

Lethal Qualities

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Rated PG

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Summary: Following his encounter with red Kryptonite in the episode “Lethal Weapon,” Clark struggles with his sense of guilt, Lois blames Metropolis for the green Kryptonite bullet, and Intergang mounts their own deadly assault.

Dialogue and plot points are taken from “Lethal Weapon,” written by Grant Rosenberg. No copyright infringement is intended.

Chapter 1: Guilt

Guilt ate at Clark, tore at his insides, twisted and writhed within him, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. It had grown so large that breathing had become a feat worthy of Superman’s strength. It colored everything he looked at with the sickly hues of self-reproach, the terrible shades of utter self-loathing, the painful tints of helplessness.

No matter how large the guilt loomed, however, Clark couldn’t let Lois know how decimated he felt. He had already hurt her enough.

“So,” he said in a cheerful tone that he dredged up from memories of how it had been before he had betrayed her. “You want to go back home and finish our little poker game?”

“Oh? Okay.” Lois smiled as she preceded him into the elevator. “But you don’t stand a chance.”

“You’re probably right,” Clark said even as he studied her closely, looking for any sign of pain in her expression or stiffness in her movements or stiltedness to her gestures. Then, because he couldn’t quite help himself — because his guilt and fear were destroying him from the inside out — he tipped his glasses down and x-rayed Lois’s body, terrified he would find more bruises shaped by the curve of his hand.

He found only one — the mark of his guilt.

Unfortunately, Lois caught him looking. “Excuse me!” she exclaimed, biting back her grin. “What did you just do?”

Clark took a deep breath — and lied. “Well, you were such a good poker player, I figured that might be as close to a win as I get tonight.”

Lois playfully responded, but Clark hardly caught the words. His mind was trapped between relief that he had found no more bruises and horror that he had to look at all. But if he had hurt her, he should *know!*

And now he and Lois were headed home. Home where she would, Clark knew, expect them to sleep in the same bed...expect them to touch. And before they got there, he had to know if he had hurt her again; he had to know if she was afraid of him. Because if she was — even the slightest bit — he wouldn’t stay, wouldn’t force her to share quarters with a man who so blithely, easily, and thoughtlessly had hurt her.

So he laughed at her remark, and he flirtatiously dived at her, backing her against the wall of the elevator and trapping her by leaning his hands on the wall to either side of her — a position that gave him an excuse not to dare touch her. Then he looked into her smiling eyes as deeply and intently as he could, calling up everything he knew about Kryptonian telepathy.

He searched for any hint of fear.

And found none.

Relief so overpowering it threatened to carry him away

flooded Clark’s being. With a shuddering breath, he closed his eyes and carefully — oh so carefully — rested his forehead against hers. Her delicate — fragile — hands came up to cradle his face. Then, never once closing her eyes or breaking his gaze, she leaned up and kissed him, once, twice, gestures of forgiveness and reassurance.

“I love you, Clark,” she whispered in his ear.

“Thank you,” he whispered back, the words scraping his throat.

“It’s not hard,” she said with a graceful shrug, her hands still on his face, as if she sought to anchor him to herself. “You make it incredibly easy.”

He swallowed his immediate protest. “I love you,” he murmured — the only words that counted, no matter what he had done to her. His breaths fell gently on her soft skin, all of himself that could be trusted to touch her...and yet, had not even his breath once sent her to death’s threshold?

“It’s all right, Clark,” she told him kindly, prompting a hard-won smile from him, just to thank her for her efforts.

Yet, still he dared not touch her.

He smoothly stepped away from her just as the slow elevator slid to a stop. Lois hesitated an instant longer, then followed him out into the spacious lobby. “Do you think Perry will be okay?” she asked conversationally.

“I think we should get Jimmy to spend some time with him,” Clark said as he caught sight of their friend about to exit the lobby doors. “Jimmy!”

“Hey, CK.” Jimmy turned toward them, stepping out of the way of other Daily Planet employees heading home for the night. His normally eager expression was gone, replaced by a despondent look that sat unnaturally on his features.

“Are you all right?” Clark peered closely at the young photographer.

Jimmy shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. What did you need?”

“Not research,” Lois said quickly, the shadow of a smile playing around her lips. Both Clark and Jimmy gave her grateful glances as the tension around them eased the slightest bit.

“Did you see Perry?” Clark asked. “I think he could use some company, someone to remind him that he’s not as bad a man as he thinks. Could you go up and talk to him?”

Stark panic flashed across Jimmy’s face. His eyes widened as he darted a glance to Lois. “Do you know what I —” He paused, then shook his head. “I think I’m the last one Perry wants to talk to.”

“He’s all alone,” Clark countered gently, the sentence awful and terrifying in his own mind. Would he be similarly alone when he was Perry’s age, abandoned by the children he had put second to the needs of the world and by the woman he had hurt more than any other? “And he cares about you, Jimmy. You should let him know that someone cares about him too.”

“I never told him,” Lois interjected, reaching out to touch Jimmy’s shoulder briefly. “I didn’t tell him you suspected his son.”

“I don’t know.” Jimmy wavered, obviously caught between his concern for the Chief and his own guilt.

Lois rolled her eyes and shoved Jimmy toward the elevators. “Go. The worst he can do is kick you out, and he must do that about five times a day already.”

Though Clark had wanted Jimmy to go to Perry, he suddenly felt unprepared — not to mention unworthy — to be alone with Lois. His mind worked frantically to come up with an excuse to be alone, to temporarily distance himself from her lest he hurt her again. “Lois!” he blurted when she turned back to him. “If you give me that watch, I’ll go drop it by Henderson’s office. We might as well finish this case completely so we can start fresh tomorrow.”

If only it were that simple, he thought wistfully.

Lois studied him, and Clark shifted uncomfortably, certain she knew what he was doing. “All right,” she agreed.

Clark blinked in surprise, then had to hurriedly reach out to take the Rolex before she noticed his astonishment at her easy agreement.

“I’ll be waiting up for you.”

“You don’t have to,” he began to say, but she cut him off.

“I will. Be careful, Clark.”

The words cut like a knife, though he knew she hadn’t meant them in the way he took them. Perhaps it hurt even worse knowing that she had forgiven him so easily after what he had done to her.

They split up just outside the Daily Planet, but as Clark walked to the nearest precinct house, he periodically turned and looked through blocks of buildings to make sure Lois reached home safely.

Henderson greeted him in his usual lackadaisical manner, just as much a façade as Clark’s glasses. As Clark spoke to the inspector, he couldn’t help but hear the conversation between the cops standing near the coffee machine.

They were talking about the rates of domestic abuse.

Clark’s hands shook when he handed over the gold watch, and Henderson looked at him strangely. “I heard you weren’t feeling well this morning, Kent, but you know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you sick before. You all right?”

Closing his mouth over the confession of what he had done to Lois, Clark nodded. “Thanks, Bill. I’ll... see you later.”

Feeling like a fugitive escaping from justice, Clark slipped from the station and melted into the shadows. Out of habit, he spun into his Suit before he took to the skies, unable to deny the insistent urge to cloak himself in the night. It had been a long time since he had felt so driven to hide. Being given Lois’s love had made him feel as if he had also been given a second chance, a ticket to belonging in a world he had not been born into. But in one moment, with the gleam of red Kryptonite, Clark had lost every right to remain here.

There were always minor accidents or petty crimes occurring in Metropolis — Superman was always needed somewhere — but Clark couldn’t trust himself to answer those distress calls. Dr. Klein had assured him the effects of the red Kryptonite had been completely neutralized, but Clark could not forget the crash of a light-pole almost falling on top of an innocent passerby, the trails of flame that had barely missed a nearby car, the crash of exploding concrete, and the whistle of shrapnel sliding dangerously through the air.

The prints of his hand marked in blackish blue on his wife’s slender arm.

Clark vaguely remembered feeling cold as a child, tromping through snow and convincing his parents to help him build a snowman before fleeing to the fire and hot chocolate inside the house. He vividly remembered the chill that had pervaded his bones while he lay in Luthor’s Kryptonite cage and listened to the Wedding March. But, for the first time since Lois had loved him, Clark felt really, truly cold. He shook with it, trembling so badly that he dared not trust his flying and had to alight on a ledge beside a stone statue, wrapping his cape around himself.

Craving stability, Clark reached out one hand to carefully, lightly set it on the statue. His hand, he knew from experience, was much more indestructible than the stone, yet he could be hurt so much more easily.

And seeing what he had done to Lois had hurt more than anything else in his life. It was worse than Trask’s unreasoning hatred, worse than Luthor’s Kryptonite cage and quantum disrupter, worse than Lois forgetting him, worse than leaving everything for New Krypton. Those others had had reasons, clear enemies or problems outside of his control. But this... hurting Lois had been all about control, he thought numbly — his total

lack of it.

From the instant Clark had realized that he was not like everyone else, he had strived for perfect command over his powers, and he had worked hard until he had obtained it. He never forgot that human beings were incredibly fragile, so delicate that one wrong bump, one slight mistake, one sharp object and they would die, their lives and futures and happiness eternally quenched. He never forgot that he could destroy so much without even making an effort. One sneeze and the electricity would be out for hours. One hiccup and the house he and Lois had made into their home would be demolished.

One hug and his wife’s flesh would be marked with his fingerprints.

Clark understood that it was the red Kryptonite that had caused the accidents. He understood that he had not been wholly to blame for his tragic loss of control.

What he could not understand was how he hadn’t known that Lois was hurt.

How could he have missed the quickening beat of her heart? Why hadn’t he heard her quick breath of pain? What had distracted him so sufficiently that he hadn’t even noticed the hurt of the woman he loved more than life itself? What was wrong with him that he had been more concerned about his own problems than Lois’s needs?

With terrible, choking self-loathing, Clark glared at his right hand, hating it — hating himself — for what had been inflicted. His desire to be normal had faded as he grew comfortable with his Superman persona and found acceptance with Lois; now, it returned with a vengeance.

An ordinary man could never accidentally crush a woman’s bone to powder. An ordinary man would have immediately noticed if he hurt his wife. An ordinary man... an ordinary man was safe.

For an instant — no longer than the beat of his heart — Clark wanted to retrieve the green Kryptonite from S.T.A.R. Labs and dose himself with it so that he would no longer be capable of causing Lois pain.

But dosing himself with Kryptonite would, he knew, hurt Lois even more than the ugly bruise. And it would solve nothing. It couldn’t take him back to before he had carelessly injured the woman he loved.

With the watch delivered to Henderson and nothing more he could do for Perry — and unable to trust himself to make Superman rescues — Clark had no other excuse to stay away from home. Lois would be waiting for him. She would want... would expect... a hug. Perhaps a kiss.

A large part of Clark longed for those things; the saner part of him instantly quelled the idea.

What if the red Kryptonite hadn’t worn off completely? What if he hurt her again?

How would he know?

But he couldn’t stand alone in the cold night, not when Kryptonite dominated his thoughts.

His parents, he thought with desperate relief. They would want to know he was all right; he should visit and assure them everything was back to normal.

Fleeing his guilt — yet knowing it was just as fast as Superman — Clark blurred toward the stars and landed in a peaceful yard in front of his childhood home. Where he always found acceptance. Understanding. Forgiveness.

But could even his parents forgive him *this* sin?

Tentatively, Clark stepped into the house, for the first time unsure of his welcome.

His parents, though already dressed for bed, greeted him effusively. Clark tried very hard to find absolution in the feel of their arms wrapped uninhibitedly around him, but all he could see was that bruise marring Lois’s perfect skin.

“We saw a bit on the news, but we were expecting a phone call, not a visit,” Martha observed, her gaze locked on Clark, doubtfully noticing that he couldn’t meet her eyes.

“The phone,” he rasped, closing his eyes as he remembered the plastic splintering into a million tiny pieces. “It...it’s broken.”

He tried to tell himself to admit what he had done, commanded himself to confess, but the words wouldn’t emerge. His parents had taken every new power in stride, never once hesitating to touch him or tell him they loved him. So why couldn’t he utter the burning admission stuck in his throat?

Because Jonathan had never once left a bruise on Martha’s skin. Because neither one of them could fathom the idea of a man hurting his wife. Clark couldn’t fathom it either, but he had done it. And done it without even realizing it.

When Martha put a hand on Clark’s arm, he had to resist the urge to jerk away from the dangerous touch. “Clark, you’re not blaming yourself for the injuries, are you? It wasn’t your fault.”

They didn’t blame him! They knew he would never willingly or knowingly hurt Lois!

He *hadn’t* done it knowingly, he reminded himself harshly; that was the purposeful distinction Lois had made the night before, and that was the problem. It had been easier to distract himself from his terror when he had been fighting the effects of the red Kryptonite, easier to pretend he was in control when he had been locked in a lab. Now, he was left with only the truth... and the guilt that even his parents’ acceptance couldn’t alleviate.

But...how had his parents known?

“Injuries?” he repeated slowly, numbly. Had there been more? Had Lois called to let them know what their son had done to the woman he had sworn to protect and cherish and love?

His parents exchanged glances before Jonathan clasped his shoulder. “Son, a man’s claiming he was harmed at one of the jewelry store robberies. He’s pressing charges against Superman and demanding that the city limit or outlaw your rescues.”

Strangely, this betrayal of Metropolis seemed as nothing compared to his own betrayal of Lois.

But it still hurt.

“How did I hurt him?” he asked quietly, the words torn from him against his will. He had been so sure he hadn’t harmed anyone...besides Lois.

“Oh, honey, you didn’t!” Martha insisted fiercely. She wrapped her hands around his arm, a habit she had begun when he had first started exhibiting his abnormal strength and had decided not to touch anyone until he was certain he could control it.

“Orville Dorian is his name,” Jonathan interjected. On the surface, he seemed almost calm, but there was a hard glint to his eyes that Clark had caught sight of only a handful of times before, usually when questions were being asked about Clark. “He has gashes on his arm from the shattered windows, and he claims he was sideswiped by Superman.”

“By me,” Clark rasped, understanding the reason behind the distinction his dad didn’t usually make. But denying this wouldn’t make it go away — he had hurt someone else. Without consciously noticing, he began to rub his fingers against his hands, as if he could feel the blood staining his impervious flesh.

Martha forcefully slid her hand into his, stopping the obsessive movement. “Clark, even if he was hurt — and I’m not saying that I believe that slimy, underhanded man for an instant — it was an accident. You would never hurt anyone!”

Caught by the force of her conviction, Clark accidentally looked into her eyes. His mouth opened to confess what he had done to Lois, but the words simply wouldn’t come. He was Superman, yet he could not force the admission from his lips.

“Don’t let this man strong-arm you, son,” Jonathan advised sternly. “Remember that Dregg fellow who tried something similar. If one person gets away with it, they’ll all want a piece of

you. And Dorian isn’t suing you — he’s pressing charges for reckless endangerment and third degree assault. The police will probably be looking for you to make your statement.”

Looking for him? They were probably terrified of him, Clark thought bitterly. They probably thought the alien would destroy them if they got too close. It was no wonder Metropolis had thought it necessary to shoot him; he was a menace. And Lois had borne most of the damage. If she weren’t the bravest person he had ever met — and the most reckless — she would have been terrified of him.

She *should* be terrified of him. He couldn’t even control his own body, couldn’t calculate how much force he could use in a hug or a handshake, couldn’t stop himself from crashing into things around him and getting innocent bystanders hurt.

He had hurt Lois.

He was a monster.

And here he was, sitting in his parents’ living room, allowing them to touch him when he knew that at any instant, he might accidentally bruise their delicate skin or crush one of their weak bones or somehow end their frail lives. Humans were so unbelievably fragile, so impossibly flimsy, so indescribably precious.

He couldn’t be trusted near them.

Clumsily, he rose to his feet, desperate to remove himself from his parents’ presence before they were hurt, afraid to move too quickly lest he accidentally injure them. “I have to go,” he said stiffly. “Lois is waiting for me.”

Their declarations of love and assurances that they would stand by him no matter what and admonitions to tell Lois they were thinking of her passed over Clark’s head. He tensed when Martha reached up to place a kiss on his cheek, and he barely restrained his wince away from his dad’s hug. They didn’t know what they were doing; hugging him was like hugging a ticking time-bomb.

Finally, pausing only to tell them he loved them — because, after all, he couldn’t leave without saying that no matter how much he didn’t deserve their love in return — Clark flung himself into the night air. He flew high and fast, driving himself harder and harder until the atmosphere thinned and became as cold as he felt. Then, breathing heavily as he fought to keep his emotions locked safely within himself, he paused.

Light clouds drifted below his feet while the stars glittered in harsh severity above him. Not part of the stars, not part of the Earth, just as he had told Lois over two years before. She had made him belong, tied him to Earth so that he didn’t have to drift in limbo anymore.

But he didn’t deserve it.

Frozen, Clark hung motionless. He saw the cold beauty spread out on every side of him...but he couldn’t react to it. He heard the cries for help coming from every city in the world...but he dared not answer them. He longed for Lois’s healing, accepting embrace...but how could he ask for anything from her? “Come home, Clark.”

He started violently, shocked to hear her voice whispering in his ear. Out of all the clamor of the Earth, her whisper instantly sliced through it all and straight to his heart.

Maybe he was weak. Maybe he was selfish. Maybe he was careless. But he couldn’t deny that siren call.

Like a shooting star, Clark fell to the Earth.

Chapter 2: Fury

Anger was not a foreign emotion to Lois. Everyone who knew her knew she could lose her temper over a dozen things a day, and they had learned that unless Clark was nearby, it was safest to stay away when her anger flared up. Of course, even Clark had earned her ire on quite a few occasions — some deserved, some not — though thankfully he took it in stride.

But contrary to what most people thought, Lois rarely got *furious*.

Fury was worse than anger. Anger was volatile, exploding quickly, passing quickly. Fury was cold and quiet and so overpowering that it hid beneath her skin until she could release it, usually by way of scathing articles that exposed corruption and resulted in more occupied cells at the Metropolis Prison. Fury was ice, and right now, Lois was trembling under the force of it. Her hands shook with the rage that filled her body and crystallized her thoughts. It threatened to overwhelm her, yet it could not be released until she had a clear target and a clearer, deadly plan.

She knew her target.

Her plan was slowly developing, plot by scheme by trap, in her mind. Usually when she brainstormed, she jotted down rapid thoughts and her jumble of ideas. Tonight, she didn't need to write them down; they were etched into her mind with tracings of hot rage and frozen in place with icy fury.

It had been hard to hide that fury from Clark, hard to pretend everything was fine, hard to conceal the shuddering of her tense breaths and the implacability of her purpose. She had almost lost it when holding his face in her hands and looking into his tortured eyes; she had almost broken then and there and screamed out her fury and desolation. That was why she had let him go off by himself even though she knew the last thing he needed was to be alone. She had needed time to compose herself, time to force her fury to rest more comfortably within the confines of her body and the mold of her resolve.

It had been two hours since Clark had left, and Lois still hadn't managed to regain her apparent calm.

In an effort to expend some of her energy, she had begun tidying up the mess left within their house. Clark had started to clean up a bit; the beginning and end of his efforts were marked by a small patch of pulverized dust and crumpled objects. Lois closed her eyes against the memory of finding her husband slumped in a defeated huddle against the wall, his eyes empty pits of loss and guilt.

The television was shattered, a bookend crumpled on the ground where it had bounced off the glass screen.

Lois's hands clenched into painful fists. Quickly, she uncurled them, knowing that the last thing Clark needed was to see any blood on her, even if it did come from her own nails puncturing her skin. Resolutely, Lois turned on her heel, leaving the mess, and strode upstairs to the guest bedroom. With quick, sharp movements, she stripped the bed and threw the sheets and blankets into the washing machine. That wouldn't stop Clark if he was really determined to avoid her tonight, but she had faith that her determination would overpower his pain.

It had to.

Retrieving clean bedding from the closet, Lois went into their bedroom and remade the bed, wanting — needing — to cleanse the room of everything that reminded her of the red Kryptonite. The blankets didn't have shards of Kryptonite in them, she knew, but they were too painful a reminder of the night she had spent alone, keeping her sobs silent, yet knowing Clark would hear them anyway. Just as she had heard his, feeling them like quakes within her soul.

The trembling grew so bad that Lois had to pause for a moment and regain her composure. Fury was different from anger, she reminded herself; it wasn't yet time to act on it. When she did release it, she had to be certain the target of her rage was present to feel her wrath.

A single tear slipped down Lois's cheek as she smoothed Clark's pillow in just the way he liked it. She wiped it away and washed her hands so Clark wouldn't smell the salt of it when she touched him.

Once the bed was made, Lois returned to the living room,

righting the table where they had played cards just two nights ago and returning the couches to their proper positions. She cleared the floor space around them, unable to resist throwing a glance to the fire Clark could light with a simple glance. She wanted that night back. She wanted that sense of peace and contentment back. She wanted her faith in what was good and fair and right back.

But it was gone, destroyed in a single instant by Kryptonite.

Clark didn't understand. He didn't see what she saw so clearly. He saw only his own guilt, his own part in the travesty that had occurred. Blinded by his enormous sense of responsibility, he wasn't able to realize that he had been betrayed. And so he blamed himself, and he refused to touch her, and he spent hours out in the cold night because he couldn't bring himself to look in her eyes. He wouldn't allow himself to be forgiven because he could not forgive himself.

"Come home, Clark," Lois whispered out the window he always used as his super entrance, and a few seconds later, he did, unable to refuse her anything. The slump of his shoulders told her that he had heard the same news that had prompted her to throw that bookend at the TV.

His spin back into his Clark clothes was slower and more precise than Lois had ever seen it. Every move he made was cautious; every gesture was kept tiny and small; every breath was carefully taken and even more carefully released. He did not meet her eyes.

Blind fury engulfed Lois, but she calmed it, controlled it, commanded it to silent patience.

"I found the cards," she said in a normal voice. "Sit down, Clark."

Neither of them was in the mood to play poker, but Lois needed more time to calm the tempest that had surged within her at the sight of Clark's self-castigation. And Clark needed time to ready himself for the moment when she would lead him to their bedroom.

Keeping up a happy chatter, Lois dealt the cards and arranged her hand. Clark did the same, the cards held so loosely in his hands that he almost dropped them several times. He was careful never to touch the table, careful to keep the table between himself and Lois.

Lois pretended not to notice, pretended to focus on the poker game, pretended she was not so terribly furious that a haze clouded her vision.

"Lois."

At Clark's strained utterance of her name, Lois looked up and finally met his eyes. If she hadn't been sitting, the pure emotion in them would have knocked her back a step. "What is it, Clark?" she asked.

"Have...have you looked at your fish?"

Prompted by his words, she glanced over her shoulder to the corner where the shattered remains of her tank lay and where Clark had collected the jars, bowls, and cups of water in which he had put her rescued fish. "Why?" she asked, turning back to look at him.

He dropped his eyes, his voice little more than a whisper, so broken that Lois's breath caught in her throat. "I couldn't find one. I tried to get them all — you love those fish. But...when I tried to find the last one, I...I could only see...fifty feet under the ground or two blocks away. I couldn't...I couldn't find it. I'm sorry."

Lois abandoned the cards and moved to Clark's side, ignoring his flinch away from her hand on his cheek. "I like my fish, Clark, but it's hardly the end of the world."

"But you love those fish."

"I love you more." Time had ran out, Lois decided, not at all sorry for it. She stood abruptly and held out her hand toward her husband. "Come on, Clark. It's been a long day, and we both need some sleep."

His face paled as he stared at her hand. On his knees, his own hands clenched into loose fists.

"You're not going to hurt me," Lois said, softly to disguise the note of steel threading her voice.

"What if I do?" he whispered, his eyes haunted. "I won't even know, Lois. I won't even notice if I hurt you."

"Yes, you will." Lois swallowed the lump in her throat and extended her hand closer to him. "Please, Clark."

His hand trembled when he slowly reached out and took hers, his grip so light her hand might have been held by a feather. Lois tightened her own grip on him and tugged, the movement causing him to rise to his feet. Not allowing herself to show even a hint of her doubt, she led him upstairs and into their bedroom.

Gently, he disengaged his hand from hers. "Lois, I think I should —"

"Clark." Lois faced him, her eyes flashing determination. She was not about to let him walk away from her, not when she needed him to still the shivers of fury abounding within her. "Look at me."

He did, almost fearfully.

"I know what you're thinking," she told him bluntly. "You think you're going to hurt me again."

At the word "again," he flinched. "Don't you?" he asked in a small voice.

"No." Lois stepped close enough to rest her hands on his shoulders. "I miss you, Clark. I don't want to sleep alone again."

He opened his mouth, but she put her finger over his lips.

"Hold me," she commanded, looping her arms around his neck. "Put your arms around me and hold me."

"But what if the red Kryptonite hasn't worn off completely?" he blurted, making a move to step away from her before he realized her hands were holding him still. Not that she could hold him there through mere strength, but Lois knew he wouldn't risk hurting her by stepping away too quickly. "What if —"

Lois smiled at him. "That's why we're practicing. Now, put your arms around me. Sheesh, I never thought I'd have to ask you twice!"

The hint of a smile crossed his lips, but it fell far short of his eyes. "I'm afraid, Lois," he whispered so softly she read his lips more than heard him. "I can't bear to hurt you again."

"You won't." She slid one hand down his arm and positioned it on her waist, did the same with the other, and returned her hands to his neck. Then, finding some comfort in his loose embrace, she rested her head against his chest. For a long moment, they simply stood there, positioned like dolls in the semblance of a hug. Finally, an eternity later, Clark's arms tightened a fraction around her, and his head dropped slowly to rest atop hers. As soft as the caress of his hand on her cheek, he dropped a kiss into her hair.

An image of him lying on the ground, an ugly wound seared into his neck, flashed behind Lois's closed eyes, and her body shuddered with the force of her emotional reaction.

Instantly, Clark was standing by the door.

"Clark, wait!" The only reason she managed to say it in time was because he hesitated before touching the place where the doorknob had once been.

"I can't!" he cried, his expression anguished. "You're afraid of me, Lois! I can't make you stay with me when you're afraid of me."

"I am not afraid of you!" she stated defiantly.

"Then why did you —"

"It's cold," she lied. "I shivered because I'm cold."

Clark wavered.

"I need you," Lois said softly, feeling the truth of those words in the fury reawakening within her, stirred by the absence of his calming embrace. Her body trembled again with her next words — not out of fear, but out of that rage. "They shot you with a

Kryptonite bullet, Clark. You could have died. I need to see you, to feel you, to hear you. I need to know you're alive and that you're with me."

His eyes softened as he heard the plea in her voice, and of his own accord, he stepped up next to her. "I'm sorry, Lois."

"You have nothing to apologize for!" she snapped harshly, then instantly regretted it when he flinched back. "Just... please, hold me."

"But..." He took a deep breath, then nodded. "All right."

They readied for bed in silence, both wrestling with their own inner demons. But they were at least together, Lois thought with relief. And, for tonight, that would be enough. Tomorrow would be the time to begin enacting her retribution.

Clark eased into the bed so slowly Lois was tempted to laugh. But she couldn't, not when his pain was so real. Unable to tear her eyes from him, Lois slipped into the bed, lying on her side so she could see him. She was wearing her most casual pair of pajamas, a long-sleeved shirt and a pair of shorts; it would be easier for him to sleep next to her if he couldn't see the bruise on her arm.

She didn't try to cuddle up next to him, not yet. For now, she was content to simply let the sight of him ease the residual fear still flooding through her system, keeping her fury ice-cold.

Once convinced Lois would stay on her side of the bed, Clark visibly relaxed. Lois knew the Kryptonite — both the red and the green — had taken their toll on him physically, the energy expended from the former and the pain inflicted by the latter leaving him exhausted. Tomorrow, if she woke up before he did, she would call Perry and tell him they'd be in a little late.

After several moments, Clark's eyes slid closed and his breaths grew deep in slumber. The features of his face relaxed and slipped into more familiar lines. Some cultures believed that the true character of an individual was revealed only in sleep; if such was true, Lois thought, it was only more proof that Clark was innocent. He looked young and vulnerable without either the glasses or the Superman mask of sternness to inadequately disguise his heart.

Lois's body suddenly seemed far too small to contain the fury welling up within her, as if a quake had torn up an additional geyser of rage and sent it exploding outward.

Gradually, she eased closer to Clark and reached out a none-too-steady hand to caress his brow and trace his cheeks and touch the thick softness of his hair. He was handsome, of course, the best looking man Lois had ever seen, and yet his appeal was so much more than that, less physical, more abstract, and bound up in integrity and conscience and strength of heart. He was the kindest, gentlest man she had ever met, the hurt of anyone else felt keenly in his own soul. He was utterly unable to harm anyone, even those criminals who struck the most deeply.

And they had shot him.

Metropolis was Lois's home, the city she had always staunchly insisted was the best in the world. And it had ordered the death of its savior, pulling the trigger despite the fact that he had valiantly kept control of his powers. It had sent a bolt of deadly green Kryptonite to strike her husband down.

Metropolis had betrayed her.

And Lois did not intend to let the city get away with its attempted murder.

"I won't let them hurt you," she breathed to Clark, speaking aloud the vow she had made the instant Dr. Klein had told her what the mayor had planned for the man she loved. Unable to stop herself, not particularly caring to try, Lois leaned over and kissed Clark, just to assure herself he was alive and well. A tear slipped down her cheek to alight on his skin.

"Don't say anything," she begged him when he woke at her touch. She burrowed into his side, desperately needing to feel his arm around her and hear his heartbeat beneath her ear. "Just hold

me.”

Clark hesitated, then reached over and picked up something from the bedside table. Lois couldn't see what it was, but she didn't care because he slipped his arm beneath her head and pulled her close to his side. His touch was as gentle as ever, and Lois wished she could convince him that he could trust himself not to hurt her.

Finally, warmed by his hold, soothed by his heartbeat, protected by his embrace, Lois felt herself completely calmed.

“I love you, Lois.” The words themselves were a caress.

A smile curved her lips, and Lois slept.

When she stirred the next morning, she smiled again.

Clark's arms were wrapped around her from behind, his breaths soft and reassuring in her hair.

Gently, Lois ran her fingers down his hands, savoring the sensation of being enveloped in his embrace, grateful that he hadn't pulled away during the night. When her fingers caught on something held in his hand, she felt Clark stir behind her.

“Good morning,” he murmured.

“You're awake,” she said before a suspicion snuck into her mind. “You didn't sleep at all, did you?”

His lack of a reply was answer enough.

“You didn't have to do that,” she said, caught between guilt at keeping him from resting and the certainty that she had been right to confront his new lack of self-confidence. “But thank you.” She played with the object held in his hands a moment more before asking, “Why are you holding your glasses?”

Clark hesitated. “I wasn't sure the red Kryptonite was completely neutralized. And last time, I didn't notice when I hurt you. So...I figured if the glasses shattered, I would know I was holding you too tight.”

“But you need these.” Lois's voice emerged shaken. The glasses symbolized his secret identity, his deep longing for a normal life, his chance to be ordinary — or to pretend to himself that he was, though Lois knew that, powers or not, he was extraordinary.

“I have extra pairs,” he said wryly, but he didn't fool Lois.

“You didn't have to do that,” she said again. “But thank you.”

Gingerly, Lois slipped the glasses from his hand, grateful when he stifled his protest, glad he stopped his immediate impulse to withdraw his arms from around her. She placed the glasses on the bedside table, then turned within the shelter of his embrace to stretch herself full-length against him. He needed her, she knew, maybe more now than ever before. She knew him better than she knew anyone, and she was certain, even without all the proof he had been offering her, that he was heaping all sorts of blame and guilt on his shoulders. In fact, she was surprised he had let her talk him into touching her at all.

One look into his shadowed eyes, however, and Lois knew why he had come back. Why he had allowed her to pull him into that loose hug. Why he had held her all night even though it meant he didn't sleep. Why he was still touching her even though she had taken away his safety measure.

He was afraid.

Of himself.

On impulse, Lois reached up and kissed him on the cheek, flattening her hands against his chest so he'd know he wasn't alone. So he'd know she wasn't afraid of him. She trusted him.

“What do you say you get dressed so we can make breakfast?” she proposed with a grin.

“But Perry —”

“While I call Perry and tell him we'll be in to work a bit late.”

“Oh, well, if *you* call him.” The hint of an amused grin on his beloved features was worth a thousand front page bylines. It was erased an instant later, however, when he soberly added, “You're

like a daughter to him.”

“That's why *I'm* the one calling him,” she teased, though inwardly she wanted to weep at how quickly his smile had been taken from him. No, not weep — she wanted to throw things and cause a lot of damage. For all his powers, Clark was deeply vulnerable. This incident with the red Kryptonite had preyed upon that weakness. Metropolis's betrayal had struck right to the heart of his deepest insecurity.

As if sensing that his somberness had disappointed her, Clark quirked his lips in the semblance of a smile. “So, when you say ‘we'll’ be making breakfast, you really mean *I'll* be making it, don't you?”

Her heart tightened as Lois fell in love with him all over again. “Just for that, I might make you do it all by yourself,” she said lightly, sliding from the bed to her feet. “But I've learned a bit more about cooking since we met, particularly breakfast foods, and it has been a while since we've eaten breakfast together. Come on — I'll bet you I can call Perry and be downstairs before you're showered and dressed, even if you cheat.”

Then, not waiting and making him admit aloud what she already knew — that he wasn't ready to use his superpowers yet — she dashed from the bedroom toward the downstairs phone.

For the next hour, Lois was able to forget what her city had tried to do to her. Though Clark was careful to never use his superpowers, he made an effort to conceal that he avoided touching her, and he tried his best to appear light-hearted in response to her determined teasing. If his smile was a bit forced, if her jokes were a bit comprised, if his hands shook when she touched him, if her mouth tightened whenever she looked at the spot on his neck where the Kryptonite bullet had razed a bloody trail of destruction...well, who could blame them? But this brief interlude of laughter and spilt flour and burnt toast was more than Lois had dared hope for the night before.

No matter how hard they were both trying, however, they couldn't shut out the rest of the world forever.

Clark was the first to broach the subject. He looked at his near-empty plate for a long moment while Lois tried to think of something to say that didn't involve a scathing condemnation of a city that shot their savior in the back. Finally, he spoke, quietly, “I visited my parents last night, after I left Henderson.”

“I'll bet they were relieved to hear everything's fine now.” Lois was proud of how calmly she spoke. She even managed to take another bite of her eggs without giving away how much the effort cost her.

“Yeah.” Clark's eyes darted to her and away again. In different circumstances, Lois might have laughed. Her husband was an exceptionally bad liar, and he was terrible at hiding things. If he had really wanted her to think he was all right, he should have finished his breakfast. Clark never left food uneaten.

Lois took a deep breath and set down her toast. “They told you about the man pressing charges against Superman, didn't they?”

His short nod was eloquent for all it conveyed of his pain and grief and guilt.

“The entire thing is utterly ridiculous!” Lois exclaimed sharply. “You didn't hurt him!”

Clark's eyes rested on her left arm. “You should know better than anyone that we can't be sure about that.”

“I should know better than anyone that you'd *never* hurt anyone!” she retorted angrily.

“Lois, you yourself said that I would never *knowingly* hurt anyone. Well, I didn't *know* that I hurt him...but clearly I did.”

Staring at Clark, Lois had to fold her arms across her chest to stop herself from pulling him into a tight embrace. “The charges will never stick. You're protected under the Good Samaritan laws. The man's just out for his five minutes of glory, that's all.

This whole thing will blow over by tomorrow.”

But she knew she lied even as she uttered the words. Whatever Dorian’s motives were, the very fact that he was willing to press charges meant the city was more than likely to at least listen to his demands that Superman’s actions be limited. Clark’s downcast eyes told her he had recognized that same fact.

“So...” She swallowed. “What are you planning on doing about it?”

“I’m going to apologize to Orville Dorian.”

“What?” Lois stared at him, aghast. “No, Clark, you shouldn’t have to —”

“Yes, I do.” Inconveniently, he chose now to finally meet her eyes, firm in his conviction. “I was scared, Lois, and I was trying to deny that my powers were affected. Because of that, people could have gotten hurt. Whether what happened to him was my fault or not, I did endanger people. And I need to apologize for that.”

Lois bit down on her automatic protest, then waited a beat longer to make sure her voice would sound passably civil. “And what else? Are you going to turn yourself in? Ask them to arrest you?”

“No. As you said, I’m protected by the Good Samaritan laws. I am going to offer to pay Dorian’s medical bills, though, as well as repair all the structural damage I caused.”

And what about all the damage he stopped from happening? she wanted to cry. Who would thank him for that? Who would tell him that he had saved far more than he had broken?

“And what about the city?” she asked tightly. “If the mayor’s actions over the last few days have been any indication, Metropolis will seriously consider hampering your ability to help.”

Clark’s hands tightened into fists before he noticed and instantly uncurled them, taking a deep breath as if to calm himself. “I...I thought about it all night, and I think I’ve decided on a course of action. If you agree.”

“It better not involve any handcuffs, cells, or Kryptonite,” she remarked acidly. At Clark’s infinitesimal wince, Lois softened. “I’m sorry, Clark.” She reached across the small table and rested her hand on top of his. “What is your plan?”

The tiny smile that reshaped his mouth was reward enough for her constraint. “I’m going to call a press conference and ask the city not to limit what I can do. But if that is their decision...” He swallowed and turned his hand palm-up beneath hers so it seemed more as if he were holding hers. “I’m going to offer to leave Metropolis.”

Lois made an inarticulate sound of distress.

“I’m going to ask them not to,” Clark added quickly, as if that made everything better. “But I won’t stay where I’m not wanted.”

“And what will you do?” she asked. “Where will Superman go?”

“There are always other cities.” He shrugged, but it didn’t hide the pain Lois knew he was feeling. His greatest fear had always been rejection, and now it was playing out right in front of him. “Or maybe Superman shouldn’t tie himself to a single city. Maybe I can just respond to large crises. After all, I am married now, and I can’t be spending all my time flying around.”

“You shouldn’t *have* to leave!” The words erupted from her harshly, unable to be contained any longer. “You *saved* Metropolis for the thousandth time! How dare they demand that you —”

“Lois.” Gently, Clark curled his fingers around her hand. “If they want me to leave, I can’t stay. I won’t force myself on anyone, not you, not a stranger, and not a city. I can’t demand that they accept me — and I won’t make them any more afraid of me than they already are.”

Lois blinked rapidly. This decision was hard enough on Clark already; he didn’t need her tears added to the mix. “And if

Superman leaves...what happens to Clark?”

“Lois...” Clark moved from the seat to kneel before her. “Clark is married to Lois Lane, who lives in Metropolis. This is my home.”

Shaking her head, Lois reached out her free hand to caress his face. “If they don’t want you, we can both leave. I’ll move with you. We’ll go to another city, one that appreciates you the way I do.”

He tried a smile. “No one appreciates Superman the way you do, honey.” He sobered. “But I would never ask you to leave. The Daily Planet is here, your friends are here, even Lucy’s moved back. Everything you love is here.”

“I love *you*,” she whispered. “And if you leave —”

“Clark will stay,” he promised. “I love it here too, Lois. I don’t want to leave. Superman can get around in a hurry. Clark can still live here.”

“But you said you couldn’t do that. You said you couldn’t hear people calling for help and not answer them. How will you ignore them while you’re here?”

“I won’t ignore them. Clark will answer them, or an anonymous stranger will.”

Lois’s heart sank to her stomach. “But you hated doing that. And it didn’t work — you always had to move on. Besides, if an anonymous stranger starts helping out, everyone will automatically assume it’s Superman.”

Silent, Clark withdrew his hand from hers and moved to sit at the table once more. His eyes were fixed on the remains of his breakfast; though he picked up his fork, he didn’t take another bite. “I don’t want to leave,” he said softly, as if he were admitting a flaw.

“And you don’t have to!” Lois stated firmly. “Metropolis will never ask you to leave! They’d be embarrassed in front of the entire world — the only city with a superhero on hand and they demand he leave? They’d never live it down.”

Clark drew patterns in his egg-yolk with the fork. “I don’t want them to accept me just because they don’t want to be laughed at.”

The emotions that swelled up within Lois were too large to be contained, and she moved around the table to throw herself into Clark’s arms, opened to receive her despite the startled expression on his face. “Even if they are stupid enough to ask you to leave,” she whispered in his ear, “I want you, Clark! Don’t ever forget that!”

He leaned his head against hers, the tension draining from his body. “I won’t,” he murmured.

“So...” Lois drew back and looked up at his desolate expression. Her fury crystallized within her into a solid force so great it could no longer be dissolved by anything other than strong action. “When are you going to hold this press conference?”

“I don’t know.” His brow creased. “I guess...this afternoon?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Do it tomorrow. Give the citizens of Metropolis a day to see that you’re fully in control of yourself. Give them a day to remember everything you’ve done for them. Have it tomorrow, late afternoon.”

“Okay,” he agreed quietly.

“And don’t you dare talk to Dorian alone,” she commanded him. “Always have witnesses with you.”

“Okay.”

She pointed a stern finger at him. “And don’t try to shut me out just because you think you hurt me.”

A shadow flickered across Clark’s features. “I won’t, Lois. I...need you. I don’t think I can do this without you.”

“Of course not,” she said flippantly. “That’s why I’m the senior partner, remember?”

Suddenly, Clark’s head snapped up in the way it always did when he heard a call for Superman.

“What is it?” Lois questioned.

His eyes locked on hers almost desperately. “There’s a fire in one of the hospitals.”

Lois stared at him expectantly. “Well, go!” she exclaimed when he didn’t move.

Still, he hesitated, and Lois almost thought she saw utter terror flood his eyes.

“Go!” she commanded.

“But what if —” He cut himself off and squared his shoulders. “I’ll meet you at the Planet.”

Then, with a determined expression replacing his earlier despair, he leaned down and kissed Lois softly on the cheek. “I love you,” he murmured, and he was gone.

But he hadn’t touched her with his hand, nor had he changed into his Suit until he left her.

Lois stood, breakfast forgotten in light of her cold purpose. Metropolis would pay for what they had done to her husband.

Chapter 3: Shame

A weight bore down on Perry’s shoulders, a burden of shame and remorse. He had tried — unsuccessfully — to ignore it, to avoid it, and then to face it. Nothing seemed to work, though, not when the most recent picture of his son was either his high school graduation or a mug shot.

<Maybe I’m crazy, but I really do believe the kid started to love me.>

A foolish hope, Perry knew. He had neglected his family in favor of his paper, and what did he have to show for it? A divorce, an empty house, a son who spoke to him only during the holidays, and another son who had turned against Superman — the very model of integrity and goodness — for money. And, he added bitterly, his shelves full of awards for the prestigious paper over which he presided.

Perry looked up from studying his aged hands when Jimmy came in yet again, this time armed with a jelly donut as excuse. The kid had been popping up every five minutes, each time with an excuse almost as bad as Clark’s, each time with a caring desperation in his eyes when he looked to his Chief.

Perry had sent him home the night before with a few words about his exhaustion and an early morning, but he had been gratified by the young man’s concern. This morning, however, the concern only seemed another slap in the face. Jimmy knew him better than his own son did.

He knew Perry was far more impressed by hard work than expensive gifts.

He knew Perry was far softer than his gruff exterior portrayed.

He knew Perry admired, respected, and liked Superman.

“You know, son, you don’t need to keep checkin’ up on me,” Perry finally said as Jimmy fussed over the placement of his donut. Unfortunately, he couldn’t seem to summon the energy needed to put a snap to his tone, so it emerged sounding tired and drained. In other words, it sounded exactly like he felt.

“I know, Chief,” Jimmy said with a smile that looked unnatural on his face, too forced to resemble his usual genuine cheerfulness. “But I bring you a donut every morning.”

“Yeah, uh, I guess you do.” Perry studied Jimmy closely, warmed again by his obvious affection. If Jimmy hadn’t been at his side, Perry didn’t know how he would have made it through those terrible moments the day before when he had realized Jerry’s briefcase contained red Kryptonite. Not that he would admit that aloud.

“Thank you, Jimmy,” he added impulsively. Not what he was thinking, but close enough.

In the middle of setting Perry’s refilled coffee mug on the desk, Jimmy froze. Suddenly, all the tension drained from him, and he slumped into the chair across from Perry. “Chief, I...” He

swallowed; then, with obvious effort, he met Perry’s puzzled gaze. “Chief, I’m the one who looked up AmPro Specialties. I’m the one who told Lois I suspected Jerry. I...I’m sorry. I really wish I had been wrong.”

“If that’s true...” Perry had to work to find moisture enough to finish. “Your name should have been on the byline.”

Jimmy gaped at him. “You think I want credit for investigating your son?”

“All reporters expect credit for investigating.” As simple as his own statement made it sound, Perry knew things were more complicated than that. But he couldn’t face it, not now. He was still reeling from the betrayal of one son; he didn’t want to have to hear about this form of betrayal from a kid that was more like a son to him than the one currently sitting in the Metropolis Prison.

“Don’t worry about it,” Perry advised Jimmy detachedly. He stood and moved around the desk to place a hand on Jimmy’s thin shoulder, more for the simple act of moving than any other reason. “I’m glad you found out, son, and I’m even happier that you told Lois. Mr. Gadget and...” He almost choked on the next name. “...and Jerry had to be stopped. Now, uh...” He turned away, blinking fiercely both to keep back his own tears and to hide the sight of Jimmy’s. “Are we running a newspaper or a bed and breakfast? Let’s get to work.”

“Sure, Chief.” Despite his own confused feelings about Jimmy’s confession, Perry was heartened to see a bit more life in the kid’s step and expression as he headed out of the office.

As soon as Jimmy was out of sight, however, the editor slumped into his chair. He wished he could allow the concern of his friends to lift the weight from his shoulders, but shame couldn’t be so easily dismissed. It was his son that had neutralized Superman in a way that could have hurt a lot of people besides the hero.

Perry turned his chair away from the newsroom. He wished he could talk to Alice, hug her and feel her sink into his embrace. He had spoken to her briefly, a minute’s awkward conversation to let her know Jerry was in prison again. For an instant, hearing her say his name in the way she had long before, he had allowed himself to hope that this tragedy could result in at least one happy ending. But a moment later, she had composed herself and quickly said goodbye.

He missed her. Actually, he’d been missing her from the moment she left him. Dating other women hadn’t helped; it had only made him realize just exactly what he had lost. What he had squandered.

And, as if that wasn’t enough, his past mistakes could have so easily led to the death or disappearance of Superman. Green Kryptonite would have taken the superhero’s life; his loss of control resulting in anyone’s death would have taken his soul. Perry knew Superman well enough to know that without a doubt.

And how would Perry have lived with himself if it had been *his* son that had caused the downfall of Superman? How was he supposed to go out into the newsroom and pretend he knew what he was talking about when they all knew he had let his son blind him with expensive gifts and lull him with lies of love and forgiveness?

Still, Perry tried to cheer himself, at least the harm was all done. The red Kryptonite was safely locked in S.T.A.R. Labs’ vault, as was the green Kryptonite; Mr. Gadget and his corrupt son were in prison; and Superman was back in the skies. In fact, Perry even thought he could hear the superhero’s name being mentioned on the news out in the bullpen.

A bullpen he needed to enter with confidence, giving no sign of the shame he felt.

“Chief!”

Irritation brought the snap back to his voice. “Hang it all, Jimmy, didn’t I tell you I didn’t need you hoverin’ over me like a —”

“Chief, it’s on the news,” Jimmy blurted, his eyes wide and disbelieving. “You’ve got to see this!”

More out of habit than real interest, Perry followed Jimmy out into the newsroom. At least the interruption had kept everyone from noticing his own slow entrance, he thought distractedly.

The televisions placed in strategic areas to goad his reporters on in their own efforts and ensure they weren’t scooped were surrounded by everyone in the newsroom. Strikingly, the viewers were all silent, their opinions and criticisms muted. In the unnatural quiet, the voice of the LNN newscaster sounded clearly.

“It’s a ferocious blaze that started about an hour ago, presumably due to a leak of flammable chemicals. Superman arrived to offer his aid, but…” The man frowned behind him at the ash-ridden image of fire engulfing the hospital. “It seems that even though the firefighters are eager to accept Superman’s help, others aren’t so certain they can trust the sick patients still trapped inside the building to Superman after the dangerous incidents that have occurred over the past two days.”

Perry’s stomach clenched in a tight knot as the camera swiveled to show a mass of firefighters, doctors, and onlookers all standing between Superman and the hospital.

“It appears the superhero is trying to convince them to let him help,” the newscaster reported, his voice shaky as the roar of the flames grew temporarily louder. “News of Orville Dorian’s injuries — inflicted the last time Superman tried to help — has spread quickly, causing many people to doubt they can trust Superman to — ah, it looks like he’s decided to do what he can no matter what the others say.”

Superman shook his head once more at an obviously angry doctor before shooting up into the air and down just as quickly into the blaze that had once been a hospital.

The newscaster kept talking as Superman left and re-entered the building a hundred times, the flames less intense and more of the cots and ambulances filled with each one of his trips. Perry, though, had a hard time concentrating on anything other than the look of grim determination on Superman’s face.

It was only a matter of time before anyone thought to ask why Superman had waited to talk to the crowd outside before going to save the trapped patients. It would be a very popular question, Perry was sure, used as proof that Superman himself was unsure of his own powers. But in their repeated dissection of the superhero’s every move, would they also notice how careful he was when placing the injured on the stretchers? Would they mention the tiny muscle working in his jaw each time he employed flight and superspeed to dash back into the fire? Would they ask about the shadowed pain apparent in his eyes?

“Chief, I need to talk to you.”

“Not now.” Only belatedly did Perry realize that it was Lois who had entered the newsroom and demanded his attention. He started to turn to her when the camera angle changed drastically, whirling to face the crowd… which had become a mob, forming up in ranks to keep Superman from easily reaching the emergency services with his precious cargo. A roar deafened the microphones as flames exploded from several windows.

“The crowd is determined to keep Superman from possibly endangering everyone’s lives,” the newscaster hurriedly announced, gesturing at his cameraman to follow him closer to the fray. “It seems there’s some concern that it is his fluctuating power causing the sudden flare-ups in several portions of the hospital.”

Superman was forced to fly over the crowd to place his coughing bundle on a stretcher. When he tried to fly again, however, the nearest spectators reached out and grabbed hold of his cape.

Superman froze.

Gasps were heard all across the newsroom.

Lois’s fingers bit painfully into Perry’s arm.

Even the newscaster went momentarily silent.

The chanting of the crowd became audible — shouts that the superhero was unsafe, dangerous, that he had turned against them. Demands that he leave them alone. Yells commanding him to allow the firefighters to do their jobs. Accusations of reckless endangerment or, worse, active enmity.

The haunted cast to Superman’s chiseled features would be splashed across every newspaper in the country, Perry was suddenly sure. It was the sort of image you thought of in the dark moments before sleep; the sort of picture that left you feeling shaken and disturbed. It was the sort of picture that sold newspapers, made history, and shook foundations.

And it went straight to Perry’s heart, an indictment of his own son and the way he had raised him.

The harm Jerry had inflicted, Perry suddenly knew, was not yet consigned to the past.

With slow, methodical movements, Superman rose an inch off the ground, another and another, sliding his cape free of the people who held him. It was a slow process since they kept jumping up to grab better holds but, finally, the superhero had risen above the throng. He turned to the hospital and stared at it intently, ignoring the calls and denunciations from below. Perry knew from past experiences that Superman was x-raying the building to make certain he had gotten everyone out. He surveyed the building from end to end, once, twice, and again, as if he did doubt his own abilities. But then, if he were to miss even one person, his detractors would use it as an excuse to vilify him.

Finally, with a tiny nod to the firefighters, Superman rose higher into the air, took a deep breath, and blew out all the flames. The wind swirled up around the crowd, and they went silent, staring up at the caped man hovering above them.

For a long moment, Superman looked down at the people. He seemed to search out individuals, his expression so purposely neutral, his eyes radiating intense pain. And then, when the cries and shouts of the mob swelled again, the superhero’s shoulders slumped. He blurred into a flash of primary colors and disappeared. He left behind a quenched fire, a hospital’s quota of rescued patients coughing from smoke inhalation, busy firefighters and EMTs, and a terrified, angry mob.

“Perry, I need to talk to you.” Lois’s voice was cold and implacable.

A shiver ran down Perry’s spine even as he turned and led her into his office. He purposely shut the door behind them, almost certain he knew what Lois wanted and just as certain that he would have to refuse her. Judging from the fury snapping like icy flames in her dark eyes, she was in no shape to write this story.

Or was she here to condemn him for his part in Superman’s current situation?

“Perry, I want to write — ”

“Now, honey, you know I can’t let you write this story. You’re too close to — ”

“— an Op/Ed piece,” she finished over him.

Caught mid-sentence, Perry stared at her. “*You*… want to write an editorial instead of the front page news about this fire?”

Her hands clenched into fists, but she made no other move. That, in itself, frightened Perry; when Lois was happy, or curious, or frustrated or angry, she put her entire body into it. Her expression would shift and change with the thousand thoughts running like a babbling brook through her mind, her hands would wave wildly to emphasize all her points, and she would pace back and forth. Perry had never seen her so still, never seen her hold herself so tightly reigned in.

“I want space for the evening edition, tomorrow’s morning and evening editions, and as many afterward as it takes.”

“As what takes?” he asked cautiously. He wanted to put an arm around her or offer her a hug, but he had always been

awkward with physical demonstrations of affection—and, in her present state, he wasn't too sure she'd welcome the embrace.

"As long as it takes to make Metropolis realize just how stupid they are to reject the man who's saved their lives more than once. The mayor had part of the green Kryptonite from S.T.A.R. Labs formed into a bullet, and then ordered a sniper to shoot Superman while he was saving the Hall of Justice from being destroyed by Mr. Gadget."

Perry nodded. "That's all been said in this morning's article. Why do you need to write an editorial?"

Lois's composure shivered, like a breeze ruffling the surface of a seemingly placid lake and hinting at the deep currents hidden within. "They shot him, Perry. And now, they might ask him to leave. Superman's planning on making an apology to Dorian later today, as well as offering to repair all the damage he inadvertently caused — but we both know that won't satisfy those vultures. I want to make sure the people of Metropolis know what they stand to lose if they continue acting like Superman's the enemy."

"Uh-huh." Using the excuse of sitting down as an opportunity to study Lois a bit closer, Perry was alarmed by what he saw. He had thought she was held under tight control; only now did he see the marks of tension at the corners of her mouth and eyes, in the trembling of her hands, by the stiffness of her posture. "And do you plan on putting your name on these articles?"

"Of course!" Finally, Lois began to pace, not much, just a step or two, but it was something. "I've been saved by Superman a dozen times —"

"More like a hundred," Perry murmured to himself.

Lois ignored him. "— and so has Metropolis. I need to remind them of that fact, and my name will make them remember how many times we've both been saved by C — Superman."

Perry's eyebrows rose almost to his hairline, and he was suddenly glad that he had shut the door. "Lois, honey, if you put your name on a series of articles defending Superman, you're going to have to be prepared for some fallout."

"I'm going to have to be prepared?" She gaped at him. "Perry, they're supposed to be the good guys, but they shot Superman and are now considering demanding that he leave! Shouldn't *they* be the ones worried about fallout?"

"I'm just tryin' to warn you that they'll accuse you of losing your objectivity and —"

"That's why it's an Op/Ed piece." She waved her hand dismissively before meeting Perry's gaze. "I understand that I'll be criticized for this, but I refuse to stand by and allow them to treat Superman like this. What they did was murder, pure and simple. They targeted a man who was obeying the laws and out to help people, and they pulled the trigger even after he did exactly that without harming a single person. That's called assassination, and it's far more illegal than trying to stop a robbery."

The hurt and betrayal on Lois's face perfectly reflected that which had so poignantly been present on Superman's. At the sight of it, Perry couldn't help but look away. By focusing on his own regret, he had been able to briefly forget the others who had been harmed by Jerry's actions. Now, however, looking at this woman he loved like a daughter, he could no longer pretend that he hadn't had a part in the past few days' travesty. He had allowed himself to be hoodwinked, just as he had once before with Bill Church Jr., and now Lois and Superman were the ones paying the price for it.

"All right then," he agreed softly. "Write the columns, Lois. Take as much room as you need."

Her smile wasn't as blinding as usual, but it nonetheless comforted him. "Thanks, Chief."

"Just don't forget that I need some front page articles, too," he added gruffly. "You and Kent better —"

Whatever he had been going to say — something so

automatic he didn't really have to think about it — was lost when he caught sight of Clark stepping off the elevator. Lois seemed to sense her husband's presence, and she turned to watch him walk toward his desk.

Ever since that first day when Clark had come for his interview bearing obscure articles, archaic manners, and a crushing handshake, Perry had been charmed by the light-heartedness that always seemed to surround the younger man. No matter what had happened the day before, Clark always entered the newsroom with a slight bounce to his step, as if at any moment he might float off the ground. His smile was always just below the surface, ready to show itself at the slightest provocation, and no amount of grumpiness or shouting could tame the mischievous glint in Clark's eyes or quiet the mild, teasing remarks that slipped so politely from his lips.

Now, however, there was no hint of a smile, no sign of a teasing remark, no indication that he was lighter than it seemed he should be. Instead, his features were lined and drawn, looking more aged than Perry had ever seen him before, and his steps dragged beneath the weight that bowed his shoulders. He gave no more than a half-hearted wave to those who greeted him, and he fiddled with his glasses four times before even reaching his desk.

"Clark!" Perry pulled open the door to his office and strode to his side. "You look worse than Elvis after his last stint in Vegas! Are you sure you should be here instead of at home? I know you weren't feelin' too hot yesterday."

Clark's eyes flicked to Lois, who made as if to hug him before stopping just short of touching him. He tried to smile at Perry, but the editor wasn't buying it. "I'm fine, Chief."

"Maybe you should go home," Lois interjected, her eyes narrowed as she studied her husband. "You've been through a lot, and you didn't get any sleep last night."

"I was down at the hospital fire." Clark didn't look at Perry, and he shifted uncomfortably. "I can write up the —"

"Uh, I'm sorry, Clark, but I know Eduardo was down there. I'm sure he's called in his story already." Perry reached out a hand to clasp Clark's shoulder and was startled when Clark shied back. The younger man instantly tried to pretend the move had been nothing more than sliding into his seat, but it didn't fool Perry.

"That's all right," Clark assured him after an awkward moment of silence. "I've got some human interest stories I can finally finish up."

"Clark." Lois put her hands on his shoulders as if to prop him up. "Perry said it would be fine if you went home."

"Please." Finally, as if it were his last resort, Clark met Perry's gaze. "I'd really like to be here. At least I'm...useful... here. I can do something. Instead of just...sitting at home," he added hastily.

"All right," Perry said with a shake of his head. "If you're sure. I could use another article or two for the weekend edition. Send me what you have when you're ready."

"Thanks, Chief."

Giving the married couple the private moment they obviously wanted, Perry turned and headed back to his office. "Jimmy!" He caught the young man as he was hurrying by. "Get Eduardo, and tell him to write up that hospital story."

Making decisions and snapping out orders seemed to jumpstart Perry back into editor-in-chief mode, and he took full advantage of it. He hadn't started out, years ago, purposely trying to dive into his work, but it had become a habit anyway, one that presently made it easier for him to ignore the mess his personal life had become. Thanks to that, he was able to miss the fact that three hours rolled by until he reached for the next story to be looked over and found Lois's piece.

"Metropolis stands on the East Coast as a testament of courage, tenacity, determination, and even, if we're honest,

stubbornness. No world war, no national crisis, no personal obstacle can faze us. Our civic servants are devoted, our citizens are strong and hardworking, and our outlook is toward the future. Our city is almost as old as our country, and never once have I been ashamed to unequivocally state that I am a Metropolitan.

“Until yesterday.

“It can be argued that the trail of destruction following an appearance by Superman in the last two days is proof that we need protection from a super being so much more powerful than us. It could also be argued that his own admission of a medical problem should send us scrambling to find some form of failsafe in case he becomes unmanageable.

“But if we were to argue those points, if we were to take that stand, we would not be living up to the ideal of Metropolis. Bravery was our byword when Hitler marched across Europe. Tenacity was all that kept us going when the Great Depression gripped our land. Determination was what we held onto during those dark days when Lord Nor and his treasonous men demanded our surrender and ran through our streets. And stubbornness is what has kept us clinging to our greatness no matter how many villains are found lurking in our very streets.

“Yet, in one moment, with the command to shoot a man without giving him fair warning or chance for appeal, Metropolis proved itself afraid. Since that moment, it has done nothing to rectify the situation, instead giving into panic and paranoia.

“Our savior many times over, Superman has never given us reason to doubt him. He has saved our esteemed city more times than I’d like to count. In fact, with the lowest crime rate in the country, Metropolis is arguably the safest city in the world. Yet, it now trembles in terror.

“What happened to Metropolis?

“Where is the city I was once so proud to be a part of?

“I daresay it was trampled in the dust along with the Constitution, the law, and ethics in the same instant as a trigger was pulled and in the moment when mob-rule became stronger than common sense and a history of integrity.”

More than Perry’s hands trembled as he looked away from the remaining words; his entire being shook with the eloquent argument. Much as Lois Lane had insisted she could learn nothing from Clark Kent, Perry knew that she had captured his ability to make the reader feel what the writer felt. This was an article that would be laughed off the front page for its lack of objectivity. But it would be beautiful on the Op/Ed page.

For the first time, Perry began to feel a bit more hopeful.

Slowly, he turned to gaze out over his newsroom — his home. Reporters and researchers walked purposely, orderly in their sometimes-hectic movements. Jimmy was on the move, never still, moving from desk to desk with frequent trips to the darkroom. Lois was sitting at her desk, working either on a slower story or her piece for the morning edition. Judging from the grim expression on her face, it was the second, Perry thought wryly.

From his vantage point, the editor couldn’t see Clark’s face, but the set of his shoulders was still slumped. With sudden determination, Perry returned to Lois’s piece, finished editing it, and then strode out into the bullpen.

“Great work, Lois,” he congratulated her. “After you make these corrections, I’ll put it front and center. Clark.” He turned to see Clark look up from his screen. “Jimmy let slip that it was you who asked him to come talk to me last night.”

Clark gave the semblance of a smile. “It was, Chief. I didn’t think you’d want to be alone.”

“Well, I don’t know about that, but it was a nice thought.” Perry stepped closer and lowered his voice. “Uh, I was wondering if, uh, you could — ”

The strident ring of the phone on Clark’s desk interrupted him, and he gestured Clark to answer it. As nervous as he was

about this request, any distraction was welcome.

“Must have been a wrong number,” Clark said, setting the phone back down. “What was it you wanted, Chief?”

“I, uh...well, I told Jerry I’d visit him tonight. And I was, uh, wonderin’ if you’d go with me.”

“Me?” Clark shot a panicked look to Lois, but Perry didn’t turn to see her response.

“That’s one place I don’t want to go alone, and Alice won’t go with me, of course, and, uh, well...I don’t want to ask Jimmy to go. It might be a little awkward if I brought him to visit my son. But you know Jerry — you seemed to get along all right when we were at your house for dinner. Of course, I know that he wasn’t really being truthful about himself, but — ”

“Chief!” Clark reached out as if to put his hand on Perry’s shoulder but dropped it back to his side instead. “I’ll go, if you really want me to.”

“Careful, Perry,” Lois added almost mischievously, determinedly tucking her hand against Clark’s elbow, heedless of the strange look he gave her. “You almost sounded like me there for a second.”

Despite himself, a smile stole across Perry’s face. “Yeah, well, you learned a lot more from me than you think.”

For the second time, Perry was interrupted by the ringing of a phone, this time from Lois’s desk. Lois excused herself to answer it. “Lois Lane.” A second later, she scowled and forcefully hung up the phone. “You know, it’d be nice if you get a wrong number to at least *tell* the person that’s what happened instead of just hanging up. Don’t people realize how rude that is?”

“I’d definitely say it’s on the same level as ripping out the pages of a public phonebook,” Clark said with the hint of a real smile as he looked at his wife.

“Now, there is nothing wrong with that,” she protested through her grin, her dark eyes soft as she gazed back at Clark.

Perry cleared his throat. “Well, why don’t we go as soon as we’re done for the night, Clark? About seven, maybe?”

“Sure, Chief.”

There was a bit more spring to his step as Perry walked away from his two star reporters, a bit more life in his eyes as he looked for Jimmy, a bit more Metropolitan spirit within him as he planned his next move. In order to help Lois, he’d have to write a short editor’s note at the bottom of her article, just a little something to help emphasize the point she was trying to make. To help Clark...well, that was what the trip to the prison was for.

“Jimmy!” Perry caught the kid’s sleeve as he dashed past him. “What do you say we grab a bite for lunch? Finish up what you’re doing, and let’s skedaddle.”

Almost cheerfully, he began to whistle. After all, he thought, he hadn’t gotten to be editor-in-chief because he could yodel.

Chapter 4: Dread

A hard ball of dread sat low in Clark’s stomach. His destination was less than half a block away, visible to him even without employing his powers. He could have been there in the fraction of a second as Superman; as Clark, he could reach it in a minute.

Yet he couldn’t bring himself to take one more step nearer it.

Nervously, he fiddled with his tie. It would have been easier to come as Superman, he knew, but he hadn’t yet managed to convince himself to change into the superhero. The feel of hands pulling on his cape, the sound of shouts aimed his way, the look of fear and hatred — they were all too fresh, too raw, a wound that hadn’t yet scabbed over. Superman was hated now, hated and feared; Clark wasn’t. And so he was Clark.

But Clark couldn’t meet with Orville Dorian.

Though truthfully, Clark wasn’t sure *Superman* was up to it either.

Throughout his three and a half years as Superman, he had

accidentally hurt a few people while apprehending them. He had even, much to his horror, been responsible for a few deaths that still haunted him during dark nights when their accusing eyes would send him crashing back down to the bed. As many times as his parents and Lois told him it wasn't his fault, Clark could still vividly remember the image of Lucy kneeling beside Johnny Corbin's body, the sound of Spenser Spenser and his cohorts shattering into a million pieces, the feel of Tez's body beneath him turning limp and cold as his eyes burned into oblivion, the smell of Patrick Sullivan's body smoldering into ashes, and the terrible feelings of helplessness as Jaxon Xavier slipped away and Annette Westman shrank to nothing.

As much as he dreaded remembering these things in his dreams, how much worse would it be to look into the real eyes of a man who had been harmed by his desperate need to deny his weakness? How much worse would it be to face the accusation while he was awake?

It had been easier lifting the space-shuttle, but Clark finally managed to take another step toward the station, and another, and another, until finally he found himself just across from it. And now it was time to change into Superman and take responsibility for his actions.

<I'm used to saving people, not getting them injured,> he had once told Lois.

Clark double-checked several times that he was alone in the alley before spinning into the Suit. Now, more than ever, he could not afford his secret identity being discovered. He needed the haven of Clark Kent, a refuge to which he could flee when being Superman hurt too much. So, carefully, Clark modeled the stance that had become iconic. He spread his legs to keep from running, straightened so that he seemed taller than he really was, folded his arms across his chest to hide everything he was really feeling, and firmed his jaw to appear sterner and more invulnerable. It was a pose he had never consciously adopted, each facet built by circumstance and public perception — a pose he was now depending on to remind him that he was a superhero, not a man.

Not daring to lose the pose lest he not be able to find it again, he floated straight up into the air and then landed almost immediately on the precinct's top step. Taking a deep breath, he strode inside the building, swallowing his dread, and exuding a false layer of confidence.

"Superman," Henderson greeted him openly. "How are you doing?"

His arms briefly loosened as Clark almost lost hold of the entire façade, its solidity crumbling beneath the unexpected weight of the inspector's concern. "I'm fine," he replied stiffly. "Though I assume you want my statement concerning —"

"Nah. I got plenty of eye-witness accounts, as well as a clear set of laws that prohibit any charges being pressed against someone only trying to help. I've already informed Dorian of that, but he's got himself a lawyer, so be careful. I'd hate to see you facing another lawsuit."

"Thanks," Clark managed, astonished by the torrent of words from the taciturn inspector. "I just want to apologize and let him know that I never meant to harm him."

"I sincerely doubt that you did," Henderson stated decisively. "I talked to Dr. Klein. He said that if you had really swiped Dorian at superspeed like he claims, he'd have been torn in half. Obviously, his story is bogus."

"And the gashes on his arms?" Clark asked.

It was hard to tell due to the tinted lenses Henderson preferred, but Clark thought he saw compassion in the officer's eyes. "Definitely caused by shattered glass."

Clark closed his eyes but couldn't escape the knowledge. "Then I did hurt him. I need to apologize, try to make amends."

Henderson studied him for a long moment, so long that Clark almost lost his composure. Finally, he shook his head and let out

a long sigh. "I suppose you do at that. Come on. He's in my office."

Consciously burying himself under the Superman persona, Clark stiffened his spine and followed Henderson into his small office. Upon his arrival, the two men already present stood from their seats. The one holding a briefcase and sporting an indifferent expression was obviously the lawyer; Superman recognized him from past run-ins. The other man was short, overweight, and trying to hide nervousness behind belligerence.

Henderson waved a hand as he made the perfunctory introductions. "Superman — Orville Dorian — Wesley Lenke."

"Mr. Dorian." Superman inclined his head graciously and held out a hand. "As much as I regret the situation, I am pleased to meet you."

Dorian didn't take the offered hand. "Of course you regret the situation," he snapped, his tenor voice harsh and grating. "You can't stand that your unimpeachable image should be tarnished, can you?"

"Mr. Dorian, I'm here to apologize for any of my actions that put you in dang —"

"Well, I've got news for you, *Superman!*" Dorian's mouth twisted with distaste, and Clark fought the urge to step back before his contempt. "Simply existing with the destructive powers you hold at your beck and call puts people in danger! I've been saying it from the beginning, and now I have absolute proof of it!"

"I never meant to hurt you, and I assure you that I usually have complete control of my —"

"You are a menace, Superman, one that shouldn't be allowed in the city!"

Clark flinched back from the accusing finger Dorian poked at him, the movement causing his gaze to fall on the bandages adorning the man's arms. Superman, he reminded himself desperately; he was Superman, an invulnerable superhero.

He wished he were as strong as people thought he was, but if he were, why did the simple sight of bandages cause him to feel sick?

"Mr. Dorian," he tried again through the disconcerting sensation of falling — not a feeling he was accustomed to.

"No! If you think a simple apology is going to make me fall for the charms with which you've seduced and deceived the rest of the world, you're very much mistaken!" Dorian turned to his lawyer. "You were right, Mr. Lenke — this was a waste of time. Be warned, Superman, I plan to take this to whatever court I have to in order to make people realize you are a danger. Metropolis has been your playground too long — I plan to change that. And thanks to your recklessness, I have the means to do exactly that."

"Please, wait!" Superman stepped forward to follow the men exiting the room, but Henderson's hand on his arm stopped him.

"Don't, Superman." The inspector shook his head. "It's no use. He won't listen."

The last façade of the untouchable hero fell away, leaving Clark defenseless and alone, staring after a man he had harmed. "I never meant to hurt anyone," he whispered. "The last thing I want is for people to be afraid of me."

"Trust me, they're not." Henderson sighed and slumped back into his chair. "Come on, K — uh, Superman. If people were afraid of you, they wouldn't accuse you to your face or pull on your cape or antagonize you. They'd be falling all over themselves trying to assure you that they were on your side. You'd be surrounded by flatterers and sycophants, not rude, paranoid creeps like the one who just left this office."

Clark shook his head, wishing he could go numb to stop the devastating pain and yet cherishing that pain because it meant he still cared about whether he hurt people or not. "All my life, I've worked so hard to keep people from hating me. I've been so careful. And now... I should have never —"

“What?” Henderson demanded. “Answered a cry for help? Responded to an alarm? That’s what you do, Superman!”

“Not if it hurts people,” Clark stated definitively. “I realized even before I went to stop that robbery that my powers were too strong for me to safely control, yet I went anyway. That’s unacceptable.”

The inspector shook his head. “Look, I know you feel responsible, and really, maybe that’s a good thing — it proves that you don’t take things lightly. All right, I accept that. I understand that. But the red Kryptonite is safely stowed away, and you’re back to normal. You’ve got to move on. If you let this fester in your mind, you’ll never be effective again. Trust me. I’ve seen it happen to good police officers.”

For a long moment, Clark stared at Henderson, not sure what to say. Only belatedly did he realize that he had forgotten to be Superman. Without that mask to cover him, he couldn’t figure out how to handle the situation.

Suddenly, his head snapped around as he heard a cry for help and an alarm sound simultaneously, both originating from the same place. “There’s a robbery,” he hastily told Henderson at the inspector’s interested look. “Fiftieth and Bessolo; a convenience store.”

“Go!” Henderson snapped. “We’ll follow.”

That unreasoning, unshakable fear filled Clark, the same that had caused him to hesitate such a long moment that morning. The fear he had managed to shake off only because Lois was looking at him so trustingly and commanding him to go. How could he trust himself to handle this safely if he didn’t have her there to reassure him?

“Go, Superman!”

Clark jerked and met Henderson’s eyes — Henderson’s trusting eyes. Filled with sudden determination, Clark gave a sharp nod, then disappeared, replaced by Superman, who blurred into the distance. Police sirens chased him to the scene of the crime, falling further behind as he streaked across blocks in an instant.

In an odd way, Clark felt as if he were watching himself make the rescue. He had done the same thing hundreds of times before, so many that it had become little more than routine to round up the robbers, see that they were safely bound, ensure no one was hurt, and deliver the criminals to the arriving police. Yet never before had he been so aware of his least movement.

Superspeed had been his largest bane while under the influence of the red Kryptonite, so Clark was careful to modulate his speed as he flashed through the doors of the small store. His strength had caused the most damage by leaving fingerprints on Lois’s arm, so he kept himself under rigid control as he bound two of the robbers before they even knew he had arrived. His heat-vision had terrified him the most when he hadn’t been able to shut it off while Lois was in the room with him, so he refrained from using it at all.

But there was one more robber, standing behind the counter near the terrified cashier. “Don’t come any closer, Supes!” the thug yelled menacingly, brandishing a knife and yanking the hostage closer.

Clark froze.

This situation had played itself out a hundred — a thousand — times before. Every time, if he didn’t use his heat-vision to make the criminal drop their weapon, he would use super-breath to toss the criminal away from the innocent victim.

And yet...he hadn’t used his super-breath since before the red Kryptonite. The one time he had been tempted to, the image of Lois’s still, pale body lying like a corpse in front of Mazik and Nigel had stopped him. He hadn’t dared risk using the deadly power, not when he hadn’t been certain he could control it, not after seeing the power of his simple exhalation in S.T.A.R. Labs.

Now...now he wasn’t sure he would be able to keep the cold

air to a safe level. And he couldn’t — could *not* — bear to hurt someone else.

“That’s it,” the robber directed. He brought the knife closer to the hostage, causing the cashier to whimper with fear.

The sound was Clark’s undoing. As much as he couldn’t bear to hurt anyone, he also couldn’t stand seeing anyone in pain or danger.

Ignoring the tightening nervousness in his stomach and the fear increasing his heart-rate, Clark breathed in and blew gently at the robber. Seeing Superman’s intake of breath and knowing what would come next, the criminal tried to duck behind the hostage. Clark’s super-breath hit him, however, and the man scabbled for purchase.

The knife drew a gash down the hostage’s arm.

The criminal crashed into the shelves behind the register and slumped to the ground, too disoriented by the chill peppering frost in his hair and the force of his fall to rise. The knife had clattered to the ground before being blown safely beneath some shelves.

Clark stared at the blood on the cashier’s arm.

He couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think past the sight of that blood.

“Oh, thank God you were here, Superman! I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t showed up. Oh, there’s the police. They’ll be glad to see you dealt with them already, won’t they?”

It took a long moment for the cashier’s individual words to register in Clark’s mind, longer for him to realize they weren’t a denunciation of him at all. In fact, the man hardly seemed to notice the blood staining his forearm and dribbling down to his wrist.

“Your arm,” Clark said aloud, his voice as desolate as a desert. “You need a doctor.”

The man glanced down at the wound and shrugged. “It’s hardly a scratch at all, Superman. I’d be much worse off if you hadn’t arrived when you did.”

Clark shook his head, his eyes locked on the gash. How could the man not see that it was serious? That it was bleeding?

That it was his fault.

“I’ll fly you to the hospital,” he offered.

“You don’t have to do that,” the man insisted. He rounded the counter and moved to open the door for the police. “I don’t want to handle the bills just for a scratch like this. I’ll just put some antibiotic on it and bandage it.”

“But...” Clark cut himself off. He couldn’t *force* the man to go to the hospital. “Are you *sure* you’re all right?”

“Yeah, fine. Thanks again, Superman. Here, officers, there’s one more behind the counter.”

Clark was grateful the cashier seemed to know what to do since he was almost utterly incapable of thinking past his inaction.

<I’m like a loaded gun!> he had told Lois, despair in his voice, and then he had stared down at the ruins of their doorknob. It had seemed enormous to him then, the fact that he had ruined something of theirs. He hadn’t realized that the next day would see him totally demolishing their living room and entryway.

People had ended up hurt because he hadn’t been able to control his powers. Now, they were ending up hurt because he didn’t trust himself with his powers. Everything he did was wrong. He didn’t dare go into a rescue without second-guessing his abilities, yet by second-guessing himself, he had made what could have been a fatal hesitation. Humans were so vulnerable... and he wasn’t helping them any.

He wasn’t sure how he made it to the Daily Planet building. He certainly didn’t remember changing back into Clark clothes. And yet he found himself stepping out of the elevator and into the newsroom, his gaze instantly fixing on Lois.

As if she had developed a sixth sense concerning him — and after what they had seen of Kryptonian telepathy, perhaps she had — she looked up from her coffee and unerringly met his eyes. Her instantaneous smile faded almost before it began, and Clark wondered what exactly his expression conveyed.

“Clark?” she whispered, already rising from her chair and weaving her way through all the obstacles to meet him at the top of the ramp. “Clark, what is it? What’s wrong?”

He was shaking, he realized as he reached out to tug at her sleeve and guide her into the empty stairwell. The dim lighting only made Lois seem to shine brighter, everything that was good and right about his world. It was infinitely selfish to put his own needs above her, yet he couldn’t remember ever needing her more than at this moment. Unfortunately, he couldn’t make any words emerge past the terror, guilt, and dread choking him. And he couldn’t seem to stop trembling. Some Superman he was.

“Clark! What’s wrong?” Lois ran her hands up his chest as if searching for a wound, but her large eyes never left his, seeing in him everything he couldn’t voice. “Oh, Clark,” she murmured, and she stepped close, slid her arms around his neck, and hugged him.

Though his arms hung limply at his sides, Clark drank in every nuance of the embrace. He opened every pore of his body and allowed her love to bathe him with as much goodness and health as the sun. Briefly, his trembling grew worse.

“Clark?” Lois drew back just enough to look into his eyes. “Please, talk to me. Tell me what’s wrong! Didn’t you meet with Dorian?”

“I-I hurt someone,” he stammered, the three words he had dreaded his entire life and worked so hard to avoid.

“No,” Lois instantly denied, conviction in every line of her body. “He’s lying, Clark. There is no way he survived hitting you head-on. It’s impossible. He’s only try —”

“Not him.” Clark lowered his forehead against Lois’s, needing that extra strength in order to continue. “I apologized to him, but he wouldn’t listen.” His words came out disjointed and chaotic, none of the statements able to erase the mental images of blood and bruises. “He was so angry, Lois, and he thought I...he thought I...I don’t know what he thought.”

Lois tilted his face so she could meet his eyes, the sensation of her fingers on his chin burning through him like vital warmth. “He thought *wrong*, Clark.”

“But I hurt someone.” Vaguely, he was aware that he was repeating himself, but how could he move past this awful confession? Why didn’t anyone besides him realize that this fact destroyed him?

“Who?” she demanded, her hands tightening on his shoulders. “If it wasn’t Dorian, who was it?”

“There was a cry for help,” he admitted, though he would have done anything for this story to take a different turn.

“And you answered it,” she prompted.

“You’re so much more certain than I was.”

“I know you a lot better than you think,” she teased with an impish grin. The lump in his throat grew marginally smaller, allowing his breaths to come a bit easier. “So then what happened?”

“Then...I froze. I *froze*, Lois” He gently tugged free of her embrace so he could pace in an effort to safely expend some of his excess energy. “The robber was near his victim, and I knew I should do like I always do and blow him a safe distance away, but...I couldn’t. I couldn’t risk turning him into a block of ice!”

“And then?” Her voice was soft as a breath, gentle as a raindrop, reassuring as only she could be.

“And then the criminal tugged the hostage closer, cut up his arm, and almost killed him before I did what I should have done to begin with and blew him clear.” Clark scrubbed a hand through his hair. “It wasn’t lack of control that handicapped me — it was

my *fear* of its absence. I can’t do this, Lois! I can’t be Superman!”

“What?” He had clearly shocked her.

“Superman has to be able to make decisions and then act on them immediately. To be Superman, I have to stop being afraid. I have to convince myself that I have my powers under control.”

“All right.” She stepped up to him to take his hand, so brave and enthusiastic and willing that Clark remembered all the reasons he loved her more than life itself. “How do you do that?”

“I have to relearn all my powers.” The plan, forming as he fled the scene of the crime and the man he hadn’t helped nearly as much as he should have, crystallized in his mind. “The first time I learned them, Dad took me to an isolated field and helped me practice until I knew I could control myself. So...I think I should go back to Smallville and convince myself that the effects of the red Kryptonite are completely gone.”

“Okay.” Lois swallowed and stepped back, releasing his hand. Clark had to bite back his protest. “You do what you have to do,” she told him, just as she always gave him permission to leave her when he heard a cry for help. Only this time, the cry for help was his own.

Clark hesitated. “I...I need you with me, Lois.”

He was rewarded with the beautiful smile he would do almost anything to provoke. “Okay,” she agreed happily.

“It’s just...” He paused, not sure how to explain his reason for bringing her into possible danger. “When I practiced by myself, it never seemed to work as well as when Dad was there. With him standing by me, I *had* to safely manage the powers. I had to make sure I didn’t hurt him. I think I need that focus point, that clear reason for keeping everything in control.”

“Okay,” she said again, beaming at him. “I’m not afraid of you, Clark. I’d love to go with you.”

“We’ll have to fly there,” he said uncertainly, not yet sure he should be picking her up.

“I know.” Lois’s smile turned mischievous as she ran a hand up his chest. “That is part of the allure of going places with you.”

Despite the situation, a chuckle escaped Clark. It felt good to be reminded that his powers weren’t necessarily bad. How did she always know what he needed? he wondered as he slowly spun into the Suit.

Clark couldn’t remember a time when he had felt so awkward getting ready to scoop Lois up. He knew he had done it many times before, but as he looked at her, he couldn’t remember the mechanics of how he usually did it. Did he bend down? Where exactly did he put his hands? What if he accidentally bumped into her bruise?

Her eyes softening, Lois slipped her arms around his neck. “You said it wasn’t your lack of control that stopped you — it was your fear. You’re *not* going to hurt me, Clark, so just fly.” She kissed him lightly on the lips.

And as simply as that, it was easy to pick her up, to cradle her close to his heart, and to fly into the sapphire skies toward home. So easy he couldn’t imagine life any other way.

Chapter 5: Surprise

It was funny, Lois thought several hours later as she gazed at her husband standing several feet away from her in a Kansas field. She would have thought a practice session with Superman would involve huge explosions, enormous weights, and lots of visual effects. She had yet to see any of those things and, by this point, she doubted she would at all. What she had seen was so much more interesting, and oh so much more indicative of who Clark really was.

No wonder he was so quiet in person when he stood for ten minutes and practiced listening to things happening several miles away or blocked the sounds out so that all he could hear was the sound of birds chirping nearby. No wonder he was so unassuming

when he could pinpoint a twig lying half a mile away and burn a minute hole through it. No wonder he was so sure when he could pearl a bush with a thousand frozen droplets, then melt them in a coruscating rainbow. No wonder he was so prompt when he could flash around the world in less than a minute and stop on a dime.

Practicing his powers, Lois learned, wasn't about the big things at all; it was about the small things.

"I don't need to search for limits," Clark explained without the smallest sign of arrogance. "I need to limit what I have."

So Lois watched him crush a pebble into intricate shapes... without turning it into gravel. She watched him freeze a stick and then melt the ice... without setting the wood on fire. She watched him blur high into the sky and return instantly to her side... without overstepping his chosen mark. She watched him perform aerial maneuvers... without disturbing the branches around him.

She watched...and she marveled at the amount of control and precision that went into even the smallest of Clark's actions. How could the world accuse him of recklessness and foolhardiness when caution was obviously Superman's byword?

After a while, Lois got into the spirit of the tests Clark posed himself. She didn't want him to be alone in the solitary rite he was performing, so she treated it like a game and gave him her own challenges, daring him with her laugh and good-natured taunts. After his initial surprise and intense concentration — as if he feared that failing her challenge would mean he lost her — he began to smile a bit. When he passed every one of the tests and began to slowly relax, he even teased her back and laughed a couple times at her ever more outrageous attempts to stump him.

Lois tried to hide how honored she felt to be given this look into Clark's personal training. Once, before they were married, she had told him that every time she thought she knew everything about him, he surprised her with something new. That hadn't changed, she knew, and she was certain that it wouldn't ever stop being true.

Who would guess that Superman trained himself in the use of his natural powers? Who would guess that he wasn't so much concerned with using his powers as he was with turning them off? Who would guess that he had nightmares about himself and what he could become?

They were private facts, private moments, and aside from his parents, Lois was the only one who got to see them. It made her love him all the more and stirred a depth of protectiveness she never would have thought herself capable of before. In years past, he hadn't had anyone to turn to, and she knew from experience that that fact had taught him to push his fears down deep inside and try to ignore them. Only now, looking back, did she realize exactly how much Clark kept locked inside himself. His loss when first his spaceship and then the globe had been stolen from him. His terror and grief when she had been engaged to Lex. His confusion and helplessness when both Resplendent Man and an innocent child had possessed his powers. Even his love for her and fear of her reaction to his secret — he had had to hide all that away. But now, of his own free will, he had chosen to share this part of himself with her, and Lois grew even more resolved to force Metropolis to see the error of their ways.

Clark deserved better, and she was bound and determined to see that he got it.

"Okay, don't move," Clark instructed her gently. "I'm going to see if I can stop myself while moving at superspeed in tight corners."

"Okay," Lois agreed, a bit breathless already from all that she had seen him do.

Hearing that quality in her voice, Clark gave her a small, warm smile. And then disappeared.

Lois whirled to look behind her. A delighted grin sprang to her lips when she saw him standing there, just across from where he had been an instant before. He smiled again and repeated the

trick several times, each time appearing at a different part of the rough square he had drawn around Lois by melting the layer of snow atop the ground.

"I could almost think you were in two places at the same time!" she exclaimed when he finally stood still for more than a second.

"It's a handy trick," he admitted, a shade of remorse darkening his eyes.

"Good," she proclaimed definitively, refusing to let him blame himself for protecting his secret...and his survival.

Forcibly, she banished the image of him writhing in pain before Kryptonite. It was an image never far from her mind since the mayor's traitorous command the day before.

"I'll be right back," Clark promised abruptly before blurring away.

Lois had only just started to wonder where he could have gone — it hadn't taken him this long to zip around the world! — when he returned with a blanket and picnic basket tucked under an arm. "I thought we could eat a light dinner before going back to Metropolis," he explained self-consciously.

"Good idea." Lois reached out, took the blanket she recognized from their linen closet, and spread it over the grass Clark had uncovered for her. Before she sat down, he raked the blanket with a gaze to warm it. The quiet, enjoyable dinner passed much as had their breakfast. Clark teased her a bit and laughed when she made her own retorts. Much better even than that was the silvery gleam that had returned to his eyes and the way he no longer overtly avoided her touch.

"You know, there's one thing you didn't practice," Lois said conversationally when they had both finished eating.

"What's that?" Clark asked, reclining on an elbow, his eyes half-closed.

"This." Lois reached out and brushed her fingers over his cheek. "Touch. And I think you need to practice it."

His swallow was audible, his gaze now intent on her. "Lois..."

"Give me your hand."

His hand was warm and solid and trembled slightly as she cradled it in both of hers.

"I don't know why you're so afraid of these hands," she whispered, knowing he could hear her even above the gusts of wind. "They're so much more gentle than anything else I've ever encountered." Slowly, she lifted his hand and placed it on her cheek, simulating the movement that had first introduced her to the man he truly was. "I love it when you touch me like this. It makes me feel...cherished and safe and loved. You do it every time — every time we kiss, every time you hold me, every time I need you. Why do you do it, Clark?" She peered at him curiously, almost as eager to hear his answer as she was to reassure him.

Though she was no longer holding his hand to her face, he kept it there anyway, his thumb gently brushing back and forth over her cheek. His eyes never left his hand, as if he meant to protect her from even himself. "I do it because...because I do cherish you and love you and want to protect you. Because you're so beautiful that I just can't stop myself from touching you, from framing that beauty. Because sometimes it seems like a dream that you would love me and, if I hold on too tightly, you'll disappear. Because I want to soak in the feel of you for all the times when I couldn't touch you."

"But you *can* touch me now," she told him solemnly. "Any time you want. I'm yours, you know."

"I do know that," he said softly, his hand threading in her hair as he curled his fingers around the back of her head. "I just... can't always believe it."

"Then let me convince you," she murmured, and leaned forward to kiss him.

For an instant, Clark seemed to freeze. Then, with his free

arm, he pulled her closer to him and returned the kiss, his hand cradling her head as he always did. His fingers brushed across her cheek, his hand ran along her shoulder and her waist, as if he reassured himself that he really could touch her without hurting her.

That he could love her without destroying her.

When the kiss ended, Lois looked up at him and spread her own fingers along his face, considering him with his words ringing in her ears, framing his own beauty with her hands, cherishing him, loving him, wanting — *needing* — to protect him. “I love you so much, Clark,” she stated in a shadow of her normal voice, barely able to get the words out past the depth of emotion rioting within her.

“And I love you,” he returned, his own voice so low it sent shivers through her, his statement so easily spoken that it showcased perfectly how natural he considered loving her to be. “But, Lois,” he added, “would you promise me something?”

“What?”

His arm pulled her tighter against him — a good sign, Lois decided, since he didn’t seem afraid that he would crush her. “If I…” He swallowed hard. “If I ever hurt you again… will you please tell me?”

“I will,” she said when she could be sure her voice wouldn’t break. “I’m sorry that I hid it this time. I just didn’t want you to —”

“It’s all right,” he assured her. “I just… I can’t believe that I… didn’t even notice. I hurt you, and I… I didn’t *know*.”

“Because you didn’t hurt me.” Lois slipped her arms around his neck to keep him from pulling away. “Yes, you bruised my skin, but I knew that *you*, Clark, did not hurt me personally. The red Kryptonite was responsible, not malice or anger or intent to harm.”

He clearly didn’t agree, but he smiled at her anyway because that was what he always did. Then he kissed her again, his mouth warm and welcoming and *confident* once more against hers.

When he pulled away, his eyes gleamed with that warm silvery-brown she had loved in two men before discovering they were one and the same, and his lips were quirked in that smile she had seen so often from Clark Kent and frequently sought to draw from Superman. “So,” he asked teasingly, “do I pass this test?”

“Of course,” she said easily. “How could you not with a great teacher like me?”

“I have no idea,” he replied honestly, pulling her to her feet as he stood. “I guess we should get back to Metropolis. I’m supposed to visit the prison with Perry.”

Lois furrowed her brow. “Do you know *why* he wants you to go with him?”

Clark frowned. “I thought it was because he needed some support. I can’t imagine how painful it must be for him to think his son doesn’t love him.”

“You’ll never have to find out,” Lois promised fiercely, the fury at Metropolis stirred from its slumber. Suddenly, as much as she had enjoyed this interlude with Clark, she was impatient to be back at the Daily Planet finishing up the next morning’s article. Not that that stopped her from enjoying the flight back.

“Are you really all right?” Clark asked her before they reached the roof of the Daily Planet building. “I mean, you’ve been so caught up in helping me — and I appreciate that — but… how are *you* doing? You seem… a little preoccupied.”

Laughing, Lois kissed his cheek. “I’m flying, Clark. That’s enough to preoccupy anyone.”

“But last night you seemed a little angry about the green Kryptonite bullet.”

Lois gaped at him. “Aren’t *you* angry about that?”

He shrugged. “They were scared, Lois.”

“That doesn’t excuse murder,” she retorted. “A lot of

criminals who threaten me are scared, but you never let them use that as an excuse.”

“Isn’t that different?” he asked, shifting her in his arms so that he was embracing her as they floated down toward the distinctive roof below them.

Lois stiffened. “Why? Because you have to protect me and I can’t —”

“Because they’re breaking the law,” he hastily clarified. “And the shooter was given orders by the mayor.”

“And since when does the mayor have the right to order anyone’s assassination?” Lois demanded, that cold fury welling up within her to take the place of blood in her veins. “You weren’t under arrest. You weren’t a fugitive. You weren’t declared a national threat. You weren’t breaking the law. And we weren’t under martial law — so what gave her the right to order your death?”

Clark landed them safely and let her feet touch the ground before he answered. “I don’t know. But I was dangerous, Lois. They were just trying to protect themselves.”

“You can say that all you want,” Lois declared in a voice of steel, “but it doesn’t make it right. You protect justice for everyone else — why won’t you protect it for yourself?”

A stricken look rearranged his features, and his hands tightened on her waist. He opened his mouth, but no words emerged.

“That’s all right, Clark,” Lois told him gently. “I’ll protect it for you. For both of us. Because I need you in my life, and I don’t want to have to worry about Kryptonite bullets being issued to every police officer.”

“They wouldn’t —”

“They’ve already taken the first step,” she interrupted him. “I’m going to make sure they don’t take another.”

A slight smile curved his lips, erasing the shock she had placed there. “They don’t stand a chance, do they?”

Her grin was more satisfied. “No. They don’t.”

“Some people believe Superman sacrifices nothing to be the superhero we all know him as, to dedicate his days to performing rescues and stopping crimes. You would think that after Diana Stride’s attempt on Superman’s life and the subsequent publicizing of Kryptonite this belief would have vanished. Since that time, it has only become more apparent that there are things that can harm Superman, Kryptonite being chief among them, both the red and green varieties — such as the red Kryptonite that temporarily reduced Superman’s control of his powers and the green Kryptonite formed into a bullet in yet another attempt on Superman’s life.

“Once, the superhero was asked why he chose to be Superman when it made him a target and kept him from having things we all take for granted. He replied that it gave him a purpose and a cause, and that it was his reason for being here.

“Though he has made himself a hero for the whole of the world, Superman has adopted as his motto, ‘Truth, justice, and the American way.’ The last is a reference not to our specific way of life above all others, but rather to the idealism at the core of our country, an idealism adopted as their own by a large percentage of the world. The idealism that believes tomorrow will be better, the world will improve, the future will be ours — in part because we will stand up next to our fellow man and make it that way.

“Superman has stood up to make the world a better place, to improve tomorrow, and to shape the future. He has made sacrifices that I suspect none of us can fully understand. He daily chooses to be the hero this world needs. And he has countless times saved our lives, our city, and even our world.

“Though he asks for nothing in return for his services, I hardly think a bit of gratitude would be too much to ask for.

Certainly a green bullet fired when he wasn't looking — and illegally — isn't what he should have to expect in return for his sacrifices.

"No one should have to live looking over their shoulder. No one should be forced to live waiting for that bullet to be fired while they're in the midst of living out their life. Yet Superman is being asked — being expected — to live his life in exactly that manner. One misstep, the mayor has conveyed to him through her actions, one wrong move, one action she doesn't agree with, and he might find a green Kryptonite bullet in his heart.

"I shouldn't be alone in protesting this policy and demanding an accounting for the mayor's decision.

"Metropolis shouldn't be alone in abhorring this step taken and how close Superman came to being struck down by "friendly fire."

"America shouldn't be alone in dealing with the problem and assuring Superman he is welcome and appreciated.

"The entire world should join in to the plea for — to borrow a phrase from someone else — truth, justice, and the American way."

Lois looked over her article twice more, then saved the changes and sent it to Perry for the next evening edition. The editor had already left, after showing her a few of the changes he wanted her to make to the article she had finished just before Clark showed up to spirit her away to Kansas, but she wanted the article to be ready as soon as possible. She would continue her campaign as long as necessary, her fury assured her of that.

Satisfied with her work — though certainly not with the need for the editorials — she shut off her computer and gathered up her coat and satchel. She hoped the visit with Jerry would help Clark a bit; he always seemed to feel better after he was able to help someone else, and he was probably right in assuming that Perry needed some support right now. She had never seen the Chief look so defeated as he had the night before, not even after he had discovered that his golfing buddy, Truman Black, had been a Nazi, or that Bill Church Jr. was in charge of Intergang. A pang of sympathy for her mentor sliced through Lois. He had been through an awful lot the past year; she hoped things would begin looking up for him soon.

"Lois, your phone!"

On the ramp heading toward the elevator, Lois stopped and looked back at Jimmy's cry as he answered the phone for her.

After a moment, Jimmy shrugged and hung up the phone. "Never mind. They hung up."

"It figures," she muttered. "Thanks, Jimmy."

Since Clark had brought her to work, she had left her Jeep at home, so she took a cab to Hyperion Avenue and walked up the street toward home. Just before she reached the steps, Lois felt a hand clamp tightly around her mouth, forestalling her from calling for her husband.

"Don't move, Lane!" a man hissed in her ear. The feel of metal at her throat stilled her hand as it gripped the one over her mouth. "We got a message for your husband, and we're askin' politely for you to deliver it to him."

Lois's eyes widened as terror flooded additional adrenaline through her system. They couldn't mean Superman... could they?

"Tell him not to come after us, or he'll be even sorrier than he is now."

With an inward snort of disgust, Lois shook off her paranoid fancies and bit down hard on the man's hand. Before he could do more than let out a yell as the weapon faltered from its position near her throat, Lois grabbed the man's arm and flipped him over her shoulder.

"Superman, help!" she screamed as loudly as she could.

Unfortunately, she realized belatedly, there was another man behind the first. Lois rushed him before he could use his weapon, grappling for the gun. Things might have gone badly if she lived

in any other city, but frankly, Metropolis was Superman's turf. And her... well, Lois hadn't yet figured out why the villains couldn't realize that their chances at remaining out of prison were significantly increased if they stayed away from her.

Of course, she realized with a sinking feeling, Superman was currently in prison himself. And though he was only visiting one of the inmates, it wasn't exactly a quick process to check in and out of the place.

And the man holding the gun was a whole lot stronger than she was.

Chapter 6: Worry

The sight of Clark returning to the newsroom with the tiny hint of a smile where despair had previously rested and his hand intertwined with Lois's had eased some of Perry's worry and made him think that maybe they could get through this latest mess.

The sight of his son shuffling toward him in a prison uniform with a dozen guards standing in the vicinity instantly reawakened all of Perry's earlier worry and doused his hope.

His son was in prison.

Perry could remember the way Jerry had felt in his arms, wrapped in blue blankets, his tiny eyes blinking against the hospital light. He remembered carrying him on his shoulders and tickling his rounded stomach, delighting in the sound of Jerry's childish laughter. He remembered shaking Jerry's hand and pulling him into an awkward hug the day of his high school graduation. A hundred memories — a thousand moments — all flashed through Perry's mind as Jerry sat down on the other side of the partition.

"Hi, Jerry," Clark said after a moment, darting a quick glance to his editor.

Perry wanted to speak, but he couldn't. How did he apologize for a lifetime of neglect and rushed love? How did he explain why a newspaper had been more important than the life he had been responsible for?

How did he ignore the sense of betrayal that choked him? How did he ask his son why he had done this to him?

"Hey, Clark." Jerry flashed his patented "charmer" grin at the reporter, but his gaze instantly returned to his father. "Dad," he said cautiously. "You doin' okay?"

How was he supposed to answer that? Perry wondered. He wanted to snap that he had been doing much better before his own son had lied to him, manipulated him, and betrayed him. And yet... it was partly Perry's own fault. And he wasn't even the one who had been hurt the most. Superman was the one who had to live with the consequences of Jerry's actions.

"I'm, uh, I'm fine," he said belatedly. "How're you doin', son?"

"Better this time around than the last." Jerry made sure to meet Perry's gaze, and the editor felt the hardness encasing his heart melt a bit at the subtle assurance that his son was keeping his promise to turn over a new leaf. "And I may not end up being in here that long, not if Superman really does put in a good word for me. The judges put a lot of stock in his input."

Carefully, Perry kept his gaze straight ahead. "Do you think Superman would really be willing to do that for you?" he asked quietly. "You did target him specifically, after all. Not everyone takes kindly to that."

Jerry flinched and looked down at his hands. "Well, Clark said —"

"I've talked to Superman," Clark interrupted, "and he promised he would speak on your behalf."

Perry felt a hint of his worry fade. He looked over at the young reporter and really took in his appearance. Clark's eyes were shadowed behind his glasses, and his hands were carefully tucked in his lap, but his shoulders were straight and he met

Jerry's gaze head-on. A spark of admiration fluttered through Perry, and he had to tighten his own hands over the table between him and Jerry to keep himself from clapping Clark on the shoulder. How ironic that his own son had disappointed him while the man who didn't share even a hint of common blood with him made him feel as proud as if he *were* his father.

"Really?" Jerry gave Clark a hopeful smile. "I mean, I'd understand if he didn't. Like Dad said, I did target him. Some guys might hold a grudge."

Clark shrugged. "It's over and done with. You realized you were wrong. In the end, you did what was right. That's enough."

"Well, thanks, Clark. I'm glad you're not mad at me too. I know Superman's a friend of yours."

"Clark and Superman both have a forgiving spirit," Perry interjected before Clark had to come up with a reply. "And I'm glad. Son, I...I know some of the blame for what you did is mine to claim. And, well, I wouldn't feel right without admitting that I've made plenty of mistakes. I just want you to know that...well, that I'm on your side. If you need anything, you just let me know, all right?"

"Thanks, Dad." Jerry cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably. "How did Mom take the news?"

Clark leaned back in his seat and tried to pretend he wasn't there. Perry appreciated the gesture. It was a private conversation, but he didn't know that he wanted to face it alone. It was nice to have someone else to lean on, someone he could trust. After the last year and a half, Perry was beginning to realize just how rare it was to find someone trustworthy — first the Churches, then Truman Black, and now his own son. But Clark...Perry knew he could trust Clark.

"Well, she was...all right. Not jumpin' up and down for joy, you understand, but...she'll get through it. We all will."

"Yeah." Jerry shifted and looked behind him as two or three guards gathered by the doorway leading farther into the prison, their hushed whispering covered by the echoing sounds of the dozen conversations transpiring all around them.

"What the samhill is going on here?" Disturbed by the obvious worry of the officers, Perry shifted and stole a glance at Clark, who had his head cocked as if listening to something.

"They've all been pretty nervous today," Jerry observed with a shrug. "The rumor is that one of the prisoners was found dead."

"Dead?" Perry blinked, then leaned toward his son, the old newshound in him unable to give up such a juicy tidbit. "Suicide?"

"Not from what I heard. One of the inmates claims he saw Emmett's cell door — it was twisted and malformed, as if someone had grabbed hold of it and bent it to pull it from the lock."

"You believe this man?"

Jerry chuckled. "Dad, this is jail. Nobody's exactly what you'd call...reliable. However...he is in the cell next to Emmett, so barring a bit of exaggeration, I'd say he's in a position to know more than anyone else."

"Emmett?" Clark asked, leaning forward with caged intensity. Perry looked on in admiration, reminded of why Clark was one of his two top reporters. "Emmett who?"

A frown crossed Jerry's dark features, and the slant of his brows reminded Perry of Alice when she got to worrying over a problem. "Hmm. Let me see...it started with the letter V. I'll ask around and see, but I don't remember it right offhand. He was a scientist, that much I know — always going around prating about how he was smarter than ten of us put together. If this rumor's true, though, I'd say it didn't do him much good."

"Would you mind letting me know if you hear anything else?" Clark paused, that habitual embarrassment giving him an apologetic expression. "Sorry. I didn't mean to —"

"Don't worry about it," Perry assured him. "Trust me, if Jerry

was having as hard a time as me tryin' to think of something to say, we're both grateful for the topic."

A slight laugh escaped Jerry. "Nothing like being blunt, huh, Dad?"

"It's better than beatin' around the old bush," he said, refusing to apologize.

"No, I like it," Jerry hurriedly reassured him, prompting a slither of uneasiness in Perry. He had at first been gratified and pleased by Jerry's anxiousness to please...until it had turned out that it was only his way of deflecting suspicion. Now, the return of the flattery made the editor wonder what his son had up his sleeve.

And Perry hated that suspicion. He hated the lack of trust. He hated the entire situation.

"Well, uh..." Perry wasn't quite sure how to make a graceful exit. He had thought that seeing Jerry would bring him some measure of peace, some closure in the knowledge that his son was paying for his crime. Yet Jerry had already been here and done that; now he was doing it all over again. Would this be the cycle forever? A couple years in prison followed by a couple weeks of freedom? With his blood pressure just barely regulated, Perry wasn't sure he could survive another go-around.

"Look, Dad, before you go, I just wanted to say..." Jerry swallowed and looked down at his clasped hands. "I'm sorry."

Shame suffused Perry, overwhelming his remaining anxiety. "Son, you already said that. Now, take my advice — do your time and move on."

"Yeah." Jerry's shoulders slumped, as if in disappointment. What did he expect? Perry had accepted his apology, hadn't he? He had come and visited him, hadn't he? What more was he supposed to do? And why did it feel as if the burden were on his own shoulders rather than Jerry's?

"Look, I'll come and visit soon, maybe in a couple days?"

"All right. Thanks, Dad. Bye, Clark."

"Good night, Jerry." Clark offered him a smile — small, but all his smiles had been small since the incident with the red Kryptonite. "Thanks for the information."

"Hey, no prob. It might do me good to see what my old man does for a living."

"Old man, huh?" Perry smiled to cover the pain in his heart. "I'm not that old yet, *kid*."

A genuine smile made Jerry seem suddenly years younger. It was a good last note to go out on, Perry thought, and took advantage of the moment to turn and leave. Any longer and he feared he might just start crying — and that wouldn't do his reputation any good. He'd be lucky if anyone took him seriously at all considering how easily he'd been conned; the last thing he needed was to give the rumor-mongers something else to gossip about.

Clark was silent as they checked out of the prison, leaving the editor alone with his thoughts. Perry took a deep breath as soon as they emerged into the open air, evening-dark, chilly, and free. It stilled him for a moment, thinking about the way he was allowed to leave while Jerry was forbidden to cross the door's threshold. What would it be like to be so constrained? How would it feel to be forbidden to do what was natural? How much did the rejection of society — even knowing it was your own fault — hurt?

Surreptitiously, Perry cast a sidelong look at Clark.

Superman had been forbidden to help in any situation after the second or third catastrophe. He had been warned not to use his powers. He had been threatened with what amounted to banishment from the city he had adopted as his own. In essence, he had been rejected by the people he loved when they should have been offering him help and support. If anyone knew what it felt like to be constrained, forbidden, and rejected, it was Superman.

And it hadn't even been Superman's fault at all. It hadn't been any crime he had done. Instead, it had been because he was always trying to help, always ready to give more of himself, always prepared and able to stop the criminals from doing whatever it was they planned on doing.

Jerry had targeted Superman.

Perry's own son had attacked the beacon of hope and light.

He had thought that before, but he didn't think he had yet comprehended it. How did he reconcile that fact with the memories of his precious son?

It was a two-sided coin that had been threatening to drive Perry insane for the past day and a half, ever since he had seen Jerry open that briefcase and expose the red glow Perry knew from intimate experience. He had been the one, after all, to hear Bill Church Jr. freely admit to using it repeatedly on the Man of Steel. Bitterly, Perry wondered if he was fated to be hoodwinked by every criminal who ever got his hands on the rotten stuff.

"Chief, can I ask you something?" Clark's question was so sudden — and unexpected — that Perry started, then tried to cover it by clearing his throat.

"Uh, sure. Is everything all right?" He hesitated before cautiously adding, "You've seemed a little down all day. You're not still sick, are you?" Perry studied the younger man, searching for any sign of strain or discomfort.

"I'm fine." The answer was so automatic that Perry knew Clark must never even think before saying it to anyone who asked after him. The explanation for that could be the obvious, considering who he was, or it could just have been a mark of the selflessness of his character. Perry had never known anyone as caring and compassionate as Clark. Those two traits — along with a healthy dose of patience — had to have been exceptional, Perry thought wryly, or Lois might never have noticed him as anything more than a colleague.

"Chief, I know you're like a father to Lois, and I...well, what would you do if someone hurt her? Accidentally," he added hastily, a very vulnerable look reshaping his features.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Perry's mind raced furiously. He had to be very careful here if he didn't want to give the whole game away. "And, uh, just how accidental are we talking? Hypothetically."

"Well..." Clark took a deep, shuddering breath, and Perry was suddenly very glad for the cloaking darkness. "What if...she got bruised? Because...something distracted...the someone...and he...held onto her arm too...tightly."

"Uh-huh. Well, Clark, I think my reaction would depend on what Lois had to say about it. Seein' as how it was an accident and all."

"Oh." Clark kept silent for a few more steps, then blurted, "What if...she shrugged it off and said it didn't matter. But it still hurt her. I mean, the bruise is still there. So...wouldn't that...wouldn't that still matter to *you*?"

Perry came to a halt and turned to face Clark full-on. "Son, you know how much I love Lois. I hate to see her in trouble, though Elvis knows I should be used to it by now. But I have to say that...well, if I understand the situation...it was an accident."

Clark's brief look of panic quickly faded before his desperate guilt and impassioned earnestness. "But she was hurt! *I* hurt her! Doesn't that...I mean, doesn't that qualify as abuse? Abuse of power — or strength, I mean — if nothing else? Hypothetically speaking, of course." He glanced away, clearly struggling for control.

Pursing his lips, Perry reached out and took Clark by the shoulders, consciously registering the feel of the muscles hiding beneath the coat. "Clark. You can't blame yourself. Like I said, it was an accident. I mean, Elvis certainly made mistakes in his life — but he learned from them and he moved on. And he didn't take them all to the Colonel. So, what I'm goin' to ask you is...who

are you really tryin' to get forgiveness from? If Lois doesn't blame you — and I don't — then don't you think what you're really wanting is some way to forgive yourself?"

"I don't know if I can do that," Clark said so quietly Perry almost missed the words.

"Well then..." Perry shrugged and shook his head. "All this is more redundant than a back-up singer for Elvis — because nothing I say can change your mind about what you blame yourself for. Only you can do that. Hypothetically speaking, of course."

"Hypothetically," Clark repeated tonelessly.

"It might help if you remember that it was an accident," Perry couldn't resist adding with a backward glance at the brightly lit prison. "And, presumably, there was something...to distract you. So that you didn't realize how tightly you were holding her."

That had been the whole point of inviting Clark along, after all. Perry had figured Clark would need the reminder that he hadn't been to blame for what had happened, that there had been other people so much more responsible. Maybe it wasn't the most comforting solution — the knowledge that there would always be people willing to go after him — but it had been all Perry could think of to help. And maybe, after it had time to sink in, it *would* help. Unlike Lois, Clark always needed time to process things and think about them a little bit more thoroughly. And thanks to Lois and her articles, Perry thought with a bit more hope, Clark might actually have that time.

Clark took a deep breath, his voice firm. "Perry, I —" He broke off abruptly, his head cocking in that peculiar way of his, as if he were half-poised to take flight even now. It was a familiar sight, one the editor saw anywhere from two to twenty times a day.

Casually, Perry shrugged deeper into his coat, pretending to be occupied during that moment Clark took to listen to whatever it was he heard.

"Uh, Chief, I —" Desperation was written all over his face.

Perry raised his brows expectantly. "What is it, son? Forget you were supposed to meet Lois somewhere?"

"I — uh —"

"Well, you'd better hurry!" Perry exclaimed. "If I were you, I wouldn't want Lois mad at me. Hornets don't have nothin' on her."

"Right. Uh, good night, Chief." Already reaching for his tie, Clark ducked away. A short moment later, a sonic boom broke the stillness of the night, a pretty common sound in most parts of Metropolis.

With an amused smile, Perry shook his head and continued walking toward his car, hoping Clark hadn't really gone to meet Lois. The trouble that girl could get into would have amazed even the Colonel.

It was impossible for Perry to say how long he had known that Clark was Superman, or when precisely he had connected the reporter and the superhero. Certainly before the New Kryptonians had tried to take over things, and before that whole mess with Luthor and Lois's amnesia. In fact, Perry almost wondered, sometimes, if he hadn't known since that first fiasco with Luthor. Maybe he had made the connection watching Clark worry himself to nothing about Lois, and come up with information about Luthor only Superman could have known, and show up looking like death warmed over after a wedding that just so happened — it was later discovered — to involve a Kryptonite cage. Whenever he had figured it out, Perry had never had a moment's doubt concerning his belief that the two men were the same.

Appearances aside, Clark and Superman were both men of character, integrity, and decency. They each cared deeply about others and put their own lives second to the needs of the world.

And they both loved Lois so deeply that neither one could

hide it.

Perry had taken to thinking of Clark and Superman as two different men even in his own thoughts, because it made it less likely he'd slip. The last thing Clark needed was additional worry dumped on him about someone else being loose with his secret or being caught by some villain eager to pry it out of him. No, the editor thought it best that he keep his knowledge to himself. Most of the time, it was fun, watching Lois and Clark come up with their excuses for his quick exits and her exclusives.

This time...Perry had to lean against his car door before he could open it. This time it wasn't fun. This time, it was just plain awful. Clark was right when he said Perry loved Lois like a daughter, and Clark meant just as much — if not more — to him than Jerry did. Seeing them suffer...seeing them bear the brunt of Jerry's foolish decisions...it was probably the most painful thing that had ever happened to Perry, worse even than getting the divorce papers from Alice.

The press conference was the next day, and Perry was pretty certain he knew what Clark would say. He also knew that it would be just as wrong as it was right. Morally speaking, Clark was rightfully compelled to offer to leave, yet the very fact that Metropolis had driven him to do it was just wrong, plain and simple. Somehow, Perry determined, some way, he had to help Lois find a way to keep Superman in Metropolis.

The Daily Planet needed him.

Lois needed him.

The city needed him.

More to the point, Perry needed him.

Clark, after all, wasn't the only one who needed to find some way to forgive himself.

Chapter 7: Doubt

Clark had jerked the man away from Lois and seen that he and his companion were tied up using a convenient signpost before he even managed to process a thought beyond the terror flooding his system. Lois hadn't had to shout for his help in quite a while, and she had been pretty good lately about staying out of any stray villain's clutches, which was why hearing her in trouble now had jolted him so badly.

Leaving his prisoners for the moment, Clark was instantly at Lois's side, his eyes intent on hers as he sought and received assurance that she was unharmed. "Are you all right?" he asked anxiously. His eyes widened when he caught sight of the slowly fading whiteness around her mouth, her attacker's handprint clearly visible.

Briefly, Lois allowed her hand to rest on his arm, the touch sending tingles through his flesh. "I'm fine, thanks."

He studied her a moment longer, then nodded with relief. She had promised she would tell him if he hurt her again; he had to trust her. "I'll take these guys to the police station," he told her, his expression adding the promise that he would return as quickly as possible.

"All right," she agreed, understanding both the spoken and the silent messages.

Before he left, Clark peered toward their house, peeling the walls away to make sure there were no additional attackers lurking inside. After a moment, he let out his breath and gave Lois a tiny nod. Then, hoisting his prisoners up by their collars, he took to the air.

Only after he had dropped them off on Henderson's doorstep and given a brief statement did he realize that he hadn't once hesitated due to fear. In fact, he hadn't even *thought* of his recent lack of control.

Unfortunately, he couldn't decide if that was good or bad.

Shouldn't he care? Shouldn't that incident have left a deeper mark on him?

Lois had only managed to get inside the door, set down her satchel, hang up her coat, and walk upstairs before Clark was there. Despite his inward doubts, he didn't hesitate in stepping forward and willingly taking her into his arms. No matter how many times he saw her in danger, it never failed to make him sick and shaky with first terror and then relief.

"I'm all right," she whispered as she held him tightly to herself. "It's okay. I'm fine."

He drew back to look at her. "Are you?" he pressed, tentative.

With a smile, Lois tugged his head down for a deep kiss. "I am now," she breathed into his mouth.

Awestruck, Clark placed his fingers lightly on her cheek. "You're amazing," he voiced his most common thought concerning her. "How do you do that?"

"What? Kiss you?" She smiled flirtatiously. "I have had a bit of practice."

"You didn't need any practice." He shook his head, impatient with the distraction. "No. I meant, how do you recover so quickly from all these attempts on your life? Anyone else would be shaking for the next hour or so. *I'm* still shaking. Yet you always just shrug it off."

As if to prove his words, she shrugged. "I've had practice with that, too. Really, Clark, it's over and done with. And trust me, I have much better things to think about."

Clark gladly surrendered himself to her kiss, grateful he had been able to save her, and thankful he hadn't hurt anyone.

"Thanks for coming so quickly," she said when he moved from her lips to kiss her cheek.

"What did they want?" he asked, running a hand down her back in acknowledgement of her thanks, rewarded by her brilliant smile. "As I was leaving, I heard them telling the cop something about delivering a message."

Lois sobered and placed her hands on his face, much as she had done on the elevator the night before, an attempt to force him to really listen to her. "Clark, this is not your fault."

Trepidation fluttered through his mind. "What did they say?"

She let out an irritated breath and dropped her hands to his shoulders. "They said to tell my husband to leave them alone or bad things would happen."

Clark felt himself pale. Almost, he tightened his hands over her waist before remembering that his touch could be dangerous. "Your husband," he repeated hollowly. "Do you think they know I'm Superman?"

Her exasperated breath was answer enough, as was the way she threw her hands up in the air, but she answered aloud anyway, as she always did, filling him up with her words. "They're common thugs, Clark, and that's a common bad guy message! They *do not* know you're Superman."

"Then..." Clark frowned. "You think they meant Clark Kent?"

"He *is* my husband, you know," she replied flippantly. "Besides, Clark *does* have enemies. I'll bet they were with Intergang. Remember, two weeks ago, while I was working on that corruption scandal story, you did that story proving Costmart is a cover for Intergang? I'll bet you anything that's what they were talking about."

Relief made Clark smile, and he caressed her cheek with a careful hand. "Good."

She gave a satisfied nod, clearly pleased he had accepted her explanation. But then, he nearly always did. Her intuitive thinking could produce miracles; Clark was used to working with her understanding of things. "So," she questioned, "how did your visit with Perry go?"

Clark wasn't sure how to answer that question, not sure he could adequately describe the visit...or address the conversation afterward. "Do you think Perry knows about me?" he asked finally as they headed downstairs to the living room.

Lois paused. “I’ve occasionally wondered. There’s been a few too many times when he lets a story get by without pressing for more details, or when he provides excuses for us, or even when he just looks at me as if he knows what I’m hiding. Why? Did he say something?”

“Not in so many words.” Clark shifted awkwardly, uncomfortable with admitting that he had felt the need to look for paternal forgiveness from their editor. “Do you think if he *did* know, he’d tell us?”

“I doubt it,” Lois scoffed. “He likes his secrets. Remember Sore Throat? No, I think he’d prefer to keep in the background and say that a man in his position couldn’t know the things he knew.”

A chuckle escaped Clark. “I’d hate to hear that speech again. I still don’t know what he was trying to tell us there.”

“I think that was the point,” Lois said with a smile before sobering. “Would you feel comfortable with him knowing?”

Clark leaned back into the couch and tried to imagine telling Perry that he was Superman. As hard as he tried, though, he couldn’t seem to picture it in his mind’s eye. Telling anyone had always seemed a frightening prospect, so frightening that it had taken him two years to work himself up to the place where he could tell Lois — and he had wanted her to know more than anything. To tell someone else who wasn’t as close to him? It seemed impossible.

“I guess I wouldn’t mind him knowing,” he finally admitted. “I just... wouldn’t want to be the one to tell him.”

“Well, if he really does know already — and hasn’t bothered to say anything — I’d say it’s a pretty safe bet that he doesn’t want us to officially let him in on the secret.”

Clark nodded, but his reply was cut off by the ringing of the phone. When he answered it, however, he heard only a click. Hang-ups were much more common in Metropolis than in Smallville, so he dismissed the incident with a shrug and took a seat next to his wife on the couch.

Lois scooted closer to him and looped her arms around his neck. Despite the distraction she was willingly offering him, Clark knew he couldn’t forget the question he had tried to ask her on their flight back to the Daily Planet. The question he hadn’t quite been able to voice.

“Lois.” He curled his fingers around her shoulder and waist, almost not even afraid to touch her. “About the press conference tomorrow...”

“What is it?” Her lips turned down in a small frown. “Have you announced it already?”

“No. I figured I could do it in the morning.”

“Good. Don’t give them any more warning than absolutely necessary.”

“Honey, this morning, you seemed to finally agree to it. But... this afternoon, you... you didn’t seem as okay with it. So, are you? Okay with it, I mean.”

Lois’s arms fell away from him, leaving him feeling bereft. Yet he refused to look away from her. He needed to know if she was angry with *him*. He needed to know that she supported him. Because if she didn’t... well, he wasn’t sure he’d be able to make it through the press conference and whatever its results would be without her there to strengthen him.

“Clark, I understand that you feel you need to make the offer to leave. And, in theory, I support that. I mean, I know better than most that you never force yourself on anyone — though you do kind of quietly sneak in when they’re not looking,” she added with a teasing grin that faded too quickly. “What I don’t like is that Metropolis is even making you think it’s possible they’ll ask you to leave. I feel... betrayed, Clark. More betrayed than I’ve ever felt in my entire life — more even than when I found out what Lex really was. I wish I could spare you this pain.”

“Lois, honey, it’s not your fault,” he hastily assured her,

pulling her closer to him and tangling a hand in her hair.

“No, Clark, you’ve already had to suffer being rejected once before — from both New Krypton and Earth! How can they do this to you?” she cried, and Clark was startled to see tears shimmering in her dark eyes. “How can they possibly want someone as good as you are to leave?”

The rush of emotions that swelled up inside of Clark like an ocean of rippling waves was so strong and so overpowering that he couldn’t decipher them or pull one apart from the others.

Protectiveness — always present when he was with Lois from the first time she had turned away from the sight of a dead man to hide her face against his chest — engulfed him, and he pulled Lois into his lap, holding her tenderly to himself.

She loved him.

More, she hurt for him.

She was willing to fight for him.

He had known all these things before, but after the uncertainty and terror and guilt that had shadowed his life for the past few days, it hit him as if for the first time.

Lois loved him.

“I don’t care if they want me or not,” he whispered as he cradled her head against his shoulder. “As long as you want me — as long as you love me — I can survive being rejected by Metropolis.”

“I do love you,” she promised him fiercely.

“I know.” He pulled back to look in her eyes and gave her what felt like his first real smile since before the red Kryptonite had first affected him. “And I love you.”

Her tears were banished with her smile, and when she kissed him, he tasted her love for him and her acceptance of him. As he kissed her back, abandoning fear in favor of passion, he hoped she, in turn, tasted of his love and acceptance. He hoped that with every caress of his lips and stroke of his hands and breath of his being he conveyed to her the one simple truth he had known for almost four years now.

She was his everything.

Press conferences terrified Clark. They always had, from the moment he had attended his first as Superman to receive the key to the city. The throngs of people, the dozens or hundreds of pairs of eyes all intent on *him* alone, the noise that overwhelmed him, the expectations and possible revelations that might occur with so much focus being paid exclusively to him — it was all something he had tried to avoid. When standing before the mass of people, he could never quite conquer the fear that they were all there to stare at a freak, that they would recognize him for who he really was, that they would turn against him.

This press conference would be worse than any of the others, he knew, and that understanding almost turned him into a coward. It was tempting to just not show up. But if he did that, he would be running from the consequences of his own actions. And that was something he just couldn’t do. He had made a mistake — one prompted by the red Kryptonite — and now he had to own up to it.

He felt like a target as he descended from the skies to lightly land on the platform that had been set up just outside the Hall of Justice. The location had been Lois’s idea — a subtle means of reminding the people just what he had helped to save. Clark wasn’t sure it would work, but he hated arguing with Lois, so he had agreed.

There must have been at least a hundred reporters present, and gathered in a looser circle were dozens of ordinary people, there to listen to their superhero try to explain why he had endangered them.

He wasn’t there to explain, actually — as Lois had reminded him a dozen times before they had even finished a breakfast neither one of them had eaten. He was there to offer to leave. He

was there to reassure them that he was there voluntarily and only so long as they welcomed him. He was there to convince them that he was not a lawless vigilante who did whatever he pleased no matter how many people might get hurt. He was there to...

Clark took a deep breath, his plans and resolve melting under the seemingly neutral stares of the crowd gathered before him. Whatever he was there for, he wished he could just leave. He wished this was all over and done with.

Make the offer, listen to their response, fly away, he told himself firmly, crossing his arms over his chest in a defensive posture as the mayor stepped to the podium and gestured for silence.

“Please, ladies and gentlemen. I know we’re all anxious to hear what Superman has to say about his recent incidents, so let’s allow him to speak. Superman?”

The crowd stirred and rustled, though Clark couldn’t distinguish the mood of the large audience from the simple movement. Perhaps they were angry to see him... or perhaps they were afraid.

“Thank you.” Clark gripped the sides of the podium, though he warned himself to be careful lest the wood splinter — that certainly wouldn’t help his case any. He couldn’t bring himself to look at the mayor. His own fears concerning his powers had protected him from the betrayal Lois felt, but if the mayor had hurt Lois through her actions, then she had hurt him.

The sea of black microphones and probing eyes was an enemy that even Superman couldn’t face with equanimity. Desperately, Clark sought out Lois, found her, locked his gaze with hers, and took strength from the quiet confidence so apparent in every line of her body.

“Thank you for coming,” he said, inwardly wincing at the stiffness of his voice. He was a farmer from Kansas — no matter that he was also the last son of Krypton — and public speaking just wasn’t something at which he excelled. “I called you here today because I know there have been a lot of questions about my performance over the last several days.

“As you know, when these ‘incidents,’ as the mayor is calling them, first began, I told you it was a medical problem and that my doctors were treating me. It was later discovered that my loss of control was due to the presence of red Kryptonite, which has since been confiscated and dealt with. I am now fully in control of my powers and am once again ready and willing to help in any way I can.”

He couldn’t look away from Lois, not now, not when he was about to offer to leave the city that had so quickly become his home. Acceptance was something he had craved for as long as he could remember; rejection was what he now faced.

“However, due to public concerns, I have been informed that the city of Metropolis is considering asking me to leave. Permanently.” If he were Clark, he would have had to swallow back a lump in his throat; Superman offered him some protection from that. He had to keep his aloof persona intact, had to convince them that working in their city, though important, was not his single greatest concern.

“The last thing I want,” he said loudly and clearly, “is to inspire fear or cause harm. So if it is the decision of Metropolis to request my departure... I will willingly leave. I refuse to force my presence upon anyone. Though I do not wish to leave the city that once accepted me so wholeheartedly, I will abide by the wishes of the people. The world is a big place, and it is my hope that even if I must leave the city of Metropolis, we can all still live peacefully. Thank you.”

Curious, he thought. Before his speech, his hands had been trembling and his thoughts fragmented. Now that he was done, however — now that he had offered to make this ultimate sacrifice — he was calm and steady. The entire scene almost seemed dreamlike in a way, as if it were already done and over

with, possessing no more power to hurt him than an old, faded memory.

“A generous gesture, Superman, thank you.” Whatever the mayor’s next words were, however, was never to be discovered.

The crowd of passersby and reporters had listened in complete silence as Superman made his speech. Clark had been watching Lois as he spoke, so he hadn’t noticed the range of emotions, from interest to horror to desperation to a protectiveness that Clark would have instinctively known Lois would identify with. As soon as the mayor began speaking, the spell of silence was broken, and people began calling out all at once, a maelstrom of denial and support.

And denunciations.

“Murderer!”

“Traitor!”

Clark froze. He had lost sight of Lois; she had been swallowed up by the crowd. Each new cry — each derisive, accusing call — made him feel as if he trembled on the edge of a precipice, as if the slightest movement would send him spiraling down to a dark, lonely place even Superman couldn’t fly out of.

The mayor stepped forward. “Please! Everyone, please! I understand your fear, but please realize that we are doing all we can to —”

Clark’s hand moved as a blur and plucked the weighed pamphlet from the air before it could strike its target... the mayor.

As he stared at the object in his hand and the mayor — who stared back with an equally shocked expression — Clark suddenly realized that the crowd wasn’t denouncing *him*. They were denouncing the mayor. Gradually, a few phrases and calls drifted past the haze of shock and fear that sounded as a roaring in his ears.

“ — tried to kill Superman — ”

“ — shot him — ”

“ — driving him out of our city — ”

“ — Superman’s the victim here — ”

“ — who will save *him*? — ”

When something else came flying toward the mayor, accompanied by a forward surge of the crowd, Clark stepped in front of her and held up placating hands. “Please, everyone, calm down. This isn’t the way to handle our problems.”

With the target of their rage hidden behind his familiar crest, the crowd quieted a bit. Clark searched their faces — not for Lois, but in disbelief. He had been so afraid of rejection, so guilty of his own actions that he could not now bring himself to believe what he was being given.

Trust.

Acceptance.

Forgiveness.

They forgave him his weakness.

They accepted him even knowing there was a red stone that could turn him into a dangerous liability.

They trusted him to control his powers and use them to protect their city.

They had claimed him just as surely and indelibly as he had claimed them.

“Thank you,” he said, a ragged edge to his voice he hoped they would blame on the microphones.

Two words...not nearly enough to convey all that he felt. But the people accepted them, glares melting into smiles, anger transforming into pleasure.

He couldn’t comprehend the depths of his gratitude and joy, not right now. It was so enormous, so moving, that it might take him the rest of his life to fully savor and enjoy. But that was all right because they were giving him the rest of his life to protect them and show them just how pleased he was with their welcome.

A distant alarm sounded piercingly loud in his super-hearing.

A tiny smile curved Clark's lips.
His city was calling him...and he would, as always, answer it.

With a last nod of affirmation, Clark flourished his cape and disappeared in a blaze of red and blue.

Chapter 8: Fear

At any other time, Lois might have found irony in the fact that the mayor had been protected by Superman, the man she had ordered shot and killed just two days before. Any present appreciation of that fact was, however, overshadowed by the fierce triumph and utter vindication she felt to witness the crowd of her own peers and fellow citizens rise up in support of her husband.

Clark might think he was feared and suspected, but Lois knew better.

She might have briefly felt ashamed of her city, but now they reasserted themselves in her heart.

No Kryptonite bullets would be issued to police officers; no orders to shoot to kill would be handed out like flak jackets; no military would be targeting Superman on the off-chance that he sneezed wrong. The people would never stand for it, not now — if Lois had anything to say about it, not ever again.

For the first time in what felt like forever, Lois didn't see the bloody wound scoring Clark's neck when she closed her eyes. Instead, she saw his smile. It was an image that was more than enough to sustain her for the rest of her life.

She had recognized the direction Clark had been flying when he disappeared, and the nod he had sent her was enough to confirm her suspicion that whatever he had heard had originated from S.T.A.R. Labs. It took only about fifteen minutes to get there from the Hall of Justice, at least when Lois was driving, so she wasn't surprised to see Superman still there when she strode into Dr. Klein's lab.

Clark gave her a tiny smile and a nod a shade deeper than usual. Lois thought she might burst with happiness at the confidence and contentment once more so apparent, shining from his being as brightly as integrity and goodness. When Clark lost himself, she lost a bit of herself with him. It was good to feel restored and whole after so long a period of dismay and uncertainty.

"Ah, Lois, it's funny you should show up," Dr. Klein greeted her in his usual absentminded manner. "We just had an incident here. Unfortunately, I don't have much to tell you."

"What happened?" Lois gaped at the damage obviously done to the vault. The box supporting the locking mechanism of the vault door had been torn from its setting and tossed to the side. The heavy door itself had been wrenched open; from within the vault, Lois could see evidence of things thrown about.

"We're not sure," exclaimed Dr. Klein. "The security cameras all blanked out for forty-five seconds. That's not enough time for someone to get from the vault to outside the range of the cameras, let alone set up the machinery necessary to do this kind of damage."

"Didn't you see anything, Superman?"

Clark grimaced and set his hands on his hips as he surveyed the vault, his eyes narrowing as he employed his telescopic vision. "Whoever — or whatever — did this was gone by the time I arrived. The alarm went off as soon as the vault was breached, but not before, so the thief must have had some way to access the outer doors."

"They're checking the surveillance videos," Klein interjected. "I don't understand how whoever this was managed to open the vault, though. It should be impossible for anyone besides...well, besides *you*, Superman."

"Well, I was in the middle of a press conference," Clark told him, his voice colored ever so slightly by that teasing quality so

unique to him.

Klein's eyes widened in horror. "No — I-I certainly didn't mean to imply that you — well, of course, it wasn't you! I mean, why would *you* need to break into our vault? It's utterly ridiculous! Of course not!"

"I understand." Clark dropped a hand on the doctor's shoulder, and Lois read the sincerity in his gaze as he said, "We're friends, Dr. Klein. I trust you, and I know without a doubt that you trust me."

Lois nodded, almost adding her own thanks before realizing that might just confuse the poor man. After all, he couldn't be expected to understand that both she and Clark were thinking of a different situation entirely. Lois knew she would never be able to repay Dr. Klein for the favor he had done them both in warning her of the mayor's plan.

"Oh. Well." Klein blushed and tilted his head in a self-conscious fashion, prompting a smile from Lois. Clark glanced toward her, amusement evident in his gaze even if Superman couldn't smile as easily as Clark could.

"So, what was stolen?" Lois asked, eager to return to the story. The editorials she'd been doing were for a cause and they expended a great deal of the fury that had been slowly boiling within her...but they just weren't the reporting she was used to. It was far past time to sink her teeth into a story that could grace the front page of the Daily Planet.

"Well..." Klein's brow furrowed. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Clark repeated. "You mean...someone went to all the trouble of sneaking into S.T.A.R. Labs, getting past the security cameras, and ripping a vault door out of the walls — and then they just walked away?"

"Apparently." Klein shrugged. "Maybe it was a prank."

"Or a show of power," Lois suggested. "If someone's planning on doing something even bigger soon, they might have wanted a way to build suspense or test their gadgetry."

"Uh, Superman, I..." Klein's head bobbed back and forth for a moment before he blurted, "The Kryptonite was the first thing I checked. It's all still there — both colors," he added hastily when both Lois and Superman noticeably tensed. "So, obviously, that wasn't what...whoever did this...was looking for."

"Good," Clark said slowly. "Thank you, Dr. Klein."

A bashful smile peeked through the doctor's timid demeanor. "No problem. So, I'll let Lois know if we find anything more?"

"Yes." Superman nodded decisively. "She or Clark Kent will get word to me."

Superman met Lois's gaze briefly, then disappeared with a familiar whoosh. Biting back her smile, Lois followed him more sedately. When she emerged from S.T.A.R. Labs, Clark was waiting for her by her Jeep.

"Fancy meeting you here," she said playfully.

Gallantly, Clark opened her door for her. "I'd follow you anywhere."

From their giddy conversation as they returned to the Daily Planet, one might have thought that there had never been any fear concerning red or green Kryptonite and no order to assassinate Superman. Lois knew they were both elated and relieved that it seemed Metropolis would not be asking Superman to leave, but she treasured the moments anyway. There were far too many times when Clark obsessed over rescues gone bad or worried about her or brainstormed with her on how to hunt down the latest criminal—and, while she loved Clark for all those things, she also very much enjoyed getting to see him relaxed and content.

"So," Lois said when she parked, turning to face Clark before he could jump out to get her door. "No more talk of leaving?"

His eyes softened, gleaming with that inner light she had feared the red Kryptonite had quenched. His fingers were light and warm on her cheek. "I could never leave you, Lois."

“Not even Superman?” She was startled to hear the fragile note in her own voice. Only now, when the danger was less imminent, did she realize just how much she had feared losing her husband. Clark might have stayed with her, but a vital part of himself would have been lost had he been forced to give up so much of Superman.

“Honey, I asked you if you were all right,” he murmured, his eyes widening as he heard the fear leak into her voice. “Why didn’t you tell me you were afraid?”

“Because I was more angry than afraid,” she replied seriously. “I was *furios*, Clark. Maybe I still am. I just...I’m just glad everything’s working out.”

“Me too,” he said softly. “And, Lois?” He caught her hand and waited until she met his gaze. “Superman or Clark, I can’t leave you. You’re the one who completes me, who makes me belong, who gives me a home. I’d be lost without you.”

“Me too,” Lois managed to say past the lump in her throat. “I mean...you’re all of those things for me, too.”

Leaning forward, Clark brushed his lips against hers, a quiet symbol of their connection.

It was enough to bring the smile back to Lois’s lips, the gleam of victory back to her eyes, and the determined bounce back to her stride as she entered the newsroom. Even better was the fact that over the course of the day, Clark caught her eye several times, his hand already loosening his tie, and ducked out of sight before returning, radiating a bit more confidence and happiness.

Maybe things *could* go back to normal, Lois thought, tentatively hopeful. Maybe they could put this incident behind them just like all the rest. Maybe in a couple months or a year, they would look back on these days and not feel the pain as sharp and serrated as it had been just hours earlier.

“Lois?” Jimmy hovered at the edge of her desk, clearly uncomfortable with interrupting her. Fortunately for him, Lois was in a good mood.

“What is it, Jimmy?” she asked cheerfully. Belatedly, she wondered if he was still worried about his relationship with Perry.

“Uh, I was wondering if I could talk to you about something. See, I —”

“Just a second,” Lois told him when her phone rang. “Hello?”

The click sounded loud and suddenly ominous.

Lois frowned at the phone as she hung it up. It was true that there were a lot of wrong numbers in large cities, but it seemed to her there had been an inordinate amount in the last couple days. Or was she just being paranoid?

“Lois?”

“Oh, sorry, Jimmy.” Lois tried to turn her full attention to her friend. “What is it?”

Surreptitiously, Jimmy looked around before perching on the edge of the chair next to Lois’s desk. “I probably should have learned my lesson after Jerry, but I just couldn’t stop thinking about why he was doing it. So, I looked him up — and you’ll never guess who he used to work for!”

“Who?” A frown was pasted onto Lois’s features as she divided her attention between Jimmy and the phone.

“Orville Dorian.”

Instantly, Lois’s attention was completely focused on Jimmy. “What?”

“Well, see, after the news ran the story about Dorian pressing charges, I decided to do a background check on him — try to figure out why he’s so dead-set on getting Superman out of the city. Turns out he just switched jobs about six months ago, moved to a small retail store downtown. Anyway, guess who he used to work for?”

Lois quirked her eyebrow, inwardly amused at Jimmy’s breathless anticipation.

“Costmart!”

Instantly, Lois straightened, all hints of humor or smiles fading away. “Costmart! You mean, he worked for Intergang?”

“Could be. And I managed to get a hold of his bank records — seems there are pretty regular deposits that don’t come from his job. I think he’s still working for Intergang, or, at least, he’s helping them get rid of Superman.”

“Of course!” Lois exclaimed. “Nobody wants Superman out of the city more than Intergang. Do we have proof?”

“Well, that’s where it gets a bit dicey. The extra money is deposited under the name of a small sales company that pays by commission for door-to-door sales. I’m pretty sure if we tried to take this to the police, they’d have to accept his story.”

“But if we managed to make a solid connection between him and Intergang —”

“Already working on it.” Jimmy tossed her a triumphant smile. “I’m going through a list of his business associates and trying to cross-reference them with the people we know work for Intergang. That’s why I thought I’d tell you about this — you have way more sources than I do.”

Leaning back in her chair, Lois studied Jimmy so intently that he started to squirm. “I’m really impressed, Jimmy. You’ve done a lot of work on this — and you actually thought to investigate it in the first place.”

“Well,” he ducked his head with a half-shrug, “it just burns me up that some people think they should punish Superman. I mean, the guy’s saved my life more than once — we should give him a break, you know?”

“Yeah. All right, give me the list and I’ll get my sources looking them up. Our top priority now is discrediting Orville Dorian.”

And, she added silently, getting the mayor out of office.

The next two days passed in a blur of investigation and action. Nothing more turned up on the strange S.T.A.R. Labs break-in, and none of Lois or Clark’s sources had heard anything about it. Clark was incredibly busy re-establishing Superman’s credibility and attending to the hundreds of small crimes that seemed to have sprung up since the press conference; Lois suspected the increased activity was a ploy on Intergang’s part to make Superman slip up again and get himself thrown out of the city.

The mayor still hadn’t made an official announcement on her decision regarding Superman’s future, but Lois had heard enough from the rest of the city government to be pretty certain that banishment was completely out of the picture. Nonetheless, she continued to write her editorials, moving from protecting Superman to denouncing the assassination order.

She and Jimmy had managed to connect two of Dorian’s associates to Intergang, but they were waiting for the final paper trail that would prove the small sales company was nothing more than a front for Costmart or some other Intergang sham business. Perry was getting impatient to run the story, and Lois was more than impatient to dismiss all the doubt stirred up by criminal charges brought against her husband.

“Honey, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Lois looked up at Clark’s statement, her hand stilling in the midst of spreading honey over her piece of toast. “What is it?”

“Well...” Clark shifted and stood to move nearer her, leaning against the island in the middle of their kitchen. “Have you noticed that we’ve been getting a lot of hang-ups here, as well as at both our work phones?”

Reminded of her earlier suspicion, she frowned. “Yeah, I have noticed. Why? You think someone’s targeting us?”

A hint of a smile brightened his features. “Well, you may have forgotten, but there were those two men who attacked you and told you bad things would happen if I went after Intergang. And it’s not as if I’ve stopped trying to connect Costmart to the

criminal organization, so I think it's a safe bet to say we've been targeted. Anyway, yesterday I asked for the phone records — for our house, your work phone, and mine. I should be getting them today, and I know you and Jimmy were working on something tying Intergang to Dorian. So, I thought if they're connected, you might be able to recognize one of the phone numbers."

"You think Dorian's connected to the creepy phone calls?"

Clark shrugged. "Maybe. It's a long shot, but it can't hurt to check it out. I'd rather not come home to find you entertaining more menacing thugs."

"Ah, you're no fun." Lois grinned at his expression and patted his chest. "I think that's a great idea."

"Good. Oh, and...Lois, there was something else I wanted to say. I know I've been pretty busy lately, but I finally got around to —"

Both Lois and Clark looked over at the phone when its discordant chimes blared through the house. They exchanged a glance before Lois moved to answer the phone; Clark moved closer so he'd be sure to hear anything on the line that could give him a clue should it be their mystery caller.

"Hello?"

"Lois, honey, I need you to get down here right away."

A rush of relief flowed through Lois at the sound of her gruff editor's voice, mixed with disappointment. It would have been nice if it had been their mystery caller and Clark had been able to hear something that would have led to a solution. "What is it, Perry?" she asked with a reassuring smile at Clark. He returned the smile and went back to his breakfast.

"I think this is something you'll want to hear for yourself." She could hear a grin in Perry's voice. "Let's just say I've got a huge story for you — one you've been waiting for."

Exhilaration flared up within Lois and caused her heart to miss a beat. This could be what she had been working for since Clark had hid out in the cold night until she called him home. "I'll be right there." She hung up the phone and threw her uneaten toast in the trash. "I have to go in right now, Clark. Will you meet me there?"

"Sure."

"Oh!" She paused halfway out the kitchen door. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

He moved toward her. "Well, I finally read the —" His head cocked, and he looked off into the distance. With only a hint of frustration apparent in his eyes, he gave her a smile. "I'll tell you later."

"Be careful," Lois warned him, snatched a quick kiss, and then darted out the front door to the sound of a sonic boom echoing over Hyperion Avenue.

Perry grinned broadly as he ushered her into his office. "Well, darlin', I think you've nailed it right on the square head — and don't think I didn't know what you were lookin' to do. A friend of mine down at the City Hall just told me they've convened a special meeting — not a hearing, mind you — but an inquiry into the actions taken by the mayor over the past week. There're rumors that they're going to ask for her resignation."

Instead of the excited energy she had thought would fill her body, Lois felt strangely calm as she sank down into a seat. This was what she had determined to accomplish from the moment she had had a chance to think past her terror at hearing her husband was about to be shot with a green Kryptonite bullet. Her fury had birthed the plan within her; her talent and skill had shown her the way to stir up public ire; her fierce love had demanded she see it through to the end.

And now it was done.

The mayor would pay for what she had done to Clark.

Vengeance wasn't sweet, Lois knew. Yet this didn't feel like vengeance...it felt like justice.

"Are you all right, honey?" Perry gingerly patted her shoulder. "I thought this was what you wanted."

"I'm more than all right," she said, her voice emerging even and measured. "This *is* what I wanted. Thank you, Chief. You don't know how much you've helped me."

There was a knowing gleam in Perry's blue-gray eyes as he studied her. "Well, then all's well and good. Now, what say you get down to the City Hall and get me the story?" he said briskly, moving back across the desk to take his customary seat. "I don't want to get scooped. And where's that story you and Jimmy keep promising me?"

"I'm on it, Chief." Lois stood, and as if the motion had summoned it from wherever it had been hidden, she was flooded with all the energy she had expected earlier. The taste of victory was as sweet as it had always been, sustaining her far more than food or even coffee.

"Jimmy, grab your camera and come on!" she snapped as she exited Perry's office. "We've got two stories to grab."

Clark was safe, she thought, only now allowing herself to believe it.

Clark was safe. Superman was back in the skies. Metropolis had not failed her. And she was still collecting front-page stories. In light of all that, Lois completely forgot about the mysterious phone calls.

Chapter 9: Foreboding

Eduardo waved to Perry as he passed the editor's office on the way to the elevators, his coat slung over his shoulders. Perry managed a return wave and leaned back in his chair to survey the emptying newsroom. The night crew and janitorial staff weren't due in for another two hours, but most of the reporters were wrapping up for the night. The only one still industriously working was Jimmy.

Despite himself, Perry felt a proud smile reshape his features. The kid sure had thrown himself wholesale into the investigation of Orville Dorian, and he and Lois had discovered quite a bit to connect him to Intergang. In fact, Perry was planning on running the story on the next day's front page. It was past time Jimmy got his own byline.

"Jimmy!" he called on impulse.

"Yeah, Chief?" Jimmy asked, sticking his head into the office.

"Come in, Jimmy. I know you've been working hard on that Dorian story —"

"We're not quite there yet," Jimmy interjected defensively. "Don't worry, Chief. I should have the final piece of evidence tomorrow. I've traced the small business to the warehouse of a —"

"Now, wait a minute." Perry held up a restraining hand and moved to the front of his desk. "I'm not here to ask you for the story — or at least not that one." He swallowed his laugh at Jimmy's bewildered expression. "The thing of it is...you know Lois is going to have half the byline of the main story on Dorian. But I want you to have your own story — your name alone on the byline."

"What?" Jimmy almost staggered with shock. "My own story? On...on wh —"

"I want a sidebar on sham companies and how crime organizations use them. You've run into enough of them that you shouldn't need to do a lot of extra research for it. I'll run it alongside the Dorian story, all right?"

"That sounds great! Thanks, Chief!"

"Ah, you're long past due for it." Perry shrugged and moved back toward his chair.

"Chief?"

At Jimmy's suddenly hesitant tone, Perry turned back to the kid. "Yeah?"

“You’re not just doing this because you think my name should have been on the red Kryptonite story, are you? Because I don’t want any favors or —”

“I’m doin’ this because you deserve it, Jimmy. You’re the one who thought to look into Dorian’s background — that makes it your story.”

“It’s just...” Jimmy paused and stuck his hands into his pockets. “I know you said you were happy I investigated Jerry, but I...I’m not sure you really meant it.”

Taking a deep breath, Perry clasped a hand to Jimmy’s shoulder and led him to a seat on the couch. “Listen, son, I know I was...a bit ragged around the edges earlier. But it wasn’t your fault, believe me. I guess what has my face in the dirt is the fact that my son deceived me and made me near enough to an accomplice in his scam. I mean...I’m an old newshound and I didn’t catch the stink of what he was doin’.”

“Chief, it’s not your fault.” Jimmy’s eyes shone with the earnestness so characteristic of him. “Jerry’s a con artist, a scam man; it’s what he does. The truth is...I only thought to doubt what he said because I was...well, I was jealous.”

“Jealous?” Perry repeated cautiously. He knew instantly what Jimmy was talking about, of course — he had felt the same irrational jealousy when Jack Olsen had shown up the year before — but he wasn’t sure he wanted to address it so blatantly. His relationship with Jimmy was what it was; no need to analyze it.

“Chief, I wasn’t looking for a story when Jerry was around.”

“Yeah, well, you think Lois and Clark are looking for all the stories they find?” Perry forced a chuckle. “A good reporter is smart enough to see what he has and exploit it a bit. And you’ve got all the makings of a good reporter. I know you’re a bit more attracted to the photography aspect, but writing is something I have faith you can do. Now, what say we wrap things up for the night?”

“Sure, Chief.” There was a disappointed slant to Jimmy’s features as he left the office. Once more, just as he had felt when leaving Jerry, Perry felt as if he were missing something, as if both Jimmy and Jerry were looking for something more from him. But for the life of him, he couldn’t bring himself yet to address what that something was.

When the phone rang, Perry answered it distractedly and almost didn’t recognize Dr. Klein’s voice until the man had babbled a good two or three paragraphs. “Dr. Klein,” he interrupted decisively. “What is it? What’s the hurry?”

“I’m trying to find Lois or Clark — I have important news for them. Please, could you tell me where they are?”

“Well, Lois finished her stories and headed for home about half an hour ago, so she should be there. And Clark —” Perry paused. He had seen Clark duck out just before lunch and hadn’t seen him return yet, though usually he came back at the end of the day to quickly make up for whatever work the Superman emergencies had made him miss. “Well, he’ll probably be showin’ up here pretty soon. Is there a message I can give them?”

“Uh, well...no, not really. I guess I’ll try their house again.”

“Again?” Perry’s voice sharpened. “You’ve already tried it?”

“Yes!” Klein exclaimed. “I’ve been calling nonstop for the past ten minutes. Before that, I called their desks, but Jimmy told me neither one of them were in. Please, it’s imperative that I tell them something.”

“I’ll see if I can’t find them,” the editor promised.

“Meanwhile, you keep trying their house. I’m sure Clark will show up in about ten or twenty minutes, so try back here then.”

“All right,” Klein agreed grudgingly. “Thanks, Mr. White.”

As soon as he had hung up the phone, Perry strode out of his office. “Jimmy, do you know where Lois or Clark are?”

“Lois went home. Didn’t you get her story on the inquiry?”

“Yeah.” Pursing his lips, Perry shook his head. “Hmm. Have you seen Clark come back yet?”

“No. Usually, he gets here —”

“I know.” Perry hesitated, then abruptly made his decision.

“Look, son, I promised Jerry I’d come and visit him tonight. Would you mind goin’ with me? That way, after I’m done, we can look for Lois and Clark.”

“Look for them?” Jimmy frowned. “You mean they’re missing?”

“Well, maybe not. It wouldn’t be the first time those two dropped below the radar.” In fact, the editor thought, maybe Clark had run into Lois and decided to take her for a moonlight flight before finishing up his work. Or maybe Superman had needed Lois’s help on a situation — or, more likely, Lois had needed Superman. Either way, Perry wasn’t sure why he suddenly had such a foreboding feeling. It wasn’t as if Clark couldn’t take care of himself — and Lois.

Maybe, Perry admitted silently, he just wanted someone to be with him when he met with his son.

“Thanks for coming by, Dad.” Jerry ventured a smile, smaller and more genuine than the ones he usually flashed around.

“Oh, not a problem, son.” Perry shifted, wishing Jimmy had come into the prison with him. The kid had wanted to wait outside, and though Perry would have loved the company — not support, he told himself firmly — he knew it was probably wisest not to endanger his already-perilous relationship with his son. “How you holdin’ up?”

Jerry shrugged. “It’s not so bad now that my court date’s been set. Look, I kind of thought Clark might come with you. I have that information he wanted.”

“Do you?” Perry had to think for a minute to recall his last visit. He was more worried about Lois than he cared to admit, and it was hard to pull his mind from theories about where she might be, each one more improbable — and dangerous — than the last. “Well, give it here and I’ll see that Clark gets it.”

“All right.” Jerry leaned forward conspiratorially. “There was an inmate that got killed — just like Rudy claimed, right down to the twisted cell door. It turns out his throat was completely crushed, but there weren’t any fingerprints. His name was Emmett Vale.”

“Vale?” Perry suddenly felt wide awake, his thoughts jolted from concern for Lois. “As in the Vale brothers? As in the cyborg creators?”

“Afraid so. And there’s more. One of the guards told me yesterday that Rollie Vale has disappeared — they’re trying to keep it hushed up so the Feds don’t have to stumble over every false alarm, and probably so the press doesn’t crucify them. The guard said Rollie broke out of his cell the same night Emmett turned up dead.”

“You think he killed his own brother?”

Jerry let out a sigh and raised his hands in an extravagant shrug. “I don’t really know how there could be any other explanation. Rollie is the one who had the metal arm, remember?”

“Yeah, which would explain how the cell doors were busted open and Emmett was killed.”

The world stopped, froze in one breathless moment as a collage of information and tidbits of knowledge coalesced into one foreboding conclusion.

The twisted metal of cell doors.

The crushed throat of a brother who wouldn’t listen.

The metallic, inordinately strong arm of a too-smart criminal.

And the break-in at S.T.A.R. Labs with a twisted-open vault door, knowledge of their security systems, and a failure to show up on the surveillance footage.

Dr. Klein’s frantic call.

Lois and Clark’s disappearance.

“I have to go.” Perry stood, ignoring the way the room

seemed to spin around him, all gray and stone and startled expressions. “I have to see Dr. Klein.”

“Uh...okay.” A trace of hurt was instantly hidden beneath Jerry’s careless grin. “Guess I should have waited till the end of the visit to tell you my news, huh?”

“Jerry, I appreciate you passin’ me this information — but I think Lois and Clark are in trouble. Rollie Vale has kidnapped Clark before and been involved in a kidnapping of Lois. And no one’s seen either of them since earlier this afternoon.”

“Well, go, then!” Jerry shooed him away with his hands. “Oh, Dad! I...I did good, huh?”

Perry’s steps checked. He wanted to snap that Jerry didn’t need to *earn* his approval, didn’t need to *work* to win his father’s love, didn’t need to *buy* his way into Perry’s heart. But perhaps it would take another lifetime to convince him, a lifetime without the intervention of the Planet’s greedy needs and Perry’s own inexperience with matters of the heart.

Perhaps it would take so much more than Perry felt he had to give.

Regardless, there was no time now. If he was right about what Klein had to tell him, Clark might even now be dying. And Lois? Was she dead too? Or was she being forced to watch Clark’s pain?

They might still be all right, Perry tried to convince himself. It was a useless attempt. The twisting in his stomach that had started the minute he had hung up with Dr. Klein had grown a thousand times worse. And he didn’t have time for straightening out either Jerry or himself.

“Yeah, you did great,” he said instead. “Thanks. I’ll come by later to see you, son, all right?”

“All right.”

Perry turned his back on the sight of his son sitting solitary and small at a metal table, guards approaching him from behind to take him deeper into the prison. He strode quickly out of the prison, chafing impatiently at the check-out procedures. It seemed to take an eternity for him to be freed from the prison walls and allowed back out into the rainy night.

“Jimmy!”

“Yeah, Chief?” Jimmy straightened from the bench under the entrance’s overhang, hitching his jacket closer as he stepped to Perry’s side.

“We need to drop by Lois and Clark’s — see if they’re home. If they’re not...we need to go see Dr. Klein. You haven’t happened to see Superman lately, have you?”

“No. Why?” Jimmy’s face paled in alarm. “Are Lois and Clark in some kind of danger?”

“Aren’t they always?” Perry retorted wryly. “Come on, let’s go. I’ll fill you in on the way.”

The house on Hyperion Avenue looked disturbingly dark; no sign of movement was evident in the windows and no ray of light emerged from behind the curtains. Perry and Jimmy knocked nonetheless, neither one willing to give up so easily.

When, after five minutes, there was still no answer, Perry grudgingly accepted the fact that Lois — who should have been home a good two hours ago — wasn’t there.

“Maybe Clark found something and called her back to the Planet,” Jimmy suggested, the note of hope in his voice patently false.

“Yeah, maybe,” Perry agreed neutrally. “Let’s get to S.T.A.R. Labs.”

Dr. Klein met them at the door to allow them entrance, his entire body almost vibrating with his urgency. “I’ve tried the Daily Planet over a hundred times and their house almost as often,” he said by way of greeting. His strides were long, almost panicked, as he led them toward his lab and the vault that had been invaded.

“Still nothing?” Perry double-checked, as if Lois and Clark

might miraculously appear out of nowhere. It had happened before, after all — quite often, as a matter of fact.

“No!” Klein exclaimed. “And I really need to tell them what I discovered.”

“It’s the Kryptonite, isn’t it?” Perry asked bluntly, tired of stalling. “It was stolen during the break-in.”

Both Klein and Jimmy stared at him for a moment before the doctor nodded reluctantly. “I checked it, I swear — it was the *first* thing I checked. Both the green and the red Kryptonite were still there, and they were both emitting low signs of the radiation. But...” He grimaced. “I was running some tests on them today, and...well, they’re fakes. Even the signs of emitted radiation is nothing more than a smokescreen — ingenious, really, using the — well, never mind. Look, I’m sorry about this. We *really* need to get word to Superman to be on the lookout. If Intergang somehow has the Kryptonite — ”

“It’s not Intergang,” Jimmy told him.

“Not yet,” Perry said grimly. “But Rollie Vale and his brother always sold to the highest bidder — they did it with their weapons technology and also with whatever it was Luthor wanted from him. And Intergang pays big, particularly when they’re desperate — and Dorian’s proof of just how desperate they are. Maybe they decided that if bad publicity can’t get rid of Superman, they’ll use deadly force.”

“And Lois? Clark?” Jimmy asked worriedly. “Why would they be taken?”

“Bait.” Perry allowed himself to close his eyes for a brief moment, memories of Lois and Clark together and happy flashing through his mind. Then he opened his eyes and turned to Jimmy and Dr. Klein. “We’re going to need to figure out where Rollie Vale would have taken them. Superman’s saved us; now he needs us to save him.”

Jimmy flashed a sudden grin. “I have an idea.”

Chapter 10: Desperation

Straightening his tie, Clark paused a moment outside the Daily Planet to enjoy the feel of the soft rain on his skin. The scent of the fresh-fallen raindrops was sweet and soothing, though everyone else could probably only smell wet metal and soggy cardboard. The city lights gleamed in the reflections dancing atop the puddles scattered haphazardly across the streets, casting red and green rainbows that sparkled and shimmered with ripples. It didn’t rain often in Metropolis, but when it did, it made sure to arrive in style.

And he was free to stay and see those future rainfalls.

Free to remain in Metropolis.

Free to be himself.

When he had been out on a rescue earlier, he had been asked to report to the courthouse. The city government had apologized for the mayor’s “hasty, ill-advised” decision and informed him that he would not be asked to leave. In fact, they had thanked him for his contributions to society and *asked* him to stay.

The people had accepted him back into their good graces.

He didn’t have to leave Metropolis.

With eager steps, Clark started to cross the street toward the Daily Planet, impatient to tell Lois the good news. She’d be home already, but he needed to write up a Superman rescue story for Perry before he joined her. Maybe he’d call her with the news... but then he wouldn’t get to see the triumph and happiness explode into being like brilliant stars within her dark eyes. He wouldn’t get to be the recipient of her excited hug as she threw herself into his arms. He wouldn’t get to hear her laughter bubble over like a waterfall of delight.

No, he decided. It’d be best if he waited until he was with her to tell her the good news. It would be good to see her smiling again; she’d been so worried for him lately.

A spray of dirty rainwater splashed across Clark’s suit as a

van skidded to a stop right in front of him, cutting off his path. His hand went automatically to his tie, but two men were already jumping out and moving to confront him. Clark's eyes narrowed when he noticed that each man carried a briefcase, both of them made of lead.

Uncertainty curled its spidery hands around the pit of his stomach and twisted.

"Mr. Kent." A nearby traffic light spilled garish red tones across the face of the nearest man and gleamed in the tiny reflective surfaces of his rectangular-framed glasses.

"Rollie Vale," Clark replied, not sure what else to say in light of the fact that Vale and his brother had once kidnapped him just to draw out Superman. He could only hope that was their current purpose; if they had brought lead briefcases just for Clark Kent... well, he didn't want to dwell on that option. "I thought you were in prison."

"Yeah, well, the food wasn't the greatest. I told them to order from a different company, but did they listen to me? *No*, of course not. So, I decided to take matters into my own hands. And speaking of what's in my hands..." He hefted the briefcase and Clark couldn't help but flinch back.

"You know I won't call for Superman," Clark ventured, not sure it was a smart move but unwilling to wait any longer to find out what Rollie's plan was. The sooner he discovered the plan, the more time he had to come up with his own.

"It's interesting you mention that." Rollie smiled at him, a tight, close smile that seemed little more than a grimace. "You see, what I have in these briefcases concerns Superman a great deal...as well as you. Now, obviously my assistant here" — he gestured to the man towering over him and standing at his side, an identical briefcase clutched in his hand — "is not as well-informed as myself, hardly a surprise since I've been careful to keep certain things to myself — the more people who know something, after all, the less value it has. Besides, he wasn't there the last time I had you kidnapped and tied to a chair, compliments of the hulking cyborg my brother ruined with his harebrained schemes. He didn't see how...hard...you took the captivity and your rough handling by that idiot Corbin. He doesn't quite understand why we don't need a gun. In fact, you could say all we need are..." Rollie flashed that grimace passing as a smile again. "Well...Christmas tree lights, both of the standard colors — one each, if you catch my drift."

Clark did catch the drift, and suddenly he couldn't tear his eyes away from the briefcases. Standard colors — one each... green and red. "And what do you intend to do with them?" he asked, relieved when his voice emerged steadily. Every instinct he had was commanding him to fly away immediately, get out of range of the Kryptonite before anyone slower than himself could get it out of the shielding lead. If he did that, however, not only would Rollie Vale's suspicions be proven, but the henchman at his back would also know Clark's secret.

And no one could know that Superman was really Clark Kent, not when the threat of banishment had become so real so recently.

Not when Lois was so vulnerable.

Not when his parents were so easy to find.

Not when everyone knew who his friends were.

"Me?" Rollie Vale shrugged. "Well, for starters, I have a present I want to give you."

As soon as Vale reached out his arm, Clark took two large steps backward, expecting to feel pain wash over him in jagged, sharp waves. Instead, he saw something glitter with silver fire, something so small it was almost hidden by Rollie's fingers.

Lois's wedding ring.

"Lois," he breathed before he could think better of it. Terror flooded his being and threatened to carry away all reason and control. Desperately, he clung to that control, grasped hold of it

as if it alone could save this situation.

"That's right. I've got the little woman stashed away, although may I just point out that you two keep the oddest hours of anyone I've ever met! It was difficult to track your whereabouts. In the end, though, hardly a challenge for someone with my intellect." He shrugged again and pocketed the ring. "Well, that should keep you from...running...off. Now, get in the van."

When Clark hesitated, Vale raised the briefcase threateningly. Clark paused an instant longer. If he flew away now — or even just ran at slightly faster than human speed — he could circle back and follow the van to where Rollie was keeping Lois. He could contact Henderson and have the police surround the place and rescue his wife. It wasn't his usual style of doing things, but one of those briefcases contained red Kryptonite.

And Clark wasn't ready to be exposed to that again.

He had just barely gotten his life back after the last time. He couldn't bear to lose it again.

"Oh, and did I forget to mention?" Rollie raised a pencil-thin eyebrow. "If I don't call my associate in exactly thirty seconds and tell him that I have you with me, he's got orders to off your partner."

"All right," Clark said hurriedly, all other options obliterated by the clear threat in Vale's manner and the lack of all signs in his voice to indicate he was lying. "All right, I'm getting in. Just... please, don't hurt her."

As soon as he ducked into the back of the van, Rollie's assistant slammed the sliding door closed. The back of the van was separated from the front and windowless, so Clark was locked in darkness. Not that it bothered him; he used his x-ray vision to track the turns they took and pinpoint their location. The minute he saw Lois, he promised his racing heart, he was out of there. He'd leave the capture of Rollie Vale — and the briefcases in his possession — to those who weren't susceptible to Kryptonite.

When the door was opened, Clark hastily covered what he had purposely dropped, pretended to blink myopically in the sudden light, and allowed Vale's assistant to haul him out into the center of the crowded, abandoned interior of a warehouse. Clark absently noted the clutter of tables, tools, cardboard boxes, and packing labels as he scanned the surroundings for Lois.

Her heartbeat. It was all around him, echoing through the vast, cavernous interior of the warehouse. And yet, no matter how loudly it resounded through his superhearing, Clark couldn't pinpoint its origination.

"Where's Lois?" he demanded. Eroded by the beginnings of desperation, his voice echoed and rebounded in the cavernous warehouse just as did the heartbeat he knew without sight was his wife's.

"I'm afraid there are a few rules to this encounter. What? Did you think I'd just let you see her — hand her over and watch you take her out of here? Oh, that reminds me." Rollie turned to his henchman, who was arranging the two briefcases on a nearby table. "Tell our associate we're here and remind his employers to be patient. I always deliver."

"You'd better," the thug growled. "Intergang expects results for its money."

"And she'll get them. What do I look like — an idiot? Now, go." As soon as the man had disappeared through a door leading to a few dusty offices, Rollie Vale turned his attention back to Clark. "Now we can speak a bit more freely. I know you're Superman. Or should I say...I know Superman is you. But let's forget about semantics. What's important is that these little goodies I found in a certain vault will affect you. All I have to do is open one of these briefcases, and I'll achieve my objective."

"Your objective? And what's that?" Clark shifted so that Vale, moving to stand next to the Kryptonite, wouldn't be behind him.

He kept one eye on the criminal scientist and the other searching for Lois. She had to be here somewhere. If only he could mute the echoes of her heartbeat so he could pinpoint the original...

"I should think that'd be rather obvious. But then, I always forget that some people are even dumber than my stupid brother. Guess the possession of muscles really does mean a high intelligence isn't too likely, huh?"

"If you spend all your time gloating, you'll never get to explain the rules of your game," Clark pointed out. The floor had been covered with lead paint, implying that there was something to hide beneath their feet. If he could just find some indication of a trap door...he was almost certain her heartbeat was coming from that side of the warehouse.

"Good point." Rollie caressed the first briefcase. "Well, Superman, this briefcase contains green Kryptonite — very painful, debilitating, and lethal if exposed in large enough — or long enough — doses. This briefcase," he moved to the second, "contains red Kryptonite, the cause of several different reactions but, most recently, the complete removal of all your control regarding your powers. And the cause of most of your publicity problems at the moment, if I'm not mistaken."

"I know what Kryptonite does to me," Clark snapped, impatience and fear eating away at his mind. As far as he knew, the only good thing about Kryptonite was that it couldn't harm anyone aside from him; he hardly needed a list of its detrimental effects, particularly when someone like Rollie Vale couldn't possibly understand the true horror of Kryptonite.

Rollie smiled and flexed his left hand, an odd movement that attracted Clark's attention. "Then, to make a long story short, let me just say that Intergang has hired me to make sure you're forced to leave Metropolis permanently. Seems they have an interest in this city, and they're not too keen on sharing. The way I see it, there are two ways to get rid of you. One: I can kill you — or rather this green Kryptonite can — thereby making it impossible for you to cause Intergang any further trouble. Two: I can force the city to exile you using the red Kryptonite. Aside from the most paranoid of the bunch, they've been so disappointingly reluctant to turn on you. But with Lois here, all I'd have to do is put you in a confined space with her and the red Kryptonite, wait for you to accidentally kill her, and watch the city explode in horror that their superhero is capable of murdering his most devoted, outspoken supporter. We'll see then what they have to say about 'asking' you to leave."

"I haven't heard any rules yet," Clark managed to say past his dry throat. The room seemed to spin around him, and he forced himself to concentrate on the sight of Rollie Vale and the sound of Lois's steady heartbeat. The mere thought of Lois dying at his own hands was enough to completely shatter him. It had already haunted him for the past week, a specter now given substance and weight by Vale's threats.

"Maybe because I haven't given them yet," Rollie said sarcastically. "Rule one: you get to pick the color of Kryptonite. Rule two: you do exactly what I say unless you want me to kill your lovely wife. Rule three...well, there really isn't a third rule."

"Green," Clark said immediately, almost frantic as he used his telescopic vision to look for any openings in the floor. There! Just a little over ten feet away from his current position. It had to be Lois! Slowly, he began edging toward it. "I choose the green."

"I had a feeling you might. The mighty, soft-hearted hero can't choose his own life over someone else's, particularly not the life of the woman he loves, the woman who lies to protect him. Well then, the green it is."

With a move so fast only Clark's eyes could follow it, Rollie brought his left fist up and smashed it into one of the briefcases, releasing a short burst of green gas. The instant Clark breathed it in, he felt tiny daggers of agony rip their way down his throat and settle their piercing claws into his skin. Blinded by the gas, he

stumbled backward, trying to get away from the briefcase. Only...he didn't feel any pain washing outward from the case; it was all embedded within him, spread by every harsh breath he choked in.

As painful as it was, however, it wasn't enough to account for all the green Kryptonite that had been stored within Klein's vault. Where was the rest of it?

"Oh, I just remembered the third rule." Rollie Vale advanced on Clark, looming over him when Clark slipped and half-fell to the ground, supporting himself with a shaky arm. "Rule three: I lie."

Gathering his strength, picturing Lois smiling at him, Clark lunged upward from the floor and tried to tackle Vale.

Rollie batted him aside with his left arm so quickly his stride didn't even hitch. Clark gaped up at him, shocked by how easily Vale had stopped him. There hadn't been that much of the Kryptonite gas; his strength shouldn't have been affected so badly that he couldn't even stop a single man.

"Cyborgs are definitely underrated," Rollie Vale commented with humility that rang so false it might as well have been fingernails ran down a blackboard. "I've found that the more robotic parts I have, the faster and stronger I am. It made it easy to beat S.T.A.R. Labs security, grab your wife and evade her very skilled fighting techniques — and stop you." Abruptly bending low to the ground, Vale lifted the trap door Clark had spotted earlier.

The echoes of the heartbeat disappeared, leaving only the real thing.

Clark's own heart skipped a beat when he saw Lois lying, unconscious, in the confined space beneath him. A bruise adorned her cheekbone and blood matted the back of her head, darkening her hair. He wished she would look at him so he would know his world still existed, but her lashes lay delicately against her skin, her breathing even but shallow.

"Get in with her," Rollie commanded, his voice much harsher than it had been minutes before. "Get in or I get the red Kryptonite. And trust me, as weak as that green Kryptonite made you, you'd never be fast enough to beat me to that briefcase."

At the moment, Clark couldn't care less about calculating speed times; he was more worried about Lois and the bump on her head. Made clumsy by the dissipating Kryptonite, Clark shuffled his way to the cubby-hole and crawled in. If Vale closed the door over their heads, there wouldn't be room to sit fully upright, and he had to slip his arm under Lois's head and cradle her body to himself in order to fit next to her. Clark tried very hard to forget the fact that he had several claustrophobic tendencies.

"Good job, Mr. Kent. Now, as noble as your sacrifice would have been, I'm afraid Intergang wants you completely discredited before death. So..." Rollie stepped back to his previous position, crouched next to the end of the cubby-hole, and opened a small panel. The still-intact briefcase, Clark suddenly noticed in horror, was sitting next to Vale's knee.

"No, wait!" he cried desperately. "Don't!"

But it was too late. Vale pulled open the briefcase and extracted the red Kryptonite.

He was touching Lois, Clark reminded himself frantically. In fact, Lois was cradled in his arms.

His deadly arms.

He had to be more careful now than he ever had before in his life. He had to control his every movement, his every thought, his every breath.

Already, he could feel the red Kryptonite emanating from Vale's hands. It was too close, too dangerous, too strong. And then not only was it coming from next to Rollie Vale, but it also surrounded Clark, engulfing him in its lethal field. Everything around Clark glowed red; even Lois's skin seemed to bleed with

it.

The criminal scientist had infused the cubby-hole, Clark realized, just as Luthor had once infused the bars of a cage with the green Kryptonite.

Terror choked him, brought on by both the Kryptonite and the closeness of the walls around him. Ruthlessly, Clark fought it off, crushing it beneath the weight of his resolve and love for the woman held so dangerously in his arms.

“Now, here’s the real truth,” Vale sneered down at him. “The red Kryptonite currently painting the confines of your prison is hooked to an automatic triggering device. If you so much as cause the walls around you to shiver or if you break through the walls or try to burrow through the ground — if *anything* breaks the Kryptonite field, the device will trigger the release of the remainder of the green Kryptonite gas. I figure, enclosed in that tiny space, it’ll kill you pretty quickly. So, in essence, you still have the same choice: allow the red Kryptonite to magnify your powers and force you to kill your reporting partner, or trigger the green gas and kill yourself. Either way, I fulfill my bargain with Intergang and get my money.” Rollie’s self-satisfied smirk hovered over Clark for a moment before the trap door descended and slammed shut, leaving Clark sealed in with the red Kryptonite.

Tamping down on his urge to beg Vale to get rid of the red Kryptonite, Clark held himself absolutely still. He could feel the length of Lois’s body against his own; her breaths feathered soft and warm against his neck; her hair tickled his chin.

“It’ll be all right,” he whispered aloud to break the oppressive silence that made him fantasize he could hear the deadly hum of the Kryptonite. “Don’t worry, Lois. I promised I wouldn’t hurt you. And I won’t. I won’t. I won’t.”

Remember practicing the powers, he advised himself. Remember standing in that Kansas field and exercising constant, brutal restraint.

But this was different, he thought despairingly. This time, there was no escape. At least, not until he was sure he could break through the shrinking walls without also breaking his wife. A few minutes to accustom himself to his intensified powers and then he would tear through the trapdoor that closed them in. Even if Vale was telling the truth about the green Kryptonite, it would be worth it to free Lois before he could kill her.

“I won’t hurt you,” he murmured without conscious thought. “I won’t hurt you. I won’t hurt you.”

Each breath he pulled in was carefully modulated. He released it slowly and precisely.

He lifted his hand from her waist — slowly — and laid it against the ground, forcing himself to feel each particle of dirt against his fingertips.

He closed his eyes tightly and refused to think about flying.

The rest of his body he kept utterly still and motionless. He dared not shift his legs, dared not even try to move his arms or adjust his hands. Above all, he dared not look at or face Lois lest his heat-vision or super-breath harm her. The last time, he had consciously activated his heat-vision, yet his breath had exploded from him to take out the electricity at S.T.A.R. Labs without his volition. He had to be careful, so careful, that he didn’t make a similar mistake now, trapped in a few suffocating feet of room with his wife.

Lois’s breath tickled his neck. Clark allowed his own breath to be exhaled slowly, filled with relief each time frost didn’t pearl the walls.

Careful.

Cautious.

Slow.

Precise.

Control had abandoned him and energy now filled his body full to bursting — but it didn’t matter. He had not spent his entire

life practicing his restraint only to lose it when Lois’s life was on the line. Those long years of control would help him now, he determined resolutely.

Each time he touched a person, he knew exactly how much pressure to exact. Each time he knocked on a door, he made certain to use only the force necessary. Each time he used a pencil or typed on a keyboard or drank out of a cup, he held the object in a grip loose enough to ensure the flimsy material survived his hold. Each time he traveled anywhere at even a moderately quick speed, he ensured that he avoided knocking into anything.

All of that practice would now come to his aid and save Lois’s life.

Careful, he told himself once more, a silent litany chanting in his mind, colored in the garish hue of wet blood.

Cautious.

Slow.

Precise.

Lois’s life was on the line, literally held in his arms. He didn’t dare reach up over her head to retrieve his glasses as he had done that first night, so he had to do this on his own, without anything to use as a safety measure.

A few more minutes, he thought. A few more minutes in this death-trap buried away from the sky and then he’d get Lois out of there. The thought of breathing in a lethal amount of green Kryptonite gas was so much more appealing than the prospect of feeling Lois’s blood on his hands and knowing it was his fault or seeing her eyes staring sightlessly upward and knowing that it was he who had quenched her fire and vitality.

“I won’t hurt you,” he murmured soothingly — more for his sake than Lois’s. “I won’t hurt you. I won’t hurt you.”

Superman didn’t lie, after all. So he promised himself — and her — over and over and over again, as if sheer repetition could ensure he didn’t break the promise.

“I won’t hurt you. I won’t hurt you. I won’t hurt you.”

Chapter 11: Pain

Lois woke slowly and knew instantly that Clark was at her side. She could feel the resonance of his heartbeat beneath her cheek, steady and sure and strong. Contentedly, she moved her hand to rest on his chest. How many mornings had she woken up in just this way, to just this sound, with just this feeling of happiness? Too many to count and not nearly enough.

Breathing in deeply, Lois wondered at the slight metallic smell to the air, and then she moved her head and all thought was lost beneath the white cascade of pain. Agony thumped its way through her skull, rattling around like dice in a cup, scorching wherever it fell and leaving behind searing torment. She let out a tiny whimper...and wondered why Clark’s arm didn’t tighten around her in comfort and why he remained silent.

And then she remembered.

Driving home from work. Wondering what Clark had wanted to talk to her about that morning. Finding the front door unlocked and stepping inside expecting to see her husband. Starting up the second set of stairs toward their bedroom and feeling someone behind her. And then hearing Rollie Vale’s voice in her ear, etched indelibly into her memory from the moment he had sacrificed Superman’s life for his own and sold Kryptonite to the world’s worst villain.

After that, her memory grew hazy and dim, but judging from the lump on the back of her head and the pain exploding in repetitive bursts within her mind, she had been hit hard and taken to wherever she now was.

But Clark must have rescued her, she thought. He was there with her, after all; she could feel his arm supporting her and his chest beneath her cheek. Although...his hand wasn’t resting on her waist. And he was silent. And when she had moved, his heartbeat had briefly accelerated before forcibly slowing once

more.

Something was wrong.

Warily, afraid of the light that would surely feel like a dagger in the condition her head was in, Lois pried her eyes open and took in her surroundings, surprised by the absence of the bright light one would expect in a hospital.

A tiny cubby-hole, limned in red.

A locked trapdoor above her head.

Clark lying beneath her, his eyes shut, his hands pressed to the ground, his face blanked of all emotion.

“Clark!” Lois exclaimed. She regretted it immediately; the sound of her own voice made her squeeze her eyes shut against the reawakened pain pounding through her temples. “Clark,” she whispered more quietly when she finally managed to open her eyes again. “What’s wrong? Where are we? How did they get you?”

As if she needed to ask, she thought belatedly. Clark always came when she was in trouble.

“It’s Rollie Vale,” he murmured so quietly Lois had to bend her ear near his lips to catch the words. His eyes remained closed as he continued to speak in short, choppy sentences. “He has all the Kryptonite from S.T.A.R. Labs. Intergang’s paying him to get rid of Superman. He knows who I am. The walls —”

“He knows who you are?” she interrupted, panicked.

“He hasn’t told anyone.” Clark’s voice turned dry. “He doesn’t want the value of the information to cheapen.”

“All right.” Consciously, Lois fought back her fear. They would have to deal with Vale later. “What about the walls?”

“They’re infused with the red Kryptonite. Move back against the far wall — I’ll make you an exit.”

Lois had already begun to shift away from him, pressing herself against the wall behind her, when the strangeness of his words managed to penetrate the fog wrapped around her mind. <I’ll make *you* an exit,> he had said. <He has *all* the Kryptonite...>

Abruptly, she reached out and grabbed his arm. Clark stiffened and became even more still, if that was possible. “Wait a minute,” she commanded. She needed to think this through, needed to ignore her headache and focus on the situation, needed to figure out why Clark was acting so strangely.

The red bleeding from the walls to drown them in its garish color was obviously the red Kryptonite infusing their tiny cell. Lois tried to ignore her angry despair at the re-emergence of that particular demon so soon after Clark had just begun to move on from their last encounter with it. Obviously, he was afraid to move, afraid to touch her, afraid to look at her, afraid to speak too loudly, afraid even to breathe...because the red Kryptonite’s effects on his powers very well meant he could effortlessly kill her in such a small, confined space.

And yet...

“You said Vale had both colors of Kryptonite,” she said calmly, carefully making her voice level, each word given the same consideration as the last. “So why would he lock you in a cubby-hole with red Kryptonite when he knows that it makes you even more powerful?”

“It doesn’t make me *more* powerful,” he countered, always editing her copy. “It takes away my control. And he gave me a choice between red and green.”

Lois blinked and tightened her hands over his arm. “And you chose red?”

“No. He said he lied.”

“Did he?” Again, Lois took in their cell, assessing the surroundings. “But why would he —” She cut herself off, suddenly horrified. “He gave you a choice — Clark, where’s the green Kryptonite? Tell me, and I’ll try to get rid of it!”

When he remained silent, Lois frantically began running her hands along the walls and corners of the cubby-hole, ignoring the

dizziness assailing her as she sought any hint of a stone, hoping it was where she could get to it. Her body shuddered at the thought of seeing Clark laid helpless before the green Kryptonite yet again. There was something so wrong about seeing Superman in pain and hurting, something so unnatural about it that it set every cell in her body to rebellion at the sight of it.

“It’s in a gaseous form,” Clark finally admitted. “Now, Lois, please, move back so I can get you out of here.”

“No.” Lois wriggled closer to Clark and draped her leg over his and her arm over his chest. Captivity was not something she enjoyed, but there was no way she was going to let Clark move before she figured out what Vale’s game was. “Not until you tell me where the green Kryptonite is. I know it has to be here somewhere. Did he leave it waiting in the room beyond this cubby-hole? Is that it? Did he tell you that you could escape the red Kryptonite so long as you didn’t mind running into the green?”

“No, not exactly.” Lois noticed with interest that tiny dents started to form in the floor beneath Clark’s fingers. Suddenly, as if noticing the same thing, Clark let out a stuttering breath and raised his fingers into the air. “Please, Lois,” he begged, his voice almost frantic. His eyes slid halfway open before he slammed them shut again. “Please, get out of the way.”

“No. Tell me, Clark.”

“I can’t hurt you again!” he exclaimed in a voice turned ragged with the effort he was expending to keep it quiet and harmless. “Can’t you see that?”

“Clark, you know how stubborn I am,” Lois commented levelly. “And I’m not moving until you tell me exactly why Vale left you in here when he should know it wouldn’t hold you.”

Slowly, gently, Clark turned his head so he was facing away from her and let out a breath. He lowered his hands back to the floor, placing them very precisely over the infinitesimal dents. His body relaxed beneath Lois, as if he were purposely divorcing his emotion from his body. “He wants me to kill you, Lois, to prove to Metropolis that I can’t be trusted. Failing that, he wants to kill me. He claims the walls are rigged with some sort of triggering system that will release the green Kryptonite gas into the cell if I break through. Now, will you please move out of the way? I’m doing my best to control my strength, but I can’t bear to hurt you. I *won’t* hurt you.”

Surely, Lois thought, she was dreaming. She had to be. Sure, stuff like this happened to them all the time, but there was something about the blood-drenched closeness of the cubby-hole around them, something about the resigned resolve apparent in the timbre of Clark’s voice, something about the twisted sickness of the entire situation that made it so much worse this time.

“So,” she said, shocked by the conversational tone of her voice, “you want me to just move aside so you can kill yourself?”

“I can get you out,” he said confidently, missing or ignoring the dangerous note in her voice. “Besides, remember, the different colors neutralize each other.”

“No, they don’t!” Lois snapped angrily. “The green counteracted the red, but the red didn’t do anything to stop the green from tearing through your flesh! How dare you, Clark? How dare you ask me to move aside and watch you die?”

“I’m super-fast,” he explained with that irritating calm — the calmness that was most likely saving her life, Lois forced herself to realize. “I can break through the walls and get out of range of the gas without getting more than a whiff of it.”

“The last time you got ‘a whiff’ of Kryptonite gas, you almost died!” Lois exclaimed, vaguely realizing that her entire body was trembling. She hadn’t yet figured out how the same qualities that made her love him could also infuriate her so badly. “If Lord Nor hadn’t cheated and tried his utmost to kill you, you *would* have died! I am not letting you subject yourself to it again!”

“And I can’t hurt you again, Lois! He wants me to kill you — do you know how easy it would be for that to happen? I can’t hurt you!”

“And I can’t watch you die!” she cried, splaying her hands against his chest to reassure herself she could still feel his heart beating. “I can’t bear to see you hurt, Clark!”

He was silent for a long moment before he finally whispered, “I know. I know, Lois. I finally read your articles...I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Shuddering, Lois leaned her head down to rest just below his chin, wishing he would put his arms around her, knowing why he couldn’t. “Just don’t make me go through it again. Now, we’ll find a way out — one that doesn’t involve you getting a lungful of lethal gas, all right?”

“All right,” he agreed in that noncommittal way of his, the way that allowed him to soothe her temper yet still convey that he would go ahead and do what he thought was best. It was one of the first things about him that had caught her attention and one of his most irritating qualities. “But I don’t think we have much time. Do you taste that metallic taint in the air?”

“Yes.” Lois heaved a heavy sigh. “The air’s running out?”

“This cubby-hole isn’t air-tight, but it’s close, and there were enough chemicals leaking in the warehouse above that what air we do have is poisoned. I tried to breathe all the poison in, but it was using up what air we had, so I stopped.”

“Well...” Lois remembered all the times when Clark had done his best to make her feel better about situations and forced a bright tone. “We’ll think of something. How long have we been in here?”

“Not quite an hour.”

“Hmm.” Desperately, Lois looked around, searching for anything she could use as inspiration or an exit. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much to see or to take advantage of. Dingy walls, soiled floor, heavy trapdoor locked from the outside...and poisoned air. Every breath she took seemed weighted with the knowledge that it could eventually kill her. “So, you really liked my articles then?”

“Yes. How could I not?” he added, his voice a caress no matter that he was wisely avoiding physical contact. “Although I think you should have used a different name.”

“You and Perry,” Lois scoffed, pressing herself more closely against Clark. She didn’t dare shift her weight off him, not when she knew he would do whatever he thought he had to in order to see her free. She had learned that the moment he had broken her out of prison despite his belief in the justice system. “Why would my name on the editorials be any worse than the articles about Superman?”

“I just don’t think it’s wise to link your name so irreversibly with Superman. There are a lot of people out there who want to pull Superman down and are willing to do anything to achieve that goal.”

“Clark,” she said wryly. “Considering where we are, I think that goes without saying.”

“Lois.” There was a hollowness to his voice that made her swallow. “If I tell you something, will you promise not to be afraid?”

“I will,” she managed. She slid her hands up to caress his neck, hating the crimson hue that made shadows pool in the hollows of his face, loving the familiar features that had so quickly and irrevocably become so necessary for her welfare.

“I...I’m afraid.” Finally, he opened his eyes and met her gaze, drinking in the sight of her. “I can feel all my powers bubbling up inside me — I don’t know how much longer I can control them.”

“I do.” She bent her head so that her lips were just above his, the force of her stare prohibiting him from looking away. He held his breath, but otherwise made no move to withdraw from her.

“You will control them as long as you need to. Because in the instant when it feels as if they grow too strong for you — when they fight to break free — you’ll remember everything it is you love. And then your control of the powers won’t be something you have to fight for or struggle to find. It will be there because you can’t bear to harm anyone...and your own powers will shut off. They’re not a malevolent force, Clark — they’re part of you. And they have the same morals and integrity and heart as you do. I don’t understand how you can fear your powers, not when they’re only an outpouring of you.”

His hand half-rose toward her shoulder before he reversed its movement, yet Lois felt as warmed as if he truly had touched her. The emotion so blatantly exposed on his face was enough to enfold her in the love he had given her so selflessly and continuously since the first days after their introduction. She had depended on that love so many times, trusting it to keep her upright and strong even before she had admitted to herself what Clark truly offered her. Now, without words, Clark expressed all that again.

“You’ve always accepted my powers so easily,” he murmured. “I was always afraid to ask why, but if that’s why you...I won’t disappoint you, Lois.”

“I know that,” she said in a tone that indicated that fact had never been in doubt. And it hadn’t. Then, choosing to disregard their situation for the moment, Lois touched her lips to his in a kiss that left him frozen in fear and strengthened with hope. When she pulled away, Clark leaned his head forward and kissed her again. Only...this wasn’t just a kiss.

He breathed pure air into her.

And when he pulled back, he smiled at her...and did not take another breath.

“Clark,” she began uncertainly.

“I can hold my breath a long time,” he explained shortly. “You think of a way out of here. I’ll preserve our air.”

He had given *her* the hard task, Lois thought sourly. But then, she knew that was purposeful. Clark had already deduced that there was no other way out of the cubby-hole than to break the field and release the green Kryptonite gas. He was only waiting for her to come to the same conclusion.

Well, he would be waiting for a long time, she decided firmly. She *would* find a way out of this that didn’t involve him dying, no matter how long it took. Clark had been to space before without even an oxygen mask, after all; surely holding his breath would help him focus on controlling his powers.

But as much as Lois racked her brain for an answer, there didn’t seem to be any way out of their cell. She ran her hands along the edges of the trapdoor, but it was too heavy for her — and allowing Clark to open it would allow the poisonous gas to kill him.

“I can move faster than the gas,” Clark reassured her again and took advantage of her glare toward him to once more give her breath, his lips as soft against hers as the brush of wind.

“No.” The word was almost no more than the expelling of breath. Lois felt bad as soon as it was uttered, as if she had repudiated not only his sacrificial offer but also the air he was freely giving her. “Please,” she added, “let’s wait a little longer.”

His smile was answer enough, more eloquent than a well-written article.

Exhausted beyond words, still fighting the headache pounding behind her temples, Lois closed her eyes and leaned her head on his chest. Dimly, she was aware that more time was passing than she thought and that she really needed to be doing something, but it was so hard to stay alert and think on whatever it was that needed doing. Something about a door. Or walls, maybe?

“Lois? Please.” The gentlest touch she had ever known whispered along her cheek, curved under her chin, and lifted her

face. Lips as familiar as her own played along her mouth and with the sudden rush of clean, delicious air, Lois felt awake enough to open her eyes. She was greeted by the sight of Clark's gaze, mingled terror and resolve.

"Clark?" she managed groggily. That light touch guiding her head forward, that kiss that felt like coming home, and more air, this time enough to realize that he was afraid for her, so afraid he had risked touching her despite the fact that the walls around them still pulsed with red Kryptonite.

"There's no more time, Lois," he told her, and moving slowly, he shifted his body to place her on the floor. "Please, I promise I'll go as fast as I can — and we both know that's very fast. Now, please, get as far away from me as you can; curl up in the corner and cover your head with your hands in case some of the shrapnel gets away from me. All right?"

Terror flooded through Lois's body, setting every molecule alight, tingling along her bones, flaring in her senses. Suddenly more alert than she wanted to be, she reached out and grabbed Clark's head, then kissed him fiercely. "Please, Clark, *please* be careful."

What room was there for fury within her when Clark's beautiful, expressive smile filled up so much of herself? What world could contain both the evil of the poisoned gas awaiting him and the kindness implicit in his own, added kiss of life and last insanely careful caress of her cheek?

What life would there be if he breathed his last so soon after giving all his breath to her?

But Lois Lane did not fall apart, no matter how much she felt like it on the inside. So she forced herself to give him her own tremulous smile, and she scrambled as far into the corner as she could, and she covered her head with her hands. And she prayed.

Clark must have been exerting more control in the last moments than he ever had before in his life — and that was saying something, as Lois well knew — yet he paused to collect himself. His eyes narrowed as he scanned the walls around him and the trapdoor above him, searching for the best point to strike. He glanced one last time at Lois; his eyes didn't even touch on the bruise on her arm, let alone linger on it. Instead, he looked only at her eyes. Then he smiled again because, after all, that was what he did, and he turned away from her to face the trapdoor.

The sound of gunfire in the distance was explosively loud and startling, made more so by the way Clark flinched away from the noise in pain.

Relief threatened to send Lois shrinking in on herself in a gibbering mess — she ignored that compulsion and threw herself forward to grab hold of Clark's arm, both of her hands curling around it to keep him in place. "Wait!" she exclaimed, the word barely understandable so shakily did it emerge. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," she gasped incoherently. Without another word, she launched herself into Clark's outspread arms and pressed herself tightly against him. Her body shuddered with the force of her relief, and the heaving gasps she was taking in were doing nothing more than making her lightheaded and exacerbating her headache...but none of that mattered.

Something was happening out there, something that might conceivably give them another option.

An option that didn't involve Clark breathing in green Kryptonite.

Lois knew that, incomprehensibly to her, he preferred the green Kryptonite over the red, but frankly, Lois would have done anything in the world to ensure that Clark never again had to experience the pain and helplessness brought on by the cursed green stone.

"Lois." At the murmur of her name, she looked down to Clark and received another breath of air, enough to help her focus. "It's gunfire. It might be a power play, or maybe Intergang double-crossed Vale."

"It's still a chance!" she said shakily when she trusted her voice. "You said we were about taking a chance. Please, wait just a bit longer. I'll start yelling to let them know we're here. You —" Glancing around at their surroundings and considering what might have to be done to free them from the cubby-hole, she directed, "You change into Superman."

"Superman?" Clark whispered. "The space is too small. It —"

"We're here! Over here!" Lois shouted, drowning out Clark's caution.

Accompanied by the sounds of running feet approaching and the calls of at least two men, Lois stilled the trembling of her fingers and began to undo the buttons of Clark's shirt. "If anyone comes to find us here with the Kryptonite or if you have to stop someone from shooting us, it's best they find Superman, not Clark Kent. Now, hurry, help me get you into your Superman Suit."

After an infinitesimal pause, courage and resolve reshaped the features of Clark's face. "Move back," he whispered, giving her another breath before allowing her to obey him.

Lois rolled against the wall, stretching herself flat to give Clark all the room he needed. Feeling him moving behind her, hearing the rustling of noise as he made his slow change from Clark Kent to Superman, Lois closed her eyes and breathed a fervent prayer of thanks.

No matter what else happened or who was outside their cell, Clark was safe for the moment.

And that was all that mattered.

Chapter 12: Determination

Time was running out. Perry could feel it slipping through his fingers like water, impossible to grab hold of or take back. While his boys had been children, he had acted like he had all the time in the world, but he was older and wiser now and he knew there might not be another chance. If he didn't find Lois and Clark — and soon — it would be too late. Too late to say all the things he should have said before. Too late to make them take time out from work to enjoy life.

Too late to ask them for forgiveness of his complicity in their pain.

"Okay, look." Jimmy recaptured Perry's wandering attention by pointing to the computer screen in front of him. Except for a janitor in the background, the newsroom was totally empty, Jimmy's computer the only one casting light across the abandoned desks. "Here's the address where the sham sales company is supposedly based. It's one of the very few that doesn't have even a single rumor connecting it to Intergang, so —"

"So you figure if they needed a safe place to pay Vale his money, they'd use it." Perry nodded and skimmed the information listed on the screen.

"Exactly. See, ever since Clark's article connecting Costmart to Intergang, they haven't been able to use their usual front companies, and the police haven't been able to find their new base of operations." Jimmy hesitated, then reluctantly added, "This is the only lead I've got. So if it's not here, I don't even know where to start."

"Wait a minute." Perry frowned. "Is that the listed phone number of the place?"

"Uh, yeah. Why?" Jimmy looked up at him curiously.

"Huh." Suddenly more focused as he shook off remnants of debilitating fear, Perry turned and strode the few steps to Clark's desk. "Clark mentioned that he was looking through his phone records recently; he thought something might be connected to Intergang. He said there were several numbers repeated that he was going to check out."

Clark's desk was meticulously neat, each item carefully

placed. It was almost harder to find anything amongst the perfect order than it would have been to find in the rushed clutter of Lois's things. Fighting back a pang of terror for his star reporters, Perry eventually found the papers he was looking for — filed in a drawer — and quickly handed them to Jimmy.

"There, see, those three numbers repeat." He and Jimmy set out the records for each separate phone, lining them up next to each other. Clark had highlighted the repeating numbers, finding at least five different occurrences on each phone line.

"Hey!" Jimmy exclaimed. "This is the listed number of the warehouse. And I'm sure I've seen this second number before."

Impatiently, Perry watched as the kid swiveled back to his computer and began typing furiously. Finally, almost bursting with the need to *do* something, he exclaimed, "Stop bein' so shy and tell me what you've got!"

"Look, this second number matches that of another small sales rep company. I'll bet the third's also connected in some way. I could start cross-referencing —"

"How long would that take?" he demanded.

Jimmy shrugged. "It depends."

"Well, we don't have a lot of time. Come on. Let's go check that warehouse out."

Though obviously surprised, Jimmy stood and shrugged on the coat hanging over the back of his chair. "You think that's where Lois and Clark are?"

"Who knows? But the last time I followed one of your hunches, we ended up finding proof that Superman had made it back to Earth after that nasty Nightfall business. Besides, it can't hurt to check it out."

"Should we call the police?"

"With what?" Perry retorted, pushing the down button on the elevator repeatedly, for the first time impatient with its slow response. "We don't have any evidence, and we can't even be positive Lois and Clark are really missing. I've got a cell-phone; if we find anything, we'll call the police. Until then, let's not bother them."

"Wow, Chief." Jimmy grinned as he stepped into the elevator after Perry. "I guess you weren't kidding when you said Lois learned a lot from you, huh?"

Surprised into a smile, Perry knocked a fist into Jimmy's arm. "You'd better believe it, son."

Perry let Jimmy drive to the warehouse for two reasons. The first was that it was Jimmy's car. The second was because he was afraid that his stress over Lois and Clark's predicament — heightened due to his own guilt in the matter — would have an adverse effect on his driving. What he should have been worried about was what *Jimmy's* driving would do to his nerves. By the time the kid had skidded to a halt a block down from the dark warehouse, Perry was seriously considering doing an article on the mysterious powers of indestructibility Jimmy's car seemed to possess. Maybe a whole series of articles.

"Don't you know how to *ease* into a stop?" Perry demanded. He made sure to lock his knees as he stepped out of the car; no need to let Jimmy know just how shaken up that last swerve had left him. "I thought you were the one always complaining about Lois's driving! Let me tell you, at least that gal knows to stop *before* she gets to the curb!"

"All right, already! Shh." Jimmy waved a quieting hand and grimaced at Perry, who was pretty convinced that no matter how loud he spoke, his heart would still be rattling along louder. It'd be a miracle worthy of Elvis's return if he ever got his blood pressure back down after that little escapade. Great shades of Elvis, he'd have to eat a *boxful* of those sickening Paava leaves before he'd be able to see his doctor without giving *him* a heart attack!

Fortunately, he was able to regain his equilibrium by the time Jimmy made it around the car and reached his editor's side.

"Come on," Perry directed, infinitely satisfied when his voice emerged sounding normal enough. "We'll sneak around to the back. Do you suppose any flashlight you might have stashed in your car survived the trip?"

"Way ahead of you — got one in my pocket."

"Yeah, well, that *would* be about the only way one could survive," Perry muttered.

The rain masked the sound of their steps as they slipped around the soggy ruins of cardboard boxes and half-empty trash-bags escaping nearby dumpsters. The street was empty, the warehouses around them run-down and ill-used. Jimmy's flashlight stabbed a faint beam through the murkiness ahead, a weak defense against the unknown they were entering. Perry could see no sign of anyone near, but he knew that if this really was where Lois and Clark had been taken, there would surely be at least one look-out.

"All right, Jimmy," Perry started to say but was interrupted by gunfire. Acting more quickly than thought, he dove forward and pushed Jimmy back behind the corner of the warehouse. Leaning there, trying to still the shaking of his legs even as he peered around the side in search of the sniper, he found himself amazed at how quickly one could move when death threatened.

"Oh, man!" Jimmy exclaimed shortly, his eyes wide and full of shock. "Someone's shooting at us! Who's shooting at us?"

"I don't know." Perry grinned at him, blinking away raindrops. "But I'd say we're probably on the right track."

Jimmy gaped at him. "Can we call the police now?"

"And tell them what? That we're trespassing?" Perry chanced another look around the corner and saw a man nearing them, a small firearm held ready in his right hand. "Anyway, after your driving, I can't believe you're afraid of a few measly bullets."

"Measly?" Jimmy repeated incredulously. "I'd like to live to see my next birthday, thank you."

"Fine." Perry grabbed the kid's shoulder and shoved him toward a row of crates stacked parallel to the wall. "Hide behind those crates. If you see an opportunity, take it."

"What?" Jimmy had no time for anything more because the editor gave him a push that sent him into a shambling run and saw him safely behind the crates. Perry would have liked to have given him a bit more direction, but he could hear the man nearing, his steps sloshing through rain puddles.

"You!"

Raising his hands in a gesture of surrender, Perry turned to face the shooter. His bravado before Jimmy had been just that — a show — but now, he felt it become more real, forced by the depths of his fear to become concrete. He didn't like seeing the end of his life pointed at him in a cold barrel, but then, you didn't always get what you wanted. And it was far better to face this sort of danger than have to sit in his office and ponder more shame-drenched decisions as he looked at an article explaining the deaths of his two star reporters.

"Is there a problem here, mister?" he asked casually, careful to keep his hands where the man could see them. No sense in getting shot just because he got careless.

"What are you doing here?" the man demanded. As he grew nearer, the rains parting before him like a curtain, his features grew more familiar. Perry had never met him personally, but he had seen enough pictures of the street toughs Lois and Clark suspected were involved with Intergang.

Terrible fear and dread mixed together in the pit of Perry's stomach with sickening results. Forcibly reminding himself that Clark was Superman and therefore invulnerable, he tried to convince himself that there was still hope. How many times, after all, had Lois and Clark showed up safe and sound after all hope had seemingly been obliterated? He couldn't give up on them now.

"What am *I* doing here?" Perry repeated. "What are *you*

doing here?”

The man drew down his heavy brows, his hand tightening over the gun, and took another step nearer, forcing Perry to back up against the cold wall behind him. “I know you — you’re Perry White.”

“Oh, you read the Planet?” he asked.

With a terrible crash, Jimmy slammed into the man. The gun went skidding across the ground to land next to a muddy puddle. Perry dived forward and delivered a well-executed punch that surprised even himself. It had, after all, been a while since Beirut, though apparently old habits died hard.

“Grab some of that rope from those crates!” Perry snapped as he held the shooter down against the pavement. But when Jimmy took his weight off him, the man bucked upward and twisted to his feet. Praying he didn’t slip in the rain, Perry shoved the man back to the ground and delivered another punch, one that left him gasping in pain and afraid he had broken his knuckles. The shooter, however, fell limp.

“You all right, Chief?” Jimmy asked, hurrying over with some rope he’d cut from the crates.

“Yeah, but I remember now why I became an editor.” He and Jimmy bound the man’s hands and feet securely, then set him up against the wall out of sight.

“Let’s hope he’s the only lookout,” Jimmy muttered as they once more started toward the door.

“Well, this might help things a bit.” Perry scooped up the gun.

Jimmy frowned at him. “Do you know how to use that?”

Despite the situation, a guffaw escaped Perry. “Son, it’s pretty easy — point and shoot. But I don’t intend to use it except by way of intimidation. Now, do you want to stand out here talkin’ or find Lois and Clark?”

Shrugging, Jimmy pulled out his ineffectual flashlight and shoved open the door.

The confines of the warehouse were vast, open, echoing, and cluttered with the detritus of leftovers the previous owners hadn’t seen fit to take with them. It clearly wasn’t being used by any sales company that was well enough off to be making substantial payments to Dorian’s bank account. Perry found a light-switch, but the dim illumination didn’t do much to clear anything up. The most he could say was that no one else seemed to be home.

“Where do we start?” Jimmy wondered in a hushed tone.

“We’re here! Over here!”

“Lois?” Perry shouted, his heart jumping to his throat. Somewhere deep inside him, he’d known they’d be here — or stashed somewhere else equally depressing — but he had hoped nonetheless. Hoped that they were fine, taking a romantic flight that had lasted longer than they’d anticipated. Hoped that Clark wasn’t facing another situation with Kryptonite or Lois’s safety held over his head. “Lois! Where are you?”

“Perry?” Lois’s voice reverberated, but Perry and Jimmy were able to follow it forward to the cleared center of the warehouse’s interior. “Perry, we’re in a cubby-hole under a trapdoor.”

“I found it!” Jimmy exclaimed. He half-fell, half-knelt on the floor and dropped the flashlight aside, then placed his hands on the indented handle.

“We’re getting you out of there, Lois,” Perry called, kneeling at Jimmy’s side, prepared to help him lift the trapdoor.

“Don’t open the door!” Lois shouted, and both Perry and Jimmy fell motionless at the panic eating away her voice. “Superman’s in here with me, and there’s red Kryptonite infusing the walls. If you open the door or try to break in, a green Kryptonite gas will fill the cubby-hole.”

Sickened, Perry examined the door beneath him in a new light, almost imagining he could see red spilling from the edges of the cubby-hole. “Are you all right in there with Superman?”

“Of course I’m all right,” she said over Clark’s “We’re fine, sir, but I’d appreciate it if you could get us out soon.”

A tiny smile tugged at the corners of Perry’s mouth, but he hid it by creasing his brow in thought. “I think I see a small panel here that might be where these gizmos are plugged in. If I open it, will I trigger the gas?”

There was a slight pause, and then Superman’s strong, steady voice, marred only by the smallest sign of strain, emerged into the cavernous interior. “It doesn’t appear so. The lines run, unbroken, around this small space, but I don’t see any indication that they include a panel.”

“All right. Here goes nothin’.” Exchanging a quick glance with Jimmy, Perry pried open the tiny panel and was rewarded with the sight of a red stone, gleaming malevolently, attached to some wires running behind the paneling of the cubby-hole.

“We’ve found the red Kryptonite,” Jimmy exclaimed, pitching his voice loud enough to be heard through the walls. “But I don’t see anything that looks green.”

“Please,” Lois begged. “Please, try to find it!”

“Are you sure it isn’t running through the lines — rigged to spray outward?” questioned Perry.

“It might be,” Superman confirmed slowly.

“I’m going to unplug this rock,” the editor informed them; then, holding his breath, he pulled the Kryptonite free of the wires. “Are you all right?” he called hastily.

“Fine,” Superman replied shortly, but there was a thread of tension in his voice that hadn’t been there before. It would, Perry knew, be a while before the effects of the red Kryptonite wore off.

Making a sudden decision, Perry handed Jimmy his cellphone. “Son, call the police. Let them know where we are and that there’s been an attack on Superman and a kidnapping.”

“It’s Rollie Vale,” Lois added, the words muffled by the floor between them. “He’s selling to Intergang.”

Perry nodded to Jimmy but didn’t watch the kid step away to obey him. Instead, he turned to the study of the cubby-hole beneath him and the problem it posed. For whatever reason, he abruptly felt as if this was his one chance for atonement — he had played a part in Jerry’s attack on the superhero, but this moment was an opportunity to prove that he was more than his son, that he could surpass the mistakes of old, that he could make up for what he had allowed to happen.

And he did not intend to let the opportunity slip away.

With renewed determination, Perry bent to examine the sides of the cubby-hole, running his hands inside the panel to see if he could feel what he couldn’t see in the intermittent lighting.

Shockingly, his hands came across an oddity buried behind the wires that had led from the red Kryptonite to the paneling. It didn’t feel like an alien stone...but it did feel like a tiny canister.

“I think I’ve found it,” he yelled excitedly.

“Please,” Superman begged desperately. “Hurry! The air — it’s running out. Lois!” He said more, the rest fading inaudibly, spoken to the woman beside him and not to the men above. Perry felt an additional thrill of desperate terror; he had thought his main concern was Superman and the Kryptonite, not the vibrant, dedicated reporter who had strode into his office so young and full of bravado to demand a job at the Daily Planet and an uncontested place in his heart.

His hands shook as he maneuvered them by feel in the darkened, tiny panel. He dared not crack the canister open, and yet haste made him clumsy. “Please,” he found himself whispering. “Come on!”

With a slight hiss and snick, the canister came free, tiny and almost weightless in Perry trembling hold. For a breathless moment, he could do no more than sit and stare at the tiny bulb-shaped container. Then, recalling the peril of Lois’s situation, he exclaimed, “I’ve got it! It’s off!”

“Move back, sir,” Superman commanded impatiently. And as soon as Perry had struggled to his feet and backed up several paces, looking behind him to make certain Jimmy was still a safe distance away, the trapdoor flew upward and landed with a clang in a shadowed corner of the warehouse’s interior. An instant later, a mass of red and blue and a trace of yellow floated upward from a tiny cubby-hole, the limp, fragile form of a woman cradled in his careful hold.

“Lois!” Perry was there as soon as Superman landed. Only it wasn’t Superman who supported Lois as she wavered on her feet; it was Clark, made so by the sheer terror on his face as he examined her body from head to toe with narrowed eyes that saw so much more than Perry could.

“She has a concussion,” Clark explained. As soon as Perry’s arms moved to surround Lois’s shoulders, Clark stepped away, his hands falling to his sides and beginning to clench into tight fists before he consciously relaxed them.

“Lois, darlin’, are you all right?”

Perry almost sagged in relief when Lois blinked dazedly and met his gaze. “Perry?” she uttered tremulously. “Where’s Clark?”

The editor hastily looked over his shoulder, but Jimmy was still on the phone, gesturing expansively as he explained something to the person on the other end. “Uh, I’m sure he’ll turn up.” Perry cast a sharp look to Clark, and the younger man stepped forward.

“Lois.” The word was spoken quietly, simply, naturally, yet it might as well have been a hundred declarations of undying love for all that was evident in it.

No matter her apparent lightheadedness, Lois’s eyes unerringly found Clark’s. “Superman,” she said, a tiny smile curving her lips in satisfaction at remembering the correct name. “I told you we’d find another way out.”

Tenderness obliterated every other emotion in Clark’s eyes. His hand rose toward her cheek before he remembered what Suit he wore and that Perry was standing there, supporting Lois as she half-leaned against him. “You did. You’re always right.”

“About you, anyway,” Lois replied quietly.

Not wanting to intrude, Perry shifted his weight and cleared his throat. “Uh, and where *is* Clark? Jimmy and I were looking for him and Lois, and I’m sure the police now know that.”

“Oh, well.” Amusement suffused Perry as he watched Lois and Clark exchange another conversation-filled glance. Clark straightened and looked at Perry briefly before his eyes fell away to a point in the distance. “I think Clark was knocked out by the men who kidnapped Lois. She was being held as insurance to make him write an article retracting the Costmart/Intergang connection.”

“Knocked out.” Perry nodded sagely. “That’d be why he didn’t answer the door when Jimmy and I knocked.”

“Yes,” Lois affirmed quickly. “That’s why. Superman made sure he was all right, though, before coming after me. Right, Superman?”

“Right.” Again, Clark made a tiny movement with his hand before recalling himself. “But I should go. Rollie Vale is still free, and if I’m not mistaken, he’s currently meeting with the head of Intergang. If I can find him, I might be able to catch them both.”

“Are you well enough?” Perry asked, narrowing his eyes as he examined the superhero. Clark was looking a bit unsteady on his own feet, and though he held himself with rigid restraint, the signs of fear lingered in the tight corners around his mouth and eyes.

“The red Kryptonite doesn’t wear off that fast,” Lois added softly.

“I can do this.” For all the tight, controlled quality of his voice, Clark’s eyes were filled with a mute plea as he looked at his wife. It was a plea Perry recognized, having seen it in his son’s eyes just hours earlier. A plea for trust. A plea for faith. A

plea for confidence, given and thus instilled.

A plea Lois answered without hesitation. “Then go,” she told Superman. “Catch the bad guys so we can write the story — a Daily Planet exclusive.”

“How will you find Vale?” asked Perry as Jimmy rejoined their group.

“I left m — Clark’s beeper in the back of his van. If you wouldn’t mind paging me, Mr. White, I’ll zoom in on the sound and trace it to Vale’s location.”

Ignoring his amusement at Clark’s use of the name “Mr. White” and amazed once again by how differently Clark held himself as Superman, Perry nodded. “Jimmy, give me the cell-phone. Why don’t you go bring the car around so Lois doesn’t have to walk so far — and try not to hit the warehouse, would you?”

“Sure thing, Chief.” Jimmy sprinted toward the door, eager to please, as Perry flipped open the cell-phone and punched in Clark’s number.

Superman turned to follow the sound only he could hear, but then hesitated to look back at his wife. “Lois, you will let a doctor check that lump on the back of your head, won’t you?”

“If you promise to be careful,” she returned gently.

“I’m always careful,” he replied wryly. “Lois...” With only a brief glance to Perry to acknowledge that he and Lois were not alone, Clark allowed one finger to brush the curve of Lois’s cheek. “I wanted to tell you...Metropolis asked me to stay.”

Joy awoke twin suns in Lois’s eyes, and as if they were suns that provided him solar energy, Superman straightened with infused confidence and strength and blurred away. Despite the red Kryptonite, the door — and the walls — of the warehouse were undamaged by the speed of his exit.

Lois turned to Perry, one hand fisting in his shirt. “Did you hear that, Perry?”

“I did,” he returned past the lump in his throat. “I’d say you did some pretty fine work there, darlin’.”

“Not me,” she murmured as her head wobbled and then leaned on Perry’s shoulder as sirens neared the warehouse. “He did it all himself.”

Perry chuckled, remembering the moment he had introduced Lois and Clark, the astonished gleam in Clark’s eyes, the concealed surprise in Lois’s when she found herself working so well with her new partner. Then, knowing she wouldn’t hear him, he whispered, “Teamwork’s a beautiful thing.”

Chapter 13: Resolve

He hadn’t hurt her.

Clark’s attention was centered on awareness of his self and his surroundings, conscious of each raindrop as it alighted on his sensitive skin, registering the change of airflows around him as he shifted currents in the air, thinking through each move — no matter how small — before he made it. And yet, despite all that and the infinitesimal, repetitive beeping that called to him above the cacophony of dozens of meshed harmonies that was Metropolis, there was a tiny, precious part of Clark that could think of nothing more than that fact: he hadn’t hurt Lois.

And really, what more was there? He had been trapped in a hole oozing red Kryptonite and held his wife in his arms — arms that could demolish the strongest metals on Earth almost without trying...and she had emerged unscathed.

No bruise had marred her flesh.

No bones had been crushed to powder.

No skin had been ripped or torn open.

Nothing. He had exercised control...and beaten the Kryptonite.

He could still feel the effects of the red stone. It still felt as if molten energy had been poured beneath his flesh and now sizzled through his veins demanding an immediate outlet. But he no

longer felt that he couldn't stop himself. He knew that if he needed to, he could simply tell himself no and the switch to his powers would be thrown.

It was an incomprehensible victory to him, utterly unknowable in its importance, and so he could not wholly think on it, could only hide it away in a safe place and marvel over it with a piece of his mind that would break it down to manageable levels and allow him to absorb it more fully.

For now, however, duty called. Duty and something more. Rollie Vale had something of Clark's, a small ornament that meant the world to him. He wanted it back.

How Clark was able to zero in on a specific beeper was something he couldn't explain, but he had done it several times before and, really, it wasn't as if he could explain any of his other powers either. What would the world think if they knew their superhero operated more on instinct and hope than anything else?

Clark shook off the extraneous thought — another attempt to distract his mind from the magnitude of his accomplishment — and circled an upscale building that claimed to house offices for some business or another. Vale's van was parked in the lot, so Clark wasn't surprised to find a hidden back set of rooms on the basement level when he x-rayed the place. What he *was* surprised to see — no matter that Lois had suspected it — was Mindy Church standing next to the man who had fingered Joey Bermuda as the head of Intergang. That man, his eyes shifting from Vale to Mindy and back again, was holding a gun on a sneering Rollie Vale. Mindy smiled at the tableau before her, fingering a necklace that was almost hidden among the gleaming waves of her golden hair.

It was a bizarre enough scene, set as it was in what appeared to be a hidden lap of luxury, that Clark paused and tuned in to hear their conversation.

"Now, you know I don't like it when people try to take more of the cake than their plates can hold," Mindy pouted, still stroking that necklace.

"Oh, really?" Vale commented snidely. "Well, I don't like it when people promise things and then don't give them. The deal was twenty million for the removal of Superman — and that's what I want."

"Did I ever say that, Benny?" Mindy looked at her henchman, who replied with an obsequious smile and shake of his head. "I didn't think so. And I think it's awful — just awful — that you would accuse me of lying!" Her voice hardened, a bit of the honeyed smoothness replaced by hints of steel. "And if I think something's awful, it needs to go out with the trash. Don't you think so, Benny?"

"Yeah, boss," he assured her. When he took a step toward Vale, his hand tightening over the gun, Clark decided he had seen enough. No matter that Vale knew his secret, Clark couldn't just stand aside and let the cyborg die; he had to save him.

Clark didn't allow himself time to over-think the walls he had to break through — he simply crashed through them, intimately aware of how to move his body without losing his restraint on his powers. With the crash of destruction and rubble falling at his feet, Superman landed between Vale and the other two, Benny's gun crushed in his fist.

And no one had been hurt.

A thrill of victory coursed through Clark's mind, tinged with the flavor of elation. He had felt the same when he had ignored the other piece of red Kryptonite's apathetic effect and managed to save Lois and Perry from Bill Church. Though this piece's effects had seemed so much more damaging, so much more powerful, it turned out that it could hold no more power over him than he allowed it. And he refused to allow it any.

"Ooh, Superman," Mindy purred. Her eyes slitted dangerously as she threw a weighted look Vale's way. "What a surprise to see you drop by."

"I told you to have your man go ahead and kill him," Rollie interjected defensively. "But did you listen to me? *No*, you had to —"

As condescending as Rollie's manner was, he was silenced immediately by a miniscule wave of Mindy's manicured hand. "Let's not bore Mr. Superman with petty squabbles," she commented, her hand rising to the chain of her necklace. "I'm sure he's very busy."

"Busy taking all of you to the nearest police station," Clark stated firmly. It was liberating to know that he could trust himself, to be confident in the fact that when he stepped forward, he didn't have to be afraid he'd pulverize anything he touched. The terrified motionlessness that had afflicted him when he'd seen the blood on that cashier's arm was but a distant memory, made powerless by Lois's assurance that the powers would do what he told them to.

"Or I could show you the amazing present Rollie gave me." Mindy's large eyes widened decoratively, her lips curving in a smile so predatory it could only diminish her beauty.

Even before she pulled the green rock hanging from the necklace into sight, Clark knew what he would see. The overwhelming buzz of red Kryptonite affecting his powers had masked the presence of the green, but his step forward had placed him too near it.

Sharp, jagged rays of agony radiated outward from Mindy Church to swamp him in pain that cut through his invulnerable flesh and buried itself deeply in every cell of his body. Every breath was cut glass, every move — even falling to the floor — was a lesson in torment, and each second an eternity of torture. He couldn't hold back the groan torn from his clamped lips.

"Don't you think it's pretty?" Mindy was asking, her words floating just above Clark's awareness, the timbre of her voice unable to slice through the Kryptonite wave that engulfed him. "I think it's very useful — but tell me, does it go with leopard-print?"

"Stop toying with him and finish him off," Rollie urged.

Mindy answered him, but Clark couldn't catch the individual words. He had locked his gaze on Rollie Vale, or rather, on his right pocket. The pain was inconsequential; it didn't matter. It was something Clark had faced a handful of times before, something he could deal with so much more easily than the red Kryptonite. Slowly, consciously recalling the sight of his wife slumped against Perry as she fought to answer him coherently, Clark forced himself forward, dragging himself toward the trio of figures above him.

"Benny, I think it's time to take out the trash."

The command, uttered in such a feminine voice, snatched Clark's attention and shook it brutally.

Clark's hand had encountered the crumpled mess of metal that had been Benny's gun, but apparently the henchman didn't lack for a weapon. Dimly, his vision flickering in and out in a green haze, Clark looked upward to see the scrawny man aim his weapon at Rollie Vale, who was backing away with a terrified expression. More words flew through the air, cluttering the space above Clark's head with their incomprehensible syllables, but he paid them no heed. All that mattered was stopping the soon-to-be-fired bullet from hitting a man and stealing his life from him. That the man Clark was trying to save had just tried to kill him by placing him in a nightmarish situation was immaterial; what mattered was that Clark valued life, and he could not allow death to be irreversibly played out in front of him.

"No," he uttered, the denial little more than an expulsion of breath. Stalwartly, Clark ignored the pain and forced himself to his knees. If he could just manage to place his body between Benny and Vale, the bullet would never be able to hit the cyborg.

"Don't be jealous," Mindy cooed at him, appearing almost feline in her cruel anticipation. "We'll get to you in a moment."

Benny!”

Bolts of lightning took the place of Clark’s veins, spidering through his body in white-hot arcs as he threw himself upward. Bright lights to rival the sun flared across his vision when Rollie Vale’s left arm — deceptively covered by a flesh-colored material — struck his head.

A gunshot exploded through the room and instantly silenced the cluttered clamor of earlier words hanging over them.

Clark winced backward when he felt a body fall next to him, the sound of its collapse heavy enough to imply great weight. Almost as great as his disappointment that he hadn’t managed to stop the bullet.

Rollie Vale.

The situation threatened to spiral away from Clark’s control, spinning far away from him as he felt himself dragged under the flow of green-tinged pain. But he couldn’t let that happen.

<In the instant when it feels as if they grow too strong for you — when they fight to break free — you’ll remember everything it is you love. And then your control of the powers won’t be something you have to fight for or struggle to find. It will be there...they’re part of you.>

Lois’s voice sounded in his mind, ringing with a clarion call before which the green Kryptonite couldn’t help but recede. The words were important, beautiful, speaking aloud a truth Clark prayed would never change. And yet...that wasn’t why he clung to her speech so desperately. Rather, it was the tone of her voice as she had spoken the words — the inherent assurance, the unflinching faith, the obvious confidence, the unwavering love — that made the memory of her so much more powerful than the radioactive piece of his planet. No matter that he now fought the pain of green Kryptonite instead of red Kryptonite’s loss of restraint, the power behind her faith in him was the same.

As if he were still trapped in that tiny space, Clark felt the slight weight of Lois lying half atop him, her hand stroking his cheek and neck, her breath feathering against his skin. He remembered the way her dark eyes had fluttered open when he breathed air into her lungs, the way her expression had shifted into unfathomable relief as she had thrown herself back into his lethal embrace, the way her gaze had followed him when he left her with their editor.

She was waiting for him.

She needed him.

<I can’t bear to see you hurt, Clark!> she had told him.

And he could never bear to cause her pain.

At first, Mindy Church and her henchman didn’t notice him as he struggled back to his knees and then, biting back his exclamation of pain, forced himself to his feet. He wavered for a moment, valiantly struggling to focus past the dizziness making the room around him spin in circles. When he took a step toward Mindy, he could no longer restrain the cry of pain wrung from him due to his increased proximity to the Kryptonite.

“Getting impatient, are we, Superman?” Mindy smiled at him as she turned to face him. “That’s — ”

Whatever her next words were, Clark didn’t bother to wait for them. Lurching forward, he grappled with Benny for the gun and aimed as powerful a breath as he could manage in Mindy’s direction. Though glass twisted in his throat as a result, at least the waves of green pain subsided the slightest bit, diluted by a few extra feet of distance. A blow to the side of Benny’s head sent the henchman toppling to the ground.

Unfortunately, he took Superman with him.

Clark shoved Benny aside and pulled himself to his feet, aided by the support of the wall behind him. A magnified burst of agony warned him that Mindy was stepping forward. The stone at the end of her necklace gleamed malevolently, foiling any plans Clark could vaguely formulate.

He had told Lois he was fast. He had assured her he could

move quickly even while affected by green Kryptonite. Now, it seemed, was the chance to prove that assertion.

Gathering himself closely, Clark employed a burst of what was left of his superspeed to snatch the necklace from Mindy and hurl it into the distance. He made certain to note where it had fallen before he turned back to an enraged Mrs. Church.

“Now look what you’ve done!” she exclaimed. “Benny!”

But her henchman was out like a light — or pretending he was, anyway.

Already feeling a bit better, Clark straightened and gave Mindy Church his best Superman glare. “Looks like I’ll have to be the one to take out the trash.”

She turned and made as if to run from the room, grimacing when Clark quickly moved to block her way. The throbbing in his head did its best to distract him from the task of finding something to tie his two prisoners with, but Clark ignored it. It was true that he wasn’t as used to ordinary pain as other people were, but learning to control his powers had taught him to focus past any physical distractions.

Perhaps, he thought with dawning hope, Lois had been right to trust him. Maybe he wasn’t as dangerous as he had thought.

Rollie Vale’s body mocked his conclusion. And yet Clark had tried to save him; it was Vale’s own paranoia that had made him reject Superman’s assistance so violently.

A quick phone-call brought the police to the building. Clark was only too glad to turn his two prisoners over to them. It took him a long hour to explain what had happened and give them his statement about Mindy Church’s involvement in the events of the past few hours. Finally, however, the police announced satisfaction with his recounting and capped their pens.

“Excuse me?” Superman caught the nearest officer’s sleeve.

“You mentioned that you had heard of Rollie Vale’s involvement in a kidnapping. Do you know which hospital Ms. Lane was taken to?”

“Mercy Hospital, I think.” The officer paused, then said, “You look a little...well, pale. Are...are you all right?”

“I...” Clark swallowed, rocked back a step by the concern apparent in the man’s eyes. Had it only been a week since he had been assaulted by onlookers at that hospital rescue? Yet here was a man who was clearly intent on showing the superhero that he was appreciated. “Yes, thank you,” he finally replied, wishing he had more to give the man for his kindness.

“No, thank *you*.” The officer flashed a grin. “We won’t be the only city who’s overjoyed that you managed to nab the head of Intergang. Good work, Superman.”

Clark wished, for the first time in his life, that his power of flight worked just like Peter Pan’s; with the happy thoughts the officer had engendered, he could have ignored the Kryptonite’s effects and flown straight to Lois’s side. However, though he couldn’t explain how his flight *did* work, he knew without even trying that it would take a few hours in the sun to see him back in the skies. So, blending into the shadows of a nearby alley, Superman transformed into Clark Kent and flagged down a taxi.

The hospital was brightly lit and gleamed like a lantern calling him out of the cold. Clark did his best to keep his steps steady as he entered the building; the last thing he needed was some doctor thinking he needed a check-up. Even entering the hospital sent a thrill of instinctual terror through him, taunting him with the knowledge that he was different from everyone else on the planet. Under ordinary circumstances, Clark would have stayed far away, but Lois was here, and so this was where he belonged.

“Clark!” Perry hurried toward him, looking tired and a bit haggard but with a gleam in his eyes that wouldn’t have been present if Lois wasn’t all right. “Are you okay, son? You look a bit...green around the gills.”

“Uh, yeah.” Though he relished the feel of Perry’s supportive

hand on his shoulder, Clark couldn't help but look around in a visual search for Lois. He missed being able to hear her heartbeat — if only there were still daylight outside so he could have rejuvenated a bit under the sunshine!

"You sure? Superman told me what happened to you."

"Oh." Recalled to his current location, Clark finally met Perry's sharp eyes. "Well, I...I went looking for Vale to find Lois. But instead, I...found Superman. Rollie Vale's dead after an altercation with Mindy Church, who's really the head of Intergang. She and her henchman are now guests of the Metropolis Police Department. Chief, where's Lois?"

"Oh, they gave her a check-up and said she had a concussion and was suffering from a bit of oxygen deprivation. They wanted to give her a bit of oxygen before she went home — and she can only leave on the condition that someone's there to watch over her."

"I'll take care of her," Clark said, surprising himself with the amount of fierce protectiveness in his voice.

"I know you will, son." Perry gave him a careful smile. "Despite our little conversation about hypothetical danger, I know you'd never do anything to hurt Lois."

"No." Clark cleared his throat of the sudden hoarseness afflicting him. "I wouldn't."

"So..." Perry straightened as if to brush off the whole matter. "You talked to Superman, then? Listen, I..." He lowered his voice to a quiet whisper. "I've got that piece of red Kryptonite and the canister of green Kryptonite gas out in the trunk of Jimmy's car. Needless to say, that's not the safest place for them — for more than one reason. Now, uh, what do you think Superman would want done with them?"

Clark paused and studied his Chief, who refused to give himself away by so much as the flicker of an eyelash. "I guess... he'd want you to give them back to Dr. Klein. And, also..." Though he hesitated briefly, Clark knew there were very few people he trusted more than Perry White, particularly now that he was almost completely certain the editor knew about his dual identity. "There's a piece of green Kryptonite that Mindy Church used tonight. Superman threw it away, but if I told you where it was... would you be able to retrieve it and get it somewhere safe?"

"Sure thing, Clark." Was it Clark's imagination or had Perry emphasized his name just a bit more than necessary? Regardless, Clark described where the stone had fallen and received Perry's assurance that he would find it and see it safely back in S.T.A.R. Labs' vault.

"You be sure and get some rest, all right?" the Chief added, his eyes narrowed with concern as he peered at Clark.

"I will. I just...I'd really like to see Lois now." Talk of Kryptonite had managed to allay Clark's impatience only for so long. Now, with the knowledge that Lois was hurt and with the memory of her unsteady gaze when he had left her to go after Vale, Clark felt the need to see her grow almost as strong as the effect of red or green Kryptonite. Almost...except that he could fight the effects of the Kryptonite, but he couldn't deny his need to see and touch and speak to Lois.

"Clark?"

His super-powers were gone, meaning his hearing was no more exceptional than anyone else's, and yet Lois's quiet utterance of his name was as clear and audible as it always was, slicing through the clamor of the world's cries and the immediacy of his own doubts and fears.

Almost fearfully, afraid she wouldn't really be there, Clark turned from his editor, oblivious to everything but his wife.

Lois stood several feet down the hallway, her worried gaze intent on him, her shoulders rounded in exhaustion, her hair smoothed back to cover the lump he knew was there. A nurse stood just behind her, ready to offer support should Lois need it.

His wife's hands, strangely bare, were clasped in front of her, as if she already held him in her arms.

"Lois." Clark spoke the name, but he didn't need to. The sight of her was splashed all across his being, written there for anyone who looked at him. He couldn't hear Perry's quiet good night or the beeping of monitors and computers or the quiet hum of people in the background. He couldn't see anything but Lois growing nearer to him as he took large steps toward her, heedless of the weakness infusing his body.

And then he was pulling her into his arms, clasping her tightly to himself with not even a hint of fear that he would hurt her. He didn't need to measure his strength, or doubt his control, or limit his reaction to her. Because, powers or no powers, Kryptonite or no Kryptonite, he loved her. And he would never harm her. Not now, not ever.

"Oh, Clark, I was so afraid for you," she murmured, burying her face against his chest. "Are you all right?"

"I am now," he whispered, unable to loosen his grip and pull back to look at her. He had every inch of her memorized, and feeling her body pressed tight against his and her breath against his neck and her silky hair beneath his hand was more important than drinking her in with his sight. So he held her close and squeezed his eyes shut as he leaned his head against hers.

"I love you," she breathed, holding him just as tightly despite the fact that she was leaning heavily against him.

"And I love you," he replied.

And that, he thought, was a force so much more powerful than any color of Kryptonite.

Chapter 14: Triumph

Clark's arms around her were all that was holding Lois together. Ever since the trapdoor to their cell had gone flying into the shadows and Clark had lifted her into freedom and clean air, she had felt lightheaded, dizzy, and vague, as if the entire world were passing her by while she processed her relief and abated fear. Perry's solicitous questions, the doctors and nurses around her, the murmur of the hospital — it had seemed little more substantial than a dream that had no power to truly affect her.

Yet now, with Clark holding her together, his heartbeat reflecting hers even as it gave hers a reason to beat, his breaths mirroring hers even as their continuation gave her a reason to inhale and exhale, his flesh next to hers so much more important and sacred than her own, now she could start to think again, could start to look around and process what was happening. Now that he was safe, she could return to reality, content that it was still a reality worth living.

But still her body quivered with tiny shivers she couldn't control or tame. It was infuriating to be so affected by this one escapade when she was, as Clark had observed, so good at putting attempts on her life and dangerous encounters behind her. Why, she wondered, was this one so different? Why did her veins still pulse with leftover liquid terror? Why couldn't she smooth out her breathing and quit her trembling and loosen her grip on Clark? Why did she feel like breaking down into tears and letting Clark put her back together, kiss by caress by whisper?

Because, something within her replied, this time it wasn't her own life that had been in danger.

It had been Clark's.

Was this what he went through every time he saw her dangle over the jaws of death? Was this terrible, helpless feeling of utter inevitability and complete powerlessness what he experienced each time he had to swoop in and pull her from death's door? No wonder he shook long after she did following those encounters. No wonder he held her so tightly and stared at her so long and followed her so closely after any situation where she came so near to the end. No wonder he had been so thoroughly terrified of his own helplessness and her mortality that he had once been led

to separate himself from her.

Lois tightened her grip still further on Clark at that thought. Regardless of her new understanding, she couldn't bear to lose him. She needed him too much to even contemplate the thought of watching him walk away. Not that he would, she quickly assured herself. They were far past that juncture of their relationship; they had given their lives to one another and sworn their eternal fidelity.

"It's okay," Clark whispered in her ear, as if sensing her distress. "I'm right here."

"Please," Lois murmured, too drained and weary to even lift her head from his chest. "Please, can we go home?"

"Of course."

Lois almost cried out when Clark's arms withdrew from around her. She felt her stability fluctuating, threatening to fly apart in a million pieces that might shatter still further if Clark weren't there to so carefully catch them and build her back up. The only thing that kept her together was the fact that he kept one arm around her waist, drawing her after him as he filled out a few forms, directed her to sign her name, and began to lead her out of the hospital.

"I wish I could fly you home," he said quietly. "But we'll have to take a cab."

He had already waved down a taxi and helped her into the backseat, sliding in after her and gathering her close to himself, before she regained enough coherence to realize that something bad must have happened if he couldn't fly them home.

"You ran into the stone again?" she asked him, unable to raise her voice too loudly and yet still speaking in code due to the presence of the cab driver.

"Church and Vale had a piece. It's all right; Vale's gone now and the police have Church. Perry's taking care of everything." Clark tightened his arms around her, and for the first time, Lois was aware enough to recognize the fact that he was gaining as much assurance and strength from her presence as she was from his.

Words escaped her for the moment, the process too complicated and intricate for her to grab hold of the perfect collection of syllables that would right his world for him. So, in lieu of verbal comfort, she snuggled in closer to him and hoped that the beating of her heart and the sound of her breaths and the sensation of her skin against his were enough to assure him that she was there and safe and still deeply, desperately in love with him.

"Lois." His voice was so quiet, so soft, so well-known to her, that she more felt him say her name than heard him. The feel of his hand sliding down to take hers was just as familiar, just as welcome, just as comforting.

Her breath caught when she felt him slide her wedding ring back on her finger. Around her, the world seemed to click back into place, the last key turned to return it to its normal, every-day perfection. A single tear slipped free to caress the curve of her cheek as gently as he usually did.

"I love you, Lois," Clark whispered, his arms tightening around her, proof that he was no longer afraid to touch her and hold her and love her.

In answer, Lois slid her hand — shimmering with the tiny star he had given her — up into his hair and buried her face in his neck, blotting out the rest of the world and drowning herself in the feel and smell and taste of her husband.

She wasn't even aware that they had reached their brownstone until she felt his arms slide under her and lift her. A brief twinge of anxiety, awoken by the thought that he was still recovering from both colors of Kryptonite-*again*, and so soon after the last time! — made her stir briefly with the intention of walking to the door herself, but the effort was too great for her and the thought swirled away to be lost in the sea of

overwhelming emotions turned vague, a sea that surrounded her and engulfed her in its liquid embrace.

Dimly, she heard the door close behind her and felt herself surrounded by all the comforts and security of home, an ethereal feeling she couldn't describe but that instantly made itself known when crossing that threshold Clark carried her across — once in delight with their new home and now with relief to shut out the rest of the world. Then, Clark's movements and the vague sensation of space moving around her informed her that he was carrying her up the stairs and into their bedroom. The next thing she knew, he was setting her down atop the bed, the covers seeming to rise up around her, embracing her in warmth and comfort.

Comfort that was obliterated when Clark began to move away from her.

"No," she blurted, grasping blindly upward to catch hold of his shoulders. "No, don't leave me!"

"I was —" Clark subsided, then gently settled himself next to her, drawing her close to him, allowing her to stretch out and press herself fully against him, giving her back her world. "All right," he murmured. "I'm here. Shh, it's all right. I'm here."

As if his words — or the familiar surroundings — had caused the last of her barriers to disintegrate, Lois's tears could no longer be held back. The sea that had carried her along in its silken, flowing currents now demanded a release and poured from her eyes, a rainy storm prompted by sheer terror and stress and relief.

"I was so afraid," she said, the words separate and disjointed, swallowed up between sobs. "I thought you were going to die! I thought you... I was afraid you would have to breathe in that... please, Clark, please tell me you're okay!"

"I'm okay," he obliged her, his voice so calming and strong and *alive* that she wept harder. "Shh, Lois, it's all right. I'm okay."

"How do you do this?" she demanded, more in sympathy with him now than she ever had been before. "How can you think I'm going to die and *not* break down afterward? How can you be so strong?"

"I'm not strong," he told her, a note of such bleak somberness in his voice that Lois couldn't help but quiet her sobs and dam the flood of tears to hear every nuance of his answer. "I do break down, every time I see you in danger. I just... I hold it inside. And I go flying. And then I watch you sleep or laugh or work or whatever it is you're doing. And by seeing that you're all right, by listening to your heartbeat, by talking to you about the mundane or the important, I banish the terror."

"Until the next time," she finished for him.

Clark's smile was so astonishing, so unexpected, so amazing, that Lois caught her breath. "With you, Lois, there's always a next time. But that doesn't matter. What matters are the moments — moments of happiness and bliss and contentment and friendship and passion. Even the moments of danger and fear and all-consuming relief. All of those combined compose our life, and taken altogether they're beautiful. Perfect. Each moment with you is a miracle."

Lois had never met a man like Clark, who believed in such stark absolutes and yet thought of the world as a beautiful place, who spent so much time seeing the very worst and most vicious life had to offer and yet was convinced there was good in everyone, who displayed the most amazing gentleness humanity had ever seen and yet possessed such amazing inner strength. She had never met — would never meet — anyone else who could touch her so deeply with his words and the love so unashamedly, unabashedly, fearlessly exposed in his eyes and in every one of his actions.

It had taken her a very long time to believe that a man like that could — and did — exist in the real world. A long time to realize that he was true and honest and sincere. It had been easier

to believe in Superman, a being with extraordinary powers and a heart of gold, than to believe in the ordinary Clark Kent, a man who loved her with all that he was and so unequivocally that it was impossible for him to hide or contain it. But he had eventually convinced her, eventually won her trust, eventually brought her to the understanding that if a man could fly, he could also love her selflessly.

And though Lois wished she could respond to his declaration with equal poetry, she could, as always, only respond with her own actions. Could only give him her reply by lifting her head and bringing her mouth to his and kissing him with all the tenderness and awe and wonder she felt that he loved *her*. Kissing him with all the love and affection and respect she felt for him.

“Clark,” she said as he kissed her cheek, her temple, her chin, and her lips again. “Please, take me flying. And then let me watch you. Let me see you living out your life. Let me hear your heartbeat. Let me talk to you about anything and everything. I want to be healed.”

For once, he didn’t ask whether she was well enough; he had witnessed her emotional sobs and was well able to hear the desperation presently imbuing her voice. So, even though he couldn’t fly yet, not physically, he lifted her into his arms with no sign of strain, and he moved her to the open window, so close that if she avoided looking behind her, it almost did seem they were in the skies. And he whispered in her ear, pointing out specific stars or describing unique cloud configurations or recounting scenes of beauty from his own memory.

And then, when she felt herself grow drowsy, he took her back to the bed and tucked her in, nestling her close to his heart so she could hear its steady thumping and know that he was well. And he smiled at her so she could imprint the image in her mind and use it as a shield against all the fear-drenched images sleep wanted to send her, and he laughed when she traced his smile with a finger. And he kissed her softly as she fell asleep so that she took his love with her into whatever dreams visited her.

And when she woke, he was there beside her, ready with a smile and a greeting and an understanding ear.

And Lois was healed.

When she emerged from the shower, dressed in comfy slacks and a long-sleeved t-shirt, Clark was waiting with an impish smile that gave away the fact that he had a surprise for her.

“What is it?” she demanded immediately. She hated surprises... usually. Except when it was Clark who gave them to her. And really, since he was himself a mystery that never failed to surprise her, that seemed fitting.

“I made you breakfast,” he told her, as if that were an unusual occurrence. “Lay down. It’s supposed to be breakfast in bed.”

“But I’m up already,” she insisted playfully, afire with curiosity to know what had him biting back a grin that refused to stay hidden.

“The doctor said you were supposed to take it easy, and Perry’s not allowing us to come into work today. So...” He paused before finally allowing his grin to burst forth unrestrained. “If you want to know what the surprise is, you might as well lay down and get comfortable.”

“Oh, fine,” she agreed ungraciously. For Clark’s sake, she huffed a bit and made a big deal about settling herself in the bed and meticulously arranging the covers about her. She knew it reassured him to see her acting so normally after her breakdown of the night before; his eyes practically lit the room without even the benefit of the sun as he watched her.

Clark ducked into the hallway, then stepped back into the bedroom with a tray in his hands. The smells of food such as only he could conjure up made Lois suddenly more quiescent about sitting there, waiting for him to serve her.

“Are you going to eat with me?” she inquired shyly.

“I was hoping you’d ask,” he replied.

Setting the tray on the bed, Clark settled himself next to her, and Lois couldn’t resist stealing a quick kiss before he could remove any of the covers from the dishes. “What was that for?” he asked, though his tone indicated that he didn’t mind in the least.

“Just stealing a taste of dessert before the main meal,” she teased him.

“Well, in that case.” Clark leaned nearer her and snatched his own quick kiss. “You’re right,” he told her softly. “It makes everything else taste better.”

Lois giggled and held up a stern finger. “But don’t think this means you don’t have to tell me what you’re hiding!”

“Who says I’m hiding anything?”

“I don’t even know why you try giving me that innocent look,” Lois said, doing her best not to be distracted by the sight of steaming muffins revealed by Clark’s flourishing removal of a lid. “You can never hide anything from me.”

“Nothing?” He raised a questioning eyebrow.

Biting back her grin, Lois raised an eyebrow. “Your alter ego hardly counts. Everyone knows that falls under the category of... well, of superpowers!”

“Really?” Clark chuckled and offered her a muffin that she couldn’t very well turn down. He had gone to an awful lot of trouble to make it for her, after all, and she didn’t want to hurt his feelings. “Do I have to start listing that power on my résumé now?”

“The next time you make a résumé for Superman, you can,” Lois granted imperiously before laughing at the silliness of her mood and taking a large bite of the muffin. After that, it was a few moments before she managed to recall herself to the mystery before her.

“So?” she demanded as soon as she had finished her last bite.

Clark met her gaze as casually as if he weren’t hiding something from her. “Yes?”

“You know what I want, Clark!”

“Do I?” Clark took their plates, stacked them back on the tray, and set the tray on the floor beside the bed. Probably a wise move, thought Lois, since her fingers were itching to grab a pillow and force Clark to reveal his secret to her. Well, she inwardly shrugged, why not?

“Tell me now,” she commanded, and grabbed hold of a pillow, raising it threateningly over her head. “You can’t cheat until you soak in a bit more of that sun, and I’m warning you, without your powers, you’ll never be able to stand against me in a pillow fight.”

“A pillow fight?” Clark repeated incredulously. “What are you, eight?”

Pretending outrage, Lois used the pillow to knock Clark on the head. “Come on, Kent — what are you hiding?”

“I’m not hiding anything,” he protested, holding up his arm in a warding gesture. “But... if you really need a distraction that bad, why don’t you try reading the paper?”

Lois glared at him suspiciously as she took the paper, certain this was just another delaying tactic. Yet when she looked down at the paper, she was astonished by the major headlines adorning the front page.

“Plot to discredit Superman foiled by Man of Steel, by Perry White,” Lois read aloud, her eyes skimming over the articles. “Mayor forced to resign under cloud of controversy, by Lois Lane and James Olsen. Dorian connected to Intergang, by Lois Lane and James Olsen. Superman nabs head of Intergang, by Clark Kent and Perry White. Superman here to stay, by Perry White and James Olsen.” She looked up from the paper with wide eyes to meet Clark’s satisfied gaze.

“I don’t think Perry or Jimmy got any sleep last night,” he told her, putting an arm around her so he could examine the paper

over her shoulder. “The Chief called last night after you were asleep to ask if he could use our notes on the different stories, but I had no idea he had all... *this*” — Clark waved his hand at the headlines — “in mind.”

“Clark...” Lois couldn’t say any more; her voice had given out as she opened the paper. As familiar with the layout of a newspaper as she was with the back of her hand, she nonetheless found herself rustling through the other pages as if she had never held a newspaper before. Finally, she looked up from the main articles and countless letters to look at her husband. “Did you look through the whole paper?”

His smile was small and...proud. Not proud of himself, but proud of her and her accomplishments. “I did. It seems your editorials made people eager to show their appreciation of Superman.”

Lois looked back down at the paper, filled to overflowing with letters from Metropolitans who had sent in their stories of rescues and loved ones returned to them and inspiration gleaned from Superman’s actions. “Did you know Perry was planning this?”

“Yes. I told you I read the papers with your Op/Ed pieces. He had added a short note at the bottom of your editorials asking people to write in with their thoughts on Superman. I don’t know that he expected quite that many. The back page says there will be an extra edition to print the rest.”

“Clark.” Puzzled by his relaxed calmness, Lois laid her hand flat against his cheek and turned his face so that he would look at her. “Isn’t this what you wanted? Don’t you want Metropolis to accept and appreciate you?”

“I do,” he answered quietly, laying his own hand over hers. “It means more to me than I can say that so many people obviously understand that my goal is to help them and that they accept me into their lives. But what’s more important than that is the fact that *you* never abandoned or rejected me. Ever. And even if Metropolis had asked Superman to leave... I would have been all right. Because I still had you.”

“And even if Metropolis had betrayed and disappointed me,” Lois realized, “I would still have you.”

“Always,” he promised her instantly.

“Oh, Clark. I love you.” As she threw herself forward into his arms, Lois wasn’t aware of the newspaper heedlessly crumpled between them, or whether her byline had been featured prominently or not, or even what the letters praising and extolling her husband said. Later would be time enough to revel in the triumph afforded her in those few pages of newsroom ink. Later would be time enough to thank Perry for what he had done and follow up on the mayor’s resignation and cover Intergang’s fall. Later would be time enough to merge back into the flow of the world.

But for now, for this perfect, miraculous moment, Lois was content to spend time with her husband. To listen to his laugh and memorize his smile and luxuriate in the gleam that darkened his already-dark eyes every time he looked at her. To remember all the reasons she loved him and to fall in love with him all over again. To heal him with her presence and to be healed in turn.

Against Clark’s mouth, Lois laughed her happiness aloud and melted under his gentle touch.

Chapter 15: Forgiveness

It was so simple he couldn’t believe he hadn’t realized it before. It was so difficult he didn’t know if he had the power to see it done here. And yet he had to try. For the sake of his son, Perry had to do his utmost to accept a heartfelt apology and offer the one thing he hadn’t yet — forgiveness.

Forgiveness.

Perry turned the word over and over in his head, mulling over the meaning and implications of the three-syllable word.

It meant letting go.

It meant moving on.

It meant loving without reservation.

And that just wasn’t something Perry White, Editor-in-chief, was very good at doing.

He was good at ignoring things. Good at pretending they had never happened or didn’t matter. Good at putting up a bold front that denied the fact there was a problem.

But that wasn’t true forgiveness.

And he needed to learn how to forgive. For Jerry’s sake. For Jimmy’s sake. For his own sake.

Jerry was waiting for acceptance and absolution from the father he had betrayed in order to fully move past his criminal mistakes.

Jimmy wanted a hand on his shoulder, a word of approval, and a smile from his Chief in order to believe that he hadn’t irrevocably damaged something between them.

And Perry needed some resolution to the awful guilt and shame and fury that had been broiling within him since his son had attacked Superman and his protégè had gone behind his back to investigate. He needed to forgive — not only them — but also himself.

“Pops, you came back!” Despite the pleased grin on Jerry’s face, Perry could sense a certain vulnerability present in his son, the same that had been there when he had, in his younger years, presented his father with a report card or a trophy. As if he were waiting for approval while knowing he was unlikely to get as much as he wanted.

“Son...” Perry had to clear his throat, locking his gaze with Jerry’s to let him know how serious he was. The last time he had stared at his son so intently was when he had handed him his retirement check. This time, Perry was determined things would end better. “Jerry, I’ll always come back,” he promised his son.

Jerry’s eyes lit up, yet still he waited, that awful, half-fearful patience evident in his posture and expression.

Perry stood, disliking the feeling of sitting in judgment of Jerry. He wished he were better at this sort of thing, but as Jimmy had said, there were quite a few similarities between Perry and Lois. Unlike her, however, Perry was alone; he didn’t have anyone to help him through this as she did. The patience of his Clark Kent — Alice — had run out when she had grown tired of waiting for her husband to notice her, to stop his never-ending search for the perfect edition and realize that he already had something so much more important than a newspaper. She had given up and divorced him and left him alone to gaze into the hopeful, guilty eyes of their son.

But, like Lois, Perry refused to give up.

“I’m always coming back,” he said again, bending to rest his hand on Jerry’s shoulder, feeling the tension of bunched muscles beneath his palm. “What you did was...well, it was wrong, I won’t deny that. But I forgive you. And I’m here for you. I’ll be there at your trial, sitting right behind you. And I’ll visit you until you’ve served your time. And then I’ll be there to welcome you home and help you really, truly start anew. Jerry, I’m on your side — and I’m sorry if I ever left you with any other impression.”

“Dad...” With a quick glance to the hovering guards, Jerry stood and pulled Perry into a hug. This time, Perry didn’t stand there with his hands held awkwardly to the side, frozen in indecision, shame, and confused resentment. This time, he wrapped his son in a full embrace and granted them both absolution.

Then, before the guards could grow too nervous, they both laughed and separated and laughed again. Then they sat, and Perry told his son what had happened — most of which Jerry had read in the paper — and Jerry asked about Beirut, and they spent an hour trading anecdotes from their individual pasts and jointly recalling shared memories. And this time, when Perry left the

prison, he didn't leave behind a stranger in a building that represented despair and loss; this time, he bid temporary farewell to his son and left a place that would one day give him back that same son.

Handing the Kryptonite articles over to Dr. Klein and seeing them safely locked away in a new, improved vault had been liberating. But knowing that the next time he came to see Jerry, he'd find a friend waiting for him...that was even more freeing. More amazing.

More healing.

"Chief! Chief!"

Perry frowned when he saw Jimmy hurrying toward him from the parking lot. "Jimmy? What are you doing here?"

"Chief, you'll never guess who called your office! Oh, and they said they sent a letter — a formal notice for him — but that hasn't arrived yet. Anyway, I can't believe it!"

"Well, maybe *I* could," Perry said dryly, "if you'd tell me what this is all about. Come on, son, what's got you higher than a cat's back?"

"It's amazing — though, come to think of it, I can't believe he's never gotten it before. I'll have to ask them why not."

"Jimmy," Perry began, but Jimmy was too excited to take notice.

"It's amazing, Chief! They called you because they figured the Daily Planet would be able to get word to him more easily."

"Jimmy!" The editor put a bit of a growl in his voice and finally received a bit of notice from the kid. Good thing Jimmy's writing had been more focused than his rambling, he thought exasperatedly.

"Well," Jimmy began, unable to curtail the beaming grin that made him look even younger than he was. "Superman's just won the International Peace Prize! They're going to give it to him next week!"

"The Peace Prize?" Perry repeated, stunned by the enormity of the announcement. Clark had earned this award — he deserved it — but in some way, the editor had helped him gain this recognition. And maybe that, along with everything else that had happened, was enough to prove that Perry White wasn't as much of a laughingstock as he had seemed these past couple weeks.

"This is huge!" he exclaimed. "And we're the only ones to know?"

"I think so. Like I said, they called you to see if you'd print it in the paper and get the word out to Superman."

"Print it? Great shades of Elvis, you can bet your bottom dollar we're going to print this!" Perry increased his speed, eager to get back to the newsroom. "This is quite a scoop — and on top of the big story about Intergang's fall we printed before the Star or the tabloids even got wind of it. Come on, Jimmy — we've got a lot of work to do."

Since they had spent most of the night before getting the morning edition ready for printing, Jimmy could have groaned at the thought of more long hours awaiting him at the office. Instead, he simply matched his pace to Perry's, his smile still present. Perry felt a thrill of pride course through him. He was even more certain now than ever before that Jimmy would be a great in this business one day — maybe sooner than even Perry had realized.

"So..." Perry hesitated, not used to asking too many personal questions. But then, he had taken the kid fishing before; a personal question shouldn't be too hard. "How did it feel to see your name on the front page?"

Perry would have sworn Jimmy actually bounced a good two feet in the air. "Great! Say, when are the Kerths anyway?"

A guffaw escaped the editor. "You don't lack for confidence, do you? Sounds like you've been spendin' too much time with Lois."

"Not Lois," Jimmy corrected, his entire manner changing in

an instant from excitement to shyness. "But I've been watching *you*. You know," he forced a chuckle, "trying to learn from the best and all."

"Confidentially," Perry said, slinging his arm around Jimmy's shoulders as if it were the most natural thing in the world, "that would be Lois and Clark. Together, they make the finest investigative team this world has ever seen. But someday, son, you'll be in the same league as them."

"Really?"

"As sure a thing as the King. Now, come on. There's a scoop waitin' for us. Speaking of which, I think I'll send Clark to cover Superman's acceptance of the award."

"Clark?" Jimmy repeated. "Why him?"

Perry smiled. "He is one of my best reporters. And, from what I understand, he travels well."

"Okay. You riding with me?" Jimmy pulled out his keys as they reached his vehicle.

"I don't know." Perry eyed the car dubiously, not sure he should trust his life to its indestructibility a second time.

"I'll be careful," Jimmy promised with a grin. "Trust me."

"All right." The smoothness of Perry's agreement obviously caught Jimmy by surprise. "I do trust you, son. Now, do you plan on just standin' there all day?"

"No, sir." With an exuberant grin, Jimmy slid into the car.

Refusing to be frightened by the speed at which Jimmy exited the prison parking lot, Perry leaned back, his mind racing with plans and layouts and assignments. When he and Jimmy arrived at the Daily Planet and entered the newsroom — the editor amazed that he had survived the harrowing trip — Perry walked straight from the elevator to his office without a hint of shame, his back straight, his head held high. And when he barked orders, everyone around him leapt to obey, their movements orderly even as they were chaotic, the sure sign of a successful newspaper.

"Stick with me, son," Perry told Jimmy. "Let's show 'em how a real newspaper is run."

"Sure, Chief," Jimmy replied happily.

Ah, Perry thought with an inward smile. He loved the smell of ink in the morning.

THE END