning?”

The glasses were warm in my hand, and suddenly very, very heavy. This, I thought with an inward grimace, had to be why Clark had suggested we listen to the official story before coming up with our own. And yet...if I didn’t plan on letting the whole world know Clark’s personal story, the secret he had entrusted to me, I would have to learn how to do this convincingly—learn how to hide what amounted to another life altogether.

“Chief,” I began, a bit haltingly before warming to my subject. “The thing is...Clark and I wanted the exclusive. And when Luthor called demanding that we get Superman to meet with him, we didn’t want to risk contacting the police, not when we knew Superman would be able to arrest Luthor. But when we got there, Luthor was completely insane, raving on and on about how he was going to take down Superman, destroy Clark, and rule the world. Anyway, he...he ended up throwing himself in this enormous vat of melted steel, and...well, there was a resulting explosion. Superman protected Clark and I, but...he felt awful that he hadn’t managed to save Luthor, and that piled on top of the fact that he thought he had let those men he tied up die in that fire a couple weeks ago—it’s made him...it’s made him reconsider whether he should continue helping or not. I don’t know what he’ll decide, but you know how people can turn against celebrities and heroes, so Clark and I decided to come back and write up the story before any wrong conclusions could be reached.”

I held my breath as soon as I finished, then frowned in surprise when Perry *smirked*. “Much better,” he approved. “Of course, I’m not saying that I know anything—officially or otherwise—and I’m not even going to pretend that I can unravel half of what’s really happened, but I will tell you that that’s the story I’d stick to if I were you.”

My mouth hung open in shock as Perry turned and moved to the door. He paused with his hand on the knob, then turned to look at me, his expression softening in the way that had become habitual ever since I had, after witnessing a particularly nasty drive-by shooting during my internship, broken down in his office and cried against his shoulder. “And, Lois, darlin’...I’m proud of you. For helpin’ him and bein’ his friend. I have a feeling his life’s not the easiest in the world, particularly lately.”

“How—” I darted yet another glance toward the bedroom, fervently hoping Clark didn’t know that, less than a day after I had learned it, I had already blown his secret. “How did you know?”

Perry paused for a long moment, probably deciding how much to reveal before he shrugged, settling his hands in his pockets. “I wondered about it when they both left Metropolis—Clark isn’t the kind of man to leave so unexpectedly, particularly with the way he so obviously felt. Of course, when he and Superman were both standing in front of me, I dismissed it as a crazy hunch. But...I got a call yesterday. From his parents. Seems they saw the headlines about Superman and were...well, wonderin’ if I had heard anything from

Clark. They’re a pretty cagey pair, but...it was enough to make me wonder. Enough to help me put the pieces together when Jimmy found his glasses there.”

For a long moment, I remained silent, trapped by indecision, draining and immobilizing, and rising grief, terrible and violent. Perry regarded me steadily; it was the kindness in his eyes that was my undoing.

“Luthor cloned him,” I whispered numbly, and strangely enough, it was only then that everything I should have been feeling earlier came tumbling through me with all the force of a destructive river crashing through the remnants of a dam and ripping away everything in its path. “He captured him, tortured him, and then stole his life—and I never knew! I never even thought—I never saw—I didn’t even realize—I thought they were brothers—and how could he let me—he tried to tell me, but I—I kissed him, and he—”

With only a trace of awkwardness, Perry pulled me into a fatherly hug, and my rushed, disjointed words fell away as tears insisted on leaking from my eyes. For a moment, I leaned against Perry, let his clumsy, affectionate reassurances slow the tide of emotions within me, hold back the tiny, whispering doubts that hid in the shadows of my mind, and calm the sobs trying to erupt.

When I was finally strong enough to pull back from Perry’s embrace, I gave him a tentative smile and wiped a few last tears away. Purposely keeping things light, Perry made some weak joke and a passing mention of Elvis before guiding me to the couch and sitting beside me. I hesitated only an instant before briefly telling Perry what had happened, some tiny part of myself relieved to be able to talk about the extraordinary events to someone besides the man at the center of them all.

Perry listened intently—his eyebrows arching in eloquent shock a few times—then nodded determinedly and said gruffly, “Let me write up this story—I’m not stealing the exclusive, mind you, just writing up the facts of last night. You and Clark need some rest before tackling the exposé.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but it was only force of habit. More than anything, I longed for a day or two to allow these revelations to sink in, to comprehend the fact that Luthor and Su—the clone—were dead, to get to know Clark AKA Superman without all the misconceptions and lies and false assumptions. So I smiled, told Perry not to make a habit of stealing my stories, and inwardly relaxed, knowing without a doubt that he would never write anything to betray Clark.

Perry gave me another soft look while he was leaving, but I was grateful he didn’t try to pull me into another hug. I didn’t *want* to cry anymore; I wanted to figure my life out and *not* have it turned upside down immediately afterward.

So I walked back into the bedroom—mildly relieved to see that Clark hadn’t stirred except to turn a bit more toward the healing light—and I sat on the edge of the bed, and I studied the man who was my partner. The man who was my hero.

And I purposely began to remember—from my first meeting with the farmboy from Kansas, to the explosive debut of Superman, to the early days of my growing friendship with “both” of them, to the day when they had left Metropolis, to the night I was thrown into a cell and heard the familiar voice split the darkness into shards, to the night before when I had finally seen both men coalesce into one—purposely began to remember Clark *and* Superman in order to merge them together in my mind.

And I thought, very long and very hard, about what I wanted to happen next. I thought about my resolve not to hurt Clark. I thought about how hard it would be to lie to everyone I knew, to all my friends and family and every stranger in the world. I thought about the simple, beautiful life I had imagined living with Clark. I thought about my fantasies about Superman and flights around the world and to Caribbean beaches. I thought about the love and devotion I knew Clark would show me, and the stories I would have to cover up or lie about. About the scars Luthor had forced on Clark, and the light, fairy-

like kisses Clark had rained down on me. About how blind I had been, and how scared Clark had been—maybe still was.

When Clark finally stirred and woke, long after my tangled thoughts had wrestled themselves to a conclusion, his sleep-darkened eyes fell immediately on me. A flurry of lightning-fast emotions passed across his features—awe, joy, surprise, wariness, and then that startling yet familiar blankness as he waited for me to speak. Waited for me to tell him what I thought before he spoke.

I tightened my arms around my knees, folded to my chest, but did not break his gaze. “Perry was here,” I said calmly. “He’s covering the story for us until we’re ready to write the in-depth exclusive.”

“Oh.” Moving slowly, Clark sat up and tentatively leaned back against the headboard. He looked down at his hands before looking back to me. I watched him without blinking. “What are you doing?” he finally asked quietly, his brow furrowing.

“Looking at you,” I replied with the hint of a smile. “*At you*, not through you.”

By the brilliant shift of his features, I knew he understood me. Clark, after all, had never wanted to be invisible. At least...not to me.

Clark straightened his shoulders, as if bracing himself to pick up a burden he had temporarily dropped, and took a deep breath. “Lois, I need to explain that—”

“I think I can put all the pieces together,” I interrupted, keeping my voice perfectly steady. The past hour of thought and memory made me confident I knew his story, or at least most of it.

“Okay,” he said softly. Nervously, he twisted the bedspread between his hands, but he met my gaze evenly.

Though I had been preparing this speech since Perry left, I still paused to swallow and marshal my thoughts. “I saw all the boyhood pictures of you when we were in Smallville,” I began, “so I’m assuming you arrived as a baby. The Kents must have found you and adopted you and hid your origins. Although, considering the fact that you said Bureau 39 had your ship and globe, I’m guessing that neither you nor your parents knew where you were originally from.”

His tiny nod confirmed my suspicion. “I found out I was from Krypton the same day I told you.”

I ignored his insertion, determined to stick to my script. “So, then, you grew up as any ordinary boy, believing yourself to be human. *Hoping* you were human. I don’t know if you had powers the whole time or if you later developed them—”

“They started manifesting when I was ten,” he interjected quietly.

“But you hid them,” I continued, concealing the shock I felt no matter that I had guessed that. Forcibly, I shoved aside the image of a small boy with an unruly lock of hair struggling to come to terms with the fact that he could survive any hurt, lift any weight, and see through any obstacle. It was a strong image, though, and to ignore it, I had to focus almost desperately on the Clark in the present.

“You hid them,” I said again, “because you were Clark Kent and Superman is just what you eventually decided to do with your powers.”

He said nothing, so I went on, contemplating each phrase before I spoke it.

“After college, you wandered the world, looking for a place to belong, a place where you could fit in and be just Clark Kent. But you couldn’t stop yourself from helping people, and so you always moved on, always hiding, always searching. You wanted to help—*needed* to help—but you needed to be Clark too. And Clark wanted to be an investigative journalist. So you came to Metropolis. To the Daily Planet. And you found yourself a job. And a partner.” For the first time, my voice wobbled.

Clark’s eyes were intent on me, searching desperately for some sign of what I felt. But I couldn’t give anything away—not yet. I wanted to be sure I understood everything about him before I made another mistaken assumption. Wanted to be sure I was seeing the whole picture this time. Wanted to make sense of my life by making sense of his.

“For some reason,” I began again, “you stayed in Metropolis. You

found a way to hide who you really are even as you demonstrated to the world what you can really do. Out of all the places in the world you had visited, you chose Metropolis as your home—as Superman’s home. But things grew more complicated when you—”

“Fell in love with you,” he finished for me when my voice gave out. “Which was about two minutes after I met you.”

Which answered the question of why he had chosen Metropolis as his home. But, again, I ignored him—I had to if I wanted to be able to finish my narration. “Right. You wanted to tell me, but you were afraid. Afraid I’d write the story. Afraid I’d hate you. Afraid I’d be hurt. Afraid I would betray you. Afraid I would never love the real you.”

Tears were coming, hastened by the indescribable, spine-tingling, soul-shaking look on Clark’s face, so I quickly moved on.

“The reason you left Metropolis at the same time as Superman is now painfully obvious.” I forced a tiny chuckle, wincing when it came out sounding watery. “And you wandered the world again. Thinking yourself a danger to others yet unable to stop yourself from helping, you were once more a wanderer, an outcast. Only, this time, you kept looking back on the place you had left, calling Perry and Jimmy...and me. No matter what you had found out about your alien origins, you couldn’t let go of Clark.”

“I didn’t *want* to let go,” Clark murmured, almost to himself.

“Then...” I paused briefly, less sure about this next part. “You heard about Nightfall, and you went to Smallville—or maybe they’re the ones who told you the news.”

Clark shook his head. “I read your article, Lois, the one proving that I hadn’t caused the heat-wave. I went home to tell Mom and Dad I was moving back to Metropolis. While I was there, we saw the news about the asteroid.”

“And you went into space alone.” I couldn’t resist staring at him, trying to comprehend the magnitude of Superman’s abilities—the depths of Clark’s bravery. “I’m assuming this is when you got amnesia since there was almost a day between the shattering of Nightfall and the diversion of the large piece still headed toward Earth. You said your parents helped you, so you must have made it back to Smallville after your first try, and they tried to help you regain your memories and prove to you that you were Superman. After all,” I added, almost bitterly, “the world was still in danger, and Superman was needed.”

For a moment, I forgot what I was supposed to say next. Superman had been needed to save the world...but what about Clark? How could he have known that *he* was needed, too? That *I* had needed him?

“Yes,” Clark said when I had been silent a moment. “I remembered everything in time to divert the remainder of the asteroid, but...” He trailed off, his eyes falling away, his hands clenching, unconsciously confirming my suspicions about what had come next.

“I would guess that Luthor had been following you since you left Metropolis at the same time as Superman,” I said, smoothly returning to the script I had prepared. “He probably wanted to know what your link to Superman was. While you had amnesia, I’ll bet his men threatened your parents and, in doing so, somehow discovered you were Superman. Something must have jogged your memory, and you hid your parents somewhere safe, and you flew back into space to deal with the remaining fragment.”

“They tried to shoot Dad,” Clark uttered hoarsely. “I had just started remembering a few things, and there was this one image of me catching bullets. When I got in between the men and Dad, they...they saw, and...well, I still hadn’t remembered everything, so they managed to get away. When my memories did return, I knew I had to hide Mom and Dad just in case Luthor came after them.”

I nodded, then shifted a bit. “This is the part I’m a bit foggy on. Was Luthor waiting in Smallville with the Kryptonite when you returned?”

“No.” Clark looked down at his bandaged hands and consciously relaxed them. “I didn’t go back to Smallville. I went to Metropolis.” He looked up and caught my eyes, mutely pleading with me. “I was going to tell you everything, Lois, and beg you to help me stop Luthor

before he could hurt Mom and Dad. But Luthor must have guessed what I was planning, or maybe he tracked me coming back from space. I don't know. I just know that he was there, outside your apartment building. When I landed, he..." Clark's jaw clenched painfully, and he closed his eyes, hiding from me whatever leaked through his stiff control. "When I woke up, I was in the cell."

My own eyes fluttered closed. He had been right outside my door, right on the doorstep—how had I missed that? How had I not been able to *sense* that he was there, that he was in pain, that he needed me? How could he have been so close when I was so far away?

Dragging my attention back to Clark's sudden silence, I took up the rest, though truthfully, I wasn't too certain about much of this part either. "While you were his prisoner, Luthor took samples of your DNA, and he hired some scientist or other to make the clone. And, because that's the kind of man Luthor was, he taunted you, and toyed with you, and tortured you. And he put a camera in your cell so the clone could observe you and learn how you moved and spoke and thought."

A muscle fluttered in Clark's jaw. "He would pose me hundreds of what-if scenarios and ask me what I would do. He'd make me answer him, even when I didn't want to. I...I didn't know he had the clone listening. I didn't know there *was* a clone."

"But there was," I concluded quietly. "And Luthor put me in the cell with you so the clone could see how we interacted. Then, because he was getting bored or because he wanted more power or because he was sick enough to find some pleasure in it, he took you aside and told you the rules of his 'game' before having his clone 'rescue' us. And he used me as the lock in your prison. You tried to tell me a hundred different ways, but I never saw it. I never opened my eyes and—"

"Hey," Clark reached out a hand toward me before letting it drop back into his lap. "You saw two different men standing in front of you, Lois—well, one was standing. The other was flying. You can't blame yourself for not immediately jumping to the conclusion that one of them was an alien and the other was a clone."

"That did complicate things," I conceded with a grimace. I had tried to hate myself for falling for his trick—and I was certainly annoyed that I hadn't realized Clark was Superman before he ever left Metropolis—but the truth was that I didn't see how I could have realized "Superman" was the double of my partner any more quickly than I had. Despite my own conviction, however, it was more of a relief than I wanted to admit that Clark didn't seem to blame me either.

"But, Clark..." My brow wrinkled with my confusion. "There's just one thing I'm confused about. Your letter—did you know I would read it? Were you so sure I would find it? And if you did it on purpose, why didn't you just spell everything out clearly? Why did you leave it so vague?"

"Lois..." The bed shifted when Clark swung his legs over the side and stood, and I had to put out a hand to keep my balance. I froze, however, when Clark turned back to look down at me, remembered fear painting shadows over the features the sun illuminated as he gestured to match his impassioned words. "I was so frustrated and desperate and...and scared. Luthor had promised to kill you if I told you I was Superman, but I couldn't just...just sit by and watch his *game* play out! You don't know how hard it was to leave Metropolis during the heat-wave—to leave the job I had always wanted and the friends I had made...and you." His hands fell back to his sides, his gaze going to the window.

"After Nightfall, I made the decision to tell you, Lois, and it was the most...*freeing*...decision I had ever made. But then Luthor...and to sit there and not be able to say anything and watch the clone..." He closed his eyes and took a shaky breath. "We had had the news on all day that day, and even though nobody else seemed to notice, I could tell he was having trouble controlling his powers. When he flew me to Lex Tower's roof to deliver Luthor's commands and warnings, his grip tightened far too much whenever his emotions got the best of him. He could control it, mostly, but only when he wasn't in pain."

"In pain?" I repeated. After the mudslide, I remembered, the clone

had looked as if he were hurting, and again when I had asked him Clark's questions, and the night before when I had begged Clark to leave so I could use the Kryptonite. "What was wrong with him?"

Clark shrugged, almost casually, but I knew him too well not to see the pain he was inexpertly concealing. "I'm not human, Lois, even if I look it. Whatever their cloning method was, it couldn't support Kryptonian genes. He was dying."

Slowly, cautiously, I stood, my script almost entirely forgotten. I moved around the bed so that I could study Clark's closed expression. "He helped us last night," I observed neutrally.

"Yes." Clark ran a hand back through his hair, tousling it. He looked achingly vulnerable at that moment, standing there alone, barefoot, slightly disheveled, his face bare of any disguise, slight burn marks crisscrossing his palms. "He wasn't all bad, Lois. All he knew was Luthor. Can you imagine being raised by that monster? He...he wanted to do right, Lois. He just didn't know what that was."

"He seemed to know at the end," I said, stretching the truth just a bit for Clark's sake. He seemed oddly sorrowful about the death of the man who had replaced him, which was just so Clark-like that I almost smiled.

"I was trying to teach him," Clark admitted, oblivious to my thoughts. "He didn't know you would get hurt, Lois. After that first incident with Nigel, he even refused to help Luthor unless you were kept safe. I can't help but feel bad for him. He...he was trying so hard. There *was* some good in him," he insisted stubbornly, seemingly convinced that I would argue with his conclusion.

"Of course there was," I agreed firmly, shoving aside my own qualms about the man who had made sure to kiss me in front of Clark, who had flaunted his powers before him, who had used me as a means of intimidation, torture, and observation...and the man who had taken pity on Clark and flown with him, who had wanted me to tell him—what? that he was good? that he didn't have to do what Luthor had wanted?—and the man who had sacrificed his own life to save me.

"There *was* good in him," I told Clark. "But I never doubted that. As you said in your letter—there must have been something of you in him."

Clark opened his mouth as if to speak, but no words emerged; he simply stared at me.

"So you *didn't* know I'd find the letter?" I prompted.

Shaking his head a bit, as if to clear his thoughts, he shrugged self-consciously. "I...hoped...you would find it. But I didn't know for sure if you would. I wasn't even sure if I wanted you to or not. I was afraid that if I simply told you everything, you would insist on confronting Luthor or blurt out something that would let Luthor know I had violated his rules. And when I was writing it, I just...I just wrote what I was thinking." He let out a mirthless chuckle. "The next morning, at first, I was sure you had found it, but you never said anything, so I...I decided you hadn't."

"I did find it—I just didn't know what to think of it," I admitted, hating the flush I could feel staining my cheeks. Luthor's spiteful words rang once more through my mind. "I didn't mean to ignore it, Clark. It's just that...there were so many other startling revelations happening at the same time," I finished a bit lamely, unable—with him staring directly at me, so earnest and curious—to explain that I had been too taken aback by the love so blatant between every line of the letter to focus on the revelation to which he had been trying to lead me.

"I have a question," Clark said, almost timidly. "You...you said you knew my secret. You said you knew what Luthor had taken from me. But then...you...you *didn't* know that I was Superman. So...what secret did you know?"

Looking at him now, I was reminded of all the reasons I hadn't guessed that he was the all-powerful superhero. He was so uncertain, so helpless in some aspects, so innocent, so...*human*. "I thought he was your brother," I said simply, unable to find any embarrassment in the admission. "The things you both said, the way you acted together...I thought the reason I had never seen you together before

was because you didn't want anyone to notice how similar you both looked, and that you ran from danger to avoid revealing that you were invulnerable, and that he was working for Luthor in exchange for your freedom and continued safety."

I darted a glance at Clark from beneath my lashes and caught an amused smile playing along his lips before he hastily sobered. "Well," he said, the smile evident in his voice only because I had seen it on his face, "I did kind of think of the clone as a brother." A flash of sorrow streaked through his eyes. "He was learning, and he...he could have been someone Superman could talk to. Someone he could share problems like Nightfall with. Someone who could be his friend."

The beginnings of hurt disappointment settled like a stone in the pit of my stomach. Carefully concealing that reaction, I sat down on the edge of the bed. "So, Clark." I looked up at him as I returned to my forgotten script. "I told you your story. Do you think you can tell me mine?"

Instantly, Clark was wary, uncertain, tentative...and patiently hopeful. Cautiously, probably afraid I might bolt, he sat beside me, regarding me intently. "Yes," he said hoarsely, then cleared his throat. "You were born into a family that didn't understand your inner brilliance, didn't know how to cope with the extraordinary strength and intelligence that radiated outward from you, didn't take the time to appreciate your natural beauty. As a result, you were hurt when you were young, and then again later when a man stole your innocence and your story. But you didn't allow those betrayals to break you; you forced them to make you stronger. You determined to be the best that you could be—and you succeeded. You rose to the top of your field, proved that you truly were extraordinary, demanded that the world be a better place, and outshone all the other lights in the sky."

I swallowed, unable to look away, unable to catch my breath. Surreptitiously, I blinked away the awed tears his words had elicited, the shock that he could possibly see me the way he described me.

"But you were lonely," Clark continued, his compassionate insight—not his x-ray vision—seeing to the depths of my soul. "And you wanted to find someone you could trust. Someone who would prove that the bad things that had happened to you weren't the norm, weren't what you should have to expect. Someone who would accept you wholeheartedly, someone with whom you could belong. Someone with whom you could be yourself." He paused, maybe realizing, as I was, just how much of his own dreams he was verbalizing. "And then, simultaneously, two men came into your life. One seemed to be too good to be true and the other—"

"Was dangerously compelling," I said when he stopped to search for words.

Clark's eyes widened, but after a slight hesitation, he continued. "You were drawn to the hero, hoping he would right the wrongs in your life and prove that the cynicism you had adopted wasn't necessary. You began to trust your partner, surprised when you found that you could be a good friend to others. But..." He swallowed, finally looking away. "But they both broke their promises and left you all alone."

"And then?" I asked after a moment.

"And then you struggled on, refusing to give up or give in, refusing to let the world pass you by. You stubbornly, radiantly fought to make your own world better without the aid of a hero or a partner. And when they both came back, one seemed too hurt to fix and the other still seemed too good to be true."

"Yes," I murmured, and was sure he was confused about which description he fit.

"You felt that things were going to be better now. But gradually, you found that nothing was as it seemed. And"—he bent his head, his shoulders slumped—"just as you decided to give your heart to me, you found out I had lied again—lied about everything."

"And then?" I prompted gently, swallowing back my protest over his conclusion and finally understanding the reason behind the shadow that had earlier darkened his features. "What happens next?"

He closed his eyes. "I don't know."

"Come on, Clark." I scooted nearer him, brushed a hand over his. "You've read my mind before—read it again."

"I don't know, Lois." He opened his eyes and looked at me, allowed me to see the depths of his emotions: the hope he could never quash...the fear that his hopes would once more be dashed. "I hope your story has room for me in it. I hope I can be the man you were looking for. I hope you can accept a Superman who's really just an ordinary man and an ordinary man who's really an extraterrestrial with extraordinary powers. I *hope* all those things, but...I don't know what *you* want."

I moved my hand to rest on his chest, slid it up higher to his shoulder, turned him to face me more fully so I could put my other hand on his opposite shoulder. The stone in my stomach had disappeared, vanished so quickly that I felt lightheaded. "Clark, you said in your letter that hope was the only power you had left. I'll tell you the only secret I have left—it's the most powerful ability you possess."

And I kissed him, my lips brushing his gently, tenderly. His arms enveloped me immediately, instinctively. "Lois," he breathed and he pulled me closer, slanting his mouth over mine.

"I love you, Clark," I assured him, now certain all over again of the truth of that statement. Certain that I was making the right decision. Certain that I was in the dark no longer. Certain that I wanted to bask in his light—and give him my own light and warmth in return—for the rest of my life.

"Even after I left you?" he asked as he stole another kiss. My eyes were closed, but I could feel him smile against my mouth, and I gasped at the sensation of *feeling* a smile rather than seeing it.

"You came back," I murmured past the fireworks sparkling in my stomach and the liquid heat flowing through my veins. I looped my arms around his neck, wanting to draw closer to him, and we tumbled back on the bed, our limbs and hearts and lives all tangled together.

"Even after I lied?" he questioned with another kiss, this one even more potent than the last.

"You confessed." I couldn't help but laugh a bit, knowing he only wanted to hear me say the words again, teasing him with the answers even while knowing he needed to hear the truth of them.

At my laugh, he brought a bandaged hand to the back of my head to weave his fingers through my hair, tilting my head into his kiss. "Even though you deserve someone better?"

If his kisses hadn't been distracting me, I would have laughed aloud at the very thought of someone better than him. "That's impossible!" I asserted fiercely.

His mouth covered mine, and he rolled over onto me with a laugh, a sound that thrilled me as much as his tender kiss. "Lois, that statement proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that there's a fine line between brilliance and lunacy!"

Suddenly serious, feeling the importance of this moment, I drew back and looked up at him, my hands threaded through the hair at the back of his neck. "Clark," I said, somberly though my eyes shone with a light that rivaled the early afternoon sunlight entranced with our happiness and laughing at us from above. "This...this is the most brilliant moment in my whole life."

And Clark smiled at me, and he kissed me, and all the darkness vanished before the light brilliant enough to flood the whole of my universe.

Epilogue

The bed was soft when I sank into it a week later, the blankets warming quickly as I brought them up over my shoulders, the pillow cool against my cheek...but there was something missing. I couldn't hear the sound of breathing from the other side of the room, couldn't feel the presence of my partner as he lay on his side facing me, couldn't speak my secrets to him while the moon chased away any would-be eavesdroppers, and so sleep had also deserted me. I had told Clark that I wasn't used to sleeping in the same room as another person, but now I was no longer used to the solitude.

Clark had insisted on moving to Perry's the same day we had told each other our stories, his tiny, embarrassed grin and the memory of how his kisses alone had been able to move me serving as cause enough for the transition. He still spent almost every waking hour with me as we worked on our series of articles detailing the fall of the house of Luthor, usually not leaving the apartment until after ten at night, but it wasn't the same, though I had to admit that I enjoyed the goodnight kisses we shared.

Still, I told myself, shifting on the bed to make myself more comfortable, at least he was here, in Metropolis, in the employ of the Daily Planet, once more officially assigned as my partner. Much better to have him just across the city than clear across the world, especially when he was now so free and open and unburdened.

Henderson had, at least on the surface, accepted our story about the night of Luthor's demise, and although we had been given a light slap on the wrist for not going straight to the inspector, we had otherwise escaped the entire fiasco relatively unscathed. Even better, no one had yet found any of the clone's remains within the ashes and soot-stained, melted debris of Steelworks, which meant no one had connected Superman to Luthor or come to the erroneous conclusion that the superhero was once more "dead."

Every day, it seemed, the MPD uncovered new crimes Luthor had committed, which was a good thing since Luthor's long, vengeful arm had seen to it that Nigel, the key witness, was assassinated just two days earlier. The whole of Metropolis was in an uproar as Luthor's empire toppled from the shining top of Lex Tower all the way down to the corrupt foundation, and the resulting front page stories were keeping both Clark and me incredibly busy. I should have been exhausted enough to fall asleep almost instantly every night, but because Clark's presence left me with an overdose of energy and his absence left me with a sense of malaise, it was usually after midnight by the time I settled enough just to get into bed, let alone fall asleep. Despite the late hours, however, I always woke up early, eager for the moment when Clark would arrive to kiss me as if the nights apart were as hard on him as they were on me and cook breakfast while I kept him company.

A smile curved my lips at this reminder of what the morning entailed, and I finally managed to drift off to sleep, staving off the reality of the empty spot across the room where the cot had once been by imagining Clark lying beside me, his arm resting across my waist, his breaths feathering the back of my neck, his smile filling my dreams.

Dimly, gradually, I became aware that a steady tapping sound was dragging me from my hard-won sleep. Excitement surged through me at the thought that morning had come more quickly than I had realized and that Clark was already here, but the instant I opened my eyes, a disappointed frown overtook me. The bedroom was still flooded with darkness, the moon veiled behind thin clouds.

The tapping sound was repeated, and I froze when I realized that it was coming from the living room window. A bolt of fear sent sparks of lightning through my veins, setting the hair at the back of my neck upright and pebbling my skin. Only—I glanced at the clock—a half hour had passed since I had thought how relieved I was that no sign of the clone had been found. But what if... what if he had survived? What if he was here now? After all, I wasn't quite as convinced as Clark about his inherent goodness.

Cautiously, I slipped from the bed, trying to still the rapid beating of my heart and regretting for the millionth time the emptiness of the space beside the window. The tapping stopped; I had to wonder if it was because he had heard the increase in my pulse-rate.

Firming my grip on my courage and setting my mouth into a grim line, I pulled the bedroom door open and stepped into the living room. The night was heavy with shadows, but the lights from the street below silhouetted the form hanging outside my apartment. He raised his hand in a small wave just as I stepped close enough to see that my visitor wore a winter coat, casual clothes... and glasses.

"Clark!" I exclaimed, the fear instantly obliterated. Hurriedly,

unable to wipe away the silly grin spreading itself over my features, I unlocked the window and threw it open. "You're flying!"

"I can fly again!" he repeated jubilantly, laughing exultantly. Gracefully, quickly, as if flying were as natural for him as breathing, he swooped through the window, set his hands to my waist, and effortlessly twirled me around the room.

I couldn't help but laugh down at his shining face as my feet dangled in the air a foot or two above the floor of my apartment. "If I had known you were flying around, I'd have left the window open."

He laughed again, banishing the stillness and silence and darkness that invaded my apartment whenever he left—laughed because he could, because he wanted to, because I was laughing back at him. "I can fly!" he said again, and I idly wondered if this had been his reaction the first time he had discovered he could snub his nose at gravity. "I'm completely back to normal—well, normal for me."

"Which *is* super," I said with a grin that made him spin me in another giddy circle.

Again, his laugh split the silence, and I felt that I could fly just on that sound alone. How had I ever lived without his smile and laugh and touch and words that lit the very contours of my soul? "That's what my parents said," he told me happily.

"You told your parents before you told me?" I asked, pretending affront, though it really didn't bother me. How could I begrudge him any conversation with his parents when he had been so obviously thrilled the first time he was able to call them six days ago and tell them to come home? Apparently, he had hidden them in Rome, trusting that their lack of plane tickets and passports and their use of cash would hide them among the hundreds of other tourists there. It didn't hurt, Clark had confided, that Jonathan had been saving to take Martha there for their next anniversary.

"No," Clark assured me, taking my remark seriously. "They said that when I told them my other powers were returning."

I set my hands to his shoulders to balance myself and chuckled at the memory of how excited he had been over the past few days as each of his powers returned to him. Before, I had thought he was just happy to realize the Kryptonite's effects were once more proving only temporary; now I realized that he had been counting down the days until he could reclaim the skies.

"So how did you discover that you could fly again?" I arched my brows mischievously. "You didn't go throwing yourself off any buildings, did you?"

"Of course not—that's your department," he retorted, adjusting his grip on me so that he was holding me in a loose embrace rather than out where he could twirl me around. Before I could do more than whack him lightly on the shoulder, he smiled and said, "I woke up when I rolled over and bumped into the ceiling fan. I haven't floated in my sleep since before—well, since before. I came over here as soon as I woke up enough to realize exactly what this means."

"What this means..." I repeated, suddenly breathless over more than just his wonderful, even-more-radiant-than-before, exactly-as-handsome-as-Superman's smile. No explanation had been given for Superman's recent absence; Clark had never mentioned the subject, and I had refused to make up a story before I knew what he planned to do. But if he could fly... would he take up the mantle—or rather, the cape—again?

"Yes," he said, almost solemnly save for the twinkle glittering in his eyes and sparking through his glasses. "I've been waiting to ask you this my whole life."

"Ask me what?" I blurted in shock. That certainly didn't sound like anything to do with Superman. But he couldn't mean...no. He couldn't. He wouldn't.

His smile fought the restraints he had imposed on it, tugging at both corners of his mouth as he finally set me down and alighted on the floor himself. He took a step away from me, then held out his hand to me in invitation. "Lois... will you fly with me?"

Tears sprang to my eyes, tears such as I had never wept before—tears of happiness, of joy, of awe that this man could look at *me* with

such devotion and admiration and hope in every fiber of his being. I blinked the tears away, preferring to smile instead. “You know,” I managed to scrape together the semblance of a voice to say, “you are the most romantic spaceman I’ve ever met.”

He blinked, then chuckled. “Exactly how many spacemen have you met?”

“Enough,” I replied haughtily before softening. “Just exactly enough.”

Inordinately pleased, he smiled and spread the fingers of the hand he still had outstretched. “So, Lois,” he said in that hypnotizingly smoky voice. “Will you fly with me?”

“Yes, I will,” I whispered as I slid my hand into his, relishing the feel of his unblemished, unscarred palm. Then I cleared my throat and held up a warning finger. “On one condition.”

His brows arched playfully as he lifted me once more into the air, slowly spinning us around in an impromptu waltz, his grin delighted. “What condition? Breakfast in Paris? Lunch in Japan? Dessert on a tropical beach?”

“No,” I said despite the euphoric feeling unfurling in my stomach at the thought that Clark would give me all those things I had once imagined acting out with Superman—that he would fulfill all the fantasies, conscious and unconscious, that I had ever had. Placing my palms on Clark’s chest as I stepped up close to him, I sobered. “I want you to wear the Superman Suit.”

Slowly, as if caught in slow motion, his smile melted away, and with it his command of gravity. Our feet settled once more on the floor, Clark’s arm loosening from around me. “Lois,” he said quietly, his gaze dropping from mine. “Luthor used the name, the Suit, the powers, for his crimes—he mired Superman in his evil!”

“Who do you think would believe any criminal dumb enough to come forward saying Superman tried to get him to work for Luthor?” I pointed out. “Superman’s been accused of some bad things before, but a lot of them are so unbelievable that even the National Whisperer won’t print them. Even Luthor’s henchmen have been too scared of the possible ramifications to blow your identity! Besides, isn’t it safer to fly as Superman than as Clark?”

“It’s more than that,” Clark said, more subdued than he had been since I had told him the end of our story. “The last time I was Superman, the world rejected him—”

“Yes, it is more than that,” I interrupted, keeping fast hold of my patience. “You saw that memorial yourself, saw what the world truly thought of you demonstrated in the plaque and the gifts and the flowers. The Suit, the powers, the name, that statue—they’re *yours*, Clark. The clone can’t—”

“He hurt you!” Clark cried, the memory of pain shredding his voice to ribbons. His gaze finally returned to me, devouring me as if to reassure himself that I was alive and well; I hated that I had doused the light he had exhibited while twirling me through the air. “He hurt you, Lois,” he repeated, almost inaudibly, his hand skimming along my cheek. “He hurt you...and I don’t want you to be afraid of me.”

“He wasn’t you, Clark,” I stated gently. “You’re not him. I know you would never hurt me. And I’m not afraid of you.”

Clark’s arms fell away from me, and he distanced himself by a couple paces, half-turning his back to me as he hid the honesty of his expression. “Superman was mine, Lois—*ours* because I thought of the idea when you told me to bring an extra change of clothes to work”—I blinked, stunned by that casually dropped bombshell—but Luthor stole him and used him for his own ends. How can I be Superman again when Luthor ruined him so badly?”

“Luthor *tried* to ruin him,” I said softly, knowing it was useless to deny it, shrugging aside the strangeness of the way Clark regarded his alter ego. “But, Clark, if you take back the name and the Suit, Luthor will have failed. Superman’s a part of who *you* are, Clark, not anybody else—not even a copy of you.”

Clark angled slightly toward me so he could study my expression intently. “Lois, if I wear the Suit...wouldn’t you look at me and see *him*?”

“No,” I said and knew the truth of it as soon as I uttered the word. “No, Clark, I wouldn’t. I’d know you anywhere.”

A flicker of vast relief moved discernibly through his being as his eyes fell closed.

Encouraged by this, I moved forward to rest my hand on his healed back. “But, Clark,” I added seriously. “Don’t do this because of Luthor. Don’t do it for your parents or for the world, or even for me. Do it for *you*...because Superman is important and special. And you are so...” I swallowed back a lump and blinked rapidly. “You are so wonderful and amazing and extraordinary, Clark...and there’s no reason you should have to hide that.”

With a sigh that drained the hidden tension from his body, Clark turned and took me into his arms. His breath fluttered my hair as he dropped a small, meaningful kiss on my temple. “All right,” he said quietly, and I had to restrain the urge to throw my arms around him and grin triumphantly. “I have a few Suits at home in Smallville. I’ll go get one and come right back.”

“I’ll get dressed while you’re gone, so don’t go *too* fast,” I warned him, then impulsively kissed him, delighted—as I had been uncountable times over the past week—at the freedom to do so, at the rightness of it all, at the future spreading out before us.

Clark rolled his eyes, fighting a grin, snatched another kiss, and then flashed out the window.

Choosing out some warm clothes—but not *too* warm since I planned on staying very near Clark’s body heat—I dressed quickly. Most of my excitement stemmed from anticipation, and yet...and yet there was a tiny piece of me that worried whether I really *would* be able to instantly tell Clark’s Superman from the clone’s. Even the slightest check to my heartbeat would register like a screaming alarm to Clark’s superhearing, and I knew him well enough to know how much that would hurt him.

I zipped up my jacket and ran a brush through my hair to tidy it as I heard a whoosh signaling Clark’s arrival. Feeling an automatic smile transform my features, I stepped eagerly into the living room, unable to take in a decent breath of air. Disappointment dampened my excitement when I saw Clark standing there—still dressed in his regular clothes.

“Clark, you said—”

“I know,” he interrupted, hopeful trepidation flavoring his voice. “I’ve just wanted to show you this for a long time. Here.”

He offered me his glasses; I took them with only a slight hesitation. “Clark—”

Breath, speech, and thought were snatched away from me, pulled by force of inertia into the spinning blur of transforming colors that had, only seconds earlier, been Clark. The whirlwind lasted mere instants—the transition over so quickly that if I had blinked I would have missed it—and then Superman was standing where Clark had once been.

The real Superman.

And I had been right—I could instantly tell the difference. No wonder, I thought with some bit of vindication, I had not connected Clark to Superman when it had been the clone wearing the Suit; there were a thousand minute differences, from the way they stood to the expression in their eyes to the more diffident, self-conscious way Clark held himself to the astonishing gulf between the clone’s guarded wariness and Clark’s earnest openness.

“Wow!” The word was almost no more than the expelling of a breath. Hastily scrabbling for composure, I stepped up close to Clark and gave him a small, private smile. “Every time I think I know everything there is to know about you, you take my breath away with something new.”

“Good,” Clark murmured, the look in his eyes causing the rest of the world to vanish, leaving the two of us alone. “Because that’s what happens to me every time I look at you.”

My smile widened into a mischievous grin as I carefully tucked his glasses in my pocket, just as I had done in my dream. “You’re sure you’re completely better, Clark, right?”

He cocked his head. “Yes.”

“Good.” And with a laugh, I leaped into his arms, knowing he would catch me, confident he would hold me, trusting him to never let me go.

Something, some lingering darkness, fell away from Clark, and his expression lightened still further. As he floated us out of the window and shot straight up into the night sky, I knew without even looking back that the last of Luthor’s chains had fallen from Clark’s heart, leaving him, finally, unfettered and free.

Clouds spattered the ebony-inlaid sky like paint streaked too thinly over canvas, glittery stars sparkling like diamonds, piercingly sharp, laughingly obscure. The cold waited outside Clark’s embrace, but it could not reach me, could not slip past the aura of Clark’s presence to latch onto me and drain me dry of his imparted warmth.

Clark nestled me close to his heart. “Where do you want to go, Lois? I can take you anywhere in the entire world.”

“Isn’t there someplace you’ve always wanted to show me?” I asked him. Any sliver of doubt I might have had about whether he had truly wanted me to know his secret or not had been destroyed a hundred times over every time he so excitedly, jubilantly shared with me the hidden pieces of his life.

“Yes,” he admitted, his voice rumbling through his chest and sending shivers down my spine, doing what the chill of the skies could not. “But this is for you, Lois. I want to take you where *you* want to go.”

“And I want to go wherever you want to take me,” I told him firmly, then added mock-sternly, “And you’d better hurry up. It won’t be night forever.”

“No,” he agreed, laughter sending tremors through his voice. “But it could be *sunrise* forever.”

“What do you mean?” I demanded curiously.

He laughed at my impatience. “You know how they say that no two sunrises are ever the same? Well, shortly after I learned to fly, I decided to see if that was true.”

“And is it?” I asked.

“It’s true,” he confirmed contentedly, drawing me still closer to himself as we skimmed over waves that murmured and whispered below us. “In fact, even the same sunrise is different on every horizon. Look.”

My eyes followed his line of sight, and I looked out on the world—on the sunrise—as Clark saw it.

The curve of the horizon perfectly showcased the slow progression of the sun as it climbed its way up the slope of the earth, shimmering a million sparkles over water, adding canyons of depth to landscapes, shooshing away the shadows almost absentmindedly as it poured its liquid light over the world and pulled the ebony curtain from the sky to reveal colors of a thousand minute shadings. When light reached as far as the eye could see, we ghosted far above the ground below us until the misty remains of cool night were visible, and then we floated there and waited for the sun to reach us, languorously moving forward to peruse the world it illuminated.

Clark moved me in his arms, turning me so that I was parallel to his body, facing downward, nothing obstructing my sight, my arms outstretched as if I could fly on my own, though why should I when it was infinitely better to feel Clark’s left arm wrapped around my waist from behind, his right arm laid over mine, his fingers over mine, as if he were an angel that cast a shadow just below him, one over the other.

“No wonder you’re such an optimist, Clark,” I finally murmured after we had traversed half the globe to witness a thousand dawns, each etched in my mind by the power of their beauty and the delicacy inherent in their transience. I twisted my head to look at him, above and behind me. “Your world is full of eternal sunrises.”

Speechless, his expression eloquent enough to set a lump in my throat and send tingling sparks dancing through my body, he wove his fingers through mine and turned me to face him, one arm holding me in the pocket of magical unreality that kept him suspended in the air. The wind swooped and swirled around us, laughing as it twirled

between us and startled into silence when Clark’s mouth covered mine, capturing the wind between his lips so that he tasted of sky and cloud and rain and open space.

“You know,” Clark said when he pulled back to lean his brow against mine as we caught our breath, “you were right when you said I wandered the world searching for a place that was mine, looking for some feeling of connection, knowing—*hoping*—there was somewhere I belonged. This”—he slipped his fingers from mine to gesture to the gold and silver panorama surrounding us on all sides—“is where I usually went when I couldn’t find that place, when I despaired of ever belonging. I searched the entire globe for that feeling of rightness, Lois, but I’ve only felt it once in my life.”

“When?” I breathed out, though within my chest, my heart was fluttering as wildly as if a bird had somehow become incorporeal and lodged itself within me as I flew through the sky that had once belonged to it alone.

Clark’s eyes, when they met mine, were as solid, as real, as shocking as if he possessed some other form of heatvision, piercing straight and true to the very center of my being, so direct that the breath caught in my throat and fled. “The day I met you.”

Tears wet my eyelashes, dazzling my own vision when I blinked. Bringing my hands up, trusting myself fully to Clark’s hold, I framed his face with my fingers. “I can’t believe the first time I looked into your eyes, I didn’t instantly know you were the man I’d spend the rest of my life with.”

He smiled warmly, obviously overjoyed by that statement, and I couldn’t help an answering thrill to know that I had the power to bring him so much joy. “Speaking of the rest of our lives, Lois...” He paused to swallow, and I almost thought he looked frightened, though why should he? We had left our scars and wounds and chains all behind. “I’m... I’m thinking that tomorrow, I might ask you out on a date. A real date.”

A laugh of molten joy escaped me. “I’m thinking that I might say yes.”

His fingers fanned out over my back as he brought up his other hand to play through my hair. “And I’m thinking that I might ask you out a lot more after that, maybe every day, just so I have an excuse to see you even when we’re not working.”

“I’m thinking I’d like that a lot,” I told him. He still looked nervous, though he smiled at my reply.

“And then...” The sun reflected in his eyes, twin orbs of gold and crimson hope. “Then I’m planning on asking you to marry me.”

I stared at him a long moment, completely taken aback, completely stunned—completely elated. Twining my arms around his neck, I looked straight into his eyes and uttered the truest words I have ever spoken: “Then, Clark, I’m planning on being the happiest woman who ever lived.”

We hung there in the vastness of a sky large enough to encompass the whole of a world, suspended between the silver and gray vestiges of night and the burgeoning gold and carnelian and alabaster of daybreak, hovering between the blurred lines of strengthening light and fading darkness as the sun asserted its dominance. Yet Clark outshone it all as he smiled at me with a smile that told me just how many of his dreams I had made come true.

And then he curled his hand around the back of my neck and lowered his head and kissed me. The wind laughed at us as it danced its merry way around us; the sun lit us in a brilliant ray of light; the clouds obligingly provided the scarcest of veils between us and the world below. But all I knew was Clark, all I saw was his radiance, and all I was aware of was the way he grew to encompass—grew to *become*—my entire world, filling and occupying my five senses.

The taste of wind-blown mist and cool sky and drops of pure sunshine.

The sound of Clark’s smoky voice murmuring my name as if there were no other word in any language that mattered as much.

The scent of his skin, fresh and pure and clean.

The feel of his form defining mine through the strength of his

embrace, the gentleness of his touch, and the depths of love revealed through his kiss.

And light—eternal light that is mine and mine alone.

THE END