

Spark of Discovery

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Rated: PG

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Summary: Fireworks are beautiful, but they can be deadly, especially when they are tampered with...

Disclaimer: I neither own, nor make, anything. All Lois and Clark characters, plot points, and lines of dialogue belong to DC Comics, Warner Brothers, December 3rd Productions, and anyone else with a stake in the Superman franchise. As always, I'm just playing with my toys again.

Author's Note: This story was inspired by watching my town's firework display while at a friend's house. It fit very nicely with the Summer 2012 ficathon challenge issued by [MrsMosley](#) on the Lois and Clark FanFic Message Boards. The idea was to take one prompt and turn it into a fanfic. My prompt was "discovery," though it also pulled some inspiration from "art of fireworks."

Also, for the purposes of this story, Lois is not dating, nor has she ever dated, Lex Luthor.

"Beautiful, isn't it, Asabi?" Lex Luthor asked, turning to his faithful man-servant. He put his back to the large window in his office that afforded him a stunning view of the bustling city of Metropolis.

"What is it?" the man asked, moving in closer, in order to examine the cylinder in the billionaire's hand.

"One simple firework," Lex replied, smiling at the brightly colored paper of the tube.

"A firework, sir?"

Lex nodded. "Yes." He paused for a split second only before posing a question to the man. "Did you, know, Asabi, that the Chinese first used fireworks not to inflict harm or to celebrate, but to chase away evil spirits?"

Asabi shook his head. "I was unaware."

"Yes, it's true," Lex said, nodding absently, still examining the item in his hand. "It was only after the discovery of gunpowder that the simple bamboo tubes were used to inflict damage against their enemies. In both cases, it was a weapon against those that would otherwise seek to harm them."

"I see, sir."

"It wasn't until the Renaissance that fireworks became an art form," Lex continued, as though Asabi had never spoken. "It's fascinating, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Asabi said, nodding, though his eyes still spoke of his mystification at the sudden history lesson.

"Fireworks. Like any weapon, they are so beautiful. Like this sword, for instance," Lex said, sweeping his hand in the direction of his collection of swords, daggers, spears, and other weapons. "Precisely made. Every embellishment heightening the beauty and serving some purpose. And, like that sword, in the wrong hands, they can be so deadly."

"Yes, they are a lot alike," Asabi agreed, attempting to follow his boss' train of thought.

"Beautiful. Deadly. And so varied," Lex said, twisting the tube in his hands. "Different shapes. Different colors. Some that seem to linger and shimmer, others that disappear almost as soon as they explode."

Asabi nodded, starting to figure out where Lex was going

with his little speech. "I assume that is no ordinary firework." He gestured to the tube in Lex's hands.

Lex smiled, an evil light in his eyes. "Very good, Asabi. No, it's not. It's not ordinary at all."

"You have a job for me?" Asabi asked knowingly.

Lex chuckled. "You know me far too well, Asabi. Yes. I want you to take this, and plant it at tonight's firework display in Metropolis Park. Make sure it's mixed in with those to be shot off during the grand finale."

"What does it do?" Asabi asked, peering at the object a little more closely as Lex put it into his hands.

"Nothing. It's a firework. It just happens to have the ability to kill Superman."

"How's that?" the man asked, a little wide-eyed.

"Just you wait and see," Lex said as a slow, evil grin overtook his face. "Tonight, Asabi, I shall finally be free of my greatest rival."

"Clark! Over here!" Lois called out, waving her arm above her head, apparently hoping her friend could spot her over the sea of picnicking families.

Clark waved back and carefully threaded his way through the mass of outspread blankets. He was juggling a tray of food and drinks in one hand, the other hand busy shading his eyes against the nearly horizontal shafts of light from the departing sun. But even if the sun truly *could* fully blind him, he'd still be able to find Lois anywhere, the unique sound of her heartbeat a Siren call to him. A minute later he sidestepped a squealing toddler who was trying to escape her father, then arrived at the blanket he and Lois were sharing.

It was the perfect summer evening. For the past two weekends, it had rained, delaying the Annual Metropolis 4th of July Carnival and Fireworks. But now it was finally sunny and dry. It wasn't too hot and the nearly cloudless sky was the perfect canvas for the firework display that was coming. Lois and Clark had spent the entire day together at the carnival, riding the rides, browsing at the merchant stalls, and playing games of skill. Clark had won Lois a few new fish for her tank, and had offered to drop them off at her place before the fireworks could start. He had flown there, introduced the colorful fish to their new tank-mates, then flown back, stopping only to thwart one bumbling carjacker on the way.

"Hey," Clark said, reaching the blanket and sitting down.

"Here are your keys."

"Where'd you park?"

"I never moved the car. I, uh, saw a cab when I was leaving the park. It was just letting off a couple of college-aged guys when I got there." It was a true enough statement. He actually *had* seen such a taxi as he'd left the park, in search of a place to spin into the suit, away from prying eyes.

Lois' eyes widened in awe. "Nice timing!" Then she looked at her watch. "Didn't take you long at all."

Clark smiled. "I didn't hit any traffic. In any case, your scaly new friends are enjoying their new home. I dropped some food flakes in the tank too. I figured the poor little guys haven't eaten all day."

"Thanks, Clark. You're the best. Rocco was starting to look a little...well...not well."

Clark's eyebrows crawled up towards his hairline. "Rocco?"

Lois nodded. "The little silver one with the red stripe."

"You name your fish?"

Lois crossed her arms before her chest, but couldn't hide her amusement. "What? Don't tell me you never named your fish as a kid. But then again, you're pretty traditional, so you probably just named them all Goldie. Am I right?"

"Nope," Clark grinned. "Never kept any fish."

"That's just sad," Lois commented. "Poor, deprived little

Clark.”

“Deprived? I hardly think so,” Clark snorted in mock indignation. “I did have a dog named Bongo when I was really young. And a barn cat named Ambush.”

Lois giggled and arched an eyebrow. “Ambush?”

Clark laughed at the memory. “Yeah. That cat’s favorite activity was laying in wait for unsuspecting passersby and attacking them.”

“Bet he was a good mouser.”

“Oddly enough, no. That cat couldn’t have caught a dead mouse if you dropped it right in front of his face.” He shook his head. “Anyway, here. I got you a cream soda on my way back.”

“Thanks,” Lois said, taking the proffered cup. She took a sip, then set it down to one side. “So this fried dough is for both of us, right?” She flashed him a brilliant smile, the one Clark had absolutely no defenses against.

“Of course,” he said, nodding.

In truth, the portion size could have easily fed a family of four, the paper plate sagging beneath the weight of golden, steaming dough and sweet confectioner’s sugar. But more than that, Clark loved sharing his food with Lois. He loved sharing everything with her.

Clark reclined on the blanket, laying on his side and propping himself up on one elbow. He tore off a chunk of the sugary treat and chewed it almost thoughtfully. Across from him, Lois mirrored his movements. Clark loved moments like this, when Mad Dog Lane vanished, leaving behind plain old Lois, his best friend. It was times like this when he got to see her relaxed, even playful, side. It was a part of her he had gradually come to see more and more of. And the more of it he saw, the more it made Clark love her. That, in turn, only made his heart ache all the greater. Lois regarded him as a partner at work and as a friend, but nothing more.

But, he thought, maybe, just maybe they had reached a place where he could try to be so much more to her. After all, they had known each other for a long time now. September would be a year. The best year of Clark’s life, to be exact.

“Lois,” he said, speaking slowly and choosing his words carefully. “I’ve been doing some thinking lately. We’ve known each other a while now.”

Lois nodded. “Almost a year. I still can’t believe you’ve put up with me for this long.”

Clark nodded in return, ignoring Lois’ self-jab. “It’s been an amazing year, knowing you. When I first came to Metropolis, I had no idea what I would find waiting for me. I’m so thankful that what I found was you. And I was wondering...” He fumbled for words for a moment before continuing. “You’re my best friend, Lois. As I’ve gotten to know you, more and more, I’ve come to realize something. You are...exactly...that is...I have wanted...it’s been so hard to...uh...I think we...”

Lois laughed a little. “Clark?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re babbling. Only I’m allowed to do that.”

Clark laughed, and that seemed to relax him a little, seemed to bleed a little of the tension from him. “Sorry to intrude on sacred ground,” he teased. “What I meant to say was...I’d like to go out with you sometime.”

“We’re out now, Clark,” Lois said, though he could see the dawn of recognition in her eyes.

“I don’t mean as friends. I mean on a date. If you’re interested, of course.”

“Clark, you know you’re my best friend. And...I think...I’ve known for a while, that you were interested in me like that.”

“You knew?”

Lois gave him a playfully superior look. “Well, I’m not a three time Kerth winner because I’m blind as a bat to little details, Clark. Besides, I think most of Metropolis knows that

you’re interested in me.”

Clark chuckled again. “Fair enough. So...do you think you might be interested?”

Lois sighed. “You know, I figured this was coming. I just wasn’t sure when. And I’ve given it a lot of thought. I mean, a *lot* of thought.”

“And?” Clark prompted, when Lois fell silent.

Lois struggled for a moment before speaking again. “I want to, Clark. I’m just...afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Well,” Lois said, shrugging, “of what might happen. What if things don’t go well for us? I can’t lose you, Clark. I can’t lose the best friend I’ve ever had.”

Clark gave her a reassuring smile. “Hey, if it makes you feel any better, I’ve thought about that too.”

“You have?” Lois asked, perking up a little.

“Well, sure. You’re my best friend too, Lois. And if there’s one thing I’m sure of, it’s this. No matter what happens, if we were to try dating, you’ll never lose me. I can’t imagine my life without you in it, without the bond of friendship we share.”

“Really?”

“Really.” He put all his conviction in that single word, trying to will Lois into knowing the truth of it.

“When you put it that way, who could resist? Yes, I think I would like to go out with you.”

Clark’s face lit up with a thousand watt smile. “Great! How about dinner tomorrow night?”

“Sounds wonderful. What’d you have in mind?”

“Well, I thought I’d take you someplace amazing. Someplace not quite exotic, but rare in its own right. Someplace that will make all your friends green with jealousy.”

“Geez, you make it sound like you’re renting a plane to take us to Tuscany or something.”

“Close, but not quite.”

Lois’ eyebrow arched again. “Okay, now you’ve done it. I need to know. Where is this mysterious place?”

“Antonio’s,” Clark said, letting his eyes sparkle with satisfaction as Lois’ mouth gaped open.

“*Antonio’s*? Clark, you need to make reservations six months in advance for that place. It’s the most exclusive restaurant in the entire city.”

“I know,” Clark said, giving her a grin that told her he knew something she didn’t.

“Okay, what is it? What strings do you have that you’re going to pull?”

“I think I told you enough for now.”

“Uh uh. No way. Tell me.”

“Lois, can’t you just enjoy it without having to unravel a mystery?”

Lois didn’t hesitate to respond. “No. I’m a reporter. Unraveling mysteries is what I do.”

Clark hesitated for a moment, until he saw that look come into Lois’ eyes — the one that assured him that she would not rest until she unearthed the secret he was hiding.

“Okay, okay,” he finally said, putting his hands up in a gesture of pacification. “The executive chef? I went to college with him. We played ball together. He just moved to the city about two months ago and got in touch with me. He said he could get me in at any time, all I have to do is give him a call.”

Lois grinned at him, then tore off a section of the fried dough. They ate in silence for a while, just enjoying having the other there, and wondering what it would be like once they officially entered the realm of dating. Clark sipped from his soda, gazing at Lois in between casual glances around at the rest of the happy couples and families in the park, wondering if Lois’ acceptance of a date would turn out the way he’d always hoped. He was already in love with her. Could she ever feel the same way towards him?

Would they ever be one of the happy couples — or, better yet, happy *families* — sitting in the park one day?

“Nice night,” he commented after a while. “After two cancellations, I half feared the city would just forget about it this year.”

“Nah. Metropolis would never skip out on this, even if they had to push it to October.”

Clark chuckled. “Well, in either case, I’m glad it didn’t get cancelled.”

“Me too,” Lois agreed. “Me too.”

A couple of short hours later, it was fully dark. The sky above was dotted with innumerable stars. The night air chilled around them. Lois shivered a little and rubbed her bare arms, her thin shirt doing nothing to keep her warm. Clark moved closer to her and drew her into his arms. He was a little uncertain of how forward he should be, but Lois didn’t protest. She only sighed lightly and rested against his chest. It set Clark’s heart to soaring to be so intimately positioned with the woman of his dreams.

At 9:30, music began to pump from the strategically placed speakers in the park. A mix of patriotic and pop songs blared over the gathered crowd as the fireworks began to light up the sky. Every heavy thump of the cannons meant another bright, shimmering firework. Every screech of the rockets as they soared into the heavens meant the birth of another design in the night. Children and adults alike gaped and gasped as one after another, firework after firework bloomed overhead, shimmering for an instant before dying into nothingness once more.

“Look! A smiley face!” Lois said, pointing, as she leaned even further into Clark’s embrace.

Clark grinned. “A butterfly!” he said, pointing at a different one just before it faded.

“Wow, they’re so beautiful this year,” Lois commented.

“They really are,” Clark agreed, though he hadn’t been in Metropolis the year before, and therefore had no frame of comparison.

“I’m really glad you’re here this year to enjoy them,” Lois said after a moment, as if she could read Clark’s thoughts.

“Me too, Lois. And thank you, for being the one to share them with me.”

For half an hour, the night sky erupted into thundering booms and artful fireworks. Dogs barked at every explosion. Children squealed with delight. The chosen music gave the affair an added depth of showmanship. Finally, the single — or at most, double — fireworks became many. It was time for the grand finale.

Clark enjoyed it as multiple rockets exploded into the night, first reds, then yellows, then blues, purples, and greens, then back to reds again to repeat the ever changing light show. Around him, people murmured to one another in obvious approval. He was about to bend his head to whisper in Lois’ ear when the cycle came back around to green.

That’s when everything went wrong.

A single rocket from that cluster faltered in the air as it raced upwards. As if it had a mind of its own, it fell back to Earth. And yet, it did not fall straight down into the small lake where the fireworks were being shot from an unmanned boat. Instead, it arced over the crowd, heading for the thick of the gathered families.

What had been shouts of delight and approval instantly turned to shrieks of panic and fear. Parents grabbed up their children and ran, holding them close to their chests. Couples broke their embraces and bolted for the park’s exit. Even the dogs seemed to sense the impending disaster. Leashes strained as the animals tried to flee, barking in alarm.

“Lois! Run!” Clark instructed her, standing up on the blanket. “I’ll be right behind you.”

For once, Lois listened to him without comment. She broke

into a run, her body merging with the mass of terrified citizens. Satisfied, Clark turned, headed towards the public restrooms, ducked behind the building, and spun into his Superman suit. In the next instant, he was flying towards the renegade rocket. He caught the firework in his arms like a football, just before it could impact the ground where an elderly man was attempting to make his slow escape. The man muttered his thanks to Clark, too in shock to speak clearly. Clark merely nodded and flew back over the lake, intending to let the explosive go off above the water, or at the least, to drop it beneath the waves so that it was no longer a threat.

Clark was just above the middle of the lake when the firework went off. Green sparks spewed forth from the rocket, a heartbeat after Clark let go of the object. The scorching sparks sprayed his entire body and Clark let out a cry of pain. Weakness enveloped his body. He faltered in his flight, coughing. Then he dropped like a stone, his powers utterly abandoning him.

He realized as he tried to fight gravity what had happened.

The firework had been laced with Kryptonite.

He didn’t have much experience with the deadly rock, but the agony and weakness he was feeling was unmistakable. A hundred thousand pinpricks of the ground up and crushed stone clung to his skin and suit, burning him like fire and slowly killing him. He continued to freefall, then crashed into the once serene lake with a violent splash. He tried to swim for the closest bank, but he was too weak, too sick to make it. He managed to tread water for a couple of seconds, then sank, his dense molecular mass pulling him beneath the dark water swiftly as he blacked out.

Lois had turned back as soon as she thought herself to be out of harm’s way. She was the only one to do so. The rest of the crowd stampeded around her. Her eyes darted from face to face, looking for Clark. If he was hurt, she would never forgive herself, she knew. And so it was, in looking for Clark, that she alone witnessed Superman fall from the sky. Concerned for the hero, she ran back towards the lake. After all, he was as much her friend as Clark was.

“Superman?” she called out, when the man disappeared from view and did not resurface. “Superman?”

She still got no response. Concern gave way to sheer terror. Without thinking, she dove into the water. The colder than expected temperature was a shock to her body and she gasped against it. Then, steeling herself, she ducked beneath the surface, swimming to where she had last seen Superman. She broke the surface, took a deep breath, then dove again. Blindly, she reached out, hoping against hope to feel Superman’s body. She couldn’t see. It was too dark and the water was normally too murky anyway.

Her lungs aching, she swam up again. She allowed her head to poke above the water, sucked in another lungful of air, then continued her search. This time, as she neared the bottom, her fingertips brushed a floating piece of fabric. With a jolt, she realized it had to be his cape. Up she went again to get a fresh breath of air. Down again she went, searching for the Man of Steel. Her hand hit upon something soft — his hair. Downwards she felt, feeling his forehead, nose, chin, chest. Then sideways she groped, until at last she had her hands hooked under his armpits.

Bracing her feet against the sandy bottom of the lake, she pushed up, heading for the surface. It was a struggle, every inch of progress a battle she did not intend to lose. Superman was of no help; a dead weight in her arms. For a split second, Lois panicked. She was quickly running out of air. Superman was so heavy as he hung there, suspended in the water, unmoving. He’d been underwater for a couple of minutes now. And although she felt that she knew more about him than anyone else, she suddenly realized that what she *did* know was practically nothing. How long could he survive without oxygen? She knew from when he’d

gone to face the Nightfall asteroid that he could hold his breath for about twenty minutes. But he wasn't holding his breath now. His lungs were probably filled with water. Would his brain die as quickly as a human's could, if she didn't get him to the grassy bank right this instant?

As these bleak thoughts swirled in her head, she suddenly felt the night air in her hair again as she broke the surface. Gasping and choking as she finally took a clean breath of air, she opened her eyes. She was in the middle of the lake now. With a heaving effort, she dragged Superman's head above the water. He did not take a breath, worrying Lois even further. She took only the briefest of moments to shift his body in her arms, then she started to swim for shore.

As before, it was a struggle to gain every inch forward. But Lois was undaunted. The hardest part was over, in her mind. She'd managed to rescue her friend from a watery grave at the bottom of the lake. She swam on, slowly but surely getting closer to the green springy grass of the park. Precious seconds slipped away to minutes as she swam, and all the while she was conscious of Superman's limp, unresponsive form. But at last, she made it to her goal.

She pulled herself out of the cold water, then dragged Superman to shore. She laid him down on the ground, on his back, his boots still somewhat in the lake. A fast check for vital signs revealed nothing. Another bolt of terror sheared through Lois' mind and body. She shook him, seeing if he would respond.

"Superman?" she called out. "Can you hear me?"

There was no indication that he was going to wake up. His chest did not fill with breath. His pulse did not flutter back into existence. Lois did the only thing she could do. She tilted his head back, pinched his nose shut, and placed her lips over his mouth. Carefully, easily, she began to administer CPR to the lifeless superhero. More time slipped by as she worked, though she was only aware of it in the most abstract of ways.

After a few rounds of breathing and chest compressions, Superman finally vomited up more water than Lois had thought possible. He choked and wheezed as his airway became clear, and as he greedily inhaled as much oxygen as he could. Sirens began to wail in the distance. Police and firefighters were rushing to the scene, finally able to enter the area now that the danger was truly over.

"Lois?" Clark asked weakly, his head feeling like the entire weight of the planet was resting on his temples.

"Superman? Are you okay?"

"No," Clark said, shaking his head. "You have to get me out of here."

"What's wrong?"

"I'll explain later. Hurry, please. I can't let anyone see me this way."

"Okay. Can you stand?"

"I think so."

Lois helped him to stand. But he immediately crumpled to the ground again. Once more, Lois hooked him under the armpits and helped him to his feet. He leaned heavily on her in order to stay upright. But this time, he had more success. He did not go to his knees. Together, they stuck to the line of trees, out of the sight of the police. Every step of the way, Clark relied on Lois to help him. And every step of the way, the almost invisible grains of Kryptonite ate at his flesh like acid and sapped what remaining strength he had.

Finally they reached the edge of the park. The crowd had been dispersed by the police. Lois could see what looked like Bill Henderson, his back to them, speaking with a couple of other cops, as they looked into the distance where he was pointing. Silently, Lois and Clark edged around and made it to Lois' Jeep. Clark leaned against the vehicle, his every breath like flaming glass in his lungs. He didn't think he'd inhaled any of the

radioactive stone. He'd been fortunate enough to have been exhaling when the firework had gone off. He'd held his breath during his fall, mindful of the presence of the Kryptonite from the first stab of pain through his body. He knew he'd blacked out shortly after hitting the lake, and only hoped he'd managed to avoid swallowing any water tainted with the glowing green grains. He didn't think he had. He probably would have been in greater pain, or dead.

"Hang on," Lois said, fumbling with her keys and opening the door.

"No," Clark said, shaking his head meekly. "Can't sit in front. Too exposed."

"Okay," Lois said, biting her lower lip in anxiety.

She opened up the back door. Clark pushed himself off the rear quarter panel of the vehicle and crawled onto the bench seat. He curled up there, laying in a loose fetal position, his eyes closed, his breathing labored. He felt the vehicle rock as Lois slammed the door shut. A moment later, the driver's door opened and closed. Clark heard the click of her seatbelt as she jammed the metal tab home.

"Are you okay back there?"

"For now. Please," Clark begged. "Get me out of here."

Lois started the engine, checked for traffic, and pulled the vehicle onto the street. She drove the first few blocks in silence. Then, it seemed, her curiosity came bubbling to the surface.

"What can I do to help?" she asked.

"You're already doing it," Clark answered.

"What happened?"

Clark gritted his teeth against a fresh wave of pain. "The rocket. It was laced."

"Laced? With what?"

"Poison."

"Poison? But I thought nothing could hurt you."

"There is one thing," Clark answered cagily. He knew that, to Lois, Kryptonite was no more than a mere myth, cooked up by Jason Trask.

He groaned in agony. He had to get the almost microscopic grains of Kryptonite off his body somehow. A shower might help, he knew. And he had to get out of the tainted suit. But how? He couldn't ask Lois to drop him off at Clark Kent's apartment. She was sure to connect the dots then.

Clark Kent.

Clark's heart sank at the thought. Lois was so fixated on Superman that she hadn't realized Clark was missing. He'd gotten his hopes so high earlier in the night, when Lois had agreed to go out on a date with him. He'd thought she'd finally given up on her fantasy of dating the larger than life hero. But now, it seemed, he'd been wrong.

"I hope Clark's all right," Lois murmured, more to herself than to her passenger. Then, to Superman, she spoke louder. "He was with me in the park. I didn't see where he ran off to. I hope he doesn't think I abandoned him there."

"I'm sure he doesn't," Clark replied.

"Is there someplace I can take you?" Lois asked.

Clark's mind raced. What could he say?

Lois took his non-answer in stride. "My place, then."

"Lois...I can't."

"Nonsense. I'm not leaving you alone until you're well again. Now, what can I do, really? I'm here for you, whatever you need."

"I've got to get out of this suit," Clark said, before he could stop himself. He gritted his teeth against a fresh stab of pain. "A shower might help too, if it's not too much trouble."

"It's not," Lois said, shaking her head and speeding up to avoid getting stuck at a red light.

Before long, they were at her apartment building. The night was mercifully quiet. No one was meandering the streets, save for

a couple walking their dog and a group of a dozen teenagers, talking and laughing amongst themselves. Lois waited until both sets of people had passed by the Jeep before getting out and opening Clark's door. As before, he leaned on her for support.

"Not feeling any better?" Lois whispered to him.

"No. A little worse, if anything. I'm running out of time."

"We'll be upstairs before you know it," she whispered back.

Clark couldn't muster words for her. The effort to remain standing was too much. Every step up into the building was an exercise in torture of the cruelest kind. He felt truly accomplished when he made it to the door without collapsing, though he knew that if it hadn't been for Lois, he never would have made it. Lois opened the door and helped him inside.

The elevator was empty when Lois pressed the button to call it, and for that, Clark was grateful. He was in bad shape, and getting worse by the minute. He wondered idly if he had burn marks on his skin where the Kryptonite was searing against his flesh. They rode up to Lois' floor in silence, then made their way to her apartment, with Clark half stumbling even with Lois' assistance.

Lois' apartment had always been a comforting place for Clark. But this night, it felt like a veritable safe haven. He breathed a small sigh of relief as Lois closed the door behind them, setting the locks hastily. Then she helped him down to her bathroom. Clark slid out of her arms to sit on the closed toilet lid. Lois swiftly got a fresh towel for him and laid it on the countertop, alongside the sink.

"Here," she said, patting the towel. "Sorry it's so pink."

"It's fine."

"Drop your suit outside the door. I can run it through the washing machine. Maybe I can help get some of...whatever is hurting you...off."

"Thanks," Clark said, giving her a grateful smile.

That brought up another problem. He had absolutely nothing else to wear once he emerged from the shower. But right now, he was more concerned with getting the Kryptonite off his aching body. He would have to deal with the problem of finding clothes later.

Lois left him alone, and Clark shut the door. As quickly as he could, he peeled off the still wet suit, boots, socks, even his briefs. It was embarrassing knowing that Lois was going to be handling his underwear, but he had no choice. Everything he had on was soaking wet, and he couldn't take the chance that some grain of the deadly meteorite had worked through the suit onto his underwear.

Immediately, he felt a small tendril of relief work through his body as the material left his body. He felt even better after dropping the items outside the door and having an actual barrier between his body and the tiny grains of green stone. Then he turned on the shower and stepped beneath the spray, sinking to his hands and knees on the rubberized mat.

As the water coursed down his body in rivulets, it washed away the microscope pieces of Kryptonite. Slowly, he began to feel better. But he still did not move, did not attempt to get to his feet. He simply enjoyed the relief the water was affording him. But after a time, he tried standing, and found it within his realm of abilities. Taking up a washcloth, he soaped and scrubbed his body, over and over until he was certain that all traces of the poisonous rock were gone. He shampooed and rinsed his hair as well, making extra certain that nothing remained on his body, buried deep in his thick locks. And as the water swirled down the drain, it carried the toxic stone far, far away from him.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, he was certain that he was fully decontaminated. He shut off the water and leaned against the wall for a moment. He still felt weak, that was true. But he no longer hurt. He no longer felt the sharp sting of the miniscule grains of stone. He attempted to levitate, and found the

ability gone. Clark sighed. He didn't have much experience with exposure to Kryptonite, but he knew his powers would return in time. It was just a matter of being patient and waiting it out. And with it being so late, there was no way for him to recharge in the sunlight, to give his body a jump-start on repairing itself. He would have to wait for morning. By then, his powers might or might not return on their own. And if they didn't, he was certain that the sun would help.

But first, he had to deal with the fact that he had nothing at all to wear.

He dried off slowly, the fluffy pink bath towel soft against his skin. It was a nice change from the earlier agony he'd felt. He inhaled the lingering scent of the laundry detergent deeply. It had a distinct smell of lavender to it. He'd never paid attention to that before, always being too captivated by the scent of Lois' perfume. He realized that even though he was getting to know her on a very close, very personal level as her friend, there was still a lot to learn about her.

There was still so much to discover about the woman he secretly loved.

With a sigh, he wrapped the towel around his waist. Then he did the bravest thing he'd done all night since he'd asked Lois out on a date. He opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

He padded lightly down the hallway, towards the living room. He could see Lois sitting on the couch, her back to him. He could see even from that angle that she'd changed into dry clothes and pulled her wet hair back into a clip. The phone was pressed to her head. He could hear the fingers of her free hand drumming restlessly on the arm of the couch.

"Come on, come on. Pick up, Clark. Pick up. Where are you?"

Clark stopped short as the worry in Lois' voice registered in his brain. She sounded on the verge of tears. His answering machine must have picked up then, and Lois addressed it.

"Clark. It's me. Where are you? Are you all right? Listen...call me when you get this message. I don't care what time it is. Okay?"

Lois hung up the phone with a sigh.

"Lois?" Clark asked, hesitantly.

"Oh, Superman," Lois said, a little startled. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, a bit," Clark answered.

Lois still did not turn around. Her fingers still drummed on the couch. She was clearly agitated that Clark hadn't answered his phone.

"I, uh, threw your suit in the wash," Lois said.

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

"I wish I had something to offer you in the meantime," Lois said. "To wear, I mean. Is there anywhere I can go? Get you a fresh suit, perhaps?"

There *was* someplace she could go, but Clark couldn't tell her that.

"No," he said after a moment.

"Well, it shouldn't be too much longer. I'll put it in the dryer for you too."

"Thanks." Clark moved forward a step. "Lois? Are you all right? You sound...I don't know. Upset."

"No, I'm not all right," she said, shaking her head. "Clark was with me in the park tonight. I lost track of him when that firework went berserk and everyone starting running in every direction. I didn't see him at all when you and I were leaving the park. I thought for sure he'd be close by. He's not the type of guy to run off and leave his friends in harm's way. And now, I can't get him on the phone. He hasn't stopped by. I'm really worried about him."

"I'm sure he's okay," Clark tried to reassure her.

But Lois shook her head again. "I'm not so sure. He would

have contacted me by now if he was okay. He might be hurt. Will you be okay here for a while without me? I want to run over to his place really fast to check on him.”

“Lois, I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” Clark said, shifting uncomfortably.

If she went to his place, she still wouldn’t find him. And that would only upset her even further. He desperately didn’t want her upset or worrying. But, the question was, how could he accomplish that? If she was truly that distressed about Clark, there was nothing he, as Superman, could say or do to allay her fears. Not until his powers came back and he could leave her apartment, only to return as Clark. And even if they came back, right that moment, he still couldn’t leave until his suit was clean.

Lois finally turned to look at him. Her jaw hung open a moment as she took in the sight of him, only a fluffy, now damp, towel wrapped about him. Clark realized with a start that he’d neglected to slick down his hair after getting out of the shower and rumpling it as he gave it a quick towel-dry. He’d been too preoccupied with his own thoughts. He desperately hoped she wouldn’t notice.

“I, uh...wow,” Lois breathed. “You look...I never imagined...I mean...you look really...” She babbled for a moment, as if unable to string together more than two or three words coherently. “I mean, of course you are...but...and of course the suit comes off. But I never...wow.”

“I’m sorry,” Clark apologized, his face going crimson as he raked his hand through his hair. “I’ve made you uncomfortable.”

“No, no,” Lois quickly said. “It’s just that...you look...”

Clark raised his eyebrows. “I think we’ve established that,” he teased, unable to help himself. He gave her a lopsided smile, hoping to clear the air of some of the awkwardness that was threatening to settle like a thick blanket.

“...a lot like Clark,” Lois finished, blinking as the realization hit. She looked as though the words had been a complete shock to her, as though she hadn’t planned on saying that. “But that can’t be. Unless...”

“Unless?” Clark asked, gulping hard and trying to hide it.

He crossed his arms before his bare chest, in an effort to cover up some of his exposed skin. Touching his hair had been a mistake, he belatedly realized. That had been a very un-Superman-like thing to do. In fact, it was all too familiar a habit for Clark Kent. Teasing her had been an even bigger mistake. Though Superman joked with Lois, it was Clark who good-naturedly teased her.

“Answer me something,” Lois said, her eyes narrowing slightly. “And answer me truthfully.”

Clark moved around the couch and sat in one of the armchairs. He leaned forward a bit, resting his elbows on his thighs. “Okay. You have my word.”

“Why won’t you let me go to Clark?”

“I...uh...” Clark stammered, racking his brain for a plausible excuse. He wasn’t sure if she’d put the pieces together, and he wasn’t in a rush to give her that final piece if he could avoid doing so.

“Is it because you know that I won’t find him there?”

Clark nodded meekly, unable to find words. He barely felt himself make the movement. It was as if he was a puppet and some unseen person was pulling his strings, making him do things he wasn’t even conscious of.

“And why is that?”

“Intuition?” he tried, in a feeble attempt to keep his secret intact and knowing that he was failing miserably.

“Or because maybe you *are* Clark?”

Clark sighed. She’d put the pieces together, as he’d feared. He hated that she’d done so, and hated the fact that his own exhaustion and slip-ups had led to such a discovery. Not because he didn’t want her to know; he’d been toying for a while with

telling her the whole truth about himself. But because he had so desperately wanted to be the one to tell her. Somehow, he imagined that if Lois ever discovered his secret, that it would be a slap in the face to her, the fact that he hadn’t told her himself. He knew his assessment had been completely accurate as he saw the scowl unfold on her face, like a dark storm cloud on a bright summer’s day.

“Actually,” he said at length, “it’s the other way around.”

“What?” Lois’ hands were on her hips, like a stern and disappointed mother about to dole out some unfathomable punishment.

“Superman isn’t Clark, Lois. Clark is Superman.”

“Same difference,” Lois said, her eyes flashing hotly.

“No, it’s not,” Clark said, pouring all of his sincerity into those words. “Clark is who I am. Who I *really* am. Superman is just...the physical manifestation of what I can do. An avatar of my powers, if you will. He’s a way for me to help people, without alerting the world to the fact that Clark Kent isn’t a human being.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Lois said, crossing her arms. “Clark is a person, just like me.”

“Yes and no, Lois. I am a person. But...I’m not exactly human. I’m not from this planet, remember?”

“With all the flying, how could I forget?” Lois mumbled.

Clark nodded, conceding the point. But the usual, gleeful, look of triumph Lois usually bore after scoring a point in an argument did not appear. An icy cold vice of fear squeezed Clark’s heart as it beat frantically against his ribcage.

“So...I, uh...how much trouble am I in?” Clark asked in a quiet, trembling voice, unable to meet Lois’ gaze.

Instead, he steepled his fingers and studied them as though they had suddenly become fascinating. He was, however, painfully aware of Lois’ eyes, boring a hole through his skin straight into his soul, and turning his hopes and dreams for their future together to ashes. He knew there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn’t force Lois to accept him, accept the things he’d done and the lies he’d told. He couldn’t force her anger to abate any more quickly than it naturally would. All he could do was to answer whatever questions she might have; fully, honestly, completely.

He was totally exposed, both literally and figuratively. All disguises had been stripped away. There was no pair of glasses to hide behind. No cape to conceal him. He only hoped she would be merciful on him, though he knew he had no right to any clemency she might choose to favor him with.

“A lot,” Lois finally said after a long pause. She frowned at him. “Ugh! I can’t do this right now.” She threw her hands up in the air in exasperation.

“Do what?” Clark asked, chancing a brief glance up at her in an attempt to puzzle out what she might mean, based on the expression she wore.

“*This*,” Lois said, gesturing vaguely at him. “I don’t even know who I’m taking to right now.”

Clark frowned. “It’s me, Lois.”

“Me? Me who? Clark? Or Superman?”

“*Me*. Clark Kent, the guy you’ve been working with for almost a year now. The same guy you’ve hung out with on our days off. The one who watched the fireworks with you tonight. The one who is happy just to settle in for a Lethal Weapon marathon with you. The one who brings you your morning cup of coffee. The one who has become your friend. And the one who just happens to sometimes appear in public in a blue spandex suit and a red cape.” He attempted a wobbly smile and failed, his guts twisting in fear of what Lois would do and say.

“I can’t...I can’t picture you as Clark right now. Not knowing that your blue suit is in my washing machine and you’re sitting there, completely naked in front of me.”

“Not completely,” Clark quipped. “I *am* wearing this stylish towel.”

Lois didn’t laugh. She didn’t smile. She didn’t look amused in any way. Instead, she stood, grabbed her keys from the table by the door, and reached for the doorknob.

“Where are you going?” Clark asked, sudden dread filling his stomach.

“Out.”

“Out?” he echoed. “Lois...Lois, please. Please, don’t leave me. Not like this. Not with all this unresolved tension. Please, give me a chance to explain.” He knew he was begging her, but he was unashamed of that fact. Had he had the strength and the courage, he would have gotten on his knees before her to plead for her forgiveness.

“Oh relax, Clark...Superman...*whoever* you are. I’m just going down to my car.”

Before Clark could venture another question, she was out the door where he could not follow, lest anyone see him, and possibly call the police on the naked man running around in just a towel. But less than five minutes later, she was back. Clark looked up at the door as he heard the knob turn. Lois stepped inside, looking no less angry than she had before she’d gone to her Jeep. She flung a navy blue gym bag at Clark.

“Here,” she said, as the bag arced through the air and landed in Clark’s arms.

“Thanks.”

He’d forgotten all about the bag. Since he and Lois never knew when or where a stakeout might occur, they both kept a gym bag in her trunk, filled with a couple of changes of clothes. Clark stood, wincing a little at his residual soreness, then took the bag down to the bathroom. Once inside, he quickly pulled out a clean, dry pair of briefs, socks, white basketball shorts and a green shirt. He shook his head. Not green. He’d had his fill of green for the night. He reached back in and found a faded maroon t-shirt instead. He nodded. That was much better. At the bottom of the bag was a pair of sneakers, but he left them for the time being. The only thing he didn’t have was an extra pair of his glasses. He’d never thought he’d need them in his bag. Still, it was a relief to be in normal clothes again. Maybe seeing him in familiar attire would help Lois to realize that he really *was* just Clark, regardless of his super abilities.

“Lois?” Clark called as he reemerged from the bathroom.

“Yes?”

Clark walked into the living room and found his seat again. “I wanted to say thank you, again, for bringing my bag up.”

Lois nodded, but that was the only acknowledgement she gave him. An uncomfortable silence fell, and Clark began to fidget. Ranting Lois he could handle. Screaming Lois he could soothe. A Lois who threw things at his head he did not fear. But a silent Lois? That chilled him down to his very bones.

“Lois,” he tried after a moment. He swallowed and took a deep breath. He spread his hands in a placating manner. “I know you must be furious with me right now.”

“Furious is an understatement,” Lois snapped, cutting him off. “How could you do this to me? I thought we were partners! I thought we were best friends! Or was that a lie too? How could you betray my trust like that?”

“We are, Lois. Partners and best friends. Nothing about that was ever a lie. I’ve never done anything that was contrary to my nature, no matter which suit I was wearing. Nothing about how I’ve acted around you was ever a ruse. I genuinely care about you, Lois. I always have. I always will. And I never meant to betray you, by making you believe I was two separate people.” He sighed. “The only outright lie has been making you believe that Superman was real.”

“Of course he’s real,” Lois argued.

“No, he’s not! Superman doesn’t hold a job. He doesn’t go to

movies. He doesn’t own a home or rent an apartment. He doesn’t have bills to pay. He doesn’t have a birth certificate or a social security number, or agonize over tax forms each year. Like the great and powerful Oz, he’s just an illusion. The only real person is the man behind the curtain...Clark Kent, adopted son of Jonathan and Martha Kent, the last surviving inhabitant of a now extinct planet. Can’t you understand that?” He’d begun adamantly but by the end, his voice had once more become pleading as he sought her understanding.

Lois snorted her disgust. “Even assuming that’s true...so...what then? You were afraid I’d run off and print the real story of Clark Kent’s extracurricular activities?” Her voice turned from bitter to hurt. “I thought you knew me better than that.”

Clark felt a small ember of anger and hurt rise in him. He normally had seemingly endless amounts of patience, but after everything that had happened in just a few short hours, he was tired, achy, and slightly irritable that Lois wasn’t giving him the chance to explain things.

“And I thought you knew *me* better than that! God, Lois, do you *really* think that I thought you’d turn me into your Pulitzer Prize?” Both of his hands flew up to his head and raked through his now dry hair.

Lois’ eyes narrowed again, unfazed by his outburst and accusation. “Then why? Why lie to me? Answer me that.” It was more a dare than an actual question.

Clark sighed and leaned back in his chair a little, his anger cooling as suddenly as it had come to a boil. “Because I’m a coward,” he said softly, unable to look in her direction, the admission lancing his heart.

Lois’ eyes widened in surprise, but she didn’t lose her hard tone. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” Clark said evenly, nodding to himself a little, as if to bolster his own confidence. “I haven’t said anything to you...haven’t told you...because I was afraid. Afraid of what might happen if anyone found out. You and everyone I love would become targets. Just look how many times we’ve been in danger because of a perceived connection to Superman. Imagine if the criminal element found out for certain that Clark Kent *is* the Man of Steel. And...I was afraid of...this. How you would react when I finally told you.”

“So you thought it better that I figure it out for myself, is that it? Don’t you see how insulting that is?”

“What? No! Lois, I never wanted you to have to figure it out on your own. I mean, I always knew it was a possibility, because you’re the smartest person I know. But, I wanted to be the one to tell you. For the past month, I’ve been trying to figure out what words to say, and when to say it. I’ve wrestled with how to make you realize that I never meant to hurt you. But every time I’ve tried, the words haven’t sounded right to me. Or we’ve been sucked into thwarting some psychopath’s evil plot to destroy Metropolis and/or the world.”

Lois hesitated for a moment, apparently thinking over what he’d said. “You were really going to tell me?”

“Yes.” He nodded for emphasis.

“But you only decided to this past month.”

“Not exactly,” Clark said, squirming a little. “I think part of me has wanted you to know all along. But you have to realize, Lois, that I *had* to wait as long as I did, even when I knew for certain that you wouldn’t turn me into a page one story. My parents and I have protected this secret for nearly thirty years. Even without the element of danger, even if Superman didn’t exist, it never would have been easy for me to tell you the truth. The *whole* truth. That I’m not from Earth. That I have these strange powers. Because it makes people look at me so differently, when I’ve only ever wanted to fit in and be a normal guy.”

“That’s absurd,” Lois said, her expression softening only

microscopically. “I wouldn’t have treated you differently.”

“Wouldn’t you have?” Clark asked, his voice soft, having lost all of his anger. Now, only sadness reigned there.

“No,” she asserted, with a shake of her head.

Clark smiled sadly. “That’s not true. Think about our past year together, Lois. Think about how we’ve been as Lois and Clark. Then think about how we’ve been as Lois and Superman. Please.”

Lois fell silent for a long while. She had a faraway look in her eyes, and Clark hoped that she was doing as he’d asked, and was mentally reviewing their time together in both of his personalities. She didn’t look at Clark at all. She didn’t seem to acknowledge that he was even alive during that time. Clark chewed his lower lip in worry as he forced himself not to stare at her.

After a while, Lois sighed heavily. “Not mud brown, like Clark’s,” she whispered. “Clark is the before. Superman is the after. The way, way after.” She groaned, clearly embarrassed by the things she’d once said. “I guess you might be right,” she conceded after a moment.

“I am?” Clark asked, a little surprised at her willingness to admit when she’d made a mistake.

“Yeah. I guess I haven’t treated you the same when you’ve been in a business suit instead of the flashy blue one. And, God, am I ever embarrassed at some of the things that I’ve said to you. I’m sorry.”

Clark smiled at her. He wanted to rush to the couch and hug her, but he remained seated, though it was an effort to do so. There would be time enough for that later. Perhaps when he was sure that he wasn’t in danger of losing her completely from his life.

“There’s no reason to be sorry, Lois. You weren’t supposed to know that I’m both men. Did they hurt, the things you said? Yeah. But they also reassured me that my disguise was working. If you could work side by side with me and never make the connection, then I was safe, because you’re the most intelligent person I’ve ever met. If you didn’t know, what chance did the rest of the world have?”

The washing machine beeped loudly, announcing that it was finished with its cycle. Lois automatically rose and emptied the machine. She transferred everything to the dryer, shut the door, and pressed the button to start it. A moment later, the rhythmic sound of the rotating drum could be heard.

“Your stuff will be ready in a little while,” Lois said, sounding unsure of what else to say, now that the worst of her fury seemed to be gone. “Then I guess you’ll be flying off.”

Clark shook his head. “Not until I’m sure that we’re okay,” he said. “I couldn’t stand it if I left and you were still upset. And I won’t leave until I’ve answered all of your questions. I want to be totally upfront with you from now on, Lois. No more lies. No more half truths. No more hiding.” He hesitated a moment. “And besides, I can’t fly anywhere right now.”

“Because of the suit.”

“No. Because of what happened tonight.”

“What *did* happen tonight?” Lois asked suddenly, as though she’d forgotten the trauma of seeing Superman so close to death. “I didn’t want to say anything before, but you don’t look so good, even now. Not to mention those burns on your skin that I saw earlier. What caused that? And when you fell in the lake and didn’t resurface...” She shook her head and let her voice trail off.

Clark sighed. “Remember Jason Trask?”

“Sure, but he’s dead.”

Clark nodded. “Yeah, but remember how he thought that there was a stone out there, one that could kill Superman?”

It was Lois’ turn to nod. “Of course...you decided to name it Kryptonite even though it was *my* story.”

“It’s real, Lois.”

“Come again?”

“It’s real. And it does exactly what Trask thought it would. It *can* kill me, Lois. It takes away my powers. It saps my life. It makes me vulnerable to everything, just like a normal person. The rocket tonight was laced with it. When the firework exploded, I got pelted with Kryptonite dust. I blacked out when I was in the water. You’re the only reason why I’m not a permanent fixture at the bottom of the lake right now. You saved my life, Lois. I’ll never forget that.”

“I...I had no idea. I thought Trask was just some nutcase.”

Clark grinned wryly. “He was. He just happened to be right about that one particular thing.”

“And you knew about this? When we went to Smallville, I mean.”

Clark shook his head. “No. I didn’t know until that first night, when you and Mom went off together so you could see where you were sleeping. I went with Dad out to the shed. He told me what was really going on at Wayne’s property and showed me the chunk of Kryptonite they’d hidden from Trask and his men. That was the first time I was ever in contact with it. It took almost a day for my powers to come back, even after I stopped feeling sick.”

“So, wait. Wait a minute,” Lois said, pinching the bridge of her nose as if to ward off a headache. “Did Trask...know...about you?”

“Well, no,” Clark said, his shoulders slumping a bit. “At least, not at first. But when he was about to kill my folks, I had no choice. I had to reveal myself, or they would have burned in the fire he’d set. I’m just glad that my powers came back in time for me to save them. Of course, that prompted Trask to try his luck in killing me.”

“So, you’re saying you didn’t have your powers when you fought with him? When he had a gun pointed at you, his finger on the trigger, half a second from shooting you in the back?”

“I was just as vulnerable as the next guy, and a little weak and woozy from being exposed to the Kryptonite again.”

“Oh, God,” Lois moaned, burying her head in her hands. “I’ve always known that I almost lost you that day. But to have you confirm it...”

“I’m sorry, Lois. I never meant to upset you.”

Clark stood from his seat. For a moment he stood there, looking lost. Then he crossed to Lois. Kneeling before her, he took one of her hands gently. He looked into her eyes, hoping she would see how much he meant the things he was saying.

“Lois? Lois, please, look at me.”

“I’m okay, I think. And you? Are you okay now? I mean, aside from your powers not...uh...”

“Not working?” Clark supplied. “I’ll be fine. I’m a little tired and achy, but I’m fine now, thanks to you.”

“I didn’t do all that much,” Lois mumbled.

“Sure you did. You pulled me out of the lake and revived me when I wasn’t breathing. You helped me get out of the park without being seen. You’re washing the dust off my suit. And you loaned me your shower to get the rest of the Kryptonite off my body. You saved my life tonight, several times over. I can’t thank you enough.”

Lois nodded but did not speak. Clark remained on his knees before her. As before, he wasn’t quite sure what to make of her silence. Either she was processing everything he’d said, or she was getting ready to unleash all the wrath of Mad Dog Lane upon him. He tried not to wince as he waited for her to speak.

“Oh, get up already,” Lois said, finally breaking the silence.

Clark did as he was told. He chanced sitting next to her on the couch. He wanted to touch her — to put a hand on her shoulder or to hold her to him — but he firmly squashed the desire. He knew he was still walking on a knife’s edge with her. And he was unwilling to do anything that might push him off that

precarious perch.

“Get comfortable,” Lois said, a little of her earlier annoyance tainting the edges of her words. “You still have a *lot* of explaining to do.”

“I know. And I want to.”

“Good. Now, start from the beginning.”

Again, Clark did as he was bid. He settled into the couch cushions and told Lois his story. He started from how his parents had seen what they had thought was a meteor, crashing in their friend’s field. He told her how Jonathan and Martha had found his ship there, with him inside, no more than two months old, and how the orphaned boy had become the answer to their prayers. He told her of his childhood, and of how hard it had been developing frightening powers. He told her of how he’d come to the decision to never tell a soul about who and what he really was, and how his father had always warned him that scientists would want to lock him in a lab and dissect him like a frog if word got out.

He went into detail of how he’d concocted the idea of becoming Superman, thankful that he could finally express his sincerest gratitude to her for putting the idea into his mind in the first place. He told her of the struggle it had been in the beginning, to keep his two identities apart. He told her of how uncomfortable he’d been, appearing in public in such a skin-tight outfit, and of how he’d slowly come to enjoy being Superman, to the point where the suit now felt strangely good to him. With each new discovery, Lois’ eyes grew wider and wider.

And as he spoke, Clark found himself discovering things as well. Specifically, he was finding out just how easy it was to tell Lois all of these things. Things he’d never before told a soul. Things that even his parents didn’t know — things he’d hidden from them, not wishing to burden them with more of his problems. And not only was it easy to tell Lois all of his secrets, but it felt so right, so natural. It took Clark off-guard for a moment as the realization hit. All this time he’d been fretting over how to tell her about himself. Now that he was, it was as natural as breathing, as freeing as flying, as empowering as his strength. He could scarcely believe that it had taken him so long to finally do it.

When he was through, Lois sat quietly, absorbing all he’d said. Then, slowly, she reached over and took his hand.

“I’m sorry,” she said, casting her eyes down at the couch cushions. “I guess I didn’t realize that it wasn’t exactly a picnic for you either, all this time, hiding who you are.”

“It wasn’t so bad,” Clark said, shrugging, trying to allay the sadness he detected in her demeanor. “I always had my folks to talk to. And I always had you too. Even if I couldn’t tell you everything, you have no idea how often you said just the right thing to me. Something that made me feel less alone, or less of the alien that I am, or stopped me from hanging up my cape for good. And I want you to know, Lois, how glad I am that you finally know.”

Lois nodded. “I’m glad I know too,” she offered, giving him a smile. “Looking back, it makes so much sense. Why you’d space out in the middle of a conversation, only to snap back to reality, make a lame excuse, run off, then come back with a Superman exclusive. And it certainly explains how I could have been equally attracted to two men. Because both are the same person.”

“You’re attracted to me? The uh, real, Clark me?” Clark asked, a bit of a twinkle back in his eyes.

Lois grinned. “I *did* agree to go out with you, didn’t I?”

Clark chuckled, for what felt like the first time in a long, long time. “Good point.”

“So...I guess...the next question is...what exactly happened tonight? Why did the rocket go rogue? How?”

“Well, I think we know the why. Someone was targeting me.

That’s the only logical explanation for why the firework was laced with Kryptonite. I don’t know if that was a rocket that was tampered with or if it was specially designed and somehow slipped into the ones that were supposed to be shot off tonight. As for the how, I think we’ll need to know more about the rocket first. Maybe we can talk to Henderson in the morning, see if the police can recover the pieces from the lakebed. I won’t be able to examine it with you, but it may give us some clues so we can track down whoever did this.”

“You think someone put the lives of hundreds, maybe thousands, in jeopardy just to get at you?”

Clark shrugged. “Well, why not? Remember what happened just after Superman made his debut? Suddenly we had people jumping off buildings across town from each other. We had bombs planted in buildings, then remotely detonated only after I entered the building. I was being tested then, I’m sure of it. But tonight was no test. Someone wanted to kill me. I’d stake my life and reputation on that.”

“Any ideas who might want that? Trask *is* dead, after all. He’s the only one deluded enough to think of you as a threat, that I know of. And, he’s the only one who knew about the Kryptonite.”

Clark nodded slowly. “I have an idea. But you’re going to think I’m crazy.”

“Crazier than the fact that you moonlight in tights?” Lois arched a skeptical eyebrow.

Clark chuckled. “Maybe. I’ll leave that determination up to you.” A second later, his smile faded and he turned serious.

“Clark? What is it?”

“I have...reason to believe...that it could be Luthor’s doing.”

“Lex?”

He nodded again. “Yeah.”

To his infinite relief, Lois only looked at him with interest. There was no mocking disbelief in her features. Nothing to suggest that she thought him insane.

“Why?” she finally asked.

Clark shifted a little in his seat and shrugged, as though that would help him find the right words. “It’s more of a gut feeling than anything,” he admitted. “But I’ve gotten the sense that he’s been behind some of the near-disasters we’ve seen since Superman arrived.”

“Like?”

Again, it was a genuine question. There was no animosity, no disbelief, nothing to indicate that she was merely humoring him.

“Probably a dozen things,” Clark said. “The space program debacle, for starters. The tests that I mentioned before. The smart kids. The heat wave that Superman was blamed for. Think about it. Every time, Lex has been lurking the shadows. His companies have been there, involved in some way. Lex Labs made the smart serum. Lex’s company was responsible for the nuclear reactor. Lex was ready and willing to send up a space station of his own. LexCorp has always, always been there.”

“Lex employs thousands of people in the city, though. It doesn’t mean he is personally responsible for anything.”

“That’s true, but in all of those cases, who had the most to gain? Objectively speaking, it’s Lex. Let’s take the sabotaged space program — and we *do* objectively know that sabotage was involved with that bomb that got planted. Luthor was perfectly poised to swoop in and be the savior of it. Then he’d make millions — billions — off any medical discoveries made aboard his own station. Who saved the space program? Superman, killing Luthor’s dreams of looking like a hero while making a ton of money in the process. So Luthor started to hate him. He probably decided to get rid of him. But to do that, he needed to know Superman’s limits. Hence the tests. He learned how fast he is, how invulnerable. How do you get rid of someone you can’t kill?”

“You drive them away,” Lois said, fitting the pieces together.

“Exactly.”

“You think the leak at the nuclear reactor site was...*intentional*?”

Clark drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yes, I do. I didn’t see it at the time, but looking back, I’m almost sure of it.”

“But...he must have known that would expose millions of people to harmful nuclear waste. Not to mention blistering heat. Thirty-nine people died of heat stroke during that fiasco.”

Clark nodded. “Knowing and caring are two *very* different things, Lois. My guess is that he wasn’t willing to let a little thing like millions of lives sway him from his ultimate goal of getting rid of Superman.”

“And what about tonight?”

“I don’t know,” Clark admitted. “Somehow, someone, Luthor or otherwise, discovered that Kryptonite is real. And somehow they got a hold of some, probably from the chunk that Wayne sent out to a lab to be analyzed, but went missing. My guess is that no price tag would be too high for Luthor to pay for something that could potentially kill Superman.”

“Okay, I have to ask. Do you always talk like this?”

“Like what?”

“Like Superman is some sort of other person?”

Clark smiled and laughed lightly. “Yeah. Drives Mom nuts. Even more so when I start talking completely in the third person, like Clark and Superman are *both* separate from who I am.”

Lois laughed too and shook her head before turning back to the subject at hand. “Do you have any proof of this? The stuff about Lex?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. But believe me, nothing would please me more than to take him down when I *do* find it.”

It was just after two in the morning when Lois and Clark finally left her apartment. At that hour, no one was likely to be on the streets to potentially see Clark without his glasses. And he most definitely had to go as Clark. His powers hadn’t returned, and it just wouldn’t do at all to have Superman riding around in Lois Lane’s Jeep Grand Cherokee. Too many unwanted questions could arise from that. Instead, Clark carefully examined his suit once it was dry, noting with relief that he didn’t feel any of the sickening effects of the Kryptonite as he ran his hands over the whole of the fabric. He folded up the suit and cape, and placed them, along with his boots, in the oversized gym bag. Then he and Lois left the apartment.

They rode in silence for the duration of the short drive. Clark would have given anything to know what Lois was thinking. If only he had the power to read minds! He sighed. Not that a power like that would do him any good at the moment. He still needed to recharge in the sunlight before any of his powers would come back, he suspected.

It didn’t take long before they were in front of Clark’s building, the normally brief drive feeling somehow shorter than ever. He sighed to himself, then turned to face his partner, his best friend, the only woman he’d ever loved.

“Lois?” he ventured, after a moment. “Are we...okay?”

She didn’t immediately answer. She seemed to be gathering herself before replying. “Yeah, we’re okay. I’m sorry I got so angry earlier.”

“You had every right to be.”

“Maybe. But, I’m more relieved now than anything else. Thanks for trusting me with this secret.”

Clark smiled at her. “Thanks for being trustworthy. And for forgiving me, not to mention for saving my life.”

Lois nodded. “So, I’ll pick you up at nine? Then we can get to work figuring out who tried to kill you, and put the lives of so many on the line.”

“Nine sounds good,” Clark said, nodding. “I’ll buy breakfast for us on the way in to the Planet.”

“You were doing that anyway,” she said, and Clark was relieved to hear the familiar, teasing tone in her voice.

“Fair enough,” he said, shrugging.

“Well, I guess this is goodnight.”

“I guess.” Clark swallowed hard, needing to ask his next question, and dreading the answer. “Lois?”

“Yeah?”

“I, uh, realize that this might not be the best time to bring this up, in light of everything that happened tonight. But, I, uh...should I still make that reservation for us? At Antonio’s?”

Lois frowned for a moment. “No,” she finally said, shaking her head slightly.

Clark’s heart deflated right there in his chest, like a balloon that had been punctured with a needle. The wind was squeezed from his lungs as his chest suddenly became tight.

“That’s understandable,” he said, trying his hardest not to let his utter heartbreak show. “I shouldn’t have asked. I should have known better.”

“No,” Lois said again. “What I mean is, tomorrow isn’t a good day for that. Let’s hold off until we nail whoever messed with the fireworks. Something tells me we won’t have time to enjoy ourselves on a date if we’re in the middle of a huge investigation like this one probably will turn out to be.”

Clark felt his whole body brighten, and the vice around his ribs vanished. “You mean you still want to go out with me? Even after all I put you through?”

Lois nodded. “I was hurt earlier, that’s true. But I’m also smart enough to realize when something good is staring me in the face. At least, I *hope* I’m smart enough. You’re a good guy, Clark. You’re my best friend. And recently, I’ve started to wonder if there’s more to us than just our friendship. I have too many regrets in my life as it is. I don’t want missing out on an opportunity to find happiness be one of them. And if I passed up exploring a possible relationship with you, I’d regret it for the rest of my life. I’m willing to give us a chance, if you are.”

“No regrets,” Clark breathed.

“No regrets,” Lois echoed again. “Now get going. You look exhausted.”

He had to agree with Lois. He *was* exhausted. Since Lois had cornered him with her discovery that Superman and Clark Kent were the same person, he’d been running on adrenaline and what little energy he’d had left after the Kryptonite had savaged his body. He needed sleep, and needed it badly.

“All right,” he said, giving her a nod and a smile. “See you at nine.”

“Goodnight, Clark,” Lois said softly.

“Goodnight, Lois.”

“You *will* be okay by yourself, right? After everything that happened with the Kryptonite?” she suddenly asked. It was clear that the thought hadn’t occurred to her before now.

Clark wished he could say no. He wished he had a legitimate reason to ask Lois to stay with him. But he was through lying to her. That was a thing of the past. He wasn’t the same man he’d been twelve hours before — the one who gave her half truths, partial lies, and flimsy excuses. From this night forward, he’d made a silent vow in his heart to never lie to her ever again, to never be that man again.

“I’ll be fine,” he assured her. “The biggest threat is gone. I just need some sleep and sunlight, that’s all.”

“Okay.”

“Goodnight, Lois,” he repeated, grabbing the door handle.

“And thanks again for saving my life tonight.”

“What are best friends for?” she replied, giving him a bright smile.

Clark nodded, then leaned over and lightly kissed Lois on the cheek. It was purely on impulse that he did it, and he was happy to see that she did not pull away, or get angry, or slap him. Then

he opened the door and grabbed his gym bag from the back seat. In the next moment, he turned from the car and headed to his door.

All around him, the night was as silent as it got in a big city. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear the wail of an ambulance siren. Dogs barked and two cats screeched as they fought. Car tires squealed as someone took a turn way too quickly, probably only a block or two away. He hoped that it wasn't Lois. And from Mr. Kinsey's apartment, he could hear light jazz music playing through the open window, two stories above, in the building directly adjacent to Clark's apartment. Clark smiled to himself, and carefully kept his back to the window. Mr. Kinsey was a self-admitted "horrible" insomniac. In seconds, Clark was inside his apartment, shutting the night out behind him as he closed the door. For the first time since leaving Lois' apartment, he felt safe. There were no prying eyes here. No one to see him without his glasses. No one to question his pallor and the weary way he held his body.

He brought his bag over to the closet. Zipping it open, he carefully extracted his Superman suit and all its pieces. He hung them in his secret compartment with the others, happy to have it out of sight for the time being. He was finished being Superman for the day. Then he brought his bag to his bedroom, replacing the items he was wearing with new ones, so that the bag was once again full. He stripped out of his clothes and readied himself for bed.

He slipped into a thin pair of sleep shorts, quickly brushed his teeth, and climbed into bed. The cool sheets felt good on his tired, still somewhat sore, body. He closed his eyes, beckoning sleep, but it did not come right away. For a short time, his mind kept him awake, thoughts of Lois swirling through his brain.

She now knew everything.

It was inevitable. He had known it, almost from the time he'd first been partnered with her. She was either going to find out on her own one day, or he was going to be forced into a situation where he would have to tell her. Or they would wind up in a relationship and he would tell her because she would need to know. Clark had always imagined that it would be awkward for her to be privy to such knowledge. He'd always imagined that he would still harbor some last shard of fear. But oddly enough, he felt not one iota of worry. He didn't feel awkward, having her know about his alter ego. He felt freed, like a man whose shackles had been removed after close to thirty long years of captivity. He felt lighter. In fact, he was certain he would have been floating all night long, if only his powers had returned. He felt embarrassed too, that he'd withheld the truth from her for so long.

"What's done is done," he muttered to himself. "Can't change the past."

That was his last thought before sleep overtook him. He slept deeply and dreamlessly. It was as if his ordeal had sapped even his brain's energy to the point where it could not conjure any dreams, good or bad. He was thankful for that, once he awoke. He'd needed the break for any and all types of reality.

He found himself in a warm patch of sunlight, which filtered in through the half-closed shades of his bedroom windows. He groaned a little, throwing a hand over his eyes, shielding them from the sudden assault of light. For a moment he just lay there in that same position, unmoving. Then he rolled over, off his back, and looked at his bedside clock. The clock he suddenly realized he'd forgotten to set.

"Oh no!"

It was a minute to nine. He'd overslept. Lois would be arriving any time now. And she would be expecting him to be dressed, ready, and bright-eyed. Instead, he was wearing nothing but his sleep shorts, was far from ready for the day, and was still somewhat groggy, his head still fogged with the remnants of his

sleep. He pushed himself out of bed, rubbing the heels of his palms into his bleary eyes.

A second later his hearing picked up the sound of a heartbeat.

Clark's own heart soared at the sound. Never mind the fact that his powers had returned. Lois was there! All remaining fragments of sleep melted away. He sprang away to the door, leapt the steps with a single small jump, unbolted the lock, and threw it open to find Lois poised there with her fist raised to knock.

"Morning!" he offered brightly.

"Morning," Lois said, stepping into his apartment. "How'd you know it was me?" She paused for a moment. "Stupid question. X-ray vision, right?"

Clark shook his head, shutting the door as he did so. "Nope. I heard your heartbeat."

"And you knew it was me, just based on that?" she asked, surprised, and noting his state of utter undress. He wasn't even wearing his glasses.

He nodded. "I don't want this to sound creepy, but I'd know your heartbeat anywhere, Lois. You could put everyone on this planet together in one place and I'd be able to find you in that crowd, completely blind, just by the sound of your heart."

Lois smiled at him. "That's sweet. And now it makes so much more sense to me how you're always looking at the elevators when I come into the bullpen. Don't think I haven't noticed how you try to hide it by burying yourself in your work."

"Guilty as charged," Clark said, grinning from ear to ear.

"So, is this how it's going to be now, all the time?"

"What? Casually talking about my powers as if it's the most normal thing in the world?" he asked.

Lois gestured to his mostly naked form. "I meant your lack of clothing in my presence."

"Sorry about that. Just give me a few seconds to get ready, then we can head out. I'm afraid I overslept."

"I'm guessing you needed it," Lois said, nodding and motioning for him to go get dressed. "You look a lot better this morning."

"I *feel* better," Clark admitted, dashing off to his bedroom, while keeping up the conversation. "I'm a hundred percent recovered." He shaved, brushed his teeth, dressed, and reemerged, even finding time to make his bed. "Everything's right again. All my powers are back and seem to be functioning just as effectively as they always have."

"Good," Lois said, smiling in approval. Her eyes raked over his light gray suit and white shirt, though she rolled her eyes at the American flag print tie. "Because something tells me we're going to need all the help we can get in putting whoever was behind yesterday's attack behind bars where they belong. You know," she said, gently grabbing his tie as he stood before her, "for a superhero, you have surprisingly super-horrendous taste in ties."

"What? You don't like it?"

Once more, Lois rolled her eyes. "How is it that you can be so clueless sometimes?" she wondered aloud, shaking her head.

"Maybe my wardrobe needs a woman's touch," he said playfully.

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Kent. I agreed to go out on a date with you. Not to be your personal shopper or your wife or anything." By her tone, Clark knew she was only teasing him.

"Not yet," he teased back, shrugging, as if to suggest that he knew he'd win her over.

"Maybe not ever," she said, grinning playfully and patting his cheek. "But first things first."

"Our date."

"No," she said, her eyes sparkling with laughter. "Finding your would-be assassin, so that we can enjoy our first date in peace."

Clark nodded, still smiling. “Agreed.”

“I thought so. And on that note, let’s get going. I spoke to Henderson before I came over. A dive team is going to be recovering whatever they can from the rocket in about an hour or so. He said he’ll call when they’re done so that I can take a look.”

“Great,” Clark said, grabbing his glasses and setting them on his face. He grabbed his keys and wallet and shoved them into his pocket. “You’re the best.”

“I know,” Lois retorted, smiling and patting him on the shoulder. “But I love to hear you say it.”

Clark chuckled and shook his head. He guided Lois back through his apartment to the door, locking it behind them as they exited. He was so thrilled to be trading such playful, light-hearted banter with her. The night before, when Lois had figured out his secret and been so angry, he’d been terrified that he’d lost her for good. He’d imagined an irreparable, jagged hole torn from the once invulnerable fabric of their friendship. Even after they’d talked things out, and though the night had ended on a positive enough note, Clark had feared that Lois would treat him differently, now that she knew his secret. But to see her acting so normal around him, his last, tiny knot of fear uncoiled and disappeared.

He was still Clark Kent in her eyes, the only person he’d ever wanted to be to her.

Clark drummed his pencil on his desk, staring sightlessly at the monitor of his computer. He leaned forward in his desk chair, resting his elbows on the top of his desk, unable to focus on anything. He sighed and shifted his gaze to Lois’ desk, directly across from him. Lois’ *empty* desk. Without her there, it looked dark and cold, like some foreboding dungeon sitting across the way, not twenty feet from where he sat. He always felt that way when Lois was out of the office. He missed her warmth, her smile, the always open invitation to perch on the edge of her desk, sharing information with her, or working through a confusing batch of research, or reading over her copy, or sharing a brief respite while munching on a bagel and sipping a cup of coffee.

“Donut?”

“What?”

“I said ‘donut,’ CK,” Jimmy said, sidling up to his desk with a box of donuts in his hand. “Man, you are one distracted guy today.”

“A little, yeah,” Clark admitted, eyeing the treats in the box. He reached in to grab one.

“Uh, not the cinnamon,” Jimmy said, shaking his head.

“Unless you want Perry to kill you and mount your head on the wall as a warning to the rest of the bullpen.”

Clark obediently pulled his hand away from the donut in question and instead settled for a glazed one. He spied a double chocolate one and fished it out as well, setting it aside for Lois.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” he said, raising his donut like he would a glass of wine in a toast.

“No problem, CK. And, uh, if you want to talk about whatever’s bothering you, you know I’m here, right?”

Clark nodded. “Thanks. I just have a lot on my mind, that’s all. Lois and I are working on what happened last night at the park.”

“Yeah, Courtney and I were there. That was some crazy stuff. Any leads yet?”

“Not yet.”

Jimmy nodded knowingly. “So all this distraction is *just* about that, then? Nothing to do with you and Lois finally going out on a date?”

“Wait, how did you...?”

Jimmy leaned a hip against the front of Clark’s desk. “Oh come on, CK. It’s so obvious. You’ve been pining after her since

the day Perry hired you, maybe longer. Everyone knows that. And to my highly trained photographer’s eye, you two are looking pretty close all of a sudden. So when’d you finally ask her? Last night?”

Clark nodded and laughed. “You’re good.” He took a bite of his donut.

“Before or after?”

“What?” Clark swallowed the piece of donut he was chewing and took another bite.

“Before or after the fireworks?”

Clark gave Jimmy a guarded look. “Why?”

Jimmy squirmed a little under Clark’s gaze. “It’s important.”

The look did not leave Clark’s face. “Before.” He took a sip of his now lukewarm coffee. “Why is it so important?”

Jimmy grinned impishly even as his face reddened with embarrassment. “I had a bet going with Tom in sports. He owes me fifty dollars now.”

Clark choked a little on his coffee as he took another sip. “Jimmy!”

“What? It’s become something of a hobby with a few of us.”

Jimmy tried to stifle his smile and failed. “Sorry, CK. I know, it was lousy of us.” He tried to look contrite, but failed at that as well.

Clark shook his head. “You guys need new hobbies.”

Jimmy nodded and patted Clark’s shoulder. “Sure thing, CK. Hey, you want in on the action? There’s a bet going around on how long it’s going to take before Stephanie in travel decks Ralph right in the face.”

Clark rolled his eyes. “Jimmy...”

Jimmy’s hands went up in a gesture of surrender. “All right, all right. But seriously, man, congrats on you and Lois. I think you guys are cute together.”

“Thanks.”

Jimmy moved away, a grin stretched from ear to ear, carrying the box of donuts toward Perry’s office. Clark watched for a moment, then went back to staring at his computer screen. The cursor on screen blinked back at him from the blank document page, mocking him. Clark groaned and threw his head back to study the ceiling instead. He wondered how much longer it would be before Lois came back, for what felt like the eightieth time that hour.

A moment later, his question was answered. Down in the lobby, he could hear the steady beating of her heart. His own heart lightened in response. Four minutes later, she entered the newsroom, striding purposefully down the ramp. Straight to Clark’s desk she went, and plopped down a steaming mug of coffee on his desk. He looked up at her questioningly. She didn’t say a word, so Clark dutifully went to her desk, retrieved her chair, and wheeled it up to his desk for her. She gave him a smile and sat, then sipped from a second cup of coffee. She waved toward the one on Clark’s desk.

“Whole milk, three sugars,” she said. “Just how you like it.”

Clark gave her a smile. “Thanks. What’s the occasion?”

“Oh, I was just doing some thinking while I was waiting for Henderson. Did you know that you’ve bought every cup of coffee we’ve had in the last three months?”

“I wasn’t really keeping track of that, Lois. Besides, I don’t mind. I like being able to do things for you. Like this.” He handed her the donut he’d taken for her. “Freshly stolen from Jimmy.”

Lois nodded. “You’ve always been so sweet,” she mused, “even when I wasn’t so sweet to you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Clark said, taking a sip from his cup. “It’s perfect.” Then, to switch topics off rehashing the past, “So, what did Henderson have to say?”

Lois shrugged. “They couldn’t find much on the lakebed. But they did find two interesting things.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What were they?”

“A mini motor, like the type you’d find on a remote controlled helicopter, and some sort of electronic box.”

Clark’s eyebrows shot up into his hairline. “Electronic box? What kind of electronic box?”

Lois shook her head. “They don’t know yet what it is. But they’ve passed it along to S.T.A.R. Labs. The theory is that it may be some sort of timer.”

“Or a computer,” Clark suggested.

“Could be.”

“Or it could have housed the...you know.” Clark lowered his voice to a whisper, gesturing vaguely.

“It’s possible.”

“Did you get to see them? The box and the motor?”

Lois shook her head again. “No, the police had already passed them on. I called Dr. Klein though. He said it will be a couple of days at the earliest before they can analyze everything. He’s going to send over some pictures when he can.”

Clark sighed. “A couple of days,” he echoed.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get whoever it was,” she said, rubbing his arm affectionately.

“I hope so, Lois. I’m genuinely worried about this.”

“Well, of course you are. Someone tried to...you know.”

Clark shook his head. “It’s not even about me,” he said, keeping his voice low. “It’s about all those people. The longer it takes to put this person behind bars, the longer people will be in danger.”

Lois nodded and sighed. “I know.” She took another sip of her drink. “Did you come up with anything?”

“No,” Clark admitted, feeling himself growing frustrated again. “I’ve got a few messages in with the event coordinators. I’m waiting to hear back. And I guess...I’m still a little distracted.”

“About last night?”

Clark nodded. “Some parts more than others. An attempt on my life I can handle.”

“But you’re worried about me? I thought we settled this, Clark.”

“That’s not exactly it,” he said, smiling. “It’s just...did you know that Jimmy had a bet going with some of the others here at work?”

“A bet?” Lois arched one eyebrow. “What kind of bet?”

“Oh, you know. Just how long it would take before I’d ask you out.” He chuckled.

Lois laughed too. Clark could see it dancing in her eyes as well. “You’re kidding.”

“Oh no. Jimmy’s quite happy it happened last night before the fireworks. Seems he won fifty bucks in the bet.”

“Good. Now he can pay me back for last month when he borrowed my car and got a parking ticket,” Lois said, crossing her arms and leaning back into her chair a bit.

That elicited another chuckle from Clark. “Come on, let’s see what we can find out, partner.”

Two days later, Clark entered the newsroom. He glanced at his watch. Only a minute late. That wasn’t bad, considering the wildfire he’d been helping to fight that morning. It had taken hours of his most intense effort and concentration, but he and the California firefighters had managed to finally get the blaze extinguished. Still, five college-aged campers had perished in the inferno, though Clark had managed to evacuate ten other camping families before they too could succumb to the flames. As always, the lives lost weighed heavily on his mind, and he found himself cursing the fact that even his speed and flight hadn’t been enough. The lives saved did little to cheer him, though he knew he should be proud of what he’d accomplished. Thousands more would have lost their lives and homes as well,

had the fire still been burning.

“Hey. Rough morning?” Lois asked, as he reached her desk. “Brutal.”

“I saw that Superman did a great job on that wildfire out west.” She was so casual the way she spoke of Superman as a separate entity from Clark.

“Yeah. But people still died. Five kids barely Jimmy’s age.”

“Hey,” Lois said, grabbing his elbow and drawing him close. “You did the best you could. No one blames you for not being everywhere at once.” Her tone was confidential, barely a whisper in his ear.

“I know, Lois,” he said with a sigh. “It just...sometimes it takes a while for the horror to sort of...wear off.”

“Well, maybe this will cheer you up. I just got off the phone with S.T.A.R. Labs.”

Clark perked up a little at that, thankful for the distraction. “What’d they say?”

“Well, the electronic box? It was a small computer. A very sophisticated one at that. It’s damaged beyond repair, so they can’t pull any data from it, but it looks like it was probably wired to the propeller, to give it directions.”

“So the rogue rocket wasn’t a rogue at all.”

“That’s what it looks like,” Lois said, tapping her pencil on the yellow legal pad before her.

“Sabotage.”

“Just like you suspected from the start.”

Clark didn’t say anything toward that comment. “Any idea who manufactured the computer?” he asked instead.

“No, but it did have a chip design that Dr. Klein said he hadn’t seen before. At least, not in person. He said it resembled a drawing he’d seen in a magazine a couple of months back. Guess what company was working on it?”

“Lex Labs?”

Lois nodded. “Which isn’t to say that your theory on who’s behind it is necessarily true,” she reminded him. “Even with as much sense as your side of things makes.”

“I know,” Clark said, dipping his head in acknowledgement. “What else did Dr. Klein have to say?”

“He’s sending over some copies of the photographs he took of the recovered pieces, now that the lab’s had some time to process the items.”

“That’s good.”

“Well, he offered to show us in person too, but I thought under the circumstances...I didn’t want to risk having you hurt again.” Lois cupped his cheek gently with one hand for a moment, leaving Clark’s flesh ablaze where contact was made.

“Thank you. I appreciate that,” Clark said sincerely.

“Lois!” Jimmy called, his voice cutting through the constant noise of the newsroom. He waved a manila envelope. “This just came for you.”

“Speak of the devil,” Lois said, giving Clark a smile. “That must be them.” She took the proffered envelope. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

“No problem.”

She tore open the sealed paper to find a plain black folder inside. Inside the folder was a small assortment of black and white photographs. Dr. Klein had, on a few of them, marked arrows in red marker, labeling the components in distracted, spidery script.

“Here, let me see those,” Clark said, moving toward his desk.

Lois handed him the photos as he sat in his chair. With a quick glance around, Clark lowered his glasses ever so slightly. He zoomed in on the photos, searching every square inch for a clue. He found nothing.

“Not even a serial number to speak of,” he said, pushing his glasses back up his nose. “Whoever did this didn’t want anyone to follow their trail back.”

“Filed off?” Lois asked.

“No,” Clark said, shaking his head. “Nothing looks scratched in that way. It’s broken and charred, but there’s no scrape marks like a file might leave.”

“So it was specially made?”

“Probably. Or a prototype.”

“Wouldn’t that have some indicator on it? In case it was stolen?”

Clark shook his head again. “Possibly. I’m not sure. It would make sense though.” He frowned, then went back to searching, lowering his glasses again and going back over the images again in case he’d missed something. “Wait a second. It looks like there’s a number here, under this charred section here. I missed it the first time around.”

“What’s the number?”

“Looks like a one.”

“Okay, so it’s the first one off the assembly line, you think?”

“Possibly.” He paused for a moment. “You know, I was thinking.”

“About what?”

“Well, Jack.”

“What about him?” Lois asked as she glanced around the bullpen.

“Think about it. He’s a street kid. He used to deal with items that weren’t exactly legally obtained. He might know someone who knows something about the, uh, stone.”

“Assuming it was stolen.”

“It *has* to be, Lois. As far as I know, the piece that Wayne gave my dad for safe keeping was completely destroyed. But the piece that got sent off to the lab for testing was never recovered. My guess is that it got into the wrong hands and wound up on the black market.”

“Okay,” Lois said, nodding her agreement. “Even if that’s the case, what are you going to tell Jack?”

Clark bit his lower lip in thought. “I haven’t quite worked out the wording yet. And I’m only thinking of it as a last resort. Let’s try to track down the chip’s owner first.”

“Didn’t you have a call in with the committee who oversaw the fireworks display?”

“I did, but they claim to be just as mystified as we are about the whole situation. Although, guess whose payroll they’re on.”

“Wild guess. A certain billionaire who happens to live in town?”

“Bingo,” Clark said, raising his eyebrows.

Lois frowned. “Two connections to Lex,” she muttered.

Clark nodded but did not comment.

“And Lex has never been the one to sponsor the fireworks before,” Lois said, apparently thinking aloud. “It’s usually done through the city. But with the budget cuts this year, the city couldn’t afford the display.”

“Enter Luthor, appearing as the noble savior of a beloved Metropolis tradition,” Clark said, picking up Lois’ train of thought. “With pockets like he has, the fireworks display would have been chump change. Meanwhile, he would be privy to exactly what the display would entail.”

“Which would put him in the perfect position to know when the most opportune moment would be for one very different firework to be set off,” Lois finished for him. She sipped thoughtfully from her coffee.

Clark nodded again. “Makes sense to me.”

Clark’s phone rang then, shattering their thoughts and sending tendrils of ideas shooting off into every direction at once. He picked up the receiver and cradled it between his ear and shoulder, giving Lois an apologetic smile as he did so.

“Daily Planet. This is Clark Kent,” he said, identifying himself to the caller. “Hey, Bobby. Uh-huh. Right. I see.” Clark nodded as he spoke. “Okay, that’s great. Give us twenty minutes.

982 Union. Got it. Thanks, see you then.” Clark hung up the phone, a hint of a smile on his face. “That was Bobby Bigmouth.”

“He has something for us?” Lois asked, excitement creeping into her voice.

Clark nodded again in affirmation. “Seems like one of the committee members approached him with some information.”

“Why wouldn’t they come straight to us?”

“I don’t know,” Clark said with a slight half-frown. “But he’s with Bobby now.”

They stood together. Lois hooked her arm intimately with Clark’s, which brought a smile to his face and caused his heart to skip a beat. It was amazing, he thought, that after her initial shock and anger over his secret, she had so quickly come around to acceptance. And, more even astounding to him, their friendship had not only survived, but had strengthened and thrived.

“Let’s go, partner,” she said, giving him a smile.

Bobby met them in the very back of a fresh fish store. Lois gagged as they entered and even Clark’s eyes watered. The stench of raw fish assaulted his sensitive nostrils like a literal blow to his face. He silently gave credit to the workers who milled about, seemingly oblivious to the overpowering odor. Even Bobby looked a little green around the gills. The professional snitch didn’t even so much as glance into the bag full of food Lois and Clark gave him in exchange for the lead he’d brought them.

Bobby was with the committee member; a short, red-faced, overweight, if not nervous but kindly looking man in his late forties. Bobby introduced him as Jeff Lawson. Jeff nodded to them politely, but did not offer his hand. His blood-stained apron told them that he worked at the store as a butcher.

“Miss Lane. Mr. Kent,” he greeted them warmly, though his eyes darted about the room as if expecting someone to jump out of thin air to attack him. “I’m glad you could meet with me.”

“Thanks for having Bobby contact us,” Lois said.

“You have some information for us?” Clark chimed in.

“Regarding the incident at the Metropolis Park the other night?”

Jeff nodded. “I do. But, uh, you won’t reveal that I’m the one who told you anything, will you? If it was ever discovered that I was the one who tipped you off...”

His voice trailed for a moment as he used his bare forearm to wipe at his brow. Despite the refrigerator-like temperature of the place, he was sweating. Once again, Jeff’s eyes swept the room, looking for potential enemies.

“No, of course not,” Clark assured him. “We’d never reveal a source who wanted to remain anonymous.”

“Everything we say and do here is completely confidential,” Lois added. “You can trust us.”

Jeff nodded once again. “I know. That’s why I chose to contact you out of all the other reporters in Metropolis. You get results.”

“We do try,” Clark said, giving the man what he hoped was a comforting smile.

“Yes, you certainly do,” Jeff agreed.

“So, what do you know?” Lois asked after the man fell silent, as if in thought.

“Nothing for certain,” the butcher said, his eyes again attempting to ferret out spies. “But, well, I saw someone enter the area where the boat was docked. You know, the one with the fireworks. The whole operation is computerized, from driving the boat to where it needs to be, to shooting off the fireworks with nanosecond precision. Our system even handles the music that gets pumped into the park.”

“And you saw someone by the boat?” Clark prompted, trying to steer the man back on course.

“Yes,” Jeff said, inclining his head ever so slightly. “He had a briefcase with him. He didn’t see me; I’m sure of it. I was pretty

far away. I saw him through a pair of binoculars. I like to go to the park and do some bird watching from time to time. It's sort of a hobby of mine. Anyway," he said, pulling himself back from his tangent, "I saw a man heading toward the boat area. That's off limits to the public when we're setting up for the display. A minute or two later, he came back, still holding his briefcase, strolling back across the park acting casual."

"Did you see what this man did?" Clark asked, doing his best to keep his voice calm and neutral.

Jeff shook his head. "No. A line of tall hedges provided a screen. I lost sight of him. But, as I said, it was only a couple of minutes before he reemerged. When he was out of sight again, I went to check on the fireworks. I thought maybe he'd stolen some. But they were all accounted for. I thought maybe he was just someone who wandered into the area by accident and realized his mistake before turning around to head back the way he came from."

"But you're not convinced of that now," Lois said, looking for confirmation of her own suspicions.

"That's correct," Jeff said. "I've been thinking about it for the past couple of days. I think he *did* steal a firework, and replaced it with the one that went rogue. It wouldn't have taken him long, if he knew what he was doing."

"Mr. Lawson, can you give us a description of the man you saw?" Clark asked.

"Better than that," Jeff said. "I can give you a name."

"A name? You know this person?" Lois asked.

Jeff nodded. "As a committee member, I've recently had a lot of dealings with him. His name is Asabi. And he works for..."

"Lex Luthor," Clark jumped in, finishing the man's statement for him. He took a breath, instantly regretted it, and let it out in a controlled manner.

"Yes," the butcher said. "Like I said, I can't confirm anything. I'm only telling you what I saw and what I believe happened."

"Mr. Lawson," Clark said, noting the man's distinct unease, "why come to us? Why not the police?"

"Because, Mr. Kent, I'm afraid. LexCorp owns this business. If I went to the police and things got traced back to me, I don't know what might happen. The store gets shut down, maybe. I get put on a blacklist so no one will hire me. I have a wife and four kids to provide for, as well as mortgage to pay. I can't afford to lose this job...or...or have other unfortunate things happen to me."

"Asabi could find out that you spoke with us too," Clark argued.

"That's true. But everyone knows that you and Miss Lane have a connection with Superman. Perhaps you could get word to him to watch over things?"

"We'll talk to him," Lois said, nodding, knowing the message was already delivered.

"Thank you," the nervous little man said, sounding genuinely grateful, and breathing a small sigh of relief.

"Anything else?" Lois asked, scribbling notes on a small pad of paper.

Jeff thought for a moment. "No, not that I can think of."

"Thank you," Clark said, dipping his head toward the man, rather than grabbing his hand, which bore the same overpowering odor of fish. "We appreciate the help."

"My pleasure, if it will help you find out exactly what went on," the butcher said. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to my post."

"By all means," Clark said, gesturing toward the door, beyond which the man's knives and co-workers awaited.

"Looks like we've got some work ahead of us," Lois said, as the man trundled off, back to his work.

"And I know just the place to start," Clark said, giving her a look that told her Superman would be on the case just as soon as

they left Bobby Bigmouth behind.

"I'll be damned," Perry said, wandering over to Lois' desk, holding a paper and slapping the front page with his free hand. "I still can't believe this."

"Believe it, Chief," Lois said, putting down her mug of coffee.

"This has got to be the story of the year. Maybe of the decade." Perry shook his head in disbelief. "One of the world's biggest philanthropists turns out to be one of the world's biggest criminals. And to think, I used to admire the man."

"It's not your fault, Chief," Lois said. "Lex had just about everyone fooled."

"Yeah, well," Perry tried to argue before finding it difficult to verbalize the right words.

"At least he's behind bars now, where he can't hurt anyone anymore," Clark said. "Although it *does* bother me that he escaped some of the charges, simply because the people he'd used were conveniently unable to take the stand. Like Dr. Carlton, who has basically been in a comatose state, ever since the smart kids incident. Or all the others who are no longer alive."

"Well, son, even Elvis didn't knock 'em dead with every song. Either way, Lex is away for life. He won't ever see the sun shining again except through metal bars and barbed wire lining the exercise yard."

"Yeah, I know," Clark said, not convinced. He wished he could have done more, somehow, to ensure that every charge stuck and that every person affected by Lex's actions had their closure.

It had been a month since Lois and Clark had gotten the tip from Jeff Lawson, the man who'd identified Asabi. Asabi, in turn, had identified Luthor as the brains behind the experiment, after Superman had brought him into the police station. The police, of course, had been notified of the man's involvement in the firework debacle, and had been looking for him. They had been most thankful for Superman's help.

Henderson and Wolfe had interrogated the man for hours. Asabi must have known how deeply in trouble he was. He'd cut a deal, offering up as much of Lex's criminal activities as he knew about, in exchange for leniency from the judge. He too, was currently behind bars, and would be for the next thirty years. Clark wasn't happy about that. After all, the man *had* been instrumental in some of Lex's illegal dealings. In fact, he'd been the one to carry out some of those activities, to say nothing of the fact that he'd never once tried to talk Lex out of his plans. He'd even admitted it, for crying out loud! Thirty years somehow didn't quite feel like justice. Clark had hoped the man would also get a life sentence.

Still, it was a relief to Clark that both men were locked away and no longer possessed the ability to hurt anyone else. He just hoped that Lex didn't still have any cohorts on the outside, who could still carry out his wishes.

Perry laid down the copy of that afternoon's edition of the Daily Planet. In bold, defiant letters, it proudly proclaimed that the House of Luthor had fallen with the trial's conclusion. One of Jimmy's photographs, of a snarling, enraged Lex, graced the front page of the paper, right alongside the article Lois and Clark had both worked on.

"You know, kids, I'm seeing a joint Kerth award in your future. Keep up the good work."

"Will do, Perry," Lois dutifully answered. She gave him a bit of a salute, making the editor chuckle.

"Now, I want you two to listen to me, and listen good. I don't want to hear any arguments, you understand me?"

"Of course, Chief," Clark said, from his perch on the edge of Lois' desk. "What's up?"

“Well, it seems to me you two have been all work and no play ever since that night in the park when this whole thing started. Now, I want you two to go and take a couple of days. Rest up. Relax. Recharge. Then get back here and give me more award-worthy stories. Got it?”

Clark shrugged and shared a look with Lois. She looked as eager as he did to take a step back from their work. Ever since the night of the fireworks and carnival, they’d barely got a break from their investigation. They hadn’t discussed their abandoned plans for a date during that time. Clark was more than ready for the opportunity to spend some time with Lois outside of their work obligations. If she wanted to, that was.

“Loud and clear,” Lois answered Perry.

At the same time, Clark said, “Sounds good to me, Chief.”

Perry blinked as his two top reporters willingly and eagerly accepted his order to take a few vacation days. Clark knew the man was stunned, not by his own agreement, but by Lois’. It was rare that Lois ever seemed happy to get away from her work.

“I’ll be,” Perry mumbled. “Lois, honey, are you feeling okay?”

“I’m fine. I just happen to think you’re right. Clark and I *do* need some time away from the bullpen.”

“This, uh, wouldn’t have anything to do with your budding romance, now would it?” the editor teased in his soft Southern drawl. His eyes twinkled and he smiled knowingly at them both.

“Are we that transparent?” Clark wondered aloud.

“Like glass,” Perry said, chuckling.

“Were you in on the betting pool too?” Clark asked, chuckling himself.

Perry shook his graying head. “Nah. I don’t like to get involved in things like that. I prefer to leave that for the younger crowd.”

“Like Jimmy?” Lois said, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Like Jimmy,” their boss confirmed. “Now go on. Get out of my newsroom before I throw you two out of here,” he teased lightly. “I better not see hide or hair of either one of you before next Monday. Got it?”

“Got it, Chief,” Clark said.

Perry laughed again and walked away from the desk, heading to the coffee break area. Clark could hear him whistling a tune; “Don’t Be Cruel” he realized after a few notes. It brought a smile to his face, to see Perry in such high spirits. There had been more than a few times during the course of the Luthor investigation when he was sure his boss was going to pop a blood vessel in his annoyance and stress.

Clark slipped from his perch and stood next to Lois’ desk. He shoved his hands into his pockets, filled with the uncertainty that always plagued him when he wasn’t exactly sure what to say to his partner. Lois didn’t seem to notice his unease. She merely got to work shutting her computer down. That seemed like a good idea to Clark, so he drifted to his own desk and shut his machine down. After a moment, Lois appeared before his desk.

“Ready?” she asked, giving him a smile.

Clark nodded. “All set.”

“Great. I’m starving. What do you say we go get something to eat?”

“Sounds great. You have any place in particular in mind?”

“I’m not picky,” Lois said, with a shake of her head. Her dark tresses bounced with the movement, captivating Clark.

“Although, I *do* hope we can make it to Antonio’s during our week off.”

A slow grin curved Clark’s lips. He let it come, unchallenged. “You still want that date with me?” he teased her.

Lois rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Like you haven’t been thinking of it every day since I first agreed to go out with you.”

Clark spread his hands in admittance. “You got me there.

How does tomorrow sound? Say, seven o’clock?”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Great,” Clark said, his grin going even wider. “I’ll call Kenny tonight. In the meantime, how about we go back to my place...or yours...and I get us some of that Chinese food you enjoy so much?”

Clark linked her arm with his. Together, side by side, they walked through the newsroom. A few co-workers gave them approving smiles as they passed, though Clark got the impression that he and Lois weren’t supposed to see those looks.

“I’d say that it sounds like the perfect evening,” Lois said, her grin matching his own. “I’m just glad this investigation is over now so we can focus on what’s really important.”

“Me too, Lois,” Clark said, his heart soaring within the confines of his ribcage.

Clark knocked on Lois’ door at precisely six-fifteen, as he’d promised her. It had been a near enough thing. He’d been needed at a mugging. The poor old woman who’d been mugged had had a heart attack on the scene, and he’d rushed her off to the hospital. He’d stayed just long enough to make sure she was taken care of, then he’d flown back to where he’d bent a parking meter around the would-be thief and taken the young man to the police station. He’d barely had time to get back to his apartment, get changed at super speed, then bolt out the door in a rush to make it to Lois’ place on time.

A moment later, Lois opened the door, stunning Clark as he gazed upon her. She was in a beautiful violet dress, one that hugged all the right curves, leaving Clark’s heart rate elevated and his feet barely able to move. He was aware of the fact that he was staring and that he should probably say something.

“You look fantastic,” he managed, prying his tongue off the roof of his mouth where it had super-glued itself.

“Thanks,” Lois said, blushing a little. “You look great too.”

“Thanks. I, uh, brought you these,” he said, holding out a bouquet of flowers to her.

It wasn’t a large or expensive assortment of flowers. But when he’d dashed into the florist on his way over, he’d been instantly struck with the bouquet. No two flowers were the same. Each had a unique look, a unique scent that was theirs alone. Each was a different color, or shade of color. Somehow, it reminded him of Lois. Perhaps it was because she was such a complex woman, whose layers and contradictions intrigued and excited him. Perhaps it was because she had so many facets to her personality, each one beautiful and different, like the flowers in the bunch. Perhaps it was because the random assortment of blossoms reminded him of the weird and often unrelated babbling tangents Lois frequently launched into, often leaving him slightly bewildered even through the fact that he loved those moments.

Lois smiled and brought the flowers to her nose. She inhaled their perfume deeply, closing her eyes for a moment, in what looked to Clark like a moment of bliss. Then she looked back up at Clark, her eyes meeting his and shining with gratitude and happiness.

“They’re gorgeous,” she said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. So, are you ready?”

“I’ve been ready for a long time.”

“Sorry,” Clark apologized. “I didn’t want to pressure you by showing up too early. Not to mention that I was a little tied up with, uh, you know.”

Again Lois smiled. “That’s not what I meant. What I really meant was that I’ve been ready for this date since probably the moment after I came to understand why you hid certain knowledge from me. No, wait, that’s not true. I was ready for this before you even asked me out, I think.”

As she spoke, Lois turned into her kitchen, pulling Clark along in her wake. Opening a cabinet, she found a crystal vase.

She quickly filled it with water, then unwrapped the bouquet. A moment later, she snipped the very bottoms of the stems with a pair of scissors and placed the blossoms into the vase. She moved whole thing into the living room and placed it in the center of the coffee table. Stepping backwards a pace, she admired the effect.

“Perfect,” she said.

“I’m glad you like them.”

“I love them,” Lois gently corrected him.

She grabbed her purse from the couch and ushered Clark out the door. With deft hands, she set the locks on her door. A few minutes later, they were on their way, Clark driving Lois’ Jeep across town to Antonio’s.

Walking into the restaurant, Clark gave his name to the hostess, feeling like the world’s richest, luckiest man alive. Just being able to have a reservation at Antonio’s made him feel important — only the super wealthy and famous could get spur of the moment reservations at the restaurant, and even then, it was never a guarantee. Now here he was, a virtual nobody, compared to the usual clientele of the place, his reservation less than twenty-four hours old. But to do so with Lois on his arm, knowing that he was beginning a new chapter in his life — one which included Lois in a capacity as more than just a friend — that made him feel like his heart might burst with love and happiness.

Never in his life had he ever felt so glad to be alive.

The food was exquisite, though Clark barely remembered eating any of it. Afterwards, he could barely even recall what he and Lois had ordered. He could scarcely bring to mind any memory of the bottle of wine he had brought to the table. He had only the most fleeting of impressions of the stunning décor within the walls of the restaurant. Afterwards, whenever someone asked about the restaurant, he could only come up with the words “elegant” and “warm,” knowing it had to have been more than just that.

Everything simply paled in comparison to Lois.

Their conversation never ceased, easily, fluidly moving from topic to topic. Clark found himself under the spell of her voice, noting how different she seemed to be that night. There was no trace of Mad Dog Lane. His work partner was gone. Her usually teasing tongue was subdued. Gone was the woman who joked with him about his taste in ties or poked good-natured jabs at his odd little quirks. She was not his best friend that night.

Instead, she was so much more.

She was simply the most beautiful, most elegant, most feminine woman on the planet. She was his date. She even sounded a little unsure of herself from time to time, as she told him all about herself — things Clark never would have guessed and certainly didn’t think he would have ever discovered by only being her friend. Each thing he learned about her made his heart both ache for the hardships she’d endured and burst with pride for her that she’d overcome them to become the strong woman she was. Each new discovery helped him make sense of the complex person that was Lois Lane and shed light on things she’d once hidden away from him in the dark shadows of the walls she’d built around herself.

Each new piece of information made him love her more than he’d ever thought possible.

He had known it, before their date, that he loved her — *had* loved her since the moment he’d first laid eyes on her. But by the end of that night, he knew for sure that he’d never feel for anyone else the way he felt for Lois. She alone held his heart, would *ever* hold his heart. He only hoped that this first date was just the beginning for them. He so desperately wanted to spend the rest of his life by her side, loving her and being loved by her in return.

At the end of the meal, Clark’s friend, Kenny, approached their table. He towered half a foot taller than Clark and looked as though he could easily out-muscle the reporter. But he was all

smiles and politeness, and his sparkling eyes gave away the fact that he was always ready with a laugh.

“Clark!” he said, slapping his friend on the shoulder. “Good to see you again! I don’t mean to intrude, but I just had to come say hi.”

“Hey, Kenny! Good to see you too. It’s been too long.”

“You can say that again. What’s it been? Five years?”

“Yeah. Kenny, I’d like you to meet Lois,” Clark said, unable to hide the ear to ear grin having Lois with him, as his date, caused.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” the chef said, extending a hand and smiling. “Clark won’t stop talking about you.”

Lois laughed. “The pleasure’s mine. And my compliments on the meal. I don’t think I’ve ever tasted food so delicious before.”

“Thank you,” Kenny said, dipping his head in acknowledgement and beaming with pride.

“So, what has Clark said about me?” Lois asked, grinning, and knowing the question would make Clark squirm a little in embarrassment.

“Oh, the usual. How he’s got the most beautiful, intelligent woman in the world as his partner and friend. How much he’s been looking forward to this first date with you.”

“Kenny!” Clark sputtered, feeling a blush creeping up on him.

“Personally, I’ve never seen him rave about *anyone* the way he talks about you,” Kenny continued, giving Clark a bright smile.

“Kenny!” Clark said again. This time he couldn’t force away the bloom of heat in his cheeks.

But Lois only laughed again, seemingly at complete ease that Clark had so enthusiastically spoken of her to someone else. To be honest, it surprised Clark somewhat. It was no secret that Lois enjoyed a good compliment — didn’t everyone? — but he’d seen, first hand, how knowing he’d spoken so highly of her to others had once caused her to feel uncomfortable.

“Listen,” the chef said, glancing toward the door to the kitchen. “I wish I could stay and chat longer, but I need to get back to my staff. It was nice to finally meet you, Miss Lane. Clark, call me sometime.”

“Absolutely,” Clark said, nodding. “Maybe we can shoot some hoops at the end of the week.”

“Sounds great,” the man said, before heading off back to his post.

“I, uh...sorry about that,” Clark apologized to Lois. “I had no idea he was going to come say hello.”

“It’s all right,” she said, as the waiter came and set a thick, rich slice of chocolate cake down in the center of the table for them, as well as two forks so they could share. “He seems like a really nice guy.”

“One of the greatest,” Clark confirmed. “When he’s not embarrassing me, that is.” He gave her a crooked smile.

“Actually, I like knowing that you hold me in such high regard,” Lois said, suddenly losing her demeanor of a shy date and once more becoming the friend Clark had fallen in love with.

“Well then,” he replied, taking up his usual light, teasing tone with her once again, “I’ll bear that in mind and sing your praises wherever we go from now on. I’ll be your very own, personal minstrel.”

That brought out a laugh and a broad smile from Lois, breaking down the last remnants of her uncertainty in this scary new step of their relationship. Clark relaxed too, finding, to his surprise, that even *he* had been a little shy and insecure that night. But that laugh, that wondrous, enchanting sound, dissipated the tension he’d been so unaware of, like mist in the warmth of the summer sun.

They shared their dessert, laughing the whole time, each completely at ease. Clark thought it to be the most natural thing

in all the world, to be sitting there with Lois, his partner, his best friend, his date, and the only person on the planet who was both privy to his secret and able to be trusted with it, outside of his family. It felt so *right* to finally be on a date with Lois. Like a puzzle, she was the piece, the *only* piece, who could fit into the missing space in his life, making him complete.

With dessert finished, Clark paid the bill and left a generous tip for their waiter. Then he helped Lois from her chair and linked their arms, escorting her from the restaurant. They retrieved the Jeep from the valet parking, Clark once again sliding into the driver's seat. He loved being able to do things for Lois, even if it was as simple as being the one to drive them someplace, though it wasn't too often that she allowed him to do that. For a moment, they just sat in silence, the car unmoving.

"So..." Clark began, a little nervously.

"So..." Lois echoed.

"I had a great time," Clark said, fumbling for words.

"Me too."

"I was wondering...I don't think I'm ready to call it a night just yet. Would you be interested in seeing a movie?"

"I'd like that," Lois said, nodding. "Truth be told, I was kind of hoping we could continue this date. It's been wonderful."

Clark put the car into gear and turned down the street which would eventually lead them to the movie theatre.

"It really has," he agreed. "I'm glad we finally got to do this."

"Me too," Lois said again. "Everything's right with the world, isn't it? Lex is in jail. Perry is thrilled with our coverage of the investigation and trial. We had a great dinner date together."

"Everything just seems to be falling into place," Clark said, finishing her train of thought.

"My thoughts exactly."

It did not take long to get to the movie theatre. But to their disappointment, the show they were hoping to see was sold out, and neither of them were all that interested in the ones which still *did* have tickets available. Clark stuck his hands into his pockets, debating with himself as to what he should say now.

"Sorry," he finally managed, feeling sheepish, though he knew it wasn't his fault. "Maybe I should have picked up tickets earlier in the day."

"It's okay," Lois said, rubbing his arm affectionately. "It's no big deal."

"We could try the theatre across town," he suggested.

Lois shook her head. "Nah. We'd never get there without cheating," she said, lowering her voice to a confidential whisper. "Besides, it's opening night. They're probably sold out over there too."

"Well, there is *one* place I can think of that we can go," he replied, a hint of mischief twinkling in his eyes.

"Oh, where's that?"

"My place. We can rent a video on the way and have our own, private movie screening."

"I'd like that. But let's not rent a movie. Let's just go to your place. We'll make some coffee and just relax for a while."

"Sure," Clark agreed, unlocking the car door again.

Soon they were at his apartment, Clark carrying Lois' gym bag of stakeout clothes so she could change into something more comfortable. Once inside, Lois took the bag and headed to the bathroom, leaving Clark to change at super speed into more casual apparel. Then he set the coffee brewing, humming to himself as he went through the familiar motions.

It wasn't at all unusual for him to be making a fresh pot of coffee to share with Lois. He'd done it a hundred times before, sometimes early in the morning, sometimes late at night, and, on the rare occasion, in the absolute dead of night when she'd come knocking on his door in fright or bubbling over with excitement as she finally figured out some missing piece to an investigation they were working on. He'd always graciously accepted her into

his apartment, happy to have her there and feeling the whole place sparkle and come to life with her very presence. At first, she'd come only as his partner; the partner she had grudgingly become when Perry had first been struck with the idea to pair them together. But as time had worn on, she'd come as his friend, as well as the person he worked with.

And now...

Now she was there as the woman he was dating. His — dare he think it? — girlfriend.

"Hey," she said, stepping into his kitchen, clad now in comfortable shorts and a soft-looking shirt. "What's on your mind?"

"Just happy you're here," Clark answered truthfully. "And of all the times you've been here before."

"It's different now, huh? With us dating, I mean."

"A little," Clark admitted. "But in a fantastic, exciting new way. At least, it is for me."

"It is for me too. And I feel like...I don't know...like we should have been doing this from the start."

Clark nodded his agreement and set to work preparing their drinks in their preferred ways. He handed Lois her mug, then took a sip from his own.

"Let's sit out on the terrace," Lois suggested, after taking a sip of her own drink. "It's such a beautiful night out. I feel like we shouldn't stay cooped up inside."

"Sounds good."

They both took their drinks to Clark's terrace. Clark dragged two chaise lounge chairs together and guided Lois to one. He held her mug while she settled into the comfortable cushions, before sitting in his own chair. He handed Lois back her mug, smiling at her as he did so. Lois let out what sounded like a contented sigh.

"So..." Clark said, grasping for words. "I had a great time tonight, Lois. And I was wondering if you'd allow me to take you out again. Like maybe tomorrow?"

"I had a great time too. Probably the best time I've ever had in my life. But, well, aren't you sick of me yet? I mean, we see each other every day at work. Don't you want a break from me?" she asked, and Clark caught the joking tone to her words.

"I will *never* get sick of being around you," he answered sincerely.

That stunned Lois into silence for several heartbeats. But after a moment, she recovered.

"In that case, I would love to go out with you again. What'd you have in mind?"

"I'm not sure yet," Clark said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "First I was hoping you'd even *want* to go out again. I figured I'd worry about the actual date once I knew that much."

For a time, they sat in a companionable silence, simply drinking their coffee and enjoying the other's company. Lois finished hers and set the mug on the ground, alongside her chair. Then she stood and moved to Clark's chair. Clark scooted over in surprise as she climbed up onto the lounge chair beside him, snuggled into his side, and lay her head on his chest. His arm immediately encircled her, holding her securely to him, the tenderness behind the move showing her just how precious she was to him.

"You know, knowing the things I've recently discovered about you...I think...in a way, it's brought us closer."

"Me too," Clark said, putting his free hand behind his head as they reclined, looking up at the stars. "I know I've said it before, but, I'm glad you know. It was never easy, trying to hide from you."

"I used to dream about dating Superman," Lois said in a whisper. Clark thought perhaps she sounded a little embarrassed.

"I know," he said, nodding.

“I used to dream of the adventure it would be.”

“Yeah? Like what?” he prodded, teasing her now.

“Like...impromptu picnics along the Rhine. Or lazy Sunday afternoon flights to nowhere in particular.”

“We can still do those things, Lois.”

“I know. But...I’m not so sure I want them anymore. Don’t get me wrong. Flying with you is one of the most amazing things in the world, and I’ll always love doing it. Especially knowing what I do now, that you and he are one. But tonight...tonight we were just a normal, average couple, and it was beyond anything I ever could have imagined a date with Superman -or with *Clark* — would be.”

“I’m glad, Lois. And for the record, I will always love flying with you too.” He gave her a wry grin he was sure she saw as she lifted her head to peer at him. “Particularly when I’m not flying you away from some mortal danger,” he added, utterly unable to help himself.

Lois laughed. “Yeah. I like it better too when I haven’t been snatched away from death’s door. Something about me being more relaxed and able to enjoy the view.”

“Not that I mind,” Clark said, still teasing her.

“Good. Because I really don’t intend on slowing down anytime soon. I’m still going to do whatever is necessary to break a story.”

“And win your Pulitzer,” Clark supplied, holding her a little closer and resting his chin against the top of her head.

“Well, *we* will, at any rate,” Lois said, snuggling deeper into his chest. For a moment, she was silent, shifting her gaze up to the star filled sky above.

“Lois? Are you okay? Did I say something wrong?”

Lois shook her head, though she was still laying against him. “No. I was just thinking, that’s all.”

“Care to share?”

She nodded. “I used to think I could love Superman. I used to think I could love him even if he was completely powerless; an ordinary guy leading a normal life.”

Clark bit his lower lip, growing suddenly concerned over Lois’ serious tone and topic change. He hoped — prayed — she wasn’t about to drop some bombshell on him. He hoped she wasn’t about to say that she was wrong and that she could never -would never — be able to reciprocate his feelings. His heart gave a nervous spasm in his chest. He wondered if she could feel the change in the organ’s rhythm.

“And?” he asked, unable to stop himself, needing to know the answer and dreading it at the same time. How he managed not to choke on the word was a mystery to him.

He knew, on a very real, very visceral level, that her next words would either make him the happiest man on the planet or unreservedly destroy him.

“And,” Lois said, drawing the word out longer than was necessary. She turned, twisting in Clark’s embrace to look him in the eye. “It turns out, I was half right.”

Clark swallowed hard around the lump that had appeared in his throat. “How’s that?”

“I don’t love Superman.”

“You don’t?” The words came out half strangled and fearful.

“No, I don’t. If I’ve learned anything since that night, when I found out the truth, it’s that you were right. Superman isn’t real. And I can’t love someone who isn’t real. Who I *can* love is the ordinary man. The one who holds down a job and pays his rent on time. The one who brings me coffee and makes it better than even I do. The one who will share his chocolate dessert with me or listen to me rant or brighten my day with a smile — who stands when a woman enters the room and holds doors open for people without expecting so much as a thank you in return. The one who edits my copy, even when I claim I don’t need or want it, and who has never turned me away from his door when I’ve

needed him. I love *you*, Clark. Not the caped hero. Not the powers. You. Clark Kent.”

Clark’s eyes slid shut in bliss for the briefest, most fleeting moment, before he opened them again and met Lois’ gaze once more. His heart was flying, while simultaneously smashing itself against his ribs as though it wished to escape his chest. He used his free hand to cup her cheek warmly, while holding her in a steady, even gaze.

“And I love you, Lois. I love everything about you. I have, ever since the moment I first laid eyes on you. Being with you — working alongside you every day and spending time together as friends outside of work — has been the greatest time of my life. Until now. Now...dating you...I feel like everything in my life has paled in comparison to this.”

In the next instant, his lips found hers — or perhaps her lips had found his — he wasn’t quite sure. It didn’t matter. All that mattered was that they were together. He lost himself to the moment, knowing that *this* was the greatest moment in his life, and knowing, somehow, that things would only get better from there on out.

THE END