

Blind (Super)Man's Bluff

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: What might have happened if Superman's eyesight hadn't been restored in the episode "The Eyes Have It" — leaving Lois and Clark to grapple with a new set of realities?

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"Although I may not be able to prevent the worst from happening, I am responsible for my attitude toward the inevitable misfortunes that darken life. Bad things do happen; how I respond to them defines my character and the quality of my life. I can choose to sit in perpetual sadness, immobilized by the gravity of my loss, or I can choose to rise from the pain and treasure the most precious gift I have — life itself." — Walter Anderson

Episode One Life Itself

Martha Kent was anything but pleased. She didn't like this. She didn't like this one bit. Every fiber of her being screamed that this was wrong. Still...

"Steps," she whispered from her hiding spot behind a large packing box in her only child's apartment because, whether she was happy with it or not, this was her assigned task.

She watched as her son hesitated and then groped slightly for the railing before taking his first step up the stairs leading to the door. This was never going to work. He was just far too obvious.

Good!

"Okay, you're on the landing," she whispered. Her job was to cover the living room and kitchen. Jonathan's was to cover the bedroom — in case for some reason Clark needed to go in there. "The door is right in front of you... lower," she added when he reached forward, too high to grasp the doorknob. "And to your right... I mean, left." She'd always had trouble keeping those straight.

Still, Clark had insisted that she and Jonathan both audition for their assigned roles and claimed that she take the living room

because she, apparently, was better at this than Jonathan.

A moment later, Clark was grasping the door handle and turning it. The door was pushed open from the outside before he even had a chance to get it fully open and Martha watched as a whirlwind swept past Clark into the apartment, practically knocking him off his feet in the process.

Lois.

"This better be important, Clark," Lois said, barely looking at the man in question as she bustled down the steps, tossing her coat over the back of the couch. "I don't know where you've been the past few days, but I could have really used your help. Your weekend... whatever... with Mayson couldn't have come at a worse time."

"I didn't spend the weekend with Mayson," Clark said.

For a brief moment, she paused, but a dismissive gesture with her hand made it clear that his weekend activities were not currently forefront in her thoughts — or at least that Clark's relationship with Mayson was not a topic she was currently prepared to contemplate. "Anyway, the long and the short of it is that Superman's blind. That's confidential information, by the way. Can you imagine what the thugs of Metropolis would do if they knew?"

She gave her head a quick shake before returning to her previous rant. "Anyway, I know who did it — who blinded Superman — but they got away. And then Superman took off. I thought he'd followed them. But now no one can find the guys who did it and no one has seen Superman, and by the way, what exactly have you been doing the last few..."

Her voice suddenly died as she seemed to take her first good look around her. "Packing? You've been packing? Why?" She spun around then, looking at him closely for the first time. "Clark, look at me. Why have you been packing?"

In the silence that followed, Martha shifted positions so that she could get a clearer view of Clark. He was still standing at the top of the steps, having turned around, even if he hadn't moved. His hand rested on the railing and his eyes were fixed on the floor in front of him.

"If you want to come down the stairs, the first step is right in front of you," Martha whispered. When he didn't move, she cringed. If only he started to move, or tried to look Lois in the eye, maybe the woman would stand a chance of figuring out that Superman wasn't the only one blind.

"Clark, look at me," Lois said again, this time much softer.

Martha silently willed her son to do as asked, but he stubbornly kept his eyes focused on the floor. Martha looked at Lois. She'd heard the tinge of anxiety in Lois' voice when she'd asked Clark to look at her — as if she feared being buried under an avalanche if she spoke any louder.

'Come on, Lois! Figure it out!' Martha silently tried to push these thoughts into the younger woman's mind.

Suddenly, Lois let out an audible breath, cutting through the air like a knife. "Fine! Don't look at me. Just tell what you mean by..." Her hand made a sweeping gesture, taking in the entire room. "...this."

"That's why I asked you to come over, Lois. I'm..." His voice cracked slightly. "...leaving Metropolis."

Lois reached out, grasping onto the back of the sofa, the earth beneath her feet suddenly shifting.

"Leaving... Metropolis." Lois repeated the words slowly, weighing them with her tongue. Then she gave her head a firm shake. "Don't be ridiculous, Clark. You're not leaving Metropolis. Now... what we need to do is..."

"I am leaving, Lois. I'm sorry if this seems sudden. But the last little while... I guess I've finally realized that I'm not cut out for big city life. I miss the farm. I'm going home. The editor of the Smallville Post is resigning and..." He hesitated slightly. "... my folks could really use the help."

Martha glared at her son. How dare he use her and Jonathan as an excuse for this? The way he was scuffing a foot on the floor told Martha that he knew she wouldn't approve of being used in this fashion.

"No. No, Clark, you can't leave, I..." She bit off her words, clearly re-evaluating her comments. "You can't leave now. Superman needs us! You can't just abandon m... him."

"Superman can sort out his own problems, Lois. I need to do this... for me." He turned back towards the door, his hand fumbling for the doorknob for a moment before he found it.

Martha glanced back at Lois. She seemed slightly puzzled, her eyes going to Clark and then to the open door and back to Clark.

"Okay, what's really going on here, Clark?" Lois said. "No, no. I don't buy it. This doesn't make any sense."

Martha tried to silently point her in the right direction, her mind screaming: 'He's blind, Lois. Notice that he's blind.'

"You don't run away," Lois continued. "...or well, not always... or not when it really matters, anyway."

"Goodbye, Lois," he mumbled.

"Clark, please..." Lois' voice had turned soft, pleading. "Talk to me."

"Goodbye, Lois," Clark repeated, pulling the door a little further open.

From the look on Lois' face, Martha got the impression that Lois felt as if she'd just been punched in the gut. Still, she swallowed, took a deep breath and then slowly padded up the steps.

"But..." Lois said, reaching out to place a hand on Clark's chest as he continued looking at the floor. "...what about... us?" The words were asked softly, questioningly, and in the silence that followed, Martha felt hope rise in her chest. Clark's expression didn't change, but by the way he swallowed, Martha could tell he was not unaffected.

"Us," Clark repeated softly. Then he broke the mood by taking a step back — causing Lois' hand to fall from his chest.

"Landing!" Martha whispered urgently when Clark looked as if he was about to take another step back.

Clark's foot hovered in the air for a moment and Martha suspected it was only by judicious use of his superpowers that he hadn't fallen down the stairs. He placed his foot back on the landing before speaking again.

"Us," Clark said again, this time the word was accompanied by a small snort. "Lois, there is no us. 'There is you. There is I. There is no we.' Isn't that what you've always told me?"

Lois stood in stunned silence for moment before storming back down the stairs to grab her coat. "Fine!" she said, stomping again up the stairs, pushing past Clark and into the doorway.

For a moment, Martha was hopeful that Clark was about to lose his balance, before those damned super reflexes kicked in and allowed him to regain his footing. Unfortunately, Lois' back had been turned as she'd stepped into the doorway, so she hadn't seen his almost stumble.

Lois took a step outside before turning back to look at Clark. "When you decide that you're ready to tell me what's really going on, give me a call. If I'm not too busy saving Superman, I might just be willing to give you a call back." With that, she stepped out of his apartment, slamming the door behind her.

A heavy silence filled the room as Martha stood up. She glanced over to see her husband emerge from the bedroom. Clark stood, unmoving, except for a tiny tick in his jaw.

"Well, I'd say that went better than expected," Martha said sarcastically, breaking into the oppressive silence.

"What did you expect me to do?" Clark said, losing his temper as he spun in the direction of his mother's voice.

Her eyebrows rose. Clark seldom lost his temper and it was even rarer that he lost it with her.

"Watch how you speak to your mother, son," Jonathan said

immediately in a tone of voice that sounded suspiciously like Superman's.

"Sorry," Clark responded with unmistakable contrition. "I just..." He ran his hand through his hair. "Lois can't know that Clark is blind. It would make it impossible for her not to make the connection between me and Superman."

"Why not just tell her the truth?" Martha asked. "It can't be that you're still worried that she'll publish it in some tell-all news article."

"No. No, of course not. I just..." He hesitated briefly, as if trying to marshal his thoughts into words. "I just don't want her to know that Clark is blind. It's bad enough that she knows Superman is blind. Besides..." he added, trying to inject an optimistic tone in his voice. "...maybe this isn't permanent."

Martha bit her lip. She'd already made her position known — forcefully — most of the previous evening. She agreed that he'd need to take a leave of absence from the Planet, of course. No one could be allowed to realize that Clark had lost his eyesight at the same time as Superman. The connection between them would be far too obvious. But none of them had worked out what would happen after that. Maybe this wasn't permanent. Maybe they could find a way for Clark to work around it. But for now, it only made sense for Clark to leave Metropolis before anyone made the connection.

But Lois was a different story. As far as Martha was concerned, Lois had a right to know. She was his partner and best friend. She was the woman he loved. And having watched Lois carefully over the past year, Martha was convinced that her son's feelings weren't entirely unrequited. Still, Clark Kent could be almost as obstinate as his father when he thought he was right. And when it came right down to it, no matter how wrong she thought he was, he was an adult — and she had to respect his decision.

She looked around the apartment and sighed. "Well, then, I guess there is nothing else to do now except get these boxes packed into the U-Hall van outside." Now that Clark was blind, it wasn't as if he could just fly them back to the farm.

Lois' steps faltered as she walked down the newsroom ramp and caught sight of the empty desk across from hers. Almost a month now since Clark had left, and the first sight of his empty desk in the morning still generated an almost physical feeling of pain in her chest.

But no! Today she wasn't going to think about Clark. She wasn't. He'd left. And that was that! Today she wasn't going to feel like a bird, unable to quite alight anywhere for more than brief periods of time. Slightly lost. As if a part of her was missing. He'd made this choice for both of them, and if there was one thing she knew about Lois Lane it was that she didn't look back. Eyes firmly forward. No time for regrets. No time for moping. There were stories to be written and awards to be won.

She raised her chin and marched firmly to her desk. She slapped her attaché case down on the floor and began removing her coat, freezing in mid-action when her eyes caught sight of a pen lying next to Clark's old desk.

'That's one of the big problems with this world.'

Lois could still hear Clark's words as clearly as if he had said them only yesterday. He'd rescued from her garbage can what they had both thought was a pen that no longer worked.

'Disposable products, disposable relationships, disposable lives. If everything is expendable, what happens to friendship, to trust, to loyalty? What happens to love, Lois?'

What indeed?

And yet, only days later he'd tossed away his job, his home in Metropolis... He'd tossed away her as easily as she'd tossed away that pen.

But what really made her mad, she thought, was that he hadn't

even had the decency to wrap up the pieces of his life in Metropolis before disappearing. She'd learned from Jimmy that he hadn't even told Perry in person that he was leaving. A phone call followed by his letter of resignation, delivered by his parents when they'd come to collect his things from the Planet, had been Clark's way of dealing with Perry. Jimmy hadn't even been given that much consideration. He'd only learned about Clark's departure when he'd arrived at the office to find Clark's desk devoid of all personal items.

She supposed she should feel grateful that at least he'd called and asked her to come over so that he could tell her about his decision in person.

Grateful! Yeah, right.

She gave a very unladylike snort as she plopped herself in the chair at the desk and thumbed on her computer with enough force to cause discomfort to the digit.

Perry and Jimmy weren't the only ones to get their information second hand either. Not that it didn't give Lois some small sense of satisfaction knowing that Mayson hadn't been told in person. In fact, he'd stood her up for some magical weekend they were supposed to go on together and then moved without telling her. That left the dubious honor of telling Mayson to Lois. Lois' mind immediately took her back to that moment, the day after Clark's departure.

PREVIOUSLY

Lois' eyebrows knit together in confusion when the elevator doors opened and Mayson stepped into the newsroom. What the hell was she doing here? Clark didn't work here anymore so there was no reason for Mayson to be sniffing around here like a bitch in heat. Unless... Oh, god! Clark hadn't told Mayson he was leaving!

Her certainty that Mayson didn't know hit Lois like a thunderbolt.

Lois wasn't entirely sure if she should derive some small amount of pleasure from Clark's oversight or be annoyed that Clark had disappeared, leaving Lois to tell Mayson that her 'boyfriend' had vanished. Annoyed won. This was great! Just great!

Never before had it been left to her to break up with a woman on someone else's behalf. In fact, she'd never even contemplated doing such a thing. How did one go about something like that anyway?

'It's not you; it's him.'

'You'll always be friends.'

Or maybe the trusty old... 'You deserve so much better than him.'

Did the lines sound just as forced and corny when said by a third party as they did when said by the individual himself?

"Where's Clark?" Mayson asked, stopping next to Lois' desk before Lois had managed to work out the proper etiquette for the task. Did Martha Stewart have a book for dealing with this situation?

"Didn't he tell you?" Lois asked, hoping to buy more time before the moment of truth was upon her.

"Tell me?" Mayson asked.

Well, that hadn't exactly bought her the time she needed. Maybe it was best to just get straight to the heart of the matter.

"He left," Lois said.

"Left?"

Obviously that had been too brief. "Quit. Resigned. Hit the road. Threw in the towel. Packed up and left Metropolis. Took the yellow brick road back to Kansas," Lois tried again.

"He left?"

Lois rolled her eyes. Could this woman be any more dense? "That's what I've been trying to tell you."

"But..." Mayson's voice trailed off, but the look on her face

was one of pure confusion.

Lois studied the other woman for a moment. Mayson looked so baffled by this information. Maybe things had already gone further between Clark and Mayson than Lois had realized. Oh, she had known that Mayson was half in love with Clark. What she'd never been quite able to determine was what Clark felt for Mayson.

At times when Mayson was coming on to him, he would get the same look that he used to get when Cat would throw herself at him. Still, Lois knew that Clark had gone out with Mayson at least once. She'd even seen them kissing, for crying out loud... and who knew what else. Lois had left before determining exactly what had happened next. One thing she hadn't needed was to have the image of them making out burned into her retinas for life. And if they had planned to spend the weekend together, it must have been... something, at least.

For reasons Lois couldn't say she understood, the very thought of Clark and Mayson together made her feel slightly... okay, make that extremely ill to her stomach.

Still, the lost look on Mayson's face caused Lois a pang of guilt. She'd just dropped the news on Mayson as abruptly as Clark had dropped it on her — and she knew how that felt.

"Hey, are you okay?" Lois asked, a balm to her unexpected guilt.

"Yeah, I just didn't think..." Mayson's voice trailed off as she absently planted her butt in the chair next to Lois' desk.

Lois shifted uncomfortably. She disliked the unexpected sympathy she felt for the other woman. After all, Lois had at least as much of a right to feel lost or betrayed by Clark's departure as Mayson did — so how had she suddenly been cast in the role of Mayson's comforter? After all, Lois Lane didn't do comfort. That was Clark's job.

"Why?" Mayson asked after a moment.

Lois shrugged. For some reason, she didn't want to tell Mayson that she had absolutely no idea. "His parents needed his help on the farm," she said, parroting one of the reasons Clark had given her — not adding that she hadn't believed Clark's excuse for a minute.

"So he may be coming back," Mayson said.

Again Lois shrugged. But she knew the answer to that question. Clark's departure had not been a temporary leave of absence. He wasn't coming back. "I suppose."

It was a lie, but Mayson seemed to take comfort in the prevarication so Lois didn't bother to correct her.

Suddenly, Lois' attention was caught by a report on the television quietly playing in the background — another panel discussing Superman's disappearance. A serious train wreck just outside Metropolis the night before had half the city screaming for Superman. Lois watched for a moment while the 'experts' gave their opinions — mainly to berate Superman for suddenly abandoning the city.

"I guess they don't know that Superman's blind," Mayson said, breaking into Lois' thoughts.

Lois' eyes snapped back to Mayson before darting around the newsroom. She let out a breath of relief when she realized that no one was close enough to overhear them. Still, it brought up another problem — one Lois hadn't considered before now. Who all might know that Superman was blind?

Lois had kept secrets for Superman before — his allergy to a certain green crystal, not to mention the way his powers could be transferred by an electrical charge. And she knew that neither Clark nor his parents would say anything. But what about Mayson? She had to have learned about Superman's blindness somewhere.

"We need to talk," Lois said, rising to her feet and walking briskly towards the conference room before Mayson could say anything else.

"What is it?" Mayson asked when Lois finally closed the door. "Is it about Clark?"

"No. It's about Superman."

Lois could see Mayson stiffen in response to the name.

"I know you don't like Superman," Lois said immediately.

"Now I can't say I understand that. With all the bad things you see in your job, I would have thought you would appreciate the good things Superman does, but I guess that's not really the point here."

"What are you getting at, Lois?"

"Why do you think Superman's blind?"

"He called me when you were kidnapped. I was trying to help him find you."

"Oh."

"Why?"

Lois took a deep breath and plunged ahead. Obviously, Superman's blindness was not public knowledge and if Mayson was the only other person who knew... other than the bad guys, of course...

"Have you told anyone else?" Lois asked hastily.

"No, but..."

"I just think it would be better if no one knows that Superman's blind." When it looked as if Mayson was about to object, Lois rushed on. "If the criminal element knows Superman's blind, they'll undoubtedly all make their move immediately — wanting to act without him around to stop them. Now, the longer Superman is gone, the bolder they'll all get anyway. But if they all realize at the same time that Superman is no longer able to protect the city, they will overwhelm police and emergency services. Surely you must be able to see that."

Mayson's mutinous expression had transformed into something that was much less readable while Lois had been speaking. Her courtroom face probably — the one that didn't let the jury know that her witness had completely altered his testimony on the stand.

"Listen, this isn't about your feelings for Superman," Lois continued when Mayson didn't speak. "Superman — and whether he should be doing what he does — isn't the issue. This is about keeping the criminals off the streets. Right now, my boss has all of us hustling to get the Superman story. I haven't even told him that Superman's blind. I hate lying to Perry, but..."

"I agree," Mayson said.

"...it's the right thing to do. I don't know why this is so hard for you to understand. It costs you nothing to keep what you know to yourself. And it helps the city. So why you won't..." Lois' voice trailed off. "Did you just agree with me?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Lois wasn't entirely sure why she was challenging this.

"Because you're right. I might not have liked how Superman went about his business or the man himself for that matter, but if all the criminals in the city decided to make their move at the same time, the police would be completely overwhelmed. I don't suppose Superman thought of that before he made himself so indispensable to this city."

Lois felt anger flare inside her. "Are you blaming Superman for this?"

"Well, if he'd never come, we wouldn't be worrying about this now, would we? The police wouldn't have become complacent and the criminals wouldn't be in a position to take advantage of that complacency. That's what comes from placing too much faith in one man."

Lois had to bite down hard on her lower lip to keep from exploding, but there was a bigger issue here. "So we're agreed. You won't say anything about Superman."

"We're agreed. It's not in the best interests of this city to make this public. And hopefully by the time the criminal element realizes that Superman's not returning, the police will have

regained their competence."

Lois bit back the information that she was still hopeful that Superman would return for fear that it might change Mayson's mind. But Lois was not about to give up on Superman. He would return — at least if Lois had anything to say about it. Regardless of what Mayson thought, the world needed Superman.

PRESENT DAY

And that's what she should be concentrating on. Superman! Not some no-good, lousy, inconsiderate... "Damn you, Clark Kent," she muttered as the now-familiar anger rose in her chest. "Damn you for making me care."

"Did you say something?"

Jimmy's voice snapped her out of her internal battle. Still, it took her a moment to focus on what Jimmy had said. "Uhh... no. I was just..." She gave a laugh, silently cursing herself at how shaky her voice sounded even to her own ears.

The look of sympathy on Jimmy's face, as if he'd just read her thoughts, almost did her in.

"So... did you want something?" she demanded, forcing anger into her voice. "Or are you just planning to stand there all day, wasting the Planet's time?" She raised an eyebrow, hoping, by sheer force of will, to wipe the pity off his face. It worked.

"No, I... No. Uhh... how about I..." Jimmy gestured abstractly with his hand.

"Good idea!" Lois responded, turning her eyes immediately to her now powered up computer. She had to quit doing that — snapping at everyone. Still, it was the easiest way to deal with those expressions of sympathy people kept shooting in her direction. And if she had to approach the coffee machine only to hear all conversation instantly cease one more time or deal with one more person asking how she was holding up, she was going to go into full nuclear meltdown.

Clark Kent was a non-entity to her now. She'd forget him just like she had all the other men who'd abandoned her in the past. It was no big deal, really. No big deal, at all. And at least she wouldn't have to worry about him editing her copy, stealing her headlines or otherwise being his annoying self.

Now all she needed to do was to convince everyone around her that she was past the whole Clark Kent part of her life so that they could find some other sucker to talk about and pity in their spare time.

She, on the other hand, didn't have spare time. She had work to do. She had a Superman to save, after all. If only Leit had told the truth when she'd asked how to cure Superman's blindness. She closed her eyes as she thought back, wondering for the hundredth time what she could have done differently that day.

PREVIOUSLY

"We do have a bargaining chip," Leit said. "You tell me where the device is; I'll give you the antidote for Superman's blindness."

For the first time, Lois felt a small amount of hope. An antidote existed for Superman's blindness. And since she now knew what they were looking for — an object she'd mistaken for a pen earlier in the day — she had the means to obtain that information. All she had to do was to get Leit to give her his information before she revealed the location of Faraday's device. Of course, Leit could be lying. Still, what choice did she have?

Lois looked around Clark's desk. She'd seen Clark put Faraday's device in his pen holder. Still, it wasn't there now. So... where was it?

Not that she particularly cared. She had the information she needed. Superman had been blinded with ultra-violet light and so, according to Leit, the antidote was infra-red light. Leit even had a apparatus that could be used to instantly cure Superman. Switch the contraption from ultra-violet light to infra-red light, shine it

into Superman's eyes using the visible light Leit had added from the cold end of the spectrum, turn it on and... presto! Superman would be able to see again.

Suddenly, the Daily Planet went dark and a gust of wind swept through the newsroom.

Superman. It had to be.

"I know you're here, Superman," Leit said, obviously having reached the same conclusion as Lois.

"Yes, Dr. Leit. I'm here. And I have the device you're looking for."

Superman called for Lois to come to him, to follow his voice in the darkened newsroom.

A struggle ensued, but try as she might, she couldn't shake Leit, who was now demanding that Superman return the device. She heard the device fly through the air in their general direction.

With Leit's attention distracted, she stopped down on his foot. When he grabbed for his foot, she grabbed the apparatus he'd shown her earlier, the one that had been used to blind Superman, and switched it to infrared.

"Superman! Look this way!" Lois yelled, shining the red beam directly into Superman's eyes.

She heard scrambling around her, but focused on her task. The important thing was to cure Superman's blindness. Then he would take care of Leit.

She suddenly heard laughter from the far side of the room.

"Did you really think shining infrared light into Superman's eyes would cure his blindness?" Leit asked. "It's not like when you take a positive and negative number of the same value and add them together to get zero. Infrared might be the opposite of ultra-violet, but that doesn't mean one can be used to undo the damage done by the other. Still, thanks for the distraction. I got what I came here for. Faraday's device. Thank you."

With that, he and Munch disappeared into the stairwell.

PRESENT DAY

That was the last time Lois had seen or heard about either Leit or Munch. Not even her most reliable sources had heard as much as a peep from either of them. That had been the last she'd seen of Superman, too. Then, a couple of days later, she'd lost Clark. Her eyes once again settled on his empty desk and she found herself biting her lower lip to fight back the threatening tears.

No. No. She wasn't doing this. Superman. She needed to discover a way to bring Superman back... Well, and to get rid of the pieces of information that seemed to keep leaking from her mind as a result of having Faraday's device used on her.

Martha let out a sigh as she glanced through the kitchen window to see her son lying out in the back yard, staring blindly towards the setting sun. He spent all day, every day, doing the same thing — waiting for the magical powers he got from the sun to heal his eyes. With snow all around him, and wearing only a pair of shorts, he certainly did paint quite a picture. It might have been funny if it weren't so painful to watch.

But his activities, or lack thereof, was not what was troubling Martha the most. It was almost as if something, some light was slowly going out of Clark as days passed with no improvement to his condition. He'd had one plan. Come home. Spend as much time as possible in the sun. Let it heal his eyes and then get on with his life.

And as the plan failed to work, Clark was sinking deeper and deeper into depression. Both she and Jonathan had tried to suggest other approaches, other avenues he might pursue. Book an appointment with Dr. Scott, the Kent family physician. Dr. Scott had taken over for his father, now referred to as Dr. Scott Sr., years ago. It had been Dr. Scott Sr. who had helped Martha and Jonathan when Clark had first arrived on their doorstep to get the necessary documents so that Martha and Jonathan could keep him. If he had

any suspicions about Clark's origins, he'd kept them to himself. And the son was the spitting image of his father in every way. Surely if he noticed something unusual in his examination of Clark, which Martha didn't think was likely, he could be counted on to...

No!

That idea had been shot down immediately. No one could know that Clark was blind at the same time as Superman. And even though there had been nothing in the papers about the reasons for Superman's sudden disappearance, there was still a chance that someone would make the connection between a suddenly blind Clark Kent and a suddenly blind Superman.

Well, what if they contacted Lois? She and Clark had always worked well together, getting to the bottom of problems. Maybe they could see if she had come up with anything that might...

No!

He simply refused to allow Lois to know.

Okay, so maybe he could try to adjust to his handicap, learn new ways of coping until he could find the answers he needed.

No!

He was nothing more than a danger to other people or property when he tried to do anything. One wrong move and his parents' farm would be reduced to rubble. It was far better that he just wait until the sun worked its magic.

Martha sighed again.

The whole thing had come to a head about a week ago, resulting in a knock-down, drag-out fight between Jonathan and Clark. Irresistible force met immovable object. Father and son, two of the stubbornest men Martha had ever known, had gone head to head. By the end, Clark had moved out of the farm house... and into a small cabin next to the barn that they used whenever they hired a field-hand to help with the harvest.

At first Martha and Jonathan had hoped that this would be just the push Clark needed to, at the very least, learn to get around and do things for himself. There was a kitchen — of a sort — and a shower in the small shack, after all. So maybe he'd have to learn to tend to his own needs.

It was a pipe-dream. How do you force someone to cook for themselves who doesn't need to eat? Or to clean who doesn't have to worry about germs? Or wash clothes who simply wears the same pair of grubby shorts every day. The only thing Clark would do for himself was to slip on the same pair of shorts, stumble his way to the lawn chair they had set out for him in the back yard in the morning and shuffle his way back to bed in the evening. Occasionally, he might throw in a shower for good measure — although not often enough to Martha's way of thinking. He could find his way to the washroom when needed. When people showed up at the farmhouse unexpectedly, he could disappear back into the cabin quickly enough to avoid being spotted. A string running from the cabin to the lawn chair made certain of that. But otherwise, he just lay in that stupid chair all day, staring up at the sun, clinging stubbornly to the belief that it was going to heal him.

Unable to stand it any longer, yesterday when Clark had been lying out in the sun and Jonathan had been out checking on the fence on the far side of the field, she'd gone over and cleaned the cobwebs out of the cabin, vacuumed and scrubbed until the entire place sparkled. Then last night, she'd smuggled a plate of supper and a piece of fresh peach crumble over to Clark's when Jonathan had thought she was cleaning up in the kitchen.

She knew Jonathan was right. Tough love demanded that they force Clark to take responsibility for his situation. To find ways to adapt. To look for new solutions. It was just that head and heart could not agree on leaving her baby to fend for himself — even if her 'baby' was a nearly thirty-year-old man. Not taking care of Clark went against every fiber of Martha's being.

No, regardless of what both of the men in her life may think, there was only one course open to her. It was time for the women

folk to show a couple mule-headed men how it was done!

Slipping on her boots and jacket, her course of action determined, she marched out to the barn, stuck her head inside and yelled.

"Jonathan, I've got to run into town. Supper is on the table when you're finished up in here."

"But, Martha, didn't you just pick up supplies yesterday?" But Jonathan was already talking to himself. A moment later, he heard the engine of the old pickup come to life. With a shake of his head, he returned to milking the first of the two milk cows they still kept on the farm.

Lois plopped into the chair at her desk and slipped her feet out of her shoes before reaching up to massage her temples. It had been a big news day. She would have the front page tomorrow and Perry was practically doing cartwheels. But for some reason, the rush she always felt after breaking a big story just wasn't there.

She knew what the problem was, of course. She was tired. So tired. When had everything become so difficult? After a day like today, what she should be doing was celebrating. But all she seemed to want to do was sleep.

But even sleeping seemed difficult these days. If she went home now, she'd toss and turn all night, only to have the alarm go off shortly after she'd finally managed to fall asleep. Her mind would turn over and over for hours, chasing itself like a dog chases its tail.

Back and forth. To and fro. Over and over. Just... thinking.

Not that she'd be thinking about anything in particular. And certainly, she wouldn't spend her time thinking about Clark, about his abandonment, his betrayal, his warm eyes when he would look at her as if she was the only woman in the world... She gave her head a shake to get her mind back on track. No. She wouldn't spend her night thinking about Clark. But not thinking about him seemed to take as much energy as thinking about him these days, sapping all her strength, leaving her drained just when she should be feeling refreshed and energized, ready to take on another day.

Another day of trying to find a way to save Superman. Not that she could do that openly. Perry had long since taken her off the Superman story. Not that she had given up, of course. But even she had to admit she was at a dead end. No ways to track down Leit or his associate who seemed to have disappeared into thin air. But even if she found a way to cure Superman, it wasn't as if would do him any good. There had been no sightings or reports of the big guy since the night he'd lost his sight.

She'd even tried standing on the roof of the Daily Planet yelling for Superman one night after Jimmy had mentioned a researcher at Star Labs who was currently working on some sort of advanced technology to assist the blind. A Dr. Bernard Klein. She'd wanted to discuss this with Superman, but no matter how loud or long she had called, she had been met only by the eerie sound of the wind whipping around her.

Nothing else seemed to hold her interest. Lex had returned from the dead and when he'd kidnapped her, attempted to convince her that she loved him and wanted to be with him, her primary reaction had been boredom. Of course, looking back on it now, it was a good thing that Jimmy had followed her to the sewer system and then called the police when Lex had entered behind her. Otherwise, who knew what might have happened without a Superman or a Clark Kent to save the day.

Still, she'd managed to get the story — which had made Perry happy. Now Lex was safely behind bars and so she'd moved on to other stories, none meaning more to her than Lex's story had. Less even.

Well, regardless of how tired she felt, regardless of the big story she'd broken only today, it was probably time to review her notes on Superman again — just in case she'd missed something. She turned to her computer and clicked on her documents,

scanning them briefly to find her notes on Leit.

"What are you still doing here, honey?"

Lois looked up to see her boss towering over her. He seemed to realize the imbalance of power implied by their respective positions and took a seat on the corner her desk. She hated the intimacy implied by that action even more. It seemed Perry was gearing up for some fatherly advice — which she doubted she'd want to hear right now. Besides, Perry sitting there brought to mind another who had often taken that position in the past.

"So what are you still doing here?" Perry asked again.

"I could ask the same of you," she responded pointedly, even as she realized for the first time that the newsroom was now only in a half-light, the majority of the staffers having already retired for the evening.

"I was just getting ready to go," Perry responded.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Almost nine. Now I certainly don't want to complain or anything. After all, I loved the story you broke today. And I'm the boss so complaining about how hard an employee has been working seems a little... I don't know..."

"Counterproductive?" Lois asked, slightly amused.

"Exactly! But you've been looking a little tired lately."

"There are at least five metabolic causes for fatigue reported in medical literature, including a decrease in the phosphocreatine level in the muscle, a proton accumulation, depletion of the glycogen store, hypoglycemia and an increase in the plasma concentration ratio of free tryptophan to branched-chain amino acids."

"What?"

"Huh?" Lois gave her head a quick shake. "Nothing. Just another Faraday leak."

"Uhh... Well, why don't you get out of here? Go out to dinner with a friend or something? Celebrate your big story. You're going to be the talk of the fourth estate tomorrow."

Lois quickly glanced at her desk, the humor fading. "What friends?" she mumbled under her breath.

"What was that, honey?"

"Nothing. No, look, Perry. I'm fine. I just want to tie up some loose ends here and then I'll take off."

She held his gaze in the silence that followed, refusing to confirm his concerns for her by looking away.

"Okay," he finally said, rising from the corner of her desk.

"But if you need some time off, you just let me know, okay? I don't want you burning out. What would I tell the suits upstairs if I let my number one reporter burn out?" He added the last with a grin to lighten the mood.

The phone on Lois' desk suddenly rang, causing her to jump at the unexpected sound.

"I'll leave you to it, then," Perry said, gesturing to the phone even as he began walking back towards his office.

Lois quickly grabbed the phone.

"Lois Lane."

"Hi, Lois. It's Martha..."

Lois was so shocked she couldn't find her voice to respond. Clark hadn't called her once in the past month so the last person she'd expected to hear from was Martha.

"Martha Kent," Martha continued when Lois didn't speak.

"Martha! Hi. Yes, I know it's you. I... I guess you just caught me off guard. It's good to hear from you." And it was. Martha and Jonathan had taken her in and treated her more like family than her own did during the year and a half Clark had been at the Planet. She hadn't realized just how much she'd missed them until this moment. "How are you? How's Jonathan? How's... the farm? Are you planting your crops yet?"

Martha laughed. "We usually wait until the snow's gone to do that."

"Oh, right. Right. Of course. It's just... so good to hear your

voice.” She could hardly believe she’d just admitted that, but it was. When Clark had left her, he’d taken more from her than even she had realized.

“It’s good to hear yours, too. So how are you doing?”

“Oh... you know,” Lois said, her voice trembling slightly on the words. She quickly got control of her emotions. “Work’s been busy. Always lots going on in Metropolis. Keeps me on my toes. But, hey, you know me. That’s how I like it. Never a spare moment.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good, I guess.”

“Of course it’s good. Why wouldn’t it be good? Well, just today I broke a big story. Probably one of my biggest. Diana Stride. You know her?”

“Doesn’t she have that news program? Top Copy?”

“That’s her. Anyway, you can read all about it tomorrow. But let’s just say that it turns out she’s an assassin for Intergang. She’s been working for them for years — using her cover as a reporter to get close enough to a lot of important men to assassinate them.”

“Really? And you broke the story?”

“Yeah.”

“Congratulations.”

“The police are out looking for Diana Stride right now to arrest her. When the phone rang, I was sort of hoping to hear from my source at the police station that they have her in custody.”

“Oh, well, if you’re waiting for a call...”

“No!” Lois exclaimed. “No. Don’t hang up.” She pulled herself up short. Had that sounded desperate? “It’s just... this is so much nicer than talking to Inspector Henderson.” That sounded better. “It’s just so good to hear from you, Martha. But I’ve just been prattling on about me. What about you? And Jonathan? And...” Lois’ voice trailed off.

“The farm?” Martha asked, a chuckle in her voice.

Lois felt a blush spread across her cheeks. “Yeah, well, I guess I’m sort of wondering how Clark is doing, too.”

“Actually, that’s why I called.”

Lois instantly sat up straighter in her chair, her hand tightening its grip on the phone. “What...” She had to lick her lips to try again. “What happened to Clark?”

“Nothing! Nothing! Or... well, not really.”

“What does ‘not really’ mean?” Lois said, her anxiety level rising with every passing second.

Martha’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Look, I’m using a public phone. I really can’t get into it now. But... Can you come out here?”

“To Smallville?”

“Yes. I’m really not sure what to do and... I need your help.”

“What happened to Clark?”

“He’s okay. Or... well, sort of, but... Will you come? I’ll explain when you get here.”

“Yes. Yes, of course I’ll come. Perry just told me that if I needed some time off just to ask, but can’t you tell me...”

“Great! I’ll pick you up at the airport in Wichita tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? But I really should tie up some loose ends here and...”

“Uhh... Well... I’ve sort of already bought you a ticket.”

Martha said.

Lois smiled, touched by the idea that Martha had assumed Lois would react like family would and come if there was a family emergency.

“Sorry if that seems presumptuous, but...”

“It’s okay, Martha. Of course I’ll come. You know that.” Lois let out a breath. “But can’t you tell me...”

“Tomorrow. Please. I can’t say more than that over the phone.”

Lois nodded. Okay, so she would have to wait until tomorrow. She hated waiting. But Lois knew she wasn’t about to get more from Martha now. “So... what time does my plane leave?”

Once she had the particulars, she said good-bye and hung up.

Just then, the phone rang again as Henderson called to tell her that Diana Stride was now in custody.

When she hung up after the second call, Perry exited his office, his coat on, obviously headed for home.

“Perry!” she called. “Wait up for a moment, would you?”

Perry turned and waited as Lois jumped up from behind her desk and rushed towards him with more energy than she’d had in days.

“You know that time off you offered me?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to take you up on that.”

“Great! You could use a vacation. Help get your mojo back. So when...”

“Tomorrow.”

“Great shades of Elvis, Lois. When I said take some time off, I was expecting like in a week or two.”

“I know, but... well, there’s sort of been a family emergency and...”

Perry’s expression turned from annoyed to concerned in an instant. “I understand. We’ll hold down the fort here.”

“Thank you, Perry. I just heard from Henderson that they have Diana Stride in custody, so I’ll type up that story before I leave.”

Perry nodded. “I hope everyone’s all right.”

“So do I, Perry. So do I.”

“Can you tell me what the problem is?”

“I’m not really clear on that myself. But... I have to go.”

Perry nodded, taking in her tense demeanor. “So how much time do you need?”

“I’m not sure yet. How about I give you a call in a couple of days when I get a clearer picture of the situation?”

“Fair enough.”

Lois was getting restless. Martha still refused to say a word why she’d asked Lois to come to Smallville.

‘Not yet,’ Martha had said when Lois had stepped off the airplane.

‘Not yet,’ she had repeated when they had climbed into the old pickup.

‘Not yet,’ had been the response when they had finally left Wichita in the rear-view mirror.

Not that they hadn’t talked. About Lois’ story, which today was being syndicated all over the country. About Maisie’s award winning raisin tarts. About a misadventure Jonathan had recently had with one of their milk cows. About the latest television show sensation. About diet and exercise. About their favorite guilty pleasures. About art. About everything and anything except what Lois wanted to talk about.

And now they were driving through Smallville. Past Pop’s Grocery Store. Past Maisie’s Diner. Past the little gazebo that sat in front of Town Hall. Out through the other side of town.

“Martha, why am I here?” Lois finally asked, a slight tone of exasperation creeping into her voice.

“I’m sorry, Lois,” Martha began even as she pulled the pickup over to the side of the road. “It’s just... I’m about to tell you something I have absolutely no right to tell you. And if I am going to do this, I wanted to do it here.” She gestured to the field up ahead of them.

Lois looked around at the snow covered field before looking back at Martha expectantly.

“This is Schuster’s field. Almost thirty years ago now, while Jonathan and I were driving home one evening, we saw what we thought was a meteor...”

Lois put her head in her hands and rubbed her temples. When Martha had first started talking, Lois had felt irritated. How could anything that had happened thirty years before have a bearing on what was wrong with Clark? Because, although Martha hadn’t

actually said there was a problem with Clark, that had certainly been the implication.

Still, it hadn't taken long for Lois to get sucked into the story. The shock of finding out that what they had seen had not been a meteor but a small space craft. The recklessness of Martha's behavior in proceeding to open the craft over the objections of her husband — something that Lois could certainly identify with. The immediate conviction that the baby they found that night belonged to them. The endless discussions about where the child had come from, but having no idea. The hiding of the craft. The creepy government men who began prowling around Smallville. And the doctor who had helped them with the adoption papers which had officially named this miracle child...

Clark Jerome Kent.

That was how the man she knew had become Martha and Jonathon's son. Her mind flashed back to a conversation she and Clark had shortly after he arrived in Metropolis.

"Seems to me if your real parents don't care enough to raise you, then why give them a second thought?" Lois had asked when she came upon Clark doing a story about adopted children searching for their birth parents.

"Because if they gave you away, they must have had a reason. And it's the not knowing that kills you."

Lois had realized instantly that this was a subject Clark had given a lot of thought to and, uncomfortable with the emotion she'd heard in his voice, had dismissed him with some comment about him sticking to the touchy-feely stuff while she took that hard news — which at the time was Superman.

It had been sometime after that that she'd discovered that Clark was adopted himself and so his comments had obviously been rooted in personal experience. But not until this moment did she realize just how much he hadn't known. After all, as Martha had gone on to explain, they hadn't known that he was the last of his kind rescued from an exploding planet called Krypton until he'd found a globe in a warehouse after starting to work at the Daily Planet.

Lois couldn't exactly say when during the story that her mind had made the obvious connection.

The man she knew as Clark Kent was also Superman.

And with that revelation, everything else Martha said faded into the background. How could Clark not have told her? How could she have been so blind? It made no sense. Clark Kent could not be Superman. It made perfect sense, explaining so many things over the course of the past year and a half.

"Lois, are you okay?"

Lois looked up at Martha, her mind whirling, unable to focus on one thought, one idea, one question as everything fought for supremacy in her mind at the same time.

"Lois, please answer me."

Something in Lois' mind told her that Martha was worried. That she had to answer. But to say what?

"An acid is a compound that yields hydrogen ions when in aqueous solution." Lois shook her head, finally clearing it. "Sorry... A Faraday leak."

"Lois, are you sure you're okay?" Martha asked.

"Yeah. Sorry. The people who blinded Superman..." Lois' voice trailed off for a moment. "Oh my God! Clark! They blinded Clark! That's why he left Metropolis, isn't it? That's why he was acting so strangely when I went over to his place when he said goodbye. He didn't want me to know he was blind, too! He was afraid I would make the connection. That's why he never told me the truth about why he was leaving." She looked at Martha who merely nodded her confirmation.

"Why? Was he afraid I'd splash it across the front of the Daily Planet? I can't believe he doesn't trust me. He was my friend. Superman was my friend. He knows I have kept secrets for him in the past. Hell, I didn't even report that Superman was blind!"

Tears began to fill her eyes as she spoke.

"I don't think it's because he doesn't trust you," Martha said immediately.

"Then why?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to ask him. His reasoning... especially when it comes to you... has always been a little... convoluted. But I know how much he cares about you. At least promise me you'll give him a chance to explain?" Martha handed Lois a tissue.

Lois blew her nose before finally nodding. "But I'm not promising to be polite about it."

Martha smiled. "I wouldn't expect you to."

"Good." The small smile that graced her face on that word seemed to make Martha relax.

"So..." Martha said after a brief pause. "...before you realized that Superman being blind meant Clark was also blind, you were going to explain your strange comment about... acid?"

Lois nodded. "The people who had the device used to blind Superman were trying to locate an apparatus that was used to put knowledge directly into a person's brain. It was used on me and now I seem to have bits and pieces of information leaking out at the most inopportune moments. I call them Faraday leaks because that's the guy who invented the device."

"Is it permanent?"

"I have no idea. Faraday is dead and the men who have the device have disappeared." Lois paused briefly. "So, Martha, why am I here?"

"Uhh... Well, there's a problem with Clark. And I think you are the only one who can help." With that, Martha proceeded to fill Lois in on the situation back at the farm.

"Why me?" Lois asked when Martha had finally finished.

"Why would you think I can help? Clark didn't even want me to know."

Martha took a moment to respond, as if carefully weighing what she was about to say. Finally having made her decision, she gave a slight nod. "Because you love him," she said simply.

"Why would you say that?" Lois asked, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. "Clark and I are best friends and partners — or we were partners. Okay, so we spent a lot of time together. Went out for meals or to a movie — but that is just because we're friends. Lots of friends spend time together. In fact, I'm pretty sure that's what friends do. But... love? That doesn't mean I love him, Martha. What would ever give you that idea? I mean, really, Clark has never even asked me out on a date!"

"Hasn't he?"

Lois suddenly flashed back to Clark's first week at the Planet.

"Why don't we have dinner?"

Had he meant that as in a date? She'd wondered at the time. That was why she'd hesitated. Only after her hesitation had he clarified by calling it a celebration. But even if it had been a clumsy attempt to ask her out, and she wasn't convinced that it had been... "Well, we've never been on a date." Even Martha couldn't argue with that.

"Lois, you don't have to go on a date to fall in love with someone."

"Okay, but..."

"And I didn't hear you say in there anywhere that I was wrong." Martha let out a breath. "Lois, I'm not sure how much you've even admitted to yourself yet. But I do know what I see in your eyes when you look at him. And what I hear in your voice when you talk to him. And more than that, I know you'd do anything for my son.

"You're here now, aren't you?" Martha continued. "Even after the way he left you, you still flew half way across the country on a moment's notice because I said he needed you."

"Okay, that last part might be true, but..."

"And I know the look I see in his eyes when he looks at you. And I know that, in spite of some of his more recent bone-headed

decisions, he'd do anything for you, too."

Suddenly, Martha had Lois' full attention. Was Martha saying what she thought Martha was saying? Was she saying that Clark loved her? After all, those things were the same things that had convinced Martha of Lois' feelings for Clark. So... what did Martha know about Clark's feelings for her? If anything.

Still, she couldn't ask. It was too... junior high — as if she were asking if the cute boy in class liked her.

"And don't tell me you haven't thought about these things before because I won't believe you," Martha added.

Lois was suddenly shifting uncomfortably again. "Okay, so maybe I've occasionally sort of wondered... if there might be something more than friendship between us. But I'm not sure if..."

"Lois."

One simple word. Her name. Softly spoken. And Lois knew the gig was up.

"Let's just say you might not be entirely wrong," Lois finally admitted.

Martha smiled.

"So what is it you want me to do?" Lois asked.

"Just be yourself."

Lois didn't find that particularly helpful. After all, if she were to take Martha's advice, she would be chopping off Clark's head and feeding it to him on a silver platter. She glanced over at Martha as the older woman pulled the pickup back out onto the road. On the other hand, maybe that was exactly what Martha had in mind. Well, if not, she was likely to be surprised because, whatever her feelings for the man, Lois definitely had a bone to pick with Clark Kent.

Clark lay on the lawn chair, staring up at the sun, his mind blank — or at least trying to be blank. He reached up and scratched at the beard now covering his face. He didn't know why the sun was taking so long to heal him, but he did know his folks were wrong. His miraculous healing powers came from exposure to sunlight. Lying in the sun might be taking longer to work its magic than he'd expected, but it would eventually work. It would. The alternative was simply unacceptable. This wasn't permanent. It couldn't be. He was Superman, for crying out loud.

His mind drifted, settling as it often did, on the dark-haired, dark-eyed woman who had stolen his heart with just a glance in his direction — and she didn't even know it. His parents didn't understand. He knew that. But the reason he hadn't told Lois the truth had nothing to do with him not trusting her. He wanted to protect her. Didn't want her to worry. Didn't want her to feel sorry for him. He'd tell her everything someday — when he could face her again as a whole man — not an invalid. Until then...

His head snapped up when he heard the distant sound of a vehicle coming down the road. And just as suddenly as he had tensed, he relaxed again. His parents' pickup. There was no way he could mistake the sound of a slight rattle in the left rear wheel. He really should mention to his father that he might want to repair that. Clark would do it himself, but in his current state, he'd probably do more harm than good.

He wasn't helping with the chores these days either, for exactly the same reason. He knew how strong he was. He'd come through a closed window in Lois' apartment building when he'd misjudged where the window was as if he'd been flying through wallpaper instead of glass. No. In spite of what his parents said, it was best if he didn't try to adjust to this new reality. Besides, it wasn't reality. It was just a temporary setback.

He heard the truck pull up in front of the house and come to a stop. He didn't know where his mother had gone this morning, but it was good to have her home. He worried about her when he knew she was away from the farm. Funny — he hadn't worried all that much when he was in Metropolis or traveling around the

world. But here... especially when he was helpless to provide assistance if she did get in trouble... He heard the truck door slam... twice.

What?

A slight gasp.

He'd know that voice, that heartbeat, anywhere.

He was off the chair, following the string connecting the chair to the cabin, and slamming the door before the sound of the gasp had even faded from the air.

"Clark Kent, you get back here this instant!" yelled the familiar voice.

He cringed.

"Or should I call you Superman?"

Clark froze.

"That's right. Your mother spilled the beans. Not that I wouldn't have figured it out anyway after that little disappearing act of yours. Regardless of what you might think, I'm not galactically stupid! But you are if you think I don't know you can hear me. I guess the question you have to ask yourself is whether you want to keep this conversation private — because we are going to have this conversation even if it means your parents hear every word. I would suggest we do it privately because you might not want your folks to hear exactly what I think of you for treating me the way you did — or what I think of this little moping act of yours."

Moping act? What moping act? He was blind, for pity sake! He had a right to feel a little sorry for himself. How dare she call it a moping act! Besides, it wasn't a moping act. He was just being prudent — not causing damage while he worked on getting his sight back.

In spite of her words, Lois was beginning to have serious second thoughts about this course of action. Clark still had not appeared, but Jonathan was now peering at her from the barn looking completely bemused, his gaze flicking between her and Martha. Obviously, Jonathan was not part of this plan.

Still, it was the course of action she had chosen the instant she'd seen him disappear into the cabin and she'd be damned if she was going to back down now. Instead, she fortified her resolve and walked over to the lawn chair.

"Or do you think I won't storm your private fortress over there?" she asked. "'Cause from what I hear, you haven't left it except to sit in your precious lawn chair in days." She plopped down in the chair and closed her eyes even as she continued talking. "And given that you're blind, and pretending that makes you a helpless little kitten, I don't suspect you'd have the guts to go somewhere else, so it's not as if finding you is going to be too difficult."

"Pretending?"

She smiled. That voice was far too close to be coming from... She opened her eyes to see Clark, clad only in a t-shirt, a pair of shorts and his trusty glasses — standing next to the lawn chair, holding the string that tied the chair to the cabin. She shivered. The day had quite a bite to it and just seeing him dressed like that left her feeling cold. Still, in the back of her mind she registered that he'd put on a t-shirt before coming back given that he'd only been wearing the shorts when she'd first arrived. 'Pity,' her traitorous mind whispered to her before she forced it back on track.

Having him looking at her with that blank look in his eyes that told her he couldn't see her was slightly disconcerting. She pushed that thought from her mind to continue the conversation. What he needed now wasn't pity. It was honesty.

"Yes, pretending," she said.

"Oh, and please enlighten me, Lois. Just how am I pretending?"

"Anyone else who's blind has to worry about all sorts of

dangers that you don't. They walk into furniture or risk being hit by cars."

"And I don't have to worry about things like that?"

"What's the worst that's going to happen if you get hit by a car? The car gets dented. Anyone else in your condition would be badly wounded or even dead. They go around with skinned shins and bruises when trying to learn to live without their sight. You... you're invulnerable."

"But they don't have to worry about destroying everything around them, either," Clark countered. "Lois, I flew through a closed window in your apartment as if it wasn't even there. Being Superman doesn't make it easier to be blind. It makes it harder."

"Bull."

"Bull?"

"You heard me. Bullsh..." Her voice trailed off when she saw Martha and Jonathan out of the corner of her eye. She quickly redirected her thoughts. "You only think it makes it harder because you just sit here, staring up at the sun all day instead of figuring out how to use your unique abilities to cope with your disability. Whatever happened to your claim to me when this first happened that if it was permanent you'd have to figure out how to be the best blind man you could be? Was that just a line to get me to admire you more?"

"Lois, I'm trying to get well. The sun..."

"...helps with your regenerative powers. Blah blah blah. That's just an excuse to lie here and feel sorry for yourself."

"But I need to be in the sun."

"So who's stopping you? But why can't you be trying to figure out how to use your abilities given this new handicap while you're out in the sun? Or is lying in a lawn chair a prerequisite for the sun to do its thing?"

Even Lois heard the muffled laughter coming from Clark's parents. It had to be painfully obvious to Clark. Still, when she confronted him about keeping the Superman thing from her, she really wanted it to be done in private. Too much hurt was connected with that particular lie for her to air it in public — even if the public was just Martha and Jonathan.

"Anyway, I'm going to see if your mother will let me move into your room — since, apparently, you're not using it, and take a shower — wash some of this travel dust off. And then I'll come over to the cabin and we can talk, 'cause you've got a lot of explaining to do, buster." With that she rose from the chair and began walking towards the house. She stopped suddenly, turning back towards Clark. "Oh, and have a shower yourself — you stink. And you better have the place tidied up before I get there. I don't want to sit in the middle of a mess." With those final words still ringing in the air, she entered the house, the door slamming shut behind her.

"What did you do?" Clark demanded of his mother who, he could tell by the sound of her heartbeat and breathing, was still standing next to the truck.

"I invited a friend to visit. And last I checked, I didn't have to get permission from you to invite a friend to come to my home," Martha responded, completely unrepentant.

"Ugh!" Clark grunted before disappearing back down the string and into the cabin.

"Hi, honey," Martha said, finally directing her attention towards her husband now that the drama was over. "Miss me?" she asked innocently.

Jonathan's face transformed itself from disbelieving to amusement. "Have I told you lately how brilliant you are?" he asked while coming over to give his wife a brief hug and kiss.

"I wanted to tell you, but..."

"Super ears," Jonathan concluded for her. "Yeah, I sort of figured that out. But I have to admit, I did wonder what was so important for you to pick up in Wichita today."

"You knew?" Martha asked, seeing the twinkle in Jonathan's

eye.

"Let's just say... I hoped — and I'd have been seriously disappointed if you'd come back with just a new dress or something. So you told her, huh?"

"I didn't see how it could be avoided. Are you upset?"

"It needed to be done," he said simply even as he pulled Lois' suitcases out of the truck. "Well, come on. Let's tend to our guest."

Clark fumed around the cabin, not entirely sure who he was more upset with — his mother or Lois.

His mother, he decided. She knew he hadn't wanted Lois to know. She had absolutely no right to go behind his back like that. It was his life she was messing with. And telling Lois about Superman... Unforgivable!

Yes, his mother was the one whom he was most upset with.

No, it was Lois. She hadn't had to come here — had to have known that if he hadn't invited her it was because he hadn't wanted her here. And moping! How dare she accuse him of moping? She could have at least tried to care that he'd lost his sight — tried acting as if she understood what he had been going through. Instead, she'd accused him of moping and then demanded that he have a shower and clean up his place.

Well, he wasn't going to do it!

He plopped down on the couch. If his mother could decide who was going to visit her then he had the right to decide who was going to visit him. He'd just sit in this cabin with the doors locked until Lois gave up and went away!

He sighed. Problem was she wouldn't go away. She would plop herself down on the stoop of the cabin and sit there until he opened the door and let her in. For days if need be. Or she'd pick the lock. And he did stink. And, although his mother had cleaned the place a couple of days ago, it was slightly messy once again. Did he really want Lois seeing his dirty underwear? With a sigh of resignation, he rose to his feet and felt his way around the room, looking for wayward clothes, making his bed and putting dirty dishes in the sink before following the wall to the bathroom.

But that didn't mean he wasn't still mad at Lois, he decided as he slipped out of his clothes and stepped into the shower. It didn't mean that at all.

"I brought supper," Lois said, holding up two full plates covered with aluminum foil when Clark opened the door.

"Bribery?" he asked immediately.

Lois let out a breath. "Can I come in?"

"Would it matter if I said no?" Clark asked in response.

"Clark," she said softly, feeling his rejection keenly. She knew he was upset, but still... it hurt to be dismissed so curtly. Maybe he really had meant there was no 'us' when he'd said goodbye to her in Metropolis.

He bit his lip momentarily, seeming to hear the hurt in her voice. Still, he didn't apologize, didn't say anything, in fact. He merely stepped aside to allow her access.

She entered and closed the door, walking over to the small table to set down her offerings before shivering. "It's freezing in here."

"Yeah, well, the cabin is used mainly in the fall when a farmhand is needed to help with harvest. There's no electricity."

"But there is a fireplace," she said, looking around the room which consisted of the small table, where she'd set their supper, with two chairs, an old couch which was covered with a brightly colored handmade throw, a thread-bare but very large and comfortable looking chair and a double bed. Along one wall was a counter with a few cabinets and what appeared to be a battery powered ice box and hot plate. Everything looked a little ruffled, but clean enough. And the dishes drying in the sink made it obvious that he'd done what she had asked.

He was even dressed now in jeans and a flannel shirt, his hair

still in the process of drying. Still, between the lack of glasses and the full, but slightly scruffy beard, his appearance was taking some getting used to. The only real fault Lois could find with his appearance was that his socks didn't match.

Clark shrugged. "The cold doesn't really bother me."

"Oh, right," she responded, still adjusting to the knowledge that the man she knew as Clark had been parading around Metropolis for the past year and a half as Superman. Still, as she watched her breath circle in the air, she weighed her options. Finally, she made a decision. "Well, if the cold doesn't bother you, then it shouldn't hurt you to have some heat. I see there's some firewood." When he didn't respond, she tossed her hands in the air before marching across the room to begin stacking wood in the fireplace. "I've never done this before so if I burn down the cabin you only have yourself to blame."

"Lois, I'm blind."

"No shit, Sherlock. Now, are you going to help me or not?"

Clark let out a frustrated breath, but still he felt his way along the furniture until he arrived at the fireplace. He crouched down next to her even as she continued piling wood. "Lois, what are you doing?" he asked, reaching out to feel the wood.

"I'm putting wood in the fireplace."

"Lois, this is too much wood! It will never burn like that. And if it did, it would generate enough heat to get the Taj Mahal sweltering." He reached in and began removing logs. "Did you put any kindling on the bottom?"

"Kindling?"

"Smaller stuff. I think there's a bucket with kindling around here somewhere." He began feeling around. A moment later, he felt Lois' hand on his, gently guiding it to the bucket. The simple gesture almost brought tears to his eyes. He quickly fought them back. He was angry with her. He didn't want her here. He certainly didn't want her coming in and acting as if it was her home, as if she had the right to make a fire. Still... it had been so long since he'd touched her and it felt... good. He suddenly found himself desperately wanting a hug.

"I think there's a holder with some old newspapers in it," he said gruffly, trying to fight off the unwelcome desire.

"Yeah, right here."

"Take one of those and crinkle up a couple of pages and put it on the bottom."

He could hear the crinkling of the paper as she did as instructed.

"I always knew that this was what you really thought of our profession," she said, breaking the silence.

"Huh?"

"We're in the creation of fireplace fodder business," she clarified, startling a half-laugh out of him. "Well, that and creating lining for bird cages."

"Okay, well, why don't you move over so I can..."

She quickly moved and he took her place in front of the fireplace so that he could add kindling, building it up into a nice little pile, using touch instead of sight to accomplish the task. Once he'd added the kindling, he carefully placed a couple of smaller logs on top.

"Are there matches?" he asked once satisfied with his creation.

"Can't you just... you know... use your heat vision? Or doesn't it work either?"

"Honestly... I don't know. I haven't tried to use it since... Well, you know."

"So it might still work?"

"I suppose. But what would it matter? How would I ever aim it at the right spot?"

Lois was silent for a moment before surprising him with her response. "I'll have to think about that."

"So are there matches?"

Lois rose to her feet, finding the matches on the mantle, before placing them in his hands, the light brush of her fingers again sending a tremor of desire flooding through him.

"Uhh... I think you better do this part."

"Why?"

"Because I can't see!"

"You need to see to light a match?" she asked.

Was she being deliberately dense? He needed to see to make sure he didn't set the curtains on fire. "Okay, so I light the match... then what?"

"Why don't you try it and see what happens? If it looks as if you're about to burn down the cabin, I'll stop you."

He growled slightly before finally giving in. He felt around to be sure he knew where he was supposed to place the lit match before using feel to light the match. The first match stick broke. "Satisfied?" he asked.

"No. I'm still cold."

Another frustrated breath escaped his lips before he tried again. This time the match sprung to life. He moved quickly, sticking the small fire to the newspaper, surprised by the satisfaction he felt when he heard the fire catch.

"Much better," Lois said in satisfaction as the fire took off.

"You're welcome," Clark said sarcastically.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I forget to say thank you?" She leaned over, buzzing her lips across his cheek. "Thank you so much. You're my hero."

Clark rolled his eyes, even as suspicion began to rise in his chest. "Tell me something," he said, rising to his feet. "Do you really not know how to build a fire?"

"I never said I didn't know how to build a fire. I'm a former girl scout, Clark. I can build a fire using a shoelace and sticks. I've just never built a fire in a fireplace before. Thanks for the lesson."

"So what was this?" Clark demanded. "Did you want me to prove to you that I'm not useless?"

"No," she responded. "I wanted you to prove it to yourself." Before he could recover from that reply, she continued. "Now... I'm going to light some of the candles your mother must have left here for you because it's starting to get dark and then we can eat — unless that's something you don't think you can do either."

"What are you looking at?" Jonathan asked, coming up behind his wife as she stared out the window. It took less than a moment to see that she was looking towards the cabin.

"Lights. Smoke coming out of the chimney. That's the thing that has been bothering me the most since Clark moved over there. No light. No warmth. I'd look over there as I'd be doing the dishes, and think about him fumbling around in the dark."

"He's blind, Martha. It's not as if he needs light."

"I know that, Jonathan. But it just seemed so cold so..."

"Lonely?"

She nodded.

He chuckled. "Well, he's not lonely tonight. In fact, I suspect he's got his hands full over there."

Martha nodded her agreement.

"So come on to bed. Let's leave them to hash things out."

Martha nodded again, reaching out to turn out the kitchen light as they walked together from the room.

"Better leave that on," Jonathan said, stopping her hand.

"She'll need to see when she comes back tonight."

"If she comes back tonight," Martha said softly.

"Now, Martha, they've got a lot to work through. Don't go weaving any romantic fairytales for them just yet. He's treated her pretty badly. It may take some time for them to get past it. If they ever do. Let's just be glad that she was willing to come and try to help him."

"She'll get past it," Martha responded. "Love can forgive a lot — especially when the man in question loves her just as much in

return.” Still, she left the light on as she exited the room.

“So what’s with the beard?” Lois asked. They were the first words either of them had spoken since they had started eating their dinner. It broke Lois’ heart to watch him fumbling around as he ate. Determined to break the silence, Lois had searched her mind for a neutral topic of conversation, finally settling on this one.

“You have a problem with the beard?” Clark responded testily. “Sorry if my appearance is not up to your standards.”

The sympathy she’d been feeling for him only a moment before evaporated in an instant. Lois slammed her fork down on the table. “Enough! I’ve had enough, Clark! I thought we were friends — best friends. So when your mother called and said my best friend needed my help, I immediately flew halfway across the country! I asked about the beard because I wondered if it was something you usually did when you were back on the farm or something. You know! Nice, casual conversation. But obviously you don’t want me here. Fine! I don’t stay where I’m not wanted. So if you don’t mind too terribly much, I’ll just finish up my dinner, head back to the house and pack up again. Don’t worry, Clark. I’ll go back to Metropolis and you’ll never have to see me again.”

Her rant over, Lois picked up her fork and stabbed a piece of meat, putting it in her mouth to chew viciously.

A couple of minutes of silence passed before Clark spoke again. “I have a beard because I can’t shave it off.”

Lois quickly swallowed the food in her mouth before speaking. “I’m sorry?” she asked.

“Normal razors won’t cut my hair. I have to use my heat vision. I bounce my heat vision off a mirror to shave. Since I can’t do that...” He gestured to his face.

“But your heat vision might still work. You said you haven’t even tried it.”

“Even if it did work, how would I aim it, Lois? I’d probably end up burning off all my hair in the process — and to top it off, I’d likely burn the house down around me.”

Lois opened her mouth to say something, but quickly shut it again before responding with a simple, “I see.” After another moment, she spoke again. “Do you think your mother would be willing to drive me back to Wichita tomorrow, or is there another way I can get there?”

“Lois, please...”

“Please what?”

“Don’t go. I don’t want you to leave... especially not like this.”

She simply took another bite of her food.

“I want you to stay.”

“Why, Clark? Obviously, I was wrong about our relationship. I should have realized it when you left. There is no us. Isn’t that what you said? But here I was stupid enough to believe you were still my best friend.”

“I am your best friend.” His hand came across the table, blindly searching for hers.

She ignored it. “Are you, Clark? Then maybe we just have a different idea about what that means — because I don’t tell my best friend there is no us to avoid telling him the truth.” She sighed. “Clark, I know you had to leave Metropolis. I understand that. You couldn’t have people realizing that Superman and Clark were both blind. But what I don’t understand is why you let me believe that I meant nothing to you instead of taking a risk and telling me the truth. Of course, I’m not sure why I’m surprised by that. After all, for over a year and a half, you let me believe you were two people. At one point, you even let me believe you were dead. Damn, Clark, could you have written ‘not my friend’ in any brighter neon lights if you’d tried?”

Clark instantly moved his chair closer to Lois, dangerously knocking into the table in the process. Lois quickly reached out to

steady both of their glasses.

“It’s not like that, Lois,” Clark said once he was again settled. “Not telling you... It wasn’t that I didn’t trust you or wasn’t your friend or that I wanted to make you think you meant nothing to me. It wasn’t anything like that.”

“Then why did you do it?”

“Lois, I’ve been keeping this a secret all my life. I had to keep traveling, keep moving around because sooner or later, I’d mess up and do something that would make the people around me suspicious and I didn’t want my life to become a circus or people stalking me or my parents. I just wanted something... normal. A normal life. When I moved to Metropolis and I met you...”

She felt her heart skip a beat.

Clark looked slightly flustered as he continued quickly. “... uhh... and Jimmy and Perry and everyone and got a job I really liked, I thought maybe, just maybe this was my shot at that normal life. But I was scared it was only a matter of time before something would happen... that I’d see someone in trouble and have to help and someone would catch it on a video camera and I’d have to move on again.”

“So you created Superman,” Lois said.

Clark nodded. “I created Superman. If I had thought it through, I would have realized what a sensation he’d become, but for some reason it didn’t occur to me that he’d become such a... superstar, I guess. I figured he could swoop in, save the day and then just disappear into the sky until he was needed again.”

Lois bit her lip as her mind flashed back to a conversation she’d had with Clark shortly after Superman had first appeared, when everyone in the fourth estate was desperately trying to get the definitive story about him.

“I’ll find him,” Lois had said.

“What if he doesn’t want to be found?” Clark had responded.

“What are you talking about? Why wouldn’t he want to be found?”

“Maybe all this frenzy isn’t what he expected. Maybe he’s shy.”

He’d been talking about himself, she suddenly realized. He really hadn’t expected the media frenzy that had followed Superman’s initial appearance. She let out a breath. He really was so wise in some ways and so naive in others. But she was getting off track. “That still doesn’t explain why you didn’t tell me. Maybe at first... but later on — after we became friends.”

“There were times I really wanted to tell you. To come clean. But it just got so... complicated. I was scared about how you’d react. I knew you’d be mad. Lois, you are the best friend I’ve ever had. I just so desperately didn’t want to lose you.”

“But you did lose me, Clark. Not because you told me your secret, but because you didn’t. You simply walked out of my life. How could that have been better than to risk losing me by telling me the truth?”

“I always intended to come back. I just didn’t want you to see me like this.” He gestured to himself.

Huh? “Like what, Clark? What are you talking about?”

“Like this, Lois. You know... disabled.”

“Disabled? You mean because you can’t see?”

“Well... yeah. I’m an invalid and I didn’t want you to see me like that.”

“You’re not an invalid, Clark!”

“I can’t see.”

“Well, I can’t fly!”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Do you think I’m somehow... worth less because I can’t fly?”

“Don’t be ridiculous! That’s not the same thing at all.”

“No? I can see. You can’t. I can’t fly. You can. Do you think less of me because I can’t fly?”

“Of course not, Lois. But...”

"No, Clark. No buts. You know, it seems to me that you really must not think very much of me. My best friend is blind and you think I'm going to think less of you because of it." She couldn't quite keep the slight hitch out of her voice.

He raised his hand to gently cup her cheek. Her first instinct was to move away, but then she realized what he was doing. Whether he realized it or not, he was trying to 'see' her. Her natural instinct was to hide, but she forced herself not to move, to let him 'see.' He needed to know how his actions had hurt her — and she needed to let him know. Besides, she and Clark had always had such a physical relationship. And, damn, she had missed his touch.

His fingers resting in her hair, his thumb gently traced her cheek. She could see the realization in his face when his thumb encountered moisture. The look of contrition on his face softened her heart. In recognition of that fact, she turned her face into his hand even as her hand came up to hold his hand in place.

"I'm sorry, Lois," he finally said softly.

Lois let out a breath. "You're a lunkhead. But I guess you're my lunkhead."

He smiled slightly, telling her that he'd taken her response as she'd intended it — as acceptance of his apology.

"So... will you stay?" he asked.

"Only until we finish our dinner."

"Lois..."

"Your mother made apple pie for dessert. I only had two hands so I couldn't bring it with me. I suggest that after dinner we go over to the house to eat it. After that... I have a bit more unpacking to do."

Clark smiled. When he spoke again, the relief in his voice was obvious. "We'd better hurry then — before my dad decides to finish that pie off himself."

Lois lay in bed, lazily listening to the early morning sounds coming from downstairs. Softly spoken voices, the contents of which she couldn't make out. The scraping of a chair against the floor. The clatter of pots. The door closing. Martha faintly singing.

Then the smell of coffee wafted up. Lois breathed deeply, allowing the mere smell to revive her. She'd expected to be awake half the night, mulling over the events of the past twenty-four hours in her mind. But when she'd gotten into bed, she'd finally let go of her feelings, crying herself to sleep fairly quickly.

So how did she feel about everything she had learned? She probed cautiously at those feelings. Was she still angry? Yes, she decided. Anger was still there. But there were other feelings, too. The most dominant of which was the incredible pain she felt about Clark losing his eyesight. But there was also relief — relief at the fact that he hadn't really meant to dismiss her from his life.

Her thoughts drifted slightly. Superman was Clark. Only twenty-four hours ago she had been completely oblivious to that fact and she still had not adjusted. She'd pushed the thought aside to deal with more pressing matters. But the truth was... she was hurt more than angry. The fact that Clark had kept it from her, had even at one point let her believe he was dead rather than tell her, hurt more than she could articulate. So could she forgive him? She wasn't entirely sure. Of course, she wasn't about to abandon him when he needed her help, but on a personal level... She hated being lied to and Clark had lied to her for more than a year and a half. Daily. How did she deal with that?

Martha was right when she deduced that Lois loved her son. Lois had known that simple fact for some time now. When she'd thought him dead, she'd even wished she'd told him. Still, was love enough?

She'd watched lies destroy her parents' marriage and had sworn never to get involved with a man who lied. Okay, so maybe part of her did understand why Clark had kept his Superman identity a secret. And she could see how telling her would have

been complicated. Still, he had walked out of her life rather than telling her the truth. So where did that leave her and Clark?

Not that Clark wanted more than friendship from her. In spite of Martha's comments, which had certainly served to give Lois hope, doubts that his feelings went beyond friendship still lingered. After all, what had his relationship been with Mayson? They'd gone out on at least one date that Lois knew about — which was one more than Lois have ever gone on with him. Mayson had wanted to go away for the weekend with Clark and apparently he had accepted. Was the fact that Leit had blinded him before they could leave the only thing that had prevented him from going? And if he had only recently been planning to go on a weekend getaway with another woman, what did that say about his feelings for Lois?

No. In spite of Martha's comments, Lois wasn't entirely sure that Clark was interested in her as anything more than a friend. And even if he was... How did Lois get past the fact that she had fallen in love with a liar? Should she tell Clark how much his lies had hurt her? No. Definitely not. They had already discussed his reasons, but nothing changed the fact that he had lied to her on a daily basis for over a year. This was something she would have to work through on her own. Right now he had enough on his plate. She wasn't about to add to it.

Well, now wasn't the time to try to figure it all out. Nor was there time to give in to her grief. There was work to do. And she thought she just might have an idea about where to start. What she wanted to do was to hold Clark, cry with him about what had been done to him, but after talking to Martha and realizing that he'd been doing exactly that for the past month, she knew that was the last thing he needed. No. He needed tough love which meant bottling up her own grief so that she could pull him out of his.

She leaned over to glance at the clock. Good grief. Five thirty. Well, when in Rome...

Pushing the sheets aside, she crawled out of bed to begin her day.

"Morning," Martha said when Lois finally entered the kitchen.

"Morning," Lois responded, reaching out to take the cup of steaming coffee Martha thrust into her grateful hands.

"So how did it go last night?" Martha asked.

"I'm still trying to decide," Lois responded thoughtfully. "I think we declared a truce," Lois finally added, giving a firm nod of satisfaction at the pronouncement.

"I can't thank you enough for coming, Lois. But you know... you aren't required to stay. I made that ticket open ended so if at any point you decide you've had enough of that mule-headed son of mine..."

"I think I can handle that mule-headed son of yours," Lois interrupted. "He might be mule-headed, but I decided last night that he's my mule-headed idiot."

"Did you tell him that?"

"In so many words. Except I used the word 'lunkhead.'" Martha laughed.

"Well, what can I say? We all have our burdens to endure," Lois added, trying to sound much put-upon.

"Well, Lois," Martha responded, "I can only say you must be a saint."

It was Lois' turn to laugh. Martha joined her.

"Anyway," Lois said after the laughter died down, "I have an idea. What were Clark's morning chores when he was growing up? I assume he had some. All farm boys do, don't they?"

"Hey, sleepyhead! Wake up. Day's a wasting away. It's almost daylight."

Clark opened his eyes at the sound of Lois yelling from outside his cabin and experienced the same feeling of disorientation he had every day now. Opening his eyes and

seeing... nothing. He wondered if he'd ever get use to it.

Further pounding on the door forced him to his feet before he was ready. After hearing her cry herself to sleep the night before, he wanted nothing more than to continue hearing that light tone in her voice.

"Come on, lazy. Open up," Lois called again.

"I'm coming, woman," Clark yelled back. "Keep your britches on. I'm blind, you know." But even he could hear the amusement in his voice. God, he had missed her.

In some ways, Lois was a lot like his mother. But in others... He supposed both had been shaped by their environment. Living on a farm, one came to accept that things happened in the fullness of time. There was no rushing a crop to grow or the snow to melt. So his mother was laid back, able to go with the flow. Lois, on the other hand, demanded that the flow go with her. Even in the laid-back atmosphere of the country, Lois couldn't sit still for more than a minute. That boundless energy was one of the things he loved about her. She energized him.

"How could I forget that you're blind — you remind me of it every few seconds," she said, the same playful tone in her voice that he knew she'd heard in his.

He quickly felt his way over to the door, jerking it open even as she went to knock again. He opened his mouth to make some witty — or what he hoped would be witty — comment in reply about her lack of sympathy, but instead was surprised when her fist pounded into him. She must have been unable to stop the forward momentum of her fist when he'd opened the door so suddenly.

"Hey, I got here as quickly as I could," he protested, rubbing the imaginary hurt.

"I'm sorry. I just..." Her voice trailed off into a slight gasp. "My god," she whispered under her breath.

Clark immediately wondered what he was wearing. He hadn't gone to sleep in the nude or something... Had he? He quickly reached down, relieved to discover that he was wearing his sleep shorts. But then again, that was all he was wearing.

"Uhh... yeah," Lois said, sounding slightly breathless. "Well, anyway, I came over here to..." Her voice trailed off in confusion.

"Yes?" he asked, amused and, if he were honest, slightly pleased by her obvious reaction to his state of dress.

"Coffee!" she exclaimed. "I brought coffee!"

He heard some rustling and suspected that she was picking up a couple mugs of coffee from where she'd set them on the window ledge while waiting for him. As she did, the smell of fresh coffee finally penetrated his brain. He reached out and felt her put a mug of coffee into his hand.

Making sure he had a firm grip on the mug, he turned around and shuffled his way carefully to the table. He set the mug on the table before fumbling around with a chair. He heard the door close and a moment later heard the scraping sound of the other chair as Lois joined him. He sat down before taking his first sip of coffee.

"Anyway," Lois said, "after you've finished your coffee, you're going to need to get dressed because we have chores to do."

"Chores? Lois, I can't do chores. Look at me."

"Well, not in that you can't. That's why you need to get dressed, Clark." She patted his hand patronizingly. "Otherwise, what you have on works for me."

"I'm serious, Lois," he said even as he felt a blush rise in his cheeks. He should have at least thrown on a t-shirt before answering the door. He would do it now... together with a pair of jeans... but the idea of stumbling around the room with Lois watching wasn't exactly appealing so he put the idea out of his mind to concentrate on the topic at hand. "How do you expect me to do chores?"

"Well, actually, we only have one chore this morning. Do you still call them chores when you only have one?" She must have

decided the question was rhetorical because she went on without waiting for an answer. "As for whether you do it or not... I guess you're an adult. You can hardly be forced to do chores if you refuse to do them. But according to Martha, we don't get any breakfast until we get it done. Some sort of... I don't know... barter system, I guess. She said something about that being the way things worked here in the hicks."

"I doubt she said that, Lois."

"No. You're right. She said 'sticks' not 'hicks.' I substituted that last word myself. Anyway, I'm starving. So whether or not you decide to help, I plan to do my chores. She said something about french toast."

Damn! His mother was in on this with Lois. Homemade french toast with lots of fruit, syrup and whipped cream was one of his favorites. And no one made french toast like his mother. Just the thought of it caused his taste buds to go into overdrive.

"Well, I don't know about you..." He could hear Lois place her coffee cup on the table and push the chair back as she rose to her feet. "...but I seem to have cows to milk. So how do you milk a cow anyway?"

He closed his eyes and groaned softly. She'd never be able to do that by herself so if he refused to help, he'd be forced to listen to her complain all morning about how she'd missed out on french toast. And knowing his mother... she'd actually hold Lois to that deal.

"You coming?" she asked.

"Fine," he grumbled, drinking down the rest of his coffee. "Just give me a couple of minutes to get changed."

"Probably a good idea. Those heifers see you like that they'll be too distracted to be milked."

He couldn't help but chuckle. "Actually, Lois, a heifer is a cow before she's had her first calf."

"Oh... so have both of your cows had calves?"

"They would hardly be milk cows if they hadn't given birth. Why exactly did you think they produce milk?"

"Because they're milk cows and they wouldn't be called milk cows if they didn't produce milk," Lois responded logically.

Clark shook his head in amusement even as he rose to his feet. Still, this was a bad idea.

"Okay, so let me see if I've got this straight," Lois said as, Clark's arm through hers, she walked them towards the barn as the first rays of sunlight began to make their way across the snow-covered ground. "All cows are female."

"Right."

"So then where do baby cows come from?"

"If it's called a cow it's because it's female. Males are called bulls. Collectively they're called cattle."

"So we milk the cows, but not the bulls."

"Right."

"Ever heard the expression, 'trying to milk a steer?'"

A new voice entering the conversation caused Lois' head to snap up. Jonathan was coming towards them.

"Yeah. It means something is hard to do," Lois said.

"Try impossible," Jonathan responded. He chuckled, as did Clark, leaving Lois puzzled.

"Why impossible? What's a steer?"

"Steer are male cattle."

"You told me a male cow was a bull," Lois said accusingly, looking at Clark.

"It is," Jonathan explained. "A bull is whole while a steer is... uhh..."

"Unwhole?" Lois asked.

"Castrated," Clark corrected.

"Oh," Lois said, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "Well, then. Okay. So we won't milk any bulls or steers."

"Although if anyone could milk a steer, my money's on you,

Lois," Jonathan said.

"I would hope it would be," Lois responded. "After all, I have to deal with your son on a regular basis."

This time both Lois and Jonathan shared a laugh at Clark's expense.

"Hey! Don't make fun of the blind man!" Clark objected in mock indignation.

"He sure does play that card a lot, doesn't he," Lois said to Jonathan.

"Yeah, you'd almost think he was blind," Jonathan responded, keeping up the playful banter.

"Hah, hah," Clark said. "Anyway, it's a good thing you're here, Dad."

"Why's that?"

"Because apparently Lois has to milk the cows. Perhaps you could give her a hand?"

"Uhh uhh," Jonathan responded. "Your mother told me that was Lois and your chore for this morning and I'm not risking my french toast by going against your mother." With that, he began to walk away, whistling 'Heigh-ho' from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.'

"Okay, so what do we do first?" Lois asked, not quite as sure about this plan while standing in the entranceway to the barn as she had been when Martha had first suggested it to her. The cows seemed a lot more formidable up close.

"You sure you want to do this?" Clark asked, obviously having heard some doubt in her voice.

She stiffened her spine. She'd faced down some of the biggest crooks in the country; she could take on a couple of cows. "Just tell me what we need to do."

"Okay, well, first off... are the cows in their stalls?"

"One is. The other one is sort of... lingering around outside. Waiting for a phone call or whatever it is cows do when they're not being milked."

"Okay, start with the one in the stall."

"You're not going to help?"

"Lois..." he began to protest.

"Okay, fine. What do I do?"

"The one in the stall is probably Betsy. She's older. Doesn't give as much milk anymore and is getting too old to be bred again, which would help with her milk production, so my parents also got Daisy. My mom says that you can't call a place a farm if you can't drink fresh milk while you're there. But, anyway, Betsy is probably the one to milk first since she's much more of an old pro at this."

"So what do I do?"

"Go in the stall with her and tie her up."

Lois took a deep breath. It was now or never. She'd sort of figured by this point that Clark would have gotten tired of waiting for her and would have taken the lead. But so far he was acting as if she would have to do this alone. Well, there was no way she was about to admit she and Martha had made a mistake about the way to get Clark doing things so that he could see that life hadn't ended just because he was blind. So walking forward, carefully avoiding any unfortunate offerings on the floor, she timidly slipped into the stall next to the large animal.

"Nice, Betsy," she said nervously, doing her best to avoid touching the cow as she inched her way past it. "I'm Lois. Let's make a deal here, okay? You be a good little cow and I'll try to be gentle," she said while fastening Betsy's collar to a large ring at the front of the stall. "Cause I'm sort of new to this. So I really need you to work with me here. Okay, that's a good cow. Now what do I do?" she asked once that was completed without incident.

Clark talked her through getting the milking stool, which turned out to look more like a small step-ladder than a stool, a

bucket to collect the milk and cloth for cleaning the cow's udder. Then came the moment of truth. Lois took a seat on the top step of the milking stool and reached under the cow, using the cloth to clean her udder, being careful to avoid actually touching anything with her bare hands.

The cow gave a disapproving moo and began to move sideways... towards Lois.

"Clark! Clark! Clark! Clark!" Lois yelled, jumping off the stool and backing up as quickly as possible until her back hit the wall of the stall. Still, the cow kept coming until...

The entire incident had taken no more than a couple of seconds. Lois breathed a sigh of relief when Clark was suddenly there, his strong arm pushing the cow back into place.

"Okay, that's it!" Lois said. "French toast or not, that cow's possessed. This experiment in country living is over. I give up. Surrender. I'd rather face Kyle Griffin again than this creature."

She attempted to slip past Clark, but his free hand came around her waist, stopping her sideways movement out of the stall.

"It's okay, Lois," Clark whispered in her ear even as his other hand held Betsy at bay. "She's just a bit nervous."

"She's nervous?" Lois asked in disbelief even as her heart calmed to a manageable rate.

"I'm right here. Look... how about I help?"

Lois instantly relaxed. "Well... if you insist on helping, I guess I can hardly stop you," Lois said, a salve to her wounded pride. "It's your place, after all."

"Thank you, Lois. I appreciate that," Clark said in his patiently patronizing voice.

She knew the voice well. Still, she let it go. After all, he was here. And he was offering to help. She had won so... "Fine then. What's next..."

Laughter filled the Kent farmhouse as Lois and Clark, while consuming a luxurious breakfast of fruit, french toast, syrup and whipped cream, recounted their adventure milking the cows.

"So then Lois reaches under Betsy," Clark said, "and uses her thumb and finger to give Betsy's teat one quick tug. Of course, nothing came out so she jumps up and announces that Betsy's empty."

"I didn't want to hurt her," Lois said, laughing at herself as much as with the others. "After all, if someone did that to me I wouldn't want them applying as much pressure as Clark did."

"Good tip," Clark said, earning himself a swat from Lois.

"So did you finally get the hang of it?" Jonathan asked.

"Well, Clark was sitting behind me on the stool so he put his hands over mine and sort of coached me. I was doing fine, too, until the cats."

"What about the cats?" Martha asked, sounding confused.

"Well, we managed to get into a rhythm with the milk squirting into the can," Clark said, "until the cats started gathering around. I can feel Lois getting tense, but couldn't understand why. I could hear the cats, of course, but didn't think anything of it"

"I thought I was suddenly in the middle of a Stephen King novel," Lois added, defending her reaction. "Attack of the cats or something. I figured they were guard cats who instantly recognized I was a city girl and were there to protect poor Betsy from getting her milk stolen."

Everyone laughed.

"How was I to know they just wanted their breakfast?" Lois asked through her own laughter.

"So did you oblige them?" Jonathan asked.

Lois nodded. "Yeah. I could hardly believe it when Clark told me to squirt some milk at them. I thought he was joking. But I did it and it was sort of neat — watching them jump for the milk. What was that sound you kept making anyway?" she asked, looking at Clark.

"You mean this one?" Clark asked, giving a deep guttural

whistle.

"Yeah."

"I learned that from Dad. He says it helps keep the cow calm — lets her know I'm there and everything's all right."

"Keeps them from coming sideways or trying to kick over the bucket," Jonathan added.

"You could have told me that before we started," Lois said, giving Clark a disapproving stare. "Still, I guess that would explain why you used it when the cows would start to get restless."

"Anyway, Lois did pretty good — for a city girl," Clark said.

"You have no idea. You've been doing this all your life. How would you like to be thrown into something completely foreign to you?"

"Well, I have been."

"You becoming a reporter isn't exactly the same thing as me milking a cow."

"How about working on an ocean freighter?"

"You've worked on an ocean freighter?"

"Earned my crossing across the Atlantic," Clark said proudly.

"Couldn't you have simply flown over?"

"He could have," Martha said. "And he did plenty. But he said he wanted the experience. He was fresh out of college and wanted to try everything. I think he might have had second thoughts about half way over."

"Well, Captain Stiller might have been having second thoughts, anyway," Clark corrected. "Apparently being a sailor requires more than brute strength. But it's not as if you can quit... or get fired... half way across the ocean. Any more you can quit milking a cow half way through."

"Yeah, well, unless you've got a partner. At the end my hands started cramping up," Lois said. "I never knew milking cows was such hard work. So I had to let Clark finish up."

"Well, I think we make a pretty good team."

"And don't you forget it again," Lois responded.

"I wouldn't dare," Clark said, earning himself another swat from Lois.

"So..." Martha said in the brief pause that followed. "...what do you two have planned for the rest of the morning?"

"I've been thinking about Clark's beard," Lois said, provoking a surprised reaction from Clark. "I mean, it looks okay right now." She avoided meeting Martha's eyes on the obvious lie. Clark's beard looked positively scruffy, but there wasn't much point in mentioning that if there was nothing they could do about it. "At some point, though, it's going to need at least a trim."

"Lois, I told you I can't trim it. Besides, my sight will be back long before I need to cut it."

"Fine. You're probably right. Still... Martha, you do work with welding equipment, don't you? Artist type of work."

Martha nodded. "That's right. Although right now I'm working on light sculptures. It's a process of using lights and holographic images to create sculptures. My art teacher thinks it's the art of the future. Why?"

"Well, it may be a crazy idea, but could something like a blowtorch be used to shave Clark's beard?"

"What do you think, Clark?"

"I have no idea. But I'm not sure it's necessary to waste time..."

"I've got nothing better to do," Lois interrupted. "Do you, Martha?"

"Me... no. Sounds fun. What mother hasn't wanted to try out a blowtorch on her son's face at least once during his life?"

"I'd suggest you give in gracefully, son," Jonathan said with a chuckle.

Clark let out a frustrated breath. "Fine," he said in resignation. Fighting one of these women was bad enough. Both of them together... The phrase 'milking a steer' immediately came to

mind. Besides, although Lois was still here and still talking to him, he knew he was still on thin ice with her. "But afterwards, I need to spend some time in the sun," he added.

Lois took a deep breath as Martha handed her the lit blowtorch. Still, she made no attempt to raise it to Clark's face.

"It's one thing knowing he's invulnerable," Lois explained, finally handing the blowtorch back to Martha. "Using this on him... Well, that's something else."

Martha laughed, taking the blowtorch and immediately focusing it on Clark's face.

A shiver went down Lois' spine. "Sorry, it's just..."

"I know. But I've had a lot more experience with Clark's invulnerability than you have." She turned up the flame on the blowtorch as she concentrated it on Clark's beard. "Once I even pushed him off a balcony."

"Purposely?" Lois asked.

"It was when I'd lost my memory during the asteroid crisis," Clark explained. "She was trying to teach me to fly. But then Dad had already hit me with a baseball bat so I'm not sure why I was surprised."

"It's strange thinking about this stuff now," Lois said as Martha continued to move the flame from the torch back and forth across his beard. "Now that I know there was so much more going on than I knew at the time."

Martha let out a sigh and turned off the torch.

"Well?" Clark asked.

"No luck," Martha said. "If you don't get your heat vision back soon, we are going to have to try to think of something else. Surely NASA has experimental lasers or something that might work. But why they'd give them to us..."

"Just a second..." Lois interrupted. "Clark, you said that you didn't know if your heat vision works because you've never tried it."

"That's because even if it did work, it's not as if it would be very useful when I can't aim it."

"But it could still work," Lois insisted.

"What are you thinking, Lois?" Martha asked.

"It's just... if your heat vision does work... You said you bounce it off a mirror to shave, right?"

"Right, but..."

"Martha, could you weld together a bunch of mirrors that he could somehow hold over his face so that the heat vision could simply bounce around inside, shaving him without hurting anyone else?"

Martha began to nod. "I think I could do that. He would have to be able to look into it and yet it would have to fit around his eyes tight enough not to burn off his eyebrows, but, yes, I think I could do that."

"But even if it were tight around my eyes, my heat vision would burn off my eyelashes."

"Good point," Lois said.

"I think I could do something about that," Martha said. "Flaps of some kind that instantly close after you shoot out your heat vision."

"You could do that?" Lois asked.

"I think so. Coat the inside of the flap with a reflective substance and... yes, I think I could do that."

"Then, Clark, we have to find out if your heat vision still works."

"This is crazy, Lois," Clark said while he listened to Lois moving around him.

"Hush up. I'm just about finished. Okay, done."

Clark sighed.

"The pile of sticks is now sitting in the middle of the yard with a good ten feet of snow all around it," Lois explained. "If you

miss, it's no big deal."

"And how do you suggest I try to hit it?"

"Well, don't they say that when you lose your sight, your other senses become enhanced?"

"Lois, I think it's safe to say that my other senses are pretty much as enhanced as they're going to get."

"Oh, right. So then... What if I tap the sticks and you listen and try to aim for the noise?"

"I'm not trying this until you're standing behind me."

"Fine. So I tap the sticks and then you concentrate on the spot. I'll tap your shoulder when I'm behind you."

Clark sighed, but didn't object. After all, it was pretty clear they were doing this whether he saw the point or not.

"Okay, here are the sticks."

He heard her tap and concentrated on that spot. Some rustling, which he did his best to ignore, and then she was tapping his shoulder.

He took a deep breath and imagined himself shooting his heat vision towards the sticks.

Lois gasped.

"What?" he asked.

"Uhh... well, it seems your heat vision still works," she said, but the slightly breathless quality of her voice suggested that something wasn't right.

"What? What did I do?"

"Well, maybe next time you could try giving it a little less... whatever."

"Lois..." he groaned, still waiting for his explanation even as his nostrils picked up a faintly burned aroma. "Lois?" he asked, more cautiously now.

"Nothing. Nothing. It's nothing. Just... well, the sticks didn't actually burn. They just sort of... exploded. Along with about five feet of melted snow and now... slightly burned grass. As to whether you hit where you were aiming for... I really can't say for certain where you hit."

"Oh, great," Clark groaned. "Listen, maybe this isn't the best idea. Why don't we just..."

"No. No, Clark. You just have to practice a little. We can move to some new snow and pile up some more sticks and you can try it again."

"Lois..."

"Or are you telling me that when you learned to use your heat vision, you got it right the first time, never had any accidents and didn't have to practice?"

"Ask him to tell you about the time he almost burned down the barn," Jonathan yelled from where he had been watching and listening on the front porch of the house.

Clark sighed. Just what he didn't need. His father telling Lois all about his misadventures when he'd been learning to control his powers. He felt like enough of a failure as it was without hearing those stories again. "Fine. So, I take it we're trying this again?" he asked more to derail this conversation than to see if he could do better a second time. After all, this was unnecessary. The sun would cure his blindness soon. Any day now, in fact. He was sure of it.

Lois paced about the kitchen while Martha prepared supper, nervous anticipation making it impossible for her to concentrate. When she chopped the tomatoes for the salad into mush, Martha had finally banned her from helping. Still, she couldn't sit still and as a result paced back and forth across the kitchen.

The morning had been spent helping Clark with his heat vision. The afternoon, helping Martha create a device which would enable Clark to shave. And now...

"Lois, could you pace over there?" Martha said in exasperation when Lois managed to walk between Martha and the table just as Martha went to set something on it.

"Oh... sorry," Lois said, moving out of the way to resume her pacing almost immediately.

It amazed Lois how quickly Clark had caught on to using his heat vision effectively without the use of his sight. She suspected he was doing some very intricate calculations using angles and the speed of sound to determine distance and strength. Probably subconsciously. But then... he was Superman and could undoubtedly do those calculations in his head in fractions of a second. Not that she was particularly surprised. After all, first thing this morning, when she had been in danger of being squished by Betsy, Clark had suddenly been there — moving from the door to the barn to her side faster than she would have believed possible. She wasn't sure he was even aware of how fast or how accurately he had actually moved. But it had informed her that he was capable of a lot more than he believed he was.

The afternoon had been interesting, too — working with Martha on her contraption. They'd had to go out on several occasions to where Clark had insisted on lying in the yard to take measurements of his face before returning to Martha's studio to make revisions. But finally, late this afternoon, Martha had pronounced the project complete. It was, to be sure, one of the oddest looking contraptions Lois had ever seen. A jumble of small mirrors, cut and soldered together so that the joints were practically invisible from the inside. Not that it had been easy. But Martha, it seemed, was talented enough with the soldering equipment to make it work.

Clark had been skeptical when presented with the finished product and had insisted that he be left alone to try it out for the first time — afraid that if it did come apart, they would get hurt. That was how she found herself pacing Martha's kitchen late in the afternoon.

She sighed as she thought about Clark's attitude. Martha was right when she had informed Lois that something in Clark had changed. Usually, he was the one who was optimistic. A glass half full kind of guy. But the loss of his sight, and the failure of the sun to restore it, seemed to be eating away at that natural optimism. It worried Lois.

The sound of someone at the door caused Lois to swivel in that direction just in time to see the door open and Clark step into the house. A slow smile transformed her features as she looked at him.

"It worked!" exclaimed Martha, having stopped her dinner preparations.

"It did," Clark responded, his hand now massaging his freshly shaven face.

"And you still have those cute little eyelashes of yours," Lois said with relief even as she stepped closer, reaching out to move his hand away from his face. "Why is it so red?" she asked, observing that his skin appeared almost sunburned.

"I'm afraid I used a little too much power with the heat vision. Normally when I shave, the beam only hits the mirror once before hitting my face. This time it bounced off a number of mirrors so I adjusted the strength of the beam to compensate for that. I guess it will take some practice to figure out exactly how much power I need to use."

"But you're okay?" She reached up to touch his face, pulling her hand back quickly when she realized it was hot enough to burn against her fingers.

Clark nodded. "My aftershave stung a bit more than normal, but yeah, I'm fine. Thanks. Both of you. It feels... good." He ran his hand over his chin once again.

"Well, it's great having my clean shaven son back," Martha said with a grin. "Now... how about dinner?"

Perry stared at the sentence on the paper in front of him in disbelief. Ralph's writing often required more work than most of his other reporters. But today... his writing was almost

unintelligible. What the Sam Hill did that sentence even mean?

He was about to drag Ralph into his office to tell him that a complete rewrite was necessary when he glanced at the clock. He sighed. Ralph had undoubtedly left for the day. He was about to get up to retrieve the press briefing about the new library so that he could rewrite Ralph's story himself when the ringing phone stopped him.

"White," he said into the receiver tiredly.

"Hi, Perry."

The familiar voice brought a smile to Perry's face. "Honey, hi. I was hoping to hear from you."

"Why, Perry? What happened?" Lois asked.

Perry's grin widened. Ever the reporter. How she had deduced that something had happened from what he had said, he had no idea. Not that he was surprised. She was Lois Lane after all. "Hey, can't I just be happy to hear from you?" he demanded.

"Sorry, Perry. Of course you can. I just thought... from the sound of your voice..."

"Relax, Lois. I was just funning with you. As a matter of fact, something has happened and I've been trying to find you. Where are you anyway?"

After a pause, Lois said, "Kansas."

Kansas? Well, well, well. That would explain why neither her mother nor her sister had known anything about a family emergency. The family emergency hadn't exactly been for her family. Or... was that how she thought of the Kents? Very interesting. But that meant... "Are the Kents okay?"

"It's a long story, Perry. I really can't get into it. But basically, yes. They're okay." She paused slightly. "You do understand about me saying I had a family emergency, don't you?" she asked rather tentatively.

He thought about that for a moment before responding in the affirmative.

Lois sighed. "Thanks, Perry. So why have you been looking for me?"

"Oh, right. Henderson called. He thought you should know that Kyle Griffin and his side kick... What was his name again?"

"Victor. What about them?"

"They escaped from prison."

"What! Oh, god! This is my fault. I never should have said I'd rather face Griffin than Betsy."

"Who's Betsy?"

"What? Oh, the cow," Lois responded as if that should be perfectly obvious.

"Uhh... okay," Perry said, not understanding at all. Still, deciding it wasn't important, he continued with what he still needed to tell her. "Apparently, he broke out of prison by flashing this bright yellow light in the guards' eyes and it froze them in place for a period of time, allowing Griffin and his friend to escape. Oh, and the reason Henderson was calling — aside from his belief that you need to know given Griffin's obvious obsession with you — is that apparently Griffin broke into your apartment. Your landlord reported the break-in. When the police dusted for prints, they discovered it was Griffin."

"Was anything taken?"

"Not as far as Henderson could tell. He suspects that Griffin might have been out for revenge and when he couldn't find you, trashed your apartment. I sent a repairman over to fix your door and Jimmy went over to tidy up the place a bit."

"Maybe I should catch the first flight back."

"Actually, I was going to suggest you stay where you are.

Given that Griffin seems to want revenge and has a device that can immobilize people just by flashing it at them, it will be hard for you to defend yourself using your usual methods. Let the police deal with this one."

Lois shivered. He might be right. Not that she liked the idea of running from a fight. On the other hand, she had quite enough to

deal with right here in Smallville. "Okay, Perry. I'll check in again in a few days. But listen... Have you started interviewing for Clark's job yet?"

"No. Why? Any chance the prodigal son might return?"

"I don't know. But... is there a chance you might be interested if he wanted to return? I know the way he left was..."

"Did he have a good reason?"

"Yes, Perry. He did."

Perry mulled this over in his mind for a moment. Clark was one of the best reporters he'd ever seen. And Clark and Lois together were pure gold. Still, the way Clark had simply walked out without as much as a by-your-leave... "I'd consider it," he finally said. "But I'd have to be convinced that he really did have a good reason for leaving the way he did."

He could tell by Lois' silence that she hadn't been overly happy with his answer, but it was the best he could give her.

"Okay, Perry," she finally said. "I'll give you a call in a few days. Oh, and thanks — you know, for taking care of my apartment for me."

"Hey, no problem. It was the least I could do given that Griffin's grudge with you is because of the stories you've gotten about him for the paper."

He could almost hear the smile in Lois' voice, as if she realized that he'd have done it even if it had been non-paper related, as she said, "Atomic weight is a dimensionless physical quality, the ratio of the average mass of atoms of an element to one twelfth of the mass of carbon-12."

"What's that?" he asked in confusion.

"Uhh... nothing. Goodbye, Perry."

As he hung up, Perry smiled. It seemed Lois' Faraday slips happened more when she was touched or emotional. Well, he supposed that made sense. Still, in spite of her leak, it was nice to know that she had appreciated his gesture.

His mind drifted. So Lois was in Kansas. Well, good. That was exactly what Lois needed — to work things out with Clark. He'd been worried about her after Clark left. She seemed so... bereft without him. And if they could get things worked out... well, that might not be so bad for the paper either.

His smile turned to a frown. What was going on in Kansas, anyway, that forced Clark leave the way he had and had sent Lois flying out of here on a moment's notice? He hoped everything was okay. But as soon as the thought came, he dismissed it. Lois and Clark were on the case. And with the two of them working together, they'd get it sorted out. He was sure of it. The only thing he wasn't sure of was whether or not they knew that.

Lois pulled her legs up under her as she curled up in the big chair in Clark's cabin. She watched Clark for a moment as he tended to the fire. In spite of the fact that he was blind, he was wearing his glasses. He had ever since he'd shaved. But then, she supposed that made sense. After all, clean shaven he looked suspiciously like Superman without the glasses. She took a sip of her coffee and sighed.

"Okay, so what's been bugging you all evening," Clark asked as he felt his way to the couch and took a seat.

She wasn't sure how he did it. She thought she'd been up-beat and carefree during supper with Clark's parents — being careful to hold up her end of the conversation. Still, she must have given away her concerned thoughts in some manner. That must be why Clark had invited her to come to his cabin after they'd finished doing up the dishes after supper — not that he might not have just wanted her company, she thought with an inward grin.

Still, she supposed he did have the right to know. She may have been the main target of Griffin's ire when he'd come after her the last time — all because she'd written the story that had put him in prison five years ago. But Clark had assisted in writing the story that had put Griffin back in prison. So it was possible he was as

much a target as she was.

"So what is it, Lois?"

"Well, you know I called Perry this afternoon."

Clark nodded.

"When I came here, I told him I'd call when I had a better idea of how long I'd be gone."

"So what did you tell him?"

"I told him I'd call back again soon."

She watched as Clark nibbled slightly on his lower lip.

"Does he know where you are?"

She nodded, then realizing he couldn't see her, responded in the affirmative.

"So what did you tell him... you know... about why you're here?"

"As little as possible. But there's something else." She paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. "Clark, Kyle Griffin and his partner escaped from Strykers."

"What?" Clark responded, his word almost sounding like a gunshot with the soft crackling of the fire the only other sound in the room. He ran a hand through his hair in agitation. "How did this happen?"

"Apparently, he invented a light which, when he shines it into people's eyes, temporarily freezes them. He used it on the guards and escaped."

"How did he manage to invent this in prison?"

"Arts and crafts?" Lois suggested in response.

"I can't believe this! How could the Metropolis Correctional Services have let this happen? Letting him invent a device that could be used as a weapon! He was in prison in the first place for inventing high-tech weaponry to sell to terrorists. He tried to destroy the Daily Planet with a high-tech laser for crying out loud!"

"Yeah. Well, that's not the worst of it. Apparently, he broke into my apartment and..."

"What?"

Lois flinched on the shout. "Clark, calm down," Lois said as soothingly as possible.

"How can you..." Clark gestured wildly in her direction. "... be so calm about this? He kidnapped you! He wants you humiliated and dead! He breaks out of prison and first thing he does is break into your apartment. How come you aren't... I don't know... freaking out or something? Don't you understand what type of danger you're in — or do you just not care?"

"Would you calm down? I'm in Kansas. He's in Metropolis. Besides, I don't think 'freaking out' as you put it is going to help."

"Don't you understand?"

"Understand what? Clark, what's this all about?"

"If he comes after you... I can't protect you!" Clark's voice broke on the words. "Superman can't save you this time." The final words weren't much more than a whisper.

A long moment of silence followed Clark's words. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, forcing himself to calm down. The soft crackling of the fire was the only sound in the cabin until, at last, Lois spoke.

"First of all, Superman didn't save me from Griffin last time. If I recall correctly, I'd already managed to take out Victor and Griffin by the time you arrived. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I'm not looking for a protector. If you haven't learned that by now, you don't know me at all."

"Lois..."

"And second... who says Superman can't still save me?"

"Lois..."

"Clark, how did you get between Betsy and me this morning?"

Seemingly surprised by the non sequitur, Clark hesitated.

"Excuse me?"

"When I was trying to milk the cow and she started coming towards me, I yelled for you. One moment you were standing next

to the door and the next... you were holding Betsy back from crushing me. How did you do it?"

Clark's brows furrowed. "I don't know," he admitted after a moment.

"Clark, you still have your powers. What you need to do is figure out is how to use those powers given the fact that... at least for the time being... you've lost your sight. Life hasn't ended. Your usefulness to the world hasn't ended. It may have changed, but it's up to you to decide whether you choose to embrace life... to be the best blind man you can be or if it's all too hard." She paused. When she spoke again, all her love for him was in her slightly trembling voice. "Fulfill your promise to me to be the best blind man you can be."

He was silent as he considered this, and Lois felt as if her heart was standing still while she waited for his response. He had so much potential. The loss of his eyesight hadn't changed that. The thought of him throwing it all away by sitting out here in the middle of nowhere doing nothing broke her heart.

Besides, if he chose that, and then didn't get his sight back, where did that leave her relationship with Clark? Lois wasn't sure. As strong as her feelings were for Clark, she knew that her spirit would die if she wasn't in the thick of the battle. Could she give that up to be with Clark if he decided not to rejoin life?

Something inside her knew that the battle going on in Clark at this moment was to decide whether to choose life or a slow and painful death. And as much as she wished she could make that decision for him, the choice was his alone.

"Where do we start?" he finally asked.

And with those simple words, Lois' heart started beating again. "Well, I think we start by getting you a pair of sunglasses."

"Huh?"

"Now that you're blind... Well, the whole 'using the glasses for a disguise' thing has sort of gone out the window. Everyone would wonder why a blind man needed glasses." She slipped over to sit on the couch next to him before reaching out to remove his glasses. "And yet without them, you look too much like Superman. So..."

"...sunglasses," he finished for her.

"Sunglasses," she confirmed.

The next day had its moments of excitement. As well as milking the cows, they'd been asked by Jonathan to go to the other side of the property to pick up the fire wood Jonathan had piled there from an old tree he'd had to cut down.

She never saw it coming. One moment she'd been completely in control of the truck. The next she was doing donuts, fighting the wheel to keep the truck on the road. She saw Clark open the door and realized he was about to put his foot out to stop the truck, but his foot struck the inside of the door, putting a dent in it as the truck went off the road and came to a jarring stop against a hard snow bank.

Silence enveloped the vehicle as Lois and Clark both collectively struggled to catch their breaths.

"You okay?" Clark asked anxiously.

"Everything except my pride. Must have hit some ice back there." She took a deep breath, trying to calm her trembling hands. "Okay, well, at least there isn't much of a ditch here. So..." She rested her hand on the key, taking a few more seconds, before turning.

Nothing happened.

"Did you put it in park?" Clark asked.

"Oh, right," Lois said before trying again. The engine still stayed stubbornly silent. "Great! Just great!" She checked the fuel gage. There was plenty of fuel. She flicked the lights. She had lots of power. Without waiting to think about it, she reached down to pull the release for the hood when she hesitated.

Suddenly, she cocked her head to the side. After a moment,

she pulled off her seatbelt and reached over Clark, practically laying across his lap as she began to search under the dashboard on the passenger's side, feeling around at his feet.

"What are you doing?" Clark asked, sounding slightly breathless as she continued to squirm.

"Looking for the... Uhh... here it is." She pulled up the edge of the carpet. "The fuel pressure inertia switch," she said as she pushed the button she found under the carpet.

Once that was done, she squirmed back over to her side of the car, fastened the seatbelt and turned the key. The engine purred to life.

"How did you know how to do that?" Clark asked.

Lois shrugged. "Must have seen my mechanic do it or something. But it did make sense. There was plenty of gas. The battery was fine. So there had to be a problem with compression. And then I remembered... Well, I'm not exactly sure where I heard it, but I somehow knew that the fuel pressure inertia switch often gets tripped in the event of an accident. So..." She shrugged as she cautiously pulled the truck back onto the road.

Still, after that moment of excitement, they'd completed their chore. On the way back, she'd pulled the truck over to the side of the road at what Martha had told her was Schuster's Field.

"Why have we stopped?"

Lois opened the door. "Your mom said this was Schuster's Field. Where your space craft landed. Would you show it to me?"

"But, Lois..." His voice trailed off and she realized what he'd been about to say. That he was blind. Somehow, he must have known that she wouldn't accept that excuse so after a moment, he nodded, opening the door to the truck.

She was pretty sure he even surprised himself with how the smells and sounds of the place allowed him to point things and places out with relative ease as they walked together through the field.

As they walked, Lois began probing him to tell her his story. At first, his answers had been short and terse. But it hadn't taken long for him to relax and begin opening up to her. What he had felt when he had first learned how he'd come to be Martha and Jonathan's son. Never knowing where he'd come from or why his birth parents had given him away. The fear shared by both Clark and his parents that someone would find out and take him away to dissect him like a frog. How he'd struggled as his powers had developed, always wondering how far they would go and how different he might become from his peers. As the story had unfolded, Lois began to understand Clark better.

Yes, he'd lied to her. Hid from her who he really was. But it wasn't just her. He'd lied to everyone for as long as he'd known he was different. It was as much a part of him as her need to be in the thick of the battle was a part of her. He'd adopted this persona which was Clark Kent — mild mannered, slightly awkward and utterly adorable Clark Kent — allowing no one other than his parents to see the real man hidden inside, the one who was so much deeper and more complex than she'd ever known, but at the core was still her Clark. She felt a small thrill travel through her as he began to really open up and she realized that she was the first person he had ever done that with. She was suddenly looking forward to getting to know the real man. The one who definitely wasn't Superman — but also wasn't just Clark Kent.

When they finally returned to the farm, Martha had a delicious breakfast of ham and cheese omelets with pan fries waiting for them.

Lois had been relieved to discover that there was no serious damage to the truck. A few more scratches perhaps, but given the condition the truck was in, they could hardly be noticed. Jonathan had still given the truck a thorough examination and had announced it fully operational.

The following days settled into something of a pattern. The

mornings saw Lois getting up before the sun rose to cajole Clark into doing chores. They always milked the cows, of course. In fact, surprising even herself, Lois was getting pretty good at it. But other than the milking, days differed in what needed to be done. Some tasks more fun than others.

Some days were better than others in terms of Clark's attitude as well. At times, she felt as if she had the old Clark back — the one she was coming to think of as her Clark. Positive. Glass half full. Some good could be found in everyone and some new thrill was just waiting to be discovered. The little things. That was one of the things Lois loved most about Clark — his ability to find the pleasure in the little things, things she had never noticed before Clark. The way a snowflake tasted when caught on the tongue. The soothing sound of a crackling fire. The soft fur of a baby chick when held in the hand.

Other days were harder as he fought off depression. Days when he seemed to slip into darkness and defeatism. The ones where Lois had to be the one to be positive — not a task she did well at the best of times. Often these days ended with her losing her patience and tearing a strip off him.

After morning chores, they would work on various ways to help him cope with his loss of sight. Heat vision. Cooling breath. Strength. Even learning how not to break things when he bumped into them.

Ballet had surprisingly turned out to be the answer to the last problem. One morning when he managed to completely demolish a chair when he accidentally bumped into it, Lois had suddenly had a flash of inspiration. The most graceful people on the planet were ballet dancers so what if he learned ballet?

Clark had, at first, been outraged. In spite of the tights, he had insisted that he was in no way a ballet dancer. Not yet, Lois had quickly informed him. Fortunately for him, she had taken ballet as a little girl and still remembered many of the exercises. And it had worked. As he'd learned to become more graceful, he'd found that he could be less clumsy, breaking fewer things in the process. Of course, Lois may have mixed in a few techniques from her martial arts classes with the ballet. Not that she'd told him that, of course, having too much fun calling him 'twinkle toes.'

The hardest problems they'd faced were him learning to use sound instead of sight to control his heat vision and cooling breath. Still, hours of practice were beginning to pay off. The soft whisper of water in a glass, a sound too soft for Lois even to hear, could be used by Clark to figure out where to direct a blast of freezing breath to cool water or heat vision to bring it to a boil.

One day, he'd explained to her how he had been able to change so quickly into Superman — almost making it seem as if Clark and Superman were present at the same time. Of course, that had resulted in her demanding a demonstration. Spinning into the suit and out of it had been fascinating to watch — although he had ended up in some interesting combinations of clothing as Clark as a result. Lois' favorite had been the one time when he'd forgotten to put on his trousers.

It helped that Clark had an eidetic memory. He could keep in his mind exactly how many steps to take across the barn, to the house, to the cabin. He could remember every time something was moved and exactly where it had been left. That allowed him to find his sunglasses at a moment's notice or avoid a moved chair or not trip over his work boots. Such a trait might have driven Lois nuts in normal times, but now... Seeing Clark master the skill and self-esteem that came with using it had brought tears of pride to her own eyes on more than one occasion. He had never bothered to use his remarkable memory in this fashion before — when he'd had his sight. So learning to use it now was taking time.

What fascinated Lois most was when she would move something. If he wasn't there at the time, he wouldn't know. But when he was... He seemed to be able to tell from the noise she made while moving something what she had moved and where she

had moved it — and then add that to his mental picture of the room. They could leave a room and come back hours later and he would still remember where every item in the room was located.

Oh, he still had to consciously work at it, of course. But Lois suspected with time he would be able to master the skill subconsciously. He still made mistakes. Apparently moving a pen was difficult to distinguish from moving a knife, but clearly different from moving a t-shirt. But every day he seemed to get a little better, a little more accurate.

He had perfected his use of Martha's invention for shaving. Martha had needed to make a number of revisions to the design since the original 'shaving kit' as they'd taken to calling it. But now it seemed to be working fine and Clark seemed to have figured out the exact strength of heat vision he needed to use to end up with a clean shave.

He still insisted on spending part of everyday lying in the sun. She supposed she understood. He wanted his sight back. But staring blindly at the sun hardly seemed to be helping. Still, she could hardly object. After all, surely he understood how his body worked better than she did.

Most evenings ended with the two of them back at his cabin, chatting pleasantly in front of a crackling fire. It was... nice.

The memory of their evenings together brought a smile to Lois' face. She and Clark had always been very physical with each other. But this was new. She'd given up sitting in the big chair because when she was sitting next to him on the couch he often would reach out to touch her face, seeing her by touch.

She had to admit, she was loving it.

Their physical relationship wasn't the only way they'd gotten closer in the past couple of weeks. To Lois, it felt as if they were connecting more emotionally, too. At least, she certainly felt closer to Clark than she ever had, closer than she had ever believed she could get to another person, in fact.

They had even managed to talk more about his reasons for not telling her about Superman when he'd had to leave Metropolis to avoid people finding out he was blind. As they'd talked, she'd started to understand some of his convoluted thinking. In fact, all she'd had to do was realize that in many ways Clark was a typical male. He had stupidly thought that he wasn't a man she could look up to or admire if he was handicapped. And with that understanding, the final hurt she'd felt as a result of his lies and his comments when he'd left had finally been healed. What he didn't understand was that watching him overcome the issues he faced was making her admire him more not less.

Last night had been their most intimate night yet. Contact between them had been almost constant and when he'd seen her back to the house, she'd thought he was going to kiss her.

That was why Clark's surliness today was so much harder to understand or tolerate. But that would surely change because today, for the first time, they were going flying. Lois could hardly believe how excited she was. And if she was this excited, what must it be like for Clark to think about flying for the first time since he had lost his sight?

Thump.

Lois tightened her grip around Clark's neck at the unexpected jolt of their landing.

"Guess I misjudged that, huh," Clark said, his tone flat.

"Oh, come on. It wasn't that bad. There are no huge craters in the ground." She glanced down at the small indentation in the land. "Or at least Betsy isn't going to do more than sprain her ankle if she steps into it."

Clark quickly set her down on the ground. "This is pointless."

"It's not pointless, Clark. It just takes practice." She put her arms around her neck, jumping into his arms, expecting him to catch her. When his arms remained stubbornly at his side, she grasped his neck tighter to ensure that her feet landed solidly back

on the ground.

Okay, obviously this wasn't working. She released him and rubbed her gloved hands together to cut through the cold air of the Kansas winter. "Come on, Clark. I know this is possible. Think of Betsy."

"Betsy?"

Lois nodded before again remembering that he couldn't see her. "I've been thinking about the way you were able to get to me when I was scared of Betsy. I think you're subconsciously using your hearing and the length of time sound takes to get from one thing to another to judge distances."

"You mean using the speed of sound."

"Right. The speed at which sound travels is directly influenced by both the medium through which it travels and the factors affecting the medium, such as altitude, humidity and temperature. In dry air at sea level $V \sim 331.4 + 0.6T_c$ where V equals velocity (m/s) and T_c equals temperature in Celsius."

"Lois..." Clark said cautiously.

"Sorry. Faraday leak," Lois said, hardly bothering to pause in her explanation. "Anyway, I think you do the calculations in your head. I think that's how you got to Betsy so quickly when I was in trouble. I think that's how you manage to hit a target with your heat vision and freezing breath. You can hear the way the wind echoes back when it bounces off objects — letting you know how far it is to the object — and if you can do that with smaller objects, you can certainly hear echoes letting you know how far away the ground is. Isn't there an animal that's blind — that navigates using its hearing?"

"You mean a bat?"

"That's it! They're blind; yet they can fly around and avoid hitting things. If they can do it, surely you can."

"Okay, let's assume you're right," he said stubbornly. "So what?"

"Excuse me?"

"So what? I can go up in the air, and I can go back down. Great!" His tone was both belligerent and sarcastic now. "What then? It's not as if I can fly anywhere if I can't see. How do I navigate?"

"Well, that's why I'm here. Until we figure out all the... little details..."

"Little details... some little details."

Lois ignored him and continued. "Until we figure out all the little details, I'll tell you where to go."

"Oh, and so you're a navigational expert now, are you? You got your navigational charts with you? Because things look very different up there..." He pointed to the sky. "...than they do down here."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Then we won't go far. I'm sure I can find my way around the farm."

"And what good does that do?"

Lois stepped up closer, placing the palm of her hand against his chest. She heard him take a quick, indrawn breath. "Come on, Clark. You know how much I love flying. Let's just try it again."

He stepped back. Lois let her hand fall from his chest. He really was in a mood today. He wasn't even responding to her flirting. Maybe they could use a break. After all, it was freezing out here — especially when he didn't have his arms around her. She shivered.

"You're shivering," Clark said immediately, stepping forward and placing his hands on her arms, rubbing up and down her arms to create some friction to warm her.

It felt good and she closed her eyes, sighing slightly as she relaxed into his touch. Suddenly, she stood up straight. "How did you know I was shivering?"

"I could hear the change in your breathing and I deduced from that that you were shivering."

"See! That's what I'm talking about. Using your other senses

to figure out what's going on around you and responding to it. Let's try it again. Just one more time."

When he let out a breath that Lois interpreted to be acceptance, she jumped up into his arms again. This time he caught her. "Okay, so I know you know how this works. Up."

Although she couldn't see them well behind his dark shades, Lois was fairly certain that he had rolled his eyes. She was slightly surprised he'd chosen to wear his sunglasses today. He didn't usually since only she and his family knew he was there and he wanted to give his eyes as much exposure to the sun as possible. As for why he had worn them today... She almost felt as if he was using them to hide from her — although she wasn't sure why. What was going on in that head of his? Still, now wasn't the time to worry about it because he was currently floating up into the air. "Now stop," Lois said. "Can you tell how high up you are?"

"Exactly how am I supposed to do that?"

"Well, try using those cute little ears of yours for something other than holding up your glasses. Does my voice echo back to you from the ground or something?"

"Yes."

"Okay, so how long does the sound take to get back to you?"

She waited in silence then. He was the science geek. Surely if there was some way to work out, he'd be able to do it.

"Well, say something so that I can try to calculate it," Clark said when she remained silent.

"Like what?"

"That will do," Clark said something in his voice changing as he seemed to catch on. "We're about a hundred yards in the air?"

She looked down. Now that she had his estimate, how the hell was she supposed to know if he was right? It wasn't as if she'd brought a tape measure with her.

"Well? Am I right?" Clark asked.

"How am I supposed to know?" Lois exclaimed. "You're up a long way. That's all I know."

She felt the faintest chuckle rumble through Clark's chest and began to feel a bit more hopeful. It was the first indication that Clark's mood might be improving. Maybe the defeatist had retreated for the time being — or at least was being held at bay.

"It's about a hundred yards between the house and the barn," Clark informed her. "Is that about how far we are above the ground?"

Lois calculated the distance. It was hard. Looking at the distance up and down was hard to compare with distances across. Still... "I'd say that's pretty close."

The first real smile suddenly lit up Clark's face.

"Okay," Lois said, determined to seize onto this new attitude for as long as it lasted. "Take us down again. But this time I'll keep talking so that you can continue to make the necessary calculations to determine how fast you're descending and how close you are to the ground. Of course, it might be a bit difficult for you to do with me talking the whole time, giving you instructions and everything, but..."

This time they landed as gently as a feather on the grass.

"You did it, Clark!" Lois exclaimed, her arms tightening around his neck in a celebratory hug.

"Yes, I did," Clark said, sounding almost as pleased as Lois was. "So now I can take off and land, just as long as I have some loud, babbling woman in my arms."

"In view of the celebration of the moment, I'm going to let that comment pass," Lois teased, lowering herself from his arms and sliding down his body to stand on the grass. For a moment, their bodies were connected down their entire length. Lois looked up into his eyes and she felt the atmosphere around them change as if it had suddenly come to life. She felt herself begin to stretch up towards his lips when...

As instantly as it had happened, Lois felt Clark take a startled step back, leaving her momentarily fighting for her balance.

"Right. Well," Clark said, obviously trying to pretend nothing had just happened. "What's next?"

"Umm... Well..." Lois said, trying to figure out why he'd suddenly withdrawn from her. He'd been with her a moment ago. She'd swear she'd seen him dip his head towards her as if seeking out her lips. So what had just happened?

"Come in and get some lunch, you two," Martha called from the back door, immediately breaking the awkward silence between them.

"Oh, good," Clark said immediately, his voice just a little too chipper to be sincere. "I'm starved. So... if you'll just let me have your arm..."

She did as asked, guiding him towards the house even as her mind churned.

Lois picked up a plate and began drying it. She sighed. After lunch, she and Clark had gone back out and done more flying, even going so far as to take little flights around the farm, but something had changed. Clark held her a little more stiffly. His speech was a little more formal. And then, for the first time, he had excused himself and gone back to his cabin without her the moment supper was finished.

"Are you okay?" Martha asked as she washed a coffee cup, quickly rinsing it and putting it in the drainer.

"Fine," Lois replied absently as she picked up the mug. Suddenly she set the mug down with a thud. "No. I'm not fine. I just... I think maybe it's time for me to go back to Metropolis."

"Did you two have a fight?"

Lois shook her head. "I just think... He seems to be adjusting well and... I guess I'm sort of wondering if it's time to get on with my life. He can work things out for himself from here." She tried to smile at Martha but the act was painful and she was certain by the look on Martha's face that the older woman wasn't fooled.

"Anyway," Lois continued, picking up another plate from the tray, "there's nothing more for me to do here. And I need to get back to work." Vigorously drying the plate, she set it on the counter and reached for another one. Martha's hand on her arm stopped her.

"Lois, what happened?"

"Nothing... or not really." She managed to shrug off Martha's hand and reach for the plate. "What would make you think something happened anyway? I've been here almost two weeks. Really. It's just time for me to be going home. Clark can take care of himself. He doesn't need me holding his hand. Or... at least he doesn't seem to want me holding his hand." All the fight suddenly went out of her. "I think it's time for me to go home, Martha. I was hoping to ask him to come back with me. But under the circumstances... I'm going to leave in the morning. But would you tell him that I think Perry would consider rehiring him if he wanted to come back to the Planet?"

"Lois..." Martha said softly. "What's wrong?"

Lois' hands stilled. The dishes were done. She almost wished there were more — just to give her something else to focus on. Still, she didn't turn, unable to look at Martha as she continued. "You're wrong about his feelings for me, Martha," she finally said. "I'm his friend... his best friend. But he doesn't think of me as anything more than that."

"What makes you think that?" Martha asked, her voice incredulous.

Lois shrugged. "Let's just say that he's made it pretty clear by his actions that he doesn't see us as anything more than friends." Lois finally turned to face Martha. "I just think it's time for me to go home."

Martha took the towel Lois was still clinging to and pulled it gently out of her hands before leading her to the table. Once she had cajoled Lois into a seat, she took one herself.

"Give me an example," Martha asked.

"Martha, look..."

"Come on. Just one example."

Lois took a moment before finally nodding. "Okay, well, today after Clark's first successful landing... For a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. Then he suddenly seemed to realize what he was doing and... I guess he just got caught up in the excitement of learning to land. But he suddenly..." Lois seemed to flounder for a moment, looking for words.

"Pulled away?"

Lois nodded. "Then for the rest of the day, he was... distant. And... well, you saw how he took off out of here as fast as he could after dinner this evening. I think I've been... sort of letting down my walls and he's realized that I'm in love with him. He's pulling away because he doesn't feel the same and he's afraid of hurting me." She gave a humorless laugh. "You know what the crazy thing is? I've seen him do the same thing before... with other women. Cat. Mayson. He runs rather than telling them he's not interested. And now he's doing the same thing to me. It's probably more difficult this time since we're best friends. But still..."

She gave her head a shake. "Anyway, that's why I think it's time for me to go home. To put these feelings back in the bottle. So that, hopefully, someday we'll be able to be friends again." She swiped hastily at a tear that had the audacity to escape.

Martha rose from the table and after a quick walk to the counter, handed Lois a tissue. Then she reached for the coffee pot, pouring two cups of coffee while she waited for Lois to regain her composure.

"Did Clark ever tell you about Jonathan's back surgery?"

Martha finally asked.

Lois didn't understand the non-sequitur, but she responded to the question by shaking her head.

"Clark was just little at the time. Jonathan had an accident on the tractor and had to have back surgery. It was early spring — about the time we should have been planting crops. Well, we were afraid we were going to lose the farm. Fortunately, I was able to get a job in town and we were able to hire a man to help us get the crops in and again at harvest since Jonathan was still unable to... well, do much of anything for quite a while."

She stopped to take a sip of her coffee with Lois still wondering where Martha was going with this.

"So you were able to keep the farm... obviously," Lois finally said just to get Martha talking again.

Martha nodded. "But for a time, I thought I'd lost Jonathan."

"I... don't understand. Did he almost die or something?"

"No. No. Nothing like that. I was working twelve hour days, seven days a week. And then I'd come home and still have to do work around the farm and take care of Jonathan. So I didn't notice at first. But soon it became obvious that Jonathan was... well... withdrawing from me, I guess."

Suddenly, Lois was interested, leaning forward in her chair.

"I thought he'd quit loving me," Martha said.

"Had he?"

Martha shook her head. "It took me a long time, but I finally figured out what the problem was. He felt like he was failing me. He had always been so strong. He was raised to think of the man as the provider..."

"Your protector," Lois added, her mind flashing back to her conversation with Clark where he had lamented not being able to protect her.

Martha nodded. "I was doing so well by myself; he wondered what I needed him for."

"But that's so stupid. Obviously some job isn't going to replace Jonathan in your life."

"I know that. And you know that. But Jonathan is a proud man. He felt worthless. And having to sit back and watch me save the day, he no longer understood how I could want him. I think he even thought I'd be better off without him."

"So what did you do?" Lois asked.

A sly grin quirked at the corners of Martha's mouth. "I made him feel like a man again."

"And how did you..." Lois' voice trailed off as the grin on Martha's lips and color in Martha's cheeks increased. "Oh!" Lois said. "You mean you... Wait! You're not suggesting that I..." Neither thought was ever finished and Martha didn't respond as Lois floundered for words.

Finally, Martha swallowed the last of her coffee before setting her empty mug on the table and rising to her feet. "I've always thought Clark was a lot like his father," Martha concluded as she began putting around the kitchen, doing her final touches on tidying up. When she finished she turned, walking towards the door.

"Martha," Lois finally said, causing Martha to look back. "Are you sure he loves me?"

Martha smiled. "Do you think I would have told you that story if I wasn't?" With those final words, Martha left the room.

Lois sat at the kitchen table for a long time after Martha left. She sat there as Martha and Jonathan talked quietly in the living room before finally going to bed. She sat there in the kitchen with the rest of the house dark, staring absently at her empty coffee mug as her mind moved at a million miles an hour.

She'd never been exactly courageous when it came to matters of the heart. And what if Martha was wrong about Clark's feelings for her? The safe thing to do was to go back to Metropolis tomorrow. But if she did that, she would probably lose any chance of getting Clark back into her life. Still, was this a risk she was willing to take? In her job, she often leapt off the diving board, head first, without checking the water level in the pool. But could she do that for love?

Finally, her heart pounding harder, she came to a decision. Leaving the kitchen, she began to ascend the stairs of the old farmhouse, heading to her bedroom.

Clark wasn't entirely sure what woke him. Was it the soft footsteps on the stoop of the cabin? Was it the sweet perfume of Lois, smelling of soap and shampoo, obviously fresh from the shower? Or was it, perhaps, the uneven breathing he could hear as she stopped outside his front door?

He lay there, waiting for her to knock, and was bewildered when she just stood there.

Then, he was confused again when instead of knocking as she always did, she simply opened the door and stepped inside. He propped himself up in bed and looked in the direction of the door, his head tilted slightly as he listened, waiting for her to speak, to explain what she was doing there in the middle of the night. Or... maybe it was morning?

He listened to the sounds outside. No. No, it was still night. He could distinctly hear his father snoring and the gentle breathing of his mother, both still in the arms of Morpheus. He refocused his hearing on Lois and realized that her heart rate was elevated.

"Lois?" he finally asked.

He heard her take a deep breath before slipping off her coat and draping it over the back of the couch.

"Hi, big boy," she said in what sounded as if it was supposed to be sultry, but came off as slightly shrill.

"Lois?" he asked again.

"Oh, god, Clark," she finally said, sounding distressed. "I'm sorry. I don't know how to do this. I thought I could pull it off. And your mother said... But I just... don't know how to do this. I'm sorry. I'll..." Her voice trailed off and he heard her hastily gathering up her coat again before turning back to the door.

"Lois, wait!" he said, pushing himself up further in bed. He heard her movement cease. "Do what? What don't you know how to do?"

He could hear what sounded like her forehead softly coming

to rest against the door and suspected her hand was on the door handle.

“Seduce you,” she whispered.

Seduce him? For a moment, he froze. Had he really heard her right? She'd come here to seduce him? But... At that point, his hearing picked up the soft sound of silk moving against her body as she breathed heavily and his mind involuntarily painted the image of how she must look. Before he'd been blinded, he'd never realized that various materials sounded different against the human body. And until this moment, he wouldn't have known it either. But hearing the soft whisper of what she was wearing brush against her skin now, he realized that on some level, he'd always subconsciously heard the difference. In short, Lois simply sounded sexy and his body responded accordingly.

“I'm sorry,” she continued when he took too long to react. “I'll just...” She moved then, opening the cabin door and letting in a blast of cold air.

“Wait! Wait! Wait! Wait!” Clark gasped before she could get out the door.

She hesitated slightly before pushing the door shut again.

He knew what he should ask. Why was she trying to seduce him? It was the natural question. But in his current state there was only one thing he wanted to know, desperately needed to know. “What are you wearing?” he asked, his voice husky.

He could hear her swallow before licking her lips. The image that presented left him in a cold sweat.

“Some illegally short, silky lingerie. It has a see-through bed jacket that goes over top,” she said, her voice sounding nervous. “I got it on a shopping trip with Lucy. Sort of an impulse buy. I'm not sure why I even agreed to go into the store or why Lucy was able to talk me into buying it. It was an extravagant waste of money. I've never worn it before. I'm not even sure why I packed it, but...”

“What color?” Clark asked, cutting her off impatiently.

Something in his voice brought her babble to an immediate halt.

“Black,” she whispered, her voice having gone deeper.

“What else are you wearing?”

“Black stockings that come to above my knee and below the edge of the lingerie.” Her voice trembled.

“And your feet? Surely you didn't walk over here in just your stockings.”

This time there was a hint of laughter in her voice. “The work boots your mother lent me.”

Clark closed his eyes and flopped back against the bed at the image now dancing in his head. He could practically see her standing there. The black lingerie barely covering the essentials. The black stockings highlighting her long, shapely legs with just a hint of skin at the top until her clothing cut off the top part of her leg from view. Her dark hair curling slightly around her face. She had likely reached up more than once to tuck a strand of loose hair behind her ear while she'd been standing there — a nervous gesture that was so utterly Lois. A soft blush would be staining her cheeks. Her eyes would have vacillated, as had her voice, between sexy and scared. Even the work boots she was wearing struck him as sexy.

It was a good thing she had no idea how to seduce because he was already hopelessly ensnared. If she knew what she was doing... he could hardly imagine the mess he would be in then.

“Come here,” he said, his voice not much more than a growl.

He heard her take a sharp intake of breath and step closer. Then she shivered.

“Your fire is almost out. I'm just going to put another log on first,” Lois said, dropping her coat again on the back of the couch.

Clark knew he should get up and tend to the fire instead of leaving the task to Lois. It was the gentlemanly thing to do. But in his current state, he dared not get out of bed. His other option was

to pull back the covers and suggest that Lois would be warm enough if she simply joined him, but he didn't quite have the nerve. So he listened as she walked over to the fireplace to begin her self-assigned task.

Lois fought off the urge to heave a sigh of relief as she removed her boots before tending to the fire. The sudden douse of cold had hit her unexpectedly, pulling her out of the magnetic desire his words had inspired in her as he'd insisted she describe what she was wearing. Tending to the fire had been a welcome distraction, a means of recovering her composure.

She couldn't say she was entirely certain what she was doing in Clark's cabin, or how far she was actually prepared to take this. Even as this thought passed through her mind, she flinched slightly at the hypocrisy of it. ‘Oh, god, Lois, you know exactly how far you plan to go. Look at what you're wearing. You didn't come here dressed to look at his 4H badges,’ she silently wailed to herself.

Still, she wasn't prepared to let Clark go without a fight. It was time... some might even say it was long past time for them to settle... whatever it was that existed between them. And her outfit, together with her showing up in the middle of the night, stripped away all pretexts, made it more than clear the direction she wanted their relationship to take. What else was there to say after that? Whether he returned her feelings or not... By the end of tonight, at least she would know where she stood with Clark Kent. She supposed that was something. The next step, really, was entirely his.

All too soon, the task of building the fire was completed and her skin felt the warmth of its heat. She rose to her feet and turned towards Clark. Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she walked over to Clark's bedside, sitting down beside him.

“Hi,” he said softly.

“Hi,” she responded, feeling the oh-so-quick pattering of her own heart. How had she never before noticed how his voice, speaking nothing more than a single syllable, two letter word could cause the blood to race through her veins?

Still, she was not entirely sure how to proceed. Should she tell him that somewhere along the way she had fallen in love with him? Should she simply climb into bed with him — letting her actions speak for her? Just the thought of doing something so bold almost made her feel faint. Her fear of being rejected was too strong, too overwhelming.

He solved the problem when, a moment later, he reached a hand towards her. She grasped it immediately, turning the hand over, studying it before, unable to resist, she bent over and kissed the inside of his wrist.

He half groaned, half spoke her name, as his hand escaped her grasp to find her cheek. She closed her eyes as his hand, soft yet strong, caressed the tender skin. He moved into a seated position and brought his other hand up to join the first. Gently he traced the contours of her face, her eyebrows, her nose, her full lips, before letting his fingers softly caress the line of her throat and down onto her shoulders.

When he pushed the sheer material of the bed jacket off her shoulders with his fingers, she straightened her arms, allowing the material to slip, almost silently to the bed behind her. Her heart beat jumped again when, using nothing but touch, his fingers ‘saw’ her outfit, tracing the straps over her shoulders and following the edge of the skimpy material over the swell of her breasts to where it dipped low into the valley between them. But his fingers didn't linger, following the material upwards again until they reached the straps so that he could trace the other side before allowing his hands to whisper over her sides and down to the hem of the garment.

When she moaned softly, his hands retraced their path until they were again on her neck and then buried in her hair so that he

could pull her head gently towards him.

Their lips touched in what wasn't much more than a light caress of lips on lips but the spark of electricity that jumped between them from the gentle touch shocked them both.

Without conscious thought or planning, the kiss took on a life of its own, deepening almost immediately as passion seized Lois with a potency that was completely foreign to her. The plan to seduce him dissolved. The need to talk about her feelings dissipated in an all-consuming blaze of heat and hunger.

When had she crawled under the covers with him? When had the remainder of their clothing disappeared? When had the decision been made to...

Anyway, when had any of it happened? A simple kiss and it seemed as if neither had been able to get close enough, one moment flowing into another in that all-consuming desire to become one, until, at last satisfied, they collapsed into each other's arms, exhausted, a mass of mingled limbs and sweat.

Clark lay staring unseeingly towards the ceiling as Lois slept curled up against him. How had he let this happen? It had been cruel and irresponsible and... absolutely wonderful. Still, how could he have done this to Lois? She deserved so much more than to be saddled with a blind man.

Not that being blind had in any way detracted from the wonder of making love to Lois Lane. The taste of her, the smell of her, learning the secrets of her body with his hands and mouth, the soft sounds she made in the midst of love making, the feel of her hands and lips as she'd explored him... all of it had combined together to drive him completely over the edge more than once during the course of the night. And even with all of that, her softly whispered, 'I love you,' as she'd drifted off to sleep against his chest had been the best moment of his life.

Still, it had been wrong of him to take advantage of the situation. He certainly hadn't intended to do so. No. He had... What? Been unable to resist? Even thinking that gave him a pang of disgust. He'd always abhorred men who claimed they were unable to resist as an excuse to take advantage of a woman. Yet, now he was no better than they were.

He was about to break her heart. He knew that with absolute certainty. Given the number of men who had hurt her in the past, it was remarkable the risk she'd taken by coming to his cabin last night, of making love to him without any sort of commitment. She'd put her heart on the line and he was about to deliver the final devastating blow.

His arm tightened protectively around her.

She murmured slightly and he could tell the moment she woke. Her face, which was buried in his neck, lit up in a slow smile. Then her hand whispered over his chest. She took a deep breath and let out a contented sigh.

"I had the most amazing dream," she finally whispered sleepily.

He smiled. "Funny. I think I had the same dream."

"What? Did you dream about having amazing sex with an incredible hunk of a man, too?"

He couldn't help the snort of laughter that escaped. "Maybe our dreams weren't exactly the same," he finally admitted.

"I would hope not," she said, adjusting positions. "So what was your dream about?" she asked, settling herself with her arms across his chest so that she could look at him.

"Well, it wasn't about having sex."

"Really?"

"No. Not at all. It was about *making love*... with an incredible hunk of a man."

This caused Lois to laugh. "So then... I take it you weren't disappointed. It being your first time and all."

"How...?"

Lois leaned forward, planting a gentle kiss on his lips. "How

did I know?" She shrugged. "Call it an educated guess. You just seemed a little... hesitant at times."

"Are you disappointed?"

"Disappointed? No. Never. I sort of like the idea that I'm your first. And... it answers a whole lot of questions I had about your relationship with Mayson."

"Lois, there was never anything between me and Mayson."

"I know that... *now*. But I'll tell you... no one can say you're a slow learner." She sucked in a breath through her teeth.

Clark laughed. "So do I rate a gold star?"

"Hmmm... I'll have to think about that one. A gold star is pretty impressive. I'm not sure you rate one yet, but with a little tutoring and a whole lot of practice... well, we'll see what we can do."

The humor suddenly left Clark's face and heart. "Lois..." He began slowly.

She instantly pulled away. "Oh, great. Here it comes."

"What?" he asked, confused as she sat up and began rustling around. He reached for her and felt her slip on what he assumed was the t-shirt he'd dropped on the floor while crawling into bed the previous evening. That must be what she had been reaching for when he'd heard her rustling around. He might not be able to see her, but he still keenly felt the loss of intimacy her actions represented — and it cut deep into his heart.

"This is where you tell me that although last night was great, it was a mistake. That for some reason that only makes sense to you, we can't be together. So what is it, Clark? Is it that you don't feel about me the way I feel about you? I'd understand that, really. After all, I'm not exactly happily-ever-after material."

"No! That's not it. Not at all!"

"It's okay, Clark. I understand. I mean, I knew there was a chance I was setting myself up for this when I came over here last night. You're not to blame." She began to move off the bed. "Last night was great. We'll have to do it again sometime." Her voice was flippant, but he could hear the deep hurt in it.

Desperate, Clark reached out, grabbing at her, finally managing to get a hold on her arm. "Would you just hold on?" he asked when she struggled slightly to be free of him.

Finally, she stilled.

He adjusted his hands, finally finding her face and holding it gently. "I love you. God, Lois, I've been in love with you for so long... wanted... this for so long... I can hardly remember a time when I didn't want it, didn't love you."

Her hands came up to his, pulling them away from her face and gently kissing them before lowering their now entwined hands into her lap. He could feel the soft skin of her thighs beneath the backs of his hands and closed his eyes, unable to resist savoring the feeling of renewed intimacy her actions engendered.

"If anyone other than you had come over here last night..." His voice trailed off. "Lois, I was a virgin until last night by choice."

"I never doubted that."

"The only thing I regret about it is that we didn't talk first because... Lois, I'm blind."

"I sort of figured that out."

"I don't have anything to offer you. I keep saying that I'll get my sight back, but I don't know if that's true. The last thing you need is an unemployed blind man dragging you down. You deserve so much more than that. And I can't burden you with that. You can do so much better."

She let out a sharp breath. "You're probably right," she said.

His heart dropped.

"After all, you're a stubborn, pigheaded, annoying, lunkhead who is probably a whole lot more trouble than you're worth."

"Lois..." he said, hearing the sarcasm in her voice.

"Clark, I love you. I don't care if you're blind or flying around in tights saving the day. I love you because you're you. You make

me stop and smell the roses.”

“Or the cow manure,” he added.

She softly chuckled. “Yeah, or that. What I need from you is not defined by your eye sight or your superheroness.”

“Superheroness? Is that even a word?”

“Would you let me finish?” she rebuked him gently.

“Sorry.”

“It’s who you are in here...” She freed one of her hands so that she could place it on his chest. “...that I’m in love with, that I need in my life. Clark, if I were blind and unemployed... would you still want me in your life?”

“Yes, of course, but...”

“But you’re the man. You’re supposed to take care of the little woman. In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve never exactly been the little woman. I don’t need a man to take care of me or provide for me. I need...” She paused, searching her heart and mind for words. “I need someone who will simply support and love me. I never had that as a child. I never even knew that such a thing existed until you came into my life. I need you, Clark. I just need you to love me and support me. Everything else is just...” She stumbled for a moment, trying to find the right word. “...details.”

He closed his eyes, recognizing what it had cost her to say those words. Lois Lane independent career woman of the 1990s was admitting that she needed another person. In the light of that... “I need you, too,” he admitted softly.

He could feel the tension suddenly leave her body.

“So where do we go from here?” he finally asked.

“Well... I’m going to borrow a pair of your sweats and your t-shirt and then I’m going back to the farmhouse. It’s probably too late to get back inside before your folks get up.”

He tilted his head to the side and listened for a minute.

“You’re right. Mom is already in the kitchen.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to make the walk of shame.”

“Lois, there is nothing shameful about what happened between us last night.”

“It’s an expression, silly.” She leaned forward and planted a soft kiss on his lips. When it instantly threatened to get out of control, she pulled back.

Clark groaned in protest.

She reached out, running her fingers affectionately through his hair.

“Stay,” he whispered.

She sighed. “We have chores to do. Or have you forgotten?”

“I hate chores,” he grumbled in a pout Lois was certain reflected a teenage Clark objecting to doing his chores.

“But you love me and you’re not going to make me face Betsy alone, are you?”

Clark laughed. “Glad to know I’m good for something.”

“You’re good for a lot of things,” she responded, yanking away the sheet covering him to illustrate what she meant.

“Hey!” he protested, grabbing the sheet and pulling it back up to protect his dignity. As he tucked it in tightly around his chin, Lois laughed.

“Spoil sport,” she said, before rising from the side of the bed.

After walking over to the small dresser, she opened it, rustling through it for a pair of sweats.

Clark listened to her in silence, wishing more than anything that he could watch her. Still, there was little point in wishing for something he had no way of obtaining. On the other hand, there had been times over the past year when he’d thought having Lois here like this was nothing more than a pipedream too. “So what happens now?” he asked as she continued preparing to leave.

She stopped her rustling around. “Just... think about something. When I was talking to Perry, he indicated that he may be willing to give you your job back.”

“Lois, I can’t go back to Metropolis. Superman and Clark can’t be blind at the same time.”

“No one knows that Superman’s blind. I never reported it.”

“The bad guys know. Mayson does, too.”

“The bad guys have disappeared. Besides, they will hardly pay attention if some reporter they’ve never even met turns up blind.”

“Mayson knows. And she hates Superman.”

“But she loves Clark.”

“And when she finds out that we’re together? You don’t think that might change her feelings for me?” When she didn’t respond, he spoke again. “What?”

“I was just enjoying the thought that we’re together,” she said. She walked over and gave him one final kiss before stepping towards the door. “Details, Clark,” she continued. “Nothing we can’t work out.”

“Lois...” he began.

“Clark, has anyone ever told you you’re a worry wart? Just... think about it, okay? It’s not as if you can hide out here for the rest of your life.”

He sighed.

“Love you,” she said.

Clark smiled in spite of himself. Suddenly he was anxious to do chores. He had a suspicion that they would be much more fun today. He reached under the sheet, withdrawing a handful of black silk and holding it to his nose as she turned towards the door.

Lois opened the door to Clark’s cabin only a crack to peer outside before quickly shutting it again.

“Oh, god, it’s your dad,” she said when she caught sight of a figure passing between the cabin and the house.

“He’s probably just heading out to the barn,” Clark said.

“He’ll be gone in a moment.”

Lois shook her head in amusement when she noticed what he was holding — her lingerie. Still, she didn’t comment. Instead, she simply counted to ten before cautiously opening the door once again. She let out a breath of relief when she saw that everything was now still.

Taking a deep breath, she quickly stepped outside and made a silent dash towards the house. She paused at the door, sneaking a glance into the brightly lit kitchen. No sign of Martha. Good. Her hand went to the doorknob and turned, taking great care not to make any noise. Slowly, ever so slowly so as to avoid any creaking, she pulled the door open far enough to step inside.

“Sleep well, Lois?”

The humor-filled voice coming from behind Lois caused her to jump. She spun towards Martha in guilty surprise.

“Uhh... fine,” Lois finally managed to mutter.

“Good, good,” Martha said, pushing past Lois to enter the house. “I just went out to collect some eggs for breakfast,” Martha said casually, as if finding women wearing her son’s clothes sneaking into her house before sunrise was the most natural thing in the world. “Jonathan wanted to get rid of the chickens years ago, but I don’t think you can call a place a farm if you can’t eat fresh eggs while you’re there.”

She turned back towards Lois who was still standing in the open doorway. “You coming in?” she asked the shell shocked Lois.

A blush spread across Lois’ face as she followed Martha into the house, her mind searching for some plausible explanation, other than the obvious, for why she was sneaking into the house at this hour. Unable to come up with anything remotely believable, she removed her coat and boots and made some barely intelligible remark that she was certain made no sense at all before fleeing the room, Martha’s soft chuckle following her up the stairs.

“Oh, did I mention that I called Perry this morning?” Lois said, trying to sound casual as she and Clark walked, hand in hand, towards the barn. She’d showered, dressed and gotten ready in record time, finding that she couldn’t stand being separated from

him any longer than absolutely necessary. After her phone call to Perry and one other quick call, she'd headed back to the cabin without even taking time to drink a cup of coffee.

A quick look at Clark told her that he hadn't been expecting her back quite so fast because he hadn't even gotten around to shaving. Still, the scruffy look suited him. He certainly didn't look at all like Superman at the moment. Instead he looked entirely... Clark — her farmboy. She smiled a smile which faded quickly when he brought her mind back to her phone call to Perry.

"So what did the Chief have to say?" he asked, his voice sounding as falsely casual as she was certain her voice had.

"He's ready to scream bloody murder. Says he can't run a newsroom with half a staff and is demanding that I get my butt back there immediately." She sighed. "He has a point. It has been two weeks. And it's not as if I can tell him why I need to be here. I'm not even sure there is a reason at this point — except that you're here."

A moment of silence followed her pronouncement. Finally, Clark sighed. "So when are you going?"

"I booked a flight for tomorrow morning."

Clark merely nodded.

"You could come with me," Lois continued, not adding that she'd made a reservation for him on the same flight.

"Lois, I wish I could. But I just don't see how that's possible. I'm no good to anyone this way. And I can't risk anyone making the connection between me and Superman."

"I've been thinking about that. What if we set up some sort of accident? Some way that Clark Kent could have lost his eyesight. That way your blindness would be totally separate from Superman's."

"Even if we could make up something that would keep people from connecting my blindness to Superman's... It's not as if I could go back to being a reporter."

"Why not? Most of what we do as reporters is use our minds. We could work it out, Clark. I'm sure we could. You just have to want it as badly as I do."

Clark let out a breath before subtly changing the subject. "So did Perry say anything about Kyle Griffin?"

Lois nodded. "Apparently Griffin and his partner have disappeared." She didn't add that Griffin had apparently, in one last attempt to find her, gone to the Daily Planet, freezing everyone and doing God only knew what, before leaving again — although apparently Jimmy had somehow ended up wearing someone's dress. That information would just worry Clark. "The police think that when they couldn't find me, they went to Plan B which they think is to hightail it as far from Metropolis as possible."

"But they still could be in Metropolis, just waiting for you to return."

"Clark, I don't think that's very likely. I suspect they're sipping mai tais on a beach in some country that doesn't have an extradition treaty. I mean the longer they stay in Metropolis, the more chance there is that they'll be caught. They wouldn't hang around Metropolis for two weeks just hoping for me to return."

Clark wasn't as certain, but he didn't say more as they entered the barn. After all, even if Griffin went after Lois, there wasn't much he could do to help. He wouldn't be in Metropolis. And... he was blind. In fact, Lois was probably better off if he wasn't around. At least that way, Lois would likely be more careful and not, even subconsciously, act recklessly expecting Superman to rescue her.

No, he was blind now. Superman was gone for good. There would be no more last minute rescues. The sooner he, and Lois, accepted that, the better it would be for both of them. With a sigh, he followed her into the barn.

Lois squealed as Clark grabbed her from behind and began

nuzzling her neck. Mucking out the barn was her least favorite chore. The noxious fumes, made worse by disturbing it with the pitchforks while piling the soiled hay into wheelbarrows, was almost unbearable. And Lois still wasn't entirely convinced that tying a bandana around her face did much to protect her from the smell. Clark's explanation that it helped prevent some of the dust they disturbed from getting into her lungs sounded less than plausible.

However, when in Rome... So she faithfully kept the bandana tied across her face as she tried to ignore Clark while throwing another load into the wheelbarrow. "This one is ready to go. And then I think that's it," she announced as she attempted to escape his grip so that she could get the steel broom to finish the job. "Once you empty that one, I need you to get some fresh hay from the hayloft."

"I might need you to help me find the hay," he responded playfully.

"Oh, let me guess. To a farmboy, 'come up to my hayloft to show me where the hay is' is the city equivalent of 'come up to my apartment so I can show you my etchings.'"

Clark feigned indignation. "What exactly are you accusing me of, Ms. Lane?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm accusing you of, Mr. Kent," Lois responded as she finally escaped his grasp. "Now... this wheelbarrow is ready to go to the compost pile." She put his hand on one of the handles. "And then... the hay." With that, she gave him a slap on the posterior to send him in the appropriate direction and began the task of sweeping the floor with the large, steel push-broom.

"Spoil sport," he grumbled as he began carefully rolling the wheelbarrow towards the barn doors. "All I do is ask for help in the hayloft and suddenly she thinks I've got some ulterior motive. Where's the trust, I ask you? What does she think — that I'm some animal who is going to maul her as soon as I get her alone. Somebody has obviously been defaming my good name. When I find out who, I'm going to sue. Yep. I'm going to sue them for..."

Lois shook her head as his voice faded off into the distance before turning her attention back to her task. If she finished before he came back, she just might take a trip up to the hayloft. Just to see if he needed her help, of course. No other reason. None at all. She'd never go up there otherwise. After all, she was a good girl, she was.

A small grin pulled at the corners of her mouth as she quickened her pace, hoping to finish up here and then take the ladder up to the hayloft, hopefully before Clark returned. She'd always wondered what making out in a hayloft was like. Seemed as if she might be about to find out.

"Well, well, well, well. What do we have here?"

"A sexy cowgirl? Oooo... I love cowgirls. They're so... cowgirlish."

The vaguely familiar voices caused Lois to spin towards the newcomers. "Griffin," she gasped, pulling the bandana off her face. He had a gun in one hand and what appeared to be an instant camera with an elaborate flash hanging from a strap over the other shoulder. "Victor," she added when she noticed Griffin's side-kick standing beside him.

"Hi, Lo," Kyle Griffin, aka the Prankster, responded, making sure the gun was directed at Lois. "I bet you thought you'd missed me. Or... I guess that should be that *I* missed *you*."

"Why does she always use your last name and my first name?" Victor whined.

"Maybe because I like you better than him," Lois responded, even as her eyes darted towards the barn door, hoping that Clark had returned. There was no sign of him.

"Really?" Victor asked, sounding hopeful.

"Don't be a ninny," Griffin said, giving Victor a swat on the back of his head. "She hates both of us."

"Well, maybe she hates me less than she hates you," Victor said in his own defense.

"Six of one; half a dozen of the other," Lois mumbled under her breath.

Clark climbed the back stairs to the hayloft with a number of blankets in one arm. Lois didn't know there was a back way in — which suited his purposes just fine. He'd stumble and fumble around up here loud enough to get her attention before calling out to her. Given that she'd be caught off guard by the fact that she hadn't seen him come in, maybe she'd come to check on him before realizing what he was up to. And then... His face broke into a grin.

If Lois Lane thought he was going to let her out of here without a trip to the hayloft, she was sadly mistaken. Making out in a hayloft was a Smallville rite of passage. He'd received his first kiss from Lana in this very hayloft — a fact which he might not reveal to Lois. But what he'd never done was... what he intended to do with Lois this very afternoon in this particular hayloft.

An oversight from his not-misspent youth that he intended to correct today.

He came to a halt just inside the hayloft when he heard voices down below. Had his parents joined Lois in the barn?

He directed his hearing towards the house. He could hear both his parents there. But... something about what he was hearing struck him as wrong. It took him a moment to realize what it was. They weren't moving around. Not at all. The only sound coming from them was their breathing. Otherwise the house was perfectly still.

Before he had time to sort out that mystery, he could hear some sort of movement from down below. He heard someone sitting down heavily on the old wooden chair that had made its way into the barn years ago and a slight struggle as... What? What was happening?

"Why tie me up? Why not just use that... I assume the flash on that camera is how you are freezing people. Why not just use that to freeze me in place?" Lois asked, answering his question about what was happening.

"Because you can hardly answer our questions if you are frozen. Where's that wimpy partner of yours, anyway?"

Griffin! Kyle Griffin was in his barn. Griffin must have frozen Clark's parents — which would explain the strange sounds he'd heard coming from the house — and then come out here looking for him and Lois.

"That's one thing I've never understood," Victor said, informing Clark that both men were there. "A smart, sexy woman like you being stuck with that wimp of a partner."

"That just shows how little you know Clark," Lois responded.

"There's a little saying I like. 'When the going gets tough, the not-so-tough run away,'" Victor continued with a chuckle. "Why settle for him when you could have someone like me? Hey, once we ask her our questions, can we take her with us?"

Clark tensed. Victor and Griffin had Lois. His parents were frozen in place in the house. And he was blind. So... now what?

"Just tie up her legs," Griffin said in exasperation.

"But... it's a barn," Victor objected.

"That's right, Victor. That's why there are cows."

"Barns have rats. Huge rats, teaming with bubonic plague germs. They're probably all over the place in here."

Griffin grabbed Victor by the ear and forced him closer to Lois' chair. "There are cats," Griffin said. "And cats do what, Victor?"

"Eat rats?"

"That's right, Victor. They eat rats. Now... get down there and tie up her legs."

"What do you want, Griffin?" Lois asked as Victor proceeded to tie her legs to the chair.

"Superman."

Lois' eyebrows crinkled together. "Superman? Superman's gone."

"Yes, for now. But what no one knows is where he is and if he's going to be back. For some reason, that never showed up in the papers. And before I kidnap the President to demand ransom, I need to know if the big boy scout is going to be a problem."

"You plan to kidnap the President. Do you mean the President of the United States?" Lois asked in disbelief. "Are you nuts? How do you plan to get past the Secret Service?" On the last question, her eyes drifted down to the camera draped over Griffin's left shoulder as understanding sunk in. "You plan to freeze the Secret Service," she said unnecessarily.

Clark, his heart in his throat, carefully floated across the floor of the hayloft and back out of the barn the way he'd come in. Lowering himself to the ground, he took extra care not to hit the ground too hard, not wanting to be heard.

He turned towards what he knew was the open door of the barn, wondering how he was going to get in there without being spotted. His hearing picked up the sound of Betsy, chewing her cud close to the door. They hadn't released her into the field yet since her morning milking. Perfect.

Being careful not to bump into anything, he used his hearing to float over to Betsy. He landed next to her, keeping her large body between himself and where he knew the open door of the barn to be. Placing his hand on Betsy's side, he could feel her turn her head towards him.

As softly as he could, he gave a guttural whistle. He could feel Betsy relax.

"Okay, Betsy," he said softly, gently placing his hand on Betsy's belly. "Let's go save Lois."

Lois glanced towards the barn door when she saw Betsy walk into the barn. Or... was she walking? It looked almost as if... Realizing that Betsy was indeed floating slightly off the floor, she quickly redirected her attention to the two men in front of her.

"I don't know where Superman is," she said defiantly, even if at this moment she had a pretty good idea of exactly where he was.

"We searched the computer in your apartment and at the Daily Planet and there was nothing there. But you know. You know exactly what happened to Superman, don't you?" Griffin said. "Now... I figure even if Superman has disappeared as far as the rest of the world is concerned, he'll reveal himself if you're in danger — that is if he's still on the Earth. And when he shows up..." Griffin held up the camera.

"What makes you think that Superman can be frozen by your light?"

"In your story about Dr. Leit, you said a Dr. Faraday had invented a device that inputs knowledge into your brain by flashing a light into your eyes. And you said it had been used on you."

"So?" Lois asked, wondering if they also knew that Dr. Leit had an invention that had blinded Superman from her notes as well. She thought she'd been careful, but... Did they know Superman was blind?

"On your computer at work, we found a comment about shortening the light waves to affect Superman — so I take it knowledge was added to Superman's mind as well. Not exactly a good thing — Superman having even more knowledge in that over-developed muscle he calls a brain, but the information was good for us. We were able to modify the flash to shorten the light waves."

Lois let out a breath of relief. They'd simply assumed the

same device which had been used on her had been used on Superman. So they didn't know Superman was blind. On the other hand, given what they'd learned, they may well have invented something which could freeze Superman. But... could it freeze a blind Superman?

"So, yes, we think our flash will freeze Superman."

"So... what? You want me to yell 'help, Superman?'" Lois asked in disbelief. "Even if Superman is still around, do you really think he's going to hear me all the way from Metropolis?"

"She's got a point there," Victor said, seeming to perk up at the idea that they might need to take her back to Metropolis with them.

"Shut up, Victor," Griffin responded. Obviously, he hadn't thought of that issue.

"In fact, why don't I make it easy for you," Lois said, before yelling, "Help, Superman!" at the top of her lungs.

At that moment, Betsy seemed to walk between her and her captors. She saw Clark set Betsy down before beginning to move. Not exactly at superspeed, but far faster than a normal human could. With Betsy between him and her captors, he was visible only to her as he felt his way across the floor to her chair to free both her hands and feet from their bindings.

A moment later, she watched as two things happened. Clark, flying low to the ground and therefore remaining below Griffin and Victor's field of vision, and using his hands to feel his way back out of the barn, disappeared out the door as her captors began trying to push an obstinate cow out of their way.

"Shoot the cow," Victor said in a panic. "She's attacking."

"Don't be ridiculous. Cows don't attack."

Before Lois could move off the chair, though, Griffin got around the cow. Staying perfectly still, she hoped he didn't realize that her hands and feet were now free.

"What's going on in here?"

A new voice entering the conversation directed everyone's eyes towards the barn door. Clark had walked in, a baseball cap pulled low over his forehead, leaving his eyes — and the fact that he was blind — hidden from Griffin and Victor.

"Kent!" Griffin exclaimed, instantly raising the camera. He took a picture and a bright yellow flash went off in Clark's direction.

Clark froze in mid-step. Lois' eyebrows crinkled. Had the machine actually worked on him or was he bluffing?

Either way, with Griffin looking towards Clark and Victor walking closer to him, now was her chance. Jumping up out of her chair, she tackled Griffin. The camera crashed to the ground, pieces flying everywhere, as the gun skidded across the floor of the barn. In the corner of her eye, she saw Victor turn back towards her and as he did, Clark tackled him.

"So these two guys are on America's most wanted list?" Rachel Harris, Smallville's Sheriff, asked sometime later as she walked over to where Victor and Griffin were tied up on the floor of the barn.

"That's right. They both escaped from Strykers Island Penitentiary a couple weeks ago," Clark said.

Lois looked over at him. With his sunglasses on, and his use of his superhearing to keep looking and moving in the appropriate directions, there was no way to tell that he was blind. At least, Rachel didn't seem to notice anything was wrong.

Rachel motioned for a couple of her deputies and they immediately began scooping up the captives.

"Why is it that men with guns show up whenever you two come to town?" she asked as Griffin and Victor were escorted out of the barn.

"Trask and his men came to Smallville before we arrived," Lois pointed out.

Rachel laughed. "Okay, true enough. So what are you doing

here, anyway? Come home to get your parents' blessing on your engagement?"

Lois immediately felt color rise in her cheeks and ducked her head as she pushed a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Not yet," Clark said.

Surprised, Lois turned to him. What was he suggesting? Was he saying that it was only a matter of time before he asked her to... Was he really thinking that he wanted to...

"Uhh... Well, at least this time you aren't claiming you're not together," Rachel said, interrupting Lois' spinning thoughts. "Not that I couldn't tell. Clark here was already smitten with you."

"How did you know?" Clark asked.

Rachel laughed. "Everyone in Smallville knew that, Clark." She turned to Lois. "There are no secrets in a small town."

"I guess not," Lois said even as she reflected that it seemed there was at least one secret. Or two if you counted the fact that Clark was blind.

"Anyway, I'll need both of you and Martha and Jonathan come down to the Sheriff's Office later today to give your statements."

"We'll do that, Rachel," Clark said.

Lois watched as Rachel climbed back into her SUV. Soon the Sheriff, deputies and their prisoners began to leave the property. Martha and Jonathan joined Lois and Clark as they stood there, waiting for their unwanted company to disappear into the distance.

"Are you okay?" Clark asked, hearing his parents join them.

"We're fine. All we knew was that two men came to the door, looking for you. I didn't trust how they looked. Given the camera the one guy was holding, I thought they were tabloid reporters who were trying to track down Superman," Martha said. "So I asked why they wanted to know."

"I guess that must have been enough to tell them you were here," Jonathan said, picking up the story.

"Next thing we knew the one with the camera had raised it. I heard a click and then there was a blast of light. The next thing I knew Rachel had arrived. Are you two okay?" Martha concluded.

"Fine," Lois said.

"Except now we have to go down to the Sheriff's Office to give our statements," Clark said.

"What's the problem?" Lois asked. "Between using your powers and the sunglasses, Rachel didn't have a clue you were blind."

"Here."

"What?" Martha asked, confused.

"Here. On the farm. If I'm trying to act as if I'm not blind in a building I don't know... And given that they just built the new Sheriff's Office... It's never going to work."

"And then that begs the question of why you didn't tell her you were blind when she was here earlier today," Lois concluded.

"That's a good point," Jonathan said.

"So how do you want to handle it?" Martha asked.

"I have an idea. Lois, you said something about creating some sort of accident where Clark is blinded. Problem is that other than being blinded, I can't be hurt. How would something like that happen?"

"Welder's flash," Martha said immediately.

"What?" asked Jonathan.

"Well... it's a flash of light that can affect your eyes when you're welding. Problem is that it usually clears up in a few days and only in the most serious cases does it actually blind you. But it can be more serious. One problem though... We probably should call Dr. Scott. It will be almost impossible to sell that you've been blinded by a welder's flash if we haven't at least called a doctor."

"I guess it's your call, son," Jonathan said.

Clark turned his head towards where he knew Lois was standing. "What do you think?"

"If welder's flash can clear up on its own, it would certainly

explain if you suddenly get your vision back without any sort of intervention," she said. "And I doubt a doctor would be able to tell you're Superman just from examining your eyes. And with the current stubble on your face... Just don't shave before he arrives and you should be fine."

Clark thought for a moment more before nodding. "Okay, let's get your welding stuff out, make it look as if I was in the process of using it. And then we'll call Dr. Scott."

Lois watched through the window as Martha and Jonathan chatted with Dr. Scott next to his shiny new pickup truck. Did everyone in Smallville drive pickups? She supposed it made sense, though, since he'd taken some milk, eggs, preserves and fire wood in payment for his services. She'd heard about such things, but to actually see it was entirely different.

She'd also been surprised to discover that there were still doctors in the country who made house calls. Still, it had certainly been handy that they hadn't had to all traipse off to town to see the good doctor.

Dr. Scott had been quick to admit that he wasn't exactly an expert in the field of welding flashes — which has suited their purposes fine. He'd seen a few in his time, but nothing as serious as this. But when he'd been concerned enough by Clark's complete loss of vision to insist that Clark immediately go to a hospital in Wichita to be examined, the entire family had banded together to dissuade him of that notion.

Only when Lois said that they were supposed to return to Metropolis in the morning had Dr. Scott relented. However, he'd insisted that Clark keep his eyes protected from any light until he had been seen by an expert in Metropolis. He'd treated Clark's eyes, covering them with gauze, given Clark some pain medication and promised to call Clark with the names of some experts in Metropolis as soon as he got back to his office.

Clark slipped in behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist. She sighed and leaned back into him.

"What are you thinking?" Clark asked.

"I was just wishing you really were coming back to Metropolis with me tomorrow," she said softly.

"You know, I've been thinking about that."

She turned in his arms, searching his face for some sign of his meaning. She was faintly surprised to discover that he'd already removed the gauze Dr. Scott had put over his eyes. She supposed she understood. After all, since his regenerative powers came from the sun, he wanted to get as much sunlight on them as possible — regardless of the doctor's orders. She shook her head slightly but said nothing as Clark continued to speak.

"Dr. Scott will never say anything to anyone about my being blind. He takes doctor patient confidentiality very seriously — a characteristic essential in a small town doctor," Clark began. "But at this point, we need to ask Rachel to come back here to take my statement. As soon as I do, people will begin to find out. As Rachel said, there are no secrets in a small town." As if he could see Lois' raised eyebrows, he continued, "Okay, maybe there are one or two secrets, at least in this small town. Still... everyone will soon know that I'm blind. And Dr. Scott isn't going to let me get away without going somewhere for treatment so..."

"...returning to Metropolis might be your only option," Lois completed for him.

He nodded. "But that's not the only reason I'm thinking that maybe I should go back." He paused and she waited for him to continue. "I learned something today that's making me reevaluate my position."

"Which is...?"

"Okay, well, I learned a couple of things. First... Lois, last night was incredible. And I guess I realized that it's going to kill me to lose you."

That earned him a quick kiss.

"But I'm not naive enough to think you could continue to stay here long term. You weren't meant to be a farmer's wife. I wouldn't even ask that of you. So if I want you in my life... Want to see where this will go... I guess that means returning to Metropolis." This time he was the one leaning in for a kiss.

"You said you learned two things," Lois said when he drew away. "What's the second?"

"Thanks to Griffin and Victor, I learned today that I'm not entirely useless. Maybe Superman can't save the day, but Clark Kent still seems to have a trick or two up his sleeve."

She smiled fully at this. "I never doubted that."

"So, anyway... speaking of details..." Clark said.

They hadn't been, but Lois let that particular detail pass.

"I gave up my apartment when I came back to Smallville," Clark continued. "Do you know of any place I could stay, at least until I get back on my feet?"

"I think my mother is looking for a boarder," Lois responded without missing a beat, then squealing when he grabbed her and tossed her easily onto the couch before beginning to tickle her. She wondered briefly how he'd known he was throwing her on the couch, but the question was lost as she attempted to protect herself.

Still, it didn't take long for the humor to fade and the passion between them to rise to the surface. Only Jonathan clearing his throat in the doorway reminded them that they weren't exactly alone. Still, neither minded the interruption as both remembered their unfulfilled promise of a trip to the hayloft.

Fade To Black

"Courage is not just one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point." — C.S. Lewis

Episode Two Testing Point

The wind practically tore the door from Lois' hand as she pulled it open. Fighting the unexpected gust of air, she held on tight long enough for Clark to follow her inside the lobby of her apartment building. When the door finally closed behind them, she stomped the snow off her feet and shook it out of her hair and coat. Surely the beginning of March should have somewhat more hospitable weather.

"The perfect end to the perfect day," she muttered under her breath.

She felt Clark give her shoulder a comforting squeeze although he did not respond verbally. He was feeling it, too, she knew.

'Time to spare; go by air.' She wasn't entirely sure where she'd heard that expression, but it certainly applied to their trip home today. They should have been safely back at her apartment hours ago. But storms were playing havoc with flight schedules throughout the country. Top that off with Clark's irrational fear of flying — how could Superman be afraid of flying? — and his frustration with trying to find his way, even with her assistance, around the loud and crowded terminals, had made for one hell of a day.

She went to push the button for the elevator, but stopped in mid-motion when she saw the 'Out Of Order' sign taped to the door.

"Uggh!"

"What?" Clark asked.

"We're going to have to use the stairs." She hoisted her travel bag further onto her shoulder as she turned towards the stairway.

"Lois, wait," Clark said. When she looked back at him, he reached forward, his hand finding her shoulder and then slipping under the strap he found there to remove the travel bag.

"It's okay, Clark," she said. He was, after all, already carrying three very large suitcases to her single, small travel bag.

"Lois," he said softly.

"Oh, right," she said, suddenly remembering who her travel companion was. Four suitcases weren't exactly a challenge for the man she'd seen holding up a collapsing stairway when the Daily Planet had been bombed or who had broken up an asteroid with his bare hands. Feeling almost foolish, she surrendered her travel bag before pushing open the door to the stairway.

"I should bring you along to carry bags the next time Lucy and I go on one of our impulse shopping trips," she said tiredly as she began the slow trudge up the steps, taking Clark's arm to assist him in making the trip.

Finally arriving at the door of her apartment, she looked at it in dismay. Yellow police tape, clearly stating 'Crime Scene Do Not Cross,' was across the door.

She was certain that the tape must be left over from when the police had investigated after Griffin's break in. What she should do was call Inspector Henderson, but at nearly one o'clock in the morning, it was highly unlikely that Henderson would be at the station.

She glanced briefly at Clark — Mr. Law and Order.

"What?" he asked when she hesitated.

"Nothing," she decided, tearing the tape off the door.

"Lois?" Clark asked cautiously.

"Nothing, Clark," she said again as she pulled out her keys and began unlocking the door. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him... or her in this case since he'd likely insist they go talk to her landlord, call the police, stay at a motel. And all because some rookie cop had forgotten to take down the police tape after their investigation.

She briefly wondered how Jimmy had got in, given the police tape, when he'd come over to clean up, before dismissing the thought. Undoubtedly, he'd just slipped under the tape. Or carefully removed one end, fastening it again as he left.

She stepped inside and looked around. Two full garbage bags sat by the door, next to a broken frame and a broken chair. She sighed. It appeared that although Jimmy had tidied up somewhat, there were a number of things that simply could not be cleaned. She looked at the spot on the wall, clearly outlined by faded paint, where the missing picture had been, and sighed.

"What is it, Lois?" Clark asked, stepping in behind her, closing the door and then turning to tend to the locks.

She shook her head as she shrugged out of her coat and then sat down to remove her boots. "Nothing." She couldn't deal with this tonight. "I'm just tired."

"Are you sure you don't mind me staying here?" he asked as he pulled off his coat.

"What? No. Of course not," she responded immediately, even if his comments gave her some second thoughts about this. Never had she lived with a man. And although she loved Clark and thought of him as her best friend, they'd only spent two nights together before now — and on both occasions, they'd spent most of the night using the bed for something other than sleeping. Wasn't it a little too soon even to be contemplating living together?

No, she was being crazy. He was her best friend. And she couldn't stand the thought of him not being here. She was just having some last minute cold feet. Nothing to worry about.

She took his coat and with hers, simply tossed both over the edge of a nearby chair.

But... how did this work when she wanted nothing more than to sleep? That was another thing she'd never done before — sleep with a man without having sex. Not that she'd spent the night with many men. Only one, other than Clark, in fact. And that man had used the occasion to steal her story and slip out in the middle of the night.

Not that Clark would do that. Still, it felt funny knowing that Clark would be spending the night without... Well, just without.

"I could sleep on the couch," he suggested as he removed his boots.

Her eyes immediately went to the piece of furniture in question — almost as if hoping that it had magically transformed into a hide-a-bed during her absence. "No, that's crazy," she said emphatically. She waited until he had removed his boots before taking his hand to bring him further into the apartment. "We'll work everything out tomorrow," she said. "For now... Do you want a quick tour of the place so that you can find your way around?"

He let out a breath of relief. "Yes, please," he said, seeming to relax.

She smiled slightly. It seemed he'd been as tense as she about this new situation. Realizing he was nervous, too, seemed to help somehow.

She gave him the nickel tour, helping him with figuring out where everything was. As he continued slowly working his way around the walls, mentally committing the room to memory, she took a seat on the couch.

Bang!

"Damn!" she said when the couch crumpled beneath her weight, leaving her sitting on the floor amidst the ruins of her sofa. Griffin must have sabotaged her couch, too.

"Lois, are you okay?" Clark asked, spinning towards her.

"Fine. Absolutely dandy."

Clark sighed when, after finishing up in the bathroom, he appeared in the doorway to Lois' bedroom only to hear her heart rate speed up. He briefly wondered what it was in her heart rate that told him that she was tense as opposed to excited by his return. Maybe it had more to do with the increasing agitation he'd noticed the closer they got to her apartment.

Okay, so he had also heard her muttering about feeling violated when she discovered that someone — probably Victor — had been rummaging around in her underwear drawer. He supposed that would be upsetting.

He had hoped that by wearing a t-shirt with his sleep shorts, she'd realize that he wasn't expecting anything tonight. The long, frustrating trip home had hardly been conducive to romance. He knew she was tired. He was, too, in point of fact.

He just wished she wasn't quite so uncomfortable. Maybe if he just tried to act natural, as if they had slept together for years, she'd relax. The only problem was...

"Which side of the bed are you on?" he asked. Without her talking, it was difficult to get a read on her exact position and, in this situation, he didn't want to guess wrong — afraid of making her more uncomfortable.

"What?"

By the way the bed suddenly creaked, Clark could swear she had jumped slightly on the question.

"Oh, the right side," she continued before he could ask again. "I guess I've just always slept on the right side of my bed. But I did sleep on the left side when we were at the cabin, so maybe you prefer the right side. I mean, it's not a big deal to me. So if you want the right side, I'm okay with that. Here, just let me get moved over so that you can..."

"Lois!" he said, interrupting her nervous babble. "How about I take the left side?"

"Oh. Oh, okay. Good. That's good."

Now that it was quiet again, he carefully shuffled around the bed, feeling his way along the side until he touched the pillow with his hand.

"I'll get the light," Lois said, suddenly jumping out of bed to tend to that task.

Damn. He should have thought of that. But given the fact that he didn't know if the light was on or off in the first place, it simply hadn't occurred to him. With another sigh, he pulled the covers

down and crawled into bed.

A moment later, Lois joined him.

They lay there in silence for a long moment. Suddenly curious about something, Clark stretched his hand over to Lois' side of the bed. She wasn't there. He inched it over further. Still, no Lois. Yet he could tell from her breathing and vibrations it was causing that she was in bed with him. So where was she? She had to be practically hanging off her side of the bed.

"Lois?" he asked.

"Yes?" Her voice was strained.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine."

She was anything but fine.

He let out a breath. "Would you roll over and look at me?"

She was silent for a moment. "How do you know I'm not looking at you?"

"Something about the way your voice echoes," he responded, before returning to his previous subject. "Come on, Lois. Look at me."

He held his breath until he felt her finally roll over. Then he also rolled onto his side so that they were facing each other.

"Talk to me," he said softly.

"In particle physics, the Higgs mechanism is the process in which gauge bosons in a gauge theory can acquire non-vanishing masses through absorption of Nambu-Goldstone bosons arising in spontaneous symmetry breaking.

"Argg!" Lois yelled. "These stupid Faraday leaks. They're really starting to bug me! They happen at the worst possible times. Why did Faraday have to stick this stuff in my brain when I have no way of accessing it? What point is there in inventing a device that gives me information if I can't use it? At times I almost feel possessed. I can't stand it anymore, Clark. I just can't..."

"Lois," he said softly, automatically reaching out to touch her face. He drew in a sharp breath when she actually seemed to flinch.

"I'm sorry," Lois said, her babble broken instantly by the realization that she had the hurt him. Immediately she reached out, grasping his hand as he tried to pull it back. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me." As she spoke, she moved his hand to her cheek, holding it there.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No. I want you here. I really do. If you were back in Kansas, I'd be miserable. And if you were at a hotel or something... I'd just sit here fretting about how you were doing. I just..." Her voice trailed off as if she couldn't find the words. "I'm sorry. I don't know how to explain what I'm feeling."

"Why don't you let me give it a try?"

"Please," she said, almost sounding relieved.

"You love me," Clark began.

"I do."

"But this is all so new. You don't know what I expect and you're afraid of disappointing me. It's only been two days since we admitted our feelings for each other and suddenly, we're living together. And you're feeling... unsure."

"Not about us. Never about us. But..."

"Lois, under normal circumstances, we wouldn't even be talking about moving in together, let alone doing it. You haven't had time to get used to the idea yet and you're afraid that we're pushing things too fast."

"Yes! That's it exactly. How did you know?"

"Because I feel exactly the same."

"You do?"

He nodded. "Lois, we've never even been on a proper date. You know, where we change our clothes a dozen times before the date even starts. I'd finally show up wearing..."

"... a charcoal suit," she completed for him.

He smiled. "And you'd be wearing... burgundy," he said at the

same moment she said...

"Violet." Then, realizing what he'd said, she continued, "Burgundy? That's what you've always dreamed of seeing me in? I don't have much in burgundy, but I suppose I could go shopping for... Not that you would actually be able to see it so maybe I could just pretend I was wearing burgundy. Oh, wait! That sounded insensitive, didn't it? I'm sorry, Clark, sometimes I talk before I think and..."

"Lois," Clark said softly, interrupting her babble. "So do you want to hear about the rest of our date?" he asked. When he felt her nod, he continued, "Well, let's see... we'd probably go out to an expensive restaurant or something."

"You wouldn't take me to a show or concert or something first?" she asked.

He began to breathe easier when he heard the whimsy enter her voice. "I don't think so. After finally getting you to agree to a date, I'm not sure I'd want to be stuck in some noisy environment where we could hardly hear ourselves think — let alone each other."

"Like a Pearl Jam concert?"

"Exactly! No, I'd want something quiet, intimate. A place where we could just relax and get to know each other better. Besides, I'd probably end up getting the tickets for a Pearl Jam concert from a scalper who would likely gouge me for a small fortune only to have to give them to Jimmy because we'd have to work that evening or something."

"So instead you'd take me out somewhere for supper."

He nodded.

"Would you fly me there?"

"Well, no. You wouldn't know about Superman yet, so it would have to be local."

She nodded. "But after you finally told me about Superman?"

"Then we'd have gone... anywhere you wanted."

She sighed. "Paris in the spring. I would have liked to see Paris in the spring." She sighed again.

"I'd like to be able to take you there," he said wistfully.

"Oh, no, Clark. I wasn't trying to make you feel bad. I was just... Besides, there's no reason we can't go to Paris sometime. It just means we'd have to save up for it — the way ordinary people do — the way I always imagined I'd have to do with Clark."

"You imagined us taking vacations together?"

"Where do you think all those great fantasies I had about you took place — in exotic locations, of course."

He smiled, not daring to pursue that tantalizing remark — not when she had been so skittish when he'd first climbed into bed.

"Okay, so you're taking me to an expensive local restaurant. What would happen then?" Lois asked.

"Well... after eating our meal, you'd decline dessert because you wouldn't want me to know about your sweet tooth. Of course, I know you far too well to be fooled by that." He could feel her smile under his hand. "So I'd order something sinfully chocolate only to have you wondering why they didn't bring two forks. Maybe I'd get bold and actually offer you some off my fork — and then break out in a sweat when you'd close your eyes and moan the way you always do when you consume chocolate. Then I'd walk you home and kiss you at the door before saying goodnight." He stroked her face tenderly as he spoke, more in a reassuring manner than in any way that was remotely sexual.

"Knowing me, I'd probably panic and slam the door in your face," she said.

"You forget who you're talking to. I'd probably not realize the door was closed and walk right through it," he responded.

Under his hand, he could feel her face transform into another smile as she began to relax.

She commandeered his hand to kiss his fingers. "So what do we do? How do we not... ruin this thing between us?"

"I've got a couple suggestions."

"Which are?"

"Lois, you have to realize you always have the right to say no." He brought her hand over to his lips, confident now that she wouldn't pull away, and kissed it softly before continuing. "It's important that you understand that. Just because we've already passed that... particular intimacy threshold doesn't mean that we ever have to again." His hand returned to her face and he could tell that her eyebrows had gone up. "Don't get me wrong," he rushed to add. "I'm hoping with all my heart that I'm just speaking in theoretical terms here."

She giggled.

"But I never want you to feel as if you have to make love to me because somehow it's expected or to please me."

"So if I say I'm too tired tonight..."

"I'm going to say it's been a long, stressful day."

"You're not going to be mad or disappointed."

"Well, I can't say I'll never be disappointed, but I won't be mad."

She let out a long, slow breath. "Thank you, Clark."

"Hey, don't thank me. It goes both ways. Sometimes I might not feel like making love."

"But I still have the right to try to get you to change your mind, right?"

He crinkled his eyebrows together. "Why do I think there's a definite double standard here?"

"Because there is," she said with a girlish giggle that came close to getting his blood to boil.

He suddenly had a disconcerting feeling that she was probably right. Changing his mind was not likely ever to be much of a problem for her.

"And second?" Lois asked.

"What?" he asked, trying to force his mind back from where it was slowly stripping every scrap of clothing from her body.

"You said you had two ideas about how we could make this work."

"Right. Lois, what are you doing with Lucy's old room?"

"I'm using it for storage. Why?"

"What would you say if we cleaned it out and I moved in there for now?"

"But..."

"It would give you some space and yet, at this point in time, until I get my bearings, staying here would really help me. I'd chip in with rent and stuff."

"So we'd be... roommates?"

"Sort of."

"I don't understand. Are you saying you don't want to live with me?"

"No! No, that's not it at all. But it would allow us to sort of... ease into it."

She was silent for a long moment — so long he was starting to worry him. "Lois?" he asked.

"So we'd sleep in separate rooms?"

"Only when we choose to."

"And when we don't choose to?"

"Then we wouldn't have to."

"No, Clark. That's crazy. It might be strange... thinking about us living together. And I might not always react to everything appropriately, but I really do want us to live together."

Clark smiled. "Then that's what we'll do."

"But you do have a good idea about Lucy's old room. We could move her old dresser in here and put my desk in there.

Maybe we could even get you a desk. There's a storage space in the basement that goes with the apartment. We could move the stuff in Lucy's room down there. Maybe it would make this place seem more like our place instead of you moving into my place. But that doesn't mean we couldn't go on dates and stuff, does it?"

"I promise... we can go on as many dates as you want.

However, if you do slam the door in my face, I should warn you that I'll just take out my key and come in anyway."

She shifted closer, reaching out to play with his t-shirt, sounding suddenly playful. "You would, would you?"

"Absolutely."

She giggled, even as she slipped her hands under the edge of his t-shirt.

"Lo-is," he warned as her hands began sliding over his stomach.

"Yes, Clark?" she asked, her voice a mixture of playfulness and sexuality. Gone completely was the skittish woman he'd climbed into bed with.

He pulled in a breath through his teeth when her hands became even more daring. Unable to resist, he pulled her to him, her body soft and receptive in his arms as his lips found hers. For some reason, all of a sudden didn't feel tired — nor, by the enthusiasm with which she was responding, did she.

'Welcome home,' he thought to himself as his hands slipped beneath her nightie. Because one thing he was learning very quickly was that wherever she was, that was home. Whether it was his cabin in Kansas or her apartment in Metropolis.

Lois woke to the smell of coffee as the early morning light seeped through the window of her bedroom. A smile crept across her face as she realized that Clark must have woken up before her and was currently in the kitchen, ensuring she had her favorite morning stimulant.

"Morning," Clark said from the doorway. She looked over to see Clark standing there, holding a cup of coffee.

"Morning," she responded. He began walking towards her, carrying the coffee. When she'd first arrived in Smallville, that was a sight that would have made her nervous. Her mind flashed back to the difficulty he'd had when she'd handed him a cup of coffee on her first morning in Smallville — fumbling around to find the table, causing her to flinch at how close he was coming to spilling the coffee. Now his steps were sure and his grasp on the coffee secure.

She sat up in bed, fixing the sheet around her, not entirely certain why since he couldn't see her, as he arrived next to the bed. "Thank you," she said, reaching out to take the coffee from him.

He leaned over and gave her a kiss, lingering slightly.

"No, thank you," he responded when the kiss broke.

She didn't misunderstand him, or the sexual undertones in his voice, as evidenced by the increase of color in her cheeks.

"You're so cute when you blush," he said.

"Okay, there is no way you could possibly know that," she objected.

"I know you," he responded before turning back to the door.

She could hardly argue with that — especially since he was right.

"Intimately," he added when he arrived at the door.

The color in her cheeks increased. He'd been a terrible tease before they had become lovers, often leaving her off balance. He was bound to be even worse now. It was new — being with a guy who was not afraid to tease her, especially in such a personal way. She was sort of enjoying this. Grabbing his pillow, she threw it at him.

Her eyebrows flew up in surprise when he reached out and caught the pillow. He grinned at her, tossing the pillow back on the bed before turning to leave the room.

Now, how had he done that? She'd have sworn that pillow had been silent as it flew through the air. Obviously not since Clark had heard it. Her mind flashed back to when they had been investigating the Metro Club. When he'd dropped her into a dumpster, she'd thrown something at him then, too. She couldn't remember exactly what. A cabbage, she thought. He'd caught it in much the same way — without even seeing it. Still, he really had

come a long way in the past couple of weeks. Give him time, and he might be able to fool people into thinking he could see. That could be handy in any undercover work they did in the future.

She took a sip of her coffee, prepared just the way she liked. Everything fat free and artificial. Not that she was surprised. He'd been bringing coffee for her for almost two years.

"Oh," Clark said from kitchen. "I called Perry this morning. Told him we were back in town. He said he'd meet with me this afternoon about possibly getting my job back."

"Good, but, Clark, when I spoke to Perry, he made it pretty clear that you'd better have a good explanation for why you quit the way you did." As she spoke, she reached over to where her robe was laying across a nearby chair. Picking it up, she slipped it on and padded softly into the kitchen.

"Yeah, he made that clear when we spoke," Clark responded. "I think, though, that article we submitted about the capture of the Prankster did a lot to smooth his ruffled feathers."

She stood in the kitchen doorway, sipping her coffee, watching as he made toast. He must have found the half loaf of bread she'd stuck in the freezer to keep it from going moldy when she left for Smallville. "So have you thought about what you're going to tell Perry?"

Clark sighed. "I've decided to tell him the truth."

"The truth?"

"You know. That Leit blinded Superman and since I'm Superman..." He shrugged.

She was silent for a long moment before responding with a simple, "I see." For reasons she couldn't quite articulate, even in her own mind, his response bothered her. Not that she didn't trust Perry. She did. But... She bit her lip to keep from responding, simply because she wasn't quite sure what was bugging her so much.

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"Why would I have a problem with it?" she asked in response, even though she had no doubt that he could tell she was having a problem.

"Lois?"

"It's nothing, Clark." She turned to leave the room. "Anyway, I better have my shower. I don't want to be late for work."

"Lois, please. Talk to me," he said causing her to turn back around.

"What's to talk about? You've decided to tell Perry. That's your decision, I guess. So it's fine." She knew her voice was stiff and formal, but she could hardly help that.

"Are you upset because I didn't talk this over with you before deciding to tell Perry?"

Suddenly what had been bugging Lois about his pronouncement crystallized in Lois' mind. "Yes, Clark, actually I am."

"Do you have a better idea?"

"No, I don't, but that might be because you never discussed it with me. You simply decided. What does Lois' opinion matter? I've made a decision. End of discussion." Her voice had risen slightly during the final sentences.

"So what are you saying?" Clark asked, his voice sounding slightly agitated now. "That because we're..." He gestured between the two of them.

"Together, Clark. I think that's the word you're looking for. That is... if we are together."

He refused to take the bait. "That because we are together," he said firmly, "I have to discuss everything I do with you."

"I don't give a damn whether you put peanut butter or honey on your toast, Clark. You can put both on it for all I care. But when you make decisions that could affect us, then, yeah, I want to be consulted."

"How does me telling Perry my secret affect us?"

"That's just it, Clark. If we're together, then it's not just *your*

secret anymore. It's *our* secret! Don't you get that? If the world finds out, it will damn well affect me, too."

"So are you saying you don't want me to tell Perry?"

"That's not what I'm saying at all, and you know it! I'm saying I want to discuss it." She let out a frustrated growl. "Now, before I say something I'll regret, I'm going to have my shower." She turned and left the room, abandoning the half consumed cup of coffee on the table behind her.

Clark sat quietly at the kitchen table the entire time Lois was in the shower. His toast sat forgotten on the counter, covered with neither peanut butter nor honey.

Lois was right. At first, he'd tried to convince himself that she wasn't. Problem was, and what Lois didn't know and would absolutely send her into orbit, and rightfully so, if she did, was that he had called his parents this morning, after talking to Perry, to run the issue past them. He couldn't even imagine contemplating telling someone without giving his parents a chance to provide some input. It was their secret, too.

So why hadn't it even occurred to him to consult Lois?

His parents, of course, had simply said that he should do what he felt was right. They knew and trusted Perry. And if he felt he needed to tell Perry, they would stand by his decision.

But, Lois... Why hadn't he talked to Lois?

He could find no reason he considered acceptable for that oversight. It wasn't as if he'd considered and then rejected the idea. The truth was that it simply hadn't occurred to him.

Hearing her getting ready to come out of the bathroom, he rose from the table, moving to a spot in front of the bathroom just as the door opened.

"I'm sorry," he said as instantly.

"Forget it, Clark," Lois responded even as she attempted to brush past him.

He reached out, his hand on her arm stopping her forward motion. "Don't do this, Lois."

"Do what? I'm not doing anything. You made a decision. It's fine."

"No, Lois. It's not fine. It's just..." His voice trailed off when he was unable to find the words to express himself.

"Just what, Clark?"

"Will you..." He gestured towards the kitchen. "Just sit down with me for a minute. Give me a chance to make this right?"

For a moment she was silent as she considered his question. Finally, he heard her let out a breath. He suspected she had nodded, too, although he couldn't see it, because a moment later, she walked past him into the kitchen. The sound of the chair on the floor informed him that she had taken a seat.

The quality of her silence made it obvious to Clark that she was sitting up straight in her chair, stiffly waiting for him to talk. The time in the shower had done nothing to calm her anger.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, before proceeding to find a seat of his own. She was hearing him out, but he knew he'd better make this good. "You're right," he began, hoping making that admission up front would help thaw the ice he could feel building up in the room. "It isn't just my secret anymore. It's yours, too. And I should have talked to you. Will you talk to me about it now?"

"Why didn't you talk to me before?" she asked instead of answering his question.

He let out a breath. It was the question he'd been asking himself since she'd left to have her shower and he still didn't have a satisfactory answer. "I'm new to this, Lois," he finally said.

"New to what?"

"All of it. I've never had anyone, other than my parents, who I could talk to about Superman. Having someone else know is new to me. And this..." He gestured between them. "I've never been in a serious relationship before either. Don't get me wrong. I've

dated. But nothing like what we have. I guess I'm still trying to figure out how to make this work." He fell silent then, hoping it was enough. It was, after all, all he had to offer.

Her hand coming to rest on his caused him to close his eyes in relief.

"This is new to me too, Clark," she said softly. "But I won't be marginalized. Not even by Superman. I won't be a hood ornament."

"I don't want a hood ornament. I want a partner."

She twined her fingers through his. "That's what I want too."

"So..." he continued, hoping he was safe in asking this again. "...what do you think I should tell Perry?"

At first, when she didn't respond, he thought she was still upset with him. But once she started talking, he realized she'd just been thinking.

"Could you just stick with the idea that there was an emergency at the farm and your folks needed you?"

"That's what I put in my letter of resignation," he said. "But I really hate lying, Lois." Since he could imagine her reaction to that, considering all the times he'd lied to her over the past couple years, he quickly continued. "Yeah, I know how that sounds, but..."

"Actually, I do understand, Clark."

"So what do you want me to do? I supposed I could just look for a different job."

"No. You belong at the Daily Planet." She paused. "Okay, well, we've now put out the story that Clark Kent was blinded by a welding accident in Smallville a few days ago. We've even got medical records to back that up. So we have to stick with that as the official story. Besides, even if people don't know that Superman was blinded, Clark Kent being blinded at the same time that Superman left the city is a coincidence that I doubt we want to risk. But as to what exactly to tell Perry... Why don't you just play it by ear — see how it goes?"

"Play it by ear?"

"Yes. Maybe... he'll be so distracted by the fact you were blinded in an accident on the farm that he won't press too hard about your reasons for leaving."

He nodded, although he doubted she was right. "And if he doesn't...?"

"Then you should do what you need to do," she said. "And if that means Perry finds out the truth... I guess I can accept that."

Clark smiled, squeezing her hand by way of thanks. Some might think she hadn't given him a solution, but in a way she had. His course was no longer simply to tell Perry the whole truth, but to feel Perry out. To see if something other than the full truth would suffice. It was worth thinking about.

Clark stepped onto the sidewalk in front of the Metropolis Center for the Blind when he heard Lois' Jeep pull to a stop in front of the building. There was a quality about the Jeep... or maybe it was just the way she drove it, that he couldn't help but recognize. He wanted to come here before going into the Daily Planet to meet with Perry. Since she didn't have the morning off, she'd agreed to pick him up here at noon.

His hand went to his new watch as Lois emerged from her vehicle. Feeling it, he could tell it was about five minutes after twelve.

Formerly known as the Luthor Center for the Blind — one of Lex Luthor's many pet charities — the board of directors had decided that a change of name was necessary to put some distance between them and their infamous founder. Coming here had been quite enlightening.

He'd avoided the sunglasses they had for sale since most of them were designed to help keep out as much light as possible — having been created primarily for people who, although blind, felt pain from too much exposure to the sun. Since Clark wanted as

much exposure to the sun as possible and felt no pain, he'd decided that his own sunglasses, which he'd had for years, would suffice as a disguise.

Still, the people at the MCB had been very helpful. They'd showed him how to properly use a white cane as well as introducing him to a number of other items to assist him in coping with his condition.

"How'd it go?" Lois asked before leaning in for a kiss.

"Good. Like the new watch?" He reached out and found her hand, moving it to feel his watch. "It's called a 'feel the time' watch." He moved her finger. "This is the hour." He moved her finger again. "And this is the minute. And I can tell by this that you're about five minutes late."

Lois laughed.

"You also got a white cane, I see," she said as she opened the Jeep's back door so he could place his purchases inside.

He smiled. "They even helped me learn how to use it."

"What else did you get?"

"Lots of things."

"Like?"

"A Braille phone book," he said by way of example.

"Hey, that's great. But I didn't know you could read Braille."

"Learned it years ago — when I was living in Nigeria. They were looking for someone to teach Braille and since I pick up languages easily, I volunteered. I got some other stuff too." He leaned over and picked up a couple of very full bags of stuff from the sidewalk next to him. "Like a phone with Braille on it. And a Braille alarm clock."

"Why would you need a Braille alarm clock? You're not deaf."

"Braille on the buttons so that I can set the clock and the alarm. Also, so that I can read what time it is."

"Uhh... Definitely things you're going to need, then, especially if Perry lets you come back to the Planet. So are you ready to head over to CostMart? I'd like to look at sofas and maybe pick up a desk for you."

"Why not just see if you can get your sofa fixed?"

"I don't think that's likely — given the damage Griffin did to it. Besides, I was thinking that if you're living with me... It might be nice to have a comfortable place where we can sit and... you know..."

"...cuddle?"

By the quality of the silence that met his declaration, he was certain he'd made her blush.

"Is that okay?" she asked tentatively.

"Hey, you want to have another place for us to make out... and you think I'm going to have a problem with that?"

That earned him a playful swat.

"So you ready to go?" Lois asked.

"Actually, before we go... I'm wondering if you'd come in here with me for a minute. I want to show you something."

"Sure," Lois said, taking his arm to guide him back into the building.

"Oh, I don't know about this," Lois said skeptically when the proposal was put to her. "The apartment is awfully small. And it doesn't allow pets."

She glanced over at Clark who was nibbling on his lower lip. He seemed to be trying not to influence her decision, but the hang-dog look on his face following her words gave him away. This was obviously something he really wanted.

"As far as your apartment not allowing pets... The Fair Housing Act requires that guide dogs be an exemption to any no pet rules," the woman at the Center said. "Guide dogs are very well trained," the woman went on to explain. "And they're gentle. You'll find he quickly becomes a member of the family."

Lois looked again at the fox-colored dog sitting obediently at

Clark's side. She'd never been much of a dog person — or an animal person of any kind. Still... "What's his name?"

"Shadow," Clark responded.

He didn't look much like a shadow to Lois, but she crouched down until she was on the same level as the dog. "Come here, Shadow," she said. The dog looked at her but didn't move. "He doesn't seem that well trained to me."

"That's because he's on the harness," the woman said. "Right now, he's working. If he was off the harness, he'd come to you." "He's working, huh?"

The woman nodded. "Why don't you give her a demonstration, Mr. Kent?"

Clark nodded and proceeded to do just that. It was fascinating to watch as man and dog worked together to navigate the obstacle course in the large room. Not once did Shadow direct his master wrong. He pulled Clark to a halt as he was about to step off an edge or if a barrier above his head was too low. And Lois had to admit, Clark looked as if he was having fun.

"Okay, well, let me meet him," Lois finally said, her heart softening even further at the large smile that appeared on Clark's face.

Clark crouched down and clicked Shadow's harness off him.

"Come here, Shadow," Lois said again. This time Shadow bounded over to her, his tongue lolling off to one side. Lois felt a rush of nerves as the dog got closer, afraid the animal was about to jump up on her. Still, Shadow came to a stop a few feet in front of her, carefully walking the rest of the way. It seemed that he, too, was nervous.

Reaching out cautiously, Lois carefully patted the dog's head. "That's a good dog," she said nervously. And then the unexpected happened. It almost seemed that Shadow's mouth stretched into a smile.

"He smiled at me," Lois gasped in surprise.

The woman nodded. "Yes. Some dogs smile."

"Why?"

"For much the same reason humans do."

Lois crouched down and Shadow shifted closer, looking up at Lois with those big brown puppy dog eyes. Lois let out a breath as she continued to stroke the soft fur of the animal. "So you want to come live with us, hey?" she asked.

Shadow turned her head and licked Lois' hand. "Okay, now that's something that's going to take some getting used to," Lois said, holding her hand away from herself.

The woman handed her a wipe to clean her hand and Shadow looked chagrined. "Oh no," Lois quickly said to Shadow. "It's okay. I know that was just your way of saying..." She looked up at the woman. "What was he trying to say?"

"That he likes you."

"Really?" Lois looked back at the dog, her final defenses disappearing as she looked into that cute face once more. Letting a sigh escape, she rose to her feet. "So... you want a guide dog," she said, looking at Clark.

"He'd be really good, Lois. I'd be the one taking him for walks and everything. You wouldn't have to worry about him at all. I'd..."

"Clark," Lois said, busting into his babble, "you can get him. So pay for him or whatever you have to do and let's get going. We still need to go to CostMart."

"It's not quite that simple," the woman said.

"What? Is he not available? Why would you show us a dog that's already promised to someone else?" Lois asked.

"No, Lois," Clark said, interrupting Lois. "It's just that I can't take him with me right now."

"Why not?"

"He's finished his training," the woman said. "But Mr. Kent here still needs to be trained."

A grin quirked at the edge of Lois' mouth. "I've been working

on that," she said, provoking a smile out of the woman and a blush out of Clark.

"Mr. Kent will have to come here and train with Shadow for a while before he'll be able to take Shadow with him."

"I made an appointment to come back today after work," Clark said.

"Oh, you did, did you?" Lois asked, her eyebrows going up.

"Subject to your approval on letting me get him," Clark quickly added.

Lois shook her head in amusement as she wondered if Martha had ever been able to deny a young Clark anything. After all, how could anyone deny that face anything? His children would likely have the same effect on her.

That thought brought her up short, killing the enjoyment of the moment. They'd never talked about children. Weren't even talking about marriage, for crying out loud. But... she glanced over at Clark, knowing instinctively that he'd want children. Was that something she could do? She'd caved pretty quickly over the dog issue, but... Did she even want children?

The trip to CostMart had been a little rushed due to the extra time they'd taken at the MCB. Still, they managed to order a desk and find a comfortable couch that folded out into a hide-a-bed. They arranged for delivery to take place on Friday evening. That had been perfect since the rest of Clark's stuff, which his folks were shipping, was expected to arrive on Friday.

Clark paid for the desk and chipped in for half the sofa. Lois had at first objected, saying that she was the one who wanted the new sofa, but had relented when he'd said that he planned to sit on it at least half the time. Paying for half the sofa had given Clark a small thrill. It was the first step in what he hoped would be many more of having things that weren't hers or his — but instead were theirs. He doubted the symbolism had been lost on Lois either — which was why her initial hesitation was understandable. The fact that she'd given in as quickly as she had told him that she was seeing this relationship lasting long term, too.

Lois had been a little distracted when they had left the MCB. When he'd queried as to whether she was having second thoughts about Shadow, she'd assured him that she wasn't, which was why her sudden announcement that she wasn't sure she wanted children had been something of a surprise. Where had that come from? Knowing Lois, it could have come from anywhere.

The sound of fast moving, scuffling feet distracted him from his thoughts. A moment later, someone bumped into them from behind.

"Hey!" Lois exclaimed. "Watch where you're going?"

Almost immediately, Clark was grabbed by the lapels. "A wise prince cannot and should not keep his pledge when it is against his interest to do so," the man said before releasing him and dashing off towards the exit.

"What was that?" Lois asked as the man seemed to crash through the doors and onto the street outside.

The sound of two more people running past interrupted their musings. He felt Lois' grasp on his arm tighten as she began pulling him in the same direction. He quickened his pace to keep up with her. "What's happening?" he asked.

"That's what I want to know," she said as they followed the commotion out into the parking lot.

He could hear the sounds of a struggle and felt himself tense. Not too long ago, he would have been in the middle of what was happening, in the blue and red suit demanding an explanation. Now, he couldn't even see for himself what was going on.

"Grab Mr. Smith," he heard a woman say.

"What's happening?" he asked again.

"The guy who grabbed you — the woman called him Mr. Smith — has been detained," Lois said, as she continued to lead them closer. "He's about six feet tall, older — sixty maybe. He had

dirt under his fingernails, slightly scruffy grey hair, a beard and appears to be wearing nothing more than a hospital gown.”

“And the people who stopped him?”

He heard an ambulance pulling up — one quick blast of its siren giving it away.

“A woman and a big man. The man is actually doing the detaining. He’s casually dressed and looks a little... Not sure how to describe it. I guess he looks a little like the hired muscle.”

“And the woman...”

“Five four, five five maybe. Short chopped blonde hair — done quite professionally. She’s also dressed professionally. But she’s wearing flat shoes.”

“Medical personal maybe?” Clark asked.

“Looks like it. The woman is giving the man who grabbed you a shot of something and they’re putting him in an ambulance,” she said as she continued to drag Clark closer. “What’s going on?” she asked when they were finally close enough.

“Nothing to worry about,” a woman said. Clark could hear her rustling around in her purse. “My name is Dr. Durant. I work for the Metropolis Psychiatric Hospital. This man escaped this morning. We’re just collecting him. Now, please... If you’d step back and let us do our job.”

Lois and Clark stepped back but didn’t leave, continuing to observe the proceedings — Lois with her eyes and Clark with his hearing.

“There was something very odd about that,” Lois said when they were again alone.

“You’re telling me.”

Lois turned to him. “What?” she asked.

“What he said when he grabbed me... Mr. Smith?”

“What about it?”

““A wise prince cannot and should not keep his pledge when it is against his interest to do so.” It’s a direct quote from *The Prince* by Machiavelli.”

“Why would a guy with dirt under his fingernails and wearing a hospital gown be quoting Machiavelli?” Lois asked.

“And then... When they were driving off, they said something.”

“What?”

“Well, the woman said, ‘Did you recognize that woman?’ And her accomplice said something about, ‘Yeah. That’s just what we don’t need.’”

“That woman? Did they mean me?”

Clark shook his head. “I don’t know, but...”

“...what if they recognized me and were saying that they didn’t need us looking into... whatever just happened here.” She grabbed his arm again and began dragging him towards the Jeep.

“Are they still in sight?” Clark asked. “Maybe we could follow them.”

He heard the slight rustle of hair as Lois shook her head. “No. But I got the license number on the ambulance. What about it partner? What do you say we see what we can find out about Mr. Smith? Oh and the woman’s I.D... It was from the Metropolis Psychiatric Hospital and identified her as a Dr. Sandra Durant. I think we should see what we can find out about her.”

Clark smiled. “Sounds like a plan,” he said, loving the idea of plunging, once again, into an investigation.

Perry glanced up from the papers in front of him when his newsroom suddenly went silent. Not a sound he wanted, or was used to hearing, from his reporters. Where was the chatter? Where was the hustle that told him his reporters were on top of whatever was happening in the world?

Part of his question was answered when he glanced out into the newsroom to see Lois and Clark descending the steps into the bullpen. Still... Although having Clark arrive back after a month and a half away might explain the disruption, it didn’t explain why

everyone wasn’t rushing him to say hello.

As Perry walked across his office, he noticed that Clark was holding Lois’ arm. Okay, so a public demonstration of a change to Lois and Clark’s relationship might explain some of the unexpected reluctance on the part of his reporters to approach the duo. Still, why was everyone so quiet? He’d have expected cat calls and whistles if this was because of some public declaration that the star reporting team was now something more.

It wasn’t until he arrived at the door to his office, and saw the white cane Clark was using to feel out the steps in front of him that the mystery was finally revealed. He wasn’t holding on to Lois because of a change in their relationship. He was holding onto her arm because she was helping him find his way down the stairs. In other words...

Clark was blind.

Perry grasped the doorframe of his office to steady himself as he watched Lois and Clark complete the trip down the stairs, feeling the shell shock that his reporters were obviously sharing.

“Hey, C.K., welcome back,” Jimmy said, the first to finally break the silence which had surrounded Lois and Clark’s entrance.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark responded.

“So what happened?” Jimmy asked as other reporters finally started to gather around the prodigal reporter.

“It’s a long story,” Clark said.

“Farm accident,” Lois added.

“Hey, man. That blows,” Jimmy said. “Sorry, I just...” His voice trailed off in confusion.

“It’s okay, Jimbo,” Clark said affectionately as others began to welcome him back.

Perry stood back, waiting for Clark’s colleagues to say their hellos before stepping out into the newsroom. “Okay, back to work. This is the Daily Planet not second string at the Smallville Post,” he called into the din. “You can get caught up with Kent when you’re not on Planet time.”

As people began to disburse, Perry walked over to his former star reporting team.

“Hey, don’t be dissing the Smallville Post, Chief,” Clark said.

“It’s good to see you, son,” Perry said, holding out his hand and then pulling it back awkwardly when he realized Clark couldn’t see it.

He heard Lois whisper something to Clark who immediately offered his hand. Perry rushed to take it, still experiencing that strangely uncomfortable feeling.

“Relax, Perry,” Clark said softly. “I know I’m blind.”

Perry finally smiled. “Thank you, son,” Perry said, feeling the odd tension began to dissipate. “Why don’t we go in my office and talk?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Clark said as he and Lois followed Perry to his office.

Perry’s mind was spinning. Clark was blind. Given Perry’s suspicions, he really hadn’t thought something like this was even possible. Of course, Clark’s current condition didn’t answer Perry’s question about why Clark had left the Daily Planet. Or did it? No, Lois said it was a farm accident. But... what type of farm accident could hurt... a man like Clark.

On the other hand, Clark had disappeared during Lois’ adventure with a Dr. Leit — an eye doctor. And if the man knew how to heal eyes...

Suddenly, the pieces fell into place in Perry’s mind. It made sense. In fact, it was the only thing that did. Why Clark’s parents had been the ones to collect his personal belongings from the Planet. Why Clark hadn’t come by to say good-bye to the staff. Why the reasons he’d given for his departure had seemed so unbelievable. It explained all the things that had bugged Perry following Clark’s departure.

“Have a seat, son,” Perry said as he sat down behind his desk.

“Why don’t you go back to work, Lois? Clark and I can take it from here.”

Lois said nothing as she released Clark’s arm to place his hand on the back of one of the chairs. Once that was done, she turned back to the door. But instead of leaving, she closed the door before sitting down in the chair next to Clark. She said nothing but met Perry’s eyes in a way that told him he’d pretty much need a crowbar to pry her from her position at Clark’s side. She almost reminded him of a lioness preparing to defend her wounded mate.

Well, well, well. That was an interesting development, too. There was no mistaking the fact that they were together now. He still wasn’t entirely clear, though, whether Lois knew more now about her partner than she had when she’d left for Smallville.

Still... there was a pretext to maintain and some serious questions to tackle. The game must be played.

“Lois, I thought I told you to go back to work,” Perry growled. “It’s okay, Lois,” Clark added, reaching over to squeeze her arm.

“As I understand it,” she said slowly, “you’re talking to Clark about the possibility of giving him his job back. Since he’s my partner, I think I have a right to have my opinion considered.”

Perry almost smiled. First point to Lois — and so he awarded the reporting team with the score of...

Fifteen love.

Instead of acknowledging her, though, he grunted. “Clark?” he asked.

“She has a point,” Clark said. “If you do agree to take me back, she’s the one who is going to be most affected — especially given my condition. I’d say that gives her some say. After all, she’d be saddled with a blind man for a partner.”

“Clark, we’ve already talked about this,” Lois said. “Most of what we do involves using our minds. And there is nothing wrong with your mind.”

“Whoa there, kids,” Perry said when it looked as if Clark was about to respond. “I think we’re putting the cart before the horse here. There is still the issue of Clark walking out of here without so much as a by-your-leave.”

That comment silenced both his star reporters. Score one for Perry.

Fifteen all.

“So what do you have to say for yourself, Clark?” Perry asked.

Clark shifted uncomfortably. “That I’m sorry. And that I wouldn’t have left the way I did if there was any other choice.”

“I’m afraid I need more than that,” Perry said.

Perry noticed that Lois’ hand found Clark’s. So... It seemed she did know... anything worth knowing about her partner.

“I’m sorry,” Clark finally said. “I don’t think I should say more. There are people counting on my discretion. But I can tell you that it really was the only option and I’m sorry for any problems it caused you or the paper.”

Perry grunted. He wondered for a moment whether or not to push the point. Clark hadn’t said he wouldn’t tell him — just that he didn’t think he should. He could see that Lois was chewing nervously on her lower lip as she watched him. That decided the issue in Perry’s mind. Pushing might get him more information than he wanted to know... officially at least. “Just tell me that if I decide to give you a second chance that it won’t happen again,” Perry said.

He watched as both Lois and Clark seemed to begin breathing again, confirming his suspicions that they had come in here prepared to tell him if he pushed too hard.

“It won’t, sir,” Clark said immediately.

“Okay, then let’s get down to brass tacks,” Perry said. “Tell me about your eyes. Lois said something about a farm accident?”

“Yes, sir,” Clark responded.

Perry again fought the urge to grin. Clark hadn’t lied... exactly. After all, the ‘yes, sir,’ was simply a confirmation that

Lois had made that statement. However, it certainly left the impression that he’d been blinded in some sort of farm accident. Score one to the reporting team.

Thirty fifteen.

“Is the condition permanent?” Perry asked.

“The doctor isn’t sure. My sight might come back on its own. We just don’t know.”

“Are you completely blind or do you have some sight?”

“I can’t see anything — not shadows, not even shades of light and dark.”

Perry pursed his fingertips together as he thought about that. Could Clark do the job if he was blind? Because as much as he might like Clark, the Daily Planet wasn’t paying him to put people on the payroll who couldn’t handle the job. On the other hand, if his suspicions were correct, then Clark had actually been injured while working on a story. That would have qualified him for Workers Comp — assuming Clark felt he could reveal how he had really been blinded. So didn’t the Daily Planet owe him at least a chance to prove he could do the job?

“Look, Perry,” Clark said. “I know I have some challenges to overcome. But I have some ideas about how to do that. I can read Braille and I’m going to talk to Jimmy about some computer advances I learned about today. If they work the way they’re supposed to, I think I’ll be able to handle it. I can’t promise I won’t make some mistakes. But I promise I’ll give you a hundred percent and if I can’t pull my own weight, you won’t have to fire me. I’ll hand in my letter of resignation myself.”

Perry nodded. Clark was right. He at least owed it to the young man to let him see if he could do the job — so to speak.

“Okay, then,” he said. “Let’s give it a shot.” He looked at Lois. “Am I correct in assuming you want him back as your partner?”

“Using the observed cosmic expansion conjunctively with the general theory of relativity, we can infer from the data that the further back into time one looks, the universe ought to diminish in size accordingly. However, this cannot be extrapolated indefinitely.” Lois clenched her teeth before, as calmly as she could, saying, “Yes, I want him back as my partner.”

“Okay, but if I feel like you’re carrying him, I’ll have to split you up. And, Clark, I expect you to tell me if you can’t do the job.”

“He’ll be fine, Perry,” Lois said defensively.

“Lois...” Clark said softly, reaching over to squeeze her hand.

Perry smiled at the way she instantly calmed. Clark had obviously tamed the wild-cat — as much as Lois Lane would ever be tamed by anyone, of course. Score another one to the reporting team.

Forty fifteen.

“Okay, then. But if you can’t do the job, I don’t want your resignation. I suspect we might be able to find you something you can still do. Obituaries is always looking for a good writer.”

He saw Lois and Clark both flinch and scored another one to himself.

Forty thirty.

“Now that that’s settled... Before I send you down to personnel to do the necessary paperwork, I have an assignment I want to give the two of you.”

“Something happened when we were at CostMart during the lunch hour that we want to follow up on,” Lois interrupted.

“That shouldn’t take us long, Lois,” Clark said. “I don’t see why we couldn’t do both.”

Perry smiled — loving the fact that Clark obviously wasn’t expecting to be coddled just because of his impairment. As a result, Perry instantly awarded his reporting duo...

Game, set and match.

The look of adoration Lois cast in Clark’s direction told Perry that she was thinking much the same thing even if she did mutter, “Teacher’s pet.”

Lois picked up the file Perry took out of his desk and passed over to her. "He gave me a file," she whispered to Clark.

Clark nodded.

She still wasn't sure why Perry hadn't pushed for an explanation for Clark's resignation. Not that she was about to look that particular gift horse in the mouth. Still, it bugged her that she couldn't quite figure it out. She quickly pushed her questions to the back of her mind to turn her attention to what Perry was saying.

"Steven Baker and I met each other when I was a war correspondent in Vietnam," Perry said.

Lois opened the folder to see, mixed in with some other papers, a black and white picture of several young men looking slightly disheveled but smiling for the camera. They were crowded around the open doors of a chopper. Some sitting. Some standing. Surrounding them was the paraphernalia of war — guns, vests, helmets, canteens, packs. Arms were around shoulders in an obvious demonstration of camaraderie.

"It was 1966 and I was as green as grass," Perry said. "I think I was twenty-one. I thought I was so cool — an important war correspondent. I was especially proud because I had managed to get embedded with an elite unit. Anyway, Steve was a number of years older than me and was on his second tour in Nam. For some reason, he took pity on this young kid who had more guts than brains. He would keep an eye out for me when things would get crazy.

"One night, we were dropped into a hot zone. For some reason, the entire unit got turned around. An attack from the Vietcong came before we had a chance to dig in. Guns were firing and explosions were going off all around us. And there I am, lying prone on the ground, holding my helmet on my head, hoping to live through the night, when I felt a hand grab the back of my vest, dragging me to my feet.

"It was Steve. He never said a word, just kept his grasp on my vest as he dragged me out of there, his gun firing the entire time. If it hadn't been for him, I'd have probably still been lying there when the Vietcong finally overran our position."

Lois took a closer look at the picture. She could recognize the young man in the picture as Perry — although barely and mostly because of the camera hanging around his neck. "There's a picture of a bunch of them together," Lois informed Clark before she turned her attention to Perry. "Which one is Steve?" she asked.

Perry reached across the desk and tapped the picture. Lois took a closer look at the man in question. Something about him looked vaguely familiar, but she couldn't quite bring that thought into focus. Maybe she'd seen a picture of him before.

"Why are you telling us this, Perry?" Clark asked, bringing Lois' attention back to the matter at hand.

"I lost touch with him over the years," Perry said. "So I had no idea he was even in Metropolis. Day before yesterday, I got a call from his daughter." He struggled with his next words. "Some of the guys who came back from Nam were never quite able to adjust back into society," Perry explained. "Steve was one of those. His daughter informed me that he lost his home a few years ago and was living on the streets."

It was a common story. There were a lot of unrecognized victims from that war.

"Anyway, the reason his daughter called was because apparently he went missing a few weeks ago."

"How does she know that he's missing?" Clark asked. "Maybe he just moved on to another location."

"That's what the police told her," Perry said. "When she couldn't get them to take an interest, she remembered that Steve had mentioned me from time to time over the years. Seems he would brag that saving me was one of the best things he had ever done. Apparently, he thought I'd done him proud with the stories

I'd broken over the years."

"So you want us to follow up on this?" Lois asked.

Perry nodded. "I know it's not exactly... hard news, but..."

"I think a forgotten Vietnam vet is a story worth telling, Perry," Clark said, interrupting Perry.

"So is the police ignoring a missing person's report just because the person is homeless," Lois added.

"Thanks, guys," Perry responded before shoosing Lois and Clark out of his office as gruffly as he could.

Jimmy looked up from where he was working on getting Clark's computer set up to see Lois slowly showing Clark around the newsroom. It was strange watching them. Lois was constantly talking, explaining what was around them, while Clark nodded occasionally, but rarely said anything. It was almost as if he was committing the entire room to memory.

No, that would be impossible — especially given the amount of detail Lois seemed to be supplying. But the exact purpose of the tour was lost on Jimmy. Maybe it was just to give him some orientation.

When Clark had first stepped off the elevator, Jimmy had felt a rush of anger given how Clark had left the Planet. Until he'd realized that Clark was blind. Anger had dissipated immediately as concern for his friend had surged to the forefront of his mind.

Besides, if Lois could forgive Clark, which she obviously had, how could Jimmy hold a grudge? And he had to admit, he was glad to see Lois looking so content once again. It had been painful to watch her retreat into herself. At times, she had seriously scared him, too, taking risks to get the story that were over the top even for her — as if she no longer cared what happened to her. But now... Clark had returned and it was obvious that everything was now right in Lois' world. And with that realization, his indignation had retreated permanently and Clark had received Jimmy's unconditional forgiveness.

So when Clark had come over to talk to him about setting up his computer to take into account his handicap, Jimmy had quickly picked up the challenge and run with it. The fact that Clark had apologized to Jimmy at the same time had been an unexpected bonus.

Jimmy was especially glad when he discovered in the storage room a keyboard with Braille on the keys — although where it had come from, Jimmy had no idea. Still, he suspected Clark would be pleased. Not for basic typing, of course, since the little raised dot on the F and J keys helped to orient a person's hands on the keyboard, but if he wanted to use some of the less used keys the Braille would come in handy.

As for the rest of it, he would have to stop by accounting to see if some of the equipment Clark wanted could be ordered. Jimmy planned to get the okay from Perry to help grease those particular wheels.

The programming Clark had mentioned, however, was available on the internet — if one knew where to look. Fortunately, Jimmy did.

Jimmy pulled a small pair of his personal earphones out of his pocket and stuck them into the jack on the computer as he waited for the program he'd chosen to download. He'd try to requisition a better set of headphones for Clark, but these would at least let Clark know if the program would suit his purposes.

"Hey, Jimmy," Clark said as he and Lois approached his desk.

"How did you know it was me?" Jimmy responded.

"Who else would be sitting at my desk? Besides, I recognized your aftershave," he added as an afterthought, realizing that he would likely need another reason to recognize Jimmy in the future.

"Hey, cool," Jimmy said. "I've heard that when you lose your eyesight, your other senses become enhanced. Guess it's true, huh?"

He heard Lois stifle a chuckle and had to fight one off himself. 'If you only knew, Jimmy,' he wanted to say. He settled for, "Yeah, Jimmy. You have to find other ways to interact with the world."

"Well, I think I've got things pretty much set up on your computer," Jimmy said before moving out of the way so that Clark could take a seat. As he began explaining to Clark how the program he'd downloaded would talk to him, tell him what was on his screen and even read the contents of web pages and other programs, Lois excused herself to make some phone calls.

Jimmy was just finishing up when Lois returned. By the pace of her return and the speed of her heart, she was obviously on a mission. Clark almost smiled when he realized that even with his sight, Jimmy had missed the signs.

"Anyway," Jimmy said, "I'm going to see what I can do about ordering a Braille printer. The program you have will allow you to print things off in Braille, but you'll need a special printer to use it. Oh, and I'm going to see if they can add Braille editions of some of the major newspapers we subscribe to."

"Thanks, Jimmy. You've been a big help."

"Sure, no problem." Jimmy took a seat on the edge of Clark's desk. "Hey, have you found another place to live yet? I went by your old apartment the other day and there was a young couple living there."

"Uhh... well..." Clark stammered. He and Lois hadn't exactly discussed what they were going to tell people.

"Clark's going to be living with me," Lois said.

"Really?" Jimmy asked, the tone of his voice making it clear that he was thinking things that... were probably exactly right. "Hey, I think it's great," he continued, obviously responding to the look Lois must have given him.

"We've already ordered a desk and a new couch," Clark said. He was not entirely sure why he'd said that. "And my folks are sending my personal belongings back from Smallville," Clark continued. Why was he explaining this to Jimmy? What happened between him and Lois was their business, after all. But for some reason, he just couldn't seem to stop talking — as if he was trying to direct Jimmy's mind away from the bed he was sharing with Lois. "CostMart is going to be delivering the desk and couch on Friday evening."

"Hey, look," Jimmy said. "I don't have plans for Friday evening. Why don't I come over and help you move the stuff in?"

Clark wanted to refuse. He could probably do it quicker himself. Still, given his handicap, it would seem strange to refuse the offer of assistance. "That would be great, Jimmy," he said instead.

"Cool! It will give us a chance to catch up," Jimmy said, jumping up from the corner of Clark's desk and practically skipping towards Perry's office.

"Do you want to tell me what that was all about?" Lois asked, taking Jimmy's place on the corner of his desk.

"I don't know," Clark confessed, running a hand agitatedly through his hair. "I could hear myself talking, but just couldn't seem to force myself to shut up."

"Let me guess... you were trying to protect my honor — get Jimmy's mind off what might be happening in that big bed of mine..." She stopped momentarily. When she continued, there was something sultry in her voice. "...that big bed of *ours* by talking about couches and desks and personal belongings." Her voice was soft, slightly amused even, as her hand began to smooth his now ruffled hair.

"Crazy, hey," he said, relieved to discover she was amused rather than offended.

"You," she responded. "It was just... you."

"So what had you all fired up when you first came over here?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Oh, right. Well, while you and Jimmy were doing your male bonding thing, I called the Metropolis Psychiatric Hospital."

Clark sat up straighter.

"There are three male patients there with the last name of Smith. That's all they would tell me."

"So one of them could be our Mr. Smith?"

"Maybe. But without seeing them, I can't know. But get this..." She paused for dramatic effect. "...there's no Dr. Sandra Durant working there. In fact, I made some other inquiries and there is no Dr. Sandra Durant registered to practice medicine anywhere in New Troy."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Also, when I questioned them about someone escaping this morning, they denied it."

"That doesn't mean a lot. They might be trying to cover up a slip in their security."

"True. But given that there is no Dr. Durant working there..."

"...it does seem like they might be telling the truth."

"Exactly. So then I looked up the license number for the ambulance. It is registered to Speedy Ambulance, but when I called Speedy Ambulance..."

"Let me guess. They claimed they hadn't made a pick up at CostMart this morning."

"You got it."

Clark nodded. "Anything on our other story?"

"Well, I took a look at the file Perry gave us. Not much there. A basic biography. The note Perry made when he talked to Steve's daughter. The picture I mentioned in Perry's office. I did call his daughter, however. She said her father was living on the east side of Suicide Slum when he disappeared. Apparently, she realized he was missing because every Sunday, no matter where he was, he'd give her a call to see how she was doing. When he didn't call, she knew something was wrong."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Oh, and I asked her to fax us a more recent picture of her father. Turns out she has a scanner so she's going to email it to us."

"Whose email address did you give?"

"Both of ours."

Clark turned towards his computer. "Let's see if Jimmy's program does what it's supposed to do."

Since his hearing told him no one was close enough to notice, he didn't bother sticking the earpiece in, being able to hear it perfectly well where it was. Still, he carefully followed Jimmy's other instructions. He felt a surge of pride when a moment later, Lois informed him that the picture which had been sent to Lois and copied to him had begun to load onto the screen.

Lois gasped.

"What?" Clark asked.

"I think we just found our Mr. Smith," Lois said, tapping the picture of Steven Baker that had appeared on the screen.

"Could I speak to Steven Baker?" Clark asked into his phone.

Lois sat on the corner of his desk, listening.

"Could you check again? I'm sure his daughter said the Metropolis Psychiatric Hospital." There was a short pause. "Well, I suppose I could have gotten that wrong. Do you know if there is anywhere else he could be?"

Clark's eyebrows rose, informing Lois that Clark had not expected that response.

"Okay, well, I'll do that then," Clark said before, after a quick good-bye, hanging up the phone.

"What'd they say?"

"That he isn't there and if I want someone to check out every psychiatric institution in New Troy I should get a researcher."

As if on cue, they both yelled, "Jimmy!"

After leaving Jimmy with instructions to check not only all psychiatric institutions, but also all hospitals and morgues for

Steven Baker or Mr. Smith or, in the case of morgues, any John Does matching Baker's description, Lois and Clark decided to visit the three Smiths they knew were registered at the Metropolitan Psychiatric Hospital — to see if any of them was actually their Steven Baker.

Clark wasn't entirely sure what use he would be, given that he couldn't identify Baker from either his picture or seeing him that morning. Still, Lois had insisted that he accompany her.

"Did you bring your cane?" Lois asked as she pulled the Jeep into a parking spot and cut the engine.

"Yes. Why?"

"Use it when we go into the MPH."

Clark cocked his head to the side, even as he began unfolding the cane. "You wouldn't be planning to take advantage of the fact that I'm blind, would you?" he asked suspiciously.

"You bet your sweet little chumpy I would."

Clark smiled. "What exactly did you have in mind, Ms. Lane?"

Clark made a show of using his cane as he and Lois worked their way across the hospital foyer. When they arrived at the information counter, he folded his cane, laying it on the counter where the woman behind the counter couldn't miss seeing it.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked.

"I hope so. We're here to see our boss. Can you tell us which room he's in?" Lois asked.

Clark made a mental note of what he could tell about the counter. He could smell coffee and by focusing his hearing, he could tell where the mug was situated. He shifted over slightly, making Lois change sides with him.

"And his name would be?"

"Smith," Lois said confidently. "Mr. Smith."

Some tapping on a computer keyboard told Clark that the woman was typing in the name.

"She has a cup of coffee sitting beside her," Lois muttered under her breath, too softly for the woman behind the counter to overhear her. "And a bunch of papers on the left side of that," she continued, both confirming what Clark already knew and adding to his mental picture of the counter.

He gave a slight nod.

"And his first name?" the woman asked, interrupting their secret exchange.

"Oh..." Lois said, sounding slightly flustered. "Honey, do you remember Mr. Smith's first name? Sorry," she continued, directing her next comment to the receptionist, "we always call him Mr. Smith."

"Is it Steven?" Clark asked.

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "There's no Steven Smith here."

"Oh, damn," Lois said. "I'm sure I'd recognize the name if I heard it."

"I can't help you without a first name."

"The name would be on our pay stubs," Clark said.

"But that means we'd have to go all the way home," Lois objected. "Please. Can't you help us? Perhaps you could just give us the room numbers of all three men and we could find the right one. Save us the trip home."

Clark suspected Lois had looked over at him on the last statement, silently pointing out to the receptionist that it would be difficult to make an extra trip home when she had to do so with a blind man. He fought back the urge to smile — she was shameless.

For a moment, the woman seemed to hesitate, but then she remembered her orders. "I'm sorry. I can't give you a room number without a first name."

That was his cue. He picked up his cane and, while turning as if to leave, dragged it across the top of the counter, knocking the coffee over so that it spilled across the papers.

"Oh no!" the woman gasped before beginning to move around frantically.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Clark said, reaching over as if trying to help, but knowing with every movement, he was actually hampering the woman's efforts to limit the damage.

"My papers," the woman exclaimed.

"Here. Let me help," Clark said.

"No. No. That's okay," the woman said, trying to be polite about not wanting his assistance.

"Are you sure? I'm just so sorry. I lost my sight recently and sometimes I'm a little clumsy as a result. Just let me..."

"Come on, honey," Lois said. "I think she'll do better if you're not helping."

"Oh," Clark said. "Well, if you're sure..."

"Yes. Yes. I'm fine." The woman sounded relieved at the prospect that he would no longer be helping.

At that point, Clark let Lois drag him towards the door. "Did you get it?" he whispered when he was sure they were far enough away to keep the woman from overhearing him.

"Rooms 342, 293 and 310."

Clark smiled. "Has anyone ever told you you're a genius?"

"Yes. But certainly not often enough." She stopped then, glancing back at the receptionist, before taking them in a different direction. It was only when she opened a nearby door that he realized she'd led him into a stairwell.

"Well, that was a waste of time," Lois said as they pulled away from the MPH.

"We pretty much knew it would be once we discovered that none of the Smiths were in the custodial section of the hospital," Clark responded. "Besides, it wasn't a complete waste of time."

"How do you figure that?" Lois asked, even as she leaned on the horn to express her displeasure with a car that was trying to cut in front of her.

"Well, we can be fairly certain that whatever we witnessed this morning is not connected with the MPH."

"Humph. Well, as far as looking for the sunny side is concerned, I'm not seeing very much sun."

"It's a start," Clark said. "Besides, just think. Once we get Jimmy's results, we'll probably have dozens more of these fun trips."

Lois glanced over at him with narrow eyes. "You do realize how easy it would be for me just to dump you off here and make you find your own way back, don't you?"

Clark's face split into a smile. "You wouldn't do that to the helpless blind man."

"Don't tempt me, farmboy."

Clark chuckled. "So... do you want to go back to the Planet and see what Jimmy has for us?"

Lois shook her head. "Not yet. Let's check out a few soup kitchens and homeless shelters on the east side of Suicide Slum — where his daughter said he was living. Maybe someone there can point us in the right direction."

The sun was getting low in the sky as two very frustrated reporters climbed back into Lois' Jeep. They'd shown Baker's picture at a dozen places, talked to several dozen people and no one had been able to help them. All of the homeless people they'd talked to claimed to have never seen him. A couple workers at the various establishments they'd visited said they thought he looked vaguely familiar, but didn't know his name or where he might be.

"I can't believe no one recognized him," Clark said.

"It had nothing to do with whether or not they recognized him," Lois responded. "It had more to do with the fact that both of us showered this morning."

Clark's eyebrows rose. "Are you saying that the people we interviewed stunk?"

"Are you saying they didn't?" she countered.

Clark had to concede the point. "So you think they refused to talk to us because we aren't one of them?"

"That's exactly what I think. According to that bio, Baker's been living on these streets for a couple of years. Someone should have recognized him."

"So should we head back to the Planet? See what Jimmy managed to dig up?"

Lois thought about that for a moment before responding.

"Let's leave it until tomorrow. I have one more thing I want to do today. Then let's grab some supper and... don't you have a date with a puppy tonight?"

Clark immediately perked up on that thought. "Jealous?" he asked.

"Why would I be jealous?" she asked. "But I should let you know that I might invite some of my cat friends over tonight. If the bed's full of cats when you get home, you'll have to find somewhere else to sleep."

Clark smiled. "So where are we going?"

"Jimmy mentioned something to me while you were in Smallville. I tried to contact Superman to tell him about it — even stood on the roof of the Daily Planet and yelled for you."

"Sorry to put you through that."

"We've already worked through all of that, Clark," she rebuked mildly.

"So what did Jimmy tell you?"

"There's a Dr. Klein at Star Labs who is apparently working on some invention that he claims will be a breakthrough for the blind. I thought maybe Superman might be a prime candidate to try out his invention."

"Lois, I don't know this Dr. Klein and I don't think I want him to know that Superman's blind."

"I'm not taking Superman to see Dr. Klein. I'm taking Clark."

"Why would he let Clark try out some new invention?"

"Think about it, Clark. You're a reporter. If you think it really is a breakthrough, you can give him some fantastic free advertising."

Clark raised his eyebrows. She had a point. And if it really was a breakthrough, he would take great pleasure in telling the world about it. Inventing anything that could assist someone suffering the loss of his sight should be encouraged. Until he'd lost his own vision and had to stumble around in this dark new world, he hadn't realized just how much of a challenge it could be.

"So what do you think?" Lois asked as she and Clark climbed back into the Jeep after leaving Star Labs.

"I think Dr. Klein is quite a character."

"As in absent-minded professor meets mad scientist sort of way?" She pulled the Jeep out of the parking lot and on to West Wagner Road.

Clark laughed. "Something like that."

"So what about that device he gave you? What's it called again? A GDS?"

"GPS, which stands for Global Positioning System, is the system it uses. But it's actually called a Navigation Bracelet." He felt the strange bracelet now on his wrist. It looked like a modern piece of plastic jewelry which could easily be hidden under a long sleeved shirt.

"Do you think Dr. Klein's claim that in a few years there will be a GPS in every new car on the market makes sense — or is he over-estimating the importance of this invention?"

"He may be right. But remember... the ones that will soon be on the market won't be nearly as advanced as the one we're trying out. That's why he needs us to write a story about it — to get backers to fund additional research."

"Lucky for you that he needs more funding." Lois reached over and gave his arm an affectionate squeeze.

"Yeah. Hey, pull over."

Lois immediately did as instructed.

"Okay, let me give this a try." He took a deep breath before pushing the large button on the front of the bracelet and saying, "Where am I?"

A woman's voice instantly told him his longitude, latitude and height above sea level.

"She needs a name," Lois said.

"Who?"

Lois reached across and tapped the bracelet. "And GPS doesn't really work for me."

"Well, what about... Atalanta," Clark answered.

"Atalanta?" Lois asked.

"She was the Greek goddess of travel. Her father wanted her to marry. Since she wasn't too keen on the idea, she told him she would only marry a man who could outrun her. Many tried and failed, and in the tradition of Greek myth, they were killed for their efforts."

"Did she eventually find a man who could outrun her?"

Clark nodded. "But only after he got help from Aphrodite."

"The goddess of love," Lois said. "Figures. Love can trip up the best of us."

Clark chuckled.

"Ata," Lois said, shortening the name. "I like it. So ask Ata the other questions Dr. Klein suggested." Lois was more interested in the answers to these questions than in finding out the longitude or latitude of current her position.

"What are my surroundings?" Clark asked, while pushing the button again.

"You're facing west on West Wagner Road, one hundred and twenty-four feet east of Cleveland Avenue."

"Points of Interest?"

Lois' mouth dropped slightly open as Ata proceeded to give the names of banks, restaurants, stores and businesses which could be seen from their current location.

"How do I get to the Metropolis General Bank?" Clark asked, only to be given detailed directions which actually required him to cross the street at the corner, followed by an inquiry as to whether he required assistance in following those directions.

"Okay, now that's impressive," Lois said.

"Lois, I know we were planning to go out for supper before I go to the MCB to start my training with Shadow."

"But...?"

"What do you say we pick up a couple of sandwiches and head somewhere out of the city to give this device a proper test?"

"What kind of test?"

"A super test."

Lois cocked her head to the side as she looked at him.

"I know the longitude and latitude stuff doesn't mean a lot to you. But that, together with height above sea level..."

"You're thinking you might be able to use Ata to navigate from the air," Lois completed for him.

Clark nodded. "So what do you say?"

Lois instantly glanced over her left shoulder and pulled back onto the street. "I say, what are we waiting for?"

Lois felt as if she was still walking on air as she and Clark arrived at the Daily Planet the next morning. When she'd mentioned Paris in the spring to Clark a couple days ago, she'd thought it was just a pipe dream. Not that it had been particularly springy in Paris — although there were definite signs of spring. Still... She now understood why it was called the city of lights. In spite of the time difference, walking down those tree lined boulevards with their bustling cafes only to emerge a short time later to see the glorious splendor of the Eiffel Tower... Words could hardly do it justice.

They hadn't had time for more than a quick tour since Clark

had needed to get back to Metropolis in time for his appointment with Shadow. Still, he had promised to take her back sometime soon — when the bloom had returned to the trees, he said.

She sighed, leaning her head against Clark's shoulder as, alone, they rode up in the elevator.

"Still in Paris?" Clark asked.

"Why would anyone go anywhere else?" she answered back wistfully.

Clark chuckled, causing Lois to glance over at him. He was practically beaming.

"That meant a lot to you, didn't it?" she said.

"Lois, you have no idea. When I first developed these powers, I resented them. Just wanted to be normal... until I discovered I could fly. Then... You have no idea how liberating it was to be able to soar through the heavens. Last night..." He shook his head, unable to put into words how much it had meant to him to be given that back.

She squeezed his hand, silently telling him she understood. The only fly in the ointment was that eventually Dr. Klein would want his device back. Still, there had to be some way to get him to agree to let Clark keep it. She would have to work on that.

"Oh, and I discovered last night that Ata has a jack for a microphone," Clark continued. "So I'll be able to speak softly enough to keep people from hearing me ask for directions. Then, if I run the cord up inside my shirt, I can attach the microphone to my collar and no one will even know it's there. And... given my hearing, I can turn down the volume so low that no one but me will hear the instructions she gives me."

Lois thought about that. From what she'd seen of the device so far, she could understand how that could come in handy. "What about pushing the button? Could that be a problem?"

"I don't think it has to be. Given how fast I can move, no one would likely even see me. With a little practice, this device could allow me to move around almost as well as if I could see. I'd still be in danger of stepping off curbs and into lampposts, though. But between the white cane and Shadow, I have a feeling that it could give me a lot of freedom."

The elevator doors opened, depositing them in the newsroom. As they walked out, Lois noticed how today's arrival was so much more comfortable than the day before. People barely looked up from what they were doing as Lois and Clark descended the stairs into the bullpen.

"Lois, Clark," Perry yelled from the doorway to his office, "come give me an update on that story I assigned you yesterday."

Lois sighed as they changed directions. Time to bring Perry up to speed on what they had... and had not managed to learn about his friend.

News seemed to travel fast in Metropolis — at least in certain circles. That was why Mayson Drake had waited at home by the phone all of the previous evening, just hoping that Clark would call her to tell her himself that he was back in town. Anticipation had turned to disappointment when evening faded into night and still her phone remained silent.

It was sort of by accident that she had heard the news. The Daily Planet reporter who covered the courthouse had mentioned in passing something about Clark's return to a colleague of Mayson's and that person, knowing of Mayson's interest in Clark, had passed the information on to her. No details had been given and Mayson's friend hadn't felt free to probe, so Mayson didn't know anything about the circumstances of Clark's return, where he was living, not even how long he'd been back in the city — only that he was back working at the Planet.

Still, he was back now. And her heart felt as if it had taken flight.

Why hadn't he called when he returned? She had to admit that was troubling. Maybe he was just worried that she'd be angry

about the way he'd left. But since he had intended to go away with her for the weekend before his sudden disappearance, she was sure her interest wasn't entirely one sided. He'd probably just been busy getting settled back in. The question was how to insinuate herself back into his life.

What she needed was some plausible excuse to visit the Daily Planet. She didn't want to appear too forward after all, but she wanted so badly to pick up from where they'd left off before he'd left Metropolis.

She was glancing around her office for some sort of inspiration when her eyes landed on a particular file. Was there some way to make use of that?

Lois looked up when the elevator dinged. While they waited for their sources to get back to them, Perry had said that one of them needed to get down to City Hall to cover a press conference. There was nothing unusual about that. Perry often assigned them short, individual, what he liked to call bread-and-butter stories, while they were waiting for bigger stories to break.

Clark had immediately volunteered to go. Perry's eyebrows had gone up, but he hadn't said anything. Neither had she — determined to trust that Clark knew his own limitations.

Still, it was Clark's first individual assignment and Lois couldn't help but worry.

Oh, she knew he couldn't be hurt. Still, if he got lost on the way over, failed to get to the press conference in time and so came back without the story, he'd be seriously disappointed in himself. After last night's high, she couldn't stand the thought.

He wanted so badly to prove to Perry, and himself, that he could still do this job. And so she found herself wanting that for him. She wanted it so bad she was nearly ill with worry, counting the minutes until he returned triumphant. Fortunately he had Ata to help him. She wished he had Shadow with him, too. Unfortunately, that wouldn't happen until sometime next week.

She held her breath as the elevator doors slid open to reveal... Anticipation turned to confusion when Mayson Drake stepped into the newsroom.

What was she doing here? She hadn't showed that peroxide blonde hair around here since the day Lois had told her that Clark had left. So why... The light suddenly went on in Lois' mind.

Mayson knew Clark was back.

Lois was as certain about that as she had been about Mayson not knowing that Clark had left. How had the grapevine got news of Clark's return to Mayson so quickly? And why had Lois and Clark never discussed exactly how they were going to handle Mayson — given what she knew about Superman?

Clark had said there had been nothing between him and Mayson. And given what Lois had learned about Clark the night they'd first made love and subsequent conversations where Clark had told her about some of the things Mayson had said to him about Superman, she believed him. Still, Mayson thought she had a chance. Otherwise, why was she here now?

She saw Mayson look at Clark's desk, confirming Lois' suspicions. Lois' gaze followed Mayson's. The desk, although obviously now occupied, still contained none of Clark's personal items.

Lois suddenly wished Clark's desk contained a picture of the two of them. Perhaps the picture Martha had taken on their last day in Smallville. Clark had insisted that he needed to be in the sun — so, in spite of the weather, Lois had joined him. As a result, they'd been curled up on the swing on the front porch, bundled up under one of Martha's brightly colored quilts. Lois' legs thrown over Clark's while they'd talked and cuddled together. Martha must have spotted them because she'd come out, camera in hand, insisting on taking a picture. She'd taken a couple before demanding one of them kissing. They had happily complied.

The pictures hadn't been developed before Lois and Clark left

Smallville, but right now Lois wished they had been. That picture would be perfect for Clark's desk — especially at the moment. No awkward questions or conversations. The truth of Lois and Clark's relationship clear for all to see — staking Lois' claim against all challengers. Or in this case, one particular challenger.

Lois suddenly had fantasies of Mayson taking one look at that picture, turning around and high-tailing it out of the Daily Planet, never to be heard from again.

The dream shattered when Mayson, after glancing around the newsroom, came down the stairs and made a bee-line for Lois' desk.

Lois quickly redirected her attention to her computer screen. Maybe Mayson would take the hint and keep moving.

"Hi, Lois," Mayson said when she arrived at Lois' desk.

Lois looked up, feigning surprise. "Mayson, I didn't expect to see you here," she said, wishing she had — early enough to get Martha to FedEx that picture for Clark's desk.

"Well, I haven't really had any information for you the last few weeks," Mayson said.

'Liar,' Lois thought. Could the woman be any more transparent? She wasn't even looking at Lois. Instead, her eyes kept darting around the newsroom. Still... "Does that mean you have something for us now?" she asked.

The question brought Mayson's eyes back to Lois. "Us?" she asked with seeming innocence.

Damn. She hadn't meant to let that slip. For a moment she was tempted to lie herself — perhaps claim she had a new partner or something — but instantly realized the futility of the gesture.

Mayson obviously knew Clark was back.

"Yes," Lois said instead. "Clark's back."

"Really? Is he here? I'd like to say hello."

"Perry sent him out on an assignment. So what do you have for us?"

The question caused Mayson to open her briefcase and pull out a file. She looked at it for a moment, as if trying to make up her mind about something, before sighing. "Is there somewhere private we can talk? This information is a little sensitive."

Lois chewed momentarily on her lower lip. She really wanted Mayson gone before Clark returned. And going somewhere private indicated a longer meeting. Still... In spite of the fact that Mayson had obviously come for the sole purpose of seeing Clark, there might be a story in whatever information she had brought with her. Still... Did Lois really want Mayson hanging around until Clark returned — and risk having her make the connection between Clark's blindness and Superman's blindness?

Concern for Clark won out. "I really don't have time now, Mayson. If it's important, you could just leave the file and I'll take a look at it when I have a few minutes." She tried to sound regretful.

"Oh, that's okay. I can't leave the file. I have a couple of other things to do in this part of town. How about I just come back later?"

'...when Clark might be here,' Lois silently added for her.

"Well, maybe I can find a few minutes right now. We can talk in the conference room." Hopefully she could finish up with Mayson before Clark returned. Then, tonight, she could tell Clark to call Mayson and make it clear to her that he wasn't interested in pursuing a relationship. It might be slightly tacky, but at least Mayson wouldn't be able to tell that Clark was blind over the phone.

"I don't mind coming back," Mayson said, sounding a little too pleased with the idea of following that course of action.

"That's okay. I don't want to inconvenience the DA's office."

Lois rose from her chair and led a reluctant Mayson into the conference room and closed the door.

"This is off the record," Mayson said.

Lois nodded.

"I mean, way, way off the record. I could lose my job and possibly even be disbarred for sharing this with you."

"Okay, fine. You were never here. I never heard any of this from you." Lois knew she was being rude, but she could only think about protecting Clark, protecting his secret — and having Mayson realize that Clark was blind... Mayson wasn't a stupid woman. How could she not make the connection between Clark and Superman? She had to get Mayson out of here as quickly as possible and if that meant being rude in rushing her along, so be it.

Mayson took a deep breath. "Okay... as you're aware, in spite of attempts by Martin Snell to prevent it, Baby Rage was ordered to go to trial. Baby Rage's new lawyer quickly copped a plea."

"Uncle Mike told me about the plea," Lois said, wondering how transparent Mayson could be. Baby Rage had been arrested for attempting to set fire to Lois' Uncle Mike's restaurant. His lawyer, Martin Snell, had attempted to corrupt the justice system to get his client off — apparently for Intergang, although that had never been proven. Fortunately, it hadn't worked. But all of this had taken place months ago. And yet this was the reason Mayson was giving for coming to the Daily Planet today?

Lois was tempted to confront Mayson, but the other woman was still talking.

"I expect you also know that Martin Snell was arrested. When he was being questioned by the police, there was an explosion in the interrogation room, killing both Snell and the police officers."

"I know that, too." An attack on a police station had been big news, after all.

"But what you may not know is that the equipment recording the interview survived."

Lois' eyebrows went up. "How is that possible?"

"The cameras in the room were destroyed in the explosion, but the recording equipment was actually in an adjoining room. As a result, we know that Snell was just seconds away from revealing the head of Intergang when the explosion went off."

Lois leaned forward in her chair, suddenly very interested in what Mayson was saying. "That's awfully coincidental."

"It wasn't a coincidence." Mayson paused to hand Lois a report.

Lois quickly scanned it, but stopped when Mayson continued to speak, explaining for her the essence of the report.

"Forensic scientists have combed every inch of that room in the past few months and they have discovered a few things. First, the police weren't the only ones watching that interview. Someone had tapped into the equipment and was watching and listening to it right up until the explosion. Also, they've been able to prove that the explosive device was operated by a remote control."

"So if he was killed by someone watching the interview at the exact moment he was about to reveal the head of Intergang..."

"...then it's a sure fire bet that Snell actually knew who the head of Intergang is."

"So we were right! He did know the head of Intergang! And if he knew who the head of Intergang is... It's got to be one of his clients. Why else would he know?"

"I agree."

"So what have you done about it? Have you subpoenaed his client list yet?"

Mayson shook her head.

"Why not?"

"Because attorney-client privilege survives the death of the attorney. We can't get that information. As a result, the investigation into Snell's death has run dry. I've been told to send my file to storage. Officially, it will remain open, but with no leads, it's basically dead."

"So why are you telling me? What do you expect us to do?"

Mayson shrugged. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

Lois' eyebrows crinkled together. What? Why would Mayson

tell her this if she wasn't asking them to follow up on something?

"I just thought, since this case involved your uncle," Mayson said, "you had the right to know that it is basically closed."

Lois didn't believe Mayson for a moment. This had nothing to do with Uncle Mike. Maybe this really was just an excuse Mayson had cooked up to see Clark. After all, a cold case wasn't exactly newsworthy.

But if this was just an excuse to come to the Daily Planet, why had Mayson made such a big deal about telling her this? Why the comments about getting fired or disbarred? It made no sense. And the fact that Lois couldn't make sense of it bothered her. No. She was definitely missing something here. But what?

It had been a nothing story. Clark knew that. Still, he had to check that his feet were on the ground as he stepped out of the elevator. He could hardly wait to tell Lois exactly how boring the Mayor's press conference had been. He was certain she would be as excited about it as he was — in fact, she was likely the only one who would be.

He tapped his way carefully down the stairs into the bullpen. As he approached Lois' desk, he realized that she wasn't there. Hearing... and smelling... Ralph walking past, Clark turned his attention to his colleague.

"Hey, Ralph, where's Lois?" he asked.

"Conference room," Ralph replied without stopping.

Lois' head shot up when, just as Mayson was putting the Snell file back in her briefcase, the door to the conference room flew open and a beaming Clark Kent practically bolted into the room.

"I did it!" he exclaimed. "I went down to City Hall and listened to the most boring press conference in the history of man! I even asked a couple questions. And I didn't get lost once. Even got a good spot at the conference. I tell you this white cane can clear a path almost as well as you."

Lois' eyes had shot to Mayson during Clark's ramble. At first, her expression was one of undisguised joy. And then, almost as if in slow motion, her face changed as she took in Clark's dark glasses, white cane and words.

As Lois rose to her feet, she placed a hand in front of her mouth, hiding it from Mayson's vision, before saying under her breath, "Mayson's here."

Clark's ramble instantly died.

"Uhh... Hi, Mayson," Clark said, quickly folding his cane, as if in an attempt to keep Mayson from seeing it. A futile gesture.

Realizing that Mayson was still trying to find her voice, Lois moved quickly. She shut the door behind Clark and began closing the blinds on the conference room windows. It was possible that Mayson was just reacting to the realization that Clark was blind. Still, how long could it be before she made the Superman connection? And when that happened... The last thing they needed was to have the entire newsroom watching and listening in.

"So how have you been?" Clark asked in an attempt to cut through the strained silence.

"You're blind," Mayson said bluntly, obviously still trying to process the information.

"Yes," Clark said, sounding resigned.

"Clark was in an accident at the farm while he was in Smallville," Lois added quickly, hoping to derail Mayson's thoughts from taking her in the obvious direction. "Welding accident. What did the Doctor call it, Clark? Welder's flash?"

"Superman's blind," Mayson said, completely ignoring Lois' explanation.

"Well, yes, but..." Lois began, desperately searching her mind for a way to stop the inevitable.

Mayson glanced at Lois and then, moving too quickly for either Lois or Clark to react, stormed over to Clark, reaching up and ripping the sunglasses off his face.

Lois' shoulders sagged. Without the glasses, there was no mistaking the man standing in the conference room.

"I knew you were hiding something," Mayson practically spat. "I always thought it was that you had feelings for Lois. But this..." Her voice trailed off as she gestured frantically towards Clark. "You're Superman."

"No, Mayson," Clark finally said. "I'm Clark."

Lois cringed. The words had been said using Superman's voice, so if Clark was still planning to try to convince Mayson he wasn't Superman...

"Yeah, right," scoffed Mayson, sounding even more annoyed now than she had when she'd originally put the pieces together.

"I'm Clark," Clark insisted again. "Superman is just a way for me to use my powers without completely disrupting my life. But Clark is who I am — first, last and always."

The words stopped Lois cold. Clark had never explained it to her in that fashion. But then, such an explanation had never been necessary. She'd known instinctively which one was the real man from the first moment that Martha had told her the truth. Of course, that might have had something to do with the fact that Lois couldn't imagine Superman moping around or being surly.

Before more could be said, the door to the conference room opened and Jimmy stuck his head inside. Lois jumped, her eyes darting from Jimmy to a glasses-free Clark. She let out a breath of relief when she realized that Clark's back was to the door.

"You have a phone call, Clark," Jimmy said.

"Thanks, Jimmy. I'll take it in a moment." He reached a hand towards Mayson, palm up. "May I have my glasses back please?"

For a moment, Mayson just looked down at the glasses, as if she'd forgotten she was holding them, and Lois held her breath to see how she would react. Then Lois began breathing again when, without a word, she placed them back in Clark's hand.

Clark slipped them on before turning to face Jimmy.

"Line two," Jimmy said.

Clark nodded and tapped his way out of the room.

"Oh, Lois," Jimmy said. "I wanted to ask you what time you want me to come by Friday evening to help get Clark moved into your apartment?"

"Uhh..." Lois' eyes flashed over to Mayson who was obviously processing the implications of Jimmy's statement. Damn it. If they had any chance of convincing Mayson to keep the secret based on her feelings for Clark, it had just flown out the window. "Why don't you ask Clark?" Lois said, unable to focus on the question given all the other stuff running through her mind at the moment.

Jimmy's eyes flicked between her and Mayson as he seemed to realize he'd just said something wrong. "Well, okay then," he said before making a quick exit, closing the door behind him.

"So..." Mayson said after a strained pause. "...I guess you finally got your wish. You and Superman. Together."

It briefly flashed though Lois' mind to lie. Maybe use the idea that Clark was moving into Lucy's room. But as quickly as the thought had come, Lois dismissed it. Mayson would find out the truth sooner or later. And be even more upset then about being lied to. Lois sighed. "No, Mayson. Superman and I aren't together. Clark and I are."

Mayson made a dismissive motion with her hand.

"So how long has this been going on?" Mayson asked. "Or were you two secretly together the whole time he was pretending to date me? Or was he pursuing you as Superman while he was dating me as Clark? What was he playing at by faking an interest in me? Was he just trying to get a source inside the D.A.'s office?" The volume of her voice had risen on each consecutive question. "Nice gig, if you can get it."

"Of course not, Mayson. There was never anything between me and Superman. And as for Clark... First off, Clark would never do that. As for me... Before Clark left, I was still trying to figure

out how I could be in love with two men at the same time.”

“Uhh... Superman and Clark. Lucky for you that they turned out to be one man then.”

“Yeah,” Lois said softly, more to break the cycle of the argument than in agreement with Mayson’s comment. “Look, Mayson, what are you planning to do with this information?”

Before Mayson could answer, the door opened and Clark reentered the room. “I’m interested in the answer to that question, too,” he said. Then he turned his head towards Lois. “Bobby will meet with us in about an hour. He indicated that he has some information for us.” As he spoke, he closed the door again.

“Uhh, well, I guess I should let you get back to work then.” Mayson picked up her briefcase in preparation to leave.

“Wait, Mayson,” Clark said. “Before you go... I need to know what you plan to do with this information.”

“In other words, you want to know if I’ll help with your ongoing deception of the people of Metropolis.”

“No, I want to know if my parents are going to have to sell the farm and move somewhere where no one will ever find them. I want to know if Lois is going to be followed everywhere she goes by paparazzi. And I want to know if I can still go out for a cheeseburger without it ending up on the front page of every tabloid in the country.”

“Oh, please.”

“Mayson, you kept the fact that Superman was blind to yourself,” Clark said. “I’m just asking that you extend that same discretion to Clark.”

“I kept the fact that Superman was blind a secret to protect this city! The city no longer needs to be protected from being abandoned by Superman. Everyone now knows that Superman is gone — and we’ve survived.”

“I didn’t abandon the city, Mayson.”

“No, of course you didn’t. Superman did. And you’re not Superman, right? You’re Clark. Superman is just the way you’ve been deceiving the city for the past couple of years.”

Clark let out a frustrated breath.

“The city... the world deserves to know the truth,” Mayson continued.

“Don’t give me that bull,” Lois responded, unable to hold her tongue a moment longer. “This has nothing to do with the world. This is your pathetic attempt to get revenge on Clark for choosing me instead of you. How petty can you get? Ruining a man’s life for not loving you.”

Mayson narrowed her eyes and looked as if she was about to respond when Clark spoke.

“I’m asking you to keep this secret for me — for what we meant to each other.”

Mayson scoffed. “And what exactly did we mean to each other?”

“We were friends, Mayson. As far as I’m concerned, we still are.”

There was no doubting the sincerity in Clark’s voice. And Lois held her breath as she waited for Mayson to respond. Mayson reached up and rubbed the bridge of her nose and made a small noise in the back of her throat.

“Is one of your headaches coming on?” Clark asked sympathetically.

Mayson’s eyes immediately flashed. “I don’t see that that’s any of your business anymore.”

Clark let out a breath. “You want to stick to the topic. Fine. Are you going to keep my secret?”

“I have a condition,” Mayson finally said.

“And what’s that?” Clark asked.

“That Superman stays gone.”

Lois sucked in a quick breath. She opened her mouth to object. There might no longer be a Superman. Might never be again. But if somehow it was possible in the future... This city... The world

itself still needed Superman.

“Deal,” Clark said before Lois could get any of her objections out.

Lois felt tears come to her eyes at the realization that Clark had honestly given up hope that his eyesight would ever return. He would never have made that deal otherwise.

Lois had been quiet since Mayson had departed. Clark had tried to talk to her, but she had insisted that they needed to get back to work. So he’d quickly typed up the story on the press conference and sent it to Perry. When the time had come to meet with Bobby, Lois had quietly asked if he was ready, but other than that, she hadn’t said a word since they’d climbed into the Jeep.

Finally, he couldn’t stand it any longer. “I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you before making that deal with Mayson,” he said.

“What?” Lois asked before continuing. “No, Clark, I’m not upset about that. After all, I confirmed to her that we were involved without discussing it with you first. I understand. We both had to make decisions on the spot. It couldn’t be helped.”

“Then why have you been giving me the silent treatment?”

“I’m not. I just... I guess I’m just sad.”

He reached over and squeezed her leg.

“I wish we had planned that better,” Lois continued. “Maybe if we had handled it differently, you wouldn’t have been forced to make that promise.”

“Lois, I’ve told you how much Mayson has always disliked Superman,” he said. “So I realized as soon as she had a condition what it was going to be. And being blind now... I don’t see how Superman can return anyway.”

“It’s one thing to fly my girlfriend to Paris without my sight. It’s another to confront the bad guys directly if they know I’m blind — and it certainly wouldn’t take long for them to figure it out. There are just too many ways they could manipulate me into making a mistake — one that could be fatal, not for me but for some innocent bystander. I mean, bullets can’t hurt me, but since bullets can go faster than the speed of sound, I can’t stop them from hitting other people without my eyesight.”

“But that doesn’t mean I’m going to quit fighting the bad guys. I’m just going to have to do it as Clark, not Superman.”

“So you’ve given up on getting your sight back?”

From the tone of her voice, Clark could tell that this was what really bothered her about his promise. “Not completely,” he said. “I’d have bought a pair of proper sunglasses if I had. I’m still allowing my eyes to get as much sunlight as possible. But, Lois, we have to be realistic here. It’s been more than six weeks and there’s not so much as a hint of improvement.”

“And if your sight does come back?”

Clark sighed. “We’ll deal with that problem if we come to it. Maybe once Mayson calms down, she’ll be willing to renegotiate.”

Lois’ silence spoke of her skepticism. To tell the truth, he had doubts about that plan, too. But... “It’s possible. She’s not a bad person, Lois.”

“Hmph.”

She pulled the Jeep off the road and put it in park, making Clark suspect that they were at the place where they were supposed to meet Bobby Bigmouth.

“You’re not still jealous of Mayson, are you?” Clark asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous. How could I still be jealous of Mayson when I was never jealous of her in the first place?” Lois responded far too quickly. Then, slightly sheepish, as if she realized how that had sounded, she added, “She gets her hair color out of a bottle, you know.”

Clark smiled. “Now, you see, I knew that. That’s why I chose you. Couldn’t stand to look at that phony hair color anymore.”

“Right. And if you could see, that might be slightly more believable.” There was laughter in her voice now.

Clark chuckled, glad that the tension between them had been broken.

"So why did Bobby ask for you instead of me?" she asked after a moment.

"He was told I was back and wanted to hear for himself. Well, that and he said he trusted me not to steal the cheese off his pizza."

"Once! I did that once and only after a long day without any lunch or supper..."

"Try every single time."

Bobby's voice coming from the back seat caused both Lois and Clark to spin towards him.

"Oh, and Clairol, number 9 — light blonde," Bobby added.

"How long have you been listening to our conversation?" Lois asked.

She sounded casual, even though Clark knew she was anything but. If Bobby had actually boarded the Jeep at the pizza parlor... What exactly had they said about Superman during the drive here?

"Long enough to know that you're not jealous."

Clark was suddenly breathing more easily. Bobby had only snuck in the back seat after they'd arrived at this spot. Their conversation about Superman had concluded before then. Still, how Bobby always seemed able to sneak in — even getting past some supersenses — was a mystery. Maybe Bobby had some superpowers of his own.

"Good to have you back to guard my food, Kent," Bobby continued. "Too bad about the eyes. If you're looking for a career change, the blind beggar outside The Pagoda died recently. His street corner's open."

"Bobby!" Lois exclaimed, even as Clark chuckled.

Most people got so tongue-tied and uncomfortable around him, not knowing quite how to react. Bobby's approach was refreshing. Weird, but refreshing.

"Just trying to be helpful. Seriously though, Kent, sorry about what happened. — farming accident wasn't it? Too bad they haven't healed. Have you considered that you might have complications or an infection of some kind? Hear that's something you have to watch out for with Welder's flash."

Before Clark could answer, Bobby continued. "Oh, and congrats on the new housing arrangement, you two."

Clark's eyebrows rose. Where did Bobby get his information anyway?

"Hey, you got my pizza!" Bobby said, reaching over to where the pizza box was sitting on the seat next to him.

Lois' hand quickly came between the seats, slamming down on the box to keep Bobby from opening it.

"Last time I let you eat in my Jeep, I had to get it professionally cleaned to get the stains out. This time... you talk to us and then you get the pizza."

"I already answered your question about Mayson Drake's hair color and gave Kent advice on his eye problem. How much do you want for a pizza? It is fully loaded, right?" He tried to pry the corner of the box open, but Lois' hand held it closed.

"Steven Baker," Lois said. "Homeless guy. Went missing on the east side of Suicide Slum. Was a vet."

"Had more than a passing knowledge of Machiavelli," Clark added. "And was recently spotted being carted off in an ambulance, but no one knows where he was taken."

"Okay, well, I don't know about Steven Baker..."

"Then why are we here?"

"There've been a rash of homeless guys on the east side of Suicide Slum who've gone missing in the past month."

"Why haven't I heard anything about this?" Lois said.

Bobby took advantage of her distraction to open the pizza box, satisfying himself that it really was fully loaded and all the cheese was still intact. It was only when the box was suddenly slammed shut again that he directed his mind to Lois' question.

"Maybe because homeless guys don't talk to people like you."

"Do the police know about this?"

"Probably. But Metropolis' finest don't consider missing homeless guys much of a priority."

"So who's behind these disappearances?"

"That I can't answer. But there is someone behind it. Someone scary. And the guys down there are really nervous. If I hear anything else, I'll call. Anyway, thanks for the pizza."

Without further ado, Bobby slipped out of the car as quietly as he'd entered.

The rest of the week was spent in futile pursuit of the leads Jimmy had dug up. Checking out hospital after hospital, institution after institution, John Doe after John Doe. They'd gone down to the east side of Suicide Slum a number of times as well, but with no better results than they'd had the first time.

They had also made a trip to the police station in Suicide Slum, but the police had basically dismissed their demand for action. Apparently one homeless man who, in their words, probably didn't want to be found and Bobby Bigmouth's claim that there were more was simply not enough to make them call out the cavalry — not when there were so many 'real crimes' in Suicide Slum that needed to be solved.

Lois and Clark had tried to convince Perry to publish a story about the police indifference to missing homeless people. But even though he desperately wanted to find his friend, he wasn't prepared to publish an unsubstantiated story that said that the police were ignoring 'a rash of missing homeless men' in Suicide Slum — not when they couldn't even confirm Bobby's claim that more than just Steven Baker were missing.

'Hard facts, boys and girls. That's what we need. Now go out there and get me some,' Perry had demanded.

By week's end, both reporters knew that unless they came up with a new approach, they were at a dead end. Still, there was business to attend to that had nothing to do with the investigation, so both decided to set the story aside — at least for one evening.

Lois sighed when, alone, she stepped into her apartment on Friday evening. The place was filled with half a dozen or so boxes. Knowing that Clark's personal effects from Smallville would arrive today, she'd left word with her landlord, Mr. Tracewski, to let the delivery men in.

At the same time, she'd had Clark's name added to her lease and had explained to her landlord that a guide dog would also be joining them. She'd been nervous about his reaction, but he'd seemed to be well versed on city ordinances because his only response had been a grunt.

She had to admit, she'd had a mix of emotions as she'd watched Clark sign the papers making him her co-tenant. It had suddenly hit Lois what she was doing. And she'd found herself wondering if she was completely insane to be doing it. She didn't think Clark had noticed her reaction. And she couldn't think of how to discuss her reaction with him. This was just something she was going to have to work through herself.

After carrying the two extra large pizza boxes and six-pack of beer over to the table, she returned to close and lock her door. She expected that Clark would be home soon. He'd left work early this afternoon to go to the Metropolis Center for the Blind, having asked both Perry and the Center if he could do his training session early today to allow for time to get moved in this evening.

Once the door was locked, she walked to Lucy's old room and switched on the light. She'd used the evenings this past week when Clark had been at his training sessions to get everything in the room packed up so that the guys could carry the boxes down to a storage room in the basement before the desk arrived. Then she'd washed walls and cupboards and had even cleaned out the old dresser Lucy had left behind to prepare for this evening. The

carpet still needed to be vacuumed, but that couldn't be done until the boxes and dresser were removed.

Satisfied that everything was as ready as it could be, she turned and eyed Clark's boxes once again. She spotted a large brown envelope taped to the top of one. Since it was addressed to both her and Clark in Martha's flowing handwriting, she proceeded to open it.

Inside were a number of papers, but the thing that had caught Lois' eye first and made her smile was an eight by ten photo of her and Clark — the very photo that Lois had been wishing for the other day, the one of her and Clark kissing on the front porch swing at the farm house. It had turned out better than Lois had anticipated. Four by six copies of the other pictures Martha had taken that day were also included. But the eight by ten was the one Lois particularly loved.

Still, in spite of her earlier wish for a picture for Clark's desk, the eight by ten was far too large to be a desk picture. So what... Her eyes caught sight of the faded paint which outlined the spot where the picture damaged during Griffin's break-in had been. She'd purchased a frame the same size and had planned to put the print in it that had been in the previous frame. But...

She dashed into her bedroom and picked up the frame. It only took a moment to switch the print in it to the picture Martha had sent. Turning it over, she smiled. It was a perfect fit. Even the colors of the matting suited the picture. She quickly returned to the living room, hung the picture up on the wall and smiled. It was absolutely perfect. Suddenly she felt it. This was no longer her place; it was their place. And it felt... right.

The sound of voices outside the door and a key turning in the first lock directed Lois' eyes to the door. Jimmy must have met up with Clark outside the building and walked in with him. She rushed over to the door and, after a quick look through the peephole, proceeded to turn the remaining locks and open the door.

"May we come in?" asked Clark, beaming from ear to ear.

"This is your place too, Clark. You don't have to ask... Oh." Her voice trailed off when she realized why he was asking. Clark and Jimmy stood there. But as well as the two men, a fox-colored dog was looking up at her, his tongue lolling out to one side. "They let you bring Shadow home!" Lois exclaimed.

"Apparently, I'm a good study. They decided we were ready to go out on our own," Clark said, looking for all the world like a little boy having just received the thing he'd wanted most on Christmas morning.

As he walked in, Lois noticed the large box he'd brought with him.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Shadow's crate."

She studied the picture on the box for a moment with a small frown. "Looks more like a cage to me," she said disapprovingly. "I don't like the idea of keeping Shadow in a cage."

"No, you don't understand," Clark said as he set the box down. "To you, it looks like a cage. To Shadow it's a den. His own private space. We'll put some old blankets in it, maybe even put one over top and he'll love it."

Lois looked at Clark skeptically, but didn't respond.

The small group decided that before digging into the pizza and beer — or in Lois' case, wine — they would take the pieces from the demolished sofa down to the dumpster and the boxes from Lucy's room down to storage in preparation for the arrival of the desk and couch. Some discussion was required to figure out how to accomplish the task. Since Clark could carry more than Lois, even without obvious use of his powers, what they eventually decided was to have Jimmy and Clark take the boxes down while Lois finished vacuuming out the parts of Lucy's room she'd been unable to clean due to the boxes.

At first, Jimmy tried to insist that he could do the job himself, but Clark's pride was unable to let him sit around while his friend worked. The problem wasn't Clark's strength, but his ability to find his way to the storage room while carrying the boxes. Oh, he would get there sooner or later, of course. But not without bumping into walls and doors.

What was eventually worked out had all three laughing. They began by attaching Shadow's leash to the front of Clark's belt. Jimmy picked up some boxes, as did Clark. Then Lois wrapped the handle of the leash around Jimmy's arm. Tied together, Jimmy led the way to the storage room.

While the guys tended to the boxes, Lois and Shadow remained behind. Lois found that she was enjoying the company. Shadow, free from his halter, had developed a serious case of puppy love. He watched carefully as Lois set up the crate and brought out a couple old blankets to make it homey. When she finally stood back to observe the finished product, she glanced at Shadow.

"What do you think?" Lois asked.

Shadow glanced at her before looking back at the crate. Then, much to Lois' surprise, he stepped forward, sniffing around the crate before following the open door inside. Again, he took his time, smelling the blankets. Lois' eyebrows rose when he, seeming satisfied with the arrangements, lay down in the crate, looking up at her with a smile on his face.

Lois felt herself relax. Clark was right. He liked the crate. "Okay, then," Lois said, "well, if you're satisfied, I have other work to do."

When Lois turned to tend to her other tasks, Shadow followed, watching her every action with interest. He particularly amused Lois when she began to vacuum. Shadow would approach the vacuum when Lois was pulling it towards herself, as if trying to make friends, only to jump back in terror when the vacuum was coming towards him. Lois slowly began to relax, amazed at how the company a dog seemed able to make her forget the frustrations of the week. Maybe this whole dog idea wasn't so bad after all. Or maybe it was just this particular dog.

It didn't take long before their individual tasks were complete and the three gathered around the kitchen table for supper.

"Hey, where did that come from?" Jimmy asked, observing the new picture on the wall.

Lois smiled. "Clark's mom sent that," she responded before proceeding to tell Clark about the new picture — and eliciting a promise from him to put one of the others in a frame on his desk. "It might have allowed me to get rid of Mayson sooner," she laughingly went on to explain.

"So what exactly was Mayson talking to you about before I arrived?" Clark said. "You never did say, but now that I think about it, you two had to have been discussing something in the conference room before I got there."

"I'm not exactly sure," Lois admitted. "I think it may have been just an excuse to come by the Planet to see you. She said something about the investigation into Snell's death being closed because she couldn't subpoena..." Lois' voice trailed off. Her eyes suddenly went wide. "Client lists!"

Jimmy and Clark looked confused.

"Of course!" she exclaimed, silently berating herself for allowing her jealousy of Mayson to lower her IQ to something perilously close to double digits. Otherwise, surely she would have picked up on what Mayson had been trying to tell her. "Mayson couldn't suggest that I dig up Snell's client lists. After all, the mere suggestion that I do something like that would get her fired or even disbarred. But..." She looked at Clark. "Clark, judging from what Mayson told me, we were right and Snell really did know the identity of the head of Intergang and that knowledge got him killed. The most logical conclusion would be that Snell worked as a lawyer for Intergang — probably pretty high up if he was trusted

with that type of information..."

"So his client list would, at the very least, be made up of people who work for or are involved with Intergang," Clark concluded.

"Exactly. It might even reveal the head of Intergang," Lois said.

"If we could get a look at his accounts, that might be useful, too."

"Finding out who pays the bills could tell us who's in charge."

"Did you guys practice that?" Jimmy asked in amusement.

"Jimmy, on Monday, could you find out what happened to Snell's files after he died?" Lois asked, while giving her pizza crust to Shadow who instantly, and noisily, began chewing. This might not be a break in their current story, but since Intergang had first appeared on the Metropolis stage, Lois had been trying to break the story. This might be exactly what they needed.

Jimmy nodded.

"Lois, did you just give Shadow table scraps?" Clark asked.

"No! Why would you say that?" Lois replied guiltily.

Jimmy laughed.

"Traitor," she said to Jimmy even as Clark shook his head in amusement.

"So... the picture... I take it you two got together when Lois went to Smallville after your accident?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah, Jimmy. We did," Clark responded.

Lois thought Clark sat up a little straighter on the admission. Lois smiled.

"Hey, I think that's great. I always thought you two would make a great couple. Guess you're glad now you went to Smallville, huh?"

Lois nodded, hoping Jimmy didn't push for more. Not that she didn't want to talk about her relationship with Clark, but there were too many land mines to negotiate in discussing exactly how they got together. And if Jimmy thought that Lois had rushed down to Smallville after he had his accident on the farm... well, that suited her just fine. And, to tell the truth, it wasn't all that far from the truth either — as long as one didn't know that the accident was a month earlier.

"Yeah, if it hadn't been for Lois, I'd probably still be moping around in Smallville instead of back here, steam rolling over her on my way to my next Kerth," Clark said. "Did you see that award winning piece I did on the mayor's press conference this week? No way she'll top that one. Not even if we find Steven Baker."

Lois reached over and gave him a swat, even as she marveled at how he'd subtly redirected the conversation, away from questions about how they'd gotten together.

"So how is your story about the homeless guy going, anyway?" Jimmy asked, obviously following Clark's conversational gambit. "Was any of the stuff I managed to dig up helpful?"

"Not really, Jimmy," Lois said.

"I'm sorry," Jimmy responded.

"Don't be," Clark said. "Even Bobby Bigmouth wasn't able to give us much."

"Well, he confirmed that no homeless people in Suicide Slum would talk to us about this."

"Why's that?"

"Because we don't stink," Lois said.

"He didn't exactly say that, Lois," Clark responded.

"Pretty much." Lois looked at Jimmy. "Apparently, they won't trust us because we aren't one of them."

"Too bad you can't quit showering," Jimmy laughed. "Maybe they'd talk to you then." After a period of charged silence, Jimmy spoke again. "What?"

"You don't think..." Lois said.

"Bobby did say that if I wanted a career change..." Clark said.

"Do you think he would help with this?"

"For the right meal, I'm pretty sure he would."

"We'd have to wait until Monday at least — you're too clean shaven at the moment. Would Monday be enough time for you to look scruffy?"

"I think so."

"What?" Jimmy asked, not understanding any of that.

"Jimmy, you're a genius!" Lois said excitedly.

"That's great!" Jimmy responded, reaching for another slice of pizza. "Now, would you mind telling me exactly why I'm a genius?"

Lois and Clark laughed before filling him in on their plan.

"Isn't that a bit dangerous?" Jimmy said.

"Clark will be fine," Lois responded casually before realizing how that might sound. "After all, he'll have Shadow with him," she quickly added.

"And who's going to bother me with a vicious attack dog at my side," Clark added for good measure.

Jimmy looked skeptically at the dog in question who was looking hopefully at Lois, begging for another crust. Lois quickly obliged him.

Fortunately, at that moment, a knock came at the door, announcing the arrival of the CostMart delivery men. Soon everyone was distracted by new tasks. As Jimmy and Clark worked to move both desks into the spare room, Lois began unpacking the boxes from Smallville into Lucy's old dresser and her closet.

In the envelope with the photos was a list from Martha, telling what was in each of the boxes. After dragging box number four into the bedroom, Lois picked up the box cutters and looked at the list. She quickly read down the list until spotting one item she didn't understand.

'S-suits.' What were S-suits? Summer suits? She was just about to slice through the tape on the top of the box to see exactly what was in it when understanding sunk in. Martha had sent the Superman suits. Lois quickly set the box cutters down and pushed the box into the back of the closet unopened.

Since there was other stuff in there besides the suits, she would have to open it later. But for now, at least while Jimmy was here, it was better left unopened.

"Something's been bugging me," Clark suddenly said as he and Jimmy moved the furniture in Lois' room around to accommodate the new dresser.

"Looks okay to me, C.K."

"Oh, sorry. I'm not talking about the dresser. No, I've been thinking about what Baker said to us when we ran into him at CostMart."

"Actually, he ran into us," Lois corrected.

Clark smiled. "Okay, well that's true. But what he said."

"What did he say?" Jimmy asked.

"A wise prince cannot and should not keep his pledge when it is against his interest to do so," Clark said.

"Sounds like a corrupt prince to me," Jimmy said.

"Or a modern day politician," Lois added, provoking noises of agreement from Jimmy and Clark.

"Why would he say something like that?" Jimmy asked.

"That's what's been bugging me. It's a quote from a book written in the fifteen hundreds by a man named Machiavelli," Clark explained.

"Hey, I think I've heard of him."

Clark nodded. "He's the reason we talk about someone being Machiavellian."

"Cunning, amoral, opportunistic," Lois said. "Not that we know anyone like that."

"Okay, but who actually quotes Machiavelli?" Clark asked. "I spoke to his daughter the other day and she didn't even know who Machiavelli was — let alone why her father would have quoted him."

When neither Lois nor Jimmy could answer his question, Clark shrugged. "Anyway, it's just been bugging me."

"Could he have been trying to tell us something?" Lois asked.

"I thought of that, but what? And what an odd way to do it. Anyway, come on, Jimmy, let's get that the couch moved to a better spot in the living room.

Lois collapsed onto their new couch as Clark saw Jimmy out. Shadow jumped up beside her, laying his head in her lap. Lois smiled, her hand immediately beginning to stroke the soft fur on Shadow's head while he gazed up at her adoringly.

After closing the door, Clark turned towards Lois. "Hey, what's Shadow doing on the couch?" he asked.

"How did you know he was on the couch?"

"Two heartbeats."

"Uhh... How do you know I'm not pregnant?"

Clark's eyebrows rose.

"I'm not," Lois said, instantly turning scarlet. "And can we just forget I said that?"

Clark smiled. "Okay, but only if you'll explain to me why Shadow's in my place."

Glad for the reprieve, Lois responded. "Well, we've been talking and I think he'd be glad to take your place in bed tonight."

"Oh, he would, would he?" Clark walked across the room to the couch. "Sorry, buddy," he said, pushing the dog off the couch. "She's mine." The moment the spot was free, Clark sat down next to Lois.

"So..." He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "What do you say we try out the sofa? Make sure it works okay."

Lois giggled, even as she raised her hand to remove his glasses as he leaned in for a kiss. "Mmmm," she moaned as his lips softly explored hers. Her hand fumbled slightly as she distractedly worked to put his glasses on the coffee table. God, he was a great kisser, able to make her entire body hum with just a innocent kiss. "I love you," she whispered when at last he pulled back, overwhelmed by the emotion she was feeling for this man.

"Uhh... But will you still love me after a few days without showering?" Clark asked.

A slow smile made its way across Lois' face. "Well, I loved you when I arrived in Smallville, didn't I. But this time... Well, I don't know, farmboy." She wrapped an arm around his neck, pulling him with her as she lay back on the sofa. "Maybe we better get in all the loving we can before that happens."

"Suits me," Clark responded, following her over, his mouth searching for hers as his hands began to wander.

An unexpected sound of whimpering right next to their ears caused them to jump, before bursting into laughter when Shadow began nuzzling at the sides of their faces.

Clark hated to contemplate exactly where Bobby had found these clothes. Half the smells they were harboring he didn't recognize and the other half he wished he didn't. It made Clark long for a hot shower. He could only hope he'd get used to it after a while.

"You ready in there?" Bobby called.

"Yeah," Clark said, pulling on the thread-bare winter coat.

Bobby opened the door and walked into the room. "Not bad. Not bad. But... something is missing." A moment later, he again walked out, looking for whatever he seemed to think was lacking in Clark's ensemble.

Shadow whimpered. Clark immediately knelt down next to the dog. "What is it, boy? The smell getting to you, too? Don't worry. It won't be for long." Shadow seemed to calm at the reassurances of his master.

Bobby chose that moment to reenter the room. "You need something on your head. Your hair still looks a little too clean cut — although, you're wearing it a bit longer these days, I see. At

least that's good." Clark flinched slightly — he was going to have to talk to his mother about coming up with some contraption to trim his hair. His thoughts were interrupted when Bobby thrust a baseball cap into his hands. "And I got you these gloves."

Clark put the cap on his head and took the gloves. As he slipped his hands into them, he discovered they had a number of holes. "Do I want to know how you managed to get holey gloves — or the rest of these clothes for that matter?"

"Everything's for sale in Suicide Slum," Bobby responded. "Don't worry, I'll send you the bill. Anyway, we should go if we want to get you settled in while it's still dark. I'll show you where to put up your cardboard box, but you'll be on your own from there. You sure you're up for this?"

"I'm up for it," Clark assured him. "So's Shadow."

"Okay, then. But if you get yourself into too much trouble, I'll be working at the soup kitchen at the corner of Fifth and Saxton today. You just get yourself there and I'll smuggle you back to Lois. Just... walk downwind of me, okay?"

Clark chuckled, but gave the promise.

"Oh, and I thought you might find this gives you an advantage."

He thrust a bottle into Clark's hand.

"It's about a half a pint of whisky. It'll help you make friends."

Partially protected from the elements by the cardboard box and the old blanket Bobby had given him at the last minute, Clark tried to get comfortable on the hard ground of his new abode. He was glad he wasn't affected by the cold and wondered how people stood it who were. Shadow whimpered slightly as he curled up tighter against Clark's side.

As Clark pulled the corner of his blanket up over Shadow and listened to the wind howling around outside in 'Cardboard City' — as it had been dubbed by the local residents — his mind went to the big comfortable bed back at the apartment. Maybe he should have waited until morning. Still, according to Bobby, in this section of Cardboard City, people were more transient and no one would wonder too much if a new resident simply appeared in the middle of the night.

"Come on, old man. You got to have something." The voice close outside his box attracted Clark's attention. The words were accompanied by some scuffling.

"You already took everything. There ain't no more," someone responded.

The comment must have been judged as insolent because there was the distinctive sound of flesh hitting flesh.

Clark was out of his cardboard box even before he'd had a chance to consider his actions. His cane in hand, he tapped his way quickly in the direction of the voices.

"Hey, leave him alone!" he demanded when a second hit sounded through the air.

The sounds of a scuffle stopped and Clark was pretty sure it was because attention had shifted to him.

"Hey, look at this, Mikey. The blind man wants us to quit picking on gramps." The voice was young, mocking.

Clark's hearing told him that two men were coming closer.

"What are you going to do if we don't?" Mikey asked in his ear.

"Just leave him alone," Clark repeated.

He felt someone poke him with something. Maybe a two by four.

"And if we don't?"

"Don't go there," Clark said.

"Come on, Robby," 'Gramps' said. "He don't mean no harm. He's just don't know no better. He's new here."

"Yeah, well, he will know better after tonight," Robby said.

Fortunately, the sound of the two by four slicing through the

air reached Clark before the first hit landed — giving him time to react, to let the blow throw him to the ground. Then, knowing it was the only thing he could do, Clark curled up in a ball as blow after blow descended, being sure to protect his face since that was the one place where a lack of bruising would be noticeable.

Grrrrr. Ruff. Grrrr.

The blows stopped.

“Where’d the mutt come from?” Mikey asked.

“Must be his.”

Clark tensed. If they went after Shadow, he wouldn’t just lie here and play possum. Still, Shadow continued to growl and snap in a way that Clark had to admit sounded terrifying.

“He’s not moving anyway,” Robby said after one more kick. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

He waited as the sound of feet began fading off into the distance before moving. Almost instantly, Shadow was there, as was the old man. Arms reached around him, helping him into a seated position. He tried to move carefully, as if protecting his ribs.

“Hey, you okay?” the man asked.

“I think so,” Clark said, wrapping an arm around himself.

He heard the man sit down on the ground next to him. “You sure?”

Clark nodded.

“I’m Marcus.”

“Clark.”

“Hey thanks for the help, Clark. But you really shouldn’t have gotten involved. Mikey and Robby come down here from time to time, but other than shakin’ us down a bit, they’re basically harmless.”

Clark’s eyebrows rose.

“Yeah, well,” Marcus continued. “Unless you cross them. Good thing your dog here showed up when he did.”

Clark reached out and Shadow instantly scooted under his arm and began to lick his face. When Lois had told Jimmy that he’d be okay because he had Shadow, he’d been skeptical. But no more.

“What’s his name?” Marcus asked.

“Shadow,” Clark responded.

“Well, since you’re new here and I sort of owe you for comin’ to help me, what do you say that you sort of stick by me until you find your feet around here?” Marcus said.

“I’d appreciate that,” Clark responded. Clark felt in his wrist, relieved to discover that Ata had survived the beating. So had the whisky. He removed the flask from his pocket. Figuring if he’d really been beaten, whisky was just what the doctor would order, he took a swig before passing the bottle over to Marcus who accepted the drink immediately. “I heard something about a friend of mine being around here,” Clark said, trying to keep the statement casual. “His name is Steve Baker.”

“We don’t got no last names around here. You must really be new to the streets.”

Clark nodded, but didn’t elaborate.

“Uhh, well, you don’t have to tell me. Most people here don’t have pasts either. But as to your friend, I don’t think I know a Steve down here. But I don’t know everybody.”

‘Damn,’ Clark thought. For a moment, he’d thought he might be out of here with the information he wanted before morning. But he didn’t dare follow up his question about Steven with one about homeless men going missing. Right now, he had an in and he wasn’t about to blow that by making Marcus suspicious of him.

“But a lot of guys sort of keep to themselves,” Marcus continued. “So who knows. You might find him yet.”

“Where’s Clark?” Perry asked.

Lois looked up from the notes she was making to see Perry standing over her. “He’s gone undercover, Perry.”

Perry’s eyebrows rose. “Do you think he’s ready for that?”

“I think it’s a perfect fit.”

Perry took a seat in the chair next to Lois’ desk.

“I think you better explain that.”

“The guys in Suicide Slum wouldn’t talk to us — we think because we’re outsiders...”

“You better not be saying what I think you’re going to say.”

“Come on, Chief. Clark can take care of himself. And a homeless blind man seemed the perfect way to get our questions answered. Besides, he has Bobby Bigmouth looking out for him and I’m going down there later today to find out how he’s doing. Oh, and Shadow’s with him.”

“Shadow?”

“His seeing-eye dog. I think that will keep people from giving him too much trouble.”

Perry looked at her steadily for a long moment and she fought the urge to squirm. If Clark didn’t have certain talents, what he was doing would be very dangerous. Perry should be tearing her apart right about now. So she was surprised when he finally nodded, giving his tacit consent.

As he rose from her desk, he spoke again. “Just keep me informed,” he said as he turned around and walked back to his office.

What? Lois stared silently at her boss’ retreating back. She’d half expected to be ordered to go and drag Clark back and then have to spend the next few days working around the Chief to get Clark back onto the streets. So why had he given in so easily?

And come to think of it, why had he accepted Clark’s non-explanation of why he’d left the Planet? Was it possible that Perry knew... Nah. That was crazy. Why wouldn’t he have said something if he knew?

On the other hand, one thing Lois had learned over the years was that Perry often knew... unofficially... a lot more than he knew officially. As he liked to say, he wasn’t editor in chief of the Daily Planet because he could yodel. It would certainly explain...

“Hey, Lois,” Jimmy said, pulling Lois out of her thoughts. “I got some information for you.”

“Information?” she asked.

“Yeah. About where Martin Snell’s files went following his death. Apparently, legal files can’t be destroyed for years after they’ve been closed. The files that were current at the time of Snell’s death have been passed on to another lawyer in his firm — Snell and Associates. Guess they’ll have to come up with a new name, huh?”

“Anyway, his old files are all at this storage facility.” He handed Lois a piece of paper with an address and storage number on it. “I’ll get the name of the new lawyer for you if you want. But if you’re planning a little snooping... I thought it might be easier breaking into a storage facility than a lawyer’s office.”

Lois smiled. He was learning.

“Anyway, I’ll keep working on this.”

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Lois said as Jimmy began walking away. She looked at the paper for a moment before making a decision. While Clark was in Suicide Slum doing his thing, maybe she’d just see what she could do with this information.

Lois drove slowly past the address Jimmy had given her. Her eyebrows rose when she caught sight of the name on the sign out front. ‘Storage, Storage and More Storage.’ Well, it appeared to be a storage facility, all right. Underneath the name in smaller letters was written: ‘Security Is Our Middle Name.’

“I thought ‘Storage’ was your middle name,” Lois muttered.

She pulled the Jeep off to the side of the road to better scope out the property. Large crate-like containers were situated on a plot of land around a small central building. Even from the road, the crate numbers were clearly visible. Large padlocks seemed to be the only locking device on the crates — at least from what she could see. That made things easier.

On the negative side, a high wire fence encircled the facility, topped with barbed wire. It only allowed access to the central building. A large German Shepherd lay sleeping beyond the fence. Those did not bode well for her chances of sneaking onto the property. And if they had taken those security measures, what other surprises might be waiting for her?

She didn't see any cameras — but that didn't exactly mean anything. Still... maybe there was another way to get a look at those files.

Putting the Jeep in drive, she pulled back out onto the road. Just one stop should do it.

The monster of a man didn't even look up from the porn magazine he was drooling over when Lois entered the office of Storage, Storage and More Storage some time later. Lois walked over to the counter and glanced at the bell sitting on it before looking back at the man. Surely he must know she was there. Still, he just continued turning pages on the magazine.

Ding!

"What'd you want?"

Einstein still hadn't looked up.

"I'm a lawyer with Snell and Associates," Lois said, pulling out one of the business cards she'd had made up less than ten minutes before. "I need to get into storage crate forty-three."

"I thought you people were coming tomorrow." He still hadn't bothered looking up.

"Excuse me?" Lois asked.

"You know. To take the files for destruction. But I guess today works. You still pay to the end of the month, though."

"Uhh... yeah," Lois said slowly. "Well, we'll still be coming tomorrow. I just need to get something out of there before then."

He gestured towards the back door. She glanced at it before looking back at monster man, not entirely certain what he was telling her.

Finally, he looked up at her. "What? You need an engraved invitation?"

"No! No, of course not," she said before heading through the door, and into the yard filled with crates. She froze when she saw the German Shepherd, but when, like the man inside, the dog didn't even look up, she carefully walked past him. Only once she was well by did she begin looking for crate forty-three.

Well, it was a good thing that security was their middle name — because otherwise they wouldn't have any security at all. Of course, Einstein hadn't given her a key, but that was hardly a problem.

Still, his comment about someone from the firm coming by to destroy the files was interesting. Jimmy had said that files had to be kept for years. And yet, it was less than six months since Snell's death. Unless... maybe the files kept here were really old. In which case, they may not be what she needed at all. Still, she was here now so...

Spotting crate forty-three, she walked over and began work on the lock.

"Ready for some lunch?" Marcus asked approaching the corner Bobby had suggested Clark use to beg. "Hey, how you makin' out?"

"I'm not sure," Clark said, picking up the tin can sitting next to him and shaking it slightly. "Sounds like I'm doing okay."

Marcus took the can from him. He picked out a number of items and tossed them away. "Stones," he explained. "Still... looks like ya got about eight-five cents."

Clark sighed, wondering which of his 'donors' he had thanked for the stones. He'd have to listen more closely to the sound made when things were dropped into his can. Still, at least it solved the moral dilemma he'd been struggling with all morning about what to do with the money. He'd decided to donate it to the soup

kitchen where Bobby was working. Not that they'd be too impressed with eighty-five cents.

"Guess I'm not too good at this," Clark said.

"Hey, don't worry about it. It's still early. Anyway, if ya got time for a break, I thought I'd take you to the Saxton Street Kitchen to get a hot bowl of soup — introduce you to some of the guys."

"Great," Clark said. He'd be glad for the introductions. And it sure beat sitting out here in the cold, collecting rocks.

He might not be overly affected by the cold. Still, Clark had to admit, it felt wonderful stepping into the warm building. He could only imagine the reprieve such places were for the regular inhabitants of the streets.

"No dogs allowed," a woman yelled from across the room. "Can't you read the sign?"

Clark hesitated. Damn. That was a problem he hadn't considered. If he hadn't wanted to blend in, he'd have informed the woman that state law required all establishments open to the public to admit seeing-eye dogs. As it was... maybe coming here wasn't such a good idea. He might be wise to beg off and wait for another chance to meet some of the men and ask some questions so as not to give away his cover.

"Hey, Marg, relax."

Bobby. Clark breathed a sigh of relief.

"Can't you see he's blind?" Bobby continued. "And that's a seeing-eye dog — so they have to be admitted."

Thank God for Bobby.

He heard the woman make a disgruntled noise but she didn't follow up on her complaint. In fact, Clark heard her walking away.

A slight tug on his arm told him that Marcus wanted him to walk so he did, following the older man towards the smell of food. "So who's your friend, Marcus?" Bobby asked while spooning some liquid into a bowl.

"This is Clark," Marcus said.

Clark could hear Marcus accept the soup and put it on his tray before accepting one for Clark as well.

"Ya want a bun?" Marcus asked. When Clark nodded, Marcus added a bun to each of their trays.

"I knew a Clark once," Bobby said casually. "He was in love with this Lois chick. If he were here now, he'd probably want me to take him back to her."

Clark understood the message immediately. "Too bad I don't know anyone named Lois," he said.

Bobby's soft chuckle followed him all the way to his seat.

Lois pushed down her excitement as she left Storage, Storage and More Storage, not wanting Einstein to get suspicious. She still wasn't sure there was anything in what she had discovered, but it certainly was possible. After all, the files hadn't been old. So why would not-old files be slated for destruction? The only answer she could come up with was that they were being destroyed, not because they were old, but because they were sensitive.

Knowing she didn't have a lot of time, she regretfully restricted her search to finding client lists and accounts. Fortunately, in true legal fashion, the files had been meticulously organized. She'd managed to scan a client list, together with a list of files and the types of services rendered with her hand-held scanner. The lists were long. If she found anything particularly interesting when she went through it this afternoon, she might try a little mission back here after the place closed tonight.

She had briefly considered taking a bunch of files now, but quickly rejected the idea. Better to do it when she had gone through the list and knew what might be best to take. And although Einstein hadn't shown any signs of intelligent life so far, she might be best not to underestimate him. Better to do this under the cover of darkness when she had a little superstrength at her

disposal.

Unfortunately, there were no accounting files in the storage room. Perhaps who had paid for various tasks was in the individual files, but she didn't dare take the time to go through all of those. Surely even Einstein would get suspicious if she stayed too long.

Einstein didn't look up as she walked past him and out to her Jeep. She breathed a sigh of relief when, after starting the vehicle, she pulled it out onto the street to return to the Daily Planet.

Marcus had been as good as his word, introducing Clark to a number of men at the shelter. Even Clark's soup seemed to hit the spot, given the cold of the day. And Bobby had seen fit to bring some scraps over for Shadow — saying something about the pooch needing some lunch, too. Shadow immediately began chowing down.

Still, since everyone seemed to be eating their lunch in silence, Clark was left with the dilemma of how to begin his enquiries. If they'd been chatting, he might be able to inject his questions in as part of casual conversation, but with no 'casual conversation' taking place, the task became much harder.

Marcus solved the problem for him. "Clark here is looking for a friend of his. Anyone know a Steve?"

There was a grumble of denials and Clark felt his heart sink.

"Hey, wasn't there a Steve who used to bed down at St. Andrews when it got too cold on the street?" the man who had been introduced to him as Eric asked after a moment.

Clark instantly perked up.

"I think I remember him," the man known as Sarge responded. "Big guy. Older. A vet if I remember correctly."

"That sounds like him," Clark said.

"Ain't he one of the guys that went missin'?" a third guy who had been introduced as Buddy asked.

"Missing?" Clark asked.

"About a month ago, a bunch of the guys just disappeared. No one knows what happened to them."

"I know," Eric said.

"Oh, not that crazy theory of yours again," Sarge said.

"It's not a crazy theory," Eric said, sounding annoyed.

The slight murmur Clark heard from the men told him that they'd been subjected to this theory a number of times — and didn't believe it now any more than they had the first time Eric had mentioned it.

"What's your theory?" Clark asked. He was just trying to make conversation, after all.

"All the missing men went to the free clinic."

Clark's eyebrows rose. "What free clinic?"

"About six weeks ago," Marcus began, "two guys showed up — doctors. They said that the city was openin' a free clinic for the guys down here. Set up shop in the old Sears building on Fraser Avenue."

"I wasn't going to no free clinic put on by the government," Eric said. "You can never trust those government doctors. Probably going to infect you with VD or somethin' just to find out how it affects people. Besides, those doctors looked shiftin'."

"So what happened?" Clark asked, trying to get them back on track.

"The guys down here rushed to take advantage of it. The doctors did examinations, took blood, patched up some wounds and stuff. And then they just vanished. Lock stock and barrel. One day the clinic was open, the next it was as if it had never been there."

"And a week or so later, a bunch of the men who'd gone to the clinic disappeared," Eric said.

"One has nothing to do with the other," Sarge said. "You know how those government programs are. The second they find

something that's successful, the funding disappears."

"I tell you... they're connected," Eric insisted. "Buddy of mine went there. He had his eyes tested. Guess they gave everyone an eye exam whether they wanted them or not. Said it was part of the general check up that they were required to do. Anyway, they promised to get my buddy some glasses 'cause his eyes ain't that good. When he went back to get them, everyone had packed up and left."

Something twigged in the back of Clark's mind, but he wasn't entirely certain what it was.

"What were the doctors' names?"

"I think one of their names might have been Lunch — or at least something to do with eating," Sarge said. "But I could be wrong."

"What did they look like?" he asked, knowing as he did that he was coming dangerously close to giving himself away — after all, why would a blind man care how they looked?

Lois sat down at her desk and looked at the newly-printed client list. She skipped through it quickly, looking for one name in particular. Yes, Bill Church was definitely there. Still, that was not definitive proof that Church was the head of Intergang.

Once she'd established that Church was one of Snell's clients, she returned to the top of the list and began going through it slowly, putting each name together with the brief description of the types of issues Snell had handled for them. After all, she didn't want to get so fixated on Church that she missed something else. Still, it was interesting to note that the vast amount of work Snell had done was for Church — even if most of it looked to be in connection with establishing a CostMart presence in Metropolis.

Taking out a pad of paper, she made notes of names to follow up on when suddenly she stopped, staring in disbelief at the next name on the list. For a moment, she sat frozen by her discovery and then she was moving, plowing through the second list to see what work Snell had done for the individual in question.

Finding what she was looking for, she leaned back in her chair, considering the implications of her discovery.

She was so lost in thought that she didn't hear the ding of the elevator so the sight of the dirty man standing next to her desk caused her to jump. She opened her mouth to ask what he wanted when her eyes finally alighted on his face.

"Clark?" she asked.

"I found out something, Lois," he said. "We need to talk. Conference room?"

Lois nodded, not adding that she'd found something, too — something very, very interesting.

Clark chuckled when he heard Lois sit down on the far side of the conference room table. He couldn't exactly say he blamed her. He'd grown accustomed to the smell of his clothes during the course of the day, but this was her first... and hopefully last... exposure.

He heard Shadow whine softly and instantly knew what he wanted. Bending down, he snapped the halter off the dog and grinned when he heard Shadow take off towards Lois.

"You need a bath," Lois immediately informed Shadow. "Probably from spending too much time with this bum."

"You'll regret saying that when you find out what I learned. Or... what I think I learned," he clarified.

"So... fill me in already."

Clark proceeded to fill her in on the information he'd obtained at the soup kitchen before adding, "So then I asked what these doctors looked like and... Lois, it sounds to me from the description as if Dr. Leit and Munch were the doctors."

"But Munch isn't a doctor."

"No. But that doesn't mean the guys might have just thought both were doctors. Or..."

"...or Munch was pretending to be a doctor," Lois added. "And his name is close to lunch and has something to do with eating. And I agree that the eye exams do sound suspicious. But do you have any proof?"

Clark shook his head. "But I was thinking that if I could get pictures of both Leit and Munch, maybe show them to Marcus. He could confirm if it was them."

"You'd be giving away the fact that you're not really one of them."

Clark let out a breath. "I know. But I think Marcus would talk to me."

Lois nodded slowly. "I found something today, too. Something that sort of connects with your discovery — loosely. Seems Dr. Faraday was one of Snell's clients."

Clark's eyebrows rose. "You got his client list?"

"Some of it, anyway. And guess what Snell was doing for Faraday?" Lois paused dramatically. "He was applying for a patent."

"On the device that was used to put knowledge into your mind?"

"I suspect so. I'm planning to sneak back into the facility where the file is being stored tonight to get it. There might be something in there that will help me figure out how to get rid of the information he put in my mind with his device."

"Or access it." Clark paused as a new thought occurred to him. "But, Lois... Are you sure you should be sneaking into some Intergang place at night alone?"

"Absolutely not," Lois responded, causing Clark's eyebrows to jump. "Which is why I'm planning to take you with me... Besides, I need your special abilities to get over the high fence."

"Uhh..." Clark said with a grin, suddenly understanding why Lois had been so quick to agree with him that she shouldn't go alone. She needed a boost over the fence. He should have known. He pushed the thought aside to address another issue. "Lois, I've got a question about your Faraday leaks."

"What?"

"Have you ever had anything other than science leaks?"

"No. Why?"

"Nothing. I guess that was a crazy idea."

"What?"

"Just... what Baker said when we bumped into him at CostMart. I just wondered if it could have been a Faraday leak. But if all of the leaks are scientific, I guess that doesn't work."

"Unless the device can be used to implant different types of information and maybe science was just the type of information I was given." She paused momentarily. When she continued, her voice was much more animated. "What if that's what this is all about? What if all of this... Baker's disappearance... the missing men... everything is connected to the Faraday device? Think about it, Clark. If you could control the information in a person's mind, you could control the person."

"But how would that be possible? After all, the device was used on you and it's not as if it replaced the knowledge you already have — it just added to it."

"Except that I can't access it."

"Yeah." For a moment both were silent as they thought about that.

"Oh, wait, wait, wait," Lois said. "What if... what if the device could be reversed?"

"You mean to take the information out of your mind?"

"No. To make the information a person already knows inaccessible and instead have the knowledge put in your brain by the device the only knowledge you could access."

"Then you really could control a person — change their entire personality or their beliefs. And the knowledge they have acquired during their entire life — which might be able to keep them from believing the new information — wouldn't be accessible to them."

"Exactly."

"And the Machiavelli leak... What better way to make a person distrust authority, make them more likely to act against it, then to fill his mind with writings like those of Machiavelli!"

Clark said.

"Right!"

"Okay, but does any of this get us any closer to finding Baker?"

"What connects these things? Well, assuming there is a connection," Lois muttered before falling silent and he could tell she was thinking.

He loved the way her mind worked. No one he'd ever met had her ability to sort through the pieces of a case to see the whole picture. Minimal information and wild speculation that more often than not turned out to be right. Even now she was undoubtedly rolling the information they'd obtained around in her mind in a haphazard fashion until it formed a pattern — a mosaic of sorts. Filling in whatever blanks existed to give her a fascinating picture of the whole. It suddenly occurred to him that he should be thinking about the case, but before he could move his mind in that direction, Lois spoke again.

"Intergang," she said.

"What?"

"The lawyer Faraday was using to apply for a patent on his device was an Intergang lawyer and..."

"...we saw... so to speak... Baker running out of CostMart..."

"...which I'm still certain is an Intergang cover. And, yes, Bill Church was one of the names on Snell's client list."

"So what are we saying here? That Faraday was working for Intergang?"

"I don't think so. In the brief moment before Faraday used the device on me, he apologized. Not typical Intergang behavior," Lois said. "Besides, if he was working for Intergang, why were Leit and Munch trying to steal his device? Why kill him? Wouldn't it be risky to make such a move against Intergang? Surely there would have been reprisals. But what if Faraday went to Snell without knowing he was an Intergang lawyer. He simply wanted to apply for a patent..."

"When he explains what the device does to Snell," Clark continued, "Snell realizes the potential for the device and goes to his bosses. So you think that Munch and Leit were working for Intergang?"

"That's exactly what I think."

"It would certainly explain why Faraday attempted to hide the device in your apartment — to keep Intergang from getting their hands on it when he realized what they wanted to use it for."

"So then, Leit and Munch blind Superman and steal Faraday's device. They then need to test it — but to do that, they need guinea pigs, so to speak..."

"So they set up a free clinic in Cardboard City to make sure they have healthy test subjects — and then they abduct the most promising candidates."

"Exactly!" Lois exclaimed.

"Okay, well, that's a great theory, but right now that's all it is."

"That's why we need confirmation. We need to be sure that Leit and Munch really were the doctors at the free clinic. Because whatever else we know about them, I think it's a safe bet to say that they weren't operating a free clinic because of some altruistic impulse."

"So we talk to Marcus."

"We talk to Marcus."

"But first... I want to take a trip to the locker rooms and get cleaned up. Marcus is going to know something fishy's going on the second I show him pictures of Leit and Munch. I think he's more likely to be up front with me if I'm up front with him."

"If you think I'm going to object to you having a shower before climbing into my Jeep... ain't gonna happen," Lois said, a

grin in her voice. "You can even give Shadow a bath while you're at it."

Lois' two guys looked and smelled much better when they finally climbed into her Jeep some time later. Shadow immediately scampered into the back to get a better view out the window, looking none the worse for his night on the streets. Clark looked better, too, his hair still slightly damp, dressed in a brown suit with one of his trademark wild ties. He was still sporting facial hair, however, since his shaving kit was at home. Still, she had to admit that a few days worth of stubble gave him a dangerously sexy quality. She chuckled.

"What?" Clark asked. "My tie not match?"

"Your ties never match," Lois responded before reaching over to straighten his tie for him. "But you look fine."

"Then what was the chuckle for?"

"I was just thinking you look dangerously sexy with a few days worth of stubble."

"Dangerously sexy, hey?" He sounded pleased with that thought. "Maybe I can work that to my advantage later."

Lois started up the engine. "I'm sure you'll try, anyway," she responded playfully as she backed out of her parking space.

"Well, I'm in need of a comfortable bed with a good woman to keep me warm after sleeping out on the dark, cold streets of Metropolis."

"Yeah, all four or five hours of it. Oh, you poor baby."

"Not even that long," Clark said before filling Lois in on how he'd met Marcus.

Clark's navigational bracelet was very useful in helping Lois and Clark find their way back to Clark's cardboard box. He'd entered the location of the box into the bracelet the previous night for just this purpose — although he thought he'd be finding his way back as a homeless person.

"Nice," Lois said, squatting down to take a look inside. "Did you decorate yourself?"

"I'll have you know that it was the best cardboard box I could find at Valuefood," Clark said, trying to sound indignant.

Before Lois could respond, a new voice entered the conversation.

"I know that dog."

Lois stood up so quickly she knocked the box over.

"Hi, Marcus," Clark said, obviously having recognized the man's voice.

Spinning around, she saw a wiry old man standing nearby, more white hair on his face than graced the top of his head. His left hand was missing — which was something she really hadn't expected. He was wearing a thread-bare military type coat which appeared to have most of the stuffing missing and she could see a ratty orange t-shirt poking out underneath. The stump of an unlit cigarette was hanging out one side of his mouth. So this was Marcus. Well, that might be a problem, because he did not look happy. Maybe Clark revealing his cover had been a mistake.

"Not so sure I know the man though," Marcus said suspiciously.

"I'm still Clark."

Marcus' eyes narrowed.

"Clark Kent," Clark continued. "I'm a reporter for the Daily Planet. And this is my partner, Lois Lane."

"I don't want to end up in no story," Marcus said. "You lie about being blind, too?"

Clark shook his head. "I lost my sight a couple months ago."

"Hmph!" Marcus turned around and began walking away.

"Marcus, please. Just... hear me out, okay?"

Marcus spun back around, more nimble than Lois would have expected.

"I don't take kindly to being lied to."

"Just give me a chance to explain?" Clark asked.

"So what's stopping you?" Marcus asked, even as he walked over to another box... or actually, his spot looked to be more of a campsite. There was an almost homey, permanent quality to his place.

Lois took Clark's hand and walked them closer.

"Now this is what a cardboard house should look like!" Lois exclaimed. At first, she couldn't believe she'd said that out loud and was worried that she'd offended Marcus — until an unexpected grin quirked at one corner of his mouth.

"Yeah," Marcus said. "His place does look kinda pathetic, doesn't it."

Clark had looked horrified at her words, but the amusement in Marcus' voice now had him looking shocked.

"Should've known just from that that he didn't belong around here," Marcus continued. His eyes seemed to take in Lois, finally coming to rest on her and Clark's joined hands.

"So this is your woman, huh? Thought you said she was your partner."

"She's both," Clark responded, his grip tightened momentarily on Lois' hand.

Lois felt a flash of anger. She was no one's 'woman.' She and Clark were equal partners. And if this old man thought... Her voice trailed off when she noticed the amused look on Marcus' face, almost as if he'd read her mind during her silent diatribe.

"She's a lot of woman, son. You sure you can handle her?"

"She handles me," Clark responded.

Marcus laughed. "Now... that I believe."

Lois felt slightly mollified — especially since it seemed that the exchange had broken the ice with Marcus.

"I still don't like being lied to," Marcus suddenly said, as if he, too, realized that the ice had been broken and wasn't particularly happy about it.

"I know. And I'm sorry, but I didn't see any other way."

"So you planning to write a story about life down here?"

Marcus asked suspiciously. "'Cause the guys won't be too happy with me for introducing you if they end up in the papers."

"I understand. And don't worry... I'm not doing a story about you... or about the guys. Lois and I are just trying to find the guys who went missing."

"Why? Can't imagine you're readers care much about a bunch of homeless guys going missing. Probably see it as less bums to worry about."

"Our boss cares," Lois said.

"He does?" Marcus asked, sounding skeptical. "Why?"

Lois glanced over at Clark, deciding to let him be the one to tell the story. Clark took a deep breath and began the tale. It wasn't until he mentioned Perry and Steve being together in Vietnam that Marcus seemed to become truly engaged in the story. Lois glanced again at Marcus' coat and then at his missing hand. Was he, too, one of the victims of that war?

"So why'd ya lie to me?" Marcus asked when Clark had finished his story. "Why pretend you were one of us instead of just askin' what you wanna know?"

"We tried," Clark said. "We visited every soup kitchen and shelter in the area and no one would talk to us."

"Because..." Lois began, almost giggling when she felt Clark's hand tighten on hers. "...we're strangers. No one would trust us." He'd obviously thought she was going to say 'because we don't stink.'

Marcus didn't seem to notice the silent exchange. Instead he was nodding thoughtfully. "So why tell me now?"

"Because Clark didn't want to keep lying to you," Lois said.

"He thought you might trust him enough to give us your help even if you knew who he was."

Marcus was silent as he studied the two of them.

"Will you help us?" Clark finally asked.

"What'd ya wanna know?"

Lois and Clark immediately relaxed. The gamble had worked. "We're following up on the free clinic," Clark said.

"Eric's theory?" Marcus asked incredulously. "Eric's crazy. He thinks the government is gonna infect people with VD just to see what happens."

"Just because he's crazy doesn't mean he might not be right," Lois responded. "Besides, he's not too far off on the government conducting experiments on people without their knowledge."

"Infectin' people with VD?"

"Well," Lois continued. "Maybe not infecting them. But from the nineteen thirties to the seventies, the government did a study of the effects of syphilis on black males — even though it meant intentionally keeping them in the dark so that they wouldn't be treated with penicillin after it was discovered to be effective against syphilis in the nineteen fifties."

"Really?" Marcus asked.

Lois nodded.

"Maybe I should listen to Eric more often. So you think he's right about the free clinic?"

"It's just a theory we're following up on at the moment,"

Clark said. "But..." He reached into his pocket and withdrew the pictures of Leit and Munch. "...can you tell us if these were the doctors?"

Clark held out the pictures to Marcus who immediately took them. It occurred to Lois that Marcus might not have even seen the doctors and wondered what they would do then. But that thought proved unnecessary when...

"Yeah, that's them. You figured that out from what the guys said at lunch?"

Clark nodded. "I had a hunch. We had a run in with these two recently and it just seemed to... fit."

"Huh. So what happens now?"

"I've got an idea about that," Lois said. She turned to Clark. "I say we fumble around at Speedy Ambulance — see if we can find out more about the ambulance that took Baker."

"You think Speedy Ambulance lied to us about not making any pickups?"

"Not necessarily, but... the ambulance I saw definitely said 'Speedy Ambulance' on the side. And the license was registered to Speedy Ambulance. Wouldn't it be easier just to rent an ambulance... maybe even long term than it would be to build your own ambulance and steal a license plate?"

"And if someone made arrangements to hire an ambulance out for the whole day... maybe even longer..."

"...then Speedy Ambulance might not even know about a pickup."

"...but they would know who they rented the ambulance out to."

"So our next stop needs to be..."

"...Speedy Ambulance."

Lois looked over at Marcus who was grinning at them as they finished up their conversation.

"Didn't understand a word of that," Marcus said. "But, damn, it was entertainin' to watch."

They were getting pretty good at the routine, Clark thought as he and Lois climbed back in the Jeep after their trip to Speedy Ambulance. Once again, Clark had managed to use his blindness to distract the man behind the counter long enough for Lois to get a look at the records.

"So what did you find?" he asked as Lois started the Jeep.

"We were right. About six weeks ago, Speedy Ambulance rented out one of their ambulances, long term, to... Wait for it... CostMart Inc."

Clark's eyebrows rose. "That would be shortly before the men started disappearing."

"Exactly. Maybe they thought they might need an ambulance for transportation or the like. It sure kept us from interfering when we saw them pick up Baker."

"True."

"So I figure we need to make a trip to CostMart," Lois said as they pulled back onto the road.

"Which one? A lot of CostMarts have gone up in the past few months."

"The one we saw Baker running out of, of course," Lois said. "Besides, it's the first one they built, and I figure it's more likely that Intergang would be using that one for... whatever."

"Assuming Intergang and CostMart are actually connected."

"Well, yeah, assuming that."

"Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Do you have a better one?"

"I'm just wondering if we have enough to go to Henderson. If we have enough for a search warrant, then maybe that's the way to go. After all, it's not like Superman can just look through the walls and see what's going on inside."

Lois thought about that for a minute. He was probably also concerned about them walking into a dangerous situation without Superman around to save the day. And... well, he may have a point there. He couldn't just disappear any more as Clark only to reappear as Superman. And she knew without a doubt that he would give away his secret in a second if it was the only way to protect her.

Still...

"I don't think that we have quite enough just yet. Let's see what we can learn at CostMart before going to talk to Bill. After all, how much trouble can we get into just by looking around?"

Clark smiled. "Have you ever met my partner? She can get in trouble walking across an open field on a sunny day."

Lois rolled her eyes, but did not respond. After all, he might... but only might... have a bit of a point.

"Oh, you are not going to believe this," Lois said as she drove around CostMart to the loading docks.

"What?" Clark asked.

"Guess what's parked out back."

"You're kidding."

"Nope," she said, pulling to a stop across from the ambulance sitting next to the large doors. "Even has the same license number of the ambulance that picked up Baker."

"Why have they left it out where anyone can see it?"

"Maybe they didn't expect anyone to be looking for it here — or that anyone would understand the significance of its being here."

She turned off the Jeep and put her hand on the door handle when Clark's arm came over to stop her from disembarking.

"Please tell me you have a plan," Clark asked.

"Of course I have a plan," she responded indignantly.

"And that would be?"

"To look around," she said, before opening the door and climbing out of the Jeep. "Coming?"

When Clark hesitated, Lois sat back down on the seat.

"What's going on, Clark?" she asked, realizing for the first time that he had serious concerns about what they were doing — more so than he normally had about her more adventurous schemes.

"Lois, have you thought about the fact that if we're right and Leit and Munch are involved in this then they know that Superman's blind?" he finally said.

Suddenly, she understood why he'd been so reluctant about coming here — the possibility that Leit and Munch, upon seeing her blind partner, would make the connection to Superman. And then... where would Clark Kent's secret be? Mayson finding out would seem like the good old days.

She slowly closed the Jeep door. "You're right," she said. "I

think we have enough to talk to Henderson.” She was about to start the engine when she stopped again. “But before we go... any chance you can listen in on what might be going on in there?”

Clark concentrated for a moment before shaking his head. “Maybe I could after hours. But right now, there’s just too much activity in the store for me to make much out.”

The pleasantries had been conducted. The prerequisite welcome homes and questions about Clark’s eyes had been completed. And the introduction of Shadow had taken place. Only then had Lois and Clark filled Inspector Bill Henderson in on what they wanted.

Henderson simply sat in silence when they finished, giving neither Lois nor Clark any idea what he was thinking.

Unable to stand the silence for a moment more, Lois spoke again.

“What else do you need? We saw... Or well I saw... Clark heard a man who was reported missing being detained against his will outside CostMart. We’ve since learned that the woman who was detaining him, and claiming to be a doctor with the Metropolis Psychiatric Hospital, doesn’t work there. In fact, we couldn’t find a doctor in Metropolis with her name at all.”

“And the ambulance he was taken away in is currently sitting outside the loading dock at CostMart,” Clark added.

“And you’re sure it’s the same ambulance?” Henderson asked.

“Absolutely,” Lois said immediately. “It has the same license number.”

“Why do I have a feeling there’s more to this than you’re telling me?” Henderson asked.

“We have theories,” Clark said. “But what we can say for certain is what we’re telling you.”

Henderson’s chair squeaked slightly as he leaned back in it. “How about you share your theories with me, too?”

Lois looked over at Clark. He said nothing and she realized that he was leaving the decision of what to tell Henderson up to her. “Fine,” Lois finally said before filling him in on the rest of their speculations.

Henderson was nodding slowly as they finished, obviously intrigued by the Intergang angle.

“What if we’re right?” Lois said. “You can use our missing guy to get a search warrant for CostMart. If there’s nothing there that connects CostMart to Intergang, you haven’t done anything that will make you look foolish. But once you’re in there looking for a missing person... As I understand the law anything you see in plain sight when you happen to be in there could be used in your Intergang investigation. This could be a lot bigger than just a missing person’s case.”

“Assuming your theory about Bill Church being the head of Intergang is right,” Henderson said.

He tapped his fingers together. “I have one more question.”

“What’s that?”

“Normally you... Or well at least Lois wouldn’t come to me until she’d obviously broken into CostMart. Why bring this to me now.”

“Maybe I’m turning over a new leaf,” Lois said.

Bill snorted. “Yeah, right.” He paused. “Okay, let’s pitch this to the D.A.’s office — see if we have enough for a warrant on your missing person,” he said, picking up the phone.

After he placed his call, Lois spoke again. “Oh, by the way, I have something I need to tell you.”

“What’s that?” Henderson asked. “And am I going to need my handcuffs?”

“Ha, ha,” Lois responded, ignoring the fact that Clark had actually laughed. “I took the crime scene tape off the door of my apartment,” she confessed.

Bill was still jokingly debating whether to get out his

handcuffs and Clark was still trying to figure out whether to be annoyed that Lois hadn’t told him about the tape when the liaison from the D.A.’s office arrived.

Why Lois had never considered the possibility that it could be Mayson Drake, she wasn’t sure. Mayson, too, stiffened when she realized who was in Henderson’s office. As Bill explained what evidence they had for a search warrant, Mayson’s eyes continued flicking back and forth between Lois and Clark.

“First you thought Bill Church was the head of Intergang,” Mayson finally said in disdain. “Now that you can’t find evidence of that, you’re accusing him of what? Abducting some vagrant?”

“Actually,” Clark responded, much more calmly than Lois was inclined to do at the moment, “we don’t know who is behind the abduction. We just followed the evidence. After Steven Baker was reported missing, Lois and I saw him — so to speak — trying to escape from CostMart, wearing nothing more than a hospital gown — which indicates that he was likely being held somewhere nearby.

“We also know that he was grabbed by a man and a woman,” Clark continued. “The woman claimed to be a doctor, but there is no doctor by the name she gave us practicing in New Troy. Yet we know she gave Baker some sort of injection — probably a sedative of some sort. And he was taken away in an ambulance which is now parked by the loading docks at CostMart — having been rented by CostMart Inc. six weeks ago. We have no evidence that links Bill Church to any of this. We just want Inspector Henderson to get a warrant to check out CostMart for our missing man — who, as it happens, saved the life of Perry White a number of years ago.”

Lois bit her tongue to keep from responding. Mayson had never bought her theory about Bill Church being the head of Intergang, so trying to argue that she was wrong when they still had no proof was counterproductive in this situation. Besides, Clark had summed up their case fairly effectively — as well as slapping Mayson’s hand pretty firmly for dismissing Steven Baker as nothing more than a vagrant.

Mayson took her eyes off him and looked back at Bill. “You have the information for the warrant all ready for me, I suppose.”

Bill passed a pile of papers across to her and she began looking through them.

A knock on the door interrupted them. “Inspector,” a young officer said sticking his head in the door, “the Chief wants to see to you.”

Henderson rose to his feet. “What’s this about, Stan?”

“Apparently, some men burst into City Hall and took a bunch of hostages, including the Mayor and the Mayor’s ten-year-old daughter who was there for the bring your child to work day — along with a number of other employees and their children.”

He had the attention of everyone in the room now.

Bill pulled his suit jacket off the back of his chair. “Have they said what they want?” he asked.

“Superman,” Stan responded. “If he doesn’t show up in an hour, they’re going to start killing hostages, one every half hour, until he arrives.”

“What?” Henderson demanded incredulously. “What are they trying to do? Superman is gone. No one knows where.” With that he quickly followed Stan out of the office, leaving Lois, Clark and Mayson staring after him in shocked disbelief.

“Get hold of Maggie Sawyer,” Bill told Stan as he rushed across the adjoining room. “Tell her to get the SWAT team down to City Hall ASAP — faster, if possible. Set up a perimeter and make sure that no one goes into the building. And empty the building of anyone not involved in the hostage situation. Tell her to have a report ready for me when I get there. I’ll be following her down there as soon as I talk to the Chief.”

Of those left behind, Clark was the first to move, closing the door before turning to face the two women.

"I have to go," he said softly.

"What?" Mayson gasped. "We have a deal. Let the police handle it. Besides, what are you going to do? You can't help anyone anymore. You're blind."

"I have to go," Clark repeated, ignoring the offensiveness of Mayson's comments.

"If you do," Mayson said, "then our deal is off! I will make sure everyone knows that Clark Kent is Superman." There was no mistaking from her tone that she meant every word.

"Lois?" Clark asked.

Lois suddenly realized Clark wasn't addressing Mayson at all. He was looking for Lois' permission — her blessing to do what he had to do, regardless of what Mayson may do as a result. Lois felt tears come to her eyes. She felt fear — fear that the bad guys wouldn't be summoning him if they didn't have some way to destroy him, fear of what their life would be like once Mayson told the world about the man behind the hero. He knew all that, she realized. And he needed her to say the one word that would let him do what his very nature required of him.

"Go," she said softly.

"I'm not kidding," Mayson responded. "You do this and your life is over."

"Go," Lois repeated more firmly now. "The suits are in an unopened box in the back of your closet."

Clark gave one firm nod and then whispered something to Ata. "Can you help me to the window, Lois?" Clark asked.

Lois took his arm and led him to the window in Bill's office. After she opened it, he turned to her, taking her face between his hands and kissing her soundly, before leaping out the window and disappearing straight up into the sky too fast for the human eye to follow, leaving her weak-kneed staring after him.

"How could you do that?" Mayson demanded. "How could you tell him to go?"

Lois spun towards Mayson.

"Because, Mayson," Lois said angrily, "it's what he needed me to do! Clark told me you once said that Superman didn't have guts. That he lacked courage. But in that, you never understood him at all, did you? Clark knows that his life is over if he does this — either because the bad guys wouldn't have insisted he come if they intended to let him walk away alive or because you intend to tell his secret to the world.

"But he still has to go," Lois continued. "Because maybe he can help. Because people's lives depend on him. And because Clark Kent could never sit back and do nothing in a situation like this. It would destroy him if he did. And, unlike you, I love him enough to let him be who he is." She grabbed her coat. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm heading down to City Hall on the off chance that I can be of some help to Clark."

Lois grabbed Shadow's halter and stormed from the room, leaving Mayson gaping after her.

Lois pulled the Jeep to a stop by the police barriers set up in front of City Hall. The police had already managed to set up a perimeter, blocking off the building. Lois could see sharpshooters taking up positions on the top of several adjoining buildings. A large trailer, which seemed to be the temporary head quarters for this police action, had been set up near her parking spot.

Night was beginning to fall and so large lights were being set up around the perimeter to ensure that City Hall remained well lit.

Lois turned to Shadow, wondering briefly if she should leave him in the Jeep, but then decided against it. Shadow had acted anxious during the entire trip here, as if he somehow understood the gravity of the situation. And after what Clark had told her Shadow had done early this morning to protect him, Lois wasn't about to write him off as a potential ally.

She quickly removed Shadow's halter and replaced it with a simple collar and leash. Given that she didn't know how to use the

halter properly, and that it was sized for someone of Clark's height, it seemed the best course of action.

She was just about to disembark when Bill Henderson drove up. As she stepped out of the Jeep with Shadow, Captain Maggie Sawyer stepped out of the trailer and waved to Bill who immediately began walking towards her.

Lois quickly slipped between the police barriers — easy enough to do because, since she had been one of the first to be informed of the situation, the inevitable crowd of reporters had not yet arrived and the police were not yet in place to keep people away — and approached the two of them, determined to talk her way into the trailer. Before anyone could say anything, a voice, amplified by a megaphone, could be heard echoing throughout the street.

"He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious. In thirty-five minutes, Superman, comes the first death."

Lois' eyes went towards City Hall to see an upper floor window open but with the blinds drawn.

"He's been doing that every five minutes," Maggie told Bill, but Lois was now close enough to hear. "But as long as the blinds are drawn, the sharpshooters won't be able to get a clean shot."

Maggie opened the door of the trailer and stepped inside. Henderson did too.

Going with the flow, Lois followed them in.

"Whoa!" Henderson said. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm coming in," Lois said.

Henderson looked at her for a long second. "Where's Kent?" he asked, looking down at the dog by Lois' side.

"Uhh... he went back to the Planet to bring Perry up to speed."

"And he didn't take his dog?"

"Well, he was going to hail a cab and he was worried that no one would stop for him if he had Shadow with him," Lois said, improvising wildly.

"I thought there were laws to prevent that type of discrimination."

Oh, damn. Right. "Well, how do you prove that a cab didn't stop because you have a dog with you? So we decided I'd bring him with me." She let out a breath. That had sounded plausible. Oh, crap. How was Clark to hail a cab when he couldn't see the cab coming? "Come on, Henderson," she said quickly, before he could think too deeply about her excuse. "Let me in. I just want to help."

Henderson studied her for a moment more before nodding. She looked at him, puzzled by his acquiescence. But he gave no hint of what he was thinking. Still, having received permission to enter, Lois followed Bill into the trailer and closed the door. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, but when they did, she realized that the inside of the trailer was a virtual technological store with high tech equipment in operation everywhere she looked.

"We've tapped into the security cameras in City Hall," Maggie said, pointing to the monitors in the van.

Lois and Henderson both moved closer, looking at the various angles captured on camera. They were good pictures, unlike many surveillance cameras Lois had seen over the years. And they were in color. Only the best for City Hall it seemed.

"For some reason, they haven't tried to prevent us from seeing what they are up to. We're not sure why. It might be that they want us to be able to observe the executions," Maggie went on. She pointed to a couple of men wearing headsets. "We've set up shotgun microphones, but so far aren't having any luck listening in on the hostages. But we'll keep working on it. As you can see, there appear to be twenty-seven hostages. Six are under the age of sixteen. They are all being held in the mayor's office. My man

over there..." She pointed to an officer who was currently on the phone. "...is trying to get all the names."

"How many perps?"

"Four as far as we can tell," Maggie said.

Lois gasped when one man turned towards the camera.

"What?" Henderson asked.

"That's Steven Baker," Lois said, pointing at one of the pictures on the screen.

"The missing homeless guy you told me about?"

Lois nodded even as Henderson looked back at the camera.

"He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious. In thirty minutes, Superman, comes the first death."
The next announcement blared over the megaphone.

'This used to be so much easier,' Clark thought in frustration as he struggled to get the suits out of the box in the closet. Spinning into one, he put his elbow through the bedroom wall. Ignoring the damage, he concentrated on running the cord for Ata's microphone up the inside of his sleeve to attach the microphone to the collar of the suit.

He turned his attention to his hair, forming it into the Superman style.

Then he froze, trying to think of anything he might have missed.

The glasses!

He slipped them off his face and dropped them on his bed. If he'd missed those, what else might he have missed? If only Lois were here. He needed to know if he had rid himself of all evidence of Clark. But if Lois couldn't tell him...

His head snapped up when he realized who he could ask. He spoke to Ata and a moment later was heading at full speed through the skies on his way to Kansas.

"He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious. In twenty-five minutes, Superman, comes the first death."

It made no sense. None whatsoever. Leit and Munch knew what had happened to Superman. They were the ones who had blinded him, after all. So if they were behind the abduction of the missing homeless men, were the ones who had brainwashed them into taking hostages at City Hall, then why would these men be demanding Superman? Even if they knew that Superman wasn't dead, they knew that he could never be fully effective again without his eyesight, knew that he'd never be able to catch bullets in his bare hand without the ability to see them, would always be vulnerable to whatever evil plots they might come up with. So what was the point in going after him now?

Lois searched her mind, wondering where she might have gone wrong. Had she missed some clue? Something that would tell her what was going on here.

"So will he come?"

Henderson's question brought Lois back to the present. "Who?"

"Lois, why do you think I let you come in here?" Henderson asked.

"Because I'm just so lovable?" Lois asked in return.

"Because if anyone has the inside scoop on Superman, it's you," Henderson corrected.

Lois stared at Henderson, some part of her mind registering how flattered she would have been by Bill's assumption two months ago. But now that she actually did have the inside scoop... "Are you asking me... What are you asking?"

"Will he come? Or should we proceed as if he's not going to show up?"

"If he can be here, I'm sure he will be," Lois responded. It was the best she could do. In truth, she was slightly surprised that Superman hadn't already arrived.

Superman hovered high above City Hall, stretching out with every one of his senses in an attempt to get a clearer view of the situation.

It was a good thing he'd stopped by to see his folks. The thing he'd forgotten was that he hadn't shaved this morning. He'd taken care of that easily enough since his mother still had an earlier model of his shaving kit. His parents had also warned him of one thing he had not considered. They'd told him that he looked blind and had suggested that, if possible, he might want to try to keep his distance, stay to shadows, do what he could not to be seen too clearly and try to avoid facing people directly. It might not be possible, but it certainly was worth consideration. The fact that Superman tended to stand still, rather than moving around a lot, and folded his arms across his chest, allowing him to easily press the button on Ata, were both a help in that respect.

Taking a deep breath, he directed his mind to the situation. He quickly determined that the hostages and the men holding them were in the mayor's office.

The sounds coming from the Mayor's office seemed to indicate a bunch of frightened people, but no one was breathing as if injured and fighting for life. That was good.

He heard the Mayor speak. "Listen to me. You have not gone too far, yet. No one is dead. If you surrender now..."

"Haji yori wa shi wo," one of the kidnappers responded.

Japanese? What were these men doing speaking Japanese? 'Death before dishonor.' A provision contained in the Bushido or warrior's code of the Samurai sanctioned, even encouraged, ritual suicide which made death preferable to the dishonor of being taken prisoner by the enemy. It was the thinking that had caused the genesis of the kamikaze pilot in World War II. Were the men Japanese? He thought he could hear a faint accent — but it was so faint that he couldn't be certain.

Putting that question to the side, he continued his survey of the situation, redirecting his attention to the rest of the building. He could hear no heartbeats. The building must have been cleared of people. Contrary to the quiet inside the building, he could hear people all around the City Hall's perimeter. Police most likely. And he could hear a crowd of reporters gathering near where Lois and Henderson talking in what, from the sounds of it, was a temporary structure of some sort. He directed his attention to the conversation, hoping to get a summary of the situation from their discussion.

Henderson turned to Maggie. "Okay, I want a plan put together for taking out the perps and saving the hostages. Assume Superman's not going to show up."

"Wait a minute!" Lois objected. "You can't treat those guys like regular perps."

"What are you talking about, Lane?" Maggie asked.

Lois turned towards her. "Those men in there... They've been abducted and brainwashed. They aren't acting on their own initiative. They're victims as much as the hostages are."

"You sure about this?" Maggie asked.

"I'm sure," she said. There was nothing wrong with her theory. She was obviously missing something here — but not about these men being brainwashed by Munch and Leit. "Steven Baker saved Perry's life in Vietnam. His daughter said he still called her every week to make sure she was all right. She knew he was missing when he didn't call. If he had gotten involved in something voluntarily, he would have at least continued to call his daughter right up until the end — to keep her from getting suspicious."

Maggie turned to Henderson. "We can use rubber bullets and tear gas, Bill. We practice drills that allow for that type of approach. But I will not risk the lives of my men. If we can take them down alive, we'll do it, but not at risk to my men."

"Fair enough," Henderson responded.

"He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious. In twenty minutes, Superman, comes the first death."

Superman's head shot up when he heard the announcement echo around the area. The first part of that announcement sounded so familiar. But where had he heard it before? There was something going on here. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on.

He needed advice. He needed to coordinate his actions with those of the police. But how did he do that without revealing the fact that he was blind?

Lois stared at the screen in front of her, carefully watching the movement of the men. She was missing something. Something vital. But what? Their demand for Superman to attend made no sense. Unless, of course, Intergang had decided to kill Superman. But although the screens showed color pictures, she could see no tell-tale green glow. There were no lead-lined boxes. So why summon Superman?

"What are you thinking, Lane?" Henderson asked as he waited for Maggie to return with her plans for storming City Hall.

"That I'm missing something. Something important."

"Like?"

"The means to harm Superman." She turned to Henderson. "Do you see any booby traps? Anything that they could even hope to harm Superman with?"

"I've heard something about a green rock that can supposedly hurt Superman. I just assumed they had some of that."

"But where?" She gestured to the screens. "Can you get close ups? Zoom in on bulges in pockets, anything like that?"

The men operating the cameras looked at Henderson. When he nodded, they began the slow task of examining the men in greater detail, following Lois' instructions as she'd insist that they zoom in on one thing after another. But no matter how hard they looked, there was no indication that any of the men had kryptonite.

"So why summon Superman?" Lois said. "If you can't hurt him if he does arrive, why insist that he come?"

"He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious. In fifteen minutes, Superman, comes the first death."

The announcements were really starting to bug Lois. And speaking of Superman, where was he? Maybe she should have gone with him to get the suit — just to ensure he didn't get lost.

"We have the lights in place now, Inspector," one of the officers said. "Should we turn them on?"

"Yes," Henderson responded. "It's dark enough now that if we don't have the lights on, they will have the ability to sneak out of there if they want."

The officer nodded and proceeded to instruct the men setting up the lights to turn them on.

Maggie chose that moment to return. She unrolled blueprints for City Hall on the table and began running through the plan with Henderson. It was a good plan that would hopefully get everyone out alive. But then she came to the bad news. "I can't get my men into place in the next fifteen minutes."

"But according to the kidnappers, they will start killing hostages in less than fifteen minutes," Lois said.

Suddenly all power went out, plunging the trailer and the surrounding area in darkness.

"We've lost power," Henderson said. "Get men on it immediately! None of those men are to escape!"

"Delay that order, Inspector." There was no mistaking the commanding voice of Superman. "I turned off the power."

"Delay that order," Henderson immediately responded.

"They aren't trying to escape," Superman said.

"You're back," Maggie said in disbelief.

Even in the shadow that was obscuring Superman, one could

see a flash of teeth when Superman smiled. But it was not a wholly happy smile as was evidenced by his tone of voice. "Not really. But I couldn't let people be killed if there was anything I could do to help stop it."

"Why do you say they aren't trying to escape?" Lois asked, drawing the conversation away from the direction it seemed to be taking.

"I overheard one of the men saying, 'Haji yori wa shi wo.' It's Japanese for 'Death before dishonor.' I think this is meant to be a suicide mission."

Lois' blood instantly ran cold. Men who had no thought for survival were exceptionally dangerous.

"To what purpose?" Henderson asked.

"Maybe they just want to see if Superman is still around," Maggie suggested.

"Even if that was the reason, why would they be approaching this as a suicide mission. Everyone knows that Superman doesn't kill," Henderson said.

"Besides, I've been gone for two months now. Why would they wonder now if I'm going to return?"

Lois knew what he was really asking. It was the same question that had caused her to believe she was missing something. Something important. Unless... Oh, god. Why hadn't she thought of that before?

"Unless for some reason they think you might return," she said, hoping that he would read between the lines. Since Leit and Munch had been the ones to blind Superman, if they had reason to fear his return it had to be because they knew that there was some way for him to get his sight back.

Her heart began to beat harder. Clark's head turned slightly towards her, as if trying to interpret the meaning of the increase in her heart rate.

"Unless for some reason they think I might return," he said after a moment and she could hear understanding in his voice.

"He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious. In ten minutes, Superman, comes the first death."

The announcement got all of their minds back on track.

"Lois, did I hear you say that the kidnappers have been brainwashed?" Superman asked.

"Yes, Superman. Clark and I have been pursuing a story about homeless men who we believe were abducted and then experimented on in such a way that the only information their minds have access to is the thoughts put there by their masters. We heard one of the men quoting Machiavelli." Lois wasn't sure why Clark wanted her to repeat the story since he obviously knew it. It must be for the benefit for those listening in.

"Sort of like the leaks you had following your encounter with Dr. Faraday shortly before I left?"

"Yes."

"That makes sense," Superman said. "The announcement they make every five minutes... the first part is a direct quote from Sun Tzu's The Art of War." Superman drew in a breath and then gave a nod. "Okay, well, I guess we give them what they want. They asked for Superman and I'm here. Let's announce my arrival and see if that can buy you some more time, Maggie, to get your officers in place."

Both Bill and Maggie gave their grateful agreement.

"No, wait," Lois said before anyone could put the plan into action.

"What is it, Lois?"

"That's exactly what they want," Lois said, suddenly certain she understood what this was all about. "Or, well not them exactly. Not the four men in City Hall holding the hostages. But whoever is controlling them."

"Why don't we call him Mr. X?" Bill suggested.

Lois nodded, grateful that he'd just made her theory easier to explain. "Mr. X wants to see if Superman is still around. Once

Superman shows up, the reason for the mission is fulfilled. Now, Mr. X knows he can't allow the police to take the men he sent on this mission into custody — there would be too many questions and it might lead back to Mr. X — so Mr. X has put it in his men's minds that this is a suicide mission. If Superman doesn't show up, they are to start killing hostages until Superman does show up. If Superman does show up or they run out of hostages, they are to take their own lives rather than allowing themselves to be captured alive."

Everyone looked at her in stunned silence.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Lois continued. "It's why they've summoned Superman without having the means to harm him. It's why their programmers put the whole 'death before dishonor' concept in their heads. It's also why they say, 'in so many minutes comes the first death' rather than saying 'if Superman doesn't show up' because if you do show up, death will still come. Only in that case... the four kidnapers will take their own lives.

"That seems like a pretty convoluted plan — to go to all this trouble just to find out if Superman is still around," Henderson said.

"That's because it's only the byproduct of the real plan," Lois said. "The main object is to test the men's programming, to make sure they will take this as far as they're programmed to go. A field test of a sort. But it's also a test of Superman — to see if he's still Superman." She dared not say more. They must want to know if Superman's sight had returned, but she couldn't say that in this company. Perhaps Clark would still pick up her meaning.

"And," Superman said, "the phrase they're quoting: 'He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious.' Is this a time when I need to know not to fight? One of Sun Tzu's main ideas is that all warfare is based on deception." He turned to Lois. "I think you're right. This isn't what it seems. If they see me, they will kill themselves."

"The only problem is..." Maggie said. "...if you don't show up, in less than ten minutes, they're going to start killing the hostages."

"And if he does show up... they might kill, not only themselves, but the hostages, too," Lois said. "It all depends on what they have been programmed to do."

"I have an idea," Superman said.

Lois took Shadow and stepped out of the trailer while Superman and Maggie finished up with the details of the plan. It wasn't a complicated plan. Superman would go in first, too fast for the men to react to his arrival. He would disarm them and tie them up. SWAT would come in as soon as they could to mop up the pieces. In fact, it was so darn simple there was little to discuss.

Except for one small problem. Superman was blind — a detail he hadn't shared with anyone in the trailer. So as they'd leaned over the blueprint of City Hall, Lois had seemed to become... well, rather a pain. At least she was pretty sure that's how Henderson and Sawyer had regarded her when she'd started describing the blueprints in detail. How many steps. How many feet. How many windows. What was the distance between these walls, to this door, to this window. Tapping on the blueprints with her finger to show Clark where he should be looking when they were studying the plan.

Finally, Henderson had enough and had thrown her out. She hadn't minded. After all, it was best for her to be alone when Clark emerged, in case he had any additional questions that he couldn't ask in front of Henderson and Sawyer.

Lois' thoughts turned from the mission to Mayson. If this was done right, maybe the public would never even learn that Superman had been involved. After all, to prevent the kidnapers from knowing that Superman had arrived and taking their own lives, it had been decided not to fix the lights and have the whole

thing take place in the dark. Given that Maggie's SWAT team had night vision goggles, it was to their advantage to do this in the dark, anyway. Even now Lois could see police officers moving news crews with their big lights out of the area.

And if the public never knew Superman had been there, would that keep Mayson from telling the world about Clark? Or was the fact that Superman had shown up at all enough to break the deal in Mayson's mind? Because, given her job, she was bound to eventually hear about the role Superman had played in this operation.

Lois pushed those thoughts from her mind. Right now there were more pressing concerns. Superman had thirty-one lives to save.

"He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious. In five minutes, Superman, comes the first death."

A shadow appeared beside her in the dark.

"You ready for this?" she asked.

"I'm ready," Clark responded, reaching down to scratch Shadow's head.

"You'll do great." She tried to inject as much confidence as she could into her voice.

He gave a nod before whispering something to Ata. Obviously not satisfied with the response, he whispered something else. Then, he was gone.

She stood there for a moment, but finding that she couldn't just stand still, she decided to take Shadow for a walk.

Ata's first directions to City Hall had been discarded because taking the time to go down the street and cross at the light had seemed a bit pointless under the circumstances. Fortunately, Dr. Klein had anticipated that possibility and had built override provisions into the program. The other thing Clark was grateful for was that the computer in the navigational bracelet was powerful enough to keep up with his speed.

He breathed out all the way across the street so that Ata's instructions could be added to the echoes coming back to him from the sound of his breath hitting the building, allowing him to calculate the exact distance to his target.

He ascended the outer wall of City Hall, almost as if he were Spiderman — although rather than using his spider-grip, he was actually flying. But he'd chosen to do it this way because it allowed him to feel each story as he passed it. Once he was on the right floor, he searched for the open window through which the kidnapper's announcements were being made. The drawn blinds might keep the sharpshooters from seeing in, but it also kept the kidnapers from seeing out. And an open window would allow him to enter the room without the sound of breaking glass.

Now came the tough part. There were four kidnapers. He had to be sure he'd located all four using nothing more than his hearing. With twenty-seven other people in the room, it was not the easiest of tasks. Yet, if he missed one, the consequences would be tragic.

He figured the hostages wouldn't be moving around much, so he listened carefully for any movement until he was satisfied that he had placed all four kidnapers. Finally, he stepped up on the window ledge and took a deep breath. He could do this. The trick was to just keep moving until all four were tied up. Even if he fumbled a bit, he was still fast enough to do this.

Lois tried to calm her nerves as she led Shadow past the crowd of reporters which had now gathered on the other side of the police barrier. Ignoring the questions they began throwing in her direction, she crossed the street to walk down the empty sidewalk in front of the buildings across from City Hall. She pulled to a halt when she saw the tell-tale sign of someone lighting a cigarette from a shadowed alleyway up ahead.

Probably just someone from one of the nearby buildings,

stepping outside to watch the action. No reason for the hair on the back of her neck to be standing on end.

She squatted down when Shadow began to show signs of objecting to her sudden halt. She wrapped her arms around the animal to whisper reassurances in his ear.

"Still no sign of Superman?" a man asked from the shadows.

"No, boss. Maybe you did more of a number on him than you thought. Maybe his sight hasn't returned."

Munch and Leit. She recognized their voices.

"Maybe," Leit said, sounding skeptical.

Suddenly, there was a commotion happening behind her. Gasps of 'Superman' coming from the crowd she'd left behind. Lois jumped up and spun towards the sound, determined to see what was going on for herself. She pulled in a sharp breath when she saw Superman, clearly captured in the bright light of a news helicopter that was hovering nearby.

'No,' she wanted to yell, but before thought could give way to speech, her mind was distracted by the sound of footsteps behind her. When she glanced back towards the source of the sound, Munch's fist was swinging towards her. It connected with her cheek, causing her to fly backwards. Her hands grasped frantically at air as she fought unsuccessfully to regain her balance. She felt her back and head connect with the pavement just before everything went dark.

Clark paused on the windowsill when he realized that his senses had picked up something else. It took him a moment to figure out what it was. The smell of explosives was coming from each of the kidnappers. Damn! They were wearing explosive vests. How had they missed that? Maybe he should...

Suddenly, he could feel heat and knew that he was the target of a high-voltage light. His hearing picked up the distant sound of a news helicopter that had undoubtedly focused in on him.

"Superman!" someone from the ground shouted and Clark knew he was out of time. Knowing it was now or never, Clark moved.

"Hoka-hey!" Steven Baker shouted.

Clark's felt the color drain from his cheeks. He knew that expression. A quotation from the Sioux leader, Crazy Horse. 'Today is a good day to die.'

Lois was disoriented when she woke to the feel of a wet tongue on her cheek. She quickly sat up and looked around. She was back in the police trailer. Shadow was tending to her as best he could. But how...

"What happened?" she asked Henderson who turned towards her when she spoke.

He smiled. "Well, looky here. Sleeping beauty's awake."

"What happened?" she asked again.

"I was hoping you could tell me that." When she didn't respond, he continued, figuring she needed a couple more minutes to get her bearings. "Shadow here came back to the trailer a few minutes ago and began scratching frantically on the door. When I realized you weren't with him and saw that he was holding what appeared to be the seat of a pair of pants in his mouth, I sent an Officer Hodge out to look for you. Given your penchant for getting in trouble, it seemed the prudent course of action. Officer Hodge said Shadow practically dragged him to where you were lying unconscious on the sidewalk across the street. He brought you back here. I had him put you on the couch and he's gone now to fetch a medic. So what happened?"

"Leit and Munch..."

"The men you think are behind this?"

Lois nodded. "They were watching things from across the street. I guess they got the jump on me."

Henderson instantly turned to one of the men in the trailer, telling him to get pictures printed up of Munch and Leit and to get

them to his men with instructions to sweep the area for any sign of them. Then he picked up his walky-talky and ordered all of his men to detain anyone missing the seat of their trousers.

As Henderson barked orders, Lois swung her feet off the couch and looked at Maggie. "What happened with Superman? Just before I was knocked out, he'd been spotted. Is anyone dead?"

"They're all safe," Maggie immediately informed her.

"Apparently, we missed the fact that the men were wearing explosive vests. Fortunately, Superman caught it and managed to disable them while tying the men up."

Lois let out a breath of relief. Still, there was another question she needed to ask. "And Superman?"

"He disappeared the moment my men stormed the room. We're sending explosive experts up there to handle the vests but it appears that the mission was a complete success."

"Oh, thank god." Lois paused to catch her breath before adding. "This isn't over yet, Henderson. More than four men were part of Munch and Leit's experiment."

"I thought of that. While we were waiting for Sawyer and Superman to do their thing, I called the precinct. Told them to proceed with the search warrant for CostMart. Hopefully men are on their way over there even as we speak."

Lois leaned against Clark's shoulder as the two of them sat on the couch in Henderson's office waiting for the results of the raid on CostMart. Apparently, Munch and Leit had vanished — probably that's what they'd been trying to do when they'd encountered Lois.

Clark's arm tightened protectively around Lois.

Clark had joined Lois at the trailer about ten minutes after things had quieted down at City Hall. He'd been horrified when he discovered what had transpired while he'd been dealing with the hostages.

His mind turned to Shadow who was on the couch next to Lois. He owed that animal a debt of gratitude. Lois had refused to go to the hospital, of course, but fortunately a medic had arrived to check her out. And at least Clark now knew what to signs to watch out for — so to speak — over the next few hours.

Clark smiled slightly as Lois quietly began playing with his hand, calming him by the simple gesture.

His mind drifted to what Lois had overheard Leit and Munch talking about in the alley. That, together with the reason for the whole hostage situation, made him wonder why they thought he might have gotten his eye sight back. He'd come to believe it was gone for good. So what was he missing?

He shivered slightly as his mind again returned to the events at City Hall. That had been close. Too close. If he hadn't smelled those explosives, the outcome could have been so very different. As it was... Thankfully, superspeed could cover for a lot of sins. From his time as Superman, he knew about various types of exploding vests. So as soon as he'd grabbed the first kidnapper, his hands had moved so fast he doubted the people in the room would have even seen them as he'd used touch to figure out how it worked and disabled it before moving on to the next man.

He wondered how the entire thing would have gone down if he had his eyesight. He would have undoubtedly simply arrived on the scene and flown in to apprehend the kidnappers. In his rush to act, would he have x-rayed their clothing to discover the explosive vests? He thought so, but wasn't entirely sure. One thing he did know was that he wouldn't have had time to smell the explosives. And if he'd tied them up without simultaneously cutting the wires to the vest, it could have been a disaster.

The explosive vests had actually turned out to be the thing that had saved the day. There had been five kidnappers, not four. The fifth one had been there in the guise of a hostage. Only because he could smell the explosives had Clark realized the mistake and

been able to correct it. And he'd done it without accidentally tying up any of the hostages.

"You did good," Lois said softly.

"I sort of did, didn't I," he responded. He could feel her face transform into a smile against his shoulder. Still, at the moment, words just couldn't do justice to the way he felt about being able to defuse the hostage situation. He hadn't thought he'd ever again feel that kind of satisfaction — the kind he got from being Superman.

She squeezed his hand, telling him she understood. God, how he loved this woman. She knew him so well. Understood what made him tick and supported him without reservation. He raised their joined hands to his lips, gently kissing her fingers even as it crossed his mind to wonder how long he should wait before bringing up the topic of marriage. Because if there was one thing he knew for certain, it was that it was only a matter of time before he began a full-court press to make Lois Lane his wife.

"I've got news," Henderson said, finally returning to his office. "What do you want first? The good news or the bad news."

"So..." Lois said, sitting in Perry's office sometime later. "... the good news is when they executed the search warrant at CostMart, they found a large room where they were holding fifteen more men."

"The bad news is that all of them appear to have the same type of programming as the men who took the hostages at City Hall," Clark added. "They've taken all of them, including the kidnapers, to the secure wing of the Metropolis Psychiatric Hospital where they hope to reverse the programming. Unfortunately, when we snuck into Storage, Storage and More Storage and got the file on Faraday, it didn't tell any of the details about how the device actually worked."

"We did pick up a few other files that looked interesting, however," Lois shrugged. "Well, they are being destroyed tomorrow so we figured they wouldn't be missed. But as far as finding out how the Faraday device works, the police didn't find the device at CostMart," Lois added. "And since both Leit and Munch seemed to have disappeared again..."

"Actually, they may have done more than disappear," Perry said.

"What are you talking about?" Lois asked.

"LNN is reporting that two men whose pictures were released by the police as 'persons of interest' in relation to the hostage situation at City Hall were found floating in Hobbs Bay about an hour ago. One of them was missing the seat of his trousers." Perry smiled at Shadow who was currently sleeping at Lois' feet.

"What happened to them?" Lois asked.

"My guess is that someone wasn't very impressed when their pictures showed up on television," Perry responded. "Probably didn't want them questioned about who they were working for."

"But if they're dead..." Lois said.

"...the doctors at MPH will have no idea how to help these men," Clark concluded.

"Successful amalgamation of the Faraday information with previously acquired erudition is a two step process. After the information has been implanted it can only be activated by exercising the neural pathways, conceivably assisted with an epinephrine catalyst," Lois said. "What?" she asked when both Perry and Clark both looked stunned. "Oh, great. I did it again, didn't I. I had another Faraday leak." When they still continued to stare at her, she asked her original question again. "What?"

"Lois," Clark said cautiously. "Did you just leak how to fix the problem?"

"No... I don't know... did I?"

"Successful amalgamation of the Faraday information with previously acquired erudition is a two step process. After the information has been implanted it can only be activated by

exercising the neural pathways, conceivably assisted with an epinephrine catalyst," Clark repeated.

"Did I say that?" she asked. "I don't even know what epinephrine is."

"It's adrenaline," Clark said.

"So what does that mean? To integrate the two types of knowledge currently in my mind, I have to... what?"

"Practice, Lois," Clark said excitedly. "It's much like a child learning to ride a bike."

"Or Superman learning to use his heat vision," Lois added, catching on. "That means the information has always been accessible to me, I just have to learn how to access it?"

"Right."

"But..." She concentrated for a moment before letting out a frustrated breath. "...I don't even know where the information is, so how do I exercise the proper neural pathways?"

"We'll figure it out, Lois. Maybe while riding on a roller coaster to get your adrenaline levels elevated."

Lois nodded. "Well, assuming we haven't figured it out before Metropolis Wonderworld opens for the season."

"And assuming that Hell's Terror Roller Coaster is enough to actually get *your* adrenaline flowing."

Lois grinned.

"Perhaps you could take some sort of artificial adrenaline," Perry suggested.

"No!" both Lois and Clark said at the same time.

"I don't want to become dependent on an artificial adrenaline supplement," Lois said.

"I suppose that makes sense," Perry said. "After all, your Faraday leaks aren't much more than an annoyance. But it might make sense for the men at the MPH — given that their condition is so much more serious."

Lois and Clark both nodded.

"Oh, and one more thing we should tell you," Lois said. "The police have taken Bill Church Jr. in for questioning, but apparently he's already lawyered up."

"Junior?" Perry asked. "What about Bill Church Sr.?"

"Apparently by the time the cops arrived, he was being taken away in an ambulance."

"What happened?"

"Heart attack," Clark said. "Henderson said it seems to have happened when Superman was first spotted at City Hall. Guess his heart just couldn't take the thought that Superman had returned."

"Who wants to bet that Junior is practically salivating at the idea of being in charge of Intergang? Well, provided he beats the current rap, of course," Lois said.

"Lois, we don't know if Bill Church Sr. was the head of Intergang, so we can hardly be sure that Junior will take over for him," Clark said.

"Pssh," Lois responded.

"Getting back to Superman..." Perry said, obviously realizing the Church discussion wasn't going anywhere. "Did he say where he's been or if he's back for good?"

Lois glanced over at Clark before turning her attention back to Perry. "We didn't have a chance to ask him," Lois said. "He came in, dealt with the situation and was gone before anyone had a chance to ask him any questions."

Perry nodded thoughtfully. "So it's just another one of those great mysteries in life that we might never know the answer to. Like who was on the grassy knoll in Dallas."

"Pretty much, Perry. Well, unless he's back. Then we'll be sure to ask him where he was," Lois said.

"Okay," Perry said. "Let's get down to business. First, I'm holding the front page open, kids. So get out there and write something I can fill it with. Once that's done, you should call the MPH and tell them what you think you just learned. They might be able to help you come up with some ideas on how to put theory

into practice on integrating those Faraday leaks — not to mention helping those poor men. Have you called Steve's daughter yet?"

"Not yet," Lois said.

"Let me do that, then," Perry said. "Okay, kids, if there's nothing else..."

"Actually," Clark said slowly. "there might be something else... something else you should probably know."

His tone had turned serious and Lois' mind raced as she tried to figure out what he was thinking. He'd gone silent at the first mention of Superman. So what... Suddenly it hit her. Mayson! In the excitement of the past few hours, she'd forgotten all about Mayson Drake's threat. And if Mayson's news came out somewhere and the Daily Planet was caught flat footed, Perry was not going to be pleased.

"What's that, Clark?" Perry asked.

"There may be some... consequences... coming out of today's activities. From Superman's appearance at City Hall."

"What type of consequences?"

"Someone might... end up... breaking some pretty sensitive news about Superman as a result of his... attendance at City Hall. And I just want you to know before that happens that..."

"Just a second, son," Perry said, interrupting him. "Are you saying you have reason to believe that someone might have been... blackmailing Superman to prevent him from showing up at City Hall today?"

"Sort of."

"Is that why he disappeared in the first place?"

"Uhh..." Clark looked slightly flustered, as if not sure how to answer. After all, how would he know the answer to that question? And yet if he didn't answer, Perry would be left with the impression that Superman was susceptible to blackmail.

"We don't think so, Perry," Lois jumped in. "We think that this was just someone trying to stop today's appearance."

"I assume you don't have proof of any of this."

"Well, not exactly, but..." Clark said.

"I can't run a story without proof, son," Perry said, again interrupting Clark, almost as if he was deliberately preventing Clark from continuing with what he might be about to reveal. "Any chance you're wrong? That this information, whatever it is, won't come out? It would be a shame if Superman was punished for trying to help. Any chance you could help... prevent that from happening?"

Slowly, Clark's face transformed from resigned to determined. "Maybe, Chief," Clark said. "Maybe."

"Good. Then take the ball and run with it, son."

"He knows," Lois said as sometime later, she walked down the darkened streets of Metropolis with Clark and Shadow.

"Somehow, he knows. Unofficially, anyway."

Clark's arm slipped around her shoulders even as hers slid underneath his jacket and around his waist.

"Maybe," Clark admitted. "Still, it's strange that he's never said anything."

"That's Perry," Lois responded. "Does it bother you that he probably knows — unofficially?"

Clark shook his head. "I was prepared to tell him when I came back to the Planet."

"Do you wish he knew officially?"

Again, Clark shook his head. "Actually, in some strange way, it's easier for me not to be certain of how much he knows. Having it be sort of... unspoken between us. And if we never say it... officially... then we can never slip up... if that makes any sense."

Lois chuckled. "Men," she said. "Your sex has raised not talking to an art form."

"We talk."

"Yeah, about the weather, about sports, but never about anything that matters, never about your feelings. Well, unless it's

couched in a bunch of sports metaphors. "Take the ball and run with it, son" she concluded using her best Perry imitation.

Clark smiled as his mind flashed back to his thoughts earlier about giving Lois a full-court press to make her his wife. His arm tightened around her shoulders. "But you love us anyway."

"You hope," she responded, a smile in her voice.

"Yes, I do," he said, turning his head so that he could plant a kiss on her temple. "How am I ever going to convince you to marry me if you don't." Before she could respond to that, he changed the subject. "Oh, by the way, I plan to go see Marcus tomorrow."

"What for?" she asked, slightly flustered. Had he really just brought up the subject of marriage? And how did she even feel about that?

"I want to take him something for all his help," Clark said, forcing her to push her questions to the back of her mind. "After all, if we hadn't figured out that Leit and Munch were behind this, we might not have figured out that Superman couldn't stop the killing by simply showing up. And if they had taken one look at me and set off those suicide vests... It could have been a disaster. I want to pay him back for that."

"I doubt he'll take money from you."

"I agree. But I was thinking he might take a nice new army coat. One that is very, very warm."

Lois smiled, giving him a squeeze.

"So do you think this will do any good?" Lois asked after a moment of silent walking.

Clark sighed. "I don't know. But Perry's right. I have to, at the very least, try again."

Lois nodded. "Maybe Mayson will be so impressed with what you did tonight that she'll forget how much she dislikes Superman."

"Not likely. She's more likely to think that there wouldn't have been any emergency at all if Superman had never existed. But maybe she'll agree to keep quiet anyway."

They stopped on the street across from the grand old building which housed the D.A.'s office. Clark sighed heavily.

"You know, I've been thinking," Lois said, trying to find a way to get Clark in a slightly more optimistic frame of mind before they talked to Mayson.

"About?"

"My Faraday leaks."

"What about them?"

"Well, if the device can be used to implant any type of information, why couldn't Faraday have used it to put classical poetry in my mind?"

Clark's eyebrows crinkled.

"Well, wouldn't it be amazing if, instead of spouting science, I was prone to suddenly quoting some beautiful verse or poem?"

Clark immediately laughed.

She gave him a squeeze. "So come on... Let's tackle the monster."

Suddenly, Clark's head shot up as a familiar scent hit his nose.

"What?" Lois asked, but Clark's mind was already consumed with locating the source of the smell.

Clark sniffed the air. The loss of his sight had made him even more sensitive to smells and he'd just recently smelled this particular scent. But where was it coming from?

Mayson Drake came down the steps to the D.A.'s office, one hand holding a briefcase, the other pressing a cell phone to her ear.

"Okay, well I'm just leaving now," Mayson said. "If you want the scoop of the century, meet me at Callards in twenty minutes."

Folding up her phone, she picked up her pace as she walked to her car. If Clark Kent thought she was not a woman of her word or would let sentiment stop her from doing what was right, he was sadly mistaken. He'd promised her that Superman was gone for

good. And yet at the first possible chance he had to prove that he meant it, he'd broken his word.

Approaching her car, she hit the button on her remote, undoing the locks. She climbed inside and closed the door before putting the key in the ignition and turning. The engine seemed to struggle to come to life.

She gave a gasp that was half surprise and half terror when her car door was ripped off and arms began pulling her out. She caught sight of the face of the man holding her, a face shaded with sunglasses.

He pulled her away from the car, forcing her to the ground, his body practically on top of hers. "Clark, what the hell do you think..."

Boom!

She automatically threw her hands over her head when the explosion came, sending shards of her car flying past her. She could tell that pieces were hitting Clark as he kept his body between her and the car. It felt as if it went on forever. But after what was in actuality probably only a few seconds, the excitement ended.

She was breathing heavily but unharmed as Clark slowly released her and moved away. Having no strength in her legs to rise to her feet, she sank back onto her butt beside the ruins of her car.

"Why?" she finally asked, her eyes alighting on Clark, even as she realized that Lois, sporting one hell of a black eye, was now approaching the scene with Clark's dog.

"Why what?" Clark asked, forcing Mayson's mind back on track.

"Why did you save me? If you'd just waited a few more seconds, all your problems would have been solved."

"That's not how I work," Clark responded, his words almost a rebuke.

Mayson gathered her strength before finally rising to her feet. It was an awkward moment when they were all finally facing each other. "I don't quite know how to thank you," she said, not able to look at Clark directly.

"Well, maybe you could just keep what you know about him to yourself," Lois suggested immediately.

The sound of sirens proceeded the arrival of police vehicles and a fire engine and in moments, the area was being flooded by people.

Fade To Black

"Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." — Vaclav Havel

Episode Three

Something Makes Sense

Tuesday Afternoon

SUPERMAN UNMASKED

The Metropolis Star

By Toby Raynes

Is it possible we have all been deceived by a pair of glasses?

Assistant District Attorney Mayson Drake gave an exclusive interview to The Metropolis Star in which she claimed that the city's favorite son, Superman, who graced the skies of Metropolis for nearly two years, is in reality Clark Kent, a mild-mannered reporter for the Daily Planet.

When pressed to reveal how she knows this, Ms. Drake stated that she met with Superman about two months ago and at that time he allegedly had been blinded by a Dr. Harry Leit, an ophthalmologist, whose body was recently found floating in Hobbs Bay.

Superman's abrupt disappearance from the city two months

ago still remains officially unexplained in spite of one brief appearance earlier this week where he had little contact with the public and made no statements to the press.

Mr. Kent also disappeared at the same time, quitting his job at the Daily Planet and returning to his adopted family's home in Smallville, Kansas. Mr. Kent recently returned to Metropolis whereupon it was revealed that he had also lost his sight.

When Ms. Drake confronted Mr. Kent with the coincidence, she claims that Mr. Kent confirmed to her that he is indeed the Man of Steel and that, on one occasion, she even saw him fly.

She also maintains that both Clark Kent and his long time reporting partner, Lois Lane, and by extension, that great bastion of truth itself, The Daily Planet, have been actively deceiving the American public in their efforts to keep this story hidden.

At the request of this paper, Dr. Simon Gaul, an expert in facial recognition programming, compared file pictures of both Superman and Clark Kent before their unfortunate accidents and confirms that the facial structures of the two men was the same.

Also backing up Ms. Drake's claim is the fact that although Mr. Kent worked for papers all over the world before coming to Metropolis, there does not appear to be any record of him traveling by air to any of the places he visited.

Calls to Mr. Kent and The Daily Planet to obtain their responses to this story have remained unanswered.

On the other side of the Atlantic, two reporters and a dog strolled along a pedestrian pathway on the bank of the Seine River, blissfully unaware of the bombshell that had been dropped on Metropolis with the publication of the evening edition of The Metropolis Star.

The sun had set and the lights of the city were reflected off the surface of the river. Clark could not see this, but he remembered it well. In the air was the smell of spring, of newly growing grass and flowers and leaves starting to bud on nearby trees. The late evening air was crisp, but not cold, especially when they had the heat of each other to warm them.

Dinner had been excellent. When he'd first decided to bring Lois back to Paris, Clark had intended to take her to the Le Jules Vernes Restaurant located in the Eiffel Tower which boasted a remarkable view of the city and a world-renowned chef. But he'd eventually decided on something that was much more their style, a small, intimate French bistro where Clark had dined several times over the years. Certainly not as grand as the Le Jules Vernes, but in Clark's opinion the food was as good and the atmosphere much more intimate. And it had the added benefit of not completely sending him into bankruptcy. Two hundred dollars a plate for dinner was sort of pricey for a simple reporter, even if the travel costs were free.

Besides, he hadn't been able to get reservations at the Le Jules Vernes at the last minute.

By tacit consent, they'd spoken about anything of any real depth. Not about work. Not about Leit and Munch's comments. Not about the Faraday device. Not even about Mayson's lack of answer as to whether she would keep Clark's secret. Instead, they'd flirted and teased each other until Lois had giggled that they were being nauseatingly mushy.

They'd spent much of the previous night, dealing with police officers, giving statements and writing up their second story of the day about an attempt on the life of an Assistant District Attorney.

So when they'd risen groggily in the morning to the ringing of the phone and been told by Perry to take the day off, they'd been more than happy to follow directions. Turning off their phone. Waking at their leisure. Making slow love in the morning light of their room. Flying to Paris to wander the streets and go up the Eiffel Tower. And finally, an intimate supper followed by a walk along the Seine. They'd put all troubling thoughts to the side to concentrate on each other and their blossoming relationship.

"I don't think even if I lived here full time that I would ever get used to this," Lois said, pulling Clark out of his thoughts.

"Used to what?"

"Walking along and suddenly catching a glimpse of the Eiffel Tower."

Clark smiled.

"I wish you could see it," she continued.

He gently kissed her forehead. "I have. And walking here with you... I feel as if I'm seeing it again."

She drew them to a stop, turning him towards her so that she could reach up and pull his head down to hers. The kiss was slow as they took their time to learn each other's taste once again. When it finally broke, the hand Clark was not using to hold Shadow tightened around her, holding her close to his heart.

She laid her head on his chest. "Now this is what I call a date," she said with a sigh of contentment. "Makes all previous dates pale by comparison."

"And it's not over yet."

Lois pulled back to look at him.

"If I recall correctly," Clark continued, "there are benches around here somewhere."

"Uhh..." She seemed to look around then. "Yeah, there's one over there."

"Can we...?"

She must have agreed because she began leading them until they finally arrived at a bench. He directed her to have a seat, but didn't sit down himself. Instead, keeping hold of her hand, he moved until he was standing in front of her.

"Clark?" she asked, obviously not understanding why he wasn't joining her.

Well, that would end in a moment. Taking a deep breath, he gathered his courage before lowering himself to a knee in front of her. "Lois, I love you. I think I've always loved you. Before we met, it was only the promise of you. But then you stormed into Perry's office, barely noticing me, and my heart nearly stopped beating. Or maybe it started beating for the first time. And from that moment on, I've dreamed of a day where I could finally ask you..." She ended his speech by placing her fingers over his lips.

She sighed and her forehead came to rest against his. "Don't. Please," she whispered.

"Lois..."

"If you're going to ask what I think you're going to ask then... please don't."

He felt his heart plummet. There could be no mistaking what he was going to ask... or her answer. He stood up abruptly, letting go of her hand as if it burned to the touch.

"Clark..." Her voice was soft, pleading with him to understand.

The problem was that he did understand. She didn't want to marry him. How could he have been so wrong as to think she did?

"It's fine, Lois," he said abruptly. "You know, it's getting late. It's probably time for us to think about going home." He took a couple steps away from her.

"Don't do this, Clark," she warned.

"Do what? I'm not doing anything. You didn't want me to ask, so I didn't."

"I didn't say never. Just... not right now. I need..."

"It's fine, Lois," he said, cutting her off abruptly. "Just answer me this... Is it because I'm blind?"

He knew by the indignant breath she took that he'd stepped over the line. "You know... I think you're right," she said, clearly angry now. "It's getting late. I think it's time to go home."

"Lois..." he began, making an effort to be conciliatory.

"Not now, Clark. Maybe tomorrow we can discuss this, but not now. I think it's time for us to go home. Morning comes fast. I think what I need most right now is a good night's sleep."

He sighed. He wanted to withdraw the accusation, but clearly

she was no longer in the mood to listen. Still, what else could it be? She claimed to love him. They were living together. So why wouldn't she marry him? Unless... maybe she really wasn't as certain as she claimed about being in a relationship with a blind man — at least on a permanent basis.

Perry's fist crinkled the afternoon addition of The Metropolis Star, the fury rising in his chest. No doubt existed in his mind that this was what Clark had been referring to when he'd been in the office last night. And to think that Perry had liked Mayson Drake. But now... She'd be run out of town on a rail if he had anything to say about it.

Dumping The Star into his trash can, he pulled up his word processing program and began to type. His editorial for tomorrow's paper would turn the entire city against that witch. She was obviously the person who had attempted to blackmail Superman into not appearing at City Hall the day before. When the city found out about that... He would hate to be in her shoes.

And... reading between the lines of Lois and Clark's early morning story, he had no doubt that this woman would be lying in the morgue today if it hadn't been for that same man.

And this was how she repaid him?

Words flowed freely as he used everything he'd learned over the years to fashion facts into persuasive argument. The heat flowing through his veins rushed quickly onto the page until it was filled. Finally, he sat back and read through it. It was good. It said what he wanted it to say.

And he couldn't publish it.

It might destroy Mayson Drake, but it would confirm things about Clark that he was certain Clark didn't want confirmed. No. The time might come for this editorial, but that time was definitely not now. Not while there was still a chance that the world wouldn't believe Mayson's claim.

Damn!

He quickly deleted the document and closed his word processor. Better to have to recreate the editorial if the time came to publish it than to risk having someone come across it on his computer.

Perry looked up, startled, when the door to his office opened and Jimmy rushed inside. "Don't you knock?" Perry demanded, his heart rate jumping at the mere thought of how close Jimmy had come to interrupting him when that incriminating editorial was still on his computer.

Jimmy looked jumbled. He glanced back at the door as if he hadn't even remembered opening it. "Uhh... sorry, Chief. Do you want me to..." He gestured towards the door.

Perry shook his head. There was little point in that. Besides, the editorial was now gone. "What is it, Jimmy?"

"Uhh..." Jimmy glanced down at his hand and Perry suddenly understood. Jimmy was holding the afternoon edition of The Star. "Have you seen this?"

Perry pointed to his garbage can.

"There's nothing to this, right?" he asked, his voice not nearly as certain as his words. "I mean, when I think about it, C.K. has always looked a little bit like Superman."

"Son, people used to think I looked a little bit like Elvis when I was younger, but when I sing 'Love Me Tender,' women don't swoon or throw their underwear at me."

Jimmy finally seemed to relax. "Probably a good thing for your relationship with Alice, huh?"

"Git!" Perry growled pointing to the door. Jimmy had just made it to the door when Perry stopped him. "Oh, and, Jimmy..." When Jimmy looked back, Perry held out the garbage can. Jimmy smiled before dropping his paper in the can to join Perry's copy. "I'm going to be heading out a little early today."

"You, Perry?" Jimmy asked incredulously. "Taking Alice out somewhere nice?"

"I wish. No, I just have some private business to take care of today. Oh, and when you leave, can you send Eduardo in here?"

The trip to Paris had been a lot more relaxed and enjoyable than the trip home. Clark silently landed them in a dark alley next to their apartment building since negotiating things like windows was still a little difficult for him, especially to do it quickly enough when carrying passengers to ensure he wouldn't be seen.

Lois sighed as she watched Clark clip Shadow's halter on him. Then she took Clark's free hand and placed it on her arm so that she could lead him back to their apartment.

How had the day gone so terribly wrong? It had been the perfect date until... Well, not until Clark had almost proposed, but when he'd accused her of turning down his proposal because he was blind. How could he be so dense? When, during the past few weeks, had she in any way given him reason to think that?

His almost proposal had been... terrifying. She'd realized the previous evening that he was thinking about marriage. But she'd managed to push that thought to the back of her mind, until he'd forced her to confront the issue. It had taken her a moment to stop him when she'd realized what he was about to do, mainly because she hadn't quite been able to believe it was happening. But as well as being terrifying, in some odd way it had also been thrilling.

Oh, she'd known from the moment they'd revealed their feelings for each other that this would never be a casual affair. That wasn't Clark's style. It wasn't hers either, for that matter. And risking their friendship, or their professional relationship, for more was not something either of them had done lightly. But marriage? If last week they hadn't been really ready to talk about moving in together, what could have possessed him to believe she would be ready to accept a proposal of marriage?

She would have been willing to talk to him about it — to tell him that although she loved him, everything was just moving a little bit too fast for her — until he'd made that very insulting comment about her stopping him because she didn't want to marry a blind man. When had she ever given him reason to believe that her feelings for him were in any way affected by the loss of his sight?

She glanced across at him. He looked as miserable as she. She wished she had some way to break the awkward silence between them. But nothing came to mind — nothing, at least, that she didn't think would simply start another fight.

Maybe words weren't what they needed anyway. Maybe she needed to simply show him how she felt about him. How much she really did love him. Well, once they got home... One way or another they'd hash it all out. She wouldn't allow them to go to sleep until he realized how much she loved him and needed him in her life — whether she was really ready to talk about marriage yet or not.

Having reached that decision, she felt calmer as they completed their trip. Arriving at the door to the apartment, Lois fished in her purse for her keys.

"Lois, I just want to say..."

"Just wait a second," Lois interrupted. Whatever he wanted to say would be better said once they were securely inside the apartment.

She turned the final key, opened the door and stepped inside.

"I just wanted to say..."

"Perry?" Lois said, again cutting Clark off when she saw Perry sitting on their new couch.

"I used the keys you keep in your desk to let myself in," Perry said, rising from the couch. "I'm sorry to intrude, but I thought you might want to see this — in private." With that he handed them a copy of *The Metropolis Star* with large pictures of both Superman and Clark visible above the fold... together with a headline that ran across the entire page. *Superman Unmasked*.

"Oh my god," Lois whispered, the color draining from her

face.

"What?" Clark asked.

"I'll leave you two to discuss this," Perry said, picking up his coat. "Just thought you should know that I've assigned Eduardo to follow-up on this for the Planet."

"Eduardo?" Lois gasped in surprise.

"What?" Clark asked again.

"Article. *Metropolis Star*," Lois said before reading from the page in front of her. "It's called: *Superman Unmasked*. Toby Raynes is the reporter on the byline. There are pictures of both you and Superman. It reads: 'Is it possible we have all been deceived by a pair of glasses? Assistant District Attorney, Mayson Drake, gave an exclusive interview to *The Metropolis Star* in which she claimed that the city's favorite son, Superman, who graced the skies of Metropolis for nearly two years is in reality Clark Kent, a mild-mannered reporter for the *Daily Planet*.'" She continued, finishing the article fairly quickly before turning her attention back to their boss. "This is our story, Perry!" she exclaimed. "How can you give it to Eduardo?"

"For the same reason I'm not submitting the editorial I wrote this afternoon demanding that Mayson Drake leave town before sunrise. Because, from the allegations in the article, no one would listen to it coming from any of us. Feel free to point Eduardo in the right direction, but this is his story. Capiche?"

"Perry..."

"We understand, Perry," Clark said before Lois could compose her argument.

She turned and glared at her partner... Or should that be soon-to-be-former partner... and current traitor. How dare he give this story away? Didn't he realize how dangerous it could be to have Eduardo... or any other reporter for that matter, digging around in his life?

"Okay, well, I'll see you both in the morning," Perry said, quickly picking up his coat and walking to the door.

"Do you want to tell me what that was all about?" Lois demanded the instant the door closed behind Perry.

"Before we talk about that... Let's just take a moment to check our answering machine," Clark said wearily.

Lois wasn't sure she wanted to wait, but he did have a point. If someone like his parents had called to say they were being hounded by paparazzi, or worse, psychopathic killers determined to seek revenge on Superman, the discussion might have to wait quite a while.

She motioned him to proceed and then cringed when she heard Toby Raynes' voice come over the speaker, asking if Clark had any response to a story that would be coming out today in which Mayson Drake claimed that he was Superman. She wondered briefly what might have happened if they had heard that message before leaving for Paris this morning. After all, if *The Metropolis Star* had a reporter with integrity, it would be Raynes. Not that her story might not have been manipulated somewhat by her editor — who didn't have quite as ethical a reputation. Smart of Mayson, though, to decide to take this story to Raynes.

The next message was worse than the first. Her mother. Demanding to know why her answering machine had been changed to her and Clark's place and then demanding to know why she hadn't been informed that her daughter was living with Superman.

By the third message, Lois had already had enough. As Barry Dunning from LNN came on the line, offering Clark a large sum of money to come on the show 'In Your Face' to answer the claim that he was Superman, she had a sudden desire to visit the bathroom.

When she came out, the messages were still continuing. She plopped herself down on the couch as the messages seemed to run together in a never ending stream of questions, requests... even a

few threats. There was even a proposed movie deal — well, providing he could furnish proof of his superhero status for their records.

“What do they want?” Lois had muttered following that particular call. “A certified copy of your Superheroes of America card?”

Finally, the one message she'd been concerned about started. Clark's parents.

“We're fine, honey,” Martha's voice said immediately.

“Rachel called. Apparently, she heard about this ridiculous story at the station before LNN picked it up. Some reporter called there to ask if she knew that Clark was Superman. She told them they were nuts and hung up immediately. After receiving another such call, she phoned to check on us. She told us that if we have any trouble with trespassers to let her know and she'd send one of the boys right out. So don't worry about us. Just let us know if there's any way we can help.”

“Oh, and if you call back and get the machine,” Jonathan added, “don't worry. We're screening our calls. After Rachel, we also got some crazy city folk calling us, wanting to know if the story was true. We told them it was a load of cow manure, of course. But when the third call came in we decided to stop answering.”

“So we're fine,” Martha added again. “You just take care of things at your end and we'll take care of things here.”

Lois closed her eyes and silently thanked whatever gods might be listening for the cool heads of Martha and Jonathon — and small-town protectiveness.

Finally, after a dozen or so more messages, including one marriage proposal and two requests of a less savory nature, the machine ran out of tape.

“So what did you think you were doing?” Lois asked again, returning to the conversation she'd started before listening to all the rubbish on their answering machine.

“Doing?” Clark asked, apparently not remembering their previous conversation.

“Giving Perry permission to assign this story to Eduardo!”

“Perry's right. We can't have anything to do with this story.”

“So what are you planning to do?” Lois asked incredulously.

“Stick your head in the sand and hope this all blows over?”

“Lois, it's not as if I can deny that I'm Superman. After all, Superman...”

“Superman doesn't lie,” Lois completed for him. “Or, well, unless it's to tell me that I mean nothing to him so that he doesn't have to reveal that he's blind. Or to tell me that he has to return a video, get a delivery from the cheese of the month club, pick up a prescription, or one of a million other excuses you've given me and Perry and all the rest of your friends over the past couple of years. And if you're talking about lying... Weren't the glasses themselves a lie? You didn't need glasses, did you? Or are you claiming that Superman really was short-sighted?”

“So what are you suggesting? That I write an article that says Mayson's wrong? It's not as if anyone is going to believe that.”

“What I'm saying is for a simple way to make gunpowder use five parts potassium nitrate, one part charcoal and two-thirds of a part sulphur by weight. Mill the charcoal and sulphur for four hours. Then add the potassium nitrate to the ball mill and mill for twenty-four to forty-eight hours — the longer the better. The result is called meal powder.”

“Arggg!” Lois yelled before returning to her previous thought.

“What I'm saying is that we find a way to discredit her. What about the fact that she only did this after you and I got together? Doesn't that make any allegations she makes against you suspect?”

“Are you honestly saying that is why she's doing this?”

“That's damn well what I'm saying. Do you really think she would have done this to you if you returned her feelings?”

“I think she's doing this because she honestly believes that it's the right thing to do. She considers Superman a vigilante and wants to make sure that he... that I stop. And I'm not going to destroy her reputation just because she wouldn't keep my secret.”

“Bull! This is the act of a woman scorned. If you can't see that...”

“I'm what? Naive?”

“At the very least.”

“And at most?”

“You still have feelings for her. That's why you're protecting her even when, after saving her life, she's doing her damndest to destroy yours.”

He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “I don't have feelings for Mayson, Lois.”

“Right. But don't let anyone suggest she's anything less than a saint, trying to protect the world from a big bad Superman.”

Clark sighed. “Lois, just tell me... is there anything in that article that isn't true?”

Lois directed her attention back to the article. “Yes!” she exclaimed after a moment. “Here... Where Toby writes: She... Mayson also maintains that both Clark Kent and his long time reporting partner, Lois Lane, and by extension, that great bastion of truth itself, The Daily Planet, have been actively deceiving the American public in their efforts to keep this story hidden.”

“Well, that's not... necessarily a lie.”

“No? Not only is she discrediting you, she's taking a shot at me and the Daily Planet. Undermining our integrity. And she's claiming, indirectly, that the Daily Planet is actively helping you deceive the public.”

“Well, she might have said something about you knowing, too, and that both of us wanted her to keep this information to herself and then simply assumed the rest.”

“You still think she's not on some personal vendetta?” Lois asked in disbelief. “To destroy you, me and the Daily Planet.”

“Well... maybe she thought you knew all along. That's not an unreasonable assumption.”

“She knew damn well that I didn't know about Superman before you lost your sight! I told her that! And why didn't she mention your strength when you pulled the door off her car last night? Because that would have certainly strengthened her claim. I'll tell you why — because that would have made her look bad — betraying you after you saved her life.”

“She might not have realized I actually pulled the door off. It all happened really fast and she was pretty scared at the time.”

“Why are you still defending her?”

“I'm not. I just can't believe this is some evil plot. She's not evil, Lois.”

“Could someone have put her up to this?”

“What?”

“How do we even know she's doing this on her own? Could she be acting on someone else's initiative? She is always been pretty close to Bill Church and can you imagine anyone who would benefit more from the destruction of Superman than Church?”

“Now you're being ridiculous.”

“Fine! Mayson is an angel. No one better say a word against her. Just lie down and play dead for all I care!”

“Look, Lois, things are bound to get crazy here. Maybe it would be best if I moved out.”

The silence that followed his suggestion was charged.

“I mean, maybe in the future we could try again,” Clark said, trying to sound reasonable. “When... if things calm down. I just think that it might be better...”

“How dare you?” Lois hissed. “An hour ago, you wanted me to marry you and now, if I understand you correctly, you're suggesting we break up.”

“I'm just saying...”

"Do whatever the hell you want, Clark! Just don't expect me to be waiting for you when you make up your mind about us! If we can't work through the hard times, we'll never make it long term anyway!" With that, she stormed into the bedroom, slamming the door shut behind her.

Clark stood in the living room, listening to the dying echoes of the slammed door for a long moment. He considered going to the door, knocking on it, trying again. Or just walking in. It was his room, too, after all. Problem was he had no idea what he would say. He'd been battered enough by Lois' reaction to his attempt to propose. Then to be hit with Mayson's betrayal. It felt as if his entire world had fallen apart in the space of one short hour. An hour ago, he'd had everything — well except, perhaps, his eyesight. Regardless, he'd been the happiest he'd ever been. Now... how could he even contemplate a life with Lois with the entire world knowing he was Superman?

He heard Shadow whimper softly as he began pawing at the bedroom door. "You and me both, pal," he said sadly before turning towards the couch. It seemed that was to be his bed tonight. A fitting end for the complete disaster this day had become.

Wednesday

The buzzing of the alarm clock woke Lois after a fitful night. She reached over, as she always did these days. Only today the man who normally occupied the other side was absent. His spot wasn't even warm. Opening her eyes, she saw what her hand had already told her. Clark's side of the bed hadn't been slept in.

She sighed.

Right. Their fight.

Could he have been serious last night when he'd suggested they should break up? They'd both said things last night they probably shouldn't have said. Still, surely he hadn't been serious.

Well, there was little point lying here, fretting. Pushing back the covers, she crawled out of bed. After taking a moment to wrap her robe around her, she walked out of her room and looked around. The bathroom door stood open. A neatly-folded blanket and pillow were lying on one side of the couch. But nowhere was the man in question. What?

Confusion was replaced by fear. Had he already moved out? In the middle of the night! Without so much as a goodbye! Fear was replaced by anger.

Well, she wasn't about to hang around here, hoping he'd return. She stormed into the bathroom to have a shower. Besides, he might intend to stick his head in the sand while Mayson fired shots at the rest of him, but Lois did not. While she'd been trying to fall asleep the previous night, she'd had some ideas. And she intended to follow up on them this morning — with or without the lunthead she lived with!

Lois pushed her way through the crowd of reporters that had gathered outside the front doors of her apartment building and forced her way to the door of her Jeep. She kept tight control of her tongue, knowing how easily she could be provoked into saying more than she intended. Even 'no comment' sounded wrong to her ears. So instead she focused on getting to her vehicle as question after question was flung in her direction.

"Does he live up to the title Man of Steel in bed?"

Lois spun around when that question penetrated her consciousness, her mouth open to reply. Her eyes landed on a reporter for the Dirt Digger who had asked the question, Samantha Richards, before her mind caught up with her and she bit back her response. Damn! Least Clark could have done was been here to endure this with her! Directing her anger at him allowed her to finally get inside her Jeep. Spinning her tires as she left the curb, it gave her a great deal of satisfaction to see paparazzi flinging themselves out of the way to avoid being hit.

Lois was even more furious by the time she worked her Jeep through the crowd at the Daily Planet to enter the parking lot. From there, the trip was fairly normal — if she ignored the looks other Planet employees gave her as she rode up in the elevator.

Stepping out into the newsroom, her eyes automatically searched out Clark's desk. She was surprised he wasn't there.

Still, now was not the time to be worrying about Clark. She had another mission on her mind. Or, well, two actually. Spotting her first target, she strode determinedly down the ramp and into the bullpen.

"Eduardo," she said, attracting her co-worker's attention immediately. "I understand Perry gave you the story about Clark supposedly being Superman." She didn't wait for him to confirm before continuing. "You might want to interview these people." She handed him a piece of paper.

"The first is Dr. Scott who is the doctor who treated Clark when was blinded in a welding accident almost six weeks after Mayson claims that Superman was blinded," Lois continued. "The second is the Sheriff in Smallville. She saw Clark earlier that same day and can confirm that he could see when she met with him before the accident. The last name is a Captain Stiller. Clark paid for his passage across the Atlantic by working on freighters. You might want to see if you can track him down. So what else have you found?"

"Good morning to you too, Lois," Eduardo drawled.

Lois rolled her eyes.

"Thanks for these. As for what other leads I might be pursuing... I guess you'll just have to wait and see."

When she narrowed her eyes at him, he just kept his level gaze on her.

"I suppose you've asked yourself what Mayson's motive might be for coming up with this garbage," she finally said. "She's a woman scorned. Clark chose me and so she's trying to get even with him."

He just raised his eyebrows.

Finally, knowing she wasn't getting anywhere with Eduardo, she growled before stomping off towards her second destination. Perry's office.

"Morning, Lois," Perry said when she stormed into the office. "Where's your better half?"

"How should I know? I'm not his mother."

Perry's eyebrows rose, but that didn't stop her. She was on a mission.

"Perry, I want to resume my investigation into Intergang."

"I thought you and Clark were following up on the attempt on Mayson Drake's life," Perry growled.

"Clark can do that. I doubt Mayson will tell us anything, especially if I'm there, so you don't need both of us covering that story. And I want to take a look at the files we got from Martin Snell as well as pursue some other leads I think might help us break the Intergang story."

Perry pursed his fingers together as he stared at her, as if trying to look into her mind. But since she didn't particularly care what he might think he was seeing there, she met his gaze, not giving an inch.

"Guess it wouldn't hurt to take a look at those files," Perry finally admitted. "And since it keeps you away from Mayson Drake, I guess that's not a bad thing either."

Lois didn't respond. After all, it wasn't likely to do her cause much good if she told him that she was hoping to find a link between Mayson and Intergang that might help discredit the woman. Oh, she didn't think that Mayson was working for Intergang. Mayson's help in breaking open the Martin Snell case was proof enough of that. But her relationship with Bill Church did make Lois wonder if she was being prodded on in her irrational dislike of Superman by her relationship with the head of

Intergang.

"And Clark?" she asked, knowing she couldn't do what she needed with Clark looking over her shoulder.

"I'll keep him on the story about the attempt on Drake's life," Perry said. "For some reason, I suspect less people are likely to end up dead that way."

It took Lois some time to get everything in place. The pen Jimmy got from Spies R Us the previous fall. Signing out one of the Daily Planet vehicles. A trench coat which had been hanging in the locker rooms since before Lois had started working at the Planet and a baseball cap, which she managed to borrow, after much belly-aching from Pete in Sports. Calling to find the hospital where Bill Church Sr. was currently admitted. As well as calling Fred the Forger, a place that rented professional uniforms and her hairdresser.

In all that time, she kept a covert eye out for her errant partner, afraid that he might arrive to discover what she was up to before she had time to put her plan into action. Still, by the time all the pieces were put in place, there was still no sign of Clark. It occurred to her to wonder where he might be, but she quickly decided that he could take care of himself. Besides, chances were that he'd just decided to spend the night in Smallville. If he wasn't back by the time she returned, she'd call the Kents.

As long as he wasn't out apartment hunting. She felt a chill run through her.

"What's the old trench coat and ball cap for?" Jimmy asked, stopping by her desk and, thankfully, pulling Lois out of her depressing thoughts.

"Same thing I intend to use the Daily Planet clunker for," she responded as she proceeded to gather up her things, tucking her small recorder in one of the pockets of the oversized trench coat. "To sneak out of the Daily Planet without attracting the attention of the vultures out front." Pulling her hair up, she pushed it under the ball cap and pulled the collar of the coat up to obscure her face. Suddenly, it occurred to her that she needed something else. "Jimmy, do you have a pair of sunglasses I can borrow?"

Jimmy immediately smiled. "Sure thing," he said before trotting off to get the requested item, glad to be part of the subterfuge. As she waited, she had one further idea. Walking over to Clark's desk, she opened it, finding, much to her surprise, what she was looking for. It seemed some habits died hard.

"Thanks, Jimmy," she said, quickly sticking the pilfered item in her pocket and closing the drawer when Jimmy returned with the sunglasses. She slipped them on her face. "Oh, and if anyone asks... And I mean anyone..." She glanced pointedly at Clark's desk. "You have no idea where I went."

"But..." Jimmy began to Lois' retreating back. "I really don't have any idea where you're going."

"Good boy," she said with a glance over her shoulder before turning her attention towards her upcoming mission.

Clark pulled Shadow to a stop when he arrived at the entrance to an alley behind the Daily Planet.

When he hadn't been able to sleep the previous night, he'd started to think about Leit and Munch's comments about his eye sight. Although he was unable to get answers directly from them, he now knew that they had expected his eyesight to return. So that meant... more time in the sun must be required.

Since it was dark outside, he'd flown to an island south of France he'd discovered in his travels, landing in an isolated spot just as the sun was beginning to rise. As he had lain in the sun, staring blindly up at it, he'd fallen asleep, Shadow curled up beside him — only to awaken some time later when Shadow barked to scare away some curious birds... He thought they might have been flamingos from the sounds they made, although without his sight, it was hard to be certain...that had come to investigate

the strange visitors.

It was only then that Clark had realized that he was late. Very late. What must Lois have thought when she'd woken in the morning to find him missing? What must Perry be thinking now?

So he'd instantly flown back to the Daily Planet, landing in a deserted alley, intending to use the suit he kept in the locker room to save himself the trip home.

But as he was about to step out of the alley and onto the street in front of the Daily Planet, he heard the commotion of a large number of people milling around outside the building. He stopped, wondering if the printers had walked off the job or something. They were in negotiations at the moment, so he supposed it was possible. He took one more step forward before he suddenly understood. They were waiting for him. And if they were here... there must be some waiting outside the apartment as well.

Damn. He should have thought of that.

Well, he wasn't about to confirm his Superman status by default, so... An instant later, a very startled dog gave an indignant yelp as Clark broke through the cloud cover hovering over Metropolis. He would have to go to work like everyone else — and that meant starting from home. Besides, now that he thought about it, hadn't he worn the suit he kept in the locker room home the day before yesterday?

Getting to work had been a nightmare. He'd called a cab from the apartment before going downstairs, knowing that hailing a cab would be impossible while trying to negotiate his way through the throng of people gathered outside the building, if he could manage it at all without his eyesight.

The other tenants were going to love those crowds.

Still, even by taking the precaution of calling for a cab, it had been near impossible to locate it with people pushing in on all sides, shouting questions at him as if he were deaf and not blind. Shadow had whimpered a couple of times as he'd tried to push the two of them through the crowd in what he hoped was the direction of the cab.

Finally, he'd shouted above the hoards, "Can someone please tell me where my cab is?"

The crowd had gone silent for the briefest of moments before seeming to realize he was helpless to escape and pressing their advantage. Question after question. Demand after demand.

Shadow growled and then began to snap, startling a few of the more relentless among the reporters enough that they stepped back. A hand on his arm and a quiet voice of a woman in his ear claiming that she would take him to his cab had been a relief. Only when someone yelled, "Nice going, Samantha," had he realized that he was being led away from the crowd by a reporter for the Dirt Digger, Samantha Richards. He pulled away quickly.

Shadow snapped.

"Hey, that dog almost bit me!" exclaimed Samantha.

"Mr. Kent? You called for a cab?"

A new voice was heard in the pandemonium surrounding him. Cautiously, Clark turned towards the sound. A man was standing beside a running vehicle. Clark carefully inched his way over to the man, hoping this wasn't another trick. He should have given the cab company a secret password or something.

He could hear the door of a car opening and approached slowly.

"How do I know you're really a cab driver?" he asked.

"Look, mister. You getting in or not," the man responded.

"Cause if not, I got another fare waiting for me."

Just then, directions to another location came in over the radio in the man's car.

Clark gestured Shadow in and then quickly entered the cab himself, so quickly in fact that he hit his head on the frame of the car. He immediately touched the spot, relieved to discover that he hadn't hit it hard enough to leave a dent — that was just what he

didn't need in front of a crowd of reporters determined to know if he was Superman. He grimaced slightly, just in case anyone had seen him hit his head. He was going to have to learn to be more careful.

He only dared to breathe a sigh of relief when the cab pulled away from the curb and the sound of shouted questions was left behind — none of which had anything to do with him hitting his head.

Once they arrived at the Daily Planet, Clark removed his billfold, feeling the bills, folded in a manner suggested to him during his first trip to the Metropolis Center for the Blind, to find the correct money to give the driver, being sure to include a healthy tip to make up for the problems he'd given the man at the other end. Still, the speed at which the driver sped away once Clark disembarked told him that the man was probably calling the cab company to suggest that if a Mr. Kent called in the future, he be given another driver.

Getting into the Daily Planet had been a little better. Even more reporters were gathered here, but security had been pretty quick to respond when it became obvious that he had arrived, leading him swiftly into the building. He suspected he had Perry to thank for that courtesy.

Clark squatted down next to Shadow as the elevator rose to the newsroom, trying to calm the disgruntled canine. Shadow was trained to ignore external distractions, but he doubted any dog could be tamed to the point of ignoring the hoards that had assaulted them on the trip here.

The elevator doors slid open before Clark was really ready and so, when he stepped out, he had to take a moment just to calm his own frazzled nerves. He was here. That was the important thing. More than two hours late, perhaps, but he had made it.

"Hey, Kent," Ralph said as he stepped up to the elevator, holding the door open so that he could talk to Clark before boarding himself. "Or should I call you Superman?" Ralph added with a laugh.

"Not now, Ralph," Clark said, trying to keep control of his temper as he quickly brushed past his colleague, his attempts to recover his equilibrium after his trip to the Planet completely obliterated.

"Oh, and congrats on thawing the Ice Queen," Ralph called after him. "I heard that you two are shackled up together."

Clark took a couple quick steps towards the stairs, trying to escape Ralph. A quick correction by Shadow was the only thing that managed to keep him from tumbling into the bullpen. He took a deep breath, relaxing slightly when he heard the elevator doors slide shut behind him, taking Ralph out of the newsroom.

Pushing his obnoxious colleague out of his mind, Clark stretched out with his senses, automatically looking for Lois, but could locate no sign of her.

He carefully tapped his way down into the bullpen and over to Lois' desk. The lack of a hum from the computer told him that it wasn't turned on. By running his hand over her desk, he knew she hadn't been there long, if at all, that morning. Lois' filing style was unique in that everything she worked on during a day tended to be spread out in a mess covering every corner of her desk. Then, at the end of the day, she'd simply swipe all of it into her top drawer — only to dig each piece she needed out again when it was required the next day. No mess meant no Lois.

But they were supposed to be following up on the story about the attempt on Mayson's life today. So... where was she? Unless... Oh, no. She wouldn't have gone to interview Mayson alone, would she? That was a nightmare waiting to happen.

Oh, his money was on Lois walking away from such a confrontation alive. Problem was, he wasn't nearly as confident she would walk away from the resulting murder charge as easily.

He could hear Jimmy rushing past his spot.

"Hey, Jimmy. Do you know where Lois is?"

"Uhh... no. I mean, not really. I'm not supposed to say."

"Come on, Jim. She didn't mean not to tell me."

"Uhh... yeah, I'm pretty sure I wasn't supposed to tell you most of all."

Uh oh. "Jimmy," Clark said warningly.

Jimmy crumbled. "I honestly don't know where she is, C.K. But she told me not to tell anyone anything anyway. And I'm pretty sure you were the one she specifically didn't want me to tell."

With that, Jimmy scurried away. Clark considered stopping Jimmy, pressing for more information, but quickly rejected the idea. Jimmy didn't know anything. If he had, he would have completely broken by now. The one thing Jimmy couldn't keep was a secret.

But where was Lois? And why hadn't she wanted him to know where she was going? That could only mean one of two things, Clark knew. Either she was still mad enough at him that she didn't want him around. Quite possible after last night... and his absence again this morning. Or... she had gone to confront Mayson. Or... she was doing something she knew he would consider dangerous. Okay, so maybe that was three things.

Still, since they were supposed to be following up on the attempted murder story, Lois' absence left him at a distinct disadvantage.

There was only one thing to do. He turned and began tapping his way towards Perry's office.

Lois took a final look at herself in the rearview mirror of the Daily Planet clunker she'd borrowed for today's mission. Perfect. She looked absolutely perfect. The long red wig she'd borrowed from her hairdresser and the glasses she'd stolen from Clark's desk went a long way towards changing her appearance.

She thought about the glasses for a moment. When no one had suspected that Clark was Superman, no one would think to check to see if there was more than clear glass in his glasses. But now... She'd have to tell Clark to put them away somewhere where no one could find them until this was all over. Because this would end. She intended to make sure of that.

She adjusted the mirror downwards, spotting first the forged name tag she'd picked up from Freddy the Forger identifying her as Wanda Detroit, janitorial staff. Her first idea had been to go in disguised as a doctor or nurse, but she had been concerned that she might unexpectedly find herself in a position where she was expected to give medical assistance. And besides, janitorial staff had not only almost as much access as medical staff, they had the added bonus of being practically invisible.

The only real concern she had was that the only janitorial outfit she'd been able to get her hands on looked more like green doctor's scrubs than the more muted green uniform of the Metropolis General Hospital janitorial staff. Still, beggars couldn't necessarily be choosers. And hopefully she'd fit in well enough that no one would notice.

She got out of the car and locked up before walking confidently into Metropolis General. A quick trip to Information and she had Bill Church's room number. Then a trip to the large diagram of the hospital displayed in the main lobby helped her come up with a workable plan.

Jimmy's spy pen had a range of about five hundred feet. Lois thought back to when Jimmy had first purchased the pen. He'd left it on her desk so that he could listen in on her conversation from the other side of the room. He had told her then that the pen had a range of about five hundred feet. It hadn't worked for her, however, when she'd tried to use it to spy on Lenny Stokes because she'd accidentally set it to radio. So she checked it to be sure it was properly set this time.

And since there was a storage room directly below Bill Church's hospital room, she had no doubt that the pen would be

able to pick up what she needed and transfer it to the room below. There were only two things she needed to do now. First, break into the storage room and second, plant the pen in Bill Church's hospital room.

Given how close Mayson was with Bill Church — as if she considered the older man a father figure — Lois she had no doubt that Mayson would be visiting him sometime today and Lois was very curious what that conversation might sound like following Mayson's interview the previous day. Anything else she managed to pick up would be a bonus.

Clark left Perry's office still unclear about who had suggested that he and Lois work on different stories. Perry had even trailed off into Elvis territory once, something about a fight between Elvis and Priscilla, although Clark had to admit, he hadn't really been listening.

Still, it could have been either Lois or Perry's idea to separate them. After all, having Lois working on a story that would likely involve some contact with Mayson was pretty much like combining gasoline and fire. On the other hand, Lois was upset enough that she may have requested this change of assignment. Problem was, he couldn't quite see Lois passing up on a chance to meet with Mayson.

And speaking of Mayson... Clark took a deep breath before picking up the phone. With police interviews and such, he hadn't had a chance to ask Mayson who might be targeting her the other night. A lot had happened since then. Still, since he was the injured party, surely if he showed that he was willing to be civil, she'd follow suit.

When he'd first met Mayson, she had given him not only the number for the D.A.'s office, but also the number for her direct line and her home number. He'd never made use of her home number, but her direct line had come in handy on several occasions over the succeeding months. So he didn't need to look up her number or, worse, try calling her through the receptionist at the D.A.'s office — where she would be told who was on the line and could pretend not to be there.

The phone only rang once before...

"Mayson Drake."

For a moment, Clark couldn't find his voice. Why hadn't he thought beyond placing the call to what he was actually going to say?

"Hello?" Mayson said.

The realization that she might be about to hang up snapped Clark out of his stupor. "Hi, Mayson. It's me. Uhh... Clark... Clark Kent." Damn. Could that have been any lamer?

Now it seemed that Mayson was the one unable to find her voice.

"Listen, Mayson, the reason I called..."

"I don't think we should be talking about this."

"No, wait. Don't hang up. I didn't call about that."

"So then why did you call?" she asked suspiciously.

"The attempt on your life."

"That's not your concern."

"Yes, it is."

"And just how do you figure that?"

"Two reasons. First, I'm worried about you. Mayson, someone is trying to kill you."

"Like I said, it's not your concern."

"Just promise me that you're taking precautions." When she didn't respond, he continued. "And second, Perry wants the story."

"Uhh... so now we get to the real reason you called. You're after the story. You don't give a damn about me. In fact, now that you know I can't be 'bought' by saving my life, you probably wish they had succeeded in killing me."

"That's not true, Mayson. And you know it," Clark responded, feeling his temper rise in spite of every attempt to keep his

feelings in check. "I do care."

"Well, if that is true, I guess that's your problem. Anyway, I've got somewhere to be. Please don't call again."

Clark suddenly found himself listening to a dead line as Mayson hung up the phone. What had that been about? He was the injured party. Where had all this newfound hostility come from?

"So does this mean you won't agree to give me an interview?" he asked rhetorically into the phone.

"Reluctant source?" Eduardo asked as he walked by.

"You have no idea," Clark responded. Well, if he couldn't get the information he needed from Mayson, where else might he be able to look?

Successfully planting the spy pen in Church's room had been easier than anticipated — made easier by the fact that Bill Church had been taken for an EKG shortly before she'd arrived at his room. In order to avoid suspicion, however, Lois continued her trip down the hall, pushing the janitorial cart ahead of her. She pushed open the door of the next room and stepped inside, immediately looking for the trash can.

A young woman, probably no more than seventeen or eighteen, wearing a candy stripper's uniform was helping a middle age gentleman across the room, apparently heading towards the bathroom.

Suddenly, the man gasped, grabbing at his chest as he fell to the floor. Almost immediately, he was unconscious.

"What do I do?" the candy stripper asked in a panic.

Lois was instantly at the man's side, her fingers expertly feeling his neck for a pulse. "He's in cardiac arrest," she said immediately. "Call code blue. Get a crash cart in here — now!" As the candy stripper rushed to follow her instructions, Lois began cardiopulmonary resuscitation — when had she learned the correct procedure for CPR, anyway?

As a nurse rushed into the room with a crash cart, Lois heard the intercom page a code blue.

"Good!" Lois said, standing up to pull a second nurse over to take over the chest compressions and barked at the first nurse to administer oxygen and attach a finger pulse oximeter as she herself grabbed the stethoscope off the cart and placed the ends in her ears. "Wait," she said, causing the nurse administering CPR to stop while she checked to see if there was a heartbeat. When she shook her head, the nurse immediately resumed CPR.

"Where's Dr. Kross?" the nurse manning the oxygen mask asked.

"Probably sneaking another private moment with Dr. Stalla," the nurse performing CPR responded.

"Well, we don't have time to wait," Lois said as she quickly grabbed the patient's chart to check allergies as well as other information.

She glanced at the name tag on the nurse operating the oxygen mask. Mindy Black. "Ms. Black, administer one mg of epinephrine," Lois said while turning her attention to preparing the defibrillator, adding gel to the paddles.

Mindy did as ordered.

After setting the power level on the defibrillator, Lois ripped the man's shirt open and placed one paddle diagonally on the right side of the man's body between the right nipple and the collar bone and the other almost under his left armpit. She looked back at the power level. "Charging," she said a couple of times. When the power was fully charged, she looked at Mindy. "Pulse?" she asked. The woman looked down at the device she had placed on the patient's finger before shaking her head. Lois immediately said, "Clear!"

The instant the nurses pulled away, she pressed the buttons on the paddles simultaneously, sending a jolt of electricity through the man's heart. Then she put the stethoscope back in her ears and listened again as Mindy announced that they had a heartbeat.

"Strong... regular," Lois said before sinking back on her heels and breathing a sigh of relief. "Okay, get him settled, set up an IV and a cardiac monitor and monitor his vital signs."

"Who are you?" Mindy asked, seeming to realize for the first time that she didn't recognize the person barking orders. "You're on the janitorial staff?" the woman gasped in disbelief as her gaze focused in on Lois' name tag.

"Uhh... well, as they say, any port in a storm," Lois said, quickly rising to her feet. Just then a doctor came rushing into the room, still doing up his shirt. His name tag identified him as Dr. Kross. "Doctor, I assume you can take over from here," Lois said before practically fleeing the room, taking the back steps down to the next floor, in hopes that she could get back to her preordained hiding spot before security could be alerted to her presence.

Once safely tucked away in her closet, she started to tremble. How had she known how to do all that?

The Faraday leaks. It was the only possible explanation. Somehow, in a moment of extreme duress, she'd found a way to access and make use of the information Faraday had planted in her mind. But then... she should have known that. After all, she seemed to leak information in two types of situations. In response to some type of question or comment. And in moments of extreme emotion. But then her leak about the Faraday information had mentioned an adrenaline catalyst. This time the two situations had combined, giving her instant access to the information that had saved a man's life.

But then... Her mind flashed back to an accident she'd had when she'd been in Kansas with Clark. Somehow she'd known how to fix the truck when it hadn't started after the accident. At the time she'd just assumed she'd heard about fuel pressure inertia switches somewhere. But she could remember her hands trembling — a probable adrenaline rush caused by the accident. So maybe this wasn't the first time she'd been able to translate theoretical science into practice.

A slow grin made its way across her face as the reality sunk in that she really had saved that man's life. Was this how Superman felt after a successful rescue? If so, she could suddenly understand how hard it must be for Clark to have to give all that up. Maybe she owed it to him to cut him a little slack.

She knew she'd been hard on him the previous night. She'd turned her anger on Clark when really it should have been directed at Mayson for her betrayal. She knew, really, that Clark wasn't in love with Mayson. And she knew Clark's nature always looked for the good in everyone. She loved that about him, in fact.

Just thinking about their fight caused a pit to form in her stomach. This was new to her. Regret. Wishing she'd handled turning down his proposal better. Wishing that instead of getting mad at him, she'd found some way to reassure him that her request that he not propose had not been a rejection of him. Not at all. She just needed... a little time to get use to the idea. That she did see her future with him. In fact, she could no longer imagine a future without him in it. But that she just needed a little time to be sure. Instead, she'd lost her temper when he'd accused her of rejecting him because he was blind.

And then, maybe, if they had settled things between them before returning to the States, she would have handled the whole Mayson tells the world thing better. Right now, they should be pulling together — not apart. And with the thought that she could lose Clark as a result of this whole mess, the pit in her stomach got bigger.

Still, there was not much she could do to make things right while staking out Bill Church's hospital room. Besides, there was something going on here, something more than just Mayson's moral scruples about Superman. Lois could feel it. What she couldn't quite get a grasp on was what exactly was going on. Was it just that Mayson really was acting out as the woman scorned? Possibly. She didn't know Mayson well enough to know for sure.

But there was one thing of which Lois was certain — by the time this was all over, she would get to the bottom of it.

Still, there wasn't time to worry about that now. She needed to get the transmitter and tape recorder ready in time for Church's return. Now... she only hoped this worked because she doubted she'd get back on Church's floor again without causing a commotion.

It took her a moment to set things up. Once she did, however, she could hear two women talking, clear as day.

"I don't know, Mindy," the one woman was saying skeptically. "I think he's just a dirty, old man."

"But you miss the point," Mindy said. "Dirty, old, rich men need love, too."

The two women laughed.

"Besides, you didn't think I intended to stay stuck in this dead end job forever, did you?" Mindy asked.

Lois cringed. If the Mindy she was listening to now was the same one who had been with her a few minutes ago, the woman had to be... well, no older than Lois was, probably younger, and if she was suggesting what Lois thought she was suggesting... Oh, gross!

Lois quickly rewound the tape to start again. She hardly thought Mindy Black's gold-digging ambitions were important to her attempt at nailing both Mayson Drake and Bill Church with this little venture.

Once everything was in place, Lois made herself comfortable, certain it was only a matter of time before she had what she'd come for. And given the amount of dust in this room, it seemed obvious that her hideout was secure. On the other hand, with the voice activated tape recorder ready to pick up every word, she could also come and go as she pleased, confident that she wouldn't miss any of the good stuff.

"Clark?"

Clark turned in his desk at the sound of Eduardo saying his name.

"I'm not sure if you know, but Perry gave me the Superman story," Eduardo continued, sounding somewhat tentative.

"He told me," Clark confirmed.

"Okay, well, Lois gave me some names to follow up on," Eduardo said, surprising Clark. "One of them, a Dr. Scott in Smallville, has refused to give me any information unless you sign a release. So I was wondering..." His voice trailed off, knowing that he'd said what needed to be said.

Clark hesitated. He didn't think Dr. Scott would say anything that could hurt him. But he was concerned about the precedent. If he agreed to this, what would others insist on knowing about him in the future? And if this claim by Mayson that he was Superman stuck, there were sure to be other such requests.

"I'm not really comfortable with that," Clark told his colleague.

"I understand," Eduardo said. "How about an interview?"

Clark shook his head.

"I suspected you'd say that," Eduardo said, a wry smile in his voice.

"Sorry, Eduardo," Clark said and then listened thoughtfully as his colleague walked away. Maybe he should have agreed to an interview.

Problem was that the he knew without a doubt the first question would be, 'Are you Superman?' And answering no to that question... He knew Lois was right. He'd lied daily for the past couple of years. Even the glasses were a lie. But never had he told so direct a lie. And if this whole thing didn't blow over and it became publically accepted that he was Superman, his lie would be firmly on record. And what would that do to Superman's credibility?

Well, he didn't have time to worry about this now. If Mayson

wouldn't tell him what he needed for his story, he had to find another way to get the information.

He picked up the phone before setting it back down again. No. Henderson was more likely to be forthcoming if asked in person. The only problem was... From his desk, he could hear the crowd of reporters milling around outside the Daily Planet just waiting for him to show.

He rose to his feet, intending to take off from the roof of the Planet. Except... He sank back down onto his chair. Given the coverage outside, was it possible that they had people with high powered cameras watching the roof — in hopes that they might catch him doing something super. That was what he would probably do in their position. It was certainly what Lois would do.

Damn. He should have thought about that last night before taking off from the roof of the apartment building. Or before returning there this morning. He could only hope that no one had thought of that yet.

He thought he'd been alone. But how could he really know? When he'd had his eyesight, he'd been able to see much further than the most powerful camera. And although he could still listen for people who might be watching, with all the noise of the city, he couldn't be certain that he would hear someone filming him from afar.

Until this whole situation was resolved, he needed to put a moratorium on all of his super activities. Even reheating his coffee was out.

So then... how did he get out of the Daily Planet?

"Jimmy?" he asked, hearing the young man rushing past. "I need your help."

Lois wasn't certain she'd ever been as bored in her entire life. Listening to Bill Church Sr. sleeping wasn't exactly exhilarating. Well, there had been Mindy Black's ridiculous giggly flirting while she was taking his readings and administering medication. Senior was not as talkative. He pretty much just grunted softly, although admittedly receptively, in response.

And all this spare time was not what Lois needed at the moment. It gave her too much time to think about her fight with Clark the previous night. Lois was just about to pack up and leave — she could collect the tape later — when she heard the door in Church's room open.

"Hey, dad. You awake?" Junior asked.

A soft grunt was Senior's reply.

Lois could hear the door close, and settled down herself. This could prove to be interesting, after all.

"Suppose you're wondering how I got out of jail," Junior said. "Well, seems there's no evidence linking either you or me to the room where the men were found. And the men found guarding the room claim they were working for Leit and that as far as they knew, Leit was working on his own. Of course, that rental agreement showing that Leit had rented the room and thereby keeping us at arm's length from Leit was the crowning touch. No evidence means no charges."

Not a ringing endorsement of their innocence, but not an admission of guilt either. Damn.

"And the guards?" Senior asked very softly.

"I'm not worried about them. Between their desire to be accepted into our guaranteed early release program and our retirement package when they're released, it's not in their interest to incriminate anyone. Besides, Snell was a pretty effective warning."

There was a brief pause and it sounded as if Junior was getting comfortable.

"Oh, and don't worry, they didn't find the operations center. So we're still in business," Junior said after a moment.

Whatever response Senior might have wanted to give, was interrupted by the door opening and a nurse sticking her head in to

tell Junior that his father needed to sleep.

"I'll just be one more minute," Junior said before the door closed again.

"Don't worry, Dad," Junior said when they were again alone. "I'll take care of things while you're here. Oh, and I spoke to the doctor about getting you a new heart. I'm sure one of our dead men will be a match. I'll make sure we start looking for a suitable donor today."

With those final words, Junior took his leave. Lois thought about his words for a long time. There was a lot in there — most of which she hadn't understood. One thing she had understood was that the operations center for Intergang must be in the CostMart, but apparently the police hadn't found it.

Other than that... What did Church mean about their 'guaranteed early release program'? She could imagine what 'retirement package' must mean. A payout. But why would the guards be so sure Church could get them out of prison? Surely the men behind an attack on City Hall would be looking at life sentences.

And what did Junior's comment about finding Senior a new heart from among one of their dead men mean? Obviously, it meant that the doctors had told Church he needed a heart transplant. But there were waiting lists for that sort of thing. And who else would a person get a heart from other than a dead man?

Well, there wasn't much more happening here at the moment, so maybe it was time for her to head back to the Planet. She could always return to find out if Church received a visit from Mayson Drake later. She quickly replaced the tape in the recorder so that she could take the first tape with her, and got ready to leave. After she typed up the conversation between the Church men, she wanted to take another look at the files they'd recovered from Snell's storage facility, see if she could find anything interesting there.

"We're here."

Jimmy's voice as he pulled his car to a stop in front of the police station brought Clark out from beneath the blanket he'd been curled up under in the back seat. Shadow immediately licked his face, relieved that his master was no longer doing something so incomprehensible. Humans were so weird sometimes.

"Do you want me to wait for you?" Jimmy asked as Clark and Shadow climbed out of the car.

Clark stopped and thought about that for a moment before shaking his head. He wasn't sure he'd actually have to sneak back into the Planet. After all, the only problem with walking through the reporters out front was likely to be facing more questions. Not pleasant, perhaps, but not unmanageable for the short time it would take to get from the cab to the building. And it wasn't fair to Perry for him to hold onto Jimmy just because between his blindness and the throngs of reporters wanting an interview, he couldn't manage everything he needed to do by himself. No. That was the very thing he'd promised Perry wouldn't happen.

"No. Why don't you head on back?" Clark asked. On the other hand, if he did walk back into the Planet, it would have the reporters out front questioning how he'd gotten out unnoticed. "But I might give you a call later to help me get back inside, if that's okay."

"Sure, no problem," Jimmy said before shifting the car into drive.

Clark immediately asked Ata to tell him the directions to the police station and was already on the way there when Jimmy pulled away from the curb.

Lois could hardly believe that Clark was still not present when she arrived back at the Daily Planet. But... had he been here? If not, it was time to get seriously concerned. Her eyes swept the newsroom, finally landing on Jimmy sitting at his desk on the far

side of the bullpen.

She approached quickly.

"Scientific America, Jimmy?" she asked when she arrived at his desk and saw what Jimmy was reading. "What happened to the Dirt Digger? I thought that was your magazine of choice."

"Well, given the number of mad scientists we seem to have in Metropolis, I thought I should improve my scientific knowledge if I'm going to work here."

"Good idea. You can be our resident science expert."

"Right!" Jimmy sputtered. "I'm not much of an expert. I can't even understand the job postings. Here's an ad for an early stage researcher in quantum nanoelectronics. The only thing I can understand from this ad is that it's a full time job. Listen to this: 'Its scientific objective is to improve our conceptual understanding of quantum electron transport at the nanoscale if needed or enabling the emergence of 'Beyond C-MOS' nanoelectronic devices.' What the hell does that mean?"

"It implies a combined effort in the topic of spintronics molecular electronics single-electronics, quantum dots, nanowires and nano-cooling," Lois said. She gave her head a shake, not minding the leak quite as much after what had happened at MGH earlier. "Anyway, I'm just wondering if you've seen Clark."

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah. I just got back from dropping him off at the police station to talk to Henderson."

"Henderson," Lois repeated. She nodded. "Did he have problems getting out of the Planet?"

"He hid under a blanket in the back of my car. Boy, those guys staking out the place really think he's Superman, don't they?"

"There are idiots everywhere," Lois said. "Did he say when he was coming back?"

Jimmy shook his head. "But he did say he might give me a call when he was ready."

"Let me know if that call comes in. I'll go get him."

"Sure thing. Guess this means you're not mad at him anymore, huh?"

Her eyebrows rose.

"Right. None of my business."

Clark had known that if he wanted to talk to Henderson, he was probably going to have to wait. But today the waiting was a little more difficult due to the fact that he kept worrying that at any second someone was going to shout out, 'Hey, it's Superman.'

"Come on, Sarge," an unfamiliar voice said to the desk Sergeant. "Just tell Henderson that a DEA agent needs to talk to him about the Mayson Drake case."

Clark's ears instantly perked up. DEA? Now that was interesting.

"I told you. He's busy at the moment."

Clark inched closer, hoping the man would give a name. But it seemed the man must have already given his name.

"All I'm asking for is a little professional courtesy here."

Clark could tell the man was trying to sound charming, but the tone of the Sergeant's response made it obvious that he wasn't charmed.

"You'll just have to wait until the Inspector's available."

Clark let out a breath. Chances were that Henderson would talk to a fellow officer before granting time to the press. Still, maybe there was an opportunity here.

As he heard the DEA agent step away from the counter, Clark approached. "Excuse me," Clark said. "Did you say you're a DEA agent working on the attempted murder of Mayson Drake?"

"Who are you?" the man asked suspiciously. "Wait a minute? Aren't you...?"

Clark tensed.

"...Clark Kent," the man completed.

"Yes," Clark responded, attempting to recover from not being called Superman.

"You're one of the reporters who were at the scene during the attempt on Drake's life, aren't you?"

"Uhh... yes."

"I saw a picture of you in the file. The Daily Planet was my next stop. I wanted to talk to you and your partner, find out what you could tell me."

"And you are?"

"Agent Daniel Scardino. But, please, call me Daniel." There was a moment of silence before Scardino continued, somewhat awkwardly. He must have offered to shake Clark's hand. "Oh, sorry. Didn't see the dog. I hadn't realized you were blind. Guess that limits what you saw that night, huh?"

"You'd be surprised how much you can pick up without your sight," Clark said, feeling unexpectedly defensive.

"Well, given the fact that the report I read said that you were the one who saved Drake's life, I guess that's true. Good job, by the way."

"Thanks," Clark responded, suddenly finding Scardino somewhat less grating. "So what's the DEA's involvement here?"

"Nothing, really. I'm not here in an official capacity. In fact, my boss sort of suggested I keep my distance on this one, but I've never been very good at following orders."

Clark smiled. "You sound like my partner," he confessed.

"That would be Lois Lane?"

Clark nodded.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Scardino said. "You're probably here to talk to someone and I'm holding you up. Still, if you'd be willing to meet with me when you get a chance..."

"I'm waiting to talk to Henderson, too," Clark said. "So I'll tell you what. You answer my questions and I'll answer yours. I'll even introduce you to my partner. Can't promise she'll be quite as forthcoming, but..." Clark shrugged.

Scardino laughed. "I had a partner like that once," he confessed.

Clark smiled. He could really like this guy.

"But we probably shouldn't talk about this out here," Scardino said. "How did you get here?"

"Uhh... a friend gave me a ride."

"I came in from Washington today so I have a rental. What do you say I give you a lift back and we can talk at the Daily Planet? Well, when you've finished up here."

Clark nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

His attention was diverted from Scardino when he heard Henderson speaking to someone on the far side of the lobby.

"So I told her you were coming," Henderson said. "She said she'd see you right away."

"Thanks, Inspector."

Clark knew that voice, too, but it took him a moment to make the connection. "Eduardo?" he asked as he began walking towards the two men.

"Hey, Kent. You waiting for me?" Eduardo asked.

"No, actually. I was hoping to speak to Henderson. What are you doing here?"

"Nothing I'm prepared to talk to you about," Eduardo said, but the touch of humor in his voice took the sting out of his words.

"Oh," Clark said.

"What are you doing here, Kent?" Henderson asked as he followed Eduardo over.

"I wanted to talk to you about the attempted murder of Mayson Drake," Clark said.

"Sorry, Kent. The Chief is keeping a tight lid on this one. No press. Now... if you were Superman..."

Clark froze, not quite sure how to respond or how to keep the color from draining out of his cheeks.

"Too bad you're not," Henderson continued with barely more than a pause.

Clark started breathing again.

"You're Inspector Henderson?" Scardino asked.

"Yes."

"Agent Daniel Scardino. DEA. I was wondering if I could talk to you about..."

"Sorry, Scardino. Your boss already called. You're off this case."

A moment later, both Henderson and Eduardo had left the lobby, leaving Scardino and Clark standing alone.

"So..." Scardino said. "Feel like letting me give you and the pooch a ride back to the Daily Planet since it seems neither of us are going to have any luck here."

Clark nodded. "Just one thing... Do you have a blanket in your car? 'Cause I sort of need to sneak back in."

Clark laughed at what he could imagine was the expression on Scardino's face. "I'll explain on the way," he said. "An article was published about me yesterday that... Well, I assume you haven't seen. If I'm seen entering the Daily Planet, I'll be bombarded with questions from reporters that I'd rather avoid at the moment."

"I don't usually pay much attention to local happenings in Metropolis," Scardino said. "But I find it interesting that reporters would hound another reporter. What did you do? Kill someone?"

"Not exactly," Clark said. He sighed. He was going to have to figure out how to deal with people following this story coming out eventually. Maybe he should consider this practice. Well, and maybe, until he figured out how to deal with this on a more permanent basis, he could practice his non-denial denial.

"Remember that 'well, unless you're Superman' comment Henderson made a couple minutes ago," he said as he, Shadow and Scardino walked towards Scardino's car.

"Yeah?"

"Well, that article I mentioned... It claims I'm Superman."

For a moment, Scardino was silent — and Clark tensed, ready to hold his glasses in place if he sensed Scardino making a grab for them.

"No offence, Kent," Scardino said, his voice amused. "I saw Superman once. And he's a lot taller than you. Besides, can't he see?"

It was the third file that had Lois most intrigued — although she couldn't articulate exactly why this file had captivated her attention. A number of drug trials. All apparently done by reputable labs. All completed.

So what was it that had captured her attention? It was some of the names of the drugs, she suddenly realized. Although no descriptions of the purpose of the drugs was provided, with names like Nirvana, Dreamer, Retribution and Resurrection, it was hard not to be curious. Intergang sure was great at coming up with drug names.

Nirvana almost sounded like a street drug — perhaps something along the lines of Ecstasy. But it appeared to have been created and tested by Omnicorp — a well respected drug company. The president, Charles Knox, had recently appeared on the cover of Billionaire Exclusive Magazine as one of the newest inductees to that select club.

Resurrection, however, was particularly interesting. It had been invented by a Dr. Stanley Gables.

It took her a moment to place the name. He'd been responsible for testing some drug... She couldn't remember what. Maybe she'd never known. ...which had gone horribly wrong. People had died. He'd been discredited. Then he'd been shot and killed by someone. The police suspected a grieving relative of one of the people who died in the study although nothing had ever been proven.

Sort of ironic. To be killed while inventing a drug called Resurrection.

But could the name be taken literally? Probably not. Surely if someone had invented a drug that could raise people from the

dead, it would be big news — even if testing was not complete. Maybe it was nothing more than some sort of pep pill — designed to revive someone who was dead tired.

Still, there was something here, something tugging at the corner of her mind that she couldn't quite get a grip on.

One thing, though, although the file didn't tell what the drugs did, it did give the scientific formulas for the drugs.

She searched her own mind, trying to find some reference to these drugs in the information provided by the Faraday device. But either she still didn't know how to access the information in spite of today's incident at the MGH, or that information wasn't included in the information she'd been given. Either had an equal chance of being true.

She stared at the chemical compounds for a long time, trying to see if they provoked a response, but there was nothing there either.

Finally, she sat back in her chair. Who did she know who might be able to answer her questions? Almost as soon as the thought had come, she knew the answer. Picking up the phone, she placed a call to Dr. Bernard Klein at Star Labs. If anyone could answer her questions, it was he.

A few minutes later, she was faxing the formulas for the drugs of most interest to her over to Dr. Klein — who had promised to get to them as soon as possible.

"Talk about crazy," Scardino said as he and Clark rode up in the elevator to the Daily Planet newsroom. "When you said there'd be reporters, I thought a couple local guys hanging around the front door. But that was a lot more than some locals. I think every news network in the world must have been represented. I don't think I'd even known there were that many cameras in the world.

"And they weren't the only ones," Scardino continued. "I'm not sure who were scarier the groupies with signs wanting to have Superman's baby or the ones who were shouting 'Alien go home.'

"I couldn't believe it when we had to be rerouted by that police officer because the crowd was blocking the street," Scardino said. "At first, I thought there must be something else going on. To find out it was because of some story claiming that you're Superman... If I hadn't seen it, I don't think I'd have believed it. Has the whole world lost its mind?"

Clark had lost interest in this conversation some time ago and was hardly listening. Although, he had to admit that the crowd hadn't gotten tired and gone away during the course of the day — the way he'd hoped they would in some small corner of his mind. If anything, it had grown as the story gained traction.

But through the cacophony taking place outside, he'd picked up Lois' heartbeat. Normally, other noises made the softer, gentler sounds impossible to pick up. But Lois' heartbeat was loud and strong in his ears.

He hadn't spoken to Lois since the previous night... and he had to admit that the things that were currently unresolved between them had him feeling off-balance. What he wanted most was to grab her and Shadow and fly away to a corner of the world where no one had ever heard of Superman. There must be somewhere like that — although at the moment, he couldn't say he knew where.

'Well,' he thought to himself resignedly, 'at least things can't get any worse.'

In that assumption, he was entirely wrong.

Lois rose from her desk and picked up her coffee mug. She was just about to head over to the coffee machine when she heard the ding of the elevator.

Something deeper, more primal than even instinct, caused Lois to look towards the elevator. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Clark step out. He paused briefly, almost as if he felt her eyes

on him, before beginning to tap his way down the stairs and towards his desk.

She let out a slight sigh when she noticed his tie. His ties were always a little on the wild side, but this one actually clashed with the rest of his outfit. Obviously, he'd had some problems getting dressed without her.

She set her coffee mug back on her desk and stepped over to his. She opened one of the drawers, quickly locating the spare tie he normally kept there. Pulling it out, she looked back at him. This one at least wouldn't clash.

She returned to her desk and sat on the corner as she watched the remainder of his approach. So caught up was she in this activity she almost missed the man walking next to him — although with his leather jacket only partially hiding a bright Hawaiian shirt it was hard to believe that was possible. Some abstract part of her mind noted that he was good-looking only to be pushed aside as her heart took her eyes back to the man next to him.

Clark's feet came to an abrupt halt when the man walking beside him stuck his hand out to the side, striking Clark in the gut.

"Please tell me that's your partner," Scardino said.

"Who?" Clark asked, not knowing where Scardino was looking.

"That Greek goddess over there. The one sitting on the corner of a desk holding a tie."

"Uhh..." Clark began, still not knowing who might be the object of Scardino's desire — although he suspected from the pain developing in his gut who it might be. Or at least he didn't think Scardino was strong enough to cause him this type of pain with a simple hit to the stomach. "I can't exactly see where you're looking."

"You mean you have more than one goddess working here?" Scardino said. "The one with the dark hair, a body to die for and legs that seem to go on forever. Even if she's not Lois Lane, you have *got* to give me an introduction."

The turmoil in Clark's stomach got worse. He could only hope that Scardino was closer in looks to Ralph than to Mel Gibson. What had ever possessed Clark to suggest breaking up with Lois last night?

No. No. His fear of losing Lois to someone like Scardino couldn't keep him from giving Lois a way out of their relationship. After all, she hadn't agreed to the public attention that would undoubtedly come from being romantically linked to Superman in the public's eye. No one deserved that. Especially not the woman he loved.

He pushed down his sudden desire to grab Scardino and strong-arm him out of the newsroom and instead pasted a phony smile on his face as he resumed his trip into the bullpen.

Lois frowned. She'd been watching the two men approach, seen them stop and witnessed the exchange. She couldn't hear the conversation which had taken place, but by the way the other man's eyes had never left her, she suspected she was the current topic under discussion. And from the false smile now gracing Clark's face, it was obvious he was not happy with the direction the chat had taken.

She narrowed her eyes, now viewing Hawaiian shirt man with suspicion.

"Hi, I'm Daniel Scardino," the man said as they approached. "Please make my day and tell me that you're Lois Lane."

"And what if I am?"

"Then I have to ask you if those eyelashes are real."

"Of course they're real."

Scardino smiled. "Boy, they sure are pretty."

Lois felt slightly off balance. Her eyes darted over to Clark, instantly feeling unaccountably guilty. She'd done nothing to

encourage this flirtation by Scardino, but something felt wrong about Scardino flirting with her in front of her boyfriend. On the other hand... Clark, his free hand now shoved deep in his pocket, was standing back slightly, almost as if he didn't think he had any right to interfere.

What the hell was that all about?

Still, it did explain why Clark's mood had suddenly changed half way down the steps. Scardino must have said something about her and Clark had obviously chosen not to enlighten him as to their relationship.

"Would you excuse us for a minute?" Lois asked Scardino before taking Clark's arm and leading him into the conference room, closing the door behind them. As soon as they were alone, Lois released Shadow from his halter before beginning to pull off Clark's tie.

"Uhh..." Clark said, one of his hands coming up as if in an attempt to protect his modesty.

"Your tie clashes," she said as she continued removing his tie. "What's going on, Clark?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Lois let out a breath as she dropped his tie on the table to pick up the other one. "Casanova out there..."

"What about him?"

Lois let out another breath as she draped the new tie around his neck. "Nothing, Clark," she said, suddenly deciding to change tactics. She began knotting the tie as she spoke. "Look, I know we both said some things last night that we didn't mean..."

"I meant what I said, Lois. I really do think we need to think seriously about whether or not I should move out — at least for the time being."

Lois growled. "Okay, fine! Maybe now isn't exactly the time to get into this! So just tell me about Casanova. Who is he and what is he doing here?" She pulled the knot tight.

Probably a little too tight because Clark's hand instantly came up to loosen it.

"Okay, Wayne. Just a bit more and I think we've got it," Jonathan said.

Wayne Irig pulled the tractor a little further into the road. "Perfect!"

After turning off the gas and removing the key, Wayne got down from the tractor before he and Jonathan stood back to observe the results.

The road that came out to Martha and Jonathan's house was a dead end, and Wayne was their closest neighbor. So although they might not get rid of all the reporters who had started arriving earlier in the day by blocking off the road, they could, at least, cut down the number who could simply park out in their vehicles to photograph the house with their long distance lenses.

Rachel and the boys had come out about half an hour ago and chased a bunch of them off. Since the road was on private property, she'd been able to exert some pressure — and had promised that if any of them came back, they'd be spending the night in Smallville's jail. Problem was that given that they only had a two cell jail, that might get full awfully quick. Not that any of the reporters knew that, of course.

Rachel had suggested to Martha and Jonathan that they might want to go somewhere until the hubbub blew over. Martha and Jonathan had thought about it before deciding on trying this as an alternative.

"Yeah, that should do it," Wayne said, observing the vehicles that they'd managed to scrounge from a number of neighbors for blocking off both the road and the ditch on either side. "Now at least those bothersome reporters will have to hoof it up the road for the next mile if they want to waste their time botherin' you and Martha. And just give us a call if you're plannin' to go somewhere and I'll move the tractor. If me and Nellie are out, you know

where the key is.”

Jonathan nodded. “Thanks, Wayne. I’ll let Rachel know, too, in case she or the boys need to get out here.”

Wayne nodded. “Damn nuisance, them reporters. Should drop them all off the end of the earth.”

Jonathan clasped Wayne’s shoulder in a friendly manner and smiled. “I might opt to keep one or two of them.”

“Well, your boy’s okay. So’s that girl of his. The rest...” Wayne shrugged. “Don’t they got something more useful to report?”

“Guess the news business must be slow today.”

“Guess so. Why can’t they all worry about things that matter? Like figurin’ out how to predict the weather.”

Jonathan laughed. “Or getting us our sports’ scores.”

“Damn straight. Should we put up the signs now?”

Jonathan nodded and pulled the signs out of the back of his pick-up — signs Martha had made up earlier in the day. ‘Park At Your Own Risk.’ ‘Private Property — No Parking.’ And then there was Jonathan’s favorite, ‘Any Car Parked Here Will Be Deemed To Be Abandoned And Treated Accordingly.’

“Thanks, Wayne,” Jonathan said when he and Wayne finished pounding in the signs.

Wayne looked for a moment at the signs. “Anyone who does ignore the signs might come back to find their car being used for target practice.”

Jonathan laughed as he walked back to his truck — the only one on his side of the barrier.

“Oh, and just to let you know,” Wayne continued before Jonathan could climb inside. “I let Alvin out into the field. Figured he could use a little exercise.”

Jonathan laughed again, wondering what those reporters who decided to cut across Wayne’s field might think if they came face to face with what Wayne liked to call ‘the cussedest bull in all Kansas.’

“So my partner tells me you and he made a deal — to tell each other what you know about the attempt on Mayson’s life,” Lois said when she arrived back at her desk.

Clark flinched slightly at the way she made ‘partner’ sound like a swear word.

“So what do you know?” Lois asked.

“You show me yours and I’ll show you mine,” Scardino responded, a definite sexual undertone evident in his voice.

Clark’s eyes narrowed, even though he kept his mouth firmly shut.

“I don’t think so,” Lois said coldly. “You talk first. After all, what if you don’t have anything worth knowing?”

“Well... I know who made the bomb used in Drake’s car,” Scardino said. “Does that qualify as anything worth knowing?”

“He’s a con by the name of Sean Macarthy,” Scardino said once he was settled in the conference room with Lois and Clark, Shadow curled up on the floor at Lois’ feet. “Macarthy was responsible for a series of drug related bombings in the late eighties. I lost someone very close to me in one of those bombings.”

With the final sentence, his eyes settled on Lois — and for the first time she saw something more than a third-rate Casanova. He was a man who had experienced some real pain in his life.

“Who?” she asked.

“My partner — Jenna.”

She’d been more than just his partner. That was obvious. Lois bit her lip, her eyes involuntarily moving over to rest on Clark. If something ever happened to him... She gave her head a quick shake, unwilling to let her mind dwell on that possibility for even a moment.

“Didn’t I hear that Macarthy died in prison?” Clark asked.

“So they say,” Scardino responded. “The attempted murder of the D.A. says otherwise. I know Macarthy’s M.O. like the back of my hand. I was the one who put him in prison. Somehow he’s out there again.”

“So your idea of solving the attempt on Mayson’s life is looking for a dead man?” Clark asked.

“I guess you could say that,” Scardino said.

Although she couldn’t say she was impressed by Scardino’s theory about the case, Lois had agreed to tell him what she’d seen and heard when Mayson’s car had exploded — appropriately edited, of course.

His ‘evidence’ that he knew Macarthy’s M.O. like the back of his hand was simply not believable in the light of the grief he still quite obviously felt over his partner’s death. No wonder his bosses had told him to keep his distance on this one.

Still, that grief demanded a certain amount of respect — and it was Clark’s story now, after all. So if he was willing to give Scardino what information he had, who was Lois to say otherwise?

By the time they had finished up, it was pretty close to quitting time.

“So where is good to eat around here?” Scardino asked as they walked out of the conference room.

“The Roma Cafe is good,” Lois said. “And it’s close by. It’s fairly casual, but the food is great.”

“One of your favorites?” Scardino asked Lois.

“Yes.”

“Good. Then why don’t you join me?”

“I don’t think...”

“Why don’t you go, Lois?” Clark said. “I want to type up my story about Ata before I leave. I’ve been feeling guilty about not typing up that story yet.”

“Clark...”

“Go. It sounds like fun.”

Her eyes narrowed momentarily. “Fine. Then, Dan, I’d love to.”

Lois quietly fumed as she hid beneath her wig, trench coat, sunglasses and ball cap in the passenger’s seat in Scardino’s rental. She could hardly believe how Clark had practically forced her to go out with Scardino. How dare he? Even if he was having second thoughts about his feelings for her, he had no right to choose her dates for her!

She’d agreed just to give him a taste of his own medicine. And she had to admit, it was somewhat satisfying to see the muscle in his jaw tick when Dan had helped her on with her coat.

Well, if that was the way Clark wanted it, she planned to have a great time. A really great time. She folded her arms defiantly across her chest as she thought about the really great time she was going to have.

“So I understand why Kent has to sneak into and out of the Planet,” Scardino said. “But why do you?”

Why her? Well, perhaps because, as far as those reporters out there were concerned, she and Clark were together. But how exactly did she say that in the circumstances? After all, Clark had made it pretty clear that he didn’t think they should be together.

“Because he’s my partner,” Lois said — although at this moment, she couldn’t say she knew exactly what that meant.

“Uhh... So if they can’t talk to him, you’re the next best thing, huh?”

“Something like that. Turn here.” Lois finally removed her arms from across her chest to busy herself with removing her disguise and finger-combing her hair. She pulled down her sun-visor, using the vanity mirror to ensure that she didn’t look as disheveled as she felt. Almost immediately, she realized that it wasn’t her appearance that seemed tousled, but what was going on

inside her.

Scardino turned the vehicle where indicated. "Is this it?" Scardino asked when they had driven about a block down from the corner.

"Uh, yeah."

A moment later, they were pulling into the parking lot.

Lois felt as if she was having some sort of out of body experience as she stepped out of the car and accompanied Scardino into the restaurant. As if from a long ways away, she heard him tell the hostess that they wanted a table for two and then followed on autopilot as they were led towards a table.

What the hell was she doing here?

She'd let anger master her once again — letting Clark goad her into agreeing to go out with another man. Damn it. And all of this after chastising herself earlier today for reacting in anger to Clark instead of talking things through with him.

Dan pulled a chair out for her.

"I can't do this," Lois said, backing away.

"What?"

"This. I'm sorry, but there's something you need to know.

Clark and I... well, we aren't just partners. We live together."

"As in... roommates?"

"No."

"Oh. But then why..."

"He's being a lunkhead at the moment," Lois said. "But... I love him, Dan. And being here with you... it's not fair to any of us. And it just feels wrong. I can't stay."

"Not even for a platonic dinner with a friend?"

Lois shook her head. "I don't have time. I have to find a two by four to hit my lunkhead over the head with."

"Well, if you're living together, why not just use a rolling pin?"

"A rolling pin?"

"Uhh... How about I give you a ride home?"

Lois shook her head. "You stay. The food really is good. I'll grab a cab."

"I hope he's worth it."

Lois gave him her first real smile, one that, although she didn't know it, he wouldn't soon forget — one that revealed a mixture of both unqualified love and that particular brand of determination of which only Lois Lane was capable. One that told him that this was a woman who was definitely not available.

"He is," she told him with complete conviction.

On the scale of horrible days, this one had to rate somewhere near the top. He'd had to tell Perry that he didn't have the Mayson Drake attempted murder story for him yet. His trip home from work had been almost as bad as the one there. But the worst blow of all was that Lois was out on a date with Agent Casanova.

What was she doing going on a date with someone else, anyway? She was living with him for crying out loud! Surely she could have waited until his side of the bed was cold before going out with another man.

Okay, so maybe this was partially his fault. He might have sort of pushed her into it. Still, she hadn't had to accept! She could have said no! But she hadn't.

And ever since, he'd been torturing himself since with images of her and Scardino at the Roma Cafe. His hand on the small of her back as he escorted her to a table. Laughing at Scardino's jokes the way she'd laughed at his only the previous evening. Reaching out to lay a hand on his arm. Her heart racing as Scardino leaned to steal a...

The key snapped in the lock.

Crap.

The aroma of something burning suddenly penetrated Clark's tormented brain. The apartment! It was coming from the apartment!

He was about to push the door in when his hearing caught the sound of an annoyed grumble coming from inside. She was frustrated, but she wasn't frantic.

Okay, no emergency. Still... Was she cooking? Would she have really brought her 'date' back here for supper? Did she have no concern at all for his feelings?

But... He stretched out with his hearing. No, she was alone. But surely there hadn't been enough time for her to have dinner with Scardino and get home in time to burn... Was that milk? It definitely had a milky smell to it.

Unable to put the pieces of the puzzle together, he turned his attention back to his immediate problem — the key he'd broken off in the lock. Feeling around, he discovered that there was still a small part of the key sticking out, enough for him to get hold of it with his fingernails and, very gently, very slowly, turn the key.

Click.

Letting out a sigh of relief, he carefully pulled the key fragment out of the lock. He'd have to tell Lois not to use the third lock down until he had a chance to get a replacement key made.

Using the next key, he turned his attention to the next lock.

"Is everything set up?"

His hearing picked up a woman's random question coming from one of the nearby apartments. He quickly dismissed it to concentrate on his task. He muttered darkly under his breath when his hand fumbled and he dropped the keys. Unable to use his vision, he had to get down on his knees and feel around on the floor. He felt Shadow's nose against his arm and then the feel of... He let out a breath of relief as he recovered the keys from Shadow's mouth.

"Thanks, boy," he said, singing to his feet.

He heard Lois begin singing softly to herself and felt his heart give an involuntary flutter.

It flashed through his mind to use superspeed to get into the house. He'd still fumble at superspeed, of course. But at superspeed, things still wouldn't take nearly as long. But as quickly as the thought came, he recalled his earlier decision to put a moratorium on all of his super powers. Given the amount of surveillance he was under and the loss of his eyesight, who knew when someone might catch something on some high powered camera even when he thought he was alone?

Still, he rebelled inside at the amount of time it was taking just to get the door unlocked. Just when he was about to give up and knock to get Lois to let him in, the last lock opened, allowing him to enter the apartment. He was grateful that locking them behind him took less time.

Realizing Lois was in the kitchen, he slipped off his coat and boots before releasing Shadow from the halter. Shadow immediately bounded away.

"Hi, boy," Lois said, her singing ending as she greeted the pup. "Bring your master with you or did he send you away, too? Other masters he wanted you to guide around for the evening."

"Lois..." he said, his voice a soft plea as he tapped his way into the kitchen.

Lois ignored him to continue addressing Shadow. "Did you walk out on them, too, boy? Leave them sitting alone without even eating supper?"

"You didn't stay for dinner?"

"See if you can turn the volume up." The random voice from a nearby apartment again penetrated Clark's consciousness.

He pushed it aside when he heard Lois stand from where she'd been squatted down to address Shadow.

"What the hell were you thinking, Clark?" Her voice as soft, but probing, and he could hear the hurt in her tone.

"Lois..."

"Has anyone ever told you you're an idiot?"

"You. Regularly."

"Is the tape recorder going? 'Cause this is getting good," said

that annoying voice again.

"That's because you are an..."

Clark suddenly understood the meaning of the voice. Shifting into gear, he grabbed Lois, his lips descending on hers in an effort to cut off whatever she'd been about to say.

He heard her give a surprised gasp, followed by a soft moan as her lips opened under his. Unable to resist, he kissed her back, accepting her invitation to invade her mouth, searching it for her taste. Her body melted against his, molding to his, soft everywhere that he was hard. His arms went around her waist, drawing her closer, even as hers wound their way around his neck as she brought her body even closer.

One kiss turned into two and then three before he felt one of Lois' hands leave his neck to slide down his shoulder and onto his chest, slipping her fingers between the buttons on his shirt.

"Focus in more on her hand."

The voice snapped Clark out of the lustful haze that was beginning to consume him. Still, it took him a moment to slow things down. Finally, he managed to force himself to break the kiss, pulling her even closer so that his lips were positioned right next to her ear.

Still panting, he breathed into her ear a single word. "Bugs."

Except for the continued heaving of her chest, she froze.

"Cameras," he whispered again.

He felt her nod against him, telling him that his message had been received and he could tell that she, like he, was mentally reviewing everything they'd said since he'd arrived home.

"Now that's what I call a proper welcome home," she said, finally drawing away from him.

"Yeah," he agreed, his mind moving as he tried to figure out how to handle this development. Even blind, Superman could have the place cleaned out in seconds, just by following the high pitched sounds he could hear coming from the equipment now that he knew to listen for it. Problem was that whoever had bugged the place would know instantly that only Superman could have cleaned the place out that quickly.

"Would you mind seeing if you have any more luck than I did cleaning the burned milk out of the saucepan while I give Perry a call?" Lois asked.

He smiled. She was brilliant. By using the cordless phone, she could come up with a viable reason to discover the surveillance devices by picking up on the magnetic clicking sound when the phone was in close proximity to the electromagnetic field produced by a hidden camera or microphone. Once they'd found one, they'd have more than enough reason to search for more.

Lois let out a breath of relief when, after the experts had come to search the apartment, finding all the surveillance devices cluttering the place, she checked the bedroom closet. The Superman suits hidden in the box in the back of the closet appeared to have been undisturbed. Still, they really needed to come up with a better storage place for the suits because the people who had bugged their apartment this time would undoubtedly try again. Or others would.

She suspected the only reason the suits hadn't been found this time was because the people planting the devices hadn't wanted to leave behind any sort of disturbance that would alert either Lois or Clark to the fact that someone had entered the apartment.

She was annoyed with herself that she hadn't considered the possibility that someone would have tried planting bugs and cameras in here. The ones in her bedroom bothered her the most. What were they hoping to capture — super sex?

The issue of bugs in their apartment also raised other questions. Were there bugs at the Daily Planet, too? What about her Jeep? And if there were surveillance devices in other places... had anyone managed to capture anything compromising? It was probably a good thing that she and Clark had been fighting today

and so hadn't spent time together, talking about things.

Otherwise... Before they had realized the problem... They could have said something incredibly incriminating to each other. Something that could have sealed Clark's fate. Positively identifying him as Superman.

It flashed through her mind that, just like they had found bugs in their apartment, she had planted a bug in Bill Church's hospital room. Was that really so different?

Yes, it was. The difference was the intent behind the activity because, although she couldn't care less about Mindy Black's flirtations with Bill Church, she had no doubt that if the cameras in her bedroom had captured her and Clark having sex, that video would have found its way into the public domain and every magazine and television news show would be publishing all the intimate details.

It was a good thing that Clark had realized that they were being bugged.

But... when had he realized they were bugged? Before or during the kiss. She'd thought at the time that the kiss meant he realized what an idiot he was being. But now...

"I'm wondering why you have so many locks on the door when they don't seem to keep anyone out," Clark asked.

She turned from where she was still squatting next to the box containing the Superman suits to see him standing in the doorway.

"Alan Morris. Kyle Griffin. Ryan Wiley. Mr. Makeup," Clark continued "Even Lex Luthor must have bust in here once or twice to set up an exact replica of your apartment in his bunker. And now this."

"And it's only going to get worse," Lois said. "But at least we know now what to look out for. By the way, couldn't you hear where the signal was being sent or something?"

"Two doors down."

"The McLoughlin residence? But they are away on holidays."

"Someone must have broken in to use the apartment as their base of operations. But they cleared out as soon as we found the first bug and since I couldn't stop them without confirming who I was..." He shrugged. "I can tell you that at least one of them was a woman, however."

Lois nodded.

"Still sure you want to be in a relationship with Superman?" Clark asked.

"No," she said, rising to her feet. "I want to be in a relationship with Clark."

"But, Lois..."

She let out a breath. "Clark..." Deciding that she didn't want to have this conversation while standing in their room, she took his arm and led him into the living room. She waited until they were both settled on the couch, before continuing. "Clark, I love you. But this... waffling on your part... I can't take it anymore."

"I just want you to have the choice to get out if you don't think you can handle all this."

"Well, you're making me think you are the one with second thoughts. That maybe you don't love me anymore."

"No, Lois," Clark responded immediately.

"So you don't love me, anymore," she said, her voice sounding small even to her own ears.

His hand instantly came up to cup her cheek. "I love you. I love you so much that..." He faltered, unable to find the words to complete his thought. He gave his head a shake and tears came to his eyes — communicating his feelings far more elegantly than words ever could.

"Clark, I love you just as much," Lois said. "So when you keep trying to push me away... Can't you understand how much it hurts me?"

"I just want... I know you didn't sign up for all this. If this doesn't blow over... If they find the evidence they need to prove conclusively that I'm Superman... Or they simply come to be

completely convinced of Mayson's story..."

"Then we'll deal with it. Us. Together."

"But..."

"No buts, Clark. We're in this together."

"Are you absolutely sure, Lois?"

"I am more than absolutely sure. Whatever happens... we're in this together. Just promise me that you'll quit trying to push me away."

He seemed to waver for another moment before nodding.

"So... Partners? In every way?"

He nodded.

"Partners," he confirmed. "In every way."

"Pinky swear," she demanded. "After all, it's not really binding unless there's a pinky swear involved. Oh, and let me see your other hand — to make sure you don't have your fingers crossed or something."

He couldn't help but smile, even as he stretched out one of his hands while making sure the other was clearly visible.

She took his pinky with hers. "We promise on three... One. Two. Three."

"I promise," they both said in unison.

"It's almost like being married," he said.

She giggled before taking his hand and raising it to her lips to kiss his fingers. If he could joke about marriage, maybe he was even finally starting to realize that her rejection of his proposal had not been a rejection of him. Still, she didn't want to talk about that now. Not after their fight. Or the day they'd had. No, she had something else on her mind at the moment. "I seem to have heard somewhere that makeup sex is really, really great. And since this is our first fight since getting together..." Her voice trailed off, letting him fill in the missing pieces for himself.

"What about our first morning here? I'd say that was a fight."

"Are you trying to be obstinate, Mr. Kent?"

"Are you propositioning me, Ms. Lane?"

"I'm doing more than that," Lois responded cheekily. "I'm telling you to prove how sorry you are by taking me to bed."

He smiled in a way that told her he wasn't quite done teasing her. "But... what about that great meal you were making?"

"Hmph. I only got as far as burning the milk for the cheese sauce. I was trying a recipe Lucy left behind for homemade macaroni and cheese. I'd heard somewhere that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach and thought... Well, can't everyone make macaroni and cheese?"

"Lois, I didn't fall in love with you for your skills in the kitchen."

"Good thing."

"Besides, there are other rooms where you definitely excel." He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

She smiled. "So what are you waiting for? Take me to the bedroom — then maybe we can order some take out."

Clark didn't need more. He scooped her up in his arms, carrying her on sure feet towards the bedroom. As they left the living room, she flicked off the light. He pushed the bedroom door closed with his foot, leaving a whimpering dog on the other side.

The decision to eat their Chinese food in bed was probably not, in retrospect, the best plan she'd ever had. Between the inherent slipperiness of much of the food and Clark's lack of sight, they were making quite a mess. Still, there were compensations. Eating a slippery shrimp off Clark's chest, and ensuring no stickiness was left behind, had certainly been thought provoking. And it had been more than a little intriguing when he had used his sense of smell to lick up some sweet and sour sauce that had dripped onto her right thigh.

Clothing optional had also proven interesting. Not that either of them had actually been comfortable with complete nudity while eating supper. But they'd had the foresight to wear old clothing.

He had thrown on an old pair of jeans to answer the door when the food arrived. And she had to admit, she was enjoying being able to explore his magnificent chest whenever she wanted. And the old dress shirt she'd stolen from Clark seemed to be quite a hit with him, providing his hands with plenty of skin to explore.

Shadow, having been granted access to the room when the food arrived, was enjoying the activity as well, acting like a living garbator, quickly gobbling up any food that made its way onto the floor or ended up close to the edge of the bed.

Still, next time, she might opt for robes at the table. Save the bed for something else... Something involving chocolate sauce perhaps.

Makeup sex, on the other hand, she couldn't say enough positive things about that particular experience. And given that both of them had felt the need to show the other how much they loved each other... Wow.

That was something else new about this relationship, she mused. In the few previous relationships that had become sexual, after the first times when feelings and excitement had been running high, sex had quickly become more of a concession Lois made to her partner's needs. Now... being close to Clark, having exclusive rights to his body, was getting better with each encounter instead of becoming something of a chore.

But that might just be because of Clark. Unlike other men, having climbed that particular mountain, he hadn't become more focused on simply fulfilling his own needs, but continued to ensure she was well satisfied, too.

If he kept this up, soon she was going to have to award him that gold star. She wondered if he realized just how different he was from other men. She stretched and purred contentedly.

"Wow," Clark said, pulling her into his arms so that she was cuddled up against his chest. "That sounded like a great thought."

"You have no idea," she said, emphasizing each word.

"Now I'm really intrigued."

Lois laughed again. "So tell me something," she said, instead of answering his query. "When you left last night... I sort of wondered if you might have gone to Kansas."

Clark shook his head before filling her in on his trip to the Mediterranean and the reason he was late for work.

Lois was thoughtful when he finished. "About your eyes... Something happened today, Clark. I managed to access the Faraday information." With that, she filled him in on saving a man's life at the MGH.

"Hey, that's really great!" Clark exclaimed.

"So anyway I wondered..." She wiggled out of his arms, turning so that she was sitting on her knees facing him. "Look up towards the light so that I can look in your eyes."

"Which way's the light?"

She took his face between her hands and turned his face so that the light was reflected in his eyes.

"What exactly is the point of this?" Clark asked.

She tried to get a better vantage point. "I'm just hoping that by looking in your eyes, maybe something will come to me about how to get your sight back."

His eyebrows rose.

"It was when I was confronted with a guy in cardiac arrest that I was able to access the information Faraday put in my head. If that's there, then maybe I can do the same to find the information that will help us figure out how to get your eyesight back."

She was silent then as she looked into his eyes. But other than the fact that his eyes were a beautiful dark chocolate in color, she couldn't tell anything. "I need one of those thing-a-ma-do-hickies for looking into a person's eyes."

"Do you mean an ophthalmoscope?" Clark asked.

"Uhh... okay."

Clark laughed, wrapping his arms around her to pull her to him.

"Hey, I'm trying to solve your eye problem," she protested, batting at his hands.

With a sigh, he released her. "Well, what do you see?" he asked after another moment.

"I see you getting lucky with a beautiful brunette," Lois said. "And, in spite of the beautiful qualifier, it better be me or you're in real trouble, buster."

He reached out, pulling her to him again. This time she didn't resist, wrapping an arm around his neck as he settled her in his lap.

"I'm sorry, Clark. I'd like to try again with one of those things you mentioned."

"An ophthalmoscope?"

"Right. But at the moment... sorry. I just see these beautiful brown eyes." Her hand ran gently down his cheek. "Guess I still have some ways to go before I can really claim to know how to access the Faraday information. Maybe I should reconsider getting some sort of adrenaline pill to see if that might help."

"No, Lois. Every drug has side effects. I really don't like the idea of you popping adrenaline tablets just to access this information."

Lois sighed. "I agree. Having the ability to access the additional information on command might be nice, but not at the risk of my health. Still..."

"We'll work on it. Your leak about how to access the Faraday information didn't seem to indicate that adrenaline was a necessity — just a possible catalyst. Maybe when things settle down a bit we can work on figuring out how you can access this information without artificial adrenaline."

Lois nodded. "Still, I'm going to contact the doctors treating the men at the MPH and tell them about my breakthrough. Those guys' situation is much more serious than mine. They might warrant the use of some sort of artificial adrenaline."

"Good idea. I did hear, however, that Steve's daughter flew in and apparently, he has been responding well to that."

"That still doesn't help with your eyes. Have you considered perhaps doing what Dr. Scott suggested?"

"Which is?"

"Going to see an expert. He gave you a list of names. Do you still have it?"

"Probably, but..." He was silent for a moment as he seemed to think about her suggestion. "Given the predators out there watching me, I don't really want to give any of them anything."

"And if you went to the wrong expert, he might well be looking for proof as to your identity."

"And since I can't wear my sunglasses while having my eyes examined..."

"I see your point. All the more reason for me to get hold of one of those ophtha-whatcha-ma-call-its and see if I can figure out what the problem is. Oh, and given the way people keep breaking in here... We need to find a better hiding place for the Superman suits."

"I've been thinking about that. When I had to use one of the suits the other night, I discovered that you have a loose floorboard in the back of your closet. I'll pry it up and place them and my shaving kit under there before we leave in the morning."

For a moment, they were both silent, enjoying being close and lost in their own thoughts.

"I wonder how Mom and Dad are making out," Clark finally said.

"Maybe we should fly out to see."

Clark shook his head. "I thought of that, but it's too risky. Even if I can now navigate without my sight — or at least will be able to until I give Ata back to Dr. Klein tomorrow..."

Lois opened her mouth to interrupt, but then closed it again, having no idea what she could say. Clark had stayed late at the Planet to type up the story about Ata. He probably felt ethically bound to return the device to Dr. Klein tomorrow.

"...but without my sight, I might miss someone taking pictures from a distance. Normally I can see further than any long distance lens, but now... No. I really don't think I can risk either a takeoff from Metropolis or a landing in Smallville. And after all the surveillance devices we found in here this evening, I'm even thinking I should avoid being too open on the phone as well. Still, I keep wondering how they're making out."

"Speaking of which... Let's turn on LNN... Just to get an idea of how they're reporting this."

When Clark nodded, Lois squirmed off his lap. After stripping off the sticky shirt, she picked up her robe before hesitating.

"Shower first," she suddenly announced.

"Suits me," Clark said, quickly jumping to his feet.

It was sometime later before Lois slipped into her robe and padded softly into the living room. She didn't bother to turn on the lights, letting the television provide her with enough illumination to settle on the couch. Clark joined her there, towel drying his hair. She immediately pulled her legs up under her, cuddling up against his side even as his arm went around her shoulders.

Lois watched and Clark listened as LNN covered a number of other stories. The 'Clark is Superman' story was still the top story of the day. But other than reiterating Mayson's claim and some basic biographical information about Clark and a shot of him being rushed into the Daily Planet this morning, they didn't have much — and certainly no pictures of Smallville or his folks.

"Maybe the worst of it is over," Clark said when the segment had played.

"Maybe," Lois responded skeptically even as she found herself wondering what might be coming next.

Thursday

Superman Living In Sin

Dirt Digger

By Samantha Richards

A source inside the Daily Planet has confirmed that Clark Kent, aka Superman, is living in sin with his reporting partner, Lois Lane.

Speculation about a sexual relationship between Kent and Lane has been frequent in media circles for over a year, but until it was revealed that Kent was Superman, no one took much official notice.

However, there can be no denying that an illicit sexual relationship exists between them now since Superman has been residing with Lane in a conjugal relationship without the legitimacy of a marriage license since his return to Metropolis.

In fact, last night Lane and Superman spent a quiet evening in their apartment during which the only lights on in the apartment appeared to be in the bedroom. Even after taking a delivery of Chinese food, the lights in the main part of the apartment stayed off, leaving observers to wonder if they were ever going to come up for air.

When asked if Superman lived up to the title of Man of Steel in bed, Lois Lane had no comment. Still, after last night, one can definitely conclude that he's not faster than a speeding bullet.

However, one can't help but wonder how the revelation that Superman is also a superstud will affect his moral authority.

When Lois and Clark arrived in the lobby of the apartment building the next morning, Lois spotted a sign that had not been there the day before. It forcefully reminded residents that they were not to open the security doors without knowing who they were admitting and informing them that it would keep everyone safe.

Obviously, that had been put up because of the break-in at their apartment the previous day.

When they climbed into the Jeep, Clark had quickly located a bug and, unobtrusively, had disabled it. Then he'd suggested to

Lois that if she had concerns about listening devices at any point in the future, she simply tap his ear and he would listen for them.

Arriving at the Planet, Lois and Clark briefly talked to Perry — mainly so that they could tell him about the attempt to bug their apartment and warn him about the possibility that there could be surveillance devices here, too. Perry had taken the warning seriously, promising to get someone in to check for such devices later today — and then regularly thereafter until this matter was resolved.

If it was resolved.

Not that anyone had voiced that thought.

Of course, they had seen the article in today's copy of the *Dirt Digger*. Jimmy had provided it to them as soon as they had arrived at their desks. But they hadn't mentioned it to Perry.

So Lois was surprised when Perry walked into the conference room for the morning meeting carrying a copy of the *Dirt Digger*.

Without introduction, he began reading. "A source inside the Daily Planet has confirmed that Clark Kent, aka Superman, is living in sin with his reporting partner, Lois Lane." He paused then, looking around at the reporters gathered in the room. "Listen up, folks, if you have something to say about Lois and Clark, talk to Eduardo. Anyone caught giving information about Lois or Clark to other papers will be fired! If you value your jobs, keep your traps shut."

Perry's gaze was hard as it rested on various reporters, those he thought were the most viable suspects.

"But, Chief," Ralph said. "It isn't as if they didn't already know that Lois and Clark are shackled up."

"I don't care if they want to know if Lois is a woman and Clark is a man. No one says anything to anyone outside this paper! If I see 'a source inside the Daily Planet has confirmed...' in any other papers, I promise you that heads are going to roll. When Eduardo is ready to publish his story, the other papers can quote us. Until then... nothing." He let that sink in for a moment. "Understood?" he finally asked. "Understood?" he asked again when no one responded.

After a general muttering of people saying they understood, Perry changed the subject, finally getting down to business. "Myerson," he said, directing his attention to one of the reporters. "Anything from the overnights that we should know about?"

"Another inmate died of natural causes at Stryker's last night," Myerson responded. "That's a total of twelve in the past three months — more than died of natural causes in the previous three years combined. So I was thinking..."

Clark knew that he'd basically tuned out after the Perry's initial introduction. When the meeting was over, he slunk out of the room, his head down, trying to be as invisible as possible. He had pretty much figured out from the questions he and Lois had been hammered with when they left their apartment this morning that something had been said, officially, about his relationship with Lois. But when Lois had read the article to him, and had described the picture at the top of the article of the two of them kissing — obviously taken before they'd found the cameras in their apartment the previous night — he'd found himself feeling...
Violated.

That was the only way he could describe how he felt.

The detail Samantha Richards had been able to decipher even without the bugs and cameras, which had obviously been planted by the *Dirt Digger*, made him feel dirty. And he was fairly certain they had changed the color of his shirt to blue to remind people that they were looking at a photo of Superman kissing his lover. Inside, along with the story, were pictures of the inside of their apartment — including one of the big bed he shared with Lois.

He knew Perry had only been doing what he had to do. But he still couldn't help but feel violated all over again by having the article referred to in front of his colleagues. The fact that everyone

knew what he and Lois had done the previous evening, in the privacy of their own bedroom left him feeling exposed and furious.

They had no right! None at all!

"Hey, Kent," Ralph said. "Guess Lois really is the Ice Queen if it takes you all night to get her off. Congrats on hanging in there though."

Clark's response was automatic. He reached out, grasping his colleague's shirt with one hand, jerking Ralph towards him.

"Hey, Kent, chill. There's no reason to get violent here."

Clark's jaw ticked even as he twisted the collar of Ralph's shirt, causing it to tighten around the man's neck. He could feel Ralph's hands pawing at his.

He felt Lois' hand on his arm almost instantly. "He's not worth it, Clark," she said softly.

Her voice broke through his rage and he released his grip on Ralph.

"Buy yourself a sense of humor, Kent," Ralph said when he was finally out of Clark's reach.

Clark jerked forward, but between Ralph's hasty retreat and Lois tightening her grip on his arm, he didn't get his hands on Ralph again.

"What's going on, Clark? You usually don't lose your temper like that."

Her voice was quiet, not much more than a whisper, obviously kept soft to prevent her from being overheard. He listened for a moment, realizing what Lois had obviously already seen. No one was nearby. He also listened for the high pitched frequency that would alert him to listening devices. He couldn't detect any.

"I'm sorry," Clark said. "It's just... They know everything that happened between us last night, Lois. Everything."

"Well, not exactly everything." Her voice was slightly suggestive, trying to direct his mind, he knew, in a different direction. But even her flirtation was not enough to distract him. How could it when his privacy had been violated like that?

"They know that we spent the evening in bed. They know what we ate for supper. They even know that we ate it in bed."

"Shh."

Lois' quiet whisper informed him that his voice had risen. He quickly calmed himself.

"They had no right, Lois," he said, much more softly but no less intently. "No right at all to invade our privacy like that."

"No, they didn't," Lois agreed softly.

"How can you be so calm about this?"

"I'm not. But we have to brush it off. We buy ourselves a set of really good blinds for the windows. Maybe I can even call in a favor or two and get some blackout curtains from Perry's old army buddy, Admiral Haberstetter."

"Stormin' Norman?" Clark asked.

Lois nodded. "Not sure how many games of battle ship he will want me to play, but I'm sure we can work out something if this goes on long enough."

He ran a hand agitatedly through his hair.

"So what are you doing today?" Lois asked, changing the subject even as her hand reached up to finger comb his hair back into place.

"I don't know," Clark said, following her obvious lead into normality. "The only lead I have on Mayson's attempted murder is a dead man. How do I follow up on that?"

"Hmm."

"What?"

"Did you hear Myerson's comments in the morning meeting?"

"I was sort of distracted. What did he say?"

"He said there have been twelve deaths by natural causes at Strykers in the past three months — more than had died in the three previous years put together."

"Do they do autopsies when someone dies in prison of natural

causes?"

"No," Lois said. "I know that because there was some talk a few years about doing autopsies for everyone who died in prison — whether it was from natural causes or not."

"What happened?"

"They decided it would be too expensive."

"Hmph. So... you think there may be a connection?"

"I don't know. I just found it interesting."

"It is," Clark said, his mind beginning to turn. "Maybe I should have a chat with Myerson."

"Couldn't hurt."

"So what do you have planned?"

"Well, I told you last night that I planted a bug in Bill Church Senior's hospital room..."

Clark nodded.

"I need to go back there and change the tape. Then I need to go to Star Labs and talk to Dr. Klein about some drug formulas I sent him yesterday."

"Maybe I should come with you," Clark said. "After all, I need to return Ata to Dr. Klein."

"That was a great article, by the way," Lois said. "I think if anything can bring in donors to Dr. Klein's project, it's your article. It was brilliant and passionate. You made it come alive, the feeling of freedom this invention gives to someone who is blind."

"I thought you didn't like the touchy-feely stuff."

"I like it when you do it," Lois said, her voice suddenly playful. "I especially like the touchy-feely stuff then."

Clark felt himself begin to relax even as a smile came to his lips. "Well, we'll have to try out more of that touchy-feely stuff later then."

"Definitely," Lois growled, giving his butt a playful swat as she turned to get her coat.

Clark and Shadow climbed out from under the blanket in the backseat of the old clunker Lois had again borrowed from the Daily Planet even as Lois stripped off the ball cap and wig she was using.

"They're going to catch on to us eventually," Clark said as Shadow licked his face.

"Well, hopefully by then this will have all blown over."

"And if it hasn't... How are we supposed to do our jobs if we have paparazzi following us everywhere?"

Lois turned towards him. "Let's not borrow trouble."

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," Clark said.

"What exactly does that mean?"

"It's from the Bible. It means... Let's not borrow trouble." Clark grinned.

Lois rolled her eyes as she opened the door to the car and climbed out. She threw the trench coat onto the seat and closed the door. "Ready?" she asked when a moment later, Clark and Shadow joined her on the sidewalk.

When Clark nodded, she placed his free hand on her arm and began walking them towards Star Labs.

"Hello, Ms. Lane," Dr. Klein said when he met them down at the entrance to Star Labs. "I was hoping you'd drop by this morning. I've been looking at those drug formulas you sent me and they're quite fascinating. Unfortunately, I've only had a chance to thoroughly examine a couple of them. I should be able to get to the others at the end of the week or early next week. I hope that's okay. Anyway, I... Oh, Superman, I didn't know you were coming, too."

"I'm Clark Kent," Clark said at the same time that Lois said...

"He's not Superman."

"Oh. Oh... Uhh... I guess I just never heard any denial so I thought... But that was foolish of me. I should have known that Superman couldn't be blinded. I would love to meet him someday.

I've always wondered if he has a doctor. Studying his super biology, discovering how he manages to seemingly defy the laws of gravity, I suspect that would be a fascinating study.

"But then, why would Superman have a doctor?" Klein continued. "It's not as if he's affected by the common cold. Although, I suppose there could be some sort of Kryptonian equivalent — a super bug, if you will. Could you imagine the amount we could learn from studying..." Dr. Klein seemed to realize that Lois and Clark both looked dazed and quickly cut himself off.

"Anyway, Mr. Kent, it's good to see you again. I can't thank you enough for your article about my little device. I've already started getting calls from potential investors. I thought your last line... Where you wrote that you'd be first in line to buy one when they finally came on the market was the best advertising I could have hoped for."

"Well, that's why I'm here. I came to give you back your device."

"Oh, well, we can talk about that upstairs. Please, come on in."

With that, he took them up in the elevator, only talking again when they were all safely seated in his office.

"About the device..."

"Oh right," Clark said, reaching down and removing Ata.

"I'm sorry about this, Mr. Kent," Dr. Klein said as he took back the device. "I would let you keep it, but this is my only prototype. What I will promise, though, is that as soon as I have a spare, it will be yours."

"That's not necessary, Dr. Klein," Clark said. "I'm a reporter. I was just doing my job."

"Given the great recommendation you gave it, I'd like you to do this for you. I wouldn't expect that it will take too long... especially with the investors I expect your article will generate. A couple weeks at most."

Lois reached over and squeezed Clark's arm as Clark stuttered out a heartfelt thank you.

"He's been dreading the day he would have to give it up," Lois informed Klein.

"Well, that was evident from his article. And the expense... given the amount of money already coming in to help get the device on the market... I figure I still come out on the better end of that deal. Anyway... about those drug tests..."

Lois leaned forward.

"Nirvana was interesting. The main component was acetylsalicylic acid."

"Aspirin?" Lois asked, surprised.

"Very good, Ms. Lane. Yes. ASA. A simple pain medication."

"Oh, but..." Lois voice trailed off. She hadn't expected it to be something so innocuous. "Well, I guess that's a bust if they are just inventing some new pain reliever."

"Not necessarily. As I said, the main ingredient is acetylsalicylic acid. But it's the other components that make it interesting. I'd need to do further studies, of course, to be certain, but my initial examination of the way these drugs are combined... I suspect they would make one very susceptible to suggestion. They would be susceptible to suggestion about five minutes after taking the drug with the effects diminishing quickly thereafter."

"But what would be the purpose of mixing these drugs together?"

"It could be a very effective way to provide pain relief," Dr. Klein said. "The effects of the aspirin could be magnified by suggestion, perhaps by suggesting to the person after they take it that the pain is gone."

"Could that work?" Clark asked.

Klein shrugged. "The mind can have a powerful influence on the body. And if the right suggestion were given... Yes, I suspect with the help of the aspirin, it could bring a lot of relief,

specifically to chronic sufferers of pain. Give the person what is basically an aspirin, wait five minutes and then tell them they're better and let the mind take it from there."

"That's assuming that the person giving the suggestion is as ethical as you, Dr. Klein," Lois said. "Otherwise... you give someone a pill for a headache and then get them to do whatever you want."

"Within reason," Klein clarified. "Suggestion can only take a person so far. For example, we know from hypnosis that a person can't be made to do something that is totally against their nature."

"But they could be coerced into doing things they don't want to do. Or even... wouldn't normally do?"

Dr. Klein nodded. "The other drug I was able to examine was Resurrection."

"Has someone found a drug that will bring people back from the dead?" Lois asked.

"Almost the opposite, actually."

"You mean it kills people?" Clark asked.

"No. But it mimics the symptoms of death."

"How's that?" Lois said.

"It's as if... the person has extreme hypothermia. The person's heart stops, but the drug keeps them from dying. They come to, apparently, with no lasting brain damage, when the drug wears off."

"But what would be the point of such a drug?" Clark asked.

"Well, the only thing I could think of was for the movies. If a person was supposed to die, they could be given a small amount of the drug and it would mimic the effects of death, giving the camera crew more time to take their shots before the person would have to breathe again. Or to make the theater much more realistic."

"Sounds like a dangerous drug if that's all it's supposed to be used for."

"Would it look as if the person died of natural causes?" Lois suddenly asked.

"Yes. A heart attack, probably," Klein said. "Why?"

"Clark, I just had a wild thought. Your dead man. The one Scardino is convinced created the bomb that was used to try to kill Mayson Drake..."

"Maybe he used this drug to escape from prison," Clark completed for her.

Lois and Clark had just arrived back at the Daily Planet, still discussing the possibility that Intergang was using Resurrection to break select individuals out of prison when their attention was diverted by LNN playing quietly in the background.

"*This is In Your Face with Barry Dunning.*" Dunning said.

"Sleazebag," Lois muttered, taking off her coat and hanging it up, even as she looked at the television. The background made it clear that Dunning was currently standing on a busy Metropolis street corner.

"*Today we're asking ordinary people for their reactions to the revelations about Superman living with his super strumpet.*"

"Super strumpet?" Lois asked incredulously.

"*You sir,*" Dunning said, *apparently stopping a man in a business suit at random. "Have you heard about Superman living with a woman?"*

"*Yes, I have.*"

"*So what do you think about that? Does it bring into question his moral character?"*

"*All I know is that if he was a candidate for president, he'd be folding up camp about now.*"

"*And you ma'am?*" Dunning said, turning to someone else.

"*What do you think about Superman living with his girlfriend?*"

"*My momma used to say that if you're ready to sleep with a man, you're ready to marry him,*" the older woman said. "*If he's going to put himself out there as some sort of moral authority, he*

shouldn't be living with a woman. What kind of example is that to our children?"

"Superman has never claimed to be some sort of moral authority," Lois said, outraged. "All he's ever said is he wants to help!"

"*And what about you?*" Dunning asked, *squatting down to talk to a young boy, probably no more than eight, standing next to his mother. "What do you think about Superman living with his girlfriend?"*

"*Superman used to be my hero,*" the boy said. "*But not anymore. I asked my mom to get rid of all my Superman stuff.*"

"*He used to refuse to wear anything but his Superman t-shirts,*" his mother said. "*But when he found out...*" She pointed to t-shirt he was wearing. "*This is the only non-Superman t-shirt we could find this morning that still fit him.*"

That one got to Lois. In her peripheral vision, she saw Clark walk away. She turned her head to watch him enter the conference room, closing the door behind him and Shadow.

She chewed on her lower lip for a moment before getting up to follow. She walked into the conference room, glad that the blinds were drawn when she saw Clark sitting, slumped over, his arms resting on his knees. Shadow, now free from his halter, was desperately licking at Clark's hands — as if trying to comfort him. She quietly closed the door behind her.

She glanced around the room. Walking up to Clark, she tapped his ear.

"There aren't any surveillance devices in here," Clark said.

She let out a breath of relief before speaking. "You know that Dunning's report is going to be terribly biased. He likes to take the extreme position... whatever that is... and would have found people who took that position to interview. There are probably more people out there who disagree with him than agree with him."

"I know that, Lois, but..." His voice trailed off and he gave his head a slight shake.

She hesitated for a moment more, her heart going out to him. She loved him so much — and to see how everything that had happened today was tearing him up inside...

Suddenly coming to a decision, she stepped in front of him. Pushing Shadow gently to one side, she removed Clark hands from where they were holding his face and dropped to her knees in front of him, still holding his hands in her own. "Marry me, Clark," she said. "We could go down to City Hall today and just get it done. There's no waiting period or blood tests required in New Troy. This will all go away if we just get married."

He withdrew one of his hands from hers to cup her cheek.

"No, Lois."

"You don't want to marry me?"

"I want to marry you. You know that. There's nothing I want more than to make you my wife. To be your husband."

"Then let's just do it."

"But I want you to marry me because you can't imagine your future without me in it. Not because..." He waved his hand in the air abstractly.

"But that's true, Clark. I can't imagine a future without you in it. So... let's just do it."

Still, Clark shook his head. "No, I don't want you to be pressured into marrying me just to prevent people from questioning Superman's 'moral authority' — whatever that means. Can you really say that you're ready to marry me?"

"I know that I love you. I know you're my future."

"But..."

She chewed momentarily on her lower lip before responding. "But there are still so many things we haven't really discussed. And... My parents loved each other. They thought they were forever. And now they can't stand to be in the same room together. It's not you I'm not sure about. It's... Are we really ready to know

that we're going to end up like your parents and not mine?"

He took her hands. "Lois, you aren't your mother. And I'm not Sam Lane. But... I understand that you need time to figure that out for yourself. And until you do... When we get married, I want you to be sure."

"Then how do we handle... all this?"

Clark sighed. "We don't. Lois, I've always lived my life doing what I believed was right. I know there are people out there who see things differently. And I can respect that. But I can't live my life according to what they believe I should or should not do.

"If things had happened differently," he continued, "I suspect we wouldn't have started out by living together. I suspect we would have dated for a time before I asked you to marry me — living together would have come after we got married. But I'm not going to apologize for the decisions I've made. I can't live my life according to what other people think I should do. I can only try to live up to what I believe is right. That's a hard enough task in itself."

Her forehead came to rest against his. "If you change your mind, just say the word. I won't be responsible for the fall of Superman."

He smiled then. "You've always been his number one fan, haven't you?"

"I even have the button and the t-shirt. But I've got to tell you, these days he's got some competition. Lately I seem to have developed this huge crush on his alter-ego."

Sheriff Rachel Harris looked up from her paperwork when she heard the door open. Two strangers stumbled into the room. One was an older man, short salt and pepper hair that was more salt than pepper. He was wearing what probably had once been a very nice wine colored dress jacket with shirt, tie and trousers that matched. With him was a younger black man who was much more casually dressed. Around the second man's neck hung what had at one point probably been a very expensive camera.

Both men looked completely disheveled, solidly caked with dirt and traces of blood on their clothes, hands and face. Their clothing was tattered and torn. Their hair was sticking out at odd angles.

The two men approach the front counter.

"I'm Deputy Aaron Stiller. Can I help you?" the young man behind the counter asked.

"Yes, we're here to demand that you arrest the crazy farmer who sent his attack bull after us and shot up our car," the older man said.

"Attack bull?" Deputy Aaron asked skeptically.

"Yes, attack bull. We were just walking across a field when this crazy bull came out of nowhere. We were lucky to escape with our lives."

"Are you saying there's a bull out there, just wandering around, attacking people?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

"I'll handle this, Aaron," Rachel said, rising to her feet and approaching the front counter.

"Who are you?" the man asked.

"Sheriff Harris. And you are?"

"Leo Nunk. National Inquisitor. And this is Lamont, my photographer. So what are you going to do about the bull?"

Rachel took out a complaint form. "Perhaps you can describe this bull for me," she said.

"What's to describe? It's a bull."

Rachel's eyebrows rose. "This is Kansas, Mr. Nunk. There are lots of bulls around here. I have to identify which bull you're accusing of this horrendous crime if I'm going to take your complaint."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Not at all. So what color was this bull?"

"Brown."

"Distinguishing marks?"

"What's that suppose to be? Funny?"

Rachel put down her pen. "Are you being difficult, Mr. Nunk? I need answers to these questions if I'm going to file this complaint. Or... perhaps you aren't telling us everything. You wouldn't happen to have been trespassing on private property when you encountered this bull would you? 'Cause I just might have to charge you with trespassing if you were."

"Okay, forget about the damn bull," Nunk said. "What are you going to do about the crazy farmer who took a shot gun to my car? It's a rental and it's not covered for shot gun damage."

"Should have got that shot gun damage coverage," Rachel muttered before asking, "Where was this car parked?" She looked at him suspiciously. "You wouldn't have been parking on private property, would you?"

"What's this? Shake down the city folk? I'm a reporter and trust me when I say that I'm a hair's breath away from writing up a story about this."

"City reporter writing a negative story about Kansas hicks. Boy, that's never been done before," Rachel said. "How will we ever survive?"

She turned at the sound of laughter behind her as the two reporters stormed out of the Sheriff's Office. Rachel picked up the complaint form, tearing it in half. "Guess that means they don't want to file a complaint," she said, winking at Aaron.

"Lois, I've been thinking about that denial issue Dr. Klein mentioned."

Lois removed the earphones and stopped the tape as soon as Clark began speaking. She had just started listening to the tape she'd retrieved from MGH this morning when Clark had approached. Nothing of interest yet. Just nurses taking readings and meaningless chatter. So Clark's interruption was more than a welcome respite.

She glanced around. No one was nearby. "Does this mean you've changed your mind? Are you going to say you aren't Superman?" The final word was said only loud enough for superears to possibly hear.

"I don't think I have a choice. The longer this goes on without me making a denial, the more people will just come to accept that it's true. Then even if we do find a way out of this, by then no one is going to believe I'm not Superman. This, at least, keeps the question open." As he spoke, Clark took a seat in the chair next to her desk.

"And if we don't find a way to convince people that they're barking up the wrong tree with this Superman allegation..."

"I'll deal with that then. But after last night... Lois, I think I have to do this. For my own defense. For your defense. For my parents' defense. After all, since the Dirt Digger wasn't the only publication to publish pictures taken from inside our apartment this morning..."

"But the Dirt Digger had the best pictures," Lois objected.

"Do you really think that is going to be enough to convict them in a court of law?"

"No," Lois said defeated. "So how are you going to make this denial? Talk to Eduardo?"

Clark shook his head. "I think it has to be more public than that."

"Well, there are a whole crowd of reporters gathered out front who would just love to get a statement from you."

"That's what I was thinking."

"But given Perry's comments at the meeting this morning, I think you should talk to him first."

Clark nodded. "That was my next stop — provided that you agreed that I should do this."

Lois smiled. He was learning. "I agree," she said.

"I'm also thinking that I should sign the release for Eduardo to talk to Dr. Scott."

Clark took a deep breath before tapping his way over to Eduardo's desk. He knew that Eduardo had spotted him when the man quit typing on his keyboard.

"Can I help you?" Eduardo asked.

Clark shook his head. "But maybe I can help you. Do you still want me to sign a release form so that you can talk to Dr. Scott?"

"Yes. Absolutely," Eduardo said, fumbling around on his desk to find the appropriate form.

After a moment, he placed the form in Clark's hand. "Uhh..." Clark said, removing a pen from his inside jacket pocket. Then he took the form again and held it out for Eduardo. "Could you?"

"Oh, right. Of course." He took the form. "What do you want me to do?"

"First... would you mind reading it to me?"

"Right. Of course," Eduardo said before reading the form. It was a standard release of information.

"Put the form on the desk and then place my hand where you need my signature."

Eduardo immediately did as Clark had asked.

Clark hesitated momentarily. Did he really trust that this form was what Eduardo had said it was? Yes, he decided. He did.

Leaning over, Clark signed the form, before asking, "By the way, do you need me to give a statement denying that I'm Superman?" He tried to keep the question casual.

Eduardo snorted. "Trust me, Kent. After working with you for more than a year, I know you're no Superman."

A light suddenly went on in Clark's mind. Maybe... Just maybe... he could make use of this. And he suddenly realized why Perry had chosen Eduardo to look into Mayson's claim. Perry must have spoken briefly to Eduardo, feeling him out, before giving him this assignment. Perry really was a crafty old dog.

Lois straightened Clark's tie as they stood just inside the glass doors of the Daily Planet together.

"You ready for this?" she asked.

"As ready as I'm ever going to be," Clark responded. "I just hope this does some good."

"At least we're doing something," Lois said. She reached up to place her hand on the back of his head before pulling him down so that she could plant a kiss on his lips. Through her eyelids, she could see the flashes of cameras snapping pictures from the other side of the doors, but she ignored it. Hopefully, this statement would make those pictures worthless.

Okay, so maybe she was being a little optimistic. Still, as she'd told Clark, at least it was better than doing nothing. And more than that, it told Lois that Clark was finally ready to fight back.

"For luck," she said when the kiss broke.

He smiled, obviously remembering the last time when she'd kissed him for luck — just before he'd gone to break up the asteroid. It had worked that time — after a few hiccups. Perhaps it would work again.

She reached up and used the pad of her thumb to wipe the lipstick off his mouth. Then she bent down and finger combed Shadow's fur. "You both look great. Now... get out there and kick butt — both of you."

Clark took a deep breath when he stepped outside the Daily Planet with Shadow. The sound of a hundred questions all being yelled at the same time was practically deafening. If he wasn't careful, he would end up both blind and deaf. And although he was fairly certain he and Lois would find a way to communicate even if both were true, he would rather not find out.

He raised his free hand, determined not to say a word until

everyone was silent. He would stand here as long as it took. Or... he could always turn around and walk back inside if they didn't give him a chance to speak, leave them cooling their collective heels for about an hour before coming back to try again. He suspected the next time he came out, they would decide that getting a statement was more important for their various publications than trying to outshout each other.

It took a couple minutes, but finally silence settled on the crowd.

"I have a short statement to make..." He began, lowering his hand.

"Are you Superman?" someone shouted. The question prompted others to begin asking questions. Fewer than before. But still enough that he would have to yell if he were to be heard above the crowd. He had no intention of doing that so he simply fell silent again.

He waited until the questions again died away before starting again.

"I have a short statement to make. For those of you wondering, my faithful companion's name is Shadow. As for my name... My name is Clark Jerome Kent, son of Martha and Jonathan Kent. And as people who know me will tell you, I'm no superhero."

The questions started again.

Clark stood still, holding up his free hand until the crowd fell silent once again. "If you keep interrupting me, we'll be here all day. And as a reporter myself, I know the importance of deadlines — and what it's like dealing with an editor when they're missed."

This brought a slight chuckle from some among the crowd.

"So if you'd just give me a minute to complete my statement..." He waited and this time there were no questions. "As for why Mayson Drake is claiming that I'm Superman... I guess you're going to have to ask her what her motivation is." He paused momentarily. "I would ask that since I'm simply a private citizen and Lois Lane is also a private citizen, you respect our privacy. Thank you."

His statement finished, Clark turned and walked back through the doors of the Daily Planet even as the questions began again. He let out a sigh of relief. He hadn't actually lied, after all. But hopefully no one would realize that he hadn't actually said he wasn't Superman.

Lois turned off the tape in disgust. She'd spent half the day going through this tape and other than medical personnel dealing with Church and the constant flirting by Mindy Black — she seemed to be in there whenever she possibly could — nothing useful was on the tape. It seemed that Junior hadn't returned during the course of the day and, although Lois could hardly believe it, Mayson Drake hadn't been by to see him either.

On the other hand, Mayson might have come by the day before to see Church — the day Lois and Clark had spent in Paris. So maybe that wasn't so unexpected.

When she'd taken the tape from the recorder she'd left at Metropolis General Hospital, she'd put in a new tape. So maybe there was still a chance that she could get something useful tomorrow. But for today...

She took the earphones out and tossed them on the desk. Pulling out the transcript she'd made of the conversation between the two churches from earlier in the day, she read through it again. Suddenly, she stopped and read it again.

"Between our guaranteed early release program and our retirement package when they're released, it's not in their interest to incriminate anyone."

And then later...

"Oh, and I spoke to the doctor about getting you a new heart. I'm sure one of our dead men will be a match. I'll make sure testing starts today."

Her head instantly snapped up when she heard the elevator ding. When Clark entered the newsroom, she immediately called to him.

"Clark... Conference room," she said before heading there herself.

Once the two of them were settled in the conference room and Shadow had been freed from his halter, Lois read Clark her transcript of the conversation she had recorded between the two Church men.

"It all fits," she said. "The drug Intergang was working on: Resurrection. The conversation about Intergang's 'early release program.' Even Junior's comments about getting a heart from among their 'dead men.' Clark, I think Church plans to kill one of the men who have escaped from jail by pretending to be dead so that he can have a new heart."

"Bet they didn't think they were signing up for that when they agreed to be part of this 'program,'" Clark said.

"But it's a smart plan," Lois said. Then, to Clark's raised eyebrows, she continued, "In a sick, demented sort of way, of course. If they kill someone who is already considered dead, no one will ever find out."

"But how do we warn people to watch out for Church when they're already dead? At least, officially?"

Lois' eyebrows crinkled together as she got lost in thought. "Or... what if they tested people and couldn't find a match? What would stop them from making arrangements to bust someone out of prison who was a match — not telling them their plans for him, of course." Lois suddenly looked in horror at Clark. "There was another death by natural causes last night. You don't think..."

"Actually, I do," Clark said grabbing the phone. As he dialed, he continued to speak. "When I spoke to the doctor out at Strykers this afternoon, he said all the men who had died of natural causes in the past three months had died of heart attacks. And you were right. No autopsies were performed. Anyway, he gave me a list of the people who have died and I noticed..." His attention was suddenly diverted to the phone in his hand. "Can I speak to Inspector Henderson? Tell him it's Clark Kent and it's an emergency."

When he was put on hold, he continued with what he'd been telling Lois. "The people on the list... The people whose names I recognized seem to have... Let's just say I suspect they are all people who were either high ranking in Intergang or have some obvious skill."

"Like bomb maker for Sean Macarthy, the one who Dan thinks made the bomb for Mayson's car."

"Exactly. Intergang needs a bomb maker. They look through the prison rosters for the best person for the job and then break him out of prison."

"You said there are people who were high ranking in Intergang. Like whom?"

"Diana Stride."

"Diana Stride died in Strykers?"

"About a month ago. When we were out in Smallville."

"So she's back out there... somewhere."

"I suspect she's a long way from here by now. After all, Intergang used her as an assassin all over the world."

"Anyway, you were saying?"

"Right. I noticed that the people whose names I recognized either had a skill or they were people who likely had some standing in Intergang. So I was surprised when I realized who had died last night." Clark broke off again, turning his attention back to the phone in his hand.

"Hi, Bill. Sorry to disturb you, but as you know, Lois and I are working on story about the bombing of Mayson Drake's car, and we found something that suggests that Intergang may be getting people out of prison using a drug which they call 'Resurrection,'" Clark said.

As he spoke Lois clicked the button on the speaker phone so she could listen in.

"Go on," Bill responded calmly.

Clark's eyebrows crinkled together in confusion. "You knew?"

"Let's just say you might not be the first person to have that thought."

"Okay, well there's something you may not have considered," Clark said, forcing himself back to the reason for the urgency of his call. "Bill Church Senior needs a new heart. If they needed a match and didn't want to wait until one came available on the transplant list... Everyone in Strykers has regular medicals don't they?"

"You think the guy who 'died' last night might have been selected because he would be a match for Senior?" Henderson asked.

"It makes sense. Look at these names. The people who have 'died' of natural causes over the past three months. People of prominence. People with certain skills that might be useful to Intergang. Now look at last night's name. Baby Rage. Why would Intergang take the risk of breaking a common street thug out of prison?"

Henderson was silent as he considered what Clark was saying.

"But if you suspected this was happening," Lois said, "I assume you have Baby Rage's body under guard to make sure that he doesn't suddenly wake up."

"Actually, no. We decided to use this opportunity to conduct a little sting operation. We've planted bugs and tracking devices in his coffin and are monitoring him now."

"So where is he?"

Henderson hesitated.

"Come on, Bill," Clark said. "You know us. You know we aren't going to risk this operation. But if Baby Rage is still alive, he's in real danger."

Henderson let out a breath. "Sorry, Kent. But I can't violate orders on this one. I'll pass your message on, but it's the best I can do."

"Come on, Bill," Lois said. "There's got to be some way to get us in on this sting operation of yours."

"Sorry. I really can't do it this time," Henderson said.

"Well, then can you pass another message on as well?" Lois asked.

"Depends."

"Tell Mayson that we think that Intergang might be behind the plot to kill her. And tell her to stay away from Bill Church." Even as she said the words, she mentally cursed. She may have just given away her one chance to record a conversation between Mayson and Church — her one chance to possibly discredit the woman. But Mayson's life was in danger. There wasn't any other choice.

"I'll warn her," Henderson responded, sounding slightly surprised, given everything that had happened in the past couple of days, that Lois would be concerned about Mayson.

"Thanks, Bill," Clark said. "Oh, and when it's possible..."

"I'll make sure you have the story before we make a public statement," Henderson said, the only concession he could give.

Lois and Clark spent the rest of the afternoon getting word out to their sources that they were looking for information on Resurrection or an 'early release program' from Strykers or anything to do with Intergang for that matter. But by the end of the day, they still hadn't gotten any positive responses.

At one point, Clark had braved the mobs out front to take Shadow for a walk so he could do his business. What thrill anyone would get of pictures of him walking his dog, he couldn't say. But given the amount of clicking he could hear when Shadow stopped at a fire hydrant, there was obviously some interest. Same with when he picked up after Shadow — at least in that he was giving

children an example to follow. Not that picking up after Shadow had exactly been easy without his sight — especially when he couldn't let his observers know how well he could smell.

Scardino had dropped by in the mid-afternoon and they'd brought him up to speed with their theory — without mentioning the sting operation they knew was currently in progress. He had informed them that he'd obtained some letters that Sean Macarthy sent to his mother from prison before his 'death.' They referred to him going to 'a better place.' Given that it seemed unlikely that Macarthy thought he was headed to heaven, it appeared to back up their theory that he had escaped.

Since Lois and Clark had also come across another drug, Nirvana, recently and Scardino was a DEA agent, they'd asked him in passing to see if he could find out if the DEA had any information on this new drug. He'd promised to make some calls.

Scardino wasn't so bad once he had given up charming Lois. And nurturing a good relationship with him could be handy in the future. Having a potential source inside the DEA was certainly not a bad thing.

Finally, they'd gone to see Perry to bring him up to speed on their investigation. They still had no proof about people using this resurrection drug to escape from prison, but were hoping to have it once the sting operation was over. They also had no motive for why Intergang might want Mayson Drake dead — although that too seemed likely if they were the ones to bust Macarthy out of prison. Motive might not be something the police needed, but their readers often demanded it.

While talking to Perry, Clark had asked whether Eduardo's story was expected to come out in the morning paper. Perry had said that Eduardo apparently had more sources he was trying to contact and so it wasn't likely that the story would come out for at least another day.

In spite of Clark's hopes that his statement might cause the crowds in front of the Daily Planet to, if not go away completely, at least cause it to thin out, the crowds was still thick as thieves by the end of the day. It appeared they would be under surveillance for at least one more night. Maybe when Eduardo's story came out, that would change.

Lois thought he was being overly optimistic. Still, she said nothing. How this would all work out... She had no idea.

"So what do you want to do about supper?" Clark asked, taking a seat on the corner of Lois' desk.

Lois leaned back in her chair. "Good question. If we order delivery again, we risk having them print what we had for supper in the morning edition of some paper — along with questions about my cooking abilities and whether Superman should really be involved with a woman who can't cook."

"Or we'd start getting questions about Superman's eating habits being a bad influence on children."

Lois smiled. "Well, we could always go out for groceries."

"Since we will likely be followed when we leave for the evening, do we really want to risk having everyone find out what type of toilet paper we use?"

"I have an idea," Lois said, picking up the phone. "How do you feel about one of Callards' famous pasta concoctions?"

"We can't go out to a restaurant, Lois. We'll be completely overrun by paparazzi asking questions."

"They have pick up."

"But if we pick it up... won't the paps who follow us home know that?"

"You're right. If we pick it up, they will."

Clark smiled when he suddenly saw where she was going with this. "Jimmy!" he yelled, saving her the trouble.

Maybe they were finally getting the hang of this thing.

Friday

Is Superman's Lover A Sexual Predator?

The Metropolis Star

By Don Burke

The Star has received confirmation that Love Fortress Magazine, the most notorious of all porn magazines, will today publish an exclusive and very detailed interview with Claude Benoit, the first co-worker to allegedly have a sexual relationship with Superman's lover, Lois Lane.

As well as giving intimate details about their sexual relationship, we've been informed that he claims Ms. Lane seduced him, a much more experienced reporter; in an attempt to sleep her way to the top of her profession and then had the nerve to accuse him of stealing her story, nearly destroying his reputation and forcing him into exile in France.

Love Fortress concludes its story with the speculation that Mr. Benoit's claim that Lois Lane is not above sleeping her way to the top would also explain her near marriage to Metropolis' most infamous criminal, Lex Luthor and calling on Superman to cut his ties with the woman.

The Delilah Effect

Editorial

Dirt Digger

By Randy Goode

After many evil men have failed in their efforts, is the former paramour of Lex Luthor and a woman with a history of unsavory sexual relationships, Lois Lane, the one to finally destroy the spotless reputation of America's number son, Superman?

If so, he won't be the first powerful man in history to be felled by an unscrupulous woman.

This has been true since the beginning of time.

In Greek mythology, Pandora, the first woman to be created, was also the one to let all the evils into the world. Biblical references back up this concept with the story of how Adam would never have been banished from the Garden of Eden if not for his devious wife offering him an apple which some scholars believe is a metaphor for sex.

One of the most famous examples, however, of a woman destroying a hero is found in the Biblical story of Delilah who seduced Samson into revealing the secret of his strength — his uncut hair. In the middle of the night, she cut his hair, leaving him helpless when she opened the doors of the hovel she shared with her lover to his enemies.

Cleopatra also managed to exploit her feminine wiles to entice Marc Anthony to betray his own country in order to protect hers. If not for Caesar Augustus, the center of the world for hundreds of years to follow would have been Cairo instead of Rome.

King Arthur was betrayed by Guinevere and Henry VIII had Anne Boleyn to lead him astray — unscrupulous women who will forever be known for bringing down great men.

And so now Superman finds himself on the brink, about to have his moral authority ripped away by a fallen woman — for what type of example can Superman be to little children when he's openly living in sin with a woman of questionable moral character, no matter how good she may be in bed?

In one hand, Clark held Shadow's halter. In the other was a full bag of garbage. He hesitated momentarily inside the back door of the building before taking a deep breath and opening it. It sounded quiet. Maybe he could actually slip out this way to take Shadow for his morning walk.

He quickly stepped outside. As fast as humanly possible, he followed his nose to the large dumpster out back. He had just about to toss the bag inside when he heard someone yell.

"He's back here!"

All thoughts of trying to take Shadow out this way fled his mind. He'd let Shadow have a moment when he and Lois braved

the crowds on the way to the Jeep.

Clark quickly completed his task and rushed back into the building. Just as he got the door closed behind him, he heard the garbage bag he'd recently deposited in the trash being torn open.

Damn. He should have thought of that. For a moment, he was tempted to try to rescue his garbage, but the thought was abandoned almost as soon as it had formed. It was too late now to prevent them from finding out what type of toilet paper they used or what type of magazines they read or what they had eaten the previous evening.

Cringing, he took out his white cane and began tapping his way slowly back up the stairs, not certain how he was going to tell Lois about this latest development.

Clark didn't know where she'd gone. She knew he would try to stop her. But she had to know. She had to see for herself what Claude had said about her. How had they even found him, anyway? He might have found them, she supposed. After all, she had no doubt that he'd been paid a large sum of money for his story.

If The Metropolis Star was right, she suspected the story he'd given them was nowhere near the truth. Still, she had to see it, to read it for herself. She had to know.

She had noted that Toby Raynes hadn't been the one to write this morning's story for the Star — which told her that whatever Love Fortress had printed was at least as bad as the story in the Star had indicated. Why else would Raynes have declined to write it? She was the reporter handling the Clark is Superman story, after all. And why else would the Star have given the story to that skumbag, Don Burke?

When Jimmy had come by when they'd arrived for work this morning and handed them the papers, he hadn't even been able to look her in the eye. She'd known it was bad before she even read the headlines. Since Clark couldn't see, she knew he'd wanted her to read the articles to him. But after reading the first paragraph of the article in The Star, she hadn't been able to continue. She couldn't bear the embarrassment.

He'd tried to comfort her, but right then, she hadn't been ready for comfort. Since she'd read those first words, there had been only one thing she needed — to see what Claude had actually said.

That was why she once again found herself wearing a red wig and sunglasses and driving one of the Daily Planet cars. She pulled the car to a stop and turned off the ignition in front of a corner store. She took a deep breath before stepping out. If someone recognized her, the next story to hit the headlines would undoubtedly be of Lois Lane spotted buying a skin flick.

Maybe she should have sent Jimmy. But she couldn't bear the thought of Jimmy reading details of her sexual relationship with Claude — especially with what appeared to be Claude's imaginative retelling of the relationship. Not that Jimmy wouldn't see it anyway. For all she knew, he had a subscription to Love Fortress. But if he did read it, she didn't want to know.

She surreptitiously scanned the store as she walked over to the magazine rack. She'd never been in this store before and so hopefully no one would realize who she was. Arriving at the rack, she picked up the nearest magazine and pretended to flip through it while her eyes, hidden beneath the sunglasses, searched the magazines in the back row of the stand.

She located Love Fortress Magazine fairly quickly. Although she could not see the front cover, she could see the date. Suspecting it was the right one, she moved quickly, pulling out the magazine. She paled when she saw the picture on the front. It was she — looking every inch the Super Strumpet. It must have been taken at Lenny Stoke's Club when she'd gone undercover as a trashy groupie.

Not the best picture. She suspected that was because it was a blow up from her in the background of a larger picture. Someone

must have been taking pictures of Lenny Stoke's performance that night and she had been one of the people in the background — or maybe not background exactly since she had put on quite a performance for Stoke that night.

Still, it was clearly her.

She quickly slipped the magazine beneath the one she was holding and walked over to the counter. She didn't look at the teller as he rang in her purchases without comment. Still, she felt terribly exposed until she was finally driving away from the store, her heart pounding hard.

Clark found himself getting angrier than he thought he'd ever been in his life as his fingers moved over the Braille letters in front of him once again. When Lois had been unable to read today's articles to him, he'd found them on the internet and printed them off on the new Braille printer. It seemed better than asking someone like Jimmy to read them to him.

He'd already read the articles more than once, but for some reason couldn't stop from reading them again.

How dare they? He was fair game. But Lois... What had Lois ever done to them?

He quickly tried to hide his anger when he heard the door to the conference room open.

"You okay, son?" Perry asked stepping into the room and closing the door.

"Uh, yeah. I'm sorry, Chief. I suppose you need the room for the morning meeting." He started rising to his feet when Perry's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"I did an informal meeting today," Perry said, causing Clark to realize that he must have been sitting here longer than he thought. "Where's Lois?"

"I don't know. She took off as soon as she read the articles."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Clark shook his head.

"Well, when Lois gets back, why don't you two take off? Take her somewhere private. Recharge your batteries."

Again Clark shook his head. "She'd never agree. If she even admits she's upset, she'll still want to stay here, to see if we can break the story about the Mayson Drake murder attempt today. We're hoping to hear from Henderson about how his sting operation went.

"Besides," Clark continued, "where would we go? We go to our apartment and people are trying to get pictures through the curtains. If we went somewhere else, even if we managed to lose the paparazzi that would undoubtedly try to follow us, someone is bound to recognize us and call the paparazzi."

"When Elvis and Priscilla..." Perry's voice trailed off. "No. No Elvis stories today."

Clark's eyebrows rose. If Perry wasn't telling Elvis stories, it must be bad.

"Can I make a suggestion?" Perry said instead.

"Please."

"Figure out a way to do something nice for her today. Make sure she knows how much you love her — regardless of what others might say."

"But, Perry..." Clark hesitated. "I know it's wrong, but I can't help feeling that she'd be better off without me. And... I promised not to push her away, but... Isn't it selfish of me to stay with her when it's subjecting her to such ridicule?"

"Don't ever let her hear you say that," Perry growled. "Not now. Her heart has undoubtedly been broken by all this. What she needs from you now is your unconditional love and support — not you pulling away. If she can't deal with all of this, she'll let you know. Unless that happens, you be her number one champion, son."

Clark nodded, touched by Perry's obviously heartfelt advice. He was right. He'd promised Lois not to push her away again. To

try to do it now... really would just be adding insult to injury.

"Thanks, Perry. I appreciate it."

"Oh, well, no problem," Perry said, sounding uncomfortable. "Anyway, you take as long as you need in here to get your thoughts together."

With those final words, Perry rose to his feet and walked out of the conference room, leaving Clark with a thing or two to consider.

Lois turned the car off but didn't get out of the vehicle. After purchasing the magazine, she'd stopped by MGH to replace the tape recording the activity in Bill Church Sr.'s room. But her mind had never left the magazine she'd just purchased.

She glanced around the Daily Planet parking lot. She was alone. Taking a moment to steady her nerves, she reached over and picked up the paper bag containing her purchases. Pulling out the first magazine, her eyebrows rose.

Wedding Styles.

Was the universe trying to tell her something?

She bit her lip, tears coming to her eyes. Not likely. After all, she was starting to wonder if Clark would be better off without her. If this whole thing didn't blow over, the paparazzi would eventually ferret out every detail of Clark's past — and discover that he really was the all American Boy Scout. She, however, was not nearly as spotless — starting with her broken family and going downhill from there. How could she ever live up to the title 'Wife of Superman?'

She forced that thought aside to pull out the second magazine. She studied the picture on the front for a moment more. In addition to her picture was a smaller inserted picture of Claude. His hair was shorter than it had been when he'd worked in Metropolis, but there was no denying that he was still as sexy looking as ever. It took her a moment to work up her nerve before opening the magazine. Finding the appropriate page, she began reading.

Maisie Tanner looked up from the cup of coffee she was pouring when the little bell that hung above the door to her diner rung. Spotting the two men, one with salt and pepper hair and the other with a camera around his neck enter the restaurant, she rushed over.

"I'm sorry. We're closed for business," Maisie announced, pointing at the 'Closed' sign hanging on the door.

The older of the two men looked around. "What about those people?"

Maisie's gaze followed his to the nearly full restaurant, obviously in full swing. All locals. "They're friends, helping me with inventory today so I'm feeding them their breakfast first."

She turned her attention back to the strangers. "So please..." She stepped up to the door and opened it. "We'll be closed for the rest of the week, too."

After looking around the restaurant once more they took her hint and left the premises.

A small grin formed on Maisie's lips as the door closed behind the third group of reporters she'd tossed out so far this morning — ever since she'd heard about the horrible stories that had been printed in today's papers.

Applause behind her caused her to turn around and take a small bow before going to fetch a fresh pot of coffee.

Was this her desk? She glanced around, just to be sure.

Lois had been so distracted by what she'd read in Love Fortress that she hadn't noticed what was sitting on her desk when she entered the newsroom. In fact, she hadn't noticed it until she set her attaché case down and was pushing it under her desk with her foot.

Two dozen red roses in a vase were situated in the middle of

her desk.

She ignored Shadow who, upon spotting her entrance, immediately bounded over. At least she knew Clark was still in the building.

Uncertain, she took the card from the roses. Her hand shook slightly as she opened it. She knew who she wanted them to be from. But she also knew not to expect it. After all, they could be from anyone. Claude Benoit immediately sprang to mind. It would be just like that sick, twisted mind of his to sell intimate details of their sexual relationship to the most popular porn magazine on the market and then turn around and send her roses.

She pulled the card from the envelope. It was blank. Confused, she turned it over in her hands before she suddenly felt something. Pin pricks in the card.

A slow smile made its way across her face and she felt herself relax.

Braille.

"Hi," Clark said, causing her to look up from the card.

"Hey," she responded, taking his tie and tugging him closer for a quick kiss.

"Do I smell flowers?" Clark asked.

"You do. Two dozen red roses by the looks of it."

"Secret admirer?"

She felt a moment of uncertainty. "I hope not."

"So you're hoping they're from a not so secret admirer, then?"

"That's exactly what I'm hoping."

"Well, why don't you read the card and find out?"

She started to relax again. The flowers were obviously from him. "Well, I opened the card, but I can't seem to read it."

"Why not?"

"Don't know the language."

"Uhh... Well, maybe I can be of some service. I know a lot of languages." He held out his hand.

Smiling, she placed the card in his hand.

"To the most wonderful woman I know," Clark said, running his finger across the card.

"Does it say who it's from?"

"Well, it's signed, 'Love... Jimmy.'"

"What!"

"Oh, wait. I got that name wrong."

"Damn good thing."

"It's not Jimmy. Jimmy is just the name that was used to buy the flowers."

"Probably a good thing — unless... the purchaser wants the world to know that he's buying flowers. So... don't leave me in suspense. Who are they from?"

"Well, the card's signed, 'Love Clark.' Do you know another Clark?"

Lois laughed. "No."

"Oh, good. 'Cause for a moment there I was worried I had competition."

"Trust me when I say you don't. But..."

"But..."

She sighed before taking his arm and tugging him towards the conference room.

"Come on, Shadow," she said when the dog, who was curled up next to her desk looked up, a hurt expression in his eyes, to watch them go. Shadow quickly jumped up and followed, content once again.

She tapped Clark's ear as they got settled and he informed her that they really were alone. Still, she paced the room for a minute before deciding where to start.

"I bought a copy of Love Fortress Magazine," she said. "I had to know what Claude said for myself."

"I wondered if that might be where you'd gone," Clark said with resignation. "Did you read the article?"

"Yes."

"How bad is it?"

"Bad. And it got me thinking... X-rays were found emanating from Crookes tubes, experimental discharge tubes invented around 1875, by scientists investigating the cathode rays, that is energetic electron beams, that were first created in the tubes.

"Damn. What I meant was... If this whole thing doesn't go away, eventually they will have every detail of our lives. Will have talked to every person we've ever known. Turned over every rock and uncovered everything we thought was buried forever. If that happens... Clark, what are they going to find out about you?"

"Not much, why?"

"That's just it. You're squeaky clean. I'm... not."

"What's your point?"

"I'm a liability to you."

"No, Lois," he quickly rose to his feet, crossing the room almost as well as a person who could see, finding her quickly. He took her in his arms, pulling her close. He ignored her attempts to brush him off. "Lois, you're not a liability. I don't care what the rest of the world thinks. Ever since I became Superman, you have been an integral part of him. You're a big part of the reason I initially created him. You're the one who convinced me that whatever I could do was enough when I was ready to hang up the suit. You're the one who, even before you knew the truth, gave me the strength to do what I did.

"You're not a liability to Superman," he repeated. "You're his biggest asset."

Tears came to her eyes as her arms finally slipped around his waist and she buried her face further into his shoulder.

"In fact... I've been thinking. I want the whole world to know exactly how crucial you are to me. And... well, I guess I'm thinking that maybe you were right yesterday."

"I was right? About what?"

"Getting married."

Lois closed her eyes.

"Let's just do it," Clark continued. "Let's just go down to City Hall and get married."

She sighed. "I'm just... Well, I know you think I'm an asset, but..."

"You are, Lois. I don't care what the world thinks. Superman needs Lois Lane."

She pulled back, her hand coming up to stroke his face. "Superman has Lois Lane. But... can we take a couple days to think about it? I'm not saying no. I just... I guess getting married just to make the day not quite so sucky seems... I bit of an overreaction."

Clark smiled. "That's not why I want to marry you."

"Then why?"

"Why do you think? Because you've got a great body."

"Clark," she said warningly, although the smile had returned to her voice.

"Okay, okay. So... no wedding today. But... I'm warning you right now that I intend to ask again."

She smiled. "I'm counting on it. After all, one of these days we're bound to both want to get married."

"At the same time, you mean?"

Lois nodded against him.

"Well then, I'm just going to have to keep asking until I finally get you on a good day."

She chuckled softly, even as she released him. "So have you heard from Henderson yet about their sting operation last night?"

"Not yet. But it was the next thing on my to-do list."

Leo Nunk and his photographer stepped through the doors to the small, family run grocery store in Smallville, Kansas. Pop's Grocery Store. Could he have chosen a name more appropriate to this backwater town?

"We're closed," said an older gentleman, wiping his hands as

he came out from the back. What hair he had left was combed across the top of his head and his beer belly was poorly hidden beneath his white butcher's coat. Probably 'Pop' himself.

"But your sign says you're open," Nunk objected.

The man shrugged. "Freezer just shut down. No idea when we'll be able to open again."

Lois leaned back in the conference room chair as Clark typed a familiar number into the phone. She watched in silence as he asked for Henderson and then studied him as he waited to be put through to the Inspector.

He loved her with such a pure love. No one had ever made her feel so safe and yet had such power to excite her at the same time. How was it she had taken so long to notice him? He was smart, loyal, loving and sexy as hell.

Marriage. She'd never had much faith in the institution. But... marriage to Clark? That might be a different thing entirely. That he saw this as a lifetime venture was without question. He had Martha and Jonathan's example to base his world view on, after all. What she had was Sam and Ellen Lane. Still, his comment the other day about looking into the future and seeing him... That was true. She could no longer see a future without him by her side.

Still, was she really what he needed in his life? Today's papers certainly didn't think so. He'd made a pretty persuasive argument for himself, however.

There were other concerns, too. Children for instance. He had said he wasn't certain he could even have children, but she knew Clark. He would be a wonderful father. And he would want children. Was it fair to marry him when she really wasn't sure how she felt about the subject? Still...

"Hi, Bill," Clark said, dragging Lois out of her thoughts.

Lois quickly pushed the button for the speaker phone.

"Hello, Clark. And by the slight echo I'm hearing, am I to assume that Lois is also there?"

"Hi, Henderson," Lois said.

"Listen," Clark said, "the reason we called is..."

"I know why you called," Henderson interrupted. "And like I said yesterday... no comment."

Lois' eyebrows crinkled in confusion. That wasn't what he'd said yesterday.

"Do I take that to mean that you don't have any news for us today?" Clark asked.

"It means exactly what you think it means... No comment."

Clark's hand felt around on the table in front of him. Figuring he was, for some reason, looking for something, she whispered, "What?"

He made a gesture as if he was holding a pen. As she quickly located pen and a piece of paper for him, he spoke again.

"Come on, Henderson. Give us something. We've got to give our editor something today."

The pen in his hand, he blindly scratched a brief message and pushed it across the table in her direction.

"Listen, I'm really too busy for this," Henderson said.

Lois looked down at the chicken scratch in front of her. Messy, but still legible. "Someone else is there."

"Anything we might be interested in?" Clark asked.

"Always the reporter, huh, Kent? No. In fact, I'm planning to take the afternoon off. So unless you plan on running a story about what police officers do in their spare time..." His voice trailed off.

"You, Henderson? I thought you were chained to your desk."

"Yeah, well. Thought an afternoon off might do me some good. Help recharge the batteries."

"Plan to go somewhere special?"

"No. Probably will just go down and walk around Centennial Park. Think I heard something about some musical group performing near the fountain at two this afternoon. Might take it in."

"Seems I've heard something about that, too. Well, enjoy your time off."

"I will."

With that, the line went dead. Clark hung up the phone. "So what do you say? Feel like taking a walk in Centennial Park this afternoon. Say... about two o'clock?"

Lois smiled and was about to respond when Jimmy stuck his head in the door. "Lois, call for you on line two."

"Thanks, Jimmy," Lois said, rising to her feet. "Think I might as well take this at my desk." She bent down, giving Shadow a little bit of attention before walking to the door.

"But you can't just throw us out."

Nunk's attention was directed towards the counter of the small motel when he stepped inside the lobby and heard the raised voice of his colleague, Mike McKee of Channel Six in Metropolis.

"Sorry, bud. When you've got bugs, you've got bugs," the man behind the counter informed McKee.

Spotting his own luggage in the large pile sitting in the center of the room, he joined McKee at the counter.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Fumigating," the man behind the counter said. "Everyone's out."

"Where can we find another motel in Smallville?" Nunk asked.

"Another motel? You're kidding right? It's called Smallville for a reason. Mrs. Banks has a bed and breakfast, if you're looking for another place to stay."

"How do we get there?"

"Oh, wait. She's visiting her daughter in Kansas City this week. Guess you're out of luck."

"Lois Lane," Lois said into the phone.

"Hi, Lois. It's..."

"Martha," Lois completed for her. "Are you looking for Clark because if you are..." As Lois spoke, she began rising to her feet.

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you."

Lois sank back into her chair. "Oh. What can I do for you?"

"I heard about some of the stories that came out about you today and..."

"Oh, god, Martha. I didn't even think of that. In a place like Smallville... You must be so embarrassed. I'm so sorry about all of this. I really didn't think when I got involved with your son that..."

"Lois!" Martha practically yelled into the phone.

Lois fell silent even as it occurred to her that Martha had been trying to interrupt her almost since she'd started talking. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. And, sweetie, I'm not embarrassed. You've done nothing to apologize for. If anything, that sleazebag, Claude, should be the one apologizing."

Tears came to Lois' eyes.

"I just wanted to know how you were holding up under all this," Martha continued.

"Uhh... well, you know... Good moments. Bad moments."

"Well, I hope that son of mine is taking good care of you."

Lois smiled. "He is. He got me roses."

"Good. If he gives you any grief, tell him I'll tan his hide."

"Thanks, Martha."

"There's another reason I'm calling. Jonathan and I had an idea. I don't want to get into it over the phone, but... Would you and Clark mind a little company?"

"You know you're always welcome. But you should know that the paparazzi are pretty unbelievable. But I suspect you've had your fair share of that there."

"Well, we've got some good neighbors. They're taking good care of us."

"Aren't you concerned, though, about leaving the house

empty?"

"Wayne's son and his family are visiting at the moment.

They've volunteered to stay here while we're in Metropolis. Don't worry. We'll get a hotel room."

"That's not necessary. Well, unless the paparazzi are too much for you. But we bought a hide-a-bed so we have room for you."

"That would be great. Give us more of a chance to talk."

"So when were you planning to come?"

"How's tomorrow?"

Slipping out of the Daily Planet was getting harder. Some of their more astute colleagues seemed to have started speculating that they might be sneaking out given that it was unusual for reporters not to leave their papers at all during the day.

As a result, even in her disguise, Lois picked up a tail when they left the Daily Planet to meet with Henderson. As result, they'd had to drive around for a good fifteen minutes to lose the tail before returning to Centennial Park. If this kept up much longer, Lois feared they might be out of a job. As it was, Perry hadn't assigned them any press conferences or grunt work — probably knowing that if one of them showed up to cover a press conference, the press conference would become about them.

And although Lois' couldn't say she minded not having to do grunt work this week, it was not a long-term solution. Without the bread and butter stories to fill the pages on a normal day, the paper wouldn't survive. No reporter could expect continued employment if they were unable to do grunt work.

Clark could easily be moved, she supposed, into a job in the editing department. She, on the other hand, had a hard time getting excited about a misplaced comma.

As they walked through Centennial Park, hoping Henderson hadn't mistaken their lateness as an indication that they hadn't received his message, Lois couldn't help but notice how many people were giving them second looks — even in their disguises. It was difficult, however, disguising the fact that Clark was blind.

She could only hope someone didn't recognize them and start snapping pictures when they were talking to Henderson. Given the clandestine nature of this meeting, it would be a shame if someone published a picture that got him fired.

"What are you thinking?" Clark asked.

"That we're not exactly inconspicuous. People are noticing us."

"And that if we are recognized when we meet with Henderson..."

"Right."

"Okay, well, do you think we would be less inconspicuous if only one of us met with him? Maybe together it's easier for us to be recognized."

Lois let out a breath. She hated the idea, but... "What if I just have a seat here and let you go on alone?"

Clark shook his head. "If one of us is more recognizable, it would be me. How about Shadow and I stay here and you go on alone?"

"Clark..."

"Just show me to a bench, Lois. We're close enough that I might even be able to listen in — provided this section of the park doesn't get too noisy."

Realizing he was right, she led him over to a nearby bench. She hated to admit it, but she'd probably get a lot less curious looks from people without him. Was this what the future held? Being unable to do something as simple as walking down the street together?

She was about to leave him behind when she suddenly stopped. "No," she said. "We're in this together. In fact, it's more your story than it is mine. We try. Until it becomes painfully obvious that we can't be seen together, we keep trying."

"What took you so long?" Henderson asked. "I was about to conclude that you two weren't as bright as I thought you were and leave."

"Sorry, Henderson," Lois said. "We picked up a tail leaving the Daily Planet and had to lose it."

Lois was glad she'd made the decision that Clark should come along. Henderson seemed to have anticipated that they might attract attention and had found a bench, almost completely surrounded by trees, near the fountain. He'd only stepped out to wave to them before disappearing back into the secluded area.

"So what's going on, Bill? Why all the cloak and dagger stuff?" Clark asked once they were settled.

"I assume you know this is off the record," Henderson said. "So I need your word not to print anything I'm about to tell you until I say it's okay — if it ever is."

"No way," Lois said.

"Then I guess this meeting is over." Henderson rose to his feet.

"What about a compromise?" Clark said. "We agree not to print anything that could be linked back to you."

Henderson hesitated before sitting back down. "Okay. Deal. I shouldn't be doing this, but I can't in good conscience just let this one go."

"What's going on, Bill?" Clark asked.

"Okay, well as you've probably guessed, our sting operation went sideways and we lost Baby Rage."

"Lost him?"

"They must have realized the coffin was bugged. A leak somewhere probably. So they managed to flood the cemetery with electronic interference. It disabled both the bug and the tracking device. By the time we reacted... We dug up the grave where he was supposed to have been buried this morning and there was nothing there. No casket. No Baby Rage."

"So what's the next step?" Lois asked.

"There is none. My superiors are planning to bury it — pretend it never happened."

"What?" Clark gasped. "But what about Baby Rage? If we're right, they're planning to kill him to steal his heart. And what about all the other people who have escaped from prison using this method for the past three months?"

"That's exactly why they plan to keep this buried. They claim it will start a panic if anyone finds out that all these dangerous criminals are back on the street."

"So better to just pretend it never happened?" Lois asked.

"That's the reasoning."

"So who's behind this? The chief? The mayor?"

"Well, the chief and the mayor agree, of course. But the driving force behind this whole cover operation is the D.A.'s office."

"Mayson Drake?"

"No, her boss. District Attorney Clemmons himself. Although Mayson is involved. She was the one who first discovered this plot. Someone she was questioning in preparation for a trial she was conducting let it slip. She thinks that was the reason someone tried to kill her — to keep her from spilling what she found out."

"Is she the one who insisted no press be given information about the attempt on her life?" Lois asked.

"No, that was Clemmons. She was the one who mentioned your names specifically though. Guess she's aware of our relationship."

"So why go against your bosses and come to us?" Clark asked.

"Because even if he is a scumbag, I happen to believe that no one deserves to be murdered. Baby Rage is still out there and, unless it's already too late, his life is in danger."

"Don't your bosses agree?"

"They don't even buy your claim that Baby Rage was busted out of prison to provide Bill Church Senior with a new heart."

"Of course they don't if Mayson is involved," Lois said.

"So... My hands are tied. Yours aren't," Henderson concluded.

"I'm not sure exactly what we can do," Clark said. "We're not exactly... unencumbered these days ourselves. And we've already basically shared everything we have with you. But we'll put the word out to our sources; see what we can dig up."

"I'll try to keep in touch," Henderson said. "I suspect that come tomorrow I will be able to talk to you by phone. It was just that today was a little crazy. Everyone and their mother was hanging around, hatching this plan to cover their butts. I just wanted the two of you on this as soon as possible."

"And if we do find something... Will you be able to act on it?" Lois asked.

"If you report a crime to me... I'll act. No one can order me not to act then."

"We'll do what we can, Bill," Clark promised.

"I know you will," Henderson said, even as he rose to his feet.

The bullet-ridden rental car hissed and sputtered as Nunk pulled into the only gas station in Smallville.

"Well, I guess we're going to be sleeping in our car and eating whatever we can pick up in here," he said as he and Lamont got out of the car.

A young man with long shaggy hair came out of the station. "You want it filled up, mister?"

"Yeah."

"You have cash, right?" the kid said, pulling the nozzle out of the gas pump.

"Uhh... no. Credit. Do you have a washroom?"

"Out of order," the kid said, even as he put the nozzle back in its place.

"What are you doing?" Nunk demanded.

"We only take cash."

"Your sign says you take credit," Nunk said, pointing to the sign in the window.

The kid glanced back at the spot Nunk was indicating. "Old sign."

Nunk let out a breath. "Fine. So where do I get some cash?"

The kid pointed to a bank machine across the street.

Realizing by the way the kid was now resting against the building that he wouldn't get service until he had cash, Nunk crossed the street, even as he pulled his bank card out of his wallet. He went to put the card in the cash machine when suddenly he swore.

He didn't know why he was even surprised to find that the sign on the machine said, 'Out Of Order.'

He walked back over to where Lamont was standing next to the car. "Bank machine is broken. Do you have any cash on you?"

"A few bucks. Probably enough to buy a couple of sandwiches."

"Fine. That will get us through this evening. We can come back to the bank tomorrow to get..."

"Walt's dad doesn't open the bank on Saturday or Sunday," the kid, still leaning against the wall, informed them.

"What?" Nunk asked.

The kid shrugged. "Just saying."

"Then what are we supposed to do for gas?"

Again the kid shrugged, before walking back into the station.

Nunk cursed before looking over at Lamont. "Well, which is it? Gas or food? I think we have enough gas to get to Kinsley. I'm sure they must have a gas station there that will take credit."

"Food then," Lamont said before both men went into the store to make what purchases they could.

"Clark, come with me," Lois said sometime later. After returning to the Daily Planet, she'd continued listening to the tapes from MGH while Clark called all their sources again, this time

looking for information about Baby Rage or any medical professionals doing anything unethical.

When Clark rose to his feet so did Shadow. Lois led the two of them into the conference room. Once they were all settled, she turned on her tape player.

"Hi, Dad."

Bill Church Junior's voice came over the tape loud and clear.

"Did you get it?"

Senior's voice was softer and somewhat raspy.

"Not yet. But everything's in motion. There was a slight complication."

"Mayson?"

"Yeah. But fortunately our source inside the D.A.'s office came through for us and we think we can counter the sting operation they're planning to mount. We've got a doctor on standby."

"So Mayson's already shared what she knows. Since she's no longer a threat, tell the boys to let up on her."

"Already done — especially given how well she's doing neutralizing those two nosy reporters. Do you think Kent is really Superman?"

"Kent? I doubt it. But the longer this whole mess continues, the longer it will keep Lane and Kent away from our operations. After all, they can hardly do their job with reporters following them everywhere they go."

"Maybe it will get bad enough to force them to leave Metropolis."

"Even better."

Lois flicked off the tape. "That's really the end of anything relevant."

"This tape is from yesterday?" Clark asked.

Lois nodded and then realizing Clark couldn't see her, responded in the affirmative. "I think instead of picking up today's tapes tomorrow, I should do it tonight."

"Good idea," Clark responded. "And I was thinking... unless we hear something from our sources, maybe we should try staking out CostMart tonight."

"You think they might be holding Baby Rage there?"

"I think it's our best lead at the moment."

"Assuming he's still alive."

Nunk and Lamont looked down at their meager purchases when they exited the gas station. Two sandwiches, a bag of chips and twenty-seven cents were all they had. Still, it was early enough that they should be able to take a trip to Kinsley before dark. Then they could put into motion their plan to sneak onto the Kent property tonight. Surely somewhere on that property was the evidence they needed to give the world the definitive proof that Clark Kent was Superman. And if not... well they could always create something that they could sell to the world as definitive proof.

Nunk wasn't certain what they were looking for. But there had to be something they could claim was proof that Kent was Superman. They'd probably even be able to sneak into the farmhouse and search the place. A farmer and his wife were probably in bed by nine and sound asleep by ten. And given the way country people were, he doubted their doors would even be locked. The most challenging part was going to be avoiding that stupid bull.

"Damn!"

Lamont's curse brought Nunk out of his internal thoughts. "What?" he asked, looking over at Lamont.

His gaze followed where Lamont was pointing.

"Damn!" he said when he saw the flat tire... or more accurately... He moved around the car... four flat tires. "They've been slashed!"

"If you're looking to get them repaired... We don't take credit," the kid said from the doorway to the gas station.

There was trouble almost from the first.

They'd spoken to their sources with no success, brought Perry up to speed and then decided to go to MGH to get the tapes before picking up their supper and proceeding to stake out CostMart. They would listen to the newest tape while conducting their stakeout.

Maybe their mistake had been in taking their own vehicle. But since they would not be returning to the Daily Planet again that day, it had seemed like the most viable option.

Oh, they had known that by doing that, they would pick up a tail or two. But they figured they could drive around until they were clear of parasites. What they hadn't counted on was becoming the lead car in what quickly seemed like a parade.

Stopping at MGH had not been possible. Not without going in with an entire entourage. Just when they thought they had finally managed to shake one, another seemed to join the race. Even Lois' somewhat wild driving style was not enough to shake them loose.

After about two hours, with Lois becoming more frustrated and thereby taking even more risks to lose their tail, they'd finally been pulled over by the police for driving over a barricade while trying to make an illegal u-turn.

The young, terrified officer had radioed a panicky call for backup when he had spotted the crowds closing in quickly on their position.

Lois' forehead came to rest on the steering wheel when it sounded as if the entire press corp enveloped the car, ignoring the inexperienced officer whose trembling voice was insufficient to the task. The piercing sound of multiple sirens approaching was almost a relief.

At least she knew what tomorrow's headline was going to be.

"Do we tell him about the tapes?" Clark asked as she and Clark sat in an interrogation room at the police station waiting for Henderson to arrive.

She reached down to give Shadow some attention, finding her nerves, which had been stretched to the breaking point for the past couple of hours, began to ease as she gently pulled on his ears making him practically purr with contentment.

"Maybe Henderson could pick them up," Clark continued.

Lois shook her head out of habit. "We can't do that, Clark. They aren't exactly..."

"Legal?"

"Exactly. It would force him into an untenable position."

Clark sighed.

Just then the door opened and Sergeant Zymak entered the room.

"Where's Henderson?" Lois asked.

"Off for the afternoon."

Oh, right. They knew that — damn it.

"So... can we go now?" Lois asked.

Zymak's eyebrows rose.

"Look, we aren't the ones who started that disturbance," Clark said.

"Riot is more the appropriate word," Zymak responded.

"We're sorry that your young officer was roughed up a bit," Clark continued, "but we had nothing to do with that."

"You're not here for starting a riot," Zymak growled. "You're here for your driving. Or are you claiming, Lane, that you didn't drive over a barricade in an attempt to make an illegal u-turn?"

"So give me a ticket for an illegal up-turn. I'll pay it on my way out," Lois said dismissively even as she rose to her feet. "You have no grounds to hold us. Come on, Clark. We're out of here."

"I was thinking more in the neighborhood of a dangerous driving charge," Zymak said. "We've been getting calls from concerned citizens about your driving for the past half hour."

Lois sank back into her chair, staring at Zymak in disbelief. He

couldn't be serious. Dangerous driving was a criminal charge in New Troy. She'd lose her license. And since Clark couldn't drive, it would leave them completely at the mercy of those wild animals following their every move.

It would be a nightmare.

"Come on, Sergeant," Clark said. "You've seen those paparazzi out there. You take away Lois' license and we're..."

"...screwed," Lois completed for him. "Completely, utterly, totally screwed."

Zymak's face softened slightly. "I'll make you a deal. I'll keep your Jeep in police lockup tonight and give you a ride home. You can pick up the vehicle tomorrow. At least it will keep me from having to take complaints about your driving for the rest of my shift."

"We're supposed to go on a stake-out tonight," Lois objected. "How are we supposed to do that without my Jeep?"

"Thank you, Sergeant," Clark said, rising to his feet. "That's imminently reasonable of you."

"But, Clark..."

"We'll work it out, Lois."

Their discussion of what they were going to do without Lois' Jeep had to be put on hold until they were safely inside their apartment. After all, they could hardly talk openly about it while riding in the back of the police car, dogging questions about why they were being driven home by the police from the press camped out in front of their apartment, or walking through the public hallway on the way to their apartment.

Lois opened the door and stepped inside. "Okay, so... what do we do without the Jeep?" she asked as soon as Clark had closed and locked the door behind them and was bending down to release Shadow from his halter.

"Do you feel a draft?"

"What?" Lois asked, even as she felt a breeze of cold air too.

"It's coming from..." Without completing his thought, he rose to his feet and began tapping his way across the room.

Curious, Lois followed him.

His foot crunched on something at the same moment that Lois realized the problem.

"Damn it!" she exclaimed, quickly bending down to grab Shadow's collar so that he wouldn't go any further. "Sit," she commanded and Shadow quickly did as ordered, allowing her to release him.

"What?" Clark asked.

"Someone broke the window leading out to the fire escape. Are there..." Her voice trailed off as she tapped his ear. In the corner of her eye, she saw Shadow begin trotting away from them on his way to their bedroom. Good. He should be safe from the glass on the floor in there.

"No. Whatever they did, it wasn't done to plant surveillance devices."

"Then what..." She began looking around her.

Shadow was suddenly back, holding some piece of black material in his mouth.

"What is it, boy?" she asked, reaching out a hand to him. He released the material and she could almost swear she could see sympathy in his eyes. Confused, she examined the flimsy piece of cloth. "Oh god," she groaned.

"What?"

"They've been rifling through my underwear drawer," Lois said as she stared in horror at the lingerie she'd worn during her first night with Clark.

"For what reason?" Clark asked, confused.

"Probably wanting to write a story about what Lois Lane wears at night for Superman."

"Oh, Lois. I'm so sorry."

She held up a hand, not wanting his sympathy. In fact, she

didn't want to think about this at all. "I'm going to call the police. Maybe we'll get lucky and get finger prints. Then, I'll call Jimmy," Lois said, pushing the thoughts of some stranger's hands pawing at her unmentionables to the back of her mind. "Maybe he can go to the hospital and collect the tape for us."

"Why do you suppose they broke the window this time? Why not just get in the way they did before?" Clark asked.

"I assume that the other building's residents have become much more vigilant about not buzzing strangers into the building."

Suddenly, she had a horrible thought. What if they'd found the suits? She rushed quickly into the bedroom and threw open the door to the closet, only breathing again when she realized that the floor in the closet was undisturbed.

Turning back around, she slowly took in the room. Her underwear drawer had a pair of black panties half sticking out and the drawer to her bed stand was partially open. Damn. That was where she kept her birth control pills. So they had that information, too. But surely such information was too personal... Or, well, not likely given what she'd read today in Love Fortress Magazine.

In point of fact, it appeared they had rifled through everything. She sighed, suddenly feeling very tired.

Nunk pushed open the door to the Sheriff's Office and almost instantly fell back when a wall of sound hit him. Collecting himself, he stepped into the crowded station. It had taken them quite some time to get here. Apparently, there was no taxi service in Smallville and the Sheriff's Office was located some distance outside of town so that it could service the whole county. They'd tried hitching a ride, but regardless of the number of old trucks that drove past them, no one stopped.

Once inside, Nunk took a look around. Mike McKee of Channel Six was up near the front. Sandra Bergquest from the Tattle-Tail Weekly was over on the other side. He could see Stan Webb and Marcel Dresler and... was that Sean Koch?

In fact, the entire room was a who's who of tabloid news. All of them shouting over each other to the petite woman standing on the other side of the counter — the only barrier separating the angry mob from the ticked-off woman who also happened to be the only person in the room with a gun.

"What's going on?" Nunk asked as he and Lamont crowded into the already jammed room.

A man who looked vaguely familiar looked over at him.

"Slashed tires."

"All of them... us?" Nunk asked in disbelief.

The man nodded.

"What are you planning to do about it?" McKee demanded of Sheriff Harris.

"I've got my deputies out, trying to track down the culprits, but so far we have no idea who is behind this. Everyone is claiming that they didn't see any tires get slashed."

"Of course they are. They're all behind this!" McKee exclaimed.

"Haven't you people ever heard of freedom of the press?"

Bergquest yelled. "What are you going to do about that?"

"What do you want me to do?" Rachel asked incredulously. "I can't make Maisie keep her restaurant open if she has to do inventory or insist that the gas station take credit or even keep the motel open if it has bugs. And if you park somewhere that is only for abandoned vehicles, you can't rightly complain if you get your car shot up."

"But what about the tires?" McKee said. "You're the law. You're required to do something about that!"

"And I'm trying, but it's going to take some time."

Suddenly the door opened and an older couple, obviously farmers by their casual attire, entered the lobby. They looked vaguely familiar to Nunk. He shrugged. He'd probably seen them

at some point during the day. Dismissing them from his mind, he turned his attention back to the Sheriff.

"Excuse me," the farmer said as he and his wife pushed their way through the crowd until they managed to get to the front. "Rachel, may I?" he asked.

"Be my guest," Rachel said, surrendering the floor to the newcomer.

The man turned towards the crowd. "I have a statement to make," the man said. He gave the woman with him an amused grin before saying, "I've always wanted to say that." Then he turned his attention back to the crowd. "For those of you who may not know, my name is Jonathan Kent and this is my wife, Martha."

The crowd erupted in questions. Cameras began snapping.

"Now, how am I supposed to make a statement with all of you yelling at me?"

"Didn't your parents teach you not to interrupt people," Martha added. Her gaze turned to her husband. "We're going to have to have a talk to our boy about this if this is how he acts when he's covering a story."

The crowd quieted and a few even chuckled, captivated by the older couple with the twinkle in their eyes.

"Now, isn't this much nicer?" Martha said.

Most of those who hadn't chuckled before did now.

"Okay, now that I have your attention, let me get to the point of our trip here today," Jonathan said. "First, although we're very proud of our boy, and happen to think he's pretty super..."

More chuckles followed this comment.

"...for any of you who actually think he's Superman, we'd like to offer you a load of cow manure at a thousand dollars an ounce. Now... Unless you want to take us up on our offer..." When no one responded, Jonathan continued. "We've heard about the problems you all have had today so we talked to some of our neighbors and took up a donation to help you out."

People looked around at each other in confusion.

"We suspect you're all feeling a little hungry," Jonathan said. "And are wondering where you're going to stay tonight. So... We made arrangements to get a bus that will take you back to Wichita.""

The crowd noise rose again. Jonathan held up a hand until they calmed down again.

"Now... Maisie has made up a lunch for you which will be served on the bus and we have called a motel in Wichita that said they have room for as many of you who want to take us up on our offer."

"What are you trying to do?" Nunk yelled. "Run us out of town on a rail?"

"Oh, no, dear," Martha said. "The bus is much more comfortable. Besides, no one is saying you have to go. But without food or accommodation or means to travel... Well, we just didn't want you to find yourselves stranded here in the hicks."

"And Maisie said she has done up a batch of her famous raison tarts... which won first prize at Corn Festival this past year," Jonathan added. He looked at his wife. "Do you think if I went along, Maisie would give me one of those tarts? I'm sure these guys wouldn't mind."

"Certainly not," Martha said. "You have to watch your cholesterol, honey. Remember what the doctor told you."

"You can't blame a guy for trying." He turned back to the crowd. "The bus will stop by here in about a half hour for anyone who is interested. It will drop you right off at the motel where I've been told they would be happy to assist you in filing your stories. Hopefully, it will help with your editors to be able to say that you at least met us." He turned to Rachel. "Thanks, Rachel," he said.

"No problem, Jonathan," Rachel said.

Martha and Jonathan both ignored the questions that were thrown at them as they returned to their truck, hand in hand. Cameras again snapped. Unfortunately for the paparazzi

assembled at the Sheriff's Office, they were unable to follow further than the truck — none of them now having working vehicles.

Martha and Jonathan watched from the comfort of their truck while a school bus full of reporters passed them by on its way out of town some time later. Once the bus was gone, they started their truck and drove back to the Sheriff's Office, to find the building much quieter.

"Did they all leave?" Martha asked Rachel as they walked across the empty lobby.

"They all left. But I think most of them are planning just to rent another car in Wichita and drive back."

Martha and Jonathan shared a look. "We thought of that," Jonathan said. "That's why all the rental agencies within a hundred miles of Wichita have been informed about how many rental cars were shot up in Smallville when those idiots parked in front of signs that told them that vehicles parked there would be deemed abandoned. Unless they want to see more of their vehicles damaged, and likely be out of business until they can get their cars repaired, they might want to think twice before renting to any more reporters for the next little while. As for their tires... You can stop your investigation."

"Why? Are you here to confess?"

"Not exactly. It's just... there were no slashed tires in Smallville today."

"What?"

"It's a wonder no one bothered to check to make sure their tires really were slashed."

"Their tires weren't slashed?" Rachel asked incredulously.

"Of course, not, dear," Martha said. "They just had the air let out of them. If anyone had actually checked, the whole gig would have been up. But the rental agencies are still going to have a heck of a time getting their cars back. So we made a deal with them. A bunch of folks here have volunteered to return cars for any agency that doesn't rent any more cars to reporters."

"They're planning to make a bit of a holiday out of the trip," Jonathan added. "They've made arrangements to borrow the school bus to get back to Smallville afterwards."

Rachel laughed. "Are you telling me that crowd won't be able to rent vehicles anywhere near Wichita?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Jonathan said. "It might not keep them away permanently — but hopefully by the time they work out a solution, this will all be over. Anyway, we wanted to tell you that Hank Irig and his family will be staying at our place for the next few days because we're on our way to Metropolis tomorrow morning."

When Lois had reached the police, she spoke to Zymak. He might have given them a hard time earlier tonight, but she knew that he would take their complaint of a break in seriously — given everything else that had happened recently. He had promised to send over a couple of officers who would conduct a serious investigation.

So now... the police had left, Lois had finished cleaning up the broken glass and Clark had put plastic up over the broken window to keep the wind out. He was currently struggling to get a blanket tacked up over the plastic so that people couldn't look in. Not the ideal set up since they could just push down the barricade, but it was the best they could do until Mr. Tracewski could repair it, which he had promised to see to tomorrow. Since the damage was less than her insurance deductible, they would have to pay for it, of course, but Mr. Tracewski would make sure it was done as cheaply as possible without compromising quality.

Lois suspected the fingerprints the police had found were probably useless. The people who had broken in had undoubtedly worn gloves. But they had found a trace amount of what appeared to be blood on a shard of glass. The cops had warned her not to get

her hopes up, however, since they weren't sure there was even enough for a proper DNA analysis.

"Here. Let me," Lois said, rushing to raise one side of the blanket for Clark.

"Thanks," he said, quickly tacking up the side of the blanket he was holding and moving over to her side.

He had just secured the blanket when he heard a commotion coming from outside. "Something's happening," he said.

"Great! Now what?" Lois stepped up to the window.

"No. It's at the front of the building."

Lois practically tripped over Shadow in her rush to get to the window. She couldn't hear whatever had alerted Clark, but after the day they'd had, she wasn't taking anything for granted. She looked out the window.

The mass of reporters outside had honed in on something, but she couldn't quite get a view of it — so surrounded was it by people pushing in. The lights from the various cameras that had come on was almost unbearable — making Lois feel sorry for the people living on the first floor. Surely no thickness of curtains would keep that amount of light from leaking in through the windows. Even if the noise from the reporters camped outside didn't bother them, the lights surely would.

Hearing Clark slowly coming up behind her, she glanced back over her shoulder.

"I can't tell what's going on, but those reporters down there look like a school of sharks going in for the kill.

"It's Jimmy," Clark said. "They keep asking questions. He keeps telling them he has no comment."

Lois glanced back out the window. "He's not making much progress," she said softly. She turned back to Clark. "Do you think this is what our friends have been enduring for the past few days?"

"Probably. I guess we're just been so caught up in our own problems that we haven't noticed."

Lois bit her lip and looked back out the window, watching in sympathy as Jimmy made slow progress to the front door of the building. If this kept up much longer, they probably wouldn't have any friends left. She'd even heard rumblings from the other occupants of the building when she and Clark had been in the public areas. How long would her landlord tolerate this before he demanded that they move out?

She turned away from the window when Jimmy finally made it to the front door of the building and, like a harried dog, scooted inside when Clark, standing right next to the security intercom, buzzed him in the moment he announced himself.

"I suppose we could always move to the Arctic or something," Lois said.

"That would be some commute."

Lois gave a tired smile. "I'd need a lift."

"Probably could be arranged. Well, unless there's a snow storm or something."

Lois' eyebrows crinkled together in confusion.

"Well, how could we manage that commute in a snow storm without having people suspect I'm Superman?"

Lois giggled, amazed by the way he could lift her out of her depressing thoughts.

Just then a knock came at the door.

"You're a life saver, Jimmy," Lois said as she dug into one of the dinners that Jimmy had brought with him.

"Hey, no problem," Jimmy responded, digging into his own dinner. "C.K. paid so it's a great deal for me, too." As he spoke, he fed a scrap to Shadow.

"Jimmy, did you just feed table scraps to Shadow?" Clark asked.

Jimmy shared a guilty look with Lois who had been doing the same thing the entire time she'd been eating.

"Uhh... no?" Jimmy's tone of voice sounded more like a

question than a denial.

Clark laughed. "Don't worry about it, Jimmy. If you're not feeding him, Lois is."

"Who me?" Lois asked, managing to sound much more innocent than Jimmy had.

Both Clark and Jimmy laughed this time, even as Shadow continued enjoying his meal.

"Well, I want to say thank you anyway," Lois said, returning to her previous thought. "Not only for this, but for getting that tape for me. Did you have any problems breaking into the storage room?"

"No. I knew reform school would come in handy some day."

"And did you have any problems putting a new tape in the machine?"

Jimmy smiled. "Don't worry. When I left, it was recording Church's snoring."

"Great," Lois said resignedly. "More snoring. Why can't they invent a recorder that edits out snoring?"

"Jimmy, Lois saw you coming into the building," Clark said, changing the subject. "Have the paparazzi been giving you much of a problem?"

"Well, I don't have them setting up camp outside my building or anything like that," Jimmy said. "But I think everyone who knows you is probably being bugged a bit right now."

"I'm sorry, Jim."

"Hey, it's not your fault," Jimmy said. He shrugged. "This will all end when they figure out that you aren't really Superman, anyway."

Lois placed her fork down on her plate, no longer feeling particularly hungry.

As soon as Jimmy left, Lois stuck the tape in her machine. As usual, there was a lot of garbage on the tape so while they let it play, Lois and Clark did up the dishes and slipped into some comfortable clothes. Lois chose a long silky nightie and then picked a blanket off the foot of the bed before returning to the living room. Shaking out the blanket, she sat down on the couch and pulled it into her lap. Shadow jumped up onto the couch next to her, laying his head in her lap. Her hand instantly found itself running gently through dog fur and pulling on the tips of his ears.

Shadow sighed in contentment, his eyelids drooping as he cuddled closer.

On the tape, Mindy Black was using a little girl voice to tell Bill Church how handsome he looked today.

Unfortunately for Shadow's romantic intentions, Clark wasn't far behind. He returned from the bedroom in a pair of sleep shorts and a t-shirt. Pushing Shadow off his spot, Clark took a seat next to Lois, his arm resting on the back of the couch behind her.

Lois pulled her feet up under her and rested her head against Clark's strong shoulder as she relaxed into his embrace.

She hardly noticed it at first. Clark's free hand began tracing an abstract pattern on her thigh as the voices on the tape droned on about heart rates and bed pans. However, her attention was captured when his hand slid under the hem of her nightie, beginning a slow path up the full length of her leg, bringing the material of her nightie with it.

Lois licked her lips as the hand continued its lazy movements up her leg, almost as if its movement was random.

She shifted positions, causing his hand to slip off her leg. His forehead furrowed slightly, but she ignored him as she pulled her legs out from under herself so that she could flip them up over his lap. In her peripheral vision, she could see him smile, realizing that he now had much better access to her legs.

Her new position, however, had an added advantage of allowing her to sneak her hand under the edge of his t-shirt so that she could explore the hard muscles she found there.

Letting out a small groan, he turned his head. She tilted her

head slightly, allowing him to find her lips. After a series of slow, easy kisses, the need to get closer seemed to hit them both at the same moment. As Clark reached for Lois, she rose up on the couch, turning so that she could straddle his lap. He groaned and pulled her closer, his hands running down over the curves of her back until...

Suddenly, Clark jerked back.

"Huh?" Lois asked confused at the sudden loss of contact.

He didn't answer, instead he quickly moved her off him so that he could rise to her feet. He was off the couch quickly, feeling his way around the couch and over to the kitchen table.

He picked up the tape recorder and flicked it off.

It suddenly occurred to her that she hadn't heard anything happening on the tape since... Well, she wasn't entirely certain what she'd last heard.

"What?" she asked, watching as he felt his way back to the couch and resumed his seat, tape recorder still in hand.

He rewound it for a few seconds before turning it on again. Something about taking Bill Church Senior down for a cardiogram.

"Is this what..."

"Just a sec."

She fell silent, immediately realizing why he'd interrupted them when she heard Bill Church Junior's voice on the tape.

"Hi, Dad. How you doing today?"

"Hmph. Did you get the package?"

"He's safely tucked away until we're ready to complete the transfer."

"Are you sure he's secure."

"Since he has no idea what's coming, he's in no rush to leave the women we've provided for him. He's been in prison for months now so... Of course, should he try to leave, he will find that's impossible."

"What about the doctor? Have you spoken to him?"

"I did. Dr. Grant is the best transplant surgeon in Metropolis. At first, he was a little... reluctant, but eventually we persuaded him that it would be in his own best interests to cooperate."

"Are you sure 'persuading' him is the best thing for my health?"

"I'll be there the whole time to make sure he doesn't try anything. He knows that your death wouldn't be very good for his health."

"So when will this happen?"

"Tomorrow."

"Why can't he do it today?"

"Apparently, you have to fast before surgery. But don't worry, Dr. Grant's given instructions to the medical staff and booked the operating room. Barring complications, he figures he'll be able to take care of you around ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Hmph."

"Anyway, Dad, I'm not going to be able to visit today. Business has to be tended to. But you know how that goes."

Lois and Clark listened as the two men said their goodbyes and the door to the room closed following Junior's departure.

"We have to contact Henderson," Lois said immediately.

"Now... where were we?" Clark asked when they hung up the phone following their call to Henderson. They had told him what they knew... and what they suspected, that Baby Rage was probably still alive, but wouldn't be by ten a.m. tomorrow and, they speculated, that he might be being held in CostMart. Unfortunately, they couldn't get over there to check things out.

Henderson thanked them for the information and promised to follow up on it, leaving them free to pursue other interests.

A smile found its way onto Lois' face. "Let me see if I can remember what was happening before you so rudely interrupted us."

Grabbing Clark's hand, she led him to the couch before giving him a slight push so that he collapsed back onto it. She climbed into Clark's lap so that she was facing him. Winding her arms around his neck, she spoke again.

"Now... this seems to ring some bells," she said, her mouth only a breath away from his.

They were the last coherent words either of them spoke for quite some time as Clark swept her up into his arms, his lips exploring hers as he carried her to the bedroom, shutting the door behind them.

Saturday

The Myth Of Man and Superman:

Ms Drake's Claim Discredited

Daily Planet

By Eduardo Friez

Since allegations earlier this week that Clark Kent was Superman sent the fourth estate into a feeding frenzy, new facts have come to light that cast doubt upon Assistant District Attorney Mayson Drake's claim.

Ms. Drake's claim rests primarily on the supposition that Superman and Clark Kent were both blinded at the same time and for that reason both disappeared from Metropolis concurrently.

However, according to Sheriff Rachel Harris of Smallville, Kansas, she met with Clark Kent almost five weeks after Superman's disappearance and she unequivocally states that there was nothing wrong with his eyesight at that time.

In addition, Dr. Joseph Scott, Smallville's sole physician, states that he treated Clark Kent shortly after Mr. Kent's meeting with the sheriff as a result of Mr. Kent having sustained an injury as a result of an accident on his family's farm that caused him to lose his eyesight.

Yet when Superman appeared earlier this week to help out with the hostage situation at City Hall, he met with both Inspector Bill Henderson and Sergeant Maggie Sawyer who in discussing the rescue of the hostages reviewed blue prints of City Hall with the Man of Steel and both Inspector Henderson and Sergeant Sawyer state that Superman was not blind at that time.

They also state that the reason the lights around City Hall were turned out was not, as some have speculated, to keep people from realizing Superman was blind, but to keep the kidnapers in City Hall from knowing Superman was there before he made his move.

Also, although he was only with the hostages briefly, all of them were contacted and none of them noticed any problems with Superman's eyesight when he rescued them.

In backing up Ms. Drake's allegations, The Metropolis Star maintains that they consulted with Dr. Simon Gaul, an expert in facial recognition programming, who compared pictures of both Superman and Clark Kent and confirmed that the facial structures of the two men are the same.

However, when Dr. Simon Gaul was contacted by this reporter, he maintained that he also informed The Metropolis Star that the same could be said for thousands of other men in the city of Metropolis alone.

The final 'evidence' provided by The Metropolis Star was an apparent lack of airplane travel during Mr. Kent's time working overseas and yet Captain Eustace Stiller, who for the past twelve years has been the captain of the ocean freighter, Silver Star, confirmed that Mr. Kent worked his passage on his freighter during a run he made to Europe in the late 1980s and according to Captain Stiller, Kent was no Superman, that in fact, he wasn't even much of a sailor.

As a result, this reporter can only conclude that Ms. Drake woefully misled the public in making her declaration that Clark Kent was Superman for reasons best known only to her.

Although Ms. Drake declined to be interviewed, a source who

knows Ms. Drake claims that her heart was broken when Clark Kent began cohabiting with Lois Lane so speculation that she was acting as a woman scorned does not seem completely unfounded.

As Lois and Clark pushed their way down the steps leading to her apartment building to get their cab first thing the next morning, Lois glanced at the small park, kiddy-corner to her apartment. All sorts of temporary structures had been erected in a haphazard manner. Litter was scattered everywhere.

As Clark stopped to allow Shadow to do his business, she spotted Michelle Sitkowitz, a neighbor of hers, trying to make her way into the building and gave the woman an embarrassed smile. She cringed when Michelle met her smile with an annoyed glare.

Since Shadow was now finished and Clark had cleaned up, she redirected her mind to getting them safely to the taxi so that they could go to the police station to collect her Jeep before going to work. Even though it was Saturday, with the Church operation scheduled for ten o'clock, they wanted to be at the Daily Planet in case the story broke today. Martha and Jonathan would be meeting them at the Daily Planet in the early afternoon anyway, so it would likely be a short day.

Besides, it was better than being held prisoner inside the apartment. With the paparazzi camped out here, it wasn't as if they could go for a walk or to a restaurant or take in a movie or anything else that they might normally want to do on their days off.

Would they ever be able to do so again?

Lois forced herself to push that thought out of her mind. No point in fuming about things she could not control.

"Have you seen Eduardo's story yet?" Jimmy said, skipping up to them as they stepped off the elevator. "He did a great job tearing apart Mayson's story."

"Not yet," Lois said.

"Jimmy!" Perry bellowed across the newsroom.

"Oops. Gotta go," Jimmy said. "Anyway, I left copies of all the papers I thought you might want to see on your desk."

They stood still for a moment after Jimmy dashed away, rushing to answer his boss's summons.

"Well?" Clark finally said. "Shall we?"

Once they were settled at Lois' desk, Clark detached Shadow's halter so that he could curl up in what had become his traditional spot next to Lois' desk and Lois began reading headlines to Clark as she quickly flipped through the various papers.

'You're Under Arrest, Superman'

The Metropolis Star

By Toby Raynes

Kryptonian Birth Control

Dirt Digger

By Samantha Richards

Superman Prefers Victoria's Secret

Dirt Digger

By Samantha Richards

"Well, I guess we now know who busted into our apartment," Clark said.

"Only way we'll prove it is if the police found some evidence that Samantha Richards was in our apartment. Of course, I'm sure these headlines will help get a conviction if there is other evidence that can be used as well," Lois responded before continuing to read headlines.

Superman's Tushy Pampered With Super Soft Toilet Paper

The National Whisper

By Martha McNeil

Superman lit le Paris Bulletin en Braille

The Paris Bulletin

By Bernard Duval

"What does that mean?" Lois asked.

"It means Superman reads the Braille version of The Paris Bulletin."

"I should have known."

"I knew I shouldn't have thrown out those papers," Clark muttered.

"They know what type of toilet paper we use, and what type of birth control we practice and you're concerned about the papers you threw out?"

"I'm concerned that I'm giving free advertising to someone who went through our trash."

"Good point," Lois said. "But..." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I hope The Paris Bulletin is the only foreign language paper you threw out."

"It was. Why?" Following her lead, he dropped the volume of his voice to match hers.

"Clark knowing French doesn't really mean much..."

"But everyone knows that Superman can communicate in a lot of different languages."

"Exactly. So... what else do we have here?" she asked in a much more normal tone of voice before continuing her search.

Senior Kents Charm Reporters Out Of Smallville

Tattle-Tail Weekly

By Sandra Bergquest

Smallville Terrorizes Reporters

National Inquisitor

By Leo Nunk

"Sounds like something happened in Smallville," Clark said.

"We'll have to ask your folks about it when they get here,"

Lois responded still flipping through papers until she found the one she was looking for. Eduardo's article. She tugged the Daily Planet from the pile and immediately began reading the article to Clark.

The phone suddenly rung. "Clark Kent," Clark said, picking up the phone on Lois' desk.

"Hi, Clark."

"Henderson," Clark said to Lois before turning his attention back to the person on the other end of the line. She leaned closer and he held the phone in such a way that she could listen in.

"Think you can lose your entourage this morning?" Henderson asked.

"We can try. Why?"

"If you can, you might want to take a trip over to MGH by nine thirty."

"Any luck tracking down Baby Rage last night?"

"Unfortunately, no. Dr. Grant never went home last night, so we couldn't bring him in for questioning, and I didn't have enough evidence to get a search warrant for CostMart. But... Well, I did have some of the boys staking out CostMart and... apparently they saw Dr. Grant leaving with an escort a few minutes ago. He was carrying one of those cooler things."

"The type they use to transport organs?" Clark asked.

"That's what we're thinking. He headed directly to MGH. He's booked an operation room for ten o'clock this morning."

"At this point," Henderson continued, "if your theory is right, we figure there's nothing we can do to save Baby Rage so there's no real rush to stop this before the operation is scheduled to take place. Then we can hopefully snag the doctor and both of the Churches."

"We'll try to be there. But don't wait for us if we can't lose our tail," Lois said.

"Don't worry, Lane," Henderson said, a smile in his voice. "I wasn't planning on it."

"Oh, and Inspector," Clark said before Henderson could hang up. "Do you have a contact number for Agent Daniel Scardino?"

"The DEA agent?"

"That's right. Would you consider giving him an invitation, too?"

“Why?”

“He’s the one who gave us the critical piece of information to alert us to the fact that people were escaping from prison by pretending to be dead,” Clark said. “I think he deserves to be there.”

Lois reached over and gently ran her hand down his cheek — once again reminded that she’d fallen in love with a good man.

Getting out of the Daily Planet was easier than the previous day. Not that the number of people out front had exactly diminished as a result of Eduardo’s article — although some of the more reputable news organizations seemed to have decreased the number of reporters they had covering it. Probably because Eduardo’s article was giving them serious second thoughts.

Both Lois and Clark had thanked Eduardo for his story — and had learned something interesting. When Lois had asked Eduardo what had made him think to contact the facial recognition expert the Star had quoted, he’d told them that he’d received an anonymous tip — from Star reporter, Toby Raynes. Apparently, she hadn’t been very happy with that particular omission to her story by her editor.

One of the disadvantages of employing an ethical reporter was that they had... ethics. The advantage was that people trusted her stories. And with Mayson still maintaining the truth of her allegation, Eduardo’s story hadn’t solved the problem — not even with the more legitimate news organizations.

And, of course, the yellow press was still as hungry as ever for any Clark/Superman story. Given the number of papers they were selling, why would they ever give it up? Some of the tabloid papers, like the Dirt Digger, normally a weekly paper, had published a new addition every day since the story had come out.

Lois hoped the Kents had some brilliant plan that would solve this mess — otherwise, it was going to be a long time before the tabs gave up their pursuit of this story, if they ever did.

So a lack of reporters wanting a story about them was not what had made it easier to sneak past them today. It was because today they’d tried a different approach. They had both hidden under a blanket in the back of Jimmy’s car — confusing the heck out of Shadow — and had Jimmy drive them to the hospital.

By the time Lois and Clark arrived, Inspector Henderson had his group assembled but they still hadn’t moved. Scardino was there, too, and greeted them cordially, thanking them for remembering him.

“What are you waiting for?” Lois asked.

“We want to make sure we have everyone in one place before we move in,” Henderson said.

“What do you mean by...”

“Bill Church Sr. is being transported to the operating room.” The voice coming in over Henderson’s radio cut Lois off.

“Standby to go in,” Henderson responded into his radio before turning to Lois and Clark. “Remember to keep back. We don’t expect anyone to start shooting, but this is a police operation.” He directed his gaze at Lois. “And don’t say anything. You’re only here as a courtesy. Even if we got the crucial tip from you, I won’t hesitate to throw your butts out of there.” He looked at Scardino. “You’re only here as a courtesy, too. So the same rules apply to you.”

Before Lois could reply, he raised the radio and instructed the officers on the other end that they were a go.

When they opened the door to the operating room, the anesthesiologist was preparing to put Bill Church Sr. to sleep. He jerked back when police officers flooded the room. Senior was not unconscious yet, although he was quite obviously groggy.

“MPD. No one move,” Henderson said, his gun in his hands.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” The man who spoke was obviously the doctor. “This is a sterile room. We’re

about to perform an operation. And get that dog out of here!”

“I don’t think so,” Henderson said, his men immediately securing the people in the room. “This is an illegal operation.”

“I’ll have your job, Inspector,” Junior said, surprising everyone when he pulled down his surgical mask. Officers moved quickly, securing him and taking the gun from where it was tucked into his trousers.

“What are you doing here, Junior?” Henderson asked. “Oh wait... Here to make sure Dr. Grant doesn’t try anything?”

“Get out of here,” Junior continued, outraged. “That heart will be of no use to my father if it takes too long to perform this operation.”

“Heart?” Henderson asked. “You have a heart here?”

“Right in here,” Junior said, tapping the cooler. “And if you don’t get out of here right now so that these doctors can treat my dad, I’ll make sure you’re dismissed from the force.”

“Funny that you say there’s a heart in there,” Henderson said, ignoring the threat completely. “I checked the national registry of donated organs this morning — and this heart...” Henderson tapped the cooler. “...is not on it. I spoke to people at the United Network for Organ Sharing, and they checked into it. They can find no records for a heart transplant for Bill Church or any transplants at all at Metropolis General Hospital today. Heck, according to them, Mr. Church isn’t even on the list for an organ transplant”

“We used another organization,” Junior said.

Dr. Grant practically groaned.

“Tell him why that’s not likely, Doctor?”

“Because UNOS is a private, non-profit organization that manages the entire nation’s organ transplant system under contract with the federal government,” Grant said.

“Besides, when we take this heart to our experts... What do you want to bet this heart has the same DNA as an escaped prisoner — Baby Rage? You didn’t think about the fact that we have his DNA on file, did you, Junior? When we prove that this is Baby Rage’s heart, not only will we have you on illegal organ distribution, we’ll have you for murder. Want to know what will knock Kent is Superman off the front page? ‘Billionaire Kills Man To Steal Heart.’”

In the background, Lois pulled out her notebook, wanting to write down that potential headline. She felt Clark jab her in the ribs.

“What are you talking about, Inspector?” Junior asked. “I read a couple days ago in the Daily Planet...” His eyes briefly alighted on Lois and Clark. “...that Baby Rage died of natural causes in Strykers. Or... are you saying that he didn’t die in prison?”

Henderson bristled, obviously realizing the same thing that Lois and Clark recognized — Junior knew that city officials didn’t want prisoner escapes leaking to the public and was trying to use that information.

After taking a moment to regain his composure, Henderson managed to regroup. “Even if that’s true, we’ve still got you on illegal organ distribution and desecrating a dead body. Boy, that could make an even better headline. ‘Billionaire Desecrates Dead Body.’ Regardless, until this is all sorted out, you’re all under arrest.”

Lois and Clark stayed until the entire police investigation was complete and they got a statement from Henderson.

They said their goodbyes to Scardino who informed them he was headed back to Washington and told Clark to cherish what he had — Clark had assured him that he did. The two men had shaken hands and Lois had received a kiss on the cheek before Scardino had left for the airport.

After saying goodbye to Scardino, they decided to retrieve Jimmy’s pen from Senior’s room and the tape recorder from the storage room while waiting for Jimmy to give them a ride back to

the Daily Planet. As they exited Senior's room, Lois spotted Mindy Black over at the counter talking to another nurse.

"Okay, so maybe Bill Church wasn't the right guy for me," Mindy said. "But I heard that Tim Lake was having some sort of minor procedure done on the third floor."

"Isn't he married to Amber Lake?" the other nurse asked as Lois and Clark walked by.

Lois glanced over in time to see Mindy shrug. "A minor complication at best."

Lois gave her head a disgusted shake. Mindy was the type of woman who gave other women a bad name.

Jimmy was waiting for them when they arrived at the front doors to the hospital. As soon as they arrived back at the Daily Planet, Lois and Clark immediately went to Perry's office.

"So anyway," Lois told Perry once they had filled him in on the story, "since they'd seen Dr. Grant taking the container containing the heart from CostMart, they were able to get a search warrant."

"And did they find Baby Rage's body?" Perry asked.

"Minus one heart," Lois said. "Also, he was killed by slicing his throat. By the amount of blood they found at the scene, there is no way the Churches are going to be able to claim that he was already dead."

"If he was killed with a doctor right there, why didn't he just give him an injection or something?" Perry asked.

"Dr. Grant might have been concerned about giving him something that might affect his heart. Or... he refused to kill him and so one of the thugs killed Baby Rage and then Dr. Grant removed the heart. It's going to take some time to sort out Dr. Grant's culpability."

"What about the other escaped prisoners?"

"They picked up a few of them during the raid at CostMart," Clark said. "Including Sean Macarthy, the man who designed the bomb used to blow up Mayson Drake's car."

"But a lot of others are still out there somewhere," Lois added. "At least now the city can't keep this story buried. And, hopefully, they'll find information in Church's files that will help them locate the rest."

"And the men they picked up are spilling their guts about the Churches," Clark added. "Seems that now that Intergang can't promise an 'early release' program, they're all trying to save their own butts."

"They transferred Senior into a secure wing of the MGH and put him on the official transplant list," Lois said. "And Dr. Grant and Junior have been taken into custody."

"They also found the operations center for Intergang when they searched CostMart this time."

"That's because we told them they missed it last time," Lois added. "And apparently, they found more than enough evidence to prove that Church Senior is the head of Intergang."

"So Henderson doesn't think either Church has a hope of walking away from this one."

"Well, that's one hell of a story, kids. And to think you got it while those parasites outside were practically climbing all over you. Well done. By the way... I wanted to make sure that you knew something... No matter what happens with all this Superman nonsense, I don't want you two worrying about your jobs. As long as I work here, we'll find a way to keep you working."

Lois bit her lower lip, fighting off the emotions she was suddenly feeling. She felt Clark reach over to squeeze her hand.

"So..." Perry continued, somewhat gruffly. "What are you waiting for? Get out there and write up these stories because, the way I figure it, you've got three. The arrest of the Churches for murdering a man to steal his heart. The prisoner escapes from Strykers. Senior as the head of Intergang. We'll print the arrest story tomorrow and then go with the two follow up stories on

Monday. That should give the legitimate press something to think about — what really happened this week while they trailed around after the two of you."

Lois and Clark worked together to type up the stories. They were still needing one final piece of confirmation that the DNA on the heart matched Baby Rage — but since that part of story wouldn't be published until Monday, they had elicited a promise from Henderson that he would contact the weekend editor by Sunday night with confirmation. They then attached a note to that story that they were waiting for confirmation on that point.

Once they had finished, Lois sent the stories to Clark's computer so that he could use his special program to give them one last edit before sending them on to Perry.

As he tapped his way back to his desk, Lois leaned back in her chair and stretched. She watched him for a minute before her attention wandered over to the television playing softly in the background.

In Your Face with Barry Dunning was on. Lois shook her head. How was it that guy got enough viewers to warrant him having a daily show?

"So how long have you known Mayson Drake?" Dunning asked.

"Since we were cheerleaders together," a woman responded. *On the screen behind them, a picture of a cheerleading squad could be seen — two pictures circled. One was a much younger version of the woman being interviewed. The other was a much younger version of Mayson Drake.*

"We've stayed close over the years," the woman continued.

"So you've known about Ms. Drake's mental problems for... how long?"

"For years, the woman said. *I remember a time in high school when...*"

Lois' eyebrows rose as the woman continued talking. This was a change. It seemed she and Clark might no longer be the only ones under scrutiny. This could be... good. On the other hand, was this woman doing to Mayson what Claude had done to her?

"Lois."

Lois looked up to see Martha and Jonathan approaching. She immediately smiled, glad they were finally here. Rising from behind her desk, she met them half way, exchanging warm hugs with both Martha and Jonathan.

A soft whimpering broke up the reunion.

"So who are you?" Martha asked, taking in the short, furry one with a waggily tail who had risen from his sleeping spot next to Lois' desk to check out the newcomers.

Lois and Clark were still laughing as Lois pulled the Jeep up in front of her and Clark's apartment building. During the drive home, Martha and Jonathan filled them in on events in Smallville.

"Well, this isn't so bad," Martha said when there were only a few reporters hanging out in front of the building.

Almost as soon as she spoke, however, people flooded out of the structures in the park across the street and ran across the road, ignoring the traffic that was swerving to miss them. Horns blew and people shouted as the Jeep was suddenly lost in a crowd of people.

"Oh, my," Martha said.

"Welcome to our world," Lois said apologetically as she turned off the Jeep.

"Just keep pushing and they'll eventually let you pass," Clark added.

With those words, all four adults and one dog got out of the vehicle and began the slow, painful trek to the building.

When they had all reached the top step, Martha turned around and looked back at the assembled reporters, still snapping pictures and yelling questions.

She held up her hands to get their attention.

"What are you doing, Martha?" Lois asked.

"Trust her," Jonathan said.

When the reporters finally quieted down, Martha spoke. "I want to thank you all for such a lovely reception for Jonathan and me," she said. "We have to say that this is a lot more people than normally welcome us when we come to see our son."

A spattering of laughter was the response of the reporters.

"In a little while, I'll be sending Jonathan and Clark out for groceries. Now, I know you all are going to be tempted to follow them. After all, watching two men shopping for groceries is so inherently interesting. But if you do that, it will keep them from getting back with what we need to prepare supper in a timely manner. And when I have my cooking interrupted, I get very cranky. So if you can refrain from following them, I promise to provide you with a copy of the recipes of the items I intend to make for supper.

"And, yes, for all of you wondering," Martha continued, "I always make a homemade meal for my son at least once when I come to Metropolis. And now that's he's been lucky enough to have persuaded the woman he loves that she loves him, too, tonight is a very special celebration."

"And since her mile-high chocolate pie is to die for, I'd suggest you really want that recipe," Jonathan added.

More laughter followed his comment.

Without another word, the four of them entered the building.

"Do you really think that will work?" Lois asked.

"Can't hurt to try," Martha responded.

"Well, I can tell you this," Clark said. "Right now, they're debating it."

"Have you considered calling the police to get rid of them?" Jonathan asked.

"Our landlord, Mr. Tracewski, has tried calling the police a couple of times. They chase off the reporters only to have them begin gathering again as soon as the cops leave," Clark said.

"We did report a recent break-in to our apartment, however," Lois said. "Hopefully they take some more definitive action there."

Lois was glad Clark had gone on a shopping trip back when he first moved in. If he hadn't, there would certainly have been comments from the reporters out there if they found out that they needed to buy all the spices in Martha's recipes.

Still, there were a lot of things Martha needed. And since the roast chicken needed to cook for an hour and a half, the list had to be made and the guys sent shopping as quickly as possible.

Lois had to admit that the supper menu Martha had planned had her mouth watering. Roast chicken with onions, carrots and potatoes that were apparently to be cooked with the chicken. Steamed green beans, drizzled with warmed olive oil spiced with garlic and topped off with thinly sliced almonds. And a fresh garden salad.

So any serious discussions were put on hold as Lois helped Martha navigate her kitchen, introduced her to Clark's unique system of putting various numbers of elastic bands on items to assist him with identification and helped her prepare her list.

Soon enough, Jonathan, Clark and Shadow left for their shopping trip, leaving Martha and Lois alone in the apartment.

"Would you like a glass of wine, Martha?" Lois asked.

"I'd love one," Martha responded, following Lois back into the kitchen. "How you holding up?"

"It's been rough," Lois said as she removed a bottle of white wine from the fridge and sought out a cork screw to open it. She gestured to the windows. "Even things like having to keep the curtains closed to try to keep people from taking pictures through the windows make things difficult."

"I can believe that."

"And then... well, before all this started, Clark asked me to marry him."

"Oh, honey. Congratulations."

"No, you don't understand Martha..."

"You're not ready."

"I didn't think I was. I know I love him. I know he loves me. But are we really ready? After all, there are still so many questions that need to be answered."

"Like?"

"Children."

"Does the fact that Clark might not be able to have children make you reluctant to marry him? Because even though I've told Clark over the years that a farm is not a farm if there are no grandchildren coming to visit..."

"Do you say that about everything?" Lois asked, distracted from the topic by Martha's comment.

Martha smiled. "Only about the things I want. My most outrageous one was when I told Jonathan that a farm is not a farm without an artist's studio."

Lois sighed. "But that's just it, Martha. Scientific arguments develop inductively, meaning that by multiple observations of certain phenomena, variables are measured and causally linked to each other." Lois let out a breath.

"What I meant to say is that I know if children are possible, Clark will want them — no matter what he says now. Even you want grandchildren and I just don't know if I want children."

"Oh, honey. Is that what's bothering you? I might say things like that but I'd rather have you for my daughter-in-law than a dozen grandchildren. Lois, you are the best thing to ever happen to Clark. I've known you were the one for him from the first time he mentioned you."

Tears came to Lois' eyes.

"And I know Clark feels the same way," Martha continued. "There are lots of issues that you two will have to deal with if you get married. This is just one of them. The thing is that you don't have to have all the answers before getting married — you just have to have the tools for working through the issues that come up. Like open communication."

"Well, we're working on that. I just need to learn not to get angry and really talk to him. And not to let him go all noble on me. I guess it's... a work in progress."

"It always will be. The real question is... do you love him enough to promise him the rest of your life?"

Lois thought about that for a moment before a smile appeared on her face. "Yes, I do."

Lois was no longer the only one with tears in her eyes.

Leaning over, Martha couldn't resist giving the other woman a hug. It took a few minutes, and a few tissues, for both women to regain their composure.

"So was what you did downstairs... your attempt to negotiate with the press... the idea you wanted to discuss with us?" Lois asked.

"Oh, no. Jonathan and I had intended to discuss this with both you and Clark together, but I suppose it won't hurt to run this past you first. As you know, my latest art endeavor is what is known as laser sculpture which involves the use of holograms..."

Sunday

Billionaire Arrested For Allegedly Killing Man To Steal Heart

The Daily Planet

By Lois Lane and Clark Kent

Superman's Parents Arrive In Metropolis

The London Voice

By Jordan Alexander

Superman's Mom's Mile-High Chocolate Pie To Die For (Recipe Inside)

New York Daily Star — Sunday Supplement

Mayson Drake's Mental Problems?

The Daily Harold

By Carson Martin

Drake Stands By Story

The Metropolis Star

By Toby Raynes

Superman's Women Make Up After Fight

Dirt Digger

By Samantha Richards

As they arrived back at the apartment Sunday night, Clark reflected that overall, it had been a good day. After Martha's experiment with the reporters the previous day — giving them her supper recipes in exchange for a little privacy shopping — had worked, they had decided that they would just try ignoring the paparazzi for the day — with admittedly mixed results.

They had started the day with a little antique shopping in one of the quaint areas in the old city of Metropolis. Once the paparazzi had realized that no one would answer questions and that the Kent family wasn't going to try to outrun them, they calmed down, simply following them store to store, snapping pictures. It was annoying and prevented any serious conversation from taking place, but it wasn't unmanageable.

The crowds were quickly kicked out of any stores they decided to check out. Although the proprietors of such stores were more than pleased to have the paparazzi snapping pictures of 'Superman and family' entering their stores.

Clark's mom had managed to find a ceramic rooster that she declared would be perfect for her flowerbed. And Lois had picked up a pair of candlesticks. In fact, things had been going pretty well until Lois had spotted the day's copy of the *Dirt Digger*.

On the front was a picture of Lois and Martha that had been taken through a crack in the curtains of Lois and Clark's apartment of the two women hugging. Both had been outraged by the headline and completely false story that accompanied it.

Lois and Martha had both wanted to storm out and confront the press immediately and had only been held back by their more level-headed partners.

Lunch at The Roma Café had been nothing short of a disaster, however. Without thinking, they had chosen one of the outdoor tables, wanting to enjoy the fresh invigorating spring air, and had been pounded the entire time by questions, yelled over the small, decorative fence set up around the outdoor tables. Given that Lois and Martha were still fuming about the article, they had not been inclined to be charitable with the reporters.

During the afternoon, they had taken in a small theater production in an old theater located near the apartment. It hadn't been anything spectacular, but since the paparazzi hadn't been admitted, it had been quite enjoyable for all participants. Even Clark, who might not have enjoyed the performance as much as the others since he was inhibited by his lack of sight from appreciating a lot of the slapstick humor, had felt himself relax and was soon laughing as much at the sound of enjoyment in the voices of the people he loved as at the performance itself.

They'd ended their day on a high note at Callards for supper which, as always, was delicious. They still had to keep their conversation light and meaningless, realizing that they were a curiosity for the other patrons of the restaurant — and anything overheard would instantly be sold to the press. Still, Callards had been busy — something they had been counting on when they called and made reservations first thing in the morning. And the hostess at Callards, a woman known to both Lois and Clark, had been discrete, setting the foursome up at the table near the fireplace, giving them some measure of privacy. So the paparazzi who had chosen to follow them were stuck outside in their cars or taking pictures through the windows.

After dinner, they'd come straight home. They had some work to do before tomorrow.

Clark's father had called the Irigs and informed the small band that the paparazzi had not yet found their way back to Smallville. Still, it was only a matter of time before they did. Hopefully, by then, there would be no reason to do so.

"Does anyone mind if we just take a quick look to see what's going on in the world before we start?" Lois asked.

When no one objected, Lois turned the television on, switching quickly to LNN.

"...unknown if the small crowd demonstrating outside the D.A.'s office was because it is Sunday or if it's because this is not a popular movement," correspondent Linda Montoya said.

"So what do they say they're protesting about?" the anchor asked.

"As you can see by the signs..."

Clark suspected that she was gesturing to the signs the protesters were holding, but he couldn't exactly see them so he hoped the correspondent would continue.

"...they are demanding that Assistant District Attorney Mayson Drake be fired."

"Do they give a reason?"

"They feel that someone with her mental instability should not be working at such a responsible job. We caught up with Ms. Drake earlier today to ask for her reaction. However, she refused to comment."

"As crazy as this sounds," Lois said, "I'm almost starting to feel sorry for her."

"I am, too," Clark said. "The last couple of days, the paparazzi have been coming down just as hard on her as they have on us. And it isn't as if she was lying."

"So what do you want to do?" Lois asked. "Tell the world that she hasn't lost her mind — that she's right about you being Superman?"

"No, of course not. I just wish I knew this wasn't going to cause a backlash for her."

"It's her own fault," Martha said pragmatically. "It's too bad that she's under fire, but she was wrong to betray your friendship the way she did. She must have known how this was going to affect your life. Yet she went ahead with it anyway."

"Yeah, but..." Clark hesitated slightly. "...after tomorrow, if this plan of ours works, things are going to get really tough for her."

"It will pass, Clark," Lois said. "It might get a bit rocky for her for a while, but it will eventually blow over. If we don't do this... It will never be over for us."

Clark nodded. "You're right. I know that. I just... feel bad for her. No matter what happens, we have each other. She's all alone. Still... my primary obligation is to protect the three of you." A soft whimper coming from near his feet caused Clark to revise his comment. "The four of you. It's just unfortunate if she's the one this comes back on, but there's nothing I can do about that."

They were just about to turn off the television when the next story caught their attention.

"In a Daily Planet exclusive report that came out today, apparently both Bill Church Jr. and Bill Church Sr. were arrested yesterday when they killed a man in an attempt to steal his heart for a transplant operation for Bill Church Sr..."

"Now," Lois said in satisfaction, "this is what I call news!"

Monday

The demonstration in front of the D.A.'s office demanding that Mayson Drake be fired was quite a bit bigger the next day as the Kent family noticed when they drove past the building on their way to the Daily Planet. Once they arrived in the newsroom, the entire group went to see Perry. Lois and Clark left first, leaving the elder Kents to talk to Perry for a while longer. A short time later,

Martha and Jonathan, too, came out of Perry's office before disappearing into the elevator.

Lois went immediately to the photocopy room where she ran off copies of a brief statement before corraling Jimmy and asking him if he would mind taking them to the reporters out front. Jimmy glanced at the paper in front of him before looking back at Lois.

"Clark's going to give a press conference?" he asked.

Lois nodded. "We want this to end and hope we might be able to do that at a press conference."

Jimmy nodded and immediately took off to play his part in this morning's drama.

Perry came out of his office and signaled to Lois. She nodded and picked up her attaché case and then grabbed Clark as the two of them joined their boss in the conference room, Shadow trailing them in. As soon as the door was closed, Perry turned on the television.

"...District Attorney Clemmons has just issued a statement that Assistant District Attorney, Mayson Drake, has been put on administrative leave until further notice," Linda Montoya was saying into the cameras.

Clark cringed.

"When asked..." Montoya continued.

"I'm going to have to interrupt you, Linda," the anchor said. "Breaking news at the Daily Planet. We take you now to Jake Killian standing outside the Daily Planet."

"Thanks, Bob," Killian said. "Just a few moments ago, a junior staffer from the Daily Planet came out to give us notice that Clark Kent will be holding a press conference outside the Planet at eleven o'clock this morning.

"Even now you can see behind me workmen setting up a stage in front of the Daily Planet where I presume Mr. Kent will appear to address the crowd."

"Is there any indication whether Mr. Kent will confirm that he is Superman?"

"No word as of yet, although that is one of the options being speculated about among reporters here."

"Will he be taking questions?"

"Again, no word. But since his last statement to the press was given by simply stepping outside the Daily Planet, the announcement that a press conference will be given today leads us to believe that he has something more than a just brief statement planned for us."

"I hope you know what you're doing, son," Perry said, looking back at Clark.

"So do we, Perry," Clark responded.

Lois locked the conference room door when Perry left and then returned to the table, picking up her attaché case. Reaching in, she removed a small bag.

"Okay, let's have your hand," Lois said.

When he laid his hand on the table, she opened the bag and pulled out a few carefully prepared items. She'd practiced this a few times last night, under Martha's competent tutelage, but there was no more time for mistakes. This time she had to do it perfectly.

Lois sat down at her desk before getting up again. So much was riding on this press conference. If they blew this, no one would ever give up the idea that Clark was Superman.

She glanced at the clock. Ten fifteen. Why did time have to move so slowly?

Had she done the work to Clark's hand too early? Maybe it would have been better if she waited longer. Why hadn't she discussed time lines with Martha? But she'd wanted to give everything enough time to dry properly.

She looked over at Clark. He seemed to be calm as he sat at his desk reading this morning's copy of The Daily Planet in

Braille. Maybe she should try to find something to do, too. She pulled open her desk drawer, looking for something, anything to distract her.

Spotting her tape recorder, it occurred to her that she hadn't listened to the last tape from Bill Church Senior's hospital room. Not that it particularly mattered. After all, they already had the story. Still... It might help to pass the time.

She stuck the earphones in her ears and turned on the tape. Leaning back in her chair, she closed her eyes and began to listen.

A few minutes later, she sat upright in her chair, her attention completely captivated by what she heard coming over the earphones.

Clark reached over and picked up the phone on his desk.

"Clark Kent," he said into it.

"Hi, Kent. It's Dan Scardino here."

"Hi, Dan. How can I help you?"

"Actually, I'm hoping I can help you," Scardino said. "I did some checking around about that drug you and Lois were asking about — Nirvana."

"Does the DEA know something about it?"

"Actually, no. But it's just been approved by the FDA as a pain medication. Notification should go out in the next few days."

Clark sat up straighter in his chair. "Is there any way to delay that?"

"Why?"

"We have reason to believe it has mind-altering properties. Might make people susceptible to suggestion."

"I'm sure the FDA would have discovered that during their testing."

"Unless someone in the FDA got paid off."

There was a pause. "Where are you getting your information about the properties of Nirvana?"

"A Dr. Bernard Klein at Star Labs."

"Let me check into it — get back to you," Scardino said before hanging up the phone.

"Clark, there's something you need to hear," Lois said, coming over to Clark's desk.

His hand went to his watch, checking the time. "I guess we have a few minutes left. Can we do this here or should we go to the conference room?"

Once they were settled again in the conference room, Lois turned on the tape recorder.

"Hi, Bill."

Clark recognized Mayson's voice immediately. "She went to see Church the morning of his operation?"

Lois nodded.

"Hi, honey," Senior responded.

"Sorry I couldn't get here earlier."

"You came by the morning after I had the attack," Bill said.

"Even though you'd almost been killed yourself. I don't expect you to come by every day. Why don't you take a seat? You look tired."

"I am. The last few days have been tough."

"Are you having second thoughts about your decision to tell the world that Kent is Superman?"

"Maybe a bit."

There was a brief period of silence on the tape before Mayson sighed. "I know we talked it all out before I did it, but still..." Her voice trailed off.

"Are you getting a headache?"

Clark could almost see her rubbing the bridge of her nose, the way she always did when she was getting one of her headaches.

"Yeah."

"Well, I have some those pills that you say are so good for your migraines. They are over here on the bed stand. And there's some water. I haven't touched it. Why don't you take a pill? I'll wait."

Some scuffling and then the sound of water.

"These are the best thing I've ever found for treating my migraines. What are they called again?" Mayson finally asked.

"Nirvana."

Clark's eyebrows rose.

"Wait. It gets better," Lois said. On the tape there was a click, indicating that for a period of time Senior and Mayson had sat quietly together — allowing for the medication to take effect.

"Now... isn't that so much better?" Senior asked.

"It is. When are these going to be available on the market?"

"Any day now... So I'm told. Anyway, getting back to the Superman issue. We talked about this on the day you came to see me after my heart attack and we worked it through. Superman is a very dangerous vigilante. You are law enforcement. It is imperative that you stop him — no matter what you have to do. And given the way he treated you, deceived you into believing that there might be something more between you, you know he can't be trusted. You have to stay strong. It's the right thing to do."

"Thanks," Mayson said, sounding much more relaxed. "I knew you'd help me to see things more clearly."

"You know I think of you as a daughter. I'm only too glad to help."

"So you were right," Clark said as Lois turned off the tape recorder. "Bill Church really was behind this whole thing. But... Now I'm going to go out there and destroy Mayson's credibility when it really wasn't her fault. How do I reconcile that?"

"As soon as this is over, we'll write the story," Lois said.

"We'll make it clear that she was being manipulated by a criminal kingpin and blame the drug."

Clark nodded.

"One thing I don't understand, though," Clark said. "If Church could persuade her to reveal Superman's secret to the press, why did he feel he had to kill her to keep her quiet about Resurrection?"

"Well, Dr. Klein did say that the drug couldn't completely change a person's predisposition. And we know that Mayson never trusted Superman, and in particular, never trusted the fact that he was so cagy about who he was and where he lived..."

"...so convincing her to reveal Superman's secret wasn't exactly a hard sell. While convincing her to keep from reporting that people were using a drug to escape from prison went against her natural disposition," Clark completed for her.

"Exactly. Now... Let me take one final look at your hand."

She studied his hand for a moment before pronouncing him ready to go.

"It was nice of Perry to lend us his car to sneak out of the Daily Planet," Martha said as she and Jonathan worked to set up the equipment they'd brought to the roof of a building across the street.

"I still can't understand why he did it without asking any questions about why we needed to leave just before Clark was going to give a press conference," Jonathan said as he plugged the extension cord into an outlet just inside the door to the roof.

"Because he knows, honey."

"Knows? You mean he knows that Clark is Superman?"

Martha nodded as she bent down to line up the lasers. "Isn't it obvious? But he also doesn't want to know officially. That's why he didn't ask any questions. Sort of like the way we've often wondered if Wayne and Nellie know. Now... Did you find a plug in for the power?"

"Not out here. But there is an outlet just inside the door to the stairwell."

"Is the extension cord long enough?" Martha asked concerned.

"Should be."

"Good. Then plug it in. I want to be sure the telemetry is lined up before we start. We don't want to have any blips in the

hologram of Superman when he shows up."

Perry, Lois and Jimmy all accompanied Clark as he took the elevator down to the lobby of the Daily Planet. Shadow sat by his side, looking as tense as the humans.

"You coming out to watch the press conference, Chief?" Lois asked.

Perry nodded. "Want to be there to see the death of this craziness?"

Lois could only hope he was right. She went over things in her mind once again. She didn't think they'd left anything to chance. So... this really should go smoothly, right?

She felt Clark give her arm a squeeze, as if he'd picked up on her questions.

Clark stopped inside the Daily Planet doors and took a deep breath.

"You ready," Lois asked.

"As I'll ever be," Clark responded.

Taking that as permission, Lois pushed open the door and led him outside. When he'd given his last statement to the press, all he'd had to do was to step outside. This time he had to negotiate his way up onto the platform that had been set up — so she would go with him.

Reporters still yelled questions. Cameras still snapped endlessly. But this time the crowds parted, allowing them to pass as Lois, Clark and Shadow walked together to the dais, climbing the stairs carefully. Lois led him to the lectern, placing his hand on it so that he could know exactly where it was before stepping around him to take control of Shadow. Once she had the dog, she stepped back, but didn't leave the stage. They stood or fell together.

Mayson Drake hid beneath a ball cap, looking around at the large crowd that was gathered for Superman's press conference. She'd not slept at all in the past forty-eight hours. First, the arrest of Bill Church Senior had resulted in her being called in to D.A. Clemmon's office to explain her relationship with the man. Then, just when she thought she might have skated past that problem, the press had turned on her — accusing her of having mental problems just because she'd had the audacity to reveal that Clark Kent was Superman.

Between those two events, coming back to back, she'd been pulled into Clemmon's office again this morning, only to find herself collecting her personal items less than half an hour later and being escorted from the premises. Reporters had been as thick as flees on a dog's back as she'd made that humiliating walk to her rental car carrying a box containing her personal belongings. Their questions had been constant and relentless, only fading into the distance when she'd finally driven away.

And now... the press conference. Clark and Lois were definitely up to something — something that would make her position so much worse. But what? Another simple denial that he was Superman wouldn't work. It had to be something more. Something that, given what she knew about him, had to be fake. Some detail he and Lois had dug up about her past, maybe? Something that might discredit her even more? Still, wouldn't he be better off leaking such information to the press rather than dirtying his own hands with it?

She looked carefully around. The crowd was blocking off the street and police officers were directing traffic around it. Cameras were everywhere and in the air was a feeling of expectancy. Her eyes roamed the surrounding buildings, noticing the number of people watching through open windows. Her gaze continued to rise when she spotted movement on a roof across from the Daily Planet.

She squinted. Why did those people look so familiar?

She almost gasped when it hit her. Martha and Jonathan Kent.

Whatever Clark and Lois were up to, it had something to do with them.

Moving quickly, she slid along the side of the buildings until she came to the door of the appropriate building. Clark Kent was not going to be able to squirm out of this. Not with everything it had cost her. No bloody way.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Clark began, "almost a week ago now, Mayson Drake made the claim that I was Superman. Since that time, Lois and I have been hounded, lied about and judged.

"We've had people going through our garbage and breaking into our apartment. We've watched our friends get hassled and had our work compromised. I tried ignoring it. And I tried giving you a statement denying that I was Superman. Yet even after a colleague of mine wrote a story discrediting Ms. Drake's claims, the harassment has continued.

"So I've decided to put to end the speculation that I'm Superman once and for all."

Mayson Drake peeked through the crack in the door to the roof caused by an electric cord running out onto the roof. She could see Martha and Jonathan fiddling with some device and was about to step through the door to confront them when her eyes came to rest again on the electric cord. The cord was connected to the device they were working with.

Her eyes went from the cord to the door. The door locked from the inside.

A slow smile made its way across her face. This was easy.

Quickly pulling the electric cord out of the socket, she tossed it outside and pulled the door shut.

"We lost power," Martha gasped. "Check on it quick, Jonathan. We're on in a moment."

Mayson smiled before turning to jog back down the stairs. First problem solved. Now... stage two. Prove that Clark Kent is Superman.

Lois looked around at the crowd as Clark spoke. She could see that he had them all in the palm of his hands as they waited for this proof. She glanced up at the roof of the building across the street, her eyebrows furrowing when she couldn't see either Martha or Jonathan. Where were they? It was almost time for them to be on.

"As you all know," Clark said. "Superman's invulnerable. So..." Clark fumbled around in his pocket for a moment, finally withdrawing his jackknife. He opened it before hesitating slightly, being certain to have everyone's attention before he continued. Then he lifted his other hand and took a deep breath before making a small cut in his palm. He made sure to grimace slightly as he did it.

Blood pooled slowly on the palm of his hand which he then held up so that the people who were now gasping and whispering could get their photos.

He waited then, knowing that in a second his identity would no longer be in question. He waited for Superman himself to appear.

Lois glanced up at the roof across the street once again. Martha suddenly appeared, making a helpless gesture which Lois understood completely. She didn't know what had happened, but something had gone wrong with the hologram.

She quickly withdrew a piece of cloth from her pocket and stepped up next to Clark. She took Clark's hand and wrapped the cloth around it — an action she had intended to save for when the hologram of Superman appeared. As she tended to his 'wound,' she whispered under her breath. "Time to go."

She didn't dare say more for fear her words might be captured by the microphones. His eyebrows furrowed slightly, but he knew far better than to respond. He gave a small nod before turning back to the microphones.

"Now... Hopefully that puts to rest the question as to my identity. As I said before, my name is Clark Jerome Kent, not Superman."

Lois glanced around at the crowd again when something caught her attention. Mayson Drake was pushing her way through the crowd. She looked completely disheveled and totally focused on Clark.

What was she doing here?

Suddenly, something in Lois' gut began screaming at her. They had to get out of there. They had to get out of there now.

Before thought could find its way into action, she saw Mayson's hand reach into her pocket.

Lois glanced at Clark, realizing he had no idea that Mayson was even in the crowd.

A flash of light on metal brought Lois' eyes back to Mayson just in time to see Mayson raise a gun.

"No!" Lois yelled, realizing immediately what was happening. Mayson was planning to shoot Clark. When the bullet bounced off him, his identity would no longer be in doubt. She threw herself at Clark, pushing him away from the lectern. As they fell together onto the podium, she felt the burning pain that told her she'd been hit and then everything went dark.

Jimmy was probably in the best position to see what happened next. Shadow, after watching the two people he loved most in the world collapse to the dais, swept the crowd looking for danger. A second later, he was practically flying through the air towards Mayson just as Mayson pulled the trigger a second time.

He yelled before crashing into Mayson, knocking her off her feet. The gun went skidding away from her even as Shadow fell to the ground and stayed there, motionless.

Shadow's heroism seemed to snap the people around Mayson into action and they grabbed her even as police officers rushed through the crowd to take over. Seeing that Shadow was about to get trampled, Jimmy ran over, scooping up his limp body.

Lois' first conscious thought was of pain. Every movement sent shooting pain through her entire body. Her second thought was of Clark. He was calling to her, begging her to be okay.

She forced her eyes open a crack to see his tear streaked face above her as he cradled her in his arms, his hand pushing painfully against her shoulder. She reached up to remove the hand, thereby informing him that she was conscious.

"Lois," he breathed.

"Hurts," she whispered, pushing at his hand.

"You're bleeding," he said, not letting up on her shoulder.

She groaned softly, allowing her hand to fall back to her side. He was obviously trying to keep the bleeding under control. Still... it hurt, leaving her in a fog of pain.

"What happened?" she asked softly, having to force herself to focus.

"Mayson took a shot at me and you dived at me to stop her from hitting me."

Oh right. She remembered now. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He leaned over, softly kissing her forehead.

Oh right. She remembered that too. "Is Mayson..."

"She's in police custody. But... Lois, Shadow got shot."

"Shadow?" she asked, instantly struggling to move. The pain and Clark's hand held her back. "I've got to see him. Is he alive? I've got to know. Please."

"He's alive. But that's all I know. He attacked Mayson and took a second bullet."

"We have to get him help, Clark," she begged, tears of pain, grief and frustration flooding her eyes.

Paramedics suddenly appeared on the podium, pushing a stretcher. "Please, Mr. Kent. You need to move aside so we can help her."

"Her shoulder..." Clark said.

A paramedic knelt down next to Clark. "I've got it."

Clark's hand disappeared only to be replaced by pressure from whatever the paramedic was doing.

"Shadow," she breathed. "We've got to help Shadow."

"He's right here."

"Jimmy?" Lois asked as Jimmy scampered up beside her with the dog in his arms. "Is he..."

"He's alive. He's even awake."

"Bring him here."

"Miss, please," the paramedic said. "We can't help you with the dog here."

"Then don't help me. I've got to see Shadow."

"Lois?" Clark begged.

"I have to know that he's all right." Tears began to fall from her eyes even as she again struggled to rise.

The paramedic, finally realizing that the only way to keep her calm was to give in to her demand, motioned to Jimmy who carried Shadow over to her, his jacket wrapped around Shadow's body. Still, Lois let out a breath of relief when she realized that he'd been telling the truth. Shadow was awake, hardly moving, looking like hell, but awake. When Jimmy laid him down next to her, she finally relaxed as she felt Shadow lick her hand.

"Okay, now if you'll just take the dog so that we can get her ready for transport..." the paramedic began.

"No. No, you have to treat him, too. He's coming with us."

"Miss, we can't treat a dog."

"He's a hero. You can treat a hero, can't you?" she asked.

The paramedic looked at her hard for a moment before finally nodding.

Finally satisfied, Lois allowed herself to collapse back onto the ground so that her shoulder could be treated.

The shot they had given her helped reduce the pain, but it didn't take it away. They told her the bullet was still inside her and lodged up against a nerve. That was the reason she was experiencing so much pain. As a result, they moved her very carefully. Still, no matter how gentle they tried to be, the pain was intense every time she moved at all.

She refused to relax, however, until they loaded Shadow in next to her and she heard them radio the hospital to ask them to have a vet standing by when they arrived. She'd ignored the indignant response to the request when she realized that the paramedic had become Shadow's champion, insisting that the call be made. Shadow was the hero of the hour, after all.

"Hey, how you doing?" Clark asked, climbing in beside her.

"About ready to go out dancing," she responded, her voice slurring slightly on the words. "Where did you disappear to?"

"I asked Perry to check on my parents," he said softly.

She glanced over to where the paramedic was fastening everyone into their spots. "Are they... okay?" she asked cautiously, knowing she had to be very careful about what she said.

"Fine. I'll tell you about it later."

She sighed and then her attention was caught by a piece of medical equipment. "Is that an ophthalmoscope?"

"Well, I can't see what you're looking at but..."

"Over there," she said, taking his hand and pushing it towards the item. "Can you get it for me?"

"Lois, I don't think..."

"Has to be now." When Clark didn't move, she looked over at the medic, feeling a little desperate. "Can you give me your ophthalmoscope?" she asked the medic.

He'd learned his lesson and, instead of questioning her, handed her the requested item before stepping out of the ambulance. Not knowing how long he'd be gone, she quickly used her good hand to slip off Clark's glasses before shining the

ophthalmoscope into his eyes, studying them intently.

"Oh my god," she breathed softly as she lowered the instrument.

"What?" he asked, even as he returned his glasses to his face.

"I should have known," she said, even as her eyelids began to droop. "I wish we'd moved to the arctic and become Inuit." Her words were slurred.

"What?" he asked again.

"UV radiation damage to the corneal epithelium is cumulative, similar to the effects with dermal epithelium..." Her voice trailed off as the pain killers took full effect and her eyes drifted closed.

She felt a blanket being tucked tightly around her and then the faintest touch of Clark's lips on her forehead before she drifted off to sleep.

Tuesday

Lane's Actions Prove Kent Not Superman

The Metropolitan Star

By Toby Raynes

Identite de Superman: la declaration de Mayson Drake discreditee

The Paris Bulletin

By Bernard Duval

Clark Kent Is No Superman

The London Voice

By Jordan Alexander

Ending The Madness: Kent Proves He's Not Superman

The Daily Planet

By Eduardo Friez

Mayson Drake Secure In Metropolis Psychiatric Hospital

The New Metro Times

By Carson Martin

Dirt Digger Reporter Arrested For Breaking and Entering

The Daily Planet

By Robert Myerson

Super-Pooch Risks Life To Save Master

Urban Dogs Magazine

By Jack Russell

Clark's fingers ran across the page of one of the Braille newspapers Jimmy had brought him as he sat quietly next to Lois' bed, waiting for her to wake up from surgery. It had been a hard earned victory, but it seemed to be universally agreed that if Lois Lane would jump in front of Clark Kent to save him from being shot, he must not be Superman. After all, she would know the truth.

The fact that he hadn't been able to save her strengthened that claim. Everyone seemed to universally believe that he wouldn't have let Lois get shot if he was able to prevent it. They were right, of course, but no one seemed to have realized that since the bullet had moved faster than the speed of sound, he simply had not been able to react in time. And since Dr. Klein had not yet contacted him about having another GPS prototype ready for him to use, he hadn't been able to fly her immediately to the hospital which he might have been tempted to do if he'd still had the device.

Today's copy of the Dirt Digger had tried, of course, to perpetuate the idea that he was Superman — probably for the sake of their own pocketbooks — claiming that Superman should be tarred and feathered for protecting his own secret rather than saving Lois. But according to Perry, no one was even bothering to buy their magazine, causing their shareholders to howl about the waste of money. If there was one universal truth that the entire world seemed to share it was that, regardless of who Superman might be or what it might cost him, he would never willingly allow harm to come to Lois Lane.

Soft whimpering coming from the bed next to Lois caused Clark to put down his paper and carefully feel his way over to the next bed where Shadow was waking up.

He still couldn't quite believe a dog had been given a hospital bed. Part of it had been because of Lois' insistence that Shadow be treated. The rest... Urban Dogs Magazine had approached him the previous night as he'd been waiting with Perry and his folks for both Lois and Shadow to get out of surgery, offering to pay all of Shadow's medical bills if he would give them an interview about Shadow. Since he knew that Lois would want to see Shadow as soon as she woke up, he had made that part of the agreement. At that point, they had taken over negotiations with the hospital — although how exactly they'd managed it was a bit of a mystery to him. He suspected they had made the hospital a financial offer they just couldn't refuse.

"Hey, boy," Clark said softly when he reached the side of Shadow's bed. The small tail tap Shadow gave him was weak. "Don't worry. You're going to be fine. They had to remove part of your lung, so you might not be able to do the hundred yard dash in five seconds any more, but other than that, you're going to be fine."

"Who you talking to?"

Clark spun around. "Lois! You're awake!"

"Did you say something about them removing part of my lung?" she asked groggily.

"No, no. I was talking to Shadow."

"Is he here? Is he okay?"

Clark could tell by the sound of her voice that she was getting agitated. "He's right here," he quickly assured her.

"Let me see."

Hearing her struggling to raise herself, he rushed to the side of the bed to help her sit up. Once she was seated, she seemed to relax and he suspected it was because she could finally see Shadow for herself. "Hey, boy," she said softly. "They gave you a comfy bed too, I see."

The tail tap that met her words was even more enthusiastic than the one he'd given Clark less than a minute before. Clark smiled. Shadow might, technically, be his dog, but there was no doubting that he adored Lois. He couldn't fault the animal his taste in women.

"Do you think it might be possible to bring him over here?" Lois asked.

And it seemed Shadow's crush might not be totally unrequited.

"In bed with you?" Clark asked. "Should I be jealous?"

"Of course not. I just..." Her voice trailed off as she seemed to realize that he was kidding, informing him that she was still pretty out of it. It wasn't like her to miss that obvious a joke.

"I think we could probably do that," he said. "Let's just get you comfortable again first."

Once he'd helped her settle back down in bed, he turned his attention to Shadow. Extending his aura to give additional protection to the animal, he carefully lifted Shadow out of bed and moved him over next to Lois — knowing instantly that he'd done the right thing by the way both of their heartbeats seemed to respond positively to the move.

She reached up and tapped his ear.

"There are no bugs," he informed her.

She let out a breath, relaxing slightly.

"How you feeling?" he asked.

"Sore. Is there..."

"What?"

"Water," she finally completed. "Uhh... There's a jug over..." She began to move, trying to get the water.

"Let me," he said, rising from the side of her bed and feeling around on the night stand on the side she'd been reaching for. It only took him a moment to locate the water and another to fill the glass sitting next to it. "Lois," he said as he handed her the glass of water, "last night you looked into my eyes and you said you should have known. And then you went on about UV radiation and

Inuit and... well, I wondered if you remembered what you were trying to say."

For a long moment she was silent before very slowly saying... "I vaguely remember that, but..."

"If you don't remember, it's okay. I just thought maybe..." He couldn't quite keep the hopeful note out of his voice. Had she figured out what was wrong with his eyes... and more importantly, how to cure it?

"Just give me a minute," she said quickly before again falling silent.

He fought the urge to fidget as he waited, but it was hard. He was so close to figuring this thing out. He just knew it. But... what if she couldn't remember what she had known last night, when she had examined his eyes with adrenaline running through her system? The adrenaline had to have dissipated by now. So... would she be able to find the information again?

"Okay, I'm trying to recreate that moment in my mind," she said. "I can remember looking into your eyes with the ophthalmoscope and seeing..." Her voice trailed off. When she continued, there was an animation to her voice that had been lacking before. "You have damage to your cornea, conjunctive and retina.. Of course, I should have known. Leit blinded you with UV light. He said as much. Keratitis or... what is commonly known as snow blindness."

"Snow blindness? I have snow blindness?" Clark asked incredulously.

"Snow blindness is caused by UV rays reflecting off the snow and into a person's eyes over a period of time. It's actually much the same thing as what we've been telling people happened. Welder's flash is also caused by UV rays — only in that case it's more... a concentrated blast of UV light. Yours happened over time.

"Leit said he had used UV rays to initially blind you," Lois continued. "But it wasn't a permanent solution. That's why Leit and Munch came back the next day and shone the light into your eyes again. You needed more exposure if they were going to keep you blind because UV light damages the cornea and the surface of the cornea usually regenerates itself every twenty-four to forty-eight hours — unless there are complications."

"I've been blind a lot longer than that," Clark said skeptically.

"But that's because the way you were treating it was by staring up at the sun. Clark, you took up from where Leit left off — continuing to expose yourself to UV and blue light on a daily basis. The result was that not only did you continue damaging your cornea, but also did damage to your retina, keeping you blind. Most people would know that it was the wrong thing to do because of the pain it would have caused. But you don't have that advantage because..." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "...you don't feel pain."

"What?"

"It's like you have a sunburn on your cornea, conjunctive and retina."

"And I've been trying to treat sunburn with more sunlight?"

"Exactly."

"But... Sunlight has never bothered me before. And you said that when the device used to blind me was examined, it was discovered that Leit shortened the light waves. Your speculation was that that's why it affected me. But he couldn't shorten the sun's rays."

"He wouldn't have needed to. When you started staring up at the sun, your eyes were already vulnerable. So the sun affected your eyes the way they would any ordinary man."

"Okay, I can buy that. But I haven't been lying out in the sun nearly as much the past few weeks and there's still no improvement."

"You still get a lot of UV light in everyday life even without staring up into the sun. And you decided against a pair of glasses

that might have kept UV and blue light out of your eyes.”

“So what do I do?”

“The cure for Keratitis is the exact opposite of what you’ve been doing. It’s keeping all UV and blue light out of your eyes.”

“So what are you saying? That if I keep my eyes covered for twenty-four to forty-eight hours, I’ll be able to see again?”

Lois cringed. “Actually, it’s not exactly that easy. It would have been if we had figured this out when it first happened. But you’ve done a lot of damage since then. And the retina doesn’t regenerate the way the cornea does.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“Treatment of Keratitis consists mainly of keeping the eye closed with patches, after instilling a few drops of ophthalmic antibiotic solution. Vision usually returns in about 18 hours. But given the length of time you’ve been exposing yourself to UV rays and blue light, and given the damage to your retina, I’m going to suggest you keep your eyes covered for a couple weeks. Allow your remarkable physiology time to work its magic. If that doesn’t work, we can talk about other options then. If you were anyone other than who you are, I doubt time would do any good at this point. But given that you’re... well, super, I think that has to be our first option.”

Clark nodded slowly as he processed this information.

“Did that make sense?” Lois finally asked.

“Yes,” he said, before turning his attention to Lois. “You did it. You found the Faraday information in your mind without the help of adrenaline.”

“Yes, I did, didn’t I,” she responded and he could hear the smile in her voice. “And now that I know where to look... I think I could do it again if I needed to.”

“Okay, so... I’ll put patches over my eyes and give it a try.”

“What are you going to do about shaving?”

Clark shrugged. “I figure I can get away with growing a beard for a couple of weeks at least.”

“Have you had a chance yet to write up the story about Mayson Drake being drugged and brainwashed by Church?” she asked.

“Not yet. But I plan to go into the Daily Planet this afternoon and do that — well, assuming that you’ll trust me to tell the story right,” he added with a grin.

She gave him a swat in response.

“Now I want to know how you managed that, Lane.”

Lois looked up from the paper she was reading when she heard Henderson’s question coming from the doorway. Her gaze followed his to where Shadow was resting comfortably on the foot of her bed. She smiled.

“I don’t exactly know,” she admitted. “I was unconscious while most of it was going on. But...” She rustled around on the night stand next to her bed, pulling out her copy of Urban Dog Magazine. This one was definitely a keeper. “...apparently it has something to do with this magazine.”

Henderson might have smiled if he actually knew how.

“Super-Pooch, huh?” Still, there was definite amusement in his voice.

“Yeah, well, I owe him a lot. If he hadn’t taken that second bullet...” She glanced back at Shadow and smiled again.

“That’s what I want to talk to you about,” Henderson said.

“May I?” He gestured to the chair Clark had been sitting in earlier. She nodded and he took a seat.

“I’m actually here to get your statement.”

“What? You not here to visit the invalid?”

“You? An invalid? Not likely,” Henderson snorted. “Besides, I don’t really care how you’re doing.” He shrugged his shoulders dismissively.

Lois smiled. “That beautiful bouquet you sent says otherwise,” she said, gesturing to one of the bouquets of flowers filling her

room.

“Someone sent you flowers and said they were from me? When I find out who is trying to make me look human, he’s going to pay.”

Lois laughed and then instantly grimaced. “Don’t make me laugh, Henderson.”

“Far be it from me to want to amuse you, Lane.”

“So then... since we’ve established that you aren’t here about my health... or for my amusement... You said something about taking my statement?”

Henderson nodded. “The D.A.’s office is currently drawing up attempted murder charges against Mayson Drake so I need...”

“No.”

“What?”

“No. I’m not giving you a statement if you plan to charge Mayson with attempted murder.”

“How can you say that? I mean, from what I’ve seen, you don’t even like her.”

“She’s not guilty, Henderson. She shouldn’t be charged for this. It’s not her fault.” Lois let out a breath. “Okay, so maybe Mayson has never been my favorite person. And, yes, she did cause us a lot of grief. But she wasn’t acting on her own initiative. She was drugged and then manipulated by Bill Church into doing what she did.”

Henderson’s eyebrows rose skeptically.

“You can read all about it in the Daily Planet tomorrow.

Clark’s over there right now writing up the story.” When he just waited patiently, she finally caved, telling him what she and Clark had discovered.

“She still fired a gun in a crowd of people. She could have killed you,” Henderson said when she had finished.

She cocked her head to the side and studied him, wondering if there was any reason that, in spite of the fact that he had helped them by telling Eduardo that Superman wasn’t blind, he hadn’t said anything about Mayson possibly killing Clark. But he continued talking, leaving her wondering what he might really know about Superman.

“Besides, Clemmons is determined to make an example of Mayson — to show that the D.A.’s office is not going to go easy on her just because she worked for them.”

“Clemmons is a jerk. Tell him if he does this, I intend to offer myself as a witness for the defense.”

Henderson was just leaving when Martha stuck her head in the doorway. “You up for some more company or do you need a nap? I could always go down to the cafeteria for some coffee and come back later.”

Lois crinkled her nose. “They brought me some hospital coffee earlier today and trust me when I say you don’t want any. You might as well be drinking dirty water. Come on in, Martha. I’m not feeling too tired. And with this morphine drip, I’m not even in much pain. On the other hand, don’t expect me to be really stimulating company.”

“I’ll take you however you are.” Martha came in and shut the door before settling into the chair Henderson had just vacated. “I’m sorry about the hologram.” She mouthed the final word, just in case of listening devices.

“Don’t worry, Martha. There aren’t any listening devices,”

Lois said. “Clark checked the place out this morning and I’ve been awake and in the room since he left. But to get back to the topic, what exactly happened with you two?”

“I’m not entirely sure. But looking back, I’d guess that Mayson spotted us on the roof because someone unplugged the device and closed the door to the roof. Since we couldn’t get back in, I’m glad Clark asked Perry to come up and check on us before you two took off for the hospital. Anyway, I’m sorry it didn’t work.”

"I'm not sorry. It wasn't the way we wanted things to go down, but it seems to have worked out." She gestured to the papers covering her bed.

"Well, I can tell you that the paparazzi hanging out in front of your apartment building have packed up and left. Jonathan and I went over to the park across the street this afternoon with some garbage bags and cleaned up a bit."

"Thank you, Martha."

"Well, it didn't take too long. When your neighbors spotted us out there, they came and helped. It became a bit of a celebration. The end of the paparazzi. I had a really nice chat with one of your neighbors. Michelle something."

"Michelle Sitkowitz?"

"That's her."

"Yeah, she wasn't exactly happy with us when the paps were climbing all over the place."

"She feels really bad about that. She wanted me to tell you."

"I sort of got that feeling when her flower bouquet arrived."

Lois gestured to a small, but very pretty bouquet of yellow flowers. By the way, I wanted to ask you something."

"What?"

"Where did you learn about blood packs and liquid latex?" Lois asked. "I mean, having Clark cut the palm of his hand was inspired."

"A few years ago, we formed a small theater group in Smallville. I was in charge of costumes and makeup." Martha shrugged. "I figured we needed some pretext for the press conference. Some reason he might have called it without knowing that Superman was about to crash the party."

"Well, it worked. Even without the hologram."

"I think you taking a bullet instead of letting Clark be hit had something to do with that. Although, I think Clark would much rather have the whole world know that he's Superman..." Even though they were alone, she mouthed the final word. "...than have you get hurt."

"Yeah, well... I just sort of reacted when I saw the gun. Anyway, it all turned out all right. By the way, did Clark go to the apartment when he left here earlier?"

"Uhh... yeah."

Lois noticed that Martha sounded somewhat guarded. "What?"

"Nothing. Uhh... yeah, he came by to get changed before going into the Daily Planet. Apparently, he hasn't gotten around to replacing the spare suit he keeps at the Planet."

"Did he seem... distracted to you?"

"What? No. Not at all. What would make you think that?"

Lois' forehead furrowed. "Martha, what aren't you telling me? Is Clark upset with me about getting shot or something?"

"No, of course not. Nothing like that."

"Then what is it like?"

Martha bit her lower lip for a moment before speaking. "Okay, look. I'm messing this up big time. Please... Can you just forget I said anything?"

Lois studied her for a moment more. Martha looked so uncomfortable that Lois couldn't make herself go in for the kill. Or maybe it was the morphine. Letting out a breath, she nodded.

Lois was dozing when the door to the hospital room opened and Clark quietly slipped in carrying an arrangement of red roses. Lois immediately rolled over and smiled as she watched him. He now had eye patches on, his sunglasses holding them securely in place.

"Hey, you're awake," Clark said, carefully feeling his way over to the long ledge on the side of the room. He went to set the flowers down when he realized that the spot was full. He carefully made his way down the ledge, feeling arrangement after arrangement until he finally found a free spot to place the flowers.

"They're beautiful, Clark," she said.

"I hope so. I had to trust the guy who sold them to me that they were okay. But it looks like you got a lot of arrangements while I was at work."

"Yeah. I never knew I had so many friends." She patted the bed next to her.

He heard the soft sound and obviously understood its meaning because he slowly tapped his way over to the bed and took a seat where she had indicated. Shadow groggily woke as the side of the bed depressed and inched his way over so that he could place his head on Clark's knee. Clark immediately scratched his head.

Lois smiled. "I love having my family all together like this," she said softly.

Clark bit his lip.

"What?" she asked, suddenly thinking about how uncomfortable Martha had been earlier in the day.

"It's just... Well, we might have to give him up."

"What? Who? Shadow?"

"Lois, if you're right and I get my eyesight back, we'll have to give Shadow back."

"What? Why?"

"He's a working dog, Lois. A lot of time and money has gone into training him. He'll have to leave us to go help someone else."

"But..." Lois couldn't find the words to complete her thought. She wanted Clark to get his eyesight back — that went without saying — but Shadow had become such a big part of her little family. She felt tears come to her eyes.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I just... I guess I hadn't thought of that." Lois pushed the sad thought out of her mind. Shadow was still with them. She would enjoy him for however long they had him. And who was to say they couldn't be granted visiting privileges afterwards? "So... your mom was here earlier," she said, deliberately changing the subject.

"She said she was going to come here when I left her earlier," Clark responded.

"She was acting... strange."

"Strange how?" Clark asked, suddenly sounding as wary as his mother had.

"Are you mad at me?"

"What? No. What would ever give you that idea?"

"Just from the things she said. And now... the way you went all... strange on me when I told you about it. You're mad at me, aren't you. You know, for getting shot."

"No, Lois. Never. I mean... I sort of wish you hadn't jumped out in front of a bullet, but..."

"See. I knew it. You are mad at me."

"No, really. I'm not."

"You don't have to worry about me going into remission or anything just because you tell me you're mad at me. I can take it, Clark. What I can't take is not knowing. Wondering when the axe is going to fall. Just tell me that you're mad at me."

"But I'm not mad at you."

"Then why was your mother so cagey? Why was she acting as if there was some big secret that she didn't want me to know about? Don't protect me. Just tell me the truth. What was it that Martha didn't want me to know?"

"That she gave me Grandma's engagement ring," Clark said, silencing her completely. He let out a breath. "Not exactly how I planned to tell you that."

"Your Grandma's engagement ring?" she asked in a small voice.

Clark nodded. "It's sort of a family heirloom. Anyway, Mom brought it with her from Kansas because... Well, she thought I might want it."

"She gave you your Grandma's engagement ring?" she asked again, still sounding a little frazzled.

"Yes," Clark said softly. "And since the secret is already out..." He reached into his pocket and removed a small velvet box. "And I guess it can't hurt that you're drugged up on morphine," he added, smiling nervously.

She reached over and stroked his cheek gently, giving him the courage to continue.

"Lois, with everything that happened this past week, I realized something. That we make a great team. Together... we're stronger than either of us is alone. I've always known that, really. But this week really drove the point home. I tried to push you away. But you were right. We belong together and as long as we face whatever comes in the future together, we'll get through it." He took a deep breath.

"Lois, none of us know how much time we have. But there is one thing I know without a shadow of a doubt..." He opened the box. "... whatever comes, whatever time we have left, I want to spend it with you. I love you, Lois Lane. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"If you aren't ready yet," he quickly continued, "I understand. And I'm not trying to pressure you to..."

Once again his voice was cut off by fingers coming to rest against his lips and a forehead coming to rest against his. She took a deep breath. Like him, if she'd learned one thing over the past week, it was that although there would always have challenges to face... they would always triumph if they tackled them together.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Yes?"

"Yes. Oh, god, yes. I want nothing more than to marry you," she added, reaching up and burying her good hand in his hair so that she could pull his head to hers. His lips met hers as they sealed the promise of forever.

When they finally broke apart long enough for him to slip the ring onto her finger, she couldn't even see it due to the unshed tears that were clouding her vision.

Epilogue

Two Weeks Later

Lois, Clark and Shadow waited patiently just outside the courtroom as other members of the press bustled past them on the way to file their stories. But since this was still Eduardo's story, they were in no rush to leave.

A couple minutes later, the doors to the courtroom opened again. Mayson Drake stepped through with a short, African American woman wearing an expensive business suit. Mayson caught sight of Lois and Clark and gave a brief nod. She turned back to the woman walking beside her. The two of them chatted for a moment more before shaking hands. As the other woman walked off, Mayson approached Lois and Clark.

"I don't know how to thank you," Mayson said.

"I wish we could have done more," Lois responded.

"Considering the fact that Nirvana couldn't make someone do something that was totally against their nature, I'm amazed that I was only charged with reckless discharge of a gun," Mayson said. "When I heard the charge, I couldn't plead guilty fast enough — before the D.A. changed his mind. And then to walk away from the whole thing with only probation... Angela Winters..." She gestured in the direction the other woman had gone. "...my lawyer tells me that the D.A.'s office only agreed to probation after you practically threatened them."

"You didn't think you were being reckless," Lois objected. "You expected..." Here she lowered her voice to a whisper. "... Superman to catch the bullet."

Mayson smiled. "Lois, I didn't even think about what would happen to the bullet. They were right. I deserved what I got — probably more — especially after everything I put the two of you through. So... thank you."

"Can I ask you something?" Lois asked.

"I guess so," Mayson replied somewhat cautiously.

"How long had you been taking Nirvana?"

Mayson's expression instantly lightened — probably relieved that Lois hadn't asked something about her feelings for Clark. "Since... Well, it would have been before we met."

"And were you always with Bill Church when you took a pill?"

Mayson nodded. "Since they weren't yet approved by the FDA, Bill said he didn't feel comfortable letting me keep them. But he told me to give him a call whenever I felt a migraine coming on." She let out a breath. "I'd always been a little anxious about someone with superpowers flying around Metropolis, and Bill knew that, but it wasn't until I started taking those pills and Bill started really playing up the fact that Superman was a vigilante that I became... well, hostile, I guess, towards him. Knowing what I know now, I suspect he wanted someone in law enforcement who was a potential ally against Superman."

"So are you saying you're no longer leery of Superman?" Clark asked.

"I wouldn't exactly go that far, but how much of that is because of the drug and brainwashing? What it comes down to is that now that I realize that my perception of Superman was manipulated by Bill, I'm not quite so convinced that Superman's the danger I thought he was. And probably even less so now that I know..." She glanced around cautiously and lowered her voice. "...who is actually wearing the suit."

"So what's next for you? Are you going to be returning to the D.A.'s office?" Clark asked.

Mayson shook her head. "I just pled guilty to a criminal offence. I expect to lose my license to practice law any day now."

"Oh, Mayson, I'm so sorry," Lois said.

"Don't be. I've already got a new job."

"Really? Where?"

"I got a call from someone named Charles Carmichael in Los Angeles. He offered me what sounds like an investigator's job with a company called Carmichael Industries. He said that his entire company is made up of... well, wacky misfits, so I should fit right in. From the job description, it sounds like exciting work. Besides, after everything that's happened, I think a change of scenery will do me good."

"So everything worked out for the best?" Clark suggested cautiously.

She smiled wryly at Clark. "Well... I am sorry for all the problems I caused you. I can't know how things might have been different if not for the drug, but I really don't think I would have gone public with what I knew if I hadn't been taking Nirvana."

"I know you wouldn't have," Clark said.

"So what's next for you two? I think I heard something about you getting married?"

"Yeah," Lois said, glancing over at Clark. "Today in fact."

"What?"

"Originally, we were going to get married this morning, but we wanted to be here just in case Clemmons tried to pull a fast one," Lois explained.

"So I ruined your wedding?"

"Not at all, Mayson. We just delayed it for a few hours," Clark said.

"Well, once again. Thank you so much," Mayson said. She stepped towards Clark, before glancing at Lois. When Lois gave a nod, Mayson gave Clark a kiss on his furry cheek. Then she turned to Lois.

They looked at each other awkwardly for a moment before Lois said, "What the hell." She stepped forward and gave Mayson a hug. She was surprised by the strength of the hug Mayson gave her in return.

"You're welcome to come to our wedding if you want," Lois said. "It's only a small group of friends and family."

Mayson laughed. "I think that might be one step too far."
Lois nodded knowingly. If their positions were reversed, it would be more than one step too far for her as well.

"Oh," Mayson said. "One thing I should probably tell you. I gave a final statement about the whole incident to Toby Raynes."

"What sort of statement?" Clark asked, somewhat nervously.

Mayson actually laughed and then glanced around before speaking. "Don't worry. I lied through my teeth," she whispered. "Said that I always knew you weren't Superman, but because of Bill's brainwashing, I made the claim because Bill convinced me that it was a way to discredit Superman — you know, because no one would trust Superman if they thought he was hiding his real identity. And because you look a little bit like Superman and had gone to Kansas at the same time that Superman disappeared, you were the obvious choice."

"When she asked why I shot at Clark if I knew he wasn't invulnerable, I told her I was so drugged up that I actually started to believe my own lie. Hopefully it will help put an end to anyone else out there that might still have doubts because of my earlier interview with the Star. And I didn't give my interview to the Planet because I thought it might be more persuasive coming from another paper."

"Thank you, Mayson," Clark responded, touched that she would have thought to do that for him.

"It sounds as if Mayson is doing better than I would have expected," Clark said as he descended the steps to the courthouse. Lois on one side of him. Shadow on the other.

"I'm glad. She didn't deserve what happened to her. I hope her new job turns out to be everything she hopes it is."

Clark nodded. "Oh, right. I almost forgot. Talking about things working out well... I've got a wedding present for you." He stopped them, turning her towards him on the sidewalk at the foot of the courthouse steps.

"What?"

"I went down to the Metropolis Center for the Blind yesterday. Lois, even if I get my eyesight back, we're going to be able to keep Shadow."

"What?" Lois gasped in surprise. They still didn't know if Clark's eyesight would return since they hadn't removed the patches from his eyes, wanting to be sure to give them time to heal. But still... "Why?"

"Apparently, they're concerned, with everything that has happened, that he might not be a suitable guide dog anymore."

Lois instantly bristled. "He's the best guide dog in the world! How dare they say he might not be a suitable guide dog? He went above and beyond in the call of duty. Is this because he was injured and can't run as fast anymore, because if it is... If they are discriminating against him because he has a disability, I'm going to write..."

"Lois!" When she fell silent, Clark continued. "It's not because he was injured. It's because a guide dog has a very narrow set of parameters. And apparently, attacking the bad guy isn't one of them. They might have continued to employ him if it had just been the incident in front of the Daily Planet, but when I informed them about his encounter with the two thugs when I was undercover in cardboard city and his reaction when you were attacked by Leit and how he kept the paparazzi back... Well, they said that given all that, they wouldn't feel comfortable giving him to someone else."

Lois narrowed her eyes at him. "And tell me something... What made you decide to tell them all about those other incidents?"

"I felt ethically bound to do so," Clark said, sounding a little too innocent.

A slow smile made its way across Lois' face. "You did, huh? And I don't suppose you knew that by telling them this they might

have serious second thoughts about giving him to someone else."

"I might have read something about that," Clark admitted. "That's why I felt such an ethical obligation to inform them."

"Right." She looked down at Shadow who instantly wagged his tail. "Don't let him fool you with that Boy Scout act of his, Shadow. Underneath that mild manner pretense and those wild ties, he's a sneaky one."

Clark laughed.

"So... no matter what happens, he's ours?"

"He's ours."

That earned him the desired reward — a slow, meaningful kiss.

"But... is it really fair of us to have a dog?" Lois asked, suddenly wondering if they were being fair to Shadow. "Given the hours we work. If you aren't blind, it's not as if we're going to be able to take him with us everywhere."

"Maybe not. But I talked to Perry and he said Shadow will always be more than welcome at the Daily Planet, that we can bring him to work every day if we want. In fact, he feels Shadow might be an asset — keep you from getting in quite as much trouble. Shadow will still have a job — just not quite the one he was originally trained for."

"What about Mr. Tracewski? My landlord. He only allowed Shadow to move in because he's a guild dog."

"I spoke to Mr. Tracewski. Apparently, he was quite impressed by the way Shadow saved our lives. So he told me that even if I do regain my eyesight, he will look the other way — just this once. And since we have our own vehicle..."

"You mean, I have a vehicle," Lois said, bumping his hip playfully as they resumed their trip to her Jeep.

"Hey, if he's *our* dog, then this is *our* vehicle," he said as they stopped next to the Jeep.

She laughed. "Touché."

"So... since we have *our* own vehicle," he repeated, "it's not as if we have to worry about taking him in taxis and if I ever need to take him back to the apartment... Well, if I get my eyesight back, I will be able to do that fairly quickly now that paparazzi aren't following my every move. And if we go on a holiday or something, Mom and Dad said we can take him to the farm so that he can chase rabbits and dig holes in Mom's flowerbeds."

Lois crouched down and scratched Shadow's head before tugging softly on the tips of his ears. "So what do you think, Shadow? You want to be *our* dog?"

Shadow's lips instantly turned up in a smile.

As Lois, Clark and Shadow climbed into the Jeep, Clark changed the subject. "Oh, and I've got some other good news."

"Well, I'm always up for good news," Lois said as she turned the key.

"I spoke to Perry this morning and he tells me that he went down to the Metropolis Psychiatric Hospital yesterday and Steven Baker was well enough that they were actually able to swap some stories about Vietnam."

"So they are making progress with Leit's victims?"

Clark nodded. "Now that they are using an adrenaline catalyst, they feel that in time, they will be able to help the men fully recover. How are your Faraday leaks doing, by the way? I don't think I've heard you have a leak in quite some time."

"Ever since I've been learning to access the information on my own, it doesn't tend to leak out of me. Who knows? I might even get through our entire wedding ceremony without some incomprehensible leak about the atomic weight of plutonium," she said with a smile.

"Well, just so you know," Clark responded. "If the preacher asks you if you take this man and you respond with the atomic weight of plutonium, I'm going to take that as a yes."

Lois immediately leaned over for one final kiss before pulling the Jeep into the road, loving this man who loved her, quirks and

all.

Lois fiddled nervously with her engagement ring as her mother put the finishing touches on her wedding dress. Since they had rushed the timetable for this wedding, it was a simple affair — organized almost completely by Martha and Ellen while Lois had recovered in hospital. And in truth, a simple affair was absolutely what Lois had wanted. Give Ellen Lane too much time and she would have turned this into a society affair. As it was, Martha had needed, on many occasions, to veto some of her more over-the-top ideas.

A small chapel had been found and a young minister had been hired. Their reception would take place in the hall attached to the chapel. Approximately thirty people and one dog would be in attendance. Yes, Lois was completely content with the arrangements.

“You about ready?” Perry asked from the doorway. “Cause we got a young man out here who is about to go into panic mode if his bride doesn’t show up soon.”

Lois smiled — thinking about Clark always seemed to have that effect on her these days.

Her father had been unable to attend, so Perry would be walking her down the aisle.

“Done,” Ellen Lane announced, giving Lois a quick kiss on the cheek before wiping away the lipstick. “I’ll see you in there,” Ellen said before quickly scooting away.

Lois turned back to Perry when Ellen disappeared through the closed doors.

“Thanks so much for doing this, Perry,” Lois said.

“Oh, hell, honey. I’m just thrilled to be asked. Now... you don’t need me to give you the lecture about the birds and the bees do you?”

Lois laughed. “I think I’ve got that one covered,” she said.

“Oh, good. Then just let me give you a quote from the king. ‘You only pass through this life once; you don’t come back for an encore.’ I don’t think I’ve ever known anyone to live that quote better than the two of you. So continue to live every day to the fullest. Embrace love. And no matter what happens, hold on to each other.”

Lois hugged him, tears in her eyes.

“Now...” he said, clearing his throat suspiciously, “let’s go find that super guy of yours.”

Clark stood at the front of the church fiddling nervously. At his side were his two best men. Jimmy and Shadow. Of course, he’d never told Jimmy that he was sharing the duties, but it had been a running joke between Lois and Clark for the past week.

“You got the rings?” he asked, turning towards Jimmy.

“Just like I did the last time you asked, C.K.”

“Right. Right. Sorry.”

The door opened and his heart leapt into his throat when the most beautiful creature he’d ever seen stepped through. He met her eyes and saw her face transform — from expectation, to shock, to realization and then to total joy.

“You can see,” he heard her whisper.

He gave a small nod. His folks had helped him remove his eye patches when they had arrived at the church. He had wanted his first image, assuming his sight had returned, to be of Lois walking down the aisle. That hadn’t been quite possible, but this was close enough. But even if he hadn’t been able to see, he’d wanted to shave before his wedding and he couldn’t do that while his eyes were covered with patches.

In the hope that he’d be able to use them, he’d brought his old glasses along. He wanted to wear them for the ceremony, but then planned to switch to a dark pair of glasses that he’d picked up at the Metropolis Center for the Blind, that would keep all UV and blue light out, until he was certain his eyes were fully healed.

That meant it would still be some time before Superman could return to the skies of Metropolis. And they would have to choose their time for Superman’s reappearance carefully. But with him and Lois working together, he had no doubt that they would work it out.

But for this moment, Superman was the last thing he wanted to think about. This was about him and Lois. And for now, he didn’t want anything to obstruct his vision. He wanted to experience this moment in time for everything it was worth.

Lois’ eyes never left his as she walked down the aisle, missing the woman Henderson had brought as his date, missing the bow tie Shadow was wearing, missing the teary smile on the face of his mother, missing everything but him.

When she finally arrived at the front of the church and Perry had surrendered her to him, he looked deeply into her eyes. “You are, without a doubt, the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

If possible, her smile widened even further.

“So... you ready to do this? Ready to walk into the future with me?” he asked.

“All my life,” she responded.

THE END

“Life has taught us that love does not consist in gazing at each other but in looking together in the same direction.” — Antoine de Saint-Exupery

END NOTES:

Sources for Lois’ various Faraday leaks (Since I don’t understand most of them, I’ve generally had to copy them word for word from scientific sites):

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<http://www.fisicx.com/quickreference/science/glossary.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic_weight

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<http://www.glaucoma-eye-info.com/ultraviolet-keratitis.html>

<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=science>

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http://www.wikihow.com/Make_Gunpowder

Some of the sources I used for information about UV and Blue Light (although there were others I read, too. Unfortunately, I can no longer remember the sites for most of the sources I consulted on this topic.)

<http://www.elvex.com/facts11.htm>

http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/799025_overview

http://www.glaucoma_eye_info.com/ultraviolet_keratitis.html