

Accused

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: Clark is facing a serious accusation, and he has no way to refute it without revealing the big secret. Just when everything looks lost, Lois steps in ...

Setting — This fic is set early in the second season (before TGoM). A couple of months have passed since Lois's almost wedding to Lex Luthor, Clark's confession of love for Lois, and his subsequent denial of his feelings.

Disclaimer — the recognisable characters from 'Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman' are not mine.

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Part 1

Clark Kent walked listlessly towards his apartment after another day at the Daily Planet.

Another Lois-less day.

He missed her. Missed her terribly. She'd been gone for less than a week, but it felt as if all his enthusiasm for living had gone with her.

He loved his life in Metropolis. He loved his job at the Daily Planet. He loved the feeling of being a part of the forever-pulsing bustle of city living.

But without Lois, something vital was missing.

Like apple pie — with no apple.

A skiing vacation — with no snow.

A song — with no melody.

She would be back tomorrow. Her week of leave would be over, and she would return to the Planet. Did that mean she was in Metropolis now? Could he call her? Could he? Just to say 'hi'? She would wonder why he'd called. She'd probably ask. And then what would he say? Perhaps, "I just wanted to hear your voice." That would be the truth, but Clark recoiled from the thought of actually admitting it to her.

It didn't fit with the 'I just want to be friends' lie he had told her after the Luthor debacle.

Last Wednesday, after receiving a phone call, she'd bombarded him with instructions for their current stories as she'd hastily cleared her desk. When he'd enquired about her sudden need to take leave, her only response had been a few muttered words, telling him not to worry.

But he had worried. Because she was Lois.

He tried to conjure her voice in his mind. He did, but it was vague and not particularly satisfying. He ached to hear her voice. Really hear it.

And he wanted to see her.

To laugh with her.

To work with her.

To be with her.

He had missed her so much.

He'd been counting down the hours since earlier today when, in response to his casually worded enquiry, Perry had told him Lois had called to confirm her return from leave.

Tomorrow. Seven o'clock. A little over nine hours. When he arrived at the Planet tomorrow morning, she would be there. Or

about to arrive.

Nine hours. Clark would tell her about the stories of the past week, and he would bring her coffee. He would watch her, and laugh with her and ... He would feel as if the colour had returned to a life that had faded to insipid grey.

Because this week had been confusing. And lonely. And disturbing. For a whole lot of reasons.

Firstly, Lois hadn't been here.

And, as he'd realised in about the first thirty seconds after saying 'bye' to her as she'd rushed towards the elevator, without her, he felt lost.

Which was ridiculous.

But there it was. Without Lois, he felt lost. Incomplete. Hollow. Aimless.

And then, adding further confusion, there was Mayson.

Mayson, who was intelligent and pretty and clearly attracted to him. She was a nice woman – but a nice woman with one critical flaw.

She wasn't Lois.

A few hours after Lois had left, Mayson had come to the Planet and offered to make a meal for him. Clark hadn't been able to find a polite way to refuse her offer, so she had arrived at his apartment that evening loaded with food, which she had cooked more than competently. She'd left her new baking pan on his stove.

The evening had gone well enough. She had asked about his life and freely given information about hers. When she had left, she had kissed him on the mouth and it hadn't been entirely unpleasant.

But she wasn't Lois.

Mayson had come to the Planet two days later, and Clark had feared that the primary reason for her visit was to prod him into asking her out on a date. A real date — to a restaurant or a movie. He hadn't obliged, because spending time with one woman when his mind was completely engrossed with someone else didn't seem like the right thing to do. And he didn't want Mayson to think there was a possibility of anything beyond friendship with him.

There wasn't. She wasn't Lois.

But, somehow – Clark was still unsure exactly how it had eventuated – she had come to his apartment again and he had cooked for her. As he'd prepared the food, he'd allowed himself to indulge in the fantasy that it was Lois who was about to knock on his door. Then, because he'd felt guilty, he'd tried to be extra nice to Mayson as they'd spent the evening together.

Which meant her goodnight kiss had lingered – and he'd gotten the impression that if he'd pushed for more, she would have eagerly complied.

But, she wasn't Lois.

So, he had broken away and told Mayson he was tired. She had left rather abruptly after that, but not before Clark had cringed at the disappointment so evident in her face.

The next morning, his shower — and his musings about Lois — had been interrupted by a knock on his door. He'd looked through the walls, seen Mayson standing there, supersped through the rest of his preparations, and opened the door.

She'd said she wanted to buy him breakfast to thank him the wonderful meal the previous evening. Clark had invited her in — primarily to give himself a few moments to try to conjure an excuse. He'd left her in the living room and gone to his bedroom, ostensibly to straighten his tie, and decided that breakfast might be the perfect opportunity to inform Mayson he could never love her romantically.

Problem was, he knew how that felt.

Lois. The park. *I have been in love with you for a long time. You must have known.*

And her reply, shredding his heart: *I do love you, but only as*

a friend.

Who would have thought being a ‘friend’ could cause such anguish?

As Clark had eaten breakfast with Mayson, he’d tried. He had. But his attempt to tell her gently had been interrupted by a call for Superman and then, within moments of him returning to the table, terminated by a call from Perry ordering Clark to chase up the story of the rescue.

He’d paid for breakfast and hurried off, the words still unsaid.

That night, he’d spent the evening patrolling the dark skies above Metropolis, only returning to his apartment long after midnight. A note had been pushed under his door: *Clark, Sorry to have missed you. Thanks for the lovely breakfast. I have two tickets for The Merry Widow on Friday night. Care to join me? Mayson.*

But by Friday night, Lois would be back in Metropolis.

And he couldn’t keep on seeing Mayson. It wasn’t fair to her. He had to tell her the truth.

It was almost ten o’clock when Clark arrived at his apartment door, having pledged to himself that the very next time he saw Mayson, he would tell her he didn’t want to date her.

That sounded so harsh. There had to be better words. Kinder words. But Clark couldn’t find them.

As he inserted the key, he heard footsteps behind him and turned. It was his neighbour, cradling her striped ginger cat in her arms. “Hello, Mrs McCreadie,” he said, hoping he didn’t sound as relieved as he felt. “Have you been out?”

“Hello, Clark,” she said in a much more sombre tone than her usual cheery greeting. “Pannikin is unwell, so I took her to the vet.”

“Nothing serious, I hope,” Clark said, reaching over to stroke the top of Pannikin’s head.

“The vet is very concerned,” she said. “Tonight is critical. If Pannikin is still with us tomorrow morning, she might make it.”

“Oh, no,” Clark said, noticing that the cat did indeed look lethargic and its coat lacklustre.

“The vet wanted Pannikin to stay at the clinic, but I know she would be distressed if I left her alone.” Mrs McCreadie lovingly scratched behind the cat’s ears. “I told the vet I’ll stay up with her the whole night and watch over her.”

“She’s fortunate to have such a dedicated owner,” Clark said.

“I would do anything for Pannikin. She’s been with me since before I came to Metropolis.”

“I hope she’s feeling much better by the morning,” Clark said.

“Thank you.” Mrs McCreadie looked around as if expecting someone else to materialise from the darkness. Clark stifled the urge to check behind him for the lurking presence of Mayson. “You’re home late,” his neighbour commented. “Did you go out for a meal?”

“No,” he said. “I’ve only just finished at the Planet.” He didn’t add that he had deliberately delayed coming home in the hope of avoiding both Mayson and a long evening alone counting down the minutes until he would see Lois again.

“Are you expecting company?”

“Nothing planned.”

Mrs McCreadie smiled and patted his arm. “Perhaps you’ll get a nice little surprise then.”

After the regularity of her visits this week, Mayson appearing on his doorstep would hardly constitute a surprise. Not knowing what to say, Clark gave a plastic smile.

“I’ll let you go,” his neighbour said. “I need to get Pannikin settled, and I’m sure you’ll want to get ready. Just in case someone decides to pay you a visit.”

She turned and waddled towards the steps that led up to her second-floor apartment.

Unable to suppress his tenuous hope that Lois might drop in — just to tell him she was back — Clark quickly scanned the area outside his apartment. No Lois.

No Mayson, either.

With a sigh that was an incongruous mix of disappointment and relief, Clark entered his apartment and closed the door.

Mayson’s baking pan was still on his bench. He’d reminded her several times to take it, but after the aborted kiss, she’d picked up her bag and left quickly.

He wasn’t in love with Mayson.

He never would be.

Because he loved Lois.

And even though she didn’t love him — not in the way he wanted — he was nowhere near recovered enough to think about being with any other woman.

He doubted he ever would be.

He was probably more in love with Lois than he had been the day in the park when he had offered her his heart. His love. His lifetime of devotion.

She hadn’t wanted him. Not like that.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs, a sound came from his bedroom. A footstep. Clark snapped around, his heart plummeting. Mayson was here? Waiting for him? In his bedroom?

He reached to slide his glasses down his nose, but before he’d looked through the wall, a woman appeared in the doorway.

It wasn’t Mayson.

“Lana?” Clark gasped. “What are you doing here?”

She stepped up to him, wearing his black leather jacket. “Clark,” she said. “Is that any way to greet your best friend?”

She wasn’t his best friend. That place in his life belonged to Lois. Pushing that thought aside, Clark tried to pull his face to a smile of welcome. “You surprised me,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting you. I —”

Lana swept him into an embrace that seemed overdone for someone he hadn’t seen in almost two years.

“I gave up waiting for you to return to Smallville, Clark,” Lana said as she backed away — although her hands remained attached to his upper arms. “I know you came for the Corn Festival last year, but I was touring Europe, so we missed each other.”

Actually, Clark hadn’t missed her at all — because Lois had been there — but now didn’t seem the appropriate moment to disclose that information.

“I had a wonderful time in Europe, Clark,” Lana continued. “I met so many amazing people. The fashion was incredible.”

She released his arms, spread his jacket wide, and twirled around, causing her dress to billow out from her body. “I got this little number in a divine store in Paris. Do you like it? It’s Prada.”

He passed a token glance over her dress and gave a terse nod.

“And I got my hair styled at the premier salon in Paris,” she said, running her fingers through her hair.

“It’s shorter,” Clark managed. “And darker.”

“Yes. Blondes are so ... vapid.”

“They are?”

“But, I’m back home now,” Lana said with a little squeal and an accompanying jump of excitement. “So we can make up for lost time.”

“How did you get in here?” Clark asked, noting that she hadn’t just come into his apartment, but had gone through his closet, as well.

He had tried to smooth any trace of accusation from his tone, but Lana’s fleeting scowl assured him he had failed. “Clark,” she said. “You might think you’ve become proficient at the big city reporter charade, but you’re still a Smallville boy at heart.”

“How did you —”

“The key was under the mat. Just like in Smallville.”

“How did you know this is my apartment?”

“As you never bothered to send me even a Christmas card, I had to ask your parents for your address.”

A stream of questions jostled through Clark’s mind. How long are you staying? What do you want? Why are you here? Summoning every ounce of the good manners his mother had instilled in him, he instead asked, “Would you like a drink? Coffee? Tea?”

“Not now,” Lana said, impatience crusting her words. “I have a restaurant booked. One of the best in Metropolis, according to the review. Table for two. We’re over an hour late because of your tardiness, but at the prices they charge, I’m sure they’ll be able to fit us in somewhere.”

“Lana ...”

“Yes, Clark?” There was a hard edge to her question — a tone Clark remembered too well.

“You didn’t tell me you were coming,” he said, trying to sound reasonable. “I’ve been working all day. It’s after ten o’clock.”

Lana moved closer again, and Clark resisted the impulse to step back. “You don’t want to go to the restaurant?” she demanded. “I’ve come all this way to see you, and it’s too much trouble to take me out for a meal?”

Clark could feel himself being jammed into a figurative corner. “Lana, you should have called me. You should have told me you were coming.”

“Do you have plans with someone else?”

“Not exactly.”

She strode to his phone, seized the handset, and held it towards him. “Whatever your ‘not exactly’ plans are, you can call and cancel.”

He didn’t have plans — only vague notions that he really needed to speak with Mayson and a simmering question about whether calling Lois to check she was home safely was a good idea. “I told you,” he said. “I don’t have concrete plans.”

Lana smacked the handset onto the table, leaving the phone off the hook. “Then what are we waiting for?”

“I’ve already eaten,” Clark said — which was true. He’d flown to Rome for a pizza. He gestured to his charcoal jacket and navy pants. “I’d need to change my clothes. I —”

Lana eyed him as if she were seeing him for the first time. Her upper lip curled in distaste. “You’re certainly right about that,” she said. “Who chose *that* outfit?”

Clark brushed at his tie. It was crimson and — he’d thought — a perfect match for his shirt.

Lana gingerly clamped the end of his tie between her forefinger and thumb. “What is that splattered on it?” she asked. “Something you ate for breakfast?”

Clark hastily looked down. There was nothing on his tie. Nothing that wasn’t supposed to be there. “It’s a flower,” he said.

Lana’s pout smoothed to a smile. She released his tie and stroked it into place against his shirt. “If you’re going to be taking off any clothes, perhaps we could skip dinner and move straight to the dessert,” she suggested in a low throaty voice that whipped panic through his stomach.

“Dessert?” he croaked, pretending he didn’t understand.

She slid right up to him. Her arms surrounded his neck. Her body rasped against his. Her mouth commandeered his, her tongue tapped on his zipped-up lips.

Clark placed his hands on her waist, trying to put some distance between them. Her lower body moved, but her upper body — and her mouth — remained firmly stuck to him.

Clark jerked his head backwards. “Lana,” he said, somehow managing to overcome the temptation to wipe his mouth.

Lana looked at him with a practiced mix of surprise and hurt. “What’s wrong, Clark?” she asked in a little-girl voice that scratched annoyance through his confusion.

“We broke up nearly a decade ago,” he said. “And we haven’t seen each other since I came to Metropolis.”

“I know you were devastated when I said we needed to take a break from each other,” Lana said. “But we’ve both had time to grow up; to find out who we really are. Now is the ideal time to get back together. We’re perfect for each other.”

Actually, ‘relieved’ had been closer to the truth than ‘devastated’. “But Lana, I ...”

Her hard eyes ran over his face. “Is there someone else?” It sounded like an accusation.

“Lana, we’ve both moved on. Made new friends. We have different lives now.”

“Is there someone else?” she said with icy definition dripping from each individual word.

“Yes.”

“That’s OK, Clark. I’m sure she’ll understand.”

“Understand what?”

“I’m moving to Metropolis.”

“You are?” Clark gasped. “I mean ... when did you decide this?”

Her hand settled on his chest, straddling his tie. “When I realised I am still in love with you, it was the obvious decision. We have to be together, Clark. We share so much history. We know things about each other. Things no one else —”

Her impassioned torrent of words was chopped off by a sharp knock at the door. Clark tilted his head to look over his glasses and suppressed his groan.

It was Mayson.

At least she wasn’t toting a bag of groceries.

“You have company,” Lana said in much the same tone she might have used to announce he had an infestation of rats. “You said you didn’t have plans.”

“I don’t,” Clark said. “But —”

“Whoever it is, get rid of her. We have important things to discuss.”

The knock sounded again, and feeling helpless to avoid the avalanche that was about to dump on his life, Clark went to his door. “Hi, Mayson,” he said after he’d opened it.

“Hi, Clark.” She stepped past him, although he hadn’t actually moved aside.

He didn’t shut his door. When he turned, Mayson and Lana were facing each other like two alley cats in dispute over a piece of meat.

Clark had always considered himself a novice when dealing with women, but he would have had to be completely clueless to have missed that he was the most likely candidate to be the piece of meat.

And, from the expressions on their faces, Mayson and Lana had taken an instant dislike to each other.

“Mayson Drake ... Lana Lang,” he said dutifully.

After a curt nod, Mayson pointedly turned her attention from Lana and centred it on Clark. “I have tickets for that show on Friday,” she said. “You never got back to me about coming.”

Lana chortled — loud and inelegant.

Clark ignored her. “I ... I’ve been busy,” he said. “Sorry.”

“I was wondering if you’d like to go out now,” Mayson said. “Get a hot chocolate. Or maybe a nightcap.”

Lana sidled between them, standing in front of Clark and facing Mayson. “Sorry, Miss Drake,” she said. “But Clark has plans with me. And he’ll be busy on Friday, too. And every other day you have in mind.”

Clark stepped out from behind her. “Lana,” he said firmly. “I can speak for myself.”

Lana whirled around. “But you won’t,” she said. “The fact that she’s still buzzing around, brandishing tickets to a show you have no interest in seeing with her makes it clear you’ve been tiptoeing around the truth.” Lana spun back to Mayson. “He’s not

interested in you,” she said. “I know Clark Kent. When he’s interested in a woman, she doesn’t have to chase him. He follows her around like a lost puppy.”

“I do not,” Clark proclaimed indignantly.

Lana patted his arm in a patronising gesture. Clark shoved his hands into his pockets and tucked his elbow against his side, out of her reach.

“So you see, Miss Drake,” Lana said with a sugary smile. “You’ve been wasting your time. Clark is with me. He was with me a long time before he met you, and he will be with me when you are nothing more than a grubby smudge on his memory.”

Mayson broke from her shocked speechlessness and turned to Clark. “Clark —”

Lana exploded. “You still don’t get it, do you?” she screamed. “You are —”

“Lana,” Clark said, pitching his voice low in an attempt to undercut her hysteria. “Don’t be so —”

Her anger turned on him as her fist bounced on his chest. “You’ve been cheating on me, Clark,” she shrieked. “Don’t deny it. I know exactly what has been happening behind my back.”

Clark lifted his hand in a feeble attempt to calm her. “Lana —”

“We had an agreement, Clark,” Lana wailed. “I trusted you when you said you loved me. I trusted you when you said you wanted to be with me forever. I gave myself to you, never thinking you’d treat me with such contempt.”

Clark felt a mesh of concern close around his throat, strangling him. He had never told Lana he loved her. He hadn’t loved her then, and he certainly didn’t love now. Could it be possible she really thought they had an agreement? Or was this an act, solely for Mayson’s benefit? “Lana, we didn’t —”

“You always pretend to be so pure and principled, Clark,” Lana screamed. “But you’re just like the rest. A woman with passably OK legs and a face that isn’t completely cringe-worthy slinks into your life and twitches her tight little butt at you, and you —”

Clark grasped Lana’s shoulders and tried to meet her wildly thrashing eyes. “Calm down, Lana,” he said, trying to sound firm despite keeping his volume low. “This isn’t helping.”

Her anger turned to tears. “You don’t understand, Clark,” she shrilled. “I love you. I need you.”

“Lana. We —”

“How could you, Clark?” she said, her question punctuated with loud sobs. “How could you break my heart?”

“Perhaps I should leave,” Mayson said.

In a split second, Lana shed all the trappings of hysteria and gave Clark a frosty look. “This isn’t how I was going to tell you, Clark,” she said, “but you’ve left me no choice.”

She couldn’t know his secret. Could she? They’d been together for a little under a year — a year when he’d still been adapting to his strange powers. “Lana —”

“I’m pregnant, Clark,” Lana said. “With your child.”

Part 2

Lois Lane entered her apartment, dumped her suitcase on the floor, and collapsed onto her sofa, expelling a gush of relief that she was home.

It had been the most draining week of her life.

It had been like being forced to watch a movie that opened with the main character in a mire of trouble, moved on to give excruciating detail of all the previous events that had led to her current predicament, and then finished without the slightest attempt to offer a resolution or even a breath of hope for recovery.

Lois had spent the days caught in the web of her mother’s alcohol-soaked animosity and despair.

She’d spent the nights snagged between disturbing dreams and awakened memories of years passed.

But the scariest thing of all had been the chilling insight that,

in so many ways, Lois was travelling the exact same path that had delivered Ellen Lane into rehabilitation, isolated, angry, and utterly dispirited.

Lois had perfected the art of building walls to keep the rest of the world at bay. She knew they called her ‘Mad Dog’ behind her back, just as surely as she knew she would prefer they believe her to be cold and ruthless rather than risk anyone seeing the loneliness that saturated her soul.

After bidding her mother goodbye — a quick kiss to a stony cheek and a tentative, unacknowledged smile — Lois had left the rehab centre feeling as if she were escaping from a prison.

As she had begun the long drive home, she had made her decision.

She was going to change.

She was.

She was going to stop building the walls. She was even going to try to allow a few cracks to appear in the ones that were already there. She was going to try to be open and honest with the important people in her life.

She was not going to let pride and fear fester to rancid bitterness and condemn her to a life lived alone.

Even if ...

Lois gulped down a sob.

Even if her epiphany had come too late to save her from her biggest mistake.

Clark’s eyes dropped from Lana’s face to sweep over her body as his lower jaw hung like a snapped twig. “But,” he spluttered. “We didn’t —”

“I know we didn’t plan it, Clark, darling,” Lana said with a gushy smile. “But these things happen. And now, you’re going to be a daddy.”

“But —”

Lana cut across his protest and turned to Mayson, opening wide the fronts of Clark’s jacket to reveal a slight protrusion under her dress. “So you see, Miss Drake, there can be no future to your little dalliance with Clark. He has responsibilities now. Responsibilities that don’t include you.”

Mayson’s gaze — full of shock and condemnation — fell on Clark. “Is it true?” she asked.

“No, it’s not —”

As the words of denial left his mouth, Lana’s temper erupted. She thumped his arm. “No!” she screamed. “No! I won’t let you do this to me. You’re a hateful, unscrupulous, cheating lowlife, Clark Kent, and I wish I’d never met you.”

“Clark?” Mayson said in clear expectation of an answer.

Deciding another denial was only going to exacerbate Lana’s anger, Clark opted instead to try to telegraph his concern regarding her behaviour. “Mayson, would you mind?” he asked desperately. “I think Lana and I need to talk this out in private.”

Mayson nodded tautly, her heels tapping a curt rhythm as she moved to the door. Once there, she turned. “I hope you’re happy together,” she said, although it seemed to Clark that her good wishes crackled with scorn.

“Of course we’ll be happy together,” Lana said, suddenly calm again. “Clark and I will be getting married and giving our baby a proper family.”

Mayson pinned Clark with her eyes, waiting for him to speak, but his tongue felt cleaved to the roof of his mouth.

After a moment that had seemed to stretch forever, Mayson nodded brusquely and strode through the door, slamming it behind her.

“Mayson,” Clark called after her. He broke away from Lana and opened the still-vibrating door. “Mayson!”

She continued hurrying away from him, but his superhearing picked up the muffled sound of her sobs.

He sprinted to her. “Mayson!” He passed her and cautiously

put out his hand, making sure he didn't contact her. "Mayson," he said, looking into her tear-stained cheeks. "I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she cried.

"I didn't know Lana was coming tonight."

"At least I understand why you could never be honest with me," Mayson said. She laughed, a harsh and angry sound. "Why you kept stringing me along without ever explicitly stating how you felt. You must have been secretly mocking me the whole time. Did you joke about me to your —"

"No," Clark said quickly. "I wasn't laughing at you. I —"

"Then why didn't you tell me there was someone else?"

Why hadn't he? Why hadn't he come right out and said he was in love with Lois? "This ..." He gestured feebly towards the door of his apartment. "This is not what it looks like."

Mayson dragged in a shuddery breath. "It looks like a man lapping up one woman's attention while trying to wriggle out of his responsibilities to another woman."

"It's not true," Clark stated. "If Lana is pregnant, the baby isn't mine."

Mayson's eyes narrowed with scorn. "Why would she lie about it?"

"I don't know," Clark said. "Her behaviour is ... She's worrying me."

"Have you been dating her?"

"I haven't seen her since I moved to Metropolis over a year ago," Clark said, keeping his voice low and calm. "I don't know why she came here. I don't understand why she's saying those things about us."

"Then why didn't you tell her that?"

"I tried to," Clark said in his own defence. "And I'll continue to try to make her see reason. But I thought it might be easier if we were alone."

"We were alone, Clark," Mayson said bitterly. "We've been alone on quite a few occasions this past week, but you never got around the telling me the truth."

"It's not my child," Clark declared.

"I don't mean that," Mayson snapped. "I mean the fact that you will never be in love with me."

On that point, he deserved her resentment. "I didn't know how to tell you," he admitted.

"You had your chance to deny her claims. But you just stood there and hoped everything would magically fix itself. Just like you did with me."

He *had* denied Lana's claims. "Mayson," Clark said. "You saw her. She's not thinking straight. She's unstable."

"I thought you were a better man than to stoop to questioning a woman's mental state," Mayson said. "I thought you'd face your responsibilities."

Mayson didn't believe him. Clark didn't know what to say.

"Don't worry, I understand," Mayson said. "I finally understand. I won't bother you again." A tear escaped from her left eye and skittered down her cheek. Clark reached for her arm. She swung at his hand and swiped him away. "Don't touch me," she cried. "Don't ever come near me again."

She spun around and darted away. Clark watched her go as regret scorched his conscience.

He should have told her before now. In trying to avoid hurting her, he had compounded her humiliation.

But he couldn't have predicted that Lana would suddenly reappear in his life.

And he certainly couldn't have predicted her allegation that he was the father of her child.

Clark turned and trudged back to his apartment.

He had to be direct with Lana.

He had to firm but gentle.

He didn't love her. He never would.

And he was *not* the child's father.

Clark stepped through the door to his apartment and closed it. Lana was sitting on the sofa, thumbing through his TV guide. He went over to her and crouched beside her. "Lana?" he said. "Are you all right?"

She looked up and gave him a glittery smile. "Now we have the whole evening together," she said brightly.

"I didn't make any promises to you," Clark said. "We broke up, we went to different colleges, we travelled separately, I moved to Metropolis; we both knew our relationship was over."

She shook her head as if he were a small child who had made a silly mistake. "We are meant to be together, Clark. We have a bond — a bond that can never be broken. We share secrets — things no one else knows about us."

Secrets? Clark searched her face as icy fingers of fear slithered through his stomach. What was Lana trying to tell him?

She gripped his arm, under his jacket, just above his wrist. He balled his hand into a fist to stop himself from drawing away. "It's OK, Clark," she said. "I won't tell your parents about you sowing some wild oats with that blonde hussy."

"We didn't —"

Her fingernails dug into his arm. "Don't lie to me, Clark," Lana said in a cold voice. "I may be able to overlook past indiscretions, but I will not tolerate being treated like a fool. You are never to see her again."

Clark figured that would suit Mayson just fine. "What do you want, Lana?" he said. "Why are you here?"

"I've already told you what I want. And I'm here to take what is mine."

He had to make a stand. "Lana, I don't love you."

"You'll learn to love me again," she said. "You'll see that this is right for all three of us." She draped her other hand around his neck. "So? The restaurant? Or a quiet night in? You choose, darling."

"Lana, you know the baby isn't mine. I haven't seen you for over a year."

"It's yours now," she chirped.

"Lana, that's not how it works. You need help. And support. Have you told your parents? What about the father? Does he know you're pregnant?"

"I've chosen you to be the baby's father," Lana said with a smile. "I thought you would be honoured, Clark."

"I ... I am honoured that you think I would be a good father to your child," Clark said. "But it's not what I want."

She held his eyes for a long moment. "You've always wanted a family, Clark."

"Yes, but —"

"This is your only chance. You're a smart boy. Take it."

He had to be direct. Brutal, even. "I'm in love with someone else."

"The dim-witted blonde?"

Clark shook his head. "No. Someone else."

"Well, clearly she isn't in love with you or she would have stopped that scrawny woman from hanging around you like a cat in heat." Lana hooked her hand further around his neck. "But I want you, Clark. The baby and me — we want you. We are going to give you the family you've always dreamed of having."

Clark clasped her forearm and removed her hand from his neck as he straightened to a standing position. "I'll call you a cab, Lana," he said, looking around for her suitcase. "You can go back to your hotel, and we'll talk about this tomorrow —"

"But Clark, I'm staying here," Lana said with lilted surprise. "Why would I book into a hotel when you have room for me here?"

"You are not —"

Lana leapt from the sofa, her hand gripped his jaw like a vice, and her eyes drilled into his as her face filled his vision. "You forget who I am," she said. "You forget that I knew you before

you became a high-flying city reporter.”

Clark tried to smother his gasp. “Wh...what do you mean?” he asked as evenly as he could.

Her hand slipped away, but the unspoken threat hovered like smog. “I want you to accept my child as yours. I want you to marry me and help me raise the baby. And I’m willing to do whatever it takes to get what I want.”

Alarm rattled through Clark. Had she guessed the connection between the at-times-inexplicable young man she had known in Smallville and Metropolis’s superhero? “What are you talking about Lana?” he asked.

Her smile curdled. “We both know what I’m talking about, Clark. You’re not the man you pretend to be, and I imagine you *really* don’t want that — quite sensitive — information made public.”

While he was still dredging through his mind for a suitable response, it came.

The sound that — in so many ways — governed his life.

A cry for help. Someone needed Superman.

“Lana,” he said, snatching at the first thought that entered his head. “I have to go out. My editor, Mr White, gave me a story today, and he wants me to have the research done by tomorrow.”

Lana stared at him for a long moment, as if carefully measuring his words. “OK,” she said.

“OK?” he gasped.

“Of course, it’s OK. I expect there are things you need to see to — that other woman, for instance. You need to tell her it’s over between you. You need to inform your editor that you will be moving back to Smallville. And I’m sure you’re very eager to announce to your friends that you’re going to be a father and invite them over to meet your fiancée.”

The cry for help — the piercing voice of a frightened young child — came again, audible only to him. “I ... I have to go,” he said.

Lana reached up to kiss his cheek. “Don’t hurry,” she said. “I have some unpacking to do. I didn’t bring any extra clothes, because I’m sure there are hundreds of fashion stores in Metropolis and I know you’ll want to provide for your wife. I had to bring this beautiful dress, of course. It’s my favourite. And I brought all my skin care products from France, too. I simply couldn’t be seen by anyone if I didn’t have them.”

Clark took her elbow and led her into his bedroom. “The bathroom is through there,” he said. “Make yourself at home.”

She smiled sweetly. “Of course, I will, darling. I *am* at home.”

Clark scuttled away. Once back in the living room, he looked through the wall and saw Lana heading into the bathroom. He spun into the Suit and flew out of the balcony door and into the Metropolis night sky.

It took less than ten minutes for Superman to extricate the child from the depths of the disused drain. He handed the wet, cold, and shaken youngster to the waiting mother, acknowledged her sobbed thanks, quickly answered a few questions from the gathered journalists, and flew away.

He floated above his apartment and looked down into it.

Lana had emptied his bathroom cabinet and was arranging an army of perfume bottles and makeup tubes on the shelves.

She was still wearing his leather jacket — a small detail that irritated him far more than was warranted. Somehow, it seemed ominously representative of her attempt to take over his life.

What was he going to do now?

There seemed little to be gained from confronting Lana again. She’d always been domineering and prone to emotionally charged outbursts when she didn’t get her own way, but he’d sensed something different in her tonight.

Something ... irrational. Erratic. Unsettling.

And that was particularly disconcerting if her thinly veiled

threat to expose secrets referred to Superman’s identity.

Could she possibly know?

Clark thought back ... back to the year when he’d started a relationship with the bright hope that it could lead to the fulfilment of his dreams. The first few months had been good. He’d been so happy to have a girlfriend that he had been compliant putty in Lana’s hands — in everything except the physical side of their relationship. He’d long before decided that he wasn’t going to be intimate with a woman unless he trusted her enough to be completely honest with her.

And, even then, he’d been a long way from feeling right about trusting Lana with the truth.

But could she have figured it out? Could she have wondered about his occasional slips? His lame excuses? The unexplainable — a hay bale catching fire — that always seemed to happen in his presence?

When Superman had appeared in the skies of Metropolis, had she recognised him as being the clumsy teenager she had dated?

As Clark watched her, Lana positioned and then re-positioned her possessions in his cabinet. What did she know? What had she guessed? And how would she use it?

If only his superpowers included the ability to read minds.

She turned around and left the bathroom, standing at the foot of his bed and gazing around the room.

Before Clark could stop himself, he x-rayed her abdomen and saw it. *Him*. A tiny baby boy floating inside his mother’s womb, oblivious to the turmoil happening around him.

Clark switched off his extra vision and shook his head, trying to delete the stolen image from his mind.

What was he going to do?

Lois.

His longing for her welled up, absorbing his confusion, his anxiety, and his sense of being buried under an overwhelming mountain of difficulties.

He needed her.

But there was a small detail he needed to deal with first.

Clark waited a couple of minutes until Lana walked into his kitchen and began inspecting the contents of the cupboards. Then, he swished through his bedroom, clearing the Suits from the hidden compartment in his closet and depositing them in a never-used boiler room in the basement of the building.

Moments later, he was outside Lois’s window.

Her light was on. She was home!

He *had* to see her.

She would never know, but he needed her to be his harbour in the midst of the storm.

He gently tapped on the glass.

The curtain was swept back, and she was there. With a smile that stopped his breath, she opened the window, and he stepped into her apartment.

“Superman,” she said.

Clark folded his arms across his chest and hoped he could command his voice to the deep, slightly aloof superhero tone. “I’m just making sure you got home safely,” he said, realising his scant explanation was an insult to the vast array of his feelings for Lois Lane.

How glad he was to be with her again.

How, with one smile, she could make everything else fade to obscurity.

“I did,” she said.

“How was your time away?” he asked.

She shrugged, and he detected a trace of despondency in her gesture, making him yearn to enclose her in his arms and hold her until the shadows had dissolved.

He took a step closer and risked a fleeting touch to her shoulder. “You look tired,” he said. Wanting to lighten the moment, he added, “It must have been some vacation.”

She didn't reply immediately, and Clark wondered if she were debating whether to reveal her reasons for needing to leave Metropolis so suddenly. "It wasn't a vacation," she said.

"Oh," she said, not trying to hide his concern. "Is everything all right?"

"Mom's in rehab," she said. "It was ... difficult."

Clark tensed his arms to keep them from reaching for her.

"Aw, Lois," he said. "I'm so sorry."

"I think she has given up," Lois said bleakly. "I don't think she can see any reason to put in the effort to get well again."

"She has you." The words were out before he could apply the Superman filter.

Lois smiled in response, but it wasn't strong enough to dissolve her gloomy mood.

Clark's longing to hold her intensified. He tried to touch her with words. "Maybe your mom didn't say so, but I'm sure you being there would have meant a lot."

Lois picked up a sweater from the back of her sofa, folded it, and replaced it in exactly the same place. "Have you seen Clark?" she asked, her eyes not meeting his.

"He got the story from yesterday's attempted robbery at the art gallery," Superman said.

"I read it," she said. "It was good."

"Not as good as when he works with you."

Her smile made another appearance, stronger this time. Its warmth permeated his heart. "I won't tell him you said that," she said.

He smiled — as much as he ever allowed Superman to smile. "You don't need to tell him," he said. "Clark knows how fortunate he is to be your partner."

She smiled again, and Clark desperately wanted to ask if she had missed anything about Metropolis. If she had missed Clark at all. Had she thought about him? Had she considered telling him about her concern for her mom? Was she looking forward to seeing him again tomorrow?

There was no way to ask any of those questions without risk of arousing the famous Lois Lane inquisitiveness, so Clark turned towards her window. "I should be going," he said. "I'm glad you're home safely."

"Thanks for dropping by," she said.

"If I can do anything to help ... with your mom ..."

Her smile was a mix of appreciation and gentle humour. "Thank you, Superman," she said. "But I didn't realise your powers included fixing a broken spirit."

He was willing to try. For Lois, he was willing to try anything. "I wish they did," he said.

"You should go," she said with a fleeting touch to his elbow. "I'm tired, and there's an entire city out there needing its hero."

He stepped onto the ledge. "See you around," he said, meaning, *See you tomorrow morning*.

As Clark flew out of the window, the oasis of Lois's presence deserted him, and his troubles settled like a concrete shroud around his shoulders. What would happen if Lois found out about Lana's claims? What would she think of him then? Would he get the opportunity to tell his side? And if he did, would she believe him?

Or would Lois think he had been seeing Lana in secret? Had fathered a child with her? And was now trying to worm out of his obligations?

Mayson hadn't believed him.

He would hate it if Lois doubted him.

He wished he could go back to her apartment — as Clark. He wished he could confide in her.

Everything.

I never stopped loving you. I'm Superman. I'm in trouble. I need you. Would you stand by me and help me through this? I know I'll be OK ... if you believe in me.

But he couldn't. They'd made an agreement. They were friends. Friends and reporting partners. Nothing more.

He couldn't go back to Lois, and he certainly didn't want to be with Lana right now.

So, after a quick patrol of the streets, Clark turned west and flew to Smallville.

Lois picked up her phone but paused before dialling.

Clark.

Thoughts of him had been her constant companion during her time away from Metropolis.

She had missed him. Missed all those little facets of his personality that were so natural, it was easy to take them for granted — his friendship, his unwavering loyalty, his steadfast support, his good-natured teasing.

His smile.

She had even missed his flashy ties.

Lois quickly punched in the familiar number and waited, trying to calm her quivery eagerness to hear his voice.

His line was busy.

She replaced the phone as disappointment swept over her.

Perhaps he was calling his parents.

If she waited a few minutes ...

Lois glanced to her watch. Ten-fifty-seven. No, she decided. If she waited a few minutes, it would be after eleven o'clock, and that was too late for a hi-how-are-you call.

With a sigh, she checked the locks, and turned out the lights, still thinking about Clark.

Had he had a good week? Had he thought about her?

If he had missed her, had he missed his partner? Or his friend?

Perhaps it would be possible to have breakfast with him. She could call tomorrow morning and ask him to help her get up to speed with current stories. Encouraged by her idea, Lois set her alarm forty minutes earlier than was strictly necessary and went into the bathroom for a shower.

Clark landed quietly on the back doorstep of his parents' farmhouse, spun into his regular clothes, and let himself into their kitchen. They were both at the table, drinking late-night cups of tea.

His mom looked up with a smile. "Clark," she greeted.

"Come and join us." Her smile collapsed as he sat at the table.

"What's wrong, honey? Is it Lois?"

"Have you seen Lana Lang recently?"

"Yes," his mom said with surprise. "She came by a few days ago."

"Did she ask about me?"

"She said she was going to Metropolis for a few days and she would like to contact you."

"Contact me?" Clark said. That was one way to describe her attempt to ravage his world.

"Did she?" his mom asked. "Contact you?"

He nodded. "When I got home tonight, she was already there. She'd let herself into my apartment."

"Did she seem all right?" his dad said.

"She was ..." Clark searched for words that wouldn't sound insulting. "... more."

"More?" Jonathan echoed.

"More single-minded. More headstrong. More intractable. More incapable of accepting anything that ran contrary to her plans."

"What did she want, son?" his dad asked.

Even though he knew his parents would believe him, Clark felt a strange reluctance to answer that question. "Did she tell you she's pregnant?"

Hesitant smiles pushed through his parents' expressions of

shock. “Pregnant?” Martha said.

Clark nodded grimly.

“Was there any particular reason she wanted to see you?” his dad asked.

Something about his father’s tone made Clark think his reply wouldn’t be a complete surprise to his parents. “Yes,” he said. “She announced to a friend of mine that I am the father of her baby.”

“Oh no, Clark,” his mom breathed.

“I’m not the father,” Clark said quickly, his eyes darting between his parents as he tried to read their reaction to his statement. “Until tonight, I hadn’t seen her since I left Smallville.”

“That’s what we thought,” his dad said.

“Did she say anything to you?” Clark asked, suddenly horrified that Lana might have broadcast her announcement to the Smallville locals.

“Nothing specific,” his mom replied. “She said she expected to be seeing a lot more of us. She said she had been very confused when she went to Europe but was much clearer now about what she wanted. She kept smiling and winking as if she were trying to convey something she wasn’t prepared to say outright.”

“She has our future planned,” Clark said dismally. “She says we are getting married and I am going to be the child’s father.”

“But surely — once your friend had gone — Lana couldn’t have kept on insisting you are the father,” Jonathan said. “She must know that you aren’t.”

“That’s the bit that has me really worried,” Clark said. “When I said I wasn’t going to marry her, she threatened to go public with what she called ‘sensitive information’ about me.”

The colour drained from his mom’s cheeks. “Aw, Clark,” she said.

“Do you think she could know?” he asked.

His parents glanced at each other, but neither spoke for a long moment. “She could, I guess,” his dad said.

“Superman has been around for over a year now,” Clark said. “Why has she waited this long to say something?”

Even as he asked the question, the answer became obvious. Now, she was pregnant. Alone. Feeling vulnerable. She needed someone.

“Have you decided what you are going to do?” his dad asked.

“I don’t love her,” Clark said forlornly. “I won’t ever love her.”

“Then you have to tell her that,” his mom said.

“I did.”

“What did she say?”

“That I will learn to love her again.”

“You need to be honest, son,” his dad said. “You can’t marry a woman you don’t love. You can’t accept a child that isn’t yours. You can’t allow yourself to be blackmailed.”

“The baby is a boy,” Clark admitted, feeling ashamed of his impetuosity now. “I looked.”

“And that boy has a father,” Martha said, patting his arm.

“His parents need to work out what is best for him.”

“I’ve always wanted a family,” Clark said.

“But not this way,” his mother said firmly. “No marriage can work when one person has been coerced into it.”

“I know,” Clark said, thinking how different he would feel if it were Lois who was pregnant and it was his child. He would be rejoicing.

But she didn’t love him. She had wanted to marry Luthor.

Seeing the worry lining his parents’ faces, Clark dragged himself from his thoughts of Lois. “I’ll find a way to talk to Lana,” he said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. “She can’t really believe that she can choose a man and demand he be a father to her child.”

“Suggest she comes back to Smallville and talks to her parents,” his mom said. “I know Ray and Millie will want to help her.”

“I should get back,” Clark said as he stood. “I don’t think she should be alone for too long.”

His mom tried to rally him with a hopeful smile. “Perhaps Lana will be seeing things more rationally after some time to think,” she said.

His parents hugged him, murmuring words of support. Clark left the warmth of their kitchen, spun into the Suit, and flew back to Metropolis, facing the prospect of spending the night on his sofa and knowing that, unpalatable as that was, it was preferable to sharing his bed with a woman he didn’t love.

He flew over the city, checking the usual trouble spots. He saw two young men, circling each other in what looked like the prelude to a fight. He landed between them. They froze, and then both began shouting accusations at the other.

When their cries had died down, Superman told them to stop acting like spoiled children and to go home before someone did something stupid.

To his surprise, one, and then the other, turned and walked away.

Clark waited until they were out of sight and then zoomed back into the air.

Everything seemed quiet. Satisfied, he turned for home.

He landed on the balcony and stopped abruptly.

There were three men in his apartment.

One was Bill Henderson. One was Detective Wolfe of the homicide squad. The third was in a police uniform, someone Clark didn’t know personally, who was stationed at the door.

Clark slipped into the room. All three of them looked up at him.

“Superman,” Henderson said, moving aside. “You heard.”

“Heard what?” Clark’s gaze was drawn to where a body was crumpled at the bottom of the stairs. He recognised her instantly. It was Mayson Drake, her blonde hair streaked with rivers of red. “Mayson?” he said, taking a hesitant step forward. “Ms Drake?”

“Stop!”

Superman froze at Wolfe’s cry. “We have cleared this walkway,” he said, indicating a path from the front door to where he and Henderson stood like sentinels over Mayson’s unmoving form. “Don’t contaminate the evidence.”

Superman rose a foot from the ground and floated over to the men, being careful to land in the designated area.

He crouched beside Mayson, already knowing there was nothing anyone could do to help her.

A pungent blend of shock and sorrow flooded through him. After taking a moment to recapture his Superman composure, Clark stood and faced the three men. “Was she dead when you arrived?”

Henderson nodded, but Wolfe fired a question. “Do you know the whereabouts of Clark Kent?” he said.

“No. I’ve been out —” Clark stopped as sharp realisation pummelled him. “Clark?” he said.

“We’re not jumping to any conclusions,” Henderson said quickly.

Wolfe shot his colleague a meaningful glance. “We want to question Kent,” he said. “If you know where he is, you should strongly advise him to give himself up.”

“Give himself up?” Clark gasped. “You think *Clark* did this?” Wolfe nodded grimly. “As I see it, he’s about three questions away from being charged with murder.”

Part 3

Clark tore his eyes from the three police officers, his gaze drawn back to his fallen friend.

She’d been alive. In his apartment. Talking. Planning for a future — both short and long term. A future that had been

violently ripped from her.

She'd been alive. Young. Vibrant. Capable of feeling emotions.

She'd been upset when she'd left his apartment. She'd arrived with hope and anticipation — excited about the tickets to the show — and had left with pain and disappointment.

That had been his fault. He should have told her. He'd had numerous opportunities over the past week to tell her how he felt, but he'd failed every time.

A heavy coating of guilt draped over the sadness welling up from his soul.

Henderson cleared his throat. "Have you heard from Clark?" he asked.

Clark snatched his eyes from the face that would never smile again. "No. I was out patrolling, and I —"

"You and Kent are particular friends?" Wolfe barked.

Clark tried to cover his surprise at the blatant suspicion sparking off the detective's question. "I wouldn't say particular friends," he hedged.

"But you're close enough that you drop into his apartment?"

Feeling the need for an explanation, Clark said, "I rescued a little boy caught down a flood drain. The city seemed quiet."

"And you just happened to find yourself here?" Wolfe's question was fired like a bullet.

"Clark's a reporter. I —"

"So the rumours are true," Wolfe said.

"What rumours?"

"That you give Kent and Lane an advantage in getting Superman exclusives."

"I speak to all members of the media," Superman said, desperately trying to shore up the barrier between Clark's churning emotions and Superman's cool, calm exterior.

"When was the last time you saw Kent?" Wolfe said.

Clark folded his arms across his chest, squared his stance, and forced himself to mould to the Superman guise. "Am I being questioned? Officially?"

"No, of course not, Superman," Henderson said with a warning look towards Wolfe. "But we want what is best for Clark. And right now, that means finding him."

"It seems you've already decided Clark did this," Superman said, trying to keep his tone impersonal.

"It happened here, in his apartment," Henderson said. "We have a —"

Wolfe stepped between them. "We are not at liberty to discuss any case with members of the public," he said coldly. "The best thing you can do now, Superman, is to find Clark Kent and get him to the station."

The grim expression on Wolfe's face tightened the coils in Clark's stomach. He turned to Henderson, but found no respite there. They both believed Clark had done this.

What had brought them to that conclusion?

"Have you checked the apartment?" Superman asked. "Is anyone here?"

"We checked for the presence of the perpetrator," Henderson said. "The apartment was empty when we arrived, and only the Medical Examiner has come since then. Except you, of course."

"When was the last time you saw Kent?" Wolfe said.

That was not an easy question to answer truthfully.

"Have you seen Clark this evening?" Henderson asked in a more reasonable tone than the one employed by Wolfe.

"No," Superman said. He scanned the room, using his enhanced vision to look beyond the wall and into his bedroom and bathroom. Lana wasn't here. The covers on his bed were ruffled.

Had the police noticed? And even if they had, how could they know that Clark Kent made his bed every morning as his mother had taught him? Where was Lana? Had she still been here when

Mayson had returned? Why had she left? Had she done this? Had she been carrying a gun? Why hadn't he checked her bag? Why had Mayson come back to his apartment?

Clark's eyes travelled back to the heartbreaking motionlessness of her blood-streaked face and saw the answer to one of his questions. About two feet from Mayson — lying upside down, probably having fallen from her hand — was her shiny new baking pan.

"Did you know Ms Drake?" Wolfe asked.

Clark jolted his attention from the body, fearing he had allowed too much of Clark Kent to show through the Superman mask. "Not personally," he said. "But that doesn't mean I'm insensitive to the tragedy of what happened here tonight."

"The tragedy that an innocent young woman lost her life?" Wolfe asked coldly. "Or the 'tragedy' that someone you consider to be a friend is wanted for questioning over a murder?"

Clark chose not to reply. "She was shot?" he asked, addressing his question to Henderson.

Henderson nodded grimly.

"It looks like a single shot to the back of the head from close range," Wolfe said, disgust pervading his professional appraisal of the case.

"Do you want my help?" Superman offered. "Do you want me to search the apartment?"

"The forensic team will be here shortly," Wolfe said. "They will do their job competently. And their work won't be compromised."

Accepting that he wasn't going to be privy to the details of the case against Clark, Superman nodded, paused a moment to pay silent respect to Mayson Drake, and then turned towards the balcony.

"Superman?"

He turned at Wolfe's voice. "Yes?"

"This is a crime scene. You are required to sign the record, stating you were here." He gestured towards the uniformed cop standing by the door.

Clark had never been asked to do that before, but it seemed he had lost his status as a trusted associate and had become a possible impediment to procuring justice. That hurt ... and they didn't even know he was the primary suspect.

He walked slowly up the stairs and scribbled an 'S' next to the documentation of his time of arrival and time of departure. Then he floated past the two men and the body.

"If you find Clark, the best thing you can do is to convince him to turn himself in," Henderson said in a tone that seemed to include a hint of apology.

Wolfe spoke up. "And I'm sure you're aware of the consequences of harbouring or assisting a person wanted for questioning."

"Anything else?" Superman said.

"No."

Clark flew out from the balcony, his mind in turmoil, and his heart squeezed by claws of grief, confusion, and shock.

Where was Lana?

What evidence did the police have? Just that it had happened in his apartment? Or something more?

There had to be more. Even Henderson believed Clark Kent had fired the gun that had brought Mayson Drake's life to an end.

Had Lana done it? Had she slipped so far that she'd been willing to kill in order to achieve her plans for their life together?

The creak of the back door grated loud in the silence, and Martha Kent jolted to a sitting position. "Jonathan," she hissed. "There's someone in the house."

"Uh?" he said sleepily.

"Someone opened the back door."

"It's probably Clark."

“He doesn’t come at this time of the night.”

“Lois is away. He’s lonely.”

Footsteps echoed from the bottom of the stairs. “Mom? Dad?”

Jonathan shot Martha a smile in the mellow arc of moonlight. “See?”

Martha switched on the bedside lamp, stood from the bed, and pulled on her robe. A quiet tap sounded on their door as Jonathan did likewise. “Come on in, Clark,” she said.

The door swung open, and Clark came in, wearing the Superman suit.

“Is everything all right?” Martha asked. Her eyes flitted over her son, her mind processing the slump of his shoulders, the dip of his head, the overall mantle of ... distress ... that clung to him like a dark cloud. “A bad rescue?” she guessed, approaching him.

“What happened, Clark?” Jonathan asked from half a step behind her.

Their son’s head lifted, and he faced them. His eyes carried an expression she couldn’t identify, but it scrawled trepidation across her heart. “Is it Lois?” Martha said.

Clark slowly shook his head. “You’ve heard me mention the deputy DA, Mayson Drake?”

Martha nodded.

“She was murdered tonight.”

“Aw, Clark,” Martha said. “How awful.” And it was, but there had to be more. Clark didn’t come home as Superman every time someone in Metropolis died. “I didn’t realise you knew her so well.”

“She was in my apartment,” he went on bleakly.

“Your apartment?” Martha repeated as foreboding swept through her like an ice-gorged stream. “When was she in your apartment? Today? Earlier?”

“She was killed there,” he said desolately. “Shot to the back of the head. Probably as she was trying to leave.”

“Aw, no, Clark.” Martha rubbed her hand down his arm. Then she recalled his earlier visit. “You said Lana was there.”

“She was,” Clark said. “Now she’s gone.”

Martha met her husband’s eyes, reading his thoughts as distinctly as if he’d spoken aloud. “Do you think Lana did it, son?” Jonathan asked, keeping his question starkly unemotional.

“I don’t know,” Clark said. “The police think it was me.”

“You?” Martha cried.

“You?” Jonathan queried more calmly. “Or Superman?”

“Clark Kent,” their son answered. “He is their primary suspect. He is wanted for questioning. One of the detectives seems sure he ... I ... will be charged.”

“But you didn’t do it,” Martha declared. “It must be a misunderstanding. When you answer their questions, it will become obvious that you didn’t do it.”

“It’s not that simple, Mom,” Clark said. “Mayson was killed in my apartment. Their first question is going to be if I was there. I can’t say I was — I don’t know what happened to Mayson — but if I say I wasn’t there, they’ll ask where I was, and I don’t have an answer for that.”

“When was she killed?” Jonathan asked.

“It has to have been in the last hour. I checked on Lana before coming here earlier.”

“So it could have happened while you were here?” Martha said.

Clark nodded. “But I can’t use that as an alibi. There’s no way to explain how Clark Kent was in Smallville, Kansas.”

“Superman could say he brought Clark here to visit his parents,” Martha suggested as a ray of hope flickered through her fear. “We can honestly verify that. We even have a reason for why you wanted to talk with us — Lana’s claims that you fathered her child.”

“No, I can’t say that,” Clark said. “They already asked me if

I’d seen Clark this evening, and I said I hadn’t.”

“You didn’t do this,” Martha said. “There can’t be enough evidence to charge you. You *didn’t* do it.”

“They already have enough evidence to want to question me,” Clark said dismally.

“What evidence do they have?” Jonathan asked.

“They wouldn’t tell me. But it’s my apartment, and they said no one else was there. And Clark’s disappearance makes him look guilty.”

“But it’s only suspicion,” Martha said. “They won’t be able to prove you did it because you didn’t. There has to be a way to prove that you didn’t do it.”

“I don’t have an alibi,” Clark said desperately. “When Mayson was killed, Clark Kent wasn’t anywhere. I have no way to prove I wasn’t in my apartment.”

“You can tell them Lana was at your apartment,” Martha said quietly.

“If I say that, it just shifts the suspicion from me to her.”

Again, Martha met Jonathan’s eyes. There had been talk among the Smallville locals. Talk about Lana’s unpredictable behaviour since her return from Europe.

Martha put a hand on the spandex stretched across her son’s broad shoulder. “Do you think Lana could have done this?”

“I don’t know what else to think,” he said. “She was there ...”

“Why would she kill the deputy DA?” Jonathan asked. “Did Lana even know Mayson?”

“They met today,” Clark said miserably. “They were both at my apartment.”

The cold fingers of comprehension bored a little deeper into Martha’s heart. “Why was Mayson at your apartment?” she said. “Was it business? Or a personal reason?”

“She had tickets to a show on Friday night. Lana bluntly informed her that I wasn’t interested in dating her. Mayson left, upset. I followed her and tried to apologise, but there was nothing I could say.”

“Because what Lana had said — that you weren’t interested in Mayson — was the truth?” Martha said.

“I liked her,” Clark said, sounding as if he were confessing a personal failing. “But not in that way. I’d been trying to tell her all week.” He blew out a long breath. “If only I had, perhaps she would still be —”

“Don’t think that, Clark,” Martha said. “Don’t say it. You didn’t kill Mayson. This is not your fault.”

He didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t pursue it. “What do you think I should do?” he said.

“I think we should consider the options,” Jonathan said.

“I can’t see any,” Clark said disconsolately. “Not good ones.”

“Clark Kent doesn’t have to be found,” Martha reminded him. “Ever.”

“No,” Clark said firmly. “No. That would have terrible repercussions for you. And Lois would think —” His face constricted with another wave of anguish. “Lois would think I had killed someone and run away. I couldn’t stand that.”

“I think the police need to know that when you left your apartment, Lana was there,” Jonathan said in his quiet, considered way.

“If Lana did this, you can’t protect her,” Martha added gently. “And if she didn’t do it, her testimony could be important in getting answers for Mayson’s family.”

“If Lana didn’t do it, why did she run away?” Clark said.

Then his cheeks paled, and he sucked in a quick breath. “What if she were taken by the murderer? Because she’s a witness? That is possible. Mayson would have enemies. It’s inevitable in her job. Perhaps someone tracked her to my apartment. Perhaps that person took Lana.”

His gush of speculation ceased, and he looked at his parents, awaiting their reaction. “That’s ... that’s possible,” Martha

conceded, unsure how to respond when the choices seemed to be restricted to having murdered or having been kidnapped by a murderer.

“Are you worried that if you bring Lana into this, she will go through with her threat to reveal what she knows about you?” Jonathan said.

“I’m worried they won’t believe anything I say because I won’t be able to be totally truthful. I’m worried it will look like a story I’ve made up to try to shift the blame onto someone else. I’m worried about what Lana will do if the police question her.” Clark released a long breath. “And yes, I’m worried she will blow the secret.”

“Maybe ...” Jonathan’s voice cracked. “Maybe it’s time, son.”

“No,” Clark said firmly. “Because if the world knows that Clark Kent is Superman, you become immediate targets for anyone wanting to control me. Anyone close to me ... Lois ... also becomes a target. The safety of everyone I love depends on Superman being separate from my life.”

“If Lana killed Mayson, I don’t think she will tell the police that Clark Kent is Superman,” Martha said. “If, in fact, she knows.”

“Why not?” Clark said.

“Because if she did, she would be handing you an alibi,” Martha said. “You would be able to prove your whereabouts when Mayson was shot.”

Jonathan spoke up. “If she didn’t do it, she might spill the secret just to give you an alibi. I doubt her baby’s ‘father’ serving a jail term for murder is a part of her grand plan.”

“I don’t think it’s possible to determine what Lana is most likely to do,” Martha said. “She’s never been predictable, and since returning from the European trip ...”

“Maybe you’re going to have to decide what is most important to you,” Jonathan said. “The secret — or Clark Kent’s reputation and freedom.”

A sickening wave tightened the tension in Martha’s stomach. “But you’d do it?” she said. “If it came to a choice between revealing the secret and being charged with a murder you didn’t commit — you’d do it?”

Clark didn’t reply for a long moment. They stood in a triangle, three people who had protected a secret for nearly three decades. In the midst of them, hovering like a palpable presence, was the spectre of a decision they had hoped they would never have to make.

“You could investigate,” Martha said, grappling for alternatives. “As Superman, not Clark. You could try to find out if all they have on Clark is opportunity — that it happened in his apartment.”

Clark considered that for a moment, and then he said, “The homicide detective, Wolfe, is already suspicious of Superman’s association with Clark. I don’t think he trusts Superman. I’m not sure anything Superman says will make a difference.”

The walls of trepidation closed in on them. Martha looked from her husband to her son, hoping to find an inkling of hope, a materialisation of the way forward. There was nothing but the reflection of her own despair.

“What are you going to do, son?” Jonathan asked eventually.

“I don’t think I have any choice but to trust the system,” Clark said, his voice hollow and listless.

Martha’s heart collapsed. “You’re going to give yourself up?” she squeaked.

“I have to,” Clark said. “I can’t hide as Superman. This isn’t going to go away. The longer Clark is missing, the more guilty he appears and the harder it’s going to be to explain why I didn’t give myself up earlier. If I wait for this to hit the papers, some people will decide I am a murderer, even if it can’t be proven.” He straightened his caped shoulders. “I have to face this. I have to go to the police and allow them to ask their questions.”

“Have you decided how you’re going to answer?” Martha said.

“I’ll try to find out exactly what evidence they have that points to Clark being the killer. Then, I’ll try to answer as truthfully as I can without revealing that Clark Kent is Superman.”

“Where will you say you were?” she said.

“I can’t say I was anywhere.”

“Was there a reason why you left her?” Jonathan asked.

“Other than wanting to come and talk to us?”

“I heard a cry for help,” Clark replied. “A boy had fallen down a storm drain.”

“You could say you were at that rescue,” Martha suggested.

“As Clark Kent. You know details of what happened. That’s proof you were there.”

Clark shook his head. “The more details I give, the more I risk being caught out in a lie. The people there — the mother, the child, the police officers — they saw Superman, but they didn’t see Clark Kent.”

“Are you going to tell the police that Lana was in your apartment?” Jonathan said.

“I don’t want to delay going to the police,” Clark said uncertainly, “but I think I should try to look for her first. If I were able to find her, a lot of things could become clearer.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Jonathan said. “She’s the daughter of Ray and Millie — they’ve been our neighbours for years. If she’s in any trouble ...”

“You’re right,” Clark said as a sudden dash of purpose straightened his posture. “If Lana didn’t do this — if she’s been kidnapped, or if she ran off because she was scared — she needs my help. And her evidence will be invaluable in finding the murderer.”

Martha drew her son into her arms and held him for a lingering moment. “We’ll catch the first flight tomorrow morning and be in Metropolis by early afternoon,” she said. “Whatever you decide to do, we’ll be there for you.”

“I ... I can’t fly you there,” he said.

“We don’t expect —”

“If I’m being questioned about a murder, it’s possible someone from the Smallville sheriff’s department will come and talk to you. Your neighbours know you were here tonight. If you’re in Metropolis early tomorrow morning ... If someone checks airline records ... I think we need to be careful about anything that connects Superman with Clark.”

“We’ll drive to Wichita and catch the first plane to Metropolis tomorrow morning,” Jonathan said. “Don’t worry about us.”

Clark studied the floor for a moment. “If ... if you see Lois, could you ... could you tell her ... tell her I’m sorry?”

“You’re not going to talk to her first?” Martha said.

Clark shook his head. “It’s the middle of the night. And anyway, I wouldn’t know what to say to her.”

“You could tell her that you didn’t hurt anyone,” Martha suggested softly.

“I couldn’t stand it if she didn’t believe me,” he said. He ducked to kiss Martha’s cheek, hugged his dad, and was gone with a gush of backdraft.

“He’s going to turn himself in, isn’t he?” Martha asked her husband. “Whether he finds Lana or not, he going to do what he thinks is right?”

Jonathan nodded slowly.

“But he won’t have answers for their questions, and that’s just going to increase their suspicion.”

Jonathan placed a gentle hand on his wife’s shoulder. “We should get back to bed,” he said. “There’s nothing we can do for our son now, and if we’re going to catch that plane, we have to be up in a couple of hours.”

Clark hovered high above the lights of Metropolis, cursing himself that he hadn't considered the possibility of Lana needing his help earlier.

He should have looked for her before skulking off to his parents.

He should have forced himself to think rationally.

He focussed his vision on his apartment. Wolfe had gone, Henderson was chatting with the uniformed officer who was now stationed outside his front door, and a team of three male forensic officers were combing through each room, armed with their tools of investigation.

There was no sign of Lana anywhere in the vicinity.

Why had she run away?

Because she had shot Mayson? Because she had been scared by someone else? Or because she had been taken by Mayson's murderer?

Was she — right now — in danger?

Clark's super-powered eyes roved over the streets, delving into the dark alleys and shadowed corners. By now, she could be anywhere. She could be inside a building. She could have gone to a hospital. He had no way of checking — not without invading other people's privacy.

He had to go to the police. He had to tell them Lana was missing. Whatever the ramifications, her safety had to be his first priority.

But the ramifications could be life changing.

What if they wanted to fingerprint him?

To Clark's knowledge, Superman's fingerprints were not on the police files. But he'd worked alongside them many times. It wouldn't have been difficult to lift a print from something he'd touched and keep it as a sort of souvenir.

Mayson had been shot. It seemed probable they would want any suspect to undertake a gunshot residue test. Of course, there would be nothing on his hands or clothes. But how would his Kryptonian physiology respond to the test?

Just like a human? Or different somehow?

And there would be questions.

Questions he couldn't answer. Time he couldn't account for. Time when Clark Kent hadn't actually been anywhere or done anything.

Would he be forced into admitting he was Superman?

If he did, his parents' lives would change forever.

And Lois ...

How would she react?

Would their friendship — the prize he had bartered for in exchange for denying his love — survive?

It wouldn't survive if he were charged with Mayson Drake's murder.

Clark zoomed across the dark city and landed in the alley half a block from the central police station. He checked for possible observers, spun into the clothes he had been wearing earlier, and slipped onto the sidewalk, still without a clear plan.

Half a dozen steps later, a hand grabbed his elbow from behind.

He spun around. "Lana!"

"Sssshhh," she hissed.

"Are you all right?" She was wearing oversized jeans, a white tee shirt, and his leather jacket. A thick ribbon lay across her hair like a bright pink bridge stretching between her ears. "Where have you b—"

"Shut up and listen," she growled. "I know you're just itching to run to the cops and spill everything like a little teacher's pet, grovelling for a shiny star."

"Do you know what hap—"

"I knew you'd come," Lana said. "Don't you realise they know it was you? If you take one step into the cop station, you'll go down for murder."

Clark lightly grasped her shoulders through his leather jacket. "Lana," he said. "You know I left my apartment."

"I know nothing."

"Were you there when Mayson was killed? Do you know who did this?"

Her look dripped with scorn. "Why would I tell *you* anything?"

"Come with me to the police," Clark said. "Tell them whatever you know. We'll get through this together."

Her laughter rattled with contempt as she shrugged his hands from her body. "Now that everything you care about is being threatened, you want to do 'together'?" she said. "Too late, Kent. I offered you 'together', and you couldn't scurry away fast enough."

"Lana, if you did this, there will be evidence. Fingerprints. Forensic —"

"They're not looking for a woman," Lana said, running her hand over the pink ribbon. "They're not looking for anyone — except you. I heard the cop talking to the witness. She said it was you."

They had a witness? Someone who had named him?

"You still believe in justice, don't you?" Lana scoffed.

"You're still too naïve to realise that the police aren't interested in finding out who really did this. They just want a conviction, so they can pat themselves on the back, close the file, and move on."

"It's not like that," Clark insisted. "I know some of the police officers. They —"

"You *know* some of the cops?" she cried. "And you still think I would be stupid enough to go in there with you?"

Did she know she was discussing this with Superman? Did she think Clark Kent could kill? Did she think Superman could? Did she have any idea of the repercussions if the 'Clark Kent is Superman' bombshell exploded right alongside the 'Clark Kent killed Mayson Drake' disclosure?

Clark took a breath and changed his tactics. "Did you see who killed Mayson?" he asked gently. "Did the killer threaten you? Is that why you are so worried about going to the police?"

She cackled loudly. "I was young and stupid when I fell for your nice-guy act, Clark," she said. "So stop wasting my time pretending you're concerned about me, and —"

"Lana, if they're looking for me, I can't hide forever. Eventually, I'll have to face their questions. They're going to ask if I was there. When I tell them I had already left, they're going to ask if anyone else —"

"Are you threatening to squeal on me?"

"I'm saying there will be questions that will make it difficult to leave you out of this."

"Let me make it easier," Lana said in a softer, more menacing tone. "I found the picture you had hidden next to your bed. The picture of the brunette. I know her name. Lois Lane. I know she works at the Daily Planet. *She's* the one you're in love with, isn't she?"

"Lana, I work with Lois. That's all."

Derision lifted Lana's upper lip to a sneer. "You always sucked at lying."

"I'm not with Lois," Clark said quickly. "She has nothing to do with this."

"I figure that if you run to the cops, I'll have nothing to lose by putting a bullet through Lois Lane's head."

"No!" Clark bit off his exclamation and grappled for a path of reason she would accept. "Lana, come with me to the police. Running away —"

She shook her head vehemently. "I'd shoot myself before I would go to the cops," she said. "I hate being this close to them, but I had to talk to you. I had to —"

"Running away isn't going to —"

"The police have a witness who says you were there when the

blonde was killed,” Lana said. “If you had any street smarts at all, you’d never be seen in Metropolis again. But I knew you’d want to do the honourable thing and tattle to the police about me being in your apartment. That’s why I had to see you. That’s why I came here. To make sure you understood. You squeal, I shoot.” She pointed her finger at him and pulled back, mimicking the firing of a gun. “Dead Lois.”

“Lana,” he said. “Hurting Lois won’t achieve anything.”

“It won’t make any difference to me,” she said lightly. “If you’re going to try to pin the blonde’s murder on me, I might as well take out a pigeon pair. One blonde. One brunette.”

“Don’t,” he begged. “Don’t make this worse than it already is.”

She smirked. “You won’t be able to stop me, Clark. Once you step into the police station, they aren’t going to let you go for a long time. Even if you spin a tale about a long-lost lover having been in your apartment, they won’t believe you. The witness didn’t see any woman except the blonde.”

“La-” His protest died as an anguished cry seized his attention. He focussed on the police radio, the tone of the voices instantly alerting him to an emergency. He listened, gathering details.

There had been a collapse in one of subway tunnels. A train was buried under the rubble. Hundreds of late-night travellers had been entombed. Their rescue would take hours of precarious excavation, and during that time, injured people would suffer. Some would die.

Clark Kent needed to walk into the police station and face his accusers regarding Mayson Drake’s murder.

He needed to protect Lois from Lana’s deranged threats.

He needed to make Lana see reason.

But Superman was needed by hundreds of people.

Clark stood, utterly torn.

Without his help, people would die.

But while he was helping them, the case against Clark would gather momentum.

And Lana would ... He really wasn’t sure what Lana would do. But he couldn’t risk her hurting Lois. “Give me the gun,” he demanded in Superman’s voice of steel.

It took her a moment to recover from her surprise. “You think I’d give you anything?” she sneered. “Even if I had a gun?”

The cries rose from the tunnel, urgent and congested with terror. “Superman! Please help us, Superman!”

He had to go.

He had to answer their call.

Clark x-rayed through the leather jacket and saw a revolver loaded with three bullets tucked into the jeans near Lana’s hip. With a movement that was superfast and supremely deft, he reached into the jacket and took the gun. He turned away and sprinted towards the alley.

Lana’s snicker of contempt chased him. “I always knew that under that thin layer of perfection lurked a pathetic coward.”

Clark kept running. He was Superman. And people needed him.

Part 4

The tinny music of a cell phone loosened the chains of sleep. The follow-up shrill of the home phone shattered the remaining vestiges of slumber and dragged Lois to full wakefulness. She rubbed her eyes as she checked the time. It was just after twelve-thirty.

It had better be Perry.

Or Clark.

No one else would dare call her on both phones at this hour.

Unless it was her mother’s rehab centre. She lunged to pick up her cell phone. “Lois Lane.”

“Lois. Are you home?”

Perry’s voice brought relief. It was just a story. Nothing that

directly involved her. Lois pushed back the covers of her bed and sat up. “Yes, Chief. What’s happened?”

“A section of the subway tunnel has collapsed. Between Northwood station and Upper Triholm. The rescue teams are congregating at Northwood.”

“Is Superman there?” Lois asked as she tucked her phone between her chin and her shoulder and began dragging indiscriminate clothes from her closet.

“Yes.”

“Have you called Clark?”

“I’ll do that next. Where should I tell him to meet you?”

“His apartment’s on the way. Tell him to wait there and we’ll go together.”

“OK.” Perry paused. “Oh, and Lois, welcome home. It’s good to have you back.”

“Thanks, Chief.”

Lois tossed her phone onto the bed and hastily stripped off her pyjamas, replacing them with multiple layers of warm clothes. She splashed water on her face, patted it dry, applied the barest essentials of makeup, and ran a comb through her hair, grateful she had decided to wash it last night.

Her cell phone rang again as she opened her apartment door. She dug it out of her bag. “Perry?” she said. “I’m leaving now.”

“I haven’t been able to contact Clark,” he said. “His phone is busy.”

“Perhaps he is trying to call you,” Lois said, impatient to finish the call and begin the business of getting the story.

“I tried his cell phone, too, but it’s turned off. You can go straight to Northwood if you want to. Clark might be there already.”

“No,” Lois said. “I called him last night and couldn’t get through. Perhaps there’s a problem with his line. I’ll wake him, and we’ll go together.”

“OK,” Perry said. “Keep in touch.”

A small crowd of people had congregated outside Clark’s apartment.

As Lois drew closer, she saw a police officer in their midst.

“Have you found the murderer?” an older man asked. “If he’s still at large, shouldn’t you be doing something to protect the citizens?”

“That is why I have suggested you return to your homes,” the officer said in a tone that indicated his supply of patience was running critically low.

“So it’s true?” a young woman from the fringes of the crowd squeaked. “Someone was killed here?”

Lois’s eyes darted from the crowd to the window next to Clark’s door. A light was on in his apartment. He must have been awakened by the commotion following the murder or whatever had brought these people from their homes in the middle of the night.

She took her cell phone from her bag, intending to call Perry and alert him to the possibility of another story. As she bypassed the crowd on the way to Clark’s door, the police officer stopped her. “Excuse me, ma’am,” he said. “You can’t go in there.”

“But my friend lives here,” she said, pausing from punching in Perry’s number.

“No one can go in there. It’s a crime scene.”

Clark’s apartment? A crime scene? The murder had happened here?

Icy dread froze the blood in her veins.

Clark would be OK. He *had* to be OK.

“Who ... who was the victim?” Lois asked.

“I’m not allowed to discuss the case with members of the public.”

“I’m not the public,” Lois said, seizing her press badge from her bag. “Lois Lane, Daily Planet.” She heard a collective

indrawn breath from crowd, but ignored it.

“The details will be released later today,” the officer said. “There will be a press conference.”

She eyed the police officer speculatively and decided he was probably young enough and agile enough that a sudden dash to Clark’s door wasn’t going to be successful.

But there was no way she was leaving without knowing Clark was all right. And she figured her best chance was to play the cool reporter chasing a story.

“Who’s in there?” Lois said with a nod into Clark’s apartment.

“I said there will be a press conference later,” the officer replied.

“Inspector Henderson?” Lois asked, grasping his name in the desperate hope it would give her some needed credibility. “Could you tell him Lois Lane is here and would like to speak with him? Please?”

With a sigh, the officer opened the door and slipped inside, closing it before Lois could manage to snatch a glimpse of what was happening in there.

The little group was staring at her. Lois turned away from them.

Fear had seized her heart, squeezing and constricting.

Clark. She couldn’t imagine her life without him. He was her best friend. He was ...

He was Clark.

The door opened, and Henderson stood in the doorway. His face was taut, moulded to the mask of detached professionalism he had developed over many years of dealing with awful situations.

“Cl-” Lois whimpered.

The police officer came through the door, and Henderson gestured for Lois to follow him inside.

Lois stepped into the apartment, her eyes darting around, searching for Clark’s face, needing his familiar, comforting presence in this storm of uncertainty.

She saw only men she didn’t recognise — probably the forensic team — writing notes, making measurements, taking photographs, collecting fingerprints, collating evidence.

Evidence for what?

Lois stretched onto her tiptoes, trying to see past Henderson. He shuffled sideways, blocking her view.

“What happened?” Lois said. “Is Clark —”

The mask slipped to reveal a more human version of the crusty old cop. “Lois,” he said.

Her anxiety whipped through her scant supplies of patience, and she grabbed fistfuls of the lapels of his jacket. “Is it Clark?”

Henderson calmly took hold of her arms. “No,” he said. “It’s not Clark.”

Her hands dropped, but relief was short-lived. “His parents?” she gasped. “Are they here?”

“No,” Henderson said. “It’s Mayson Drake.”

Mayson? “She’s ... she’s ... dead?” Lois leaned to her side and saw the lifeless body crumpled at the foot of the stairs.

Henderson moved into her vision. “I assume you knew her?”

“Only in her capacity as the deputy DA,” Lois said as the sharp edges of her fear began to recede slightly, allowing the flow of her thoughts to begin again. “We weren’t really friends.” She looked around, half expecting Clark to appear. “Why was she here? Was Clark working on a story?”

“Do you know Clark’s whereabouts?” Henderson asked.

“No. Perry’s been trying to contact him. We’re going to cover the subway collapse.”

“When was the last time you had any contact with Clark?”

“I’ve been away for a week,” Lois said. “I had to deal with some family business.”

“You haven’t had any contact with Clark today? No phone

calls? Nothing?”

“No,” Lois said, wondering why Henderson was belabouring this point.

“And you don’t know where he is now?”

“No,” Lois said. “I came to get him. But as he’s not here, I expect he heard about the collapse and has gone already.” She turned away. “I have to go. I’m really sorry about Mayson, but I need to get to Northwood.”

Henderson stopped her with a hand to her elbow. “Lois,” he said. “I don’t think you understand. Clark is missing.”

“He can’t be missing,” Lois said. “Perry didn’t say anything about him missing. Clark must have been at the Planet today.”

“He’s been missing since Mayson was killed.”

Comprehension splattered debris through her brain. “Clark?” she gasped. “You think ... you think *he* did this? He’s a suspect?”

Henderson’s eyes dropped to the floor, but he nodded his admission. “Detective Wolfe is running this investigation. He wants to talk to Clark.”

“Clark didn’t do it,” Lois stated.

“Lois ...” Henderson stalled. “You know I wouldn’t ... not without evidence. But the case looks pretty straightforward.”

“Not if you think Clark did it,” Lois said. “You’re missing something.”

“He was the only one here, Lois. Two people. One is shot dead.”

“He didn’t do it.”

“We’ve already established it wasn’t suicide. Someone else was involved.”

“OK,” Lois conceded. “But it wasn’t Clark.”

Henderson’s eyebrows dipped together. “How can you be sure? What do you know? If you know anything —”

“I told you I haven’t seen him for almost a week,” Lois said. “But I know Clark.” She shot Henderson an accusing look. “I thought you knew him, too.”

“Lois.” He released a gush of breath. “Lois, I’ve been on this job long enough that nothing surprises me anymore. People you think you know ...”

Her shock erupted into indignation. “I don’t *think* I know Clark,” she said, her voice rising. “I *know* him. I know he wasn’t here. If he had been here, he would have called an ambulance. He would have stayed with Mayson. Even if he hadn’t been able to do anything to help her, he would have still been here when the police arrived. And now, he would be helping you find whoever did this.”

“Shock can make people do things they wouldn’t normally do.”

Perhaps that was true, because right now, Lois was battling the compulsion to take Henderson’s thin shoulders and shake some sense into him. “He was probably out for the evening — playing poker with Jimmy or something like that,” she said as she took out her phone and dialled Clark’s cell number. “We’ll have this sorted in less than a minute.”

“He doesn’t have —” Henderson’s words were chopped off by the sound of a phone, coming from a few yards behind him.

“Clark’s cell phone is here,” he said. “We found it a couple of minutes ago and turned it on.”

Lois flung her phone into her bag. “There’s no law that says you have to carry your phone with you,” she said.

“Wolfe has put out Clark’s description to the patrol cars,” Henderson said. “I’ve been able to keep it quiet so far — being the middle of the night — but if we haven’t found him by daylight, Wolfe is going to insist that he be officially listed as a wanted person.”

That news, combined with Henderson’s sombre manner, reared up, mounting a challenge to her convictions about Clark. Lois ferociously quashed it. Clark hadn’t hurt Mayson, and he hadn’t run away. Short of an admission from Clark himself, she

would never believe that of him.

“What do you have?” she asked coldly.

“A witness. A witness saying she saw Clark run away a few minutes after she heard the shot.”

“Mistaken identity,” Lois said, shrugging. “Or someone trying to frame Clark.”

“The witness is also willing to testify she heard an argument between Mayson and Clark.”

“I’ve had arguments with Clark,” Lois retorted. “Lots of them. But he’s never shot me.”

Henderson inched closer. “I didn’t want to believe it either, Lois,” he said in a lowered voice. “But the evidence is compelling. And his disappearance isn’t helping his cause.”

“Then I’ll find him,” Lois said, infusing her declaration with a lofty air of certainty. “I’ll find him and bring him to the station so he can clear his name and you can stop wasting your time and begin looking for the real murderer.”

Henderson’s hand clasped her arm again. “We haven’t found the weapon.”

Lois wrenched her arm away. “Now you think Clark would hurt *me*?” she cried.

“I’m just telling you to be careful.”

Lois shook her head, beyond speechless.

“The best thing you can do for Clark is to convince him to go to the police station,” Henderson said.

Lois turned away, opened the door, and strode outside into the cold night air. Once she was out of earshot of the group still pestering the cop, she pulled out her cell phone and dialed Perry’s desk.

“Perry White.”

“Perry, it’s Lois.”

“What’s happening? Has Superman reached them yet? Have they managed to shore up the tunnel? Any further movement? Do we have a death toll?”

“What?”

“The tunnel collapse. What do you and Clark have?”

“Oh. That.” Lois looked around her, and finding no one nearby, she paused next to the looming wall of an apartment block. “Have you heard about Mayson Drake?”

“Mayson?” Perry’s surprise pulsed through her cell phone. “What does she have to do with this?”

“She was killed.”

“She was in the train?” Perry exclaimed.

“No. No. She was shot. Murdered.”

She heard Perry haul in a long breath. “Mayson was killed?” he asked. “Mayson Drake? The deputy DA?”

“Yes.”

“Do they know who did it? How was she killed? Is it linked with one of her cases?”

“Perry,” Lois said, losing all patience with the extraneous detail. “She was at Clark’s apartment. The police think he did it.”

The silence pulsed with shock. “Clark?” Perry muttered. “What does he say about it?”

“He isn’t here. They’re looking for him.”

“What evidence do they have? Did you speak to Henderson? Or Wolfe? Or some rookie who wouldn’t know a victim from a perpetrator?”

“I spoke to Henderson. They have a witness who places Clark in his apartment at the time the shot was fired and running away a few minutes later.”

“But Clark wouldn’t run away.”

“That’s exactly what I told Henderson,” Lois said. “And he wouldn’t shoot anyone, either. I’m going to find him, Chief. We need to get this sorted out before someone from the Star gets a whiff of it.”

“What about the story?”

“The story?” Her mind shuffled back. “Oh, the subway

collapse. Send Ralph.”

“Ralph?” Perry fired back in disgust.

“Or that new guy. Or Jimmy.”

“I’ve already called Jimmy. Lois, this is going to be huge.”

“Probably,” Lois said. “But I’m not writing a single word about anything until I have proved that Clark did not kill anyone.”

“Lois,” Perry said sternly. “When you find Clark, you need to take him to the police station. Don’t go running off by yourselves, trying to find the murderer.”

“Perhaps he’s out there now, trying to find Mayson’s killer. Perhaps the witness looked away and didn’t see the killer leave. Or perhaps Clark doesn’t know she’s dead. Perhaps he wasn’t home. Perhaps —” Lois stopped abruptly. She was starting to sound as if she were desperate for excuses.

She didn’t need an array of excuses.

There was a logical explanation for this.

And she would find it. “You’ll call me if Clark comes to the Planet?” she said.

“Yes. Of course.”

“Thank you.”

“Be careful, Lois,” Perry said. “The DA’s department is going to want justice for one of their own.”

“I want justice, too,” Lois said. “For both Mayson and Clark.”

Lois’s impatient banging on Jimmy’s door echoed through the silent apartment building. “Jimmy!” she called. “Are you there?”

When there was no response, she took out her kit and picked the lock. She entered, closed the door behind her, and switched on the light.

It was a mess.

And the air was rank with something that should have been put in the trash a week ago.

“Jimmy? Are you here? It’s Lois.” There was no sound or movement. She hurried into his bedroom. The bed was an empty swirl of blankets and sheets. “Jimmy?”

Lois quickly checked every room in the small apartment. No one was here. Then she retraced her steps, searching for any sign that Clark had been here — his watch, or a tie she recognised, or anything she knew that belonged to him.

There was nothing.

She switched out the lights, locked the door, and went onto the street, hailing the first cab she saw.

Ten minutes later, she was back at her own apartment. Too impatient to wait for the elevator, she sprinted up the steps and arrived, puffing, at her floor. She swung into the corridor.

Clark wasn’t there.

Lois knew he wouldn’t break into her apartment, but she unlocked the door and checked anyway. Everything was exactly as she had left it. She searched the floor near the entrance, just in case he’d pushed a note under the door.

Nothing.

Where was Clark?

Where would he go?

Lois scribbled a note on a scrap piece of paper. *Call me, it’s important, Lois.* She folded the paper in half and wrote *Clark* on the front. She slipped it under her door, making sure a portion of the corner of the paper was visible from the corridor. After locking her door, she jogged back to the stairwell.

Her body felt coiled and eager to rush into action, but her mind was providing no direction.

Where was Clark?

Did he know about Mayson?

Had he been there when she had been shot?

Or had he been sleeping somewhere, oblivious to the events

that had led to the bizarre conclusion being bandied around by Henderson and Wolfe?

Why had Mayson been at Clark's apartment?

Lois stepped out of her apartment building and automatically gestured to a passing cab.

It stopped. She got in.

Had Mayson spent a lot of time with Clark recently? Lois had sensed that Mayson had been interested in Clark from the first moment the new deputy DA had come to the Planet and introduced herself. Giving him her home number was hardly a subtle gesture.

Had Clark fallen in love with Mayson?

Had he run away because of his grief at her passing?

Because of his remorse for having been unable to protect the woman he loved?

"Where to?"

Lois jumped at the question from the driver. "Ah ... Centennial Park."

He turned around, and the cab lurched forward.

Where would Clark go? If he were shocked and hurting, where would he go?

They had agreed they were friends. Best friends. But Clark hadn't confided in her about his feelings for another woman.

Who were his other friends?

Shame rose like a pointed finger as Lois realised how little she knew of Clark's life outside of their work at the Daily Planet. She'd had a glimpse of his past when he'd taken her to Smallville last year. She knew he was the only child of wonderfully supportive parents, but really, she knew very little else about the circumstances of his life.

Had he tried to contact his parents? Did they know a woman had been murdered in their son's apartment?

It was nearly half past one — far too late to call Martha and Jonathan. But if their son were in trouble, Lois knew they would want to know.

She didn't know their number. She'd never needed to know it.

The cab stopped. Lois paid and got out.

Centennial Park.

Why had she directed the cab driver to bring her here?

Because this was a place she strongly associated with Clark.

It was here he had told her he was in love with her.

Here, she had told him she loved him — but only as a friend.

Here, she had witnessed the depths of pain her rejection had caused him.

Oh, he had scrambled to cover it, but not before his anguish had been etched into her mind forever.

Lois wandered over to the park bench and sat down with a long sigh.

Weeks later, he had said he had been lying. He'd said it had been a desperate attempt to stop her from marrying Luthor.

But his confession had lacked the heartfelt sincerity of his declaration of love.

Perhaps his feelings had changed by then. Perhaps he had felt it would be easier for her if he said he'd never been in love with her, rather than admit to having fallen out of love with her.

If that had been the case, who could blame him?

After spurning Clark, she had agreed to marry Luthor.

Luthor.

A lying, coldblooded, manipulative criminal who had never been one tenth of the person Clark was.

Clark must have realised that if she could love Luthor, she could never love him.

The two men were so vastly different.

One self-centred. One selfless.

One arrogant. One humble.

One frightening in his ruthlessness. One frustrating in his

unwillingness to bend the rules.

But, as much as Lois had disparaged the Clark Kent Moral Compass, she had come to accept it. Appreciate it, even.

Not that she'd ever told him that.

It made sense that Clark had responded to Mayson's obvious attraction. Why wouldn't he?

And, being Clark, he hadn't wanted to flaunt his new relationship in front of his partner.

Now Mayson was dead.

"Oh, Clark," Lois mumbled. If he knew, he must be hurting so much. Perhaps they had had a date planned. Perhaps their details had gotten confused. Perhaps he'd waited for her at a restaurant, but she'd come to his apartment. Perhaps, right now, he was combing the city, desperately searching for her.

But whatever had happened between Mayson and Clark, whatever had led to Mayson lying dead on Clark's stairs, Lois knew one thing.

Clark had not killed her.

Whatever Mayson had done, she could not have hurt Clark as much as Lois had on this park bench.

She could not have aggravated him as much as Lois's stubborn insistence that everything be done her way.

She could not have insulted him as much as Lois had in the early days when she had dismissed him as a country hack.

Lois knew from experience — when you hurt Clark Kent, he didn't hurt back. Oh, he might prod a little, he might retaliate with a little line in self-defence, but he never resorted to nastiness.

When she had put their friendship to its greatest test — getting to the top of the aisle to make marriage vows to Luthor — Clark hadn't faltered.

Afterwards, she'd needed a friend — and her best friend had been right there for her, offering comfort. His unconditional support.

And ...

His love.

He'd still loved her then. As she walked down the aisle to marry Lex Luthor, Clark Kent had loved her.

She'd been too blind to see it.

No. Not blind.

Scared.

She'd opened the door to peek at what love would be like with Clark Kent.

And it had petrified her.

It had been so pure.

So intense.

So eternal.

Instead of being brave enough to fling the door wide open, she'd slammed it shut and run away to the supposed safety of a life with Luthor.

Whom she hadn't loved.

And — even if his secrets hadn't come out — could never have loved.

But, he'd been safe.

He couldn't hurt her.

Discovering his true character hadn't brought a sense of betrayal — only acute embarrassment at her own stupidity.

But, Clark ...

Clark could hurt her.

Clark could destroy her.

Because she loved him.

Lois jumped up from the seat.

Clark had been there for her more times than she could count. Now, it was her turn to be there for him.

And for that, she needed to know the details of the case against him.

So she could dismantle and disprove it. Piece by piece.

Until everyone knew rationally what she had known instinctively.

That Clark Kent was not a killer.

Part 5

The police officer was still guarding Clark's door, but the crowd had dwindled to a couple of middle-aged women, standing off to the side and sipping from steaming cups.

Lois approached the cop with purposeful strides. "I need to see Inspector Henderson."

"He left."

The light was still on in Clark's apartment. "Who's in there?"

The cop's heaved-out breath crackled with annoyance, but he said, "The forensic team is still working."

"Henderson told me it was a clear-cut case," Lois said casually. "Wonder what's taking them so long."

"Every crime scene has to be processed with scrupulous care," he said, sounding as if he were quoting from a manual.

"I figure you'll be glad when they finally finish," Lois said, hoping her comment sounded enough like sympathy to conceal that her true motive was a quest for more information. "You must be tired of standing out here in the cold."

"I will be here —" He stopped abruptly as if remembering that he shouldn't be chatting to anyone. However, that truncated sentence was enough to confirm Lois's assumption that Clark's apartment would be guarded all night in case he should return home.

Unfortunately, unless the cop was open to a bribe, getting access to the crime scene was going to be difficult.

"Has Henderson gone back to the police station?" Lois asked, keeping up the conversation while she mentally rummaged around Clark's apartment for another way in. There was the balcony, but unless you were Superman or skilled in abseiling, that wasn't a viable entrance or exit.

"I think he went home," the cop said, perhaps deciding it was permissible to alleviate his boredom if the information didn't relate directly to the case.

"Any idea when the forensic guys are expected to finish?"

"Another hour at least," he said.

"You're going to be frozen by then," Lois noted.

He shot her a look that clearly said she wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know.

"Do you get backup?" Lois said. "Surely they can't expect you to stay here alone all night."

"Our resources are stretched to breaking point," he said. "Everyone available is at the tunnel collapse."

"Is that still happening?" Lois asked, reflecting on how long it had been since a big story had unfolded in Metropolis without her being right in the thick of it.

"Yeah."

"I thought Superman was there."

"He is. But even he can't save hundreds at once. He could crash his way in, but if he did that, when he got to the front of the train, he'll only be rescuing bodies."

"People are still alive? And trapped?"

"Yeah. Lots of them. It's going to be a long night for everyone."

A long night when the team of Lane and Kent should be there, getting the story. Working together. "Bye," Lois said, turning away from the cop and wondering if, after a couple more hours of cold monotony, he might be willing to swap a cup of hot coffee for ten minutes in Clark's apartment.

She caught a cab to the police station.

It was uncharacteristically quiet, even considering the late hour.

Lois marched up to the counter. "Lois Lane, Daily Planet. Could I speak with Inspector Henderson, please?" she asked the young woman.

"I'm sorry. Inspector Henderson is off-duty."

"He wasn't off-duty an hour ago. I was talking to him then. I have further information about a case he's working on."

The woman paused for a moment. "I'll see if he's still here," she said, implicitly admitting that he was. A few moments later, she returned the phone and said to Lois, "The inspector will see you in Interview Room 18. It's along the —"

"I know where it is," Lois said. "Thank you very much."

Her eagerness for answers swept her to Room 18, but when she got there, it was empty. She sat in the chair and slumped on the table, letting out a long breath as the torrents of exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her.

Clark was out there somewhere, and each passing minute made her more inclined to believe he was unaware of what had happened to Mayson.

The news was going to shock him. And, being Clark, he was going to feel some responsibility because it had happened in his apartment.

The room was pleasantly warm. Soothingly quiet. Lois closed her eyes.

During the week spent with her mother, she'd yearned for her normal routine.

Working at the Planet. The thrill of chasing stories. The satisfaction of bringing home exclusives. The fulfilment of front-page headlines carrying her by-line.

And Clark.

She loved him.

She had probably loved him that day in Centennial Park, but she — the brave and intrepid reporter — had taken the safe route. The cowardly route.

But now ...

Now, she just needed to find him.

Where was he?

What did he know?

What had happened between him and Mayson?

What ...

The sound of the door startled Lois from her thoughts, and she jumped as Henderson slid into the chair on the other side of the table. "Sorry to have kept you waiting," he said. "It's been one of those nights."

He looked weary. His face was drawn, and his eyes rimmed with red. "Thanks for seeing me," Lois said.

He gave her a ghost of a smile. "You have ten minutes," he said dryly. "And I'm only giving you that because I can sit down."

A glance to the wall clock told her over half an hour had passed since she'd come into the room. She must have dozed off.

"You said you have information for me," Henderson continued.

"I lied," Lois said, figuring neither of them had the time or the patience for quibbling. "But I need to know exactly what evidence you have against Clark."

Henderson didn't look particularly surprised by her admission. "I can't give the details of the case to a member of the press."

"I'm not here as a member of the press," she said. "I'm here as Clark's friend."

"I figured that," Henderson said. "Otherwise, I'd be in a cab now and on my way home."

"But you believe he did it?" Lois had tried to make her question sound like an accusation, but it came out sounding pathetically hopeful that there had been some new development.

"The forensic team is almost finished," Henderson said, "but they've found nothing that changes our assessment of the case."

"That Clark shot Mayson?"

Henderson nodded grimly.

Her protest leapt to her lips, but Lois swallowed it down. There was nothing to be gained from declaring Clark's innocence again. "What do you have?"

"A witness. And several eyewitness statements that support the main witness."

"Who's the witness?"

Henderson paused. "Do I need to remind you this is off the record?"

"No," Lois scoffed. "I'm here to protect Clark, not to get a story. I'll be doing everything I can to keep this out of the papers."

"The witness is Mrs McCreadie, Clark's neighbour."

"What did she see?"

"It seems Mrs McCreadie's life centres around her cat and watching over her neighbourhood."

"Go on."

"Her cat was sick. Therefore, she was up late. The cat was in a basket near the window. Mrs McCreadie saw it all."

"Saw what?" Lois asked, aghast. "Is she saying she actually saw Clark shoot Mayson?"

"No. She —"

"Then it's circumstantial."

Henderson reached behind him for two clean coffee cups and two sachets of sugar. He positioned the coffee cups on the table between them. "This is Clark's apartment," he said. He pointed to the handle of the cup. "And this is his front door."

Lois nodded.

"This is Mrs McCreadie's apartment." He positioned the handle of second cup perpendicular to the first. "This is her second floor window. It overlooks Clark's door."

Lois had never noticed the proximity of the window or that it provided such a perfect opportunity to monitor the comings and goings of Clark's apartment.

"We checked out the sick-cat story with the vet," Henderson said. "He confirms that Mrs McCreadie left his surgery about nine-thirty. She met Clark at his front door just before ten."

It was strangely comforting to know Clark's whereabouts less than four and a half hours ago. A lot had happened since then, but it seemed like the first real connection Lois had had with him in a week. "Was Clark leaving?" she asked. "Or coming home?"

"Coming home. He said he'd worked late. Mrs McCreadie had noticed a blonde woman visiting him regularly, so she made a light comment about him possibly expecting company."

"Mayson?" Lois said, trying to keep the tumult of her emotions from encroaching into her question.

"Yes. We showed Mrs McCreadie a photo of Mayson, and she positively identified her as the woman who has been visiting Clark."

"What did Clark say about expecting company?" Lois asked.

"Mrs McCreadie said he was noncommittal. He didn't say he was expecting her."

"Perhaps he wasn't too happy to discover she had been spying on him."

"Maybe. They talked for a short time — mostly about her sick cat. Then they parted ways — Mrs McCreadie to her apartment, Clark to his." Henderson put one of the sugar sachets in the cup representing Clark's apartment.

"When did Mayson arrive?"

"About ten minutes later."

"She went into Clark's apartment?"

"Yes." The second sachet went into the cup. "But the door was left open."

"Open?"

"From her vantage point, the witness couldn't see into the apartment, but she could see the splash of light outside, indicating the door was open."

Lois nodded, not sure how that was relevant.

"It was probably because of the open door that she was able to hear some of the interaction between Mayson and Clark," Henderson said.

"Interaction?"

"She heard screaming. A woman screaming."

"Screaming in fear? Anger?"

"Anger, she thought."

"Did she hear anyone respond?"

"No."

"Did she hear anything specific? Words?"

Henderson fidgeted with the sugar sachets. "She only heard one line clearly."

"And that was?"

"She heard Mayson scream, 'You cheated on me, Clark.'"

Lois shook her head. "Clark wouldn't do that."

"We don't know that he did," Henderson said. "But the fact that Mayson accused him of it gives us a possible motive."

"What motive?" Lois said scornfully.

Henderson sighed. "I know Clark, too," he said. "I know he always seemed to be an honest, straight-up guy."

"Now you think he's a cheat and a murderer," Lois said.

"All I'm saying is that this wouldn't be the first time someone who lives very honourably has panicked when faced with the possibility of a tarnished reputation."

Lois snorted. "Does that really sound like Clark Kent to you?"

"No," Henderson admitted. "But I have to keep coming back to the concrete evidence." His gaze dwelt on the cup. "Two people in one room. One is shot, the other runs away."

"What else did the witness say?"

"Five or six minutes after she arrived, Mayson left Clark's apartment." Henderson took one sachet from the cup and held it a couple of inches from the cups. "She was moving quickly and appeared upset. Clark followed her, caught up to her, and they had a quick conversation. Clark reached out for her, but she swung at his hand and then ran away. He walked back to his apartment and shut the door." The sachet demonstration copied his words — one back in the cup, one tucked into Henderson's hand.

"So we know Mayson was with Clark, and she was alive when she left?" Lois said.

"That time, yes."

"She came back?"

"A bit over half an hour later, Mayson returned."

"Why would she come back?"

"There was a baking pan on the stairs. Mayson's sister has already identified as being a Christmas present from their grandmother. Our best guess is that Mayson realised it was over with Clark, so she went back to get the pan."

"Did she go into his apartment?" Lois asked.

"Yes. She strode up to Clark's door, the door opened, and she went in." Henderson put the second sachet in the cup. "Within a couple of minutes, a shot was fired. Mrs McCreadie said it was about ten-fifty, and the early forensic investigations don't disagree." Henderson stared at the cup and muttered, "Two people. One shot." He angrily flung one sachet across the table and crumpled the other in his hand. "It's such a mess."

Lois agreed, but she had too many questions to dwell on that now. "How can the witness be sure Clark didn't leave his apartment in that half an hour between Mayson's visits?"

Henderson pulled himself away from where he'd been glaring at the cups. "After hearing the shot, Mrs McCreadie watched the area below, not moving from the window," he said listlessly. "Less than five minutes later, Clark emerged from the door. Initially, Mrs McCreadie believed someone — probably the blonde woman — had fired at Clark and he was making an escape. She called 911, and she swears she didn't take her eyes

from the door until the police arrived.”

“She didn’t see anyone else leave?”

“No. She is positive that no one did. She was very worried about the safety of the police in entering the apartment.” Henderson met her eyes. “I was with Wolfe. There was no one in that apartment, Lois. Only Mayson.”

“She was already dead?”

“Yeah. Single shot to the back of the head.”

“She was on the stairs,” Lois said, remembering her glimpse of the body.

“Yes. From the way she fell, it seems most likely she was heading for the door.”

Lois said nothing as she reviewed Henderson’s story. Given the facts as presented, it wasn’t difficult to see how he — and Wolfe — had concluded that Clark had to be guilty.

But she couldn’t accept it.

Clark wouldn’t shoot anyone.

“You said you have other statements?” Lois asked.

“Yeah. The shot caused a few people to look out of their windows. Three others say they saw a figure running away from the apartment.”

“A figure?” Lois said quickly. “Did anyone identify Clark?”

“Mrs McCreadie did. She is sure it was him.”

“And the others?”

“One wouldn’t attempt any identification. When pressed, one said it could have been Clark. The other one said she didn’t know his name, but she thought it was the man who lives in the apartment at the end.”

“Mayson died just before eleven o’clock?”

“Yes.”

“So it was dark. It could have been someone else —”

“That area is quite well lit at night.”

“The witness is absolutely sure it was Clark?” Lois said.

“Yes. She is.”

“He wouldn’t run away. It wasn’t him.”

“Then do you have an explanation for how Clark got out of the apartment? He was there earlier. He was seen going into his apartment after the confrontation with Mayson. He wasn’t there when I arrived with Wolfe.”

“Has the forensic team finished?” Lois asked.

“Yes. Fifteen minutes ago.”

“And Mayson ... Mayson has been taken away?”

“Yes.”

But the cop would still be on guard in case Clark returned to his home. “I want to go into Clark’s apartment,” Lois said. “I’ve been there many times. I’ll know if something is different. I might notice something the forensic team didn’t realise is significant.”

“You can’t —”

“OK.”

“Lo-is.” Henderson’s tone said he hadn’t been fooled by her quick compliance. “Please leave it for tonight. If you go there by yourself and you do find something the forensic guys missed, you won’t have any way of proving you didn’t tamper with evidence to try to shift the suspicion from Clark.”

“I will if you come with me.”

Henderson didn’t seem at all surprised by her suggestion. “I will,” he said. “But not tonight.”

“Bill!” Lois cried. “The entire Metropolis PD has decided that Clark Kent is a killer. He’s out there somewhere, and —”

“Lois, it’s late. I’ve been on duty since seven o’clock this morning. I start again in just over four hours. Part of our city collapsed on top of hundreds of our citizens, and someone from the DA’s department has been found dead in the apartment of a prominent reporter. Tomorrow —”

“By then, Clark will probably have been charged, convicted, and sentenced.”

“I’ll meet you at Clark’s apartment at six-thirty, tomorrow morning,” Henderson said. “We’ll look through it together. Then, if you find anything, I can verify it.”

“But you don’t think we’ll find anything, do you?”

Henderson dejectedly shook his head. “I don’t know what happened between Clark and Mayson, but I can’t see any alternative to Clark having shot her. I wish I could.”

“No,” Lois said. “Clark wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t. I’m sure of it.”

“We can never be sure of how someone else will react under pressure, Lois,” Henderson said. “If this job has taught me only one thing, it’s that.”

“Well, I haven’t learned that lesson yet,” Lois said. “And I’m going to prove that Clark didn’t kill Mayson.”

Henderson slowly rose to his feet, exhaustion and despair shrouding him like a heavy cloak. “Promise me you won’t go to Clark’s apartment tonight,” he said.

“Is the cop going to be there all night?”

“Yes. And I’ve already told him that if he lets anyone in — particularly you — he won’t get even a sniff of a promotion for ten years.”

Lois was smart enough to know when she’d been outmanoeuvred. “Six-thirty?” she said.

“Yes. I’ll be there.”

“And if anything happens before then, you’ll call me?”

“Yes.”

Lois stood, too. “He didn’t do it, Bill,” she said. “Clark couldn’t shoot anyone.”

“Do you have any idea where he might be?” Henderson said. “Because the longer he is missing, the worse it looks for him.”

“I looked for him,” Lois said, “but I couldn’t find him.”

“He didn’t come to you? Your apartment?”

“No. I went back and checked.” A sudden thought exploded in her mind. “He’s not at Northwood, is he? Doing his job?”

“No,” Henderson said. “Every cop there is looking out for him.” He opened the door of the interview room, and they walked out together. “Want to share a cab home?”

“Are you worried I’ll try to get into Clark’s apartment?”

“Yes,” he said. “And that is only going to make things worse for Clark.”

Henderson had been more candid than she had any right to expect. And although he believed Clark had fired the shot that had killed Mayson, he was trying to get the best outcome for Clark. Lois nodded. “I won’t try to get into Clark’s apartment until tomorrow morning,” she promised.

“I’ll be there.”

They walked out of the police station and waited for a cab in the cold night air.

Lois paced up and down her living room.

Everything within her protested about being here. Her city was embroiled in a life and death battle, victims were trapped, Superman was heading up a massive rescue effort.

Every reporter in the city of Metropolis would be there.

Except for her.

She was at home.

But Clark was in trouble. And missing.

She swung around abruptly to avoid crashing into the wall and tried — for the thousandth time — to find a hole in the case Henderson had outlined.

Lois had to admit that it seemed clear-cut. And with anyone other than Clark, she would have been swayed to accept the obvious.

Perry had a saying about ducks ...

And this looked unambiguous. The police case established opportunity. Motive. And they had a damning witness statement.

But Clark ...

Clark didn't shoot people. And he didn't run away from his mistakes.

The only possible reason for his continuing absence was that he didn't know what had happened to Mayson.

He had to be somewhere else.

But where?

The one place he regularly visited was Smallville, but if he'd been planning to go home to see his folks, he would have told Perry.

Lois forced herself to sit on the sofa. She hauled in a humungous breath and slowed the commotion buzzing through her mind.

She closed her eyes.

Imagined the cups and sugar sachets.

And carefully reviewed every detail Henderson had given her.

Clark arriving home ...

Mayson arriving ...

The argument ...

Mayson's angry words –

Lois's eyes shot open.

Mayson had accused Clark of cheating on her.

Lois's reaction had been to jump to his defence. But in doing that, she had missed the real significance.

There was a third person in this.

The other woman.

Clark — probably upset by the confrontation with Mayson — had slipped out of his apartment, unseen by the witness, and gone to the other woman, seeking support and comfort.

He was probably with her now.

As a theory, it was patchy. It didn't explain who had killed Mayson or how the killer had entered Clark's apartment unseen or how Clark's neighbour had identified Clark as the person leaving after the shot had been fired.

But it did explain Clark's disappearance.

He'd gone to his lover. They were probably tucked up in bed together, oblivious to collapsed tunnels and shattering reputations.

Lois waited for the roll of relief. Clark was probably safe.

But it wasn't relief that swept through her.

It was jealousy.

The thought of Clark in bed — in love — with someone else felt like splinters of glass piercing her heart.

She had no right to feel jealous.

Clark had offered her his love. She had told him she would only ever love him as a friend.

So he had quietly found someone else.

So quietly, Mayson hadn't known. Mayson had convinced herself that she had something with Clark, only to find out that his heart lay elsewhere.

She'd been blind — but not as blind as Lois had been.

And she certainly hadn't deserved to die.

Who had killed her?

The most likely scenario was someone seeking revenge for something related to her work in the DA's department.

The killer had followed her to Clark's apartment, killed her, and run off. Perhaps he had donned some of Clark's clothes, trying to swing the glare of suspicion to Clark.

Perhaps Mrs McCreadie had looked away and missed the moment when the real killer had arrived at Clark's apartment. Perhaps she had only *thought* the person running away was Clark. It had been dark. And she could have been shaken by the sound of gunfire.

It didn't answer all of the accusations levelled at Clark, but it was more plausible than believing he had killed a woman and then run away.

So ...

If Clark didn't know about Mayson's death, when he found out, he was going to be upset, but he wouldn't be devastated.

He could give the police the details of his alibi, and then they, Clark and Lois, would investigate together to find Mayson's murderer.

Lois would work alongside her partner, knowing that when their day was over, he would return to the woman he loved.

Lois's tears erupted.

She had exactly what she'd said she wanted from Clark.

For them to be friends. Partners.

His voice cannoned around inside her head.

I have been in love with you for a long time. You must have known.

Had she known?

Had she known that Clark Kent was in love with her?

Yes, she'd known.

But she'd run away.

Into the arms of a criminal.

And now, it was too late.

Her tears of loss surged and spilled, hammering her until her throat felt parched and her heart felt dry.

She shakily rose from the sofa and turned on the television.

The news channel was covering the rescue live.

The reporters and interviewees were gushing in their praise of Superman. The death toll stood at fourteen. Estimates were that it would have been fifty times that without the help of the superhero.

It had taken nearly four hours, but all of the survivors had been freed from the tunnel and transported to the hospital. Without Superman's help, it would have taken days to reach the front of the train where it had ploughed into the collapsed debris, bringing another section down on itself. The reporter said it was believed that Superman was now recovering the bodies of the victims.

The coverage jumped to an interview with a city engineer. He warned commuters that the entire subway system would be closed down until all tunnels had been checked. When pushed by the reporter to give an estimated timeframe, he said that Superman's involvement would hasten the process, but the priority was safety, not convenience.

Lois knew she should be there.

It was going to be a big story. Now that all the survivors had been rescued, there would be questions asked about public safety, about negligence by the rail authorities. Current maintenance practices would be scrutinised. There would be follow-up stories as the survivors battled their injuries. The death toll would be carefully monitored. Loved ones would be reunited. There would be tributes to those who had died. There would be stories of lucky escapes and stories of the tragedy of being caught in the wrong place.

This event would be current for at least a week.

And the Daily Planet was relying on Ralph.

She should go.

Perhaps she would be able to get a few words with Superman. Perhaps she would be able to glean some small insight that would allow her to write a story to make a contribution to the Planet's coverage.

She was a reporter.

Perhaps, when Clark heard about the disaster, he would come to Northwood. Or perhaps he would call her cell phone.

Perhaps, she would have the chance to break the news about Mayson and warn him that the police wanted to speak to him. Perhaps they could go to the police station together.

Lois hauled herself from her sofa, turned off the television, picked up her bag, and left her apartment in pursuit of a story.

Part 6

Detective Wolfe replaced the phone and stared at the timeline

he had collated.

At ten-thirty the previous evening, Superman had rescued a small child who had been trapped down a drain. He'd left about ten minutes later.

The evidence said Mayson Drake had been shot at ten-fifty.

At ten past eleven, Superman had broken up a fight between two young men who had had too much to drink.

At twenty past eleven, Superman had arrived at Clark Kent's apartment, where Wolfe and Henderson had been with the body.

What had Superman been doing in the twenty minutes after Mayson Drake's death?

Twenty minutes was not a long time.

But for Superman, it was long enough.

Had Kent contacted the superhero? Had the superhero flown his friend away from Metropolis?

Had Superman's surprise at Mayson's death been an act?

Surely, if the man could see through walls, he would have known before entering the apartment.

Immediately after conducting a preliminary assessment of the scene — the victim was dead and the perpetrator was gone — Wolfe had spoken to the woman who had called 911.

It had taken less than two minutes for his questions to draw from Mrs McCreadie the gist of her testimony. He'd called in and ordered that every patrol car, every officer, be looking for Clark Kent.

Much of Metropolis had been awake all night.

Yet no one had seen Kent.

No one.

Not the cab drivers. Not the airport workers. Not the cops.

No one.

How could a man disappear?

He couldn't.

Unless ...

Unless he had some help.

Super-help.

Wolfe picked up the phone again and dialed Perry White's direct number.

"Perry White."

"Detective Wolfe, Mr White."

The short silence was telling, indicating the editor knew about Mayson's death and probably also knew his reporter was the primary suspect. "What can I do for you, Detective?" White asked with cool formality.

"Where is Clark Kent's home town?"

The silence came again. "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm investigating a murder," Wolfe snapped — not because he was particularly annoyed, but because he wanted to remind White that he had the power to lay charges for obstructing an investigation.

"Smallville, Kansas," White said, although his reluctance seared unambiguously down the phone line.

"Thank you." Wolfe went to replace the phone.

"Detective?"

"Yes?"

"Have you found Clark?" White asked, his voice burdened with anxiety. "Why do you need to contact his family?"

"We haven't found him yet." Wolfe figured the answer to the second question was too obvious to waste his breath.

"When you find Clark ... if he needs anything ... a lawyer ... *anything* ... get him to call me."

Wolfe made a grunt that could have signified agreement.

"Thanks for the information, Mr White." Then he jabbed at the hooks and disconnected the line before the editor could ask any more questions.

Wolfe tapped a couple of buttons to reach the front desk and asked the receptionist to put him through to the Sheriff's Office in Smallville, Kansas.

Superman rounded a gentle curve, and the back of the train came into view. He landed in a quiet and darkened area, unnoticed by the small team of experts discussing the preliminary steps in clearing the tunnel. He'd systematically flown through the entire subway network, checking for any structural defects. They hadn't been affected by the collapse in this section, but removing the debris — including the train — was going to be a long and precarious undertaking.

He could stay and help. He could reduce the time from days to hours. He could minimise the chance of a further collapse and reduce the risk of further injury.

But ...

The past several hours had felt as if he'd suspended his real life and become enmeshed in the evanescent isolation of the underground world.

He'd played the part of the calm, confident rescuer, but inside, the knowledge of what awaited him followed like an unrelenting stalker.

He was worried about Lois. He had taken the gun from Lana and gambled that the lateness of the hour and her unfamiliarity with Metropolis would be enough to secure Lois's safety.

What if he'd miscalculated? Lois had been in her apartment last night, but if she'd heard about the tunnel collapse, she would have come out, chasing the story.

Mayson was dead. Thoughts of her had constantly drifted through his anxiety for Lois, accentuated by the atmosphere of death, the stench of fear, and the sight of bloodied bodies.

Although he never could have loved her, the grief at her passing clouded his heart with sorrow.

The rescues had been physically demanding. More than once, he had carefully lifted a portion of crumpled steel and held it aloft so that others could go in, treating the injured and cutting free the trapped.

Superman leant against the wall of the tunnel and let his head drop low. He felt utterly drained, but he knew it wasn't the physical demands that had left him feeling so empty and fatigued.

It was the emotional demands. The need to reassure frightened people. The need to hold the hand of a trapped mother whose baby he had lifted unconscious from her arms. The need to grieve with an elderly woman pressed against the body of her deceased son. The need to push back anxiety. To alleviate shock. To ease pain. To stand in the gap between the victims and their fear.

Now, he was filthy. His suit was covered in a cocktail of grease, dirt, and blood.

He still had reserves of physical strength. If anyone had needed him, he could have continued.

But inside, he felt hollow. A big, vacuous nothing had sucked the life from him.

The people around him — the other rescuers and the rescued — thought he was a hero. They had showered him with their gratitude and respect.

How would they feel if they knew he was a murder suspect?

It was time to face his accusers.

He should look for Lois first. He couldn't do anything until he knew she was safe.

Would she be at the train station? Had news of the collapse reached her? Had she tried to contact him so they could cover the story together?

If she had, she would know he was missing.

Did she believe he had killed Mayson?

That would hurt. Maybe even more than her rejection of his love had hurt.

They were friends.

Weren't they?

She was also a reporter. She had reported on many murders.

She had written the stories of many people considered to be decent and upright — people who had snapped or broken free from the charade and done something terrible.

Would she believe he had done that?

Taken a gun?

Fired?

And then run away?

Clark felt sick inside.

He could face anything — anything but her disappointment.

He loved her.

He needed her.

He wished he could go to her. He'd done it before after a difficult or arduous rescue. Gone to her apartment as Superman and pretended he was there to give her details for her story.

But, in truth, he'd been there because he'd needed to be with her.

Just a few moments with Lois restored him.

He needed her now.

But this time, he couldn't go to her as Superman. The Suit would give him no protection against the agony of hearing her condemn Clark as being a cold-blooded murderer.

He straightened from the tunnel wall and trudged towards the entrance. Five minutes later, he emerged, and an enthusiastic cheer rose from the gathered crowd. He lifted his head and scanned the mass of people being kept at bay by a rope barrier that was reinforced by a ring of police officers.

The applause made him uncomfortable. He had never particularly liked being the centre of attention, but now it felt like a prickly blanket being pressed against his skin.

He stopped for a moment, pretending to acknowledge the crowd, but in reality, he was searching for Lois. Her heartbeat.

He found it — a steady rhythm of comfort amid the dissonance of so many other noises.

She was all right.

He skimmed across the gathered mass of people and found her.

Their eyes met.

He saw her apprehension. Her confusion. Her shock.

She'd been crying. He could see the tiny beads of dried tears scattered on her eyelashes.

She was here. Lana hadn't hurt her.

But she was here. Openly here. Where Lana could find her.

She was here. She wasn't looking for Clark. She wasn't trying to solve Mayson's murder.

She believed it had already been solved.

Whatever case the police had against Clark, Lois had accepted its validity.

She believed he was a killer and had moved on to the next story.

Inside, Superman — hero of a shaken city — died a little.

The head engineer came up to him. "How is it?" he asked anxiously.

"The rest of the tunnels are structurally sound," Superman reported woodenly. "But that could be compromised during the removal of the train. Take every precaution."

"Will you stay and help? Your strength would be invaluable."

A hand grasped his arm, and Clark looked around to see Detective Wolfe.

A series of questions bombarded his brain. Did Wolfe know Superman was the murder suspect? Had he connected Clark's disappearance with Superman's involvement in the rescue? Had Lana revealed his secret?

"Superman?" Wolfe said. "Would you mind coming to the police station, please?"

"The station?" Clark said. "Why?"

"We need to talk to you about what you saw down there. Specifically, whether there was any evidence of sabotage."

They thought someone had done it deliberately? Clark had been concentrating on the people who had needed his help, not looking for reasons why the tunnel had fallen in. "I didn't see anything," he said as the pressure of passed time squeezed against him. He needed to get away and become Clark Kent, murder suspect.

Wolfe's grip tightened. "I would really appreciate it if you would come with me," he said in a low, determined voice. "We want to avoid speculation in the media."

Speculation about what? And why was Wolfe — the homicide detective working the Mayson Drake case — here now, wanting to question Superman about the collapsed tunnel?

Wolfe had to know. Superman's identity was no longer a secret.

But Wolfe seemed willing to play along with the charade — publicly, at least.

"OK," Superman said with an apologetic glance to the head engineer. Clark let them lead him towards the police car. As he slid into the back seat, the cheers and applause of the people jarred against his inner isolation and turmoil.

They drove the hero away. And although he'd looked, Clark hadn't been able to see Lois again.

What if it had become public?

That Clark Kent was wanted for murder?

And that Superman was Clark Kent?

No. Clark calmed himself. If both of those details were known, the response to his appearance wouldn't have been so effusively positive.

Where was Lana?

Had she come forward?

What had happened while he was in the tunnel?

How much time had passed? The covering of darkness above the lit streets hadn't yet begun to disperse.

What was he going to say? When he finally faced their questions? How was he going to explain that, during the time of Mayson's murder, Clark Kent hadn't actually been anywhere?

Without an alibi, he was defenceless against their accusations.

How was he going to protect Lois while he was inside a police cell?

Should he tell the police that Lana had been in his apartment?

After all this time, it was going to appear as if he'd spent hours fabricating a lame excuse. And even if he said Lana had been in his apartment, how could he substantiate that fact?

He had to tell the police about Lana's threats. He doubted it would help prove his innocence — his credibility was going to be razed by his unwillingness to answer some questions truthfully. And mentioning her name would leave him vulnerable to her blurting out his secret.

But, if Lana was at the police station glibly informing them that Clark Kent was Superman, she couldn't be tracking Lois.

If Lois's safety could be bought at the cost of his secret, there was no question he would be willing to pay.

But that was for the future. Right now, he was here as Superman. He needed to answer their questions — whether they were about the subway collapse or Mayson's death — and get out of the station quickly.

Perhaps, while being questioned, he would find out more about the case against Clark. Perhaps he could use his hearing and vision to determine if Lana were at the station.

Perhaps that would help him decide whether his first priority was to be Clark and face the police, or to be Superman and protect Lois.

They stopped outside the police station, and Clark got out of the vehicle. As Wolfe accompanied him into the building, Clark said, "I'm filthy. Can I go and clean up, first?"

"This won't take long," Wolfe said. "I have a few questions I

want to ask you.”

Resigned to the fact that he couldn't walk — or fly — away without raising suspicion, Clark followed Wolfe into an interview room. A few moments later, Inspector Henderson walked in, shut the door, and sat behind Wolfe.

Clark waited.

“Great job on the rescue,” Wolfe said. “Several hundred people owe you their lives.”

Clark nodded as he tried to focus his hearing. He couldn't distinguish Lana's voice.

Wolfe took a piece of paper from the inner pocket of his jacket and unfolded it. “At ten-thirty last night, you rescued a little boy who had fallen down a drain.”

“Yes.”

“Approximately forty minutes later, you broke up a fight between two young men.”

Clark nodded, trying to appear nonchalant despite the increasing tension pulling through his shoulders and into his neck.

“During those forty minutes, Mayson Drake was killed.”

So this wasn't about the subway tragedy. Clark bit down on his exclamation of innocence as he stole a glance to Henderson. The inspector's face was blank.

“About ten minutes after the fight incident, you arrived at Clark Kent's apartment,” Wolfe continued.

So far, it didn't seem as if Wolfe knew he was interviewing Clark Kent. Deciding silence was his ally, Clark said nothing.

“It's what happened between Ms Drake's murder and your appearance at the apartment that interests me,” Wolfe said, placing the sheet of paper of the table and sitting back in his seat.

“I didn't see anything,” Clark stated earnestly. “I didn't hear the gunshot. I didn't see who was with Mayson.”

“Did Kent contact you at any time during the evening?”

“No,” Superman said. It was the truth.

“I think he did,” Wolfe said.

The blunt conviction of the statement felt a spurt of icy water to his face. Clark smothered his gasp and said nothing.

“I think Kent panicked after he shot Mayson Drake,” Wolfe said. “Perhaps it was an accident. Perhaps it was self-defence. Perhaps it was provocation. But I think he ran away and then he contacted you. I think you took him someplace where we wouldn't be able to find him.”

The web of suspicion closed in. Clark had known he would be questioned as Clark. He hadn't prepared to face questions as Superman.

“When was the last time you saw Clark Kent?” Wolfe asked.

“I didn't fly him anywhere,” Superman replied.

“Do you know his family?”

Clark's heart sank. “I've met them.”

“Have you ever been to their home? In Smallville, Kansas?”

“Yes.”

“When was the last time you were there?”

Clark made a quick decision that, in this instance, he needed to tell the truth. “I went there after I'd seen you at Clark's apartment,” he admitted.

“Did you take Kent with you?”

“No. I flew there alone.”

“Why did you go to his home?”

“Because I didn't want his parents to find out about this when they read the papers or heard the news in the morning.”

“What did you tell them?”

“That Mayson Drake had been killed in Clark's apartment and the police wanted to talk with him.”

“What did they say?”

“They were shocked, of course. They were concerned about their son. And they were sorry that a life had been lost.”

“Did they say when they had last had contact with Kent?”

“No.”

“Did you ask them if he had contacted them recently?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I had awoken them from sleep. They were upset. I talked to them for a while. Then I left.”

“Did you take them anywhere? Bring them back to Metropolis?”

“No. I didn't.”

“Why not?”

“They're Clark's parents,” Superman said.

“Your point being?”

“I try to avoid appearing to be close to anyone. For their safety.”

“You could have brought them here secretly.”

“You told me Clark was going to be investigated. I thought that could include questioning his parents about any contact they'd had with him. If they had left Smallville and arrived in Metropolis a short time later, I thought —”

“You wanted to keep your part in this hidden?” Wolfe snapped.

“I had nowhere to take them,” Clark said, clinging to his composure. “I couldn't take them to Clark's apartment.”

“Are you aware they have left their home?”

“No. I wasn't aware of that.”

“Do you know where they are?”

“Driving to the airport, I assume.”

“You didn't offer to go back this morning and fly them to Metropolis?”

“No.”

Wolfe nodded, although Clark wasn't at all sure that it represented acceptance of his answers. “Do you think Kent killed Mayson?”

“I wasn't there.”

“Where were you? After the drain rescue and before breaking up the fight?”

“Patrolling.”

“Patrolling where?”

“Metropolis is a big city.”

“Do you have an alibi for that time?”

He had been with Lois for a few minutes. But remembering Wolfe's reaction to Superman visiting Clark, he shrank back from mentioning that. “No.”

“So despite Metropolis being a big city, there were forty minutes when absolutely nothing happened requiring Superman's help?”

“I didn't see anything needing my help.”

“When you patrol, what are you looking for?”

“Anywhere I can help.”

“You listen?”

“Yes.”

“But you didn't hear a gunshot?”

“No. I didn't.”

“Why did you come to Kent's apartment?”

“I drop in there sometimes.”

“The timing of this particular visit suggests this was more than a casual visit.”

“Until the subway collapse, it was a quiet night.”

“Kent had been seeing a lot of Mayson Drake,” Wolfe said. “Wouldn't that be awkward? If you were to ‘drop in’ when he's entertaining a woman?”

“That has never happened.”

“Did you know Kent was seeing Mayson?”

“I didn't know he was ‘seeing’ her.”

“Did Kent ever discuss Mayson Drake with you?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“If there was a chance you’d interrupt a private moment, wouldn’t you look into his apartment before landing on the balcony?”

“I don’t look into apartments.”

“So when you landed on the balcony, you didn’t know we were there? You didn’t know Mayson’s body was there?”

“No.”

“I think you didn’t need to look because you already knew what you’d see. I think you’d already talked to Kent.”

Clark looked straight at Wolfe. “When I landed on Clark’s balcony, I had no knowledge of what had happened to Ms Drake.”

“How important are friends to you, Superman?”

“I’m not in a position to have close friends.”

“Would you lie to protect a friend?”

Clark paused. In some ways, his entire life — both of them — was a lie. “Superman stands for truth,” he said quietly.

Wolfe’s expression indicated he’d taken the answer as an admission that Superman would lie. “Do you know where Kent is now?”

“I have been in a tunnel for most of the night.”

“Answer the question, Superman. Do you know where Kent is now?”

“How could I possibly know the whereabouts of anyone who wasn’t in the subway?”

“If you’d taken Kent somewhere before going into the subway, it is reasonable to assume he would still be there.”

“I didn’t take Clark Kent anywhere.”

Wolfe’s eyes hardened with disbelief. “Can you shed any light on why Kent has disappeared?”

Clark forced his weary mind to cooperate. “Many people will wake up soon, having slept through the night unaware of either the tunnel collapse or Ms Drake’s murder,” he said.

“Are you saying Kent could be asleep somewhere?”

“I’m saying it’s hardly unusual to sleep through the night hours,” Clark said.

“He’s a reporter. His partner, Lois Lane, was at Northwood. Would it be usual for him to sleep in those circumstances?”

—

Clark sighed, wishing now that he hadn’t tried to suggest a possible explanation for Clark’s disappearance. As he was trying to frame a way to say he didn’t know about the routine of newspaper reporters without actually lying, Wolfe fired his next question.

“Is there any point in continuing to search for Kent in Metropolis?”

“Am I going to be charged with anything?”

“If I can prove you knew Kent had killed Mayson Drake and took him somewhere to avoid arrest, you will be charged with obstruction of justice.”

“Can I leave now?”

“Will you go and get Kent? And bring him to the station?”

“If I find Clark, I will strongly advise him to come to the station.”

“You can leave now.”

Superman stood and passed both cops as he strode to the door.

“Oh, Superman?”

Clark turned at Wolfe’s question.

“Did you see any evidence of sabotage in the subway?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Thank you.”

Superman walked out of the interview room, his mind a chaotic mess of uncertainty. If he came back now as Clark, Wolfe was going to believe Superman had taken Clark, had hidden him, had lied about it, and had bowed to Wolfe’s pressure.

Clark Kent’s reputation had taken a battering. The longer he stayed away, the worse it would get.

But if he went back now — as Clark — Superman’s reputation would be irreparably damaged.

If Clark were charged with murder, Superman would be charged with being an accessory after the fact.

Except if Clark were detained, Superman would disappear.

Clark walked past the counter and looked into the early morning murkiness beyond the wide glass doors. A crowd had gathered. Reporters. Photographers. Members of the general public.

Waiting for him.

Clark groaned silently. Was this about the subway collapse? Or did they know the real reason Wolfe had insisted on speaking with Superman?

The sliding doors opened, and he stepped past the barrier of police officers guarding their station.

“Superman!” the crowd called. “Superman.”

A cacophony of questions rose. Questions about the subway. Nothing about Mayson Drake. Or Clark Kent.

Perhaps he should just fly off.

But then the crowd — including reporters and photographers — would still be here when he returned as Clark.

Perhaps if he answered a few questions, they would leave to write up their stories.

He gestured to a female reporter from LNN, hoping the Superman guise would mask his impatience.

He answered her question, his mind tumbling ahead.

He had to find Lois and ensure she was safe.

He had to look for Lana.

He had to get back to being Clark Kent.

The man accused of murder.

The moment the elevator doors slid open, Lois hurried through them, making a beeline for her desk. While her computer was logging on, she sorted through her notes. After Superman had left with Wolfe, she’d found Jimmy and yanked him away from Ralph, informing the young photographer that he was working with her now. She’d talked to a few bystanders who had spent most of the night at the site. She’d slipped under the barrier to ask one of the paramedics in a waiting ambulance about the injuries sustained and had been lucky enough to be there — with Jimmy — when a small boy had been reunited with his mother.

She didn’t have enough for overall coverage of the story, but she had enough to write a contributing piece.

At any other time, the thought of being a support act to Ralph’s butchering of events would have turned her stomach, but right now, she didn’t care. All she wanted was her partner back.

Lois glanced up to the elevator, hoping the doors would open and Clark would swing in with that long hands-in-pockets stride, oblivious to everything that had happened in his absence.

But the doors remained stubbornly shut.

Perry came from his office as Lois opened a new file. “Did you find Clark?” he said.

“No.”

“He wasn’t at Northwood?”

“No.”

“Did you see the victims? Do you know for sure he wasn’t on that train?”

“I checked with the Medical Examiner. Only one victim was a young male, and he was an African American.”

“What about the injured?”

“It’s too early to get any information from the hospitals regarding individual patients,” Lois said. “But I saw Superman at the site. I’m sure he would have told me if he’d rescued Clark.”

Perry rubbed his fingers across his unshaven cheek. “What do you know about the murder?”

“Nothing I can use in a story.”

“You’ve got something from the subway disaster?” he asked with a nod to her computer.

“Just a side-story. And Jimmy has a couple of good photos. Mother and young son reunion.” Lois glanced up from her screen. Perry looked tired. Despondent. Worried. “Sorry I wasn’t there to get you the whole story.”

“You had to try to help Clark,” Perry said. He turned and walked dejectedly back to his office.

Lois’s fingers pounded the keyboard as she quickly wrote her story.

She saved it.

She rushed to the coffee machine. She took three sips and two breaths to try to give herself some distance and then re-read her story.

It was surprisingly good. And even more unexpectedly, it had that human touch that had been so notoriously absent from her work BC.

Before Clark.

He wasn’t here, but he’d been a constant in her thoughts as she’d written, so perhaps something of his essence had permeated her work.

Satisfied, she hit ‘send’, picked up her tepid cup of bitter coffee, and went to Perry’s office.

He looked up as she entered.

“I just submitted my story,” she said. “It’s not much, but ...”

“Thanks. I appreciate you going to the site. I know you have a lot on your mind.”

“You haven’t heard from Clark?” Lois asked, realising as the words came out that it was an inane question.

“No.”

“Chief?”

“Yes?”

“Do you know anything about Clark’s personal life?”

Her question had surprised Perry. “Not really,” he said.

“Do you know if he is in a relationship?”

Perry hesitated.

“You do know something?” Lois asked in swift response to the hesitation. “Has he said something to you?”

“I would have thought that if Clark were in a relationship, you would have been one of the first people to know.”

“You think he’d confide in me?”

Perry looked as if he wished he hadn’t spoken. “I figured you would have been the other person in the relationship.”

“Clark and I are friends,” Lois said firmly. “And partners.”

It wasn’t possible to determine from Perry’s nod whether he accepted her assertion.

“Do you know of anyone else?” she persisted.

“Mayson Drake came here a few times. And as she was at Clark’s —”

“Is there anyone other than Mayson?”

“No. No one. Why?”

“Just a theory I’m working on.”

Perry tapped his pencil on his desk. “Lois?” he said in a tone that darted chills up her spine.

“What?”

“There have been leaks.”

“Leaks? About what?”

“About what happened to Mayson.”

“Well, it wasn’t going to be possible to keep it quiet for long,” Lois said. “As the deputy DA, she had a profile in this city.”

“Not just that she has died, but where she died. And the identity of the main suspect.”

“Clark’s name has been mentioned?”

“Lois ...” Perry’s long breath rattled through the silence. “As I hear it, this is about as open and shut as a murder case gets. Opportunity, witnesses ... and Clark hasn’t done himself any

favours by disappearing.”

Lois’s mouth shot open in protest, but she closed it without saying anything. She had proclaimed over and over again that Clark could not have killed Mayson, but nothing had changed.

Her protests had been about as effective as bashing a brick wall with a feather.

She needed proof. When she had proof, they would have to listen.

“The word is there were only two people in the apartment — Mayson and Clark,” Perry said

“Henderson told me that.”

“Mayson couldn’t have shot herself in the back of the head.”

Lois said nothing.

“She was facing the door,” Perry continued. “The shot came from inside the apartment.”

Lois tapped her foot a couple of times, hoping her exasperation would crackle through the atmosphere.

“Only two people were there,” Perry mumbled.

Lois rolled her eyes towards the ceiling. A mountain of ‘facts’ was not going to make her believe Clark was capable of murder.

“I called the hospital,” Perry said glumly. “Clark isn’t there.”

Lois nailed Perry with a long, hard look. “Do you really believe he could kill?” she asked.

“I ... I believe everyone can snap,” her editor replied sadly. “I’ve been in this business too long to think anything is impossible.”

Lois slowly shook her head. “Clark didn’t kill Mayson,” she said. “I know he didn’t.”

“Do you know something the police don’t know?” Perry asked with sudden hope. “Was Clark with you?”

“No. I haven’t seen him for a week.”

“How can you know he didn’t do it?”

Lois murmured her frustration. Why was she having to explain what should have been obvious to everyone who knew Clark? “Because he’s Clark.”

Perry grimaced. “That isn’t going to stand up in court, Lois.”

“This isn’t going to get to court.”

“Why not?”

“Because if I can’t prove Clark didn’t do it, I’m going to prove someone else did.” She jerked the door open.

“Lois?”

She stopped but didn’t turn back to Perry.

“If he needs anything ... I’d like to help.”

“Thanks,” she said, responding to the words, not the hopelessness so evident in his tone.

She firmly shut the door, went back to her desk, shut down her computer, picked up her bag, and hurried to the elevator.

It was a few minutes after six o’clock. She needed to get to Clark’s apartment and meet Henderson.

Part 7

Clark — now clean, but still wearing the Suit — settled on top of one of the tall Metropolis buildings. He folded his cape around his shoulders, crossed his forearms over his arched knees, and stared ahead, his eyes fixed on the door of the Daily Planet building.

Ten minutes earlier, he’d faced a barrage of questions about the subway collapse as he’d emerged from the police station. He’d given them a few answers, dredging details from a mind stilled in the tragedy and circumstances of Mayson’s death.

He’d lost patience and flown away after a few minutes. He’d washed in the middle of Hobb’s Bay, hoping the cold water would shake him loose from the cloud of numbness that had engulfed him. After drying himself and the Suit, he’d floated above Metropolis, searching for Lois.

Finding her had been as simple as looking through the Daily Planet building. She’d been at her desk, feverishly typing up her story. He’d scanned her monitor and read a few lines of her copy

— enough to realise she was writing about the subway disaster.
Not the murder of Mayson Drake.

He hadn't been able to decide whether that brought relief or disappointment.

Perhaps he just wasn't capable of feeling anything with any clarity.

The subway story was huge. But the death of a deputy DA? Surely, that was going to be a big story, too?

Particularly for Lois. She had to know the murder had happened in her partner's apartment.

Had she accepted his guilt so easily? And moved on?

His answer had come a few minutes later.

Lois had risen from her desk and marched into Perry's office. Clark had willed himself to fly away.

He'd failed so comprehensively that not only had he continued his surveillance, he'd increased it by listening to their conversation. He'd justified his actions by telling himself that *not* acquiring information before facing the police was just plain gullible.

He'd heard Lois ask Perry about Clark's personal life.

Perry had replied that if Clark had been in a relationship, he would have thought it would have been with Lois.

She'd repeated the line that had become their mantra. We're friends. And partners.

The torment of that truth had risen up all over again, scorching new welts on wounds that were still laid bare and festering.

Perry had commented that Mayson couldn't have shot herself in the back of the head. He added that the shot had come from inside the apartment.

Lois — his friend and partner — hadn't protested.

Perry had said more, but it had blurred into a haze of words as Clark had waited for just one thing — the woman he loved to question whether Clark Kent had really killed Mayson Drake.

She hadn't. She hadn't questioned the details. She hadn't challenged the assumption that Clark had been holding the gun that had ended Mayson Drake's life.

With a heart that felt like a chunk of cold hard kryptonite, Clark had turned away, snapping off his hearing and taking refuge in the nearest tall building.

He'd sat down. Below him, the city had begun to stir in response to the gathering daylight, but Clark had been too busy grappling with the speed with which his life had disintegrated to take much notice.

The jury — the only jury he cared about — had found him guilty as charged.

He hadn't even had the chance to defend himself.

His mind tumbled back to his encounter with Lana. Where was she now? Would she really try to hurt Lois if he went to the police? Was she still watching the police station? Would she know if he went there? Had she seen Superman there? He should have looked for her while he'd been answering the questions.

Once he stepped into the police station, he would no longer have any control over his life.

He would be powerless to protect Lois.

Would the police believe him if he were to tell them about Lana's threats? Or had all his credibility been eroded by the long hours of absence?

As he watched, the door of the Daily Planet building opened and Lois walked out. Clark stood to his feet, his eyes darting around her.

No one stepped out from the shadows. She hailed a cab and got in. No one appeared. No one got into another cab and followed her.

Where was Lana?

Could he warn Lois? He couldn't as Clark. Clark was a wanted fugitive.

Could he go to her as Superman? Could he warn her and beg her to be careful?

Would she believe him? Would it moderate her behaviour? Would she take care to avoid potentially dangerous situations?

Probably not, he realised.

She would ask a whole lot of questions — questions he couldn't answer without admitting he had seen Clark. And that ... well, even with all of his superpowers, it wasn't easy to escape Lois Lane in full pursuit-of-a-story mode.

If Lana knew Clark Kent was Superman, how would she respond to Superman talking with Lois?

He had to do *something*. He had left Lana ... and now Mayson was dead.

With a whoosh, Superman flew into the Daily Planet building and landed in Perry White's office.

"Superman," the editor said, looking up at his sudden visitor with admirable composure. "I hear we have you to thank for saving many of our citizens' lives."

Clark wasn't here to be thanked. "Mr White," he said. "I believe Ms Lane could be in danger."

Perry's remained unmoved. "Lois is often in danger," he said wearily. "You know that better than anyone. How many times have you saved her life?"

"But, this time ... I'm worried."

Perry straightened a little in his seat. "What have you heard?"

Clark began to wish he'd had the equanimity to plan what he needed to say before barging into Perry's office. "I've ... I've heard ... things. That someone ... someone has made threats ... about hurting Lois."

"Lois didn't mention anything."

"She doesn't know."

"You think those threats are serious?"

"I don't know," Superman said. "But I wanted you to know."

"Have you told Henderson?"

"No."

Perry sighed. "What do you want me to do?"

"Don't let her go off by herself. Insist she tells you what she's doing and where she's going."

Perry shot him an incredulous look. "This is Lois we're talking about, right?" he said. "Lois L..." His speech stalled, his amazement faded, and he shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. "Is this about Clark?"

"She's working alone," Superman said tonelessly. "That makes her more vulnerable."

"So this *is* about Clark?"

"I just want Lois to be careful."

"Have you heard from Clark?" Perry asked. "I suppose you know the police want to question him?"

"Detective Wolfe told me."

"Has Clark contacted you?"

"The police have already asked me these questions."

Perry didn't react to the barb of impatience in Superman's reply. "Who threatened Lois?" he asked.

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Because ... because I'm worried that anything I say could increase the risk to Lois."

"That's why you haven't spoken to the police?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell Lois?"

"I think ... I don't want to be seen with her. For her own safety."

"You think she's being watched?" Perry gasped.

"It's possible."

"You think this person ... the one who made threats against Lois ... could be out of control? Could do something out of character?"

“Yes,” Superman said, glad Perry had understood.

“Why are you telling me?”

“You’re her editor.”

“You’re Superman.”

“I ... I’ve been busy in the tunnel. I ... they ... The debris needs clearing.”

Perry stared at Superman for a stretched moment with eyes that were rimmed red with exhaustion. “Are you sure about this, Superman?” he said. “Are you sure you have your facts right?”

Clark wasn’t sure about much at all anymore. Except that he would never forgive himself if Lana hurt Lois. “Please, Mr White,” he said. “If I didn’t think Lois could be in danger, I wouldn’t have come.”

Perry opened his mouth, and Clark braced himself for another question. But then, the editor sighed deeply and said, “OK, Superman. I’ll look out for her. Anything else?”

“No. Thank you.” He turned around with a swish of his cape.

“Oh, Superman?”

“Yes?”

“If you know where Clark is, or if you find him, please tell him to go to the police station.”

The question rose up Clark’s throat and leapt from his mouth. “Do you think Clark did what they’re saying? Do you think he could take a gun and shoot someone?”

“I think difficult circumstances affect all of us differently,” Perry said.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Perry’s head hung low. When he looked up, despair had etched new lines on his face. “The evidence says there were two people in Clark’s apartment when Mayson died,” he said. “Clark and Mayson. Mayson was shot.” His hands lifted from his desk, then slumped back. “Clark is like a son to me, but I don’t know what else to believe. I wish —”

But Clark had heard enough. Superman flew from the building, shooting up into the sky as shards of isolation perforated his heart.

Perry believed Clark had killed Mayson.

Lois had accepted his guilt without a whimper.

He was a murder suspect. Accused — that was bad enough. Alone — that was worse.

Lois arrived outside Clark’s apartment at eighteen minutes past six. She’d bought two cups of hot, fresh coffee from a street vendor, and now, she walked over to the cop guarding Clark’s door and offered him one.

He looked at it longingly, but then his expression turned wary. “You can’t go in,” he said.

“Henderson will be here in a minute,” Lois replied. “We’re going in together.”

With relief, the cop took the coffee and gave her a smile.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Quiet night?” Lois asked nonchalantly as she sipped from her steaming cup.

“After everyone realised there was nothing to see and returned to their warm homes,” he said. “What’s happening at the subway?”

“Superman got everyone out.”

“Casualties?”

“Fourteen, last I heard. That might rise. A paramedic said some of the injuries were serious.”

“Any sign that it was deliberate?”

“I think they’re investigating that now. Wolfe took Superman to the police station as soon as he emerged from the tunnel.”

“Wolfe?”

“Yeah. It surprised me, too,” Lois said. “I thought he was supposed to be working this case.”

The cop wrinkled his brow. “I doubt there could be any

connection between the two events, could there?”

Lois thought for a moment. “I don’t see how. Unless it was sabotage and it was linked to something Mayson was working on.”

The cop shrugged. “Perhaps resources are so stretched that Wolfe had to be pulled off this case and put onto the subway disaster.”

“Yeah,” Lois said. She breathed in the warm coffee aroma as a troupe of new ideas somersaulted across her mind.

What if Wolfe’s reason for wanting to see Superman had nothing to do with the subway tragedy? What if he’d wanted to ask questions about Mayson’s death? Or Clark’s whereabouts?

Until now, her thoughts had been so focussed on Clark, she hadn’t considered Superman. He was Clark’s friend. He would know Clark couldn’t have killed Mayson. He’d been busy all night with the rescue, but now everyone was out, she needed him to help her clear Clark’s name.

Superman hovered above the police station.

He had to go to the police. As Clark.

Regardless of the ramifications.

Regardless of the questions they would ask him.

Regardless of the tests they would want to do.

Regardless of what Lana would do.

Regardless of what Lois thought of him.

Regardless of whether his stumbling attempt to warn Perry would provide Lois with any protection at all.

Time had run out. He needed to go to the police station. He needed see if anything of Clark Kent’s life was salvageable.

Even if the consequence was being charged with murder, he had to go.

He flew into the nearby alley and spun into Clark’s clothes.

Then, with unwavering steps, he walked towards the entrance of the police station.

No hand gripped his arm. No voice shouted his name.

He took a deep breath. He couldn’t detect a trace of the scent Lana had been wearing last night.

The automatic doors slid open, and Clark walked inside.

An approaching figure cut through Lois’s clutter of theories, and she looked up to see Henderson walking briskly towards Clark’s apartment. “Good morning,” he said in the tone of a man who held the opinion that morning had come far too quickly to be considered ‘good’. He took a set of keys from his pocket and pushed one of them into the lock in Clark’s door.

“Oh,” Lois said.

Henderson glanced at her. “You thought we’d be breaking in?” he asked with a wry smile. He stepped into Clark’s apartment and switched on the light.

Lois stood at the top of the little flight of stairs and looked around, searching for anything that could be significant.

It looked ... dishevelled. Which, she supposed, was to be expected after a forensic team had foraged through it.

With every sense alert for clues, Lois moved slowly down the steps, veering to the left in careful avoidance of the place where Mayson had lain.

There was nothing noteworthy in the living area. Nothing in the kitchen.

Lois turned towards Clark’s bedroom and stopped as the image of Clark with another woman rose into her mind.

Henderson came up behind her. “You all right?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“It can be tough, sometimes,” he said. “Particularly when it was someone you knew.”

“Yeah.” Lois stepped into Clark’s bedroom. “Someone has been on the bed.”

“Well, ah, yeah,” Henderson said.

“No, I mean Clark makes his bed every morning. I’ve never seen the covers ruffled.”

“You come into Clark’s bedroom?”

“The bathroom’s that way,” Lois said, pointing forward. She moved to the closet, opened the door, and gasped.

“What?” Henderson said from behind her.

There was a dress hanging alongside Clark’s row of business shirts. Lois leaned closer, examining it without touching it. It was a sleeveless dress with alternating dark and light salmon stripes. The round neck dropped low, and the skirt cascaded to knee-length from under a large cream bow tied at the waist.

She stepped back to allow Henderson to see. “The forensic team didn’t think this was important?” she asked.

“They figured it belonged to Mayson,” he said.

Surprise billowed through Lois. “And did they also have a theory as to why it’s in Clark’s closet?”

Henderson looked uncomfortable. “It looks as if she stayed here a bit,” he said. “Her baking pan was here.”

“That means she has cooked here. It doesn’t mean she slept here.”

Henderson nodded towards the bathroom. “There’s more of her stuff in there.”

Lois went into the bathroom and opened the cabinet. There were rows of tubes on both shelves — skincare products made by the French company, La Roche-Posay. All of the tubes were part of the Toleriane range. She turned to Henderson. “You think Mayson moved in with Clark?”

“We think she was in the process of moving in. Mrs McCreadie said she had visited him two evenings this week and she was here very early one morning.”

Lois moved back into the bedroom. She gestured to the dress. “Is it OK if I take it out?”

Henderson nodded.

Lois slipped the dress from the hanger, gathered the material to her nose, and inhaled deeply. She couldn’t detect any trace of the cologne Clark used. “Why didn’t the forensics guys take this dress?” she asked.

“They probably checked it for ... for substances, and then decided it wasn’t relevant.”

“You mean blood?”

“Yeah.” Henderson looked uncomfortable. “And semen.”

Lois’s head shot up from the dress. “Mayson wasn’t raped?”

“No. There is no evidence of sexual abuse. No bruising anywhere on her body.”

Lois held up the dress for the cop’s inspection. “You really think this belonged to Mayson Drake?” she said, not able to smother her derision.

Henderson looked the dress up and down. “It’s not what she would wear to work,” he conceded. “But she could have dressed differently during her free time.”

“I’ve never seen her in anything that reaches beyond her mid thighs,” Lois said.

Henderson cleared his throat.

Lois stretched out the skirt sideways. “And three of her could have fitted into this.”

“Perhaps Clark bought it for her,” Henderson suggested. “Men aren’t always great at estimating size.”

“This isn’t hers,” Lois said.

“You can’t be sure about that.”

“The cosmetics aren’t hers, either.”

“How do you know?”

“The brand, La Roche-Posay, isn’t widely available in Metropolis. I’ve never seen the range, Toleriane, before. It’s French.”

“Perhaps Mayson ordered it in from France.”

“The make-up is wrong,” Lois laid the dress on Clark’s bed. “Mayson sticks rigidly to pastels. The colours are earthier. More

suited to a woman with darker hair.”

“Lois,” Henderson said. “Even if the dress and the cosmetics don’t belong to Mayson, it makes no difference to the case. It doesn’t change that two people were in this apartment and one of them was shot dead.”

“It changes everything,” Lois insisted. “It confirms there is a third person involved. The witness said she heard Mayson accuse Clark of cheating.” She gestured to the dress and beyond, to the bathroom. “These belong to the other woman.”

Henderson’s blank look encouraged her to continue.

“That other woman has been here,” Lois stated. “She sat on Clark’s bed. That’s how it got rumpled.”

“It doesn’t look rumpled to me,” Henderson said, his gaze darting over the bed.

“It is,” Lois asserted. “Clark’s bed is usually so neat, you’d think an army sergeant had checked it. He makes it in the morning, and it stays that way until evening. It he’d sat here, he would’ve straightened it.”

“It could have been Mayson.”

Lois shook her head. “You told me that the first time she was here, she stayed five or six minutes. The witness heard arguing — that suggests they were near the door. The second time Mayson came, the shot was fired a couple of minutes later. It wasn’t Mayson on the bed. And it wasn’t Clark. It was the owner of the dress. She was here. Yesterday.”

“OK,” Henderson said.

“She was here when Mayson came,” Lois said eagerly.

“That’s how Mayson concluded that Clark had someone else.”

“Mrs McCreadie didn’t see anyone else arrive.”

“Mrs McCreadie was at the vet,” Lois said. “Of course she didn’t see this woman arrive.”

“After the shot was fired, Clark was seen running away,”

Henderson said. “When Wolfe and I arrived a few minutes later, there was no one here except Mayson.”

Lois said nothing.

“And it doesn’t explain where he’s been all night,”

Henderson added.

It felt like blades rising up her throat, but Lois pushed the words out. “He could have been with the owner of the dress. In her apartment.”

“Why would Clark go there, if she were here?” Henderson demanded.

“When you and Wolfe arrived, neither of them was here.

Perhaps they —”

“If she lives here, she wouldn’t have an apart-”

Lois flounced to the closet and swung the doors wide open.

“If she lives here, she doesn’t own many outfits.”

Henderson lifted his hands. “A dress and a few tubes of cosmetics aren’t going to change anything,” he said.

“They bring doubt.”

“We have a witness statement saying Clark ran away after the shot was fired. He was here when Mayson was killed. He ran away. He hasn’t been seen since. They are the actions of a guilty man. This changes nothing.”

“It’s stopped you saying ‘two people, one shot dead,’” Lois said grumpily.

“Lois, I don’t want Clark to be guilty, either. But none of your possible scenarios are supported by the evidence.”

“I’m not trying to tell you what happened. I’m trying to make you see that there are alternatives.”

“Not if you look at the evidence.” From Henderson’s jacket pocket came the sound of his cell phone. “Excuse me,” he said as he put it to his ear. He listened and nodded a couple of times as Lois tried to eavesdrop. His eyebrows leapt with surprise. “OK,” he said finally. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“What’s happened?” Lois asked.

Henderson returned the cell phone to his pocket. “Clark Kent

walked into the Metropolis Central Police Station ten minutes ago.”

“Clark? Is he all right?”

“He’s all right.”

Relief — mixed with anxiety — flooded through Lois. “Did he say where he’s been? Did he say who killed Mayson? Was someone with him? What happens now?”

“He hasn’t said anything yet. Wolfe wants me to be there when he questions Clark. He didn’t mention anyone else with Clark.”

“What happens after Clark has been questioned?” Lois asked.

“If he confesses, he will be charged.”

“And if he doesn’t confess?” Lois asked sourly.

“That will depend on whether Wolfe thinks he has enough evidence to get a conviction.”

“Clark didn’t do it.”

“You have no evidence to prove that.”

“I have over a year of working with him.”

Henderson stared at her for a long moment. “Lois? Is there more between you and Clark than just your working relationship?”

“We’re friends.”

“More than friends?”

“No.” It was true. And it was her fault it was true. Clark had offered her his love, and she had rejected him. “This is not my dress, and those are not my cosmetics.”

“Because the way it stands at the moment, if you go to the station and proclaim Clark’s innocence, it’s ...” Henderson paused, looking as if he regretted having begun. “... it’s going to look like a woman mindlessly defending her man.”

The ‘mindlessly’ hurt. “I don’t have to be in love with Clark to know he would never kill someone and run away.”

“The prisons are full of people who ‘would never’ do exactly what they were found guilty of doing.”

Lois tempered the glare she could feel forming and asked, “What do you think will happen, Bill? Do you think Clark will be charged?”

He took a moment to consider his reply. “Yes,” he said disconsolately. “I think Wolfe has enough.”

“A weapon?”

“No. But the witness is sure of what she saw. Her testimony proves opportunity. It happened in Clark’s apartment, Lois. The overheard argument and the possibility of another woman suggest motive. Running away and disappearing all night —”

“Clark didn’t do it,” Lois said. “And you won’t be able to prove he did.”

“Then I figure you have a couple of hours to prove that he didn’t,” Henderson said. He took a plastic bag from his pocket and moved towards the dress.

“Wait!” Lois said. She took her camera from her bag, and Henderson waited while she took a photo of the dress as it lay on the bed. “Thanks,” she said. “What are you going to do with the dress?”

“Ask Mayson’s sister if it belonged to her.”

Lois went into the bathroom and, using the tips of her fingers on the rim of the lid, she picked up one of the tubes of face cream. She took it back to Henderson. “Take this,” she said. “If you can get a fingerprint from it, you might be able to identify the other woman. Then, perhaps, you’ll be on the way to actually solving this case instead of just jumping on the most obvious answer.”

Henderson didn’t respond to her gibe. But he did carefully put the face cream into another plastic bag. “I need to lock the door and take the keys,” he said. “And I can’t leave you in here.”

“OK,” Lois said. She sprinted up the stairs and exited the apartment. Once outside, she turned to Henderson. “Thanks for letting me go in, Bill.”

Henderson locked Clark’s door. “We both want the same thing,” he said.

Lois nodded tersely and walked away.

Clark figured it was significant that after walking up to the front desk of the police station and saying, “I’m Clark Kent,” he hadn’t needed to explain the reason for his presence.

A uniformed cop had sprung out from his desk behind the counter and escorted Clark to an interview room. He’d asked Clark to sit at the desk, and then he’d stood guard at the door for ten long minutes while, outside the room, the atmosphere had buzzed with snippets of urgent conversation and pulsated with harried footsteps.

Clark couldn’t be bothered tuning in his hearing. He was sure that whatever case they had against him would be outlined soon enough.

Meanwhile, he should use this time to plan.

Plan what?

Plan to deny that he had killed Mayson.

Then what?

How was he going to explain his tardiness in arriving at the station? How was he going to give details of where he had been during the night?

Lana had said there was a witness who had identified him as the murderer. How was he going to disprove that allegation when he had no explanation for what Clark had been doing at the time of her death?

What was he going to say about Lana?

He had to tell them she had made threats against Lois.

Would Wolfe believe him? Would they look for Lana? And if they found her, what would she tell them?

That he had fathered her baby?

That he had cheated on her with Mayson?

Or that he was Superman?

Had Lana been watching the entrance of the police station?

Had she managed to obtain another gun? Was she, right now, heading to the Daily Planet in search of Lois?

The minutes dragged by slowly.

Was this a part of the police strategy? To keeping him waiting? To intensify the mental pressure? Was the cop at the door surreptitiously watching him for signs of guilt?

Clark closed his eyes. Immediately, the vision of Mayson’s crumpled body invaded his mind, melding with the memories of the bodies he had recovered from the train wreck. His eyes shot open, dispelling the spectre of death.

Thoughts of Lois flooded in.

She would be all right. Perry would check on her.

Clark tried to search for her heartbeat, but the screech of noise from outside assaulted his eardrums.

He dropped his head into his hands and allowed his mind to succumb to exhaustion.

Lois swung through the bullpen at the Daily Planet and made straight for the darkroom. She hammered impatiently on the door.

“Don’t come in,” came back the urgent call.

“Jimmy?” Lois called. “I need you to develop a photo for me.”

“Lois, I’m busy.”

“This is important, Jimmy.”

“The Chief wants these shots for a second morning edition.”

Lois put her hand on the doorknob. “I’m coming in, Jimmy.”

His shriek was exactly the response she had expected. “No!”

“Then open the door.”

He groaned, but less than half a minute later, the door opened an inch and Jimmy peeked out. “What?”

Lois shoved her camera at his nose. “There’s a shot of a dress. I need —”

“A dress!”

“Yes. It’s one shot, Jimmy. It’s important. And I need it now.”

“If the Chief—”

“I’ll deal with Perry. Just do it, Jimmy.”

He took the camera. “Twenty minutes.”

“Fifteen.”

He nodded in resignation and recoiled into the darkroom.

Part 8

The long minutes of waiting ended when Detective Wolfe strode into the interview room, followed by Inspector Henderson and another officer Clark didn’t know by name. Wolfe slid into the seat opposite Clark, Henderson shut the door, and he and the third officer sat behind Wolfe.

“Mr Kent,” Wolfe said.

His solemn tone and businesslike demeanour tightened the knots tangled in Clark’s stomach. The police held all the advantages. They would ask questions he wouldn’t want to answer honestly. They had the training and experience to assess the truth of a suspect’s story.

Clark didn’t know what they knew. He didn’t know if he was going to be charged with murder. He didn’t know if, when he left this room, his life would have changed forever.

Wolfe put a tape recorder on the table and started the recording. He tonelessly spoke the details of time and those present and then looked directly at Clark. “Why did you come to the station?” he asked.

“I heard you wanted to talk with me.”

“Who told you that?”

Actually, Wolfe had told him. Last night. In Clark’s apartment. As he had stood over Mayson’s body. “I heard you wanted to talk to me. I came as soon as I could.”

The spark of interest in Wolfe’s face made Clark wish he hadn’t offered the final sentence. He resolved to pare his answers to the barest detail.

“Do you know why we want to talk to you?” the detective asked.

“I know Mayson Drake was found dead in my apartment.”

“Did you kill her?”

Lois stood a few yards from the door to Clark’s apartment.

The cop had gone. With Clark at the police station, they probably deemed it unnecessary to continue surveillance on his apartment.

Remembering Henderson’s demonstration with the cups and sugar sachets, Lois looked up and to her right. There was a row of second-floor windows. The first one offered the perfect vantage point to monitor the entrance to Clark’s apartment.

Lois moved to the outer door of the apartment building and reached into her bag for her tools. Half a minute later, the lock succumbed, and she walked into the foyer. After climbing the stairs, she knocked on the first door.

Clark hadn’t expected the most pertinent question to be fired with such stark hostility. “No,” he said. “I didn’t kill Ms Drake.”

“Do you know how she died?”

“She was shot.”

“Who shot her?”

Lana? All Clark had was circumstantial evidence and speculation. “I don’t know.”

“Were you in your apartment when she was shot?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

Wolfe’s expression remained carefully deadpan, but a slight flutter of his eyelids hinted at his surprise at Clark’s answer. “Where were you between ten-fifty and eleven o’clock last night?”

“I wasn’t in my apartment. I left about ten-thirty.”

“We have eyewitnesses who place you in your apartment at

the time of the murder.”

“I wasn’t there.”

“Where were you?”

“I was out.”

“Were you with someone?”

“No.”

“You were out? By yourself?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t have anyone who can verify your whereabouts?”

“No.”

Disbelief permeated Wolfe’s mask of detachment.

Clark’s heart sank a little lower. He could see no way out. Even if he told them Lana had been in his apartment, it wasn’t going to prove he hadn’t been there.

The only way to do that was going to involve divulging a much bigger secret.

An amply proportioned lady who was probably in her late fifties opened the door. Her initial misgivings dissolved as she stared at Lois. “You’re ... you’re the reporter?” she said. “The one who works with Mr Kent?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “I’m Lois Lane.”

“I’m so sorry about what happened to the young lady,” the woman said. “It was such a terrible shock.”

“Did you talk to the police?” Lois asked.

“Yes,” the woman said. “I thought —” She stopped abruptly and shook her head warily. “I’ve already made my statement. I don’t want to say anything else. Not to the newspapers.”

“Do you think Mr Kent killed the young woman?”

To Lois’s relief, the woman didn’t slam the door. “I wouldn’t have thought Mr Kent would do something like that,” she said slowly. “But I know what I saw.”

“And I believe you,” Lois said earnestly. “But I know Mr Kent really well, and I don’t think he could shoot anyone.”

“You’re a friend of Mr Kent’s? As well as working with him?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I’ve seen you visit him sometimes.”

“We’re friends.”

“Are you going to write a story about this? For the newspaper?”

“No. I’m trying to help Mr Kent.”

“The detective didn’t seem to think there was anything that could help him.”

“Would you mind telling me exactly what you saw?” Lois asked. “Would you mind going through it point by point?”

The woman took a moment to assess Lois. “You’re really trying to help Mr Kent?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “If he didn’t do this —”

“I only said what I saw,” the woman said, sounding defensive. “At first, I thought I was helping Mr Kent.”

“I’m not questioning your honesty,” Lois said. “And I want to make it clear that I’m not trying to persuade you to change your witness statement.”

“I wouldn’t do that, whatever you said,” the witness said staunchly.

Lois gave a hesitant smile. “I’d like to ask you a few questions — to find out exactly what you saw. Then perhaps we can work out what happened here. Would that be OK?”

Clark jolted his attention from Wolfe’s transparent condemnation.

Henderson’s eyes were cast low, and his face was a vacant veneer. The other cop stared back, his exasperation at enduring another improbable story clearly portrayed in the set of his face.

“When was the last time you saw Mayson Drake?” Wolfe asked. “Alive?”

“She came to my apartment last night.”

“What time?”

Clark thought back, mentally traversing the accumulation of interminable hours since he'd left the Planet office the previous evening. That had been at about half past nine. He'd walked home because he'd wanted to think about Lois. “About a quarter past ten,” he replied. “Maybe slightly earlier.”

“Did she enter your apartment?”

“Yes.”

“Was that a usual occurrence? Mayson coming to your apartment late at night?”

“She had been coming to my apartment recently.”

“So her visit was expected?”

“No. We hadn't planned anything.”

“Her visit was unexpected?”

“In the sense that we hadn't planned anything, yes, it was unexpected.”

“What did you argue about?”

“We didn't argue.”

“What was she upset about?”

“She ... she had seemed interested in pursuing a closer friendship. I had been trying to tell her all week that I didn't feel that way about her.”

“So you told her last night? And that upset her?”

“She realised the truth, and she was upset.” Clark held his breath, waiting for the question that would plunge Lana into this fiasco.

Henderson cleared his throat as if about to speak, but Wolfe ignored him. “Mayson Drake was a smart, beautiful woman. Why weren't you interested in her?”

“I ... I ...” Clark faltered.

“Go on, Mr Kent,” Wolfe said.

The woman's pause ended with a quick smile. “I'm Janey McCreadie,” she said.

“And you'll help me, Mrs McCreadie?” Lois asked. “You'll help Mr Kent?”

She nodded. “I heard the shot, and then I saw Mr Kent run away,” she said, her words coming in a gush as if from a ruptured dam. “I figured the blonde woman had to be the perpetrator and Mr Kent was trying to escape from her. I called 911. I watched the doorway the whole time because I was worried for Mr Kent's safety.” Her hand floated across her mouth. “It never occurred to me that Mr Kent could have been the one who fired. He has always seemed like such a nice young man. I read his stories every day. I remember his first story. The one about the old lady and the theatre. It brought tears to my eyes. I thought he must be —”

“Can we go back to earlier in the evening?” Lois cut in. “Did you speak to Mr Kent last night?”

“Yes. I was coming home from the vet. It was about ten o'clock. We met outside his apartment. I told him about my cat, Pannikin, being so sick.” Mrs McCreadie glanced behind her, moving aside so Lois could see the pet basket near the window. “I asked him about his plans for the evening.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he wasn't expecting company. I came up to my apartment and put Pannikin in her basket. The poor creature was so sick that I sat right next to her.”

“Do you remember what Mr Kent was wearing at the time you spoke to him?”

Mrs McCreadie rubbed her temple. “Dark trousers. Blue, not black. A dark grey jacket. Dark pink shirt and a nice tie with flowers on it.”

For a member of the public, Mrs McCreadie's memory for detail was phenomenal. “When you had settled Pannikin into her basket, you sat in the chair next to her?” Lois asked.

“Yes.”

“And watched out of the window?”

“It was past my normal bedtime. But I could never forgive myself if I had been asleep when Pannikin needed me. Watching the street below helped me stay alert.”

“What did you see?”

“I saw the blonde lady come. The lady who had been visiting Mr Kent a lot lately. The one who is now deceased.”

“Did she go into his apartment?”

“Yes. But the door was left open. I heard a lot of shouting.”

“Anything specific?”

Mrs McCreadie fidgeted with her door handle. “I heard the young woman accuse Mr Kent of cheating on her.”

“Have you ever seen any other women come to Mr Kent's apartment?”

The woman gave a nervous smile. “You. But you haven't been for a while.”

“I've been away,” Lois said. “You've never seen any other women visiting Mr Kent?”

“Only an older woman who mostly comes with a man. I figure they're his parents.”

“But there was no one else?”

“No.”

“How long were you at the vet?”

“I left here ...” Mrs McCreadie frowned as she thought. “... about five o'clock, I think. Yes, that's right. I caught the five-eighteen bus.”

“And you didn't return until ten o'clock?”

“No. The vet wanted Pannikin to stay, but I couldn't leave her.”

“What happened after the arguing stopped?”

“The blonde woman came out of the apartment. Mr Kent followed her and caught up to her. They had a quick conversation. She seemed agitated. After a few moments, she ran away. Mr Kent walked back to his apartment, entered, and shut the door.”

“Is it possible someone could have sneaked into the apartment while you were watching Mr Kent and the woman?”

Mrs McCreadie bit on her lower lip as she thought. “I suppose it is possible,” she said. “But they were only a few yards from the door. I can't see how I could have missed someone entering the apartment.”

Lois was beginning to understand why Wolfe had felt confident to build his case on Mrs McCreadie's testimony. She had exceptional clarity and could express herself clearly. “What happened then?”

“Mr Kent?” Wolfe prompted.

Clark hadn't been able to find the words for Mayson. He had no choice but to find them now for the detective. “I didn't love her.”

“Is there someone else?” Henderson asked from his position behind Wolfe.

“Yes,” Clark said.

“What happened after you told Mayson?” Wolfe said.

“She left. I followed her and tried to apologise.”

“Did she accept your apology?”

“She was still very upset.”

“She ran away from you?”

“Yes.”

“Did you follow her?”

“No. I went back to my apartment.”

“Did you threaten her?”

“No. I had no reason to threaten her.”

“Did she make any accusations?”

Clark quickly reviewed his conversation with Mayson. “She was upset that I hadn't told her the truth earlier.”

“What truth?”
 “That I didn’t love her. That I didn’t want a closer relationship with her.”
 “She didn’t accuse you of cheating on her?”
 “No.”
 “What happened after you arrived back in your apartment?”
 Should he mention Lana now? Or should he try to establish that he hadn’t been in his apartment at the time of the shooting?
 “I left about five minutes later.”
 “Why?”
 Because he’d heard a cry for help. “Because I wanted to think.”
 “About Mayson?”
 “About a lot of things.”
 “Where did you go? What did you do?”
 They’d reached the point where Clark had no answers. “I wandered around the city for a while.”
 “See anyone?”
 “I didn’t see anyone who could give me an alibi.”
 “In a city of millions of people, not one person saw you?”
 Wolfe said, his scepticism sharpening the question. “Not one person could attest that you weren’t in your apartment?”
 “No.” Because those who had seen him hadn’t realised they were looking at Clark Kent.
 “Where did you go? Which streets?”
 “I don’t remember which streets exactly,” Clark said, painfully aware that, although it was the truth, it sounded like a lie. “I wasn’t taking much notice.”
 “You can’t remember one single street?”
 “No.”
 “Where were you at ten-fifty?”
 “I wasn’t taking note of the time.”
 The feeling of being helplessly trapped was growing more intense with each question. It was clear that Wolfe wasn’t buying the ‘I left my apartment’ story for a moment. A quick glance behind him told Clark that even Henderson found it implausible.
 “You were seen running away from your apartment after the shot,” Wolfe said.
 Comprehension thudded through Clark’s mind. When he’d seen Lana outside the police station, she had been wearing his clothes. His black leather jacket. And probably his jeans and tee shirt, too.
 In the limited light, someone had assumed it had been him. They thought Clark Kent was a killer. And a coward.

“About half an hour later, the blonde woman returned,” Mrs McCreadie said. “She waited a few seconds at Mr Kent’s door and then went inside.”
 “Did you see who opened the door for her?” Lois asked.
 “No.”
 “What happened then?”
 “A few minutes later, I heard the shot.”
 “Only one shot?”
 “Yes.”
 “Then what happened?”
 “I waited. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to leave Pannikin.”
 “Were you sure the shot had come from Mr Kent’s apartment?”
 “Not at first. I didn’t know exactly where it had come from. But then I saw Mr Kent rush out from his door and run away.”
 “How long after the shot was fired did the person leave Mr Kent’s apartment?”
 “Two minutes. Maybe three.”
 “Was it dark?”
 “The street lights were on. The sidewalk is well lit at night.”

“Did you see his face?”
 “No. I was above him. And he was wearing the baseball cap. The red one I’ve seen him wear before.”
 “So the bill was forward? Over his face?”
 “Yes.”
 “What else was he wearing?”
 “A black leather jacket. And jeans.”
 “Sneakers?”
 “I’m not sure of the type of shoes, but they were predominantly light in colour.”
 If this case went to court, Mrs McCreadie would make an excellent witness. “Did he look up?”
 “No. He didn’t stop. He sprinted along the sidewalk and then into the alley.”
 “So you didn’t get a look at his face?” Lois persisted.
 “No. It was shielded by the bill of the cap. And the collar of his jacket was pulled up.”
 “What did you do then?”
 “I called 911.”
 “And the police came?”
 “Yes. They came very quickly. Less than five minutes after I’d made the call.”
 “And you watched the area while you waited for the police to come?”
 “Yes. The whole time. Even when I was on the phone, I was standing at the window and watching. I thought she might come out of the door, and I wanted to see which way she headed so I could tell the police.”

“I didn’t run away,” Clark said. “I wasn’t there.”
 “We have a witness who testifies that she saw you running away a couple of minutes after hearing the gunshot.”
 “It wasn’t me.”
 There was no inkling of belief in Wolfe’s expression. “Would you care to offer a suggestion as to who might have come from your apartment?”
 Clark took a deep breath. “There was someone else in my apartment.”
 “Really?” Wolfe asked with a discouraging lack of interest.
 “Someone I knew in my home town. Her name is Lana Lang.” Her name caught in Clark’s throat, accentuating the feeling he had just unlocked a door and he had no control over what might crash through it.
 “She was in your apartment when you left?” Wolfe asked.
 “Yes.”
 “When did she arrive at your apartment?”
 “I don’t know. She was there when I arrived home.”
 “Outside? Waiting for you?”
 “No. She was inside my apartment.”
 “Had you given her a key?”
 “No.”
 Wolfe’s eyebrows jumped a little. “She broke in?” he surmised.
 “She knew where to find a key.”
 “So you’re close to this woman?”
 “No. I hadn’t seen her in over a year.”
 “But she knew the whereabouts of your key?”
 Clark nodded. “It’s a Smallville thing,” he said in an explanation that sounded insipid in his own ears. “To leave a key under the mat.”
 “And you do that here?” Wolfe gasped. “In *Metropolis*?”
 “Yes,” Clark admitted, feeling his face flush.
 Wolfe shook his head and then continued. “So this woman? This Lana Lang from Smallville, Kansas, entered your apartment, even though you weren’t there?”
 “Yes.”
 “What happened after you arrived home?”

“We talked.”
 “About what?”
 Should he mention the baby? “About old times.”
 “Old times?”
 “Lana and I dated in high school.”
 “Did she say why she was chasing up an old boyfriend?”
 “She ... she was interested in re-establishing our relationship.”
 “Were you interested?”
 “No.”
 “Why not?”
 “There’s someone else.”
 “You had *three* women wanting to be with you?” Wolfe’s question came loaded with derision.
 “No,” Clark said sadly. “The third one is just a friend.”

 “You didn’t think it was possible there could have been a third person in the apartment?” Lois asked.
 “That occurred to me when the detective told me the blonde woman was dead,” Mrs McCreadie said. “But I had watched the door the entire time from the shot being fired until the police arrived, and other than Mr Kent, no one entered or left that apartment.”
 Lois took the photograph of the Prada dress from her bag. “Have you ever seen this dress?” she asked.
 Mrs McCreadie took the photograph and stared at it for a long time. Lois watched her face carefully, willing it to recognition. “Yesterday,” she said slowly.
 “You’ve seen this dress?” Lois asked eagerly.
 “Yesterday afternoon. I was calling the vet about Pannikin, and I happened to glance out of the window. I saw a woman wearing a dress just like this.”
 “Was she near Mr Kent’s apartment?”
 “She was walking the other way.”
 “So *away* from his apartment?”
 “Yes.”
 “Did you see if she had come from Mr Kent’s apartment?”
 “No.”
 “Did you see if she had knocked on his door?”
 “No. I had been tending to Pannikin and only looked out of the window as I was calling the vet.”
 “Do you remember what time this was?”
 “About four-thirty.”
 “Was the woman in the dress the same woman who had been visiting Mr Kent? The woman who was murdered?”
 “No.”
 “Are you sure?”
 “I’m absolutely sure.”
 “How were they different?”
 “This woman had darker hair. It was straight, not curly like the woman who died.”
 “Did this woman have long hair?”
 “No. Collar length.”
 “Last night, during the half an hour between when the victim left and when she returned, did anyone leave Mr Kent’s apartment?”
 “No.”
 “Are you absolutely sure?”
 “I was sitting next to the window the entire time. Four people walked by. None of them went into or out of Mr Kent’s apartment.”
 “You’re sure? You didn’t leave to go to the bathroom? You didn’t answer the phone? You didn’t stand up to get something for Pannikin?”
 “No. I was next to the window the entire time.”
 Lois gave Mrs McCreadie a smile. “Thank you so much,” she said. “You’ve been really helpful.”

“I’d do anything to help Mr Kent,” Mrs McCreadie said. “He’s a wonderful neighbour. I feel so bad that I got him into trouble.”
 “You only told the truth,” Lois said. “That’s what Mr Kent would expect you to do.”
 Mrs McCreadie looked doubtful.
 “Can I come back and talk to you again if I need to check something?” Lois asked.
 “Yes. Of course.”
 “Thank you.” Lois turned away.
 “Ah ... Ms Lane?”
 “Yes?”
 “Do you really think there’s a chance Mr Kent didn’t do this?”
 “Yes, I do.”
 “Do you think you’ll be able to prove it?”
 “I won’t rest until I have.”
 The woman smiled. “You’re a good friend. I figure poor Mr Kent needs good friends right now.”
 Lois walked down the stairs, elation sparking through her veins.
 Clark hadn’t been the person running away. The woman — the owner of the Prada dress and the La Roche-Posay cosmetics — had run away. She had been wearing Clark’s clothes. She’d taken off the dress, put on some of Clark’s clothes, and run away.
 After shooting Mayson.
Clark hadn’t done it.
 And Lois was halfway to proving it.

 “Was this Lana Lang in your apartment when Mayson Drake arrived?” Wolfe said.
 “Yes.”
 “Did they speak?”
 “Yes.”
 “Did Lana Lang tell Mayson that she, Lana, wanted to resume her relationship with you?”
 “Yes.”
 “Was that when Mayson accused you of cheating on her?”
 “Mayson and I weren’t in a relationship.”
 “She thought you were.”
 “She didn’t accuse me of cheating on her.” Seeing the scepticism inscribed on Wolfe’s face, Clark added, “Lana did.”
 Clark sensed a rustle of surprise in the three cops, but he wasn’t sure if it were a positive development or not. “How did Mayson take that?” Wolfe asked.
 “She was upset. She ran out. I followed her and tried to tell her I hadn’t known Lana was in Metropolis.”
 “We’ve already been through this, Mr Kent.” Wolfe’s tone was becoming impatient now. “Except last time, you neglected to mention the important detail that a third person was in your apartment.”
 “You didn’t ask me,” Clark said, trying to squeeze all indignation from his tone.
 “What was she wearing?” Henderson asked from his position behind Wolfe.
 Clark scanned his mind, finding no memory of Lana’s outfit. “Ah ... a dress, I think.” A couple of fragments floated back. “Yes. It was white. She said it was French.”
 Henderson glanced to Wolfe. The latter kept his gaze firmly on Clark as he continued. “Why didn’t you tell us about this woman earlier? You must have realised that the presence of a third person in your apartment could be very convenient in your current predicament.”
 Wolfe’s sarcasm stung. As Clark had feared, his credibility had eroded away. “When I left my apartment, Lana was there. According to what you’ve told me, Mayson was shot a short time later.”

“Are you saying you believe Lana Lang killed Mayson?”
 “I wasn’t there,” Clark said. “But the circumstances seem to indicate she could know what happened to Mayson.”

“When you left — because you needed to ‘think’ — you left your guest alone in your apartment?”

“Yes.”

“A guest comes from your home town, and you leave her alone?”

“She ... I needed some time alone.”

“You said before you needed to think about ‘a lot of things’. Did this include Ms Lang?”

“Yes.”

“Were you interested in resuming your relationship with her?”

“No.”

“Then why not just tell her that?”

“She ... she told me she is pregnant.”

Wolfe’s eyebrows jumped. “Your child?”

“No. Before last night, I hadn’t seen her for over a year.”

“She wanted a relationship with you despite being pregnant with another man’s child?”

“Yes. That is what she said.”

“Mr Kent,” Wolfe said in a tone laden with cynicism, “that seems illogical.”

Clark agreed. But he said nothing.

“Did it take you all night to come up with a story that is basically a copy of the situation with Mayson?” Wolfe asked. “Oh, plus a baby for good measure.”

The knots in Clark’s stomach tightened further as he waited for Wolfe to expand.

He did. “You say Mayson was interested in a relationship with you. Her sister confirms that. You say you had been trying to tell her all week that you weren’t interested. Now, suddenly, there is a second woman who is also interested in a relationship with you, and you were also trying to tell her you’re not interested. For someone whose profession is writing, that’s not terribly imaginative, Mr Kent.”

“That’s what happened.”

“To be clear, when you left your apartment last night, Mayson wasn’t there and Lana Lang was?”

“That is correct.”

“You were seen entering your apartment after chasing Mayson. No one left your apartment until after the gunshot.”

“I wasn’t there when Mayson was shot.”

“I figure you’d like us to believe it was Lana Lang dressed up as you?” Wolfe said. “And you’d further like us to believe you can slip out of a door without being seen?”

“The last time I saw Lana, she was wearing my leather jacket.”

“She was wearing your leather jacket? Or you were?”

“She was.”

Wolfe shuffled in his chair. “Why did it take you seven hours to report to the station? Where were you? And what were you doing all night?”

“I was trying to sort out my life.”

“But not with anyone?”

“No. In my own mind.”

“Does ‘sorting out your life’ include deciding the best way to dodge a murder charge?”

Back on the sidewalk, Lois didn’t have to wait long for someone to emerge from Mrs McCreadie’s apartment building. With the photograph of the Prada dress in her hand, Lois eagerly approached the young stylishly dressed woman. “Would you mind looking at this photo and telling me if you recognise it?” she asked with a smile.

The woman stopped. “Ah ...”

“It’s just a photo of a dress,” Lois said. “You’re the perfect person to ask. I can see that you’ve got a great eye for fashion.”

The woman didn’t respond to the compliment, but she took the photo. “Yes,” she said after a quick glance. “There was a woman here yesterday, wearing a dress just like that. Is it Prada?”

“Yes,” Lois said, infusing admiration into her tone. “You’re sure you saw a dress just like this?”

“Yes. I noticed it because the woman wasn’t wearing a jacket or a sweater, and I thought she should be feeling cold.”

“When did you see her?”

The woman considered for a moment. “Early evening,” she said. “About seven o’clock.”

“What was she doing?”

“Walking.”

“Which direction?”

“That way,” she said, pointing towards Clark’s apartment.

“Did you see where she went?”

“No. I was late for my bus.”

“Could you describe the woman wearing this dress?”

“Ah ... about my age. Short dark hair.”

“Was she overweight?”

“Not noticeably. Why?”

“The dress is quite loose-fitting.”

“I didn’t notice it being overly big on her — flowing, but not hanging like a sack.”

“Anything else you noticed about her? What about her shoes? High heels?”

“No. She was wearing saddle shoes. Black and white. With red soles. I remember thinking they were totally unsuited to the dress.”

Saddle shoes. Predominantly white. Flat heels. Running would have been possible. “Anything else you noticed?” Lois asked.

The woman shook her head.

“Was she carrying anything?”

“Just a handbag. I didn’t recognise the brand.”

“Was it a large bag?”

“No. Quite small.” She held her hand about eight inches apart to demonstrate.

“Do you live around here?”

The woman paused, looking unsure.

“I’m Lois Lane,” Lois said. “I’m a reporter from the Daily Planet.”

“Oh,” the woman said. “I thought you looked familiar. I’ve seen the posters.”

“Would you mind giving me your name?”

“Are you going to print this in the newspaper?”

“I won’t print anything without checking with you first,” Lois said. “But for that, I need to know how to contact you.”

“OK,” the woman said. “My name is Caitlyn Osborne. I live in apartment 307 in that building.”

“Would you be willing to make a statement to the police?”

Her mouth dropped. “This involves the police? Was the dress stolen?”

“No. Nothing like that,” Lois said. “But the police are involved, and they’re probably going to want to talk to you.”

“Is this about that murder that was supposed to have happened last night? In the end apartment?”

“Yes.”

“Is she dead? The woman who was wearing the Prada dress?”

“No.”

“You think she did it?” Caitlyn gasped.

“I’m still investigating.”

“Will I have to go to court?”

“I don’t know,” Lois said. “But all you have to say is that you saw a woman wearing this dress yesterday.” She smiled. “That wouldn’t be too hard, would it?”

“I suppose not,” the woman said.
 “Thank you, Caitlyn,” Lois said. “You’ve been incredibly helpful.”
 As Caitlyn Osborne walked away, Lois saw two men walking along the sidewalk. She chose the younger, went up to him, and showed him the photograph. He said he’d never seen a dress like that before. He also said he didn’t usually come this way, but was taking a shortcut to his office because of the closure of some of the subway trains.
 Lois asked two other woman as they walked by, but neither recognised the dress. Deciding she had enough to take to the police, Lois hailed a cab.
 As the cab crawled through the early-morning traffic, Lois pressed her exhausted body into the seat.
 Clark hadn’t killed Mayson.
 The other woman had done it. The woman in the Prada dress. What was Clark’s relationship with that woman?
 Did he love her?
 Why had the woman shot Mayson?
 Jealousy?
 Because it was hard to imagine a woman loved by Clark Kent would feel the need to resort to murder to keep his affections.
 Was that where Clark had been all night? With her? Trying to talk her into giving herself up?
 And, when she’d refused, he’d gone to the police himself?
 Why?
 To proclaim her innocence?
 To proclaim his own innocence?
 Or did the Clark Kent Martyr Syndrome stretch far enough that he would take the rap for a murder he hadn’t committed?
 Did he love her *that* much?
 Clark couldn’t kill — Lois had never wavered in believing that. But, as her thoughts crystallised now, she realised that Clark was naturally inclined to protect those who were important to him.
 Even when that person had done something wrong.
 How many times had he been there for her after she’d done something stupid?
 Like walking down the aisle to marry Luthor.
 Clark wouldn’t kill. But he would try to help the woman he loved — even if she’d made a horrible mistake.
 Maybe his love for her was so great that he was more concerned about her welfare than his reputation.
 But Lois didn’t share that concern.
 She wasn’t going to allow him to be charged with something he hadn’t done.
 Whatever the nature of his relationship with the Prada woman.

Part 9

The words ‘murder charge’ seemed to resonate around the small room, contaminating the silence. Clark stared at the tape recorder, watching mindlessly as the little spindles rotated, feeling more helpless than he ever had when facing kryptonite. “No,” he said. “That wasn’t what I was thinking.”
 His dispirited denial thudded against the cordon of disbelief that was closing around him.
 It was Henderson who broke the silence. “Where can we find Lana Lang?” he asked.
 Clark wondered idly if he had imagined a wisp of hope in the detective’s question. “I don’t know,” he replied, not lifting his eyes from the tape recorder.
 “You said she’s from Smallville,” Henderson said. “Where is she staying in Metropolis?”
 “She said her intention was to stay in my apartment.”
 Wolfe snatched back the baton. “So you have no idea where she is or where we could find her?”
 “She could be watching the Daily Planet building.”

“Because you work there?”
 “No. Because Lois Lane works there.”
 Henderson leaned forward. “What does Lois have to do with this?”
 Clark had to tell them about Lana’s threat to hurt Lois. He doubted they would believe him. He’d left it too late. It was going to sound like just another feeble attempted diversion from a desperate, guilty man. “Lana said she would hurt Lois.”
 “Because of your association with Lois?” Henderson said.
 “Yes.”
 Wolfe pushed back a few inches, the legs of his chair scraping discordantly on the wooden floor. “Are you trying to suggest motive?” he said. “Or trying to subtly plant the idea that Lana Lang is capable of violence?”
 “I’m telling the truth —”
 “You have no way to corroborate your ‘there was a woman in my apartment’ story?”
 “No.”
 “No way to prove this woman exists beyond your imagination?”
 “Everyone in Smallville knows her.”
 “Does everyone in Smallville know she was in your apartment yesterday?”
 “No.”
 “Did anyone see her in your apartment?”
 Mayson had, but mentioning that was only going to aggravate Wolfe further.
 The homicide detective leant forward. “Mr Kent ... Clark ... you do realise the seriousness of this matter? You do realise you could be charged with murder?”
 Clark lifted his head, crashing into eyes that were filled with a stinging mix of condemnation and earnest appeal. “Yes,” he said. “I realise that.”
 “And you know that your vague answers and half replies aren’t helping your cause?”
 Clark’s eyes dropped back to the table as he nodded.
 “I want detail,” Wolfe said forcefully. “I want to know exactly where you were last night. Starting at ten-thirty, the time you claim you left your apartment and finishing at six-nineteen this morning when you walked into the station.”
 “I’ve answered your questions,” Clark said.
 “No,” Wolfe snapped. “You’ve told us where you weren’t and what you didn’t do.”
 Wolfe was right. Skirting around questions was only going to take him so far ... probably to the nearest cell. “I’m not legally required to answer your questions,” Clark said.
 From behind Wolfe, Henderson’s head dropped. Wolfe’s taut expression didn’t falter. “Who told you about Ms Drake’s death?”
 “I can’t say,” Clark said, his lungs constricting as if he’d been pushed into an ocean of kryptonite and he was slowly drowning.
 “Did Superman tell you about the death? Or did you tell him?”
 Clark had no answer to push back the oppressive silence.
 “Did Superman take you somewhere to prevent us from arresting you?”
 Clark’s denial rose in instinctive defence of Superman’s reputation. Except if Clark Kent was found guilty of murder, there would be no Superman. “He didn’t take me anywhere.”
 “Would you lie to protect a friend?”
 Would he lie to protect someone he loved? Like Lois? Would he, as Superman? Would he, as Clark? Clark lied a little every time he reported on Superman’s activities using the third person. “That would depend on why they needed me to lie for them,” he said.
 “Would you lie to protect a friend who had tried to help you escape from the consequences of your actions?”
 He couldn’t say ‘yes’. He couldn’t say ‘no’. “I’m not in that

situation.”

“Here’s what I think happened,” Wolfe said, his tone twisting to blandly conversational. “I think you were in your apartment when Ms Drake returned. She was angry. Perhaps she threatened to make public your affair with another woman. For whatever reason — perhaps the other woman is married, perhaps she’s a celebrity or has a public profile — you couldn’t allow that to happen. So you panicked. Things got out of control, and you shot Mayson. You ran away. You called on Superman, and he took you away from Metropolis. Then, before you could decide what to do next, he heard about the subway collapse. He left you in your hiding place — affording you ample time to think — and came back to Metropolis to spend the next several hours saving hundreds of lives.

“As soon as he’d finished in the subway, I brought him to the station, although he, like you, was disinclined to give me straight answers. However, my questions alerted him to the fact that your continuing absence was damaging his reputation, so he returned to you, and together, you concocted a story about a woman having been in your apartment.”

Wolfe’s story was a blend of half-truths and falsehood. Clark grasped that which was refutable. “I wasn’t having an affair with anyone,” he said. “I’m not in a relationship. I didn’t cheat on anyone. I wasn’t in my apartment when Ms Drake returned. And I didn’t kill her.”

Henderson stood and took a step forward. “Clark?” he said. “We can’t help you if you don’t help us.”

Clark bit back his retort — that they had settled on the identity of the murderer within moments of finding Mayson’s body — and fixed his gaze on his interwoven fingers as the benumbing sludge rose higher, sucking him further into its mire.

“We have established opportunity,” Wolfe said. “We have motive. We have witness statements. You have no alibi. You have no proof that you weren’t present when Ms Drake was murdered. You have given us nothing to doubt our case against you.”

“Are you going to arrest me?” Clark asked.

“Yes.”

With that one word, his life as Clark Kent had gone. His job, his reputation — they wouldn’t survive this, even if he found a lawyer who could whip up enough doubt to avoid a guilty verdict.

And as for Lois ... after the Luthor debacle, she was going to wonder if anyone could be trusted.

A tap sounded on the door. Henderson reached over to open it. A uniformed cop stood there.

“Interview suspended at seven-oh-twelve,” Wolfe said. He stopped the recording and looked expectantly at cop in the doorway.

“There’s someone who would like to see you, Detective Wolfe.”

“Whoever it is, get rid of him.”

“It’s about your current case. And she’s female.”

“Perhaps it’s the enigmatic Lana Lang,” Wolfe said with cutting derision. “You come with me, Henderson.” He headed for the door, glancing over his shoulder at the third cop. “You stay here.”

Wolfe and Henderson left the room. The door shut.

Clark avoided looking at the cop.

Wolfe wasn’t going to give up until he had answers. The only answers Clark had were swathed in secrecy.

Wolfe had already tied Clark and Superman together as joint culprits. Revealing that Clark Kent and Superman were one and the same would give Clark an explanation for his non-attendance at the police station throughout the night hours, but it wasn’t going to prove that Clark Kent hadn’t shot Mayson Drake.

It would only identify Superman as being a murderer, too.

He was jammed into a corner.

And, as far as Clark could see, there was no way out.

Henderson wasn’t particularly surprised when they entered the last of the interview rooms and found Lois Lane waiting for them. Wolfe didn’t seem surprised, either, but he didn’t make any effort to hide his annoyance. “We are conducting a murder investigation,” he said.

“And I’m here to stop you from charging an innocent man,” Lois retorted.

Wolfe released a gush of impatience. “Let me guess. You’ve conjured Lana Lang out of your bag of reporter tricks.”

“If you’re talking about the third person in Clark’s apartment, then I haven’t found her, but I’m so glad you’ve finally managed to uncover her involvement in this mess,” Lois said. She glanced at Henderson. “Did you tell him about the dress?”

“I mentioned it briefly.”

“It wasn’t two people at all,” Lois stated.

Henderson held his breath, sure that Wolfe would respond to Lois’s obvious disdain with a stinging reply. Instead, he said, “What do you have?”

“I assume you asked the witness what Clark was wearing when she thought she saw him run from his apartment?” Lois said, retreating to a much more conciliatory tone. “After the shot was fired?”

“Obviously, we did,” Wolfe said dryly.

“Jeans. Black leather jacket. Red baseball cap,” Lois supplied.

Wolfe nodded his agreement.

“You have Clark here?” Lois said.

“Yes.”

“What is he wearing?”

“Excuse me?” Wolfe exploded.

“What is he wearing?” Lois repeated. “Jeans? Black leather jacket? Red baseball cap?”

“No,” Wolfe said with sizzling impatience. “But it’s not difficult to explain the difference. Sometime during the night, he found a moment to change. He had hours to do it, and he must know that turning up in those exact clothes would be tantamount to admitting guilt.”

“So you have doubts about his guilt?” Lois asked quickly.

“No.”

Lois took her cell phone from her bag and punched in some numbers. “Perry,” she said a few seconds later. “What was Clark wearing yesterday?”

Henderson heard Perry White’s squeak of surprise at the question.

“Think back, Perry,” Lois said. “It’s important.” She nodded as she listened. When she hung up, she looked at them with triumph. “Navy pants. Charcoal jacket. Crimson shirt. Crimson tie with a big white daisy in the middle.”

Wolfe stared at Lois, unmoving.

“That’s what he’s wearing now, right?” Lois said.

“What if he is?” Wolfe said.

“The witness says the person who ran from Clark’s apartment after Mayson was killed was wearing a black leather jacket, jeans, and a red baseball cap,” Lois said. “So if that person was Clark, he had to have been carrying his current clothes with him.”

Wolfe plonked his hands on his hips and said nothing.

“Because we know he couldn’t have gotten back into his apartment to get those clothes — you had his apartment guarded.”

Wolfe tapped the floor with his foot.

“Did the witness mention anything about the fleeing person carrying a bundle of clothes?”

“No,” Wolfe said. “But I didn’t ask.”

“Perhaps you should.”

Henderson held his breath, expecting an outburst from Wolfe,

but it didn't come. "Superman could have flown into Kent's apartment and retrieved his clothes," Wolfe said.

"Then Clark's current clothes would have been in his apartment when your forensic team was there," Lois said. "Was there anything in the report about worn clothing?"

"No."

"How detailed were they?"

"It's a murder case."

"Would they have noted all the clothes in his closet?"

"They took extensive photos."

"In the closet?"

"Yes," Wolfe said. "It could have been important. There were cosmetics in the bathroom, but only one piece of female apparel in the closet. We surmised that Mayson was in the process of moving in. At that early stage of the investigation, it could have been important with regard to motive."

"Now it's important for an entirely new reason," Lois said. "Because in your scenario, the navy pants and charcoal jacket should have been in Clark's apartment when the forensic team was there."

"There was a period of about ten minutes from the shot being fired to the time I arrived at the murder scene," Wolfe said. "That's long enough for Kent to have contacted Superman. And more than enough time for Superman to interfere with the evidence."

"Just before eleven last night, right?" Lois said. "Superman was with me for some of that time."

"That's convenient," Wolfe said, his cynicism spitting like oil in fire.

"He was," Lois said. "He left a few minutes before eleven."

Wolfe's eyebrow stretched higher.

"After he'd gone, I called Clark, but he didn't answer," Lois continued. "I remember checking the time. It was just before eleven, and I decided it was too late to wait a few minutes and try again."

"Lois, you can't just make up something because it suits —"

"Check my phone records."

"That will prove you tried to call Kent," Wolfe said. "It won't prove Superman was —"

"Why would Superman get *those* particular clothes?" Lois said. "Why not jeans and a sweater?"

"Probably because he knew what we would find if the forensic team tested them."

"There was a two to three minute gap between the shot and the person running away from Clark's apartment," Lois said.

"Time for the murderer to change into the jeans and leather jacket. You have the Prada dress. Take Clark's jacket and tie. See which set of clothing was being worn when Mayson died."

Wolfe scowled as he scratched his neck.

"If Clark had changed, there should be a leather jacket, a pair of jeans, and a red cap somewhere in the vicinity of his apartment. Have you found them?"

"No."

"Did you look?"

"Looking would be a waste of time if Superman —"

"What is your fixation with Superman?" Lois cried in exasperation.

"He and Kent are friends."

"That doesn't mean it's OK to use Superman to cover the holes in your case."

Henderson held his breath again, but Wolfe only sighed. "Tell me what you think happened."

"I have a witness saying a woman wearing a Prada dress and saddle shoes was near Clark's apartment at seven-thirty last night."

"Mrs McCreadie?" Wolfe questioned.

"No. Another witness — someone who lives in the same

building as Mrs McCreadie."

"Mrs McCreadie didn't say anything about seeing another woman near Clark's apartment."

"That's because Mrs McCreadie was at the vet then."

Wolfe nodded in silent encouragement to continue.

"I think the Prada woman let herself into Clark's apartment."

"How could she have done that?" Wolfe said.

"He keeps a key under his mat."

Wolfe raised his hands in frustration. "Doesn't anyone know this city's burglar stats are horrendous?" he said.

"She let herself in," Lois continued. "She waited for Clark to come home. Clark came home, wearing the clothes he had worn to work. Mayson came. Mayson saw the Prada woman in Clark's apartment, which is how she concluded that Clark was cheating on her. She got upset and left. Clark followed her. She ran away from him. Clark returned to his apartment. The Prada woman was still there." Lois eyed Wolfe steadily. "Then Clark left, still wearing the clothes he had worn all day."

"Mrs McCreadie said no one left Kent's apartment during that time."

"No," Lois corrected. "She said she didn't see anyone leave Clark's apartment. But half an hour passed between Mayson's two visits. Mrs McCreadie could have been attending to her cat. She could have been in the bathroom. She could have dozed off."

Wolfe nodded in unwilling acceptance.

"When Mayson returned, there were two people in Clark's apartment," Lois said with a pointed look at Henderson. "You were right about that. But it wasn't Clark and Mayson; it was the Prada woman and Mayson. The Prada woman obviously has some connection to Clark, and Mayson was interested in him, too — something happened between them. Mayson was shot."

"Go on," Wolfe said.

"The Prada woman quickly changed out of the dress and into some of Clark's clothes — his leather jacket and a baseball cap. She left her dress in his closet. She hurried away from the apartment. Mrs McCreadie saw her and assumed it was Clark. It's a reasonable mistake. It was dark, the person was wearing Clark's clothes, coming from Clark's apartment, and the bill of the baseball cap would have shielded her face."

"Kent is a tall man," Wolfe said. His tone had morphed from blatant scepticism to reluctant consideration. "The dress doesn't suggest the woman is overly big."

"Height can be difficult to determine from above," Lois said.

Wolfe glared at the floor for a moment. "Do you know the identity of this woman?" he asked as he lifted his head.

"I didn't until you made the comment about me conjuring Lana Lang."

"Kent hasn't mentioned her to you?"

"No. But I haven't seen Clark for a week. I've been away from Metropolis, visiting my mother."

Henderson and Lois watched Wolfe as indecision carved across his face.

"Would you consider releasing Clark?" Lois asked with more meekness than Henderson had ever expected to hear from her.

"He's a suspect in a murder case," Wolfe said brusquely.

"But he's not the only suspect," she said. "And your most important piece of evidence — the witness statement that is the crux of your case — could be mistaken identity. You have another line of inquiry — the Prada dress. If it has gunshot residue —"

"By Kent's own admission, he has no alibi," Wolfe said.

"Nothing you've said justifies how long it took him to come to the station. You haven't explained how he managed to stay hidden when every cop in the city was looking for him."

"Most cops in the city were helping with the subway collapse," Lois said. "Clark could have been anywhere else and it's not improbable that no one saw him."

"Why didn't he come to the station as soon as he heard about

Mayson?” Wolfe said.

“Because he knew she’d been killed in his apartment and he knew the Prada woman had been there. He was probably searching for her.”

“Then why didn’t he say that?” Wolfe demanded.

Lois chuckled grimly. “Because he’s Clark Kent.”

“So?”

“So he’s trying to protect her.”

“You think he would protect a murder suspect?”

Lois’s little lift of her eyebrow told Henderson she hadn’t missed the subtle shift indicated in Wolfe’s question. “If he wasn’t in his apartment at the time the shot was fired, he wouldn’t know for sure how Mayson died,” she said. “But it is very in-character for Clark to try to protect someone who could be innocent.”

The silence came again. Lois waited, watching Wolfe’s face.

“OK,” he said suddenly. “I’ll fingerprint him, take his jacket and tie for testing, and let him go.” He pointed a long finger at Lois. “This is highly unorthodox. I’m only doing this because I know both of you. I want you to give me your word that you’ll stay with him. When I need to speak to him again, I want to be able to contact him immediately.”

Lois nodded earnestly. “I’ll take him to my apartment,” she said. “You have my number.”

Wolfe turned to Henderson. “Take her and get a list of her witnesses and a description of the Prada woman.”

Henderson nodded.

Wolfe took a step away, but then swung around to face Lois. “Answer one question for me,” he said.

“OK.”

“How does a man with such appalling taste in ties manage to have three women chasing after him?”

Lois looked genuinely surprised. “Who’s the third?” she asked.

Wolfe lifted his hands in acceptance that understanding was beyond him and strode away.

Henderson leant close to Lois. “You really don’t know the identity of the third woman?” he murmured.

He’d half-expected her to respond with a knowing smile, but any trace of light-heartedness was smothered by her concern.

“How is Clark?” she said as they began walking towards Henderson’s office.

“Despondent. It would be easy to believe he has given up.”

“But he denied it?” Lois said. “He denied killing Mayson?”

“Yes,” Henderson said. “But other than that, he’s done nothing to defend himself. Wolfe is sure he’s hiding something.”

“Maybe he is,” Lois said. “But it’s not that he killed Mayson. Even Wolfe is starting to see that.”

She sounded as if she believed that finding Lana Lang would magically dispel all the accusations levelled at Clark. Henderson wasn’t so sure.

Wolfe was good at what he did. Allowing Clark to leave did not necessarily indicate the detective was backing away from his suspicions. In Henderson’s estimation, Wolfe was more likely to be employing another strategy in the hope of uncovering the truth of how Mayson had met her death.

Did Lois know about Lana Lang’s alleged threats against her? “Have you spoken with Superman today?” Henderson asked casually as they approached his office.

“No,” Lois replied. “I saw him for a few seconds after he’d finished the rescue at Northwood, but Wolfe took him away before he could speak with the reporters.”

“And you haven’t seen Clark?”

“No,” she said with a hint of impatience. “I already told you that.”

They arrived at his office, and Henderson opened the door, allowing Lois to enter first. “You’ll stay with Clark?” he said.

“After you leave here?”

The look she sent him held more than a hint of impatience.

“Yes. I already told you that, too.”

So if the threats were real, Clark would tell her. Perhaps that was the reason for Wolfe’s change of tactic — the hope that Clark would be more forthcoming to Lois than he’d been in the interview room.

Lois settled into the guest chair. “Did you ask Clark about the presence of the other woman?” she said.

“I tried to,” Henderson said. “But Wolfe wasn’t in any mood to tolerate interruptions to the flow of his questions.”

“So Clark admitted she was there?”

“Eventually.”

“But he did it reluctantly? Right?”

“Yes.”

“Did his reluctance increase Wolfe’s suspicions?”

“Yes.” Henderson picked up his pen, and then looked up, wanting to catch her reaction to his next statement. “Lois, this is a long way from over.”

She didn’t flinch. “When we find Lana Lang, we’ll get the answers we need to solve the case. Finding the real murderer will prove Clark’s innocence.”

“If he has been trying to protect Lana Lang, he could face a charge of obstruction.”

“Not if he wasn’t there. Whatever he told you would be speculation.”

“Lois ... it would be in Clark’s best interests if you were to persuade him to tell us the whole truth.”

“If Wolfe is releasing Clark because he thinks I’ll conduct his investigation for him, he’s going to be very disappointed,” Lois said sharply.

“Don’t tell me you won’t be asking Clark questions.”

“Of course, I will,” she said. “But I will be approaching it from the perspective that Clark didn’t kill Mayson. I’ll be looking for alternative possibilities that fit the evidence.”

“You think the Prada woman did it?”

“That’s how it looks to me,” Lois said. “But being the most obvious suspect shouldn’t be enough to get you charged with murder.”

“You know Wolfe has more than that, Lois,” Henderson said with mild reproof. “Starting with why it took Clark so long to get to the station.”

“I think he was looking for Lana Lang.”

“Then why were both Clark and Superman so cagey about their exact whereabouts in the time following Mayson’s death?”

“Perhaps Clark called Superman, and they searched together. Clark wouldn’t ask Superman to help him escape justice, but he might ask Superman to help someone he loves.”

“You think Clark loves this woman?” Henderson asked in surprise.

“Makes sense to me.”

It didn’t make sense to Henderson. Clark had said he hadn’t been interested in a relationship with either Mayson or Lana Lang. He’d admitted there was someone else. And Henderson was sure that woman was sitting on the other side of his desk.

But apparently, Lois Lane — the most intuitive and brilliant reporter he knew — was oblivious.

Clark had said they were only friends. But he hadn’t seen the way she’d championed his cause and vehemently proclaimed his innocence.

Perhaps if he had ...

Except, the possibility still existed that, despite all of Lois’s efforts, Clark would be charged with murder. If that were to happen, it might be best if they both believed the almost-tangible bond between them amounted to nothing more than friendship.

“What do you know about this Lana Lang?” Lois asked.

“What else did Clark say about her?”

Henderson tapped his pen on his desk, hoping it would serve as a reminder that he was supposed to be asking the questions. “She’s from Smallville. Apparently, she’s a former girlfriend.”

Lois’s reaction to that piece of information was minimal — and the little that leaked was quickly shut down. “Well, it’s obvious they have some sort of relationship,” she said airily. “Her cosmetics were in his bathroom.”

“Do you think she will try to contact Clark?” Henderson asked.

“Maybe,” Lois said. “But I’m going to take him to my apartment, so unless she’s stalking him, she won’t be able to find him.”

Henderson re-jiggled his thoughts. Perhaps Lois wasn’t so blind. “Why do you want to keep them apart? Wouldn’t finding Lana help substantiate Clark’s story?”

“I’m not going to allow Clark to go down for something he didn’t do,” Lois said as she took her notepad from her bag.

Henderson pointed his pen at Lois. “Don’t disappear,” he warned. “It might seem like a great idea to run off and solve the case, but Wolfe is not someone to mess with.”

A tiny smile erupted from her seriousness. “Clark didn’t kill Mayson,” she said. “I know he didn’t. You suspect he didn’t. And even Wolfe has his doubts.”

“I need names and contact details of your witnesses,” Henderson said. “And a description of the woman in the Prada dress.”

He took down her information, marvelling that she’d managed to infuse doubt into a case that had seemed about as open and shut as a murder case could be.

If he’d been a betting man, his money would be on Lois Lane finding a way to prove that Clark Kent had not shot Mayson Drake.

Heck, as much as Wolfe was loath to admit it, she was already halfway there.

The door opened, and Clark felt his body tense.

This was it. He was about to be arrested. Soon after that, he expected to be charged.

Wolfe, his face frozen to blank, walked in, closed the door, and sat down. His fingers tapped a rhythm on the table. He lowered his head and scratched his temple. Then his head shot up, and he pinned Clark with a long look.

“Did you kill Mayson Drake?” he said.

“No. I didn’t.”

“Do you know the whereabouts of Lana Lang?”

“No.”

The detective lurched forward. “OK,” he said. “You agree to be fingerprinted ... you agree to give me your jacket and tie for forensic analysis ... you agree to stay in Metropolis where I can contact you ... and I let you go until I’ve had some time to investigate your claims.”

“What?” Clark gasped.

“You heard me.”

“Why do you want my fingerprints?” Clark asked, managing to eke a question from the fog of his confusion.

“To eliminate yours from the prints we took at your apartment. If the woman, Lana Lang, was there, we need to isolate her prints.”

Was Wolfe backing away from his earlier allegations? Or was this a strategy to get Clark to talk? “I’d prefer not to be fingerprinted,” he said.

“OK,” Wolfe said nonchalantly. “I’ll arrest you, and you can wait in a cell while I look into some new developments.”

“Are you blackmailing me?” Clark asked.

“Of course not,” Wolfe said calmly. “I’m covering my back. I have a solid case against you. I’ve received new information that could introduce doubt. I need time to investigate. If you’re

willing to cooperate, we can be reasonable. If you’re not willing to cooperate, I have no choice but to keep you in custody.” His face darkened. “Which, considering your association with Superman, is entirely vindicated.”

“He wouldn’t help anyone escape justice,” Clark said.

Wolfe shrugged. “So which is it? The cell for a few hours? Or release?”

“I ...” Clark really didn’t want his fingerprints on file.

Wolfe stood. “OK.” He turned to the other cop. “Can you escort Mr Kent to the holding cell?” He opened the door. “And tell Ms Lane that Mr Kent has decided he prefers our company to hers.”

“Ms Lane?” Clark choked.

Wolfe slowly faced Clark. “Yes. Lois Lane.”

Did Lois have anything to do with Wolfe’s change of tactics? Had she been the female whose arrival had interrupted their interview? “She’s here?” Clark asked.

“She’s waiting for you. I’ll tell her you won’t be —”

“I’ll give you the fingerprints,” Clark said.

Wolfe nodded. “Come with me.”

Clark stood as hope spread fresh energy through his body. Lois was here. She’d come to him. Somehow, she managed to shake Wolfe’s convictions.

But it didn’t change that when Mayson had died, Clark Kent hadn’t been anywhere.

For now, that didn’t matter.

Lois was here.

Clark followed Wolfe out of the interview room and looked around for Lois. He couldn’t see her. He focussed his hearing.

And there it was. Her heartbeat.

The fingerprinting process passed in a daze. When it was done, Wolfe said to him, “I know you’re hiding something, Kent. If you’re hiding the fact that you pulled the trigger that killed Ms Drake, I won’t rest until you’re charged and convicted.”

Clark decided it would be wisest to say nothing. He loosened his tie and gave it and his jacket to Wolfe.

“You can go,” Wolfe said as he took the items of clothing. “For now.”

Clark stepped out of the room and into the long corridor. Half a dozen steps later, a door opened behind him. He turned.

Lois stepped out.

Saw him.

Stopped.

Gave a little smile.

Then broke into a run, hurtling towards him.

Before he’d taken his next breath, she was in his arms. Clark held her, breathing in her presence, letting her Loisness soak into him like sweet rain on the desert floor.

He had missed her so much.

She drew back. Her arms slid from around his neck. She looked into his face with a faltering smile. “Are you all right?” she asked.

Fifteen minutes ago, Clark had thought he might never be all right again. But now ... “Thank you,” he breathed. “Thank you for coming.”

Her smiled gained a little more strength. “You didn’t think I was going to leave you here, did you? You’re my partner, remember?”

Her partner. And friend. Right now, he needed friends, but that didn’t soothe the ache in his heart that they would only ever be friends.

“Let’s go,” Lois said, stepping away from him.

“Where are we going?”

“To my apartment.”

“Wolfe said I had to stay in contact.”

“He has my number,” Lois said as she began walking down the corridor. “I told Henderson you would stay with me.”

Clark fell into step beside her, feeling as if he were trapped in a dream. They passed the front desk, and the dream quickly became a nightmare when he looked through the glass doors and saw a crowd of people congregated there.

“Who are they?” he murmured to Lois, dropping close to her ear.

“I don’t know,” she said. “They weren’t here when I arrived.”

The sliding doors opened, and Lois and Clark walked through the doorway. The cries — full of anger and indignation — hit him like a wall of sound.

Many of them were holding up newspapers. He recognised the nameplate. The *Metropolis Star*. He read the headline.

MAYSON DRAKE DEAD! CLARK KENT QUESTIONED!

Lois’s hand slipped into his.

The questions bombarded them. Lois used her other arm to clear a path through the agitated mass of people. A man shoved the paper at her. “Is it true?” he asked. “Did Kent kill the DA?”

“No, he didn’t,” Lois said in a loud voice. “He had information the police needed.”

“How can you be sure he didn’t shoot her? She died in his apartment.”

“He wasn’t there,” Lois said.

“Then who did shoot her?”

“The police are continuing with their inquiries,” Lois said.

“But if the story in the *Metropolis Star* suggests that Mr Kent shot Ms Drake, they got it wrong.”

“He didn’t kill her?”

Lois stilled from her efforts to thrust through the crowd.

“Clark Kent did not kill Ms Drake,” she stated in a voice that left no room for doubt.

“Mr Kent?” A female reporter from LNN tried to shove a microphone into Clark’s face. “What do you say to the allegations made in today’s *Metropolis Star*?”

Lois’s hand tightened in his. “I didn’t kill Ms Drake,” Clark said.

“Mr Kent was helping the police with their investigation,” Lois said loudly. “He wasn’t arrested.”

“Has anyone been charged?”

“Not yet,” Lois said as she moved forward. They reached the road, a cab pulled up, and they climbed in.

Lois gave Clark’s address to the cab driver. Then she turned to Clark, placing her hand on his arm. “It’s going to be all right,” she said.

“Lois,” he said. “Do you really believe what you said back there? That I didn’t kill Mayson?”

“Clark!”

He figured from her expression that he was on the verge of trouble for even asking the question.

“I never believed for one moment that you had killed her,” Lois said. She pointed at him fiercely. “And you should be ashamed of your lack of faith in our friendship.”

“Everyone else seemed to believe I’d done it,” Clark said in half-hearted self-defence. It was strange how little the tide of opinion mattered now. Now he was with Lois.

“I knew you couldn’t have done it,” she said.

“How could you have known?”

“Because I know you, Clark. You can be one of the most frustrating people to walk on this planet, but you don’t kill and you don’t run away.”

A mighty ball of emotion rose up, choking his ability to speak. Clark took her hand in his, put his head back, and closed his eyes.

The thing he valued more than anything else in his life — was still all right. So far, it had withstood the accusation of murder.

Whether it would withstand Lana’s claims, he didn’t know.

Whether it would survive his secret being blown to bits, he

didn’t know either.

Her head landed softly on his shoulder. Clark hauled in a deep breath, allowed his mind to fade to nothingness, and wished the short cab ride could last forever.

Part 10

The cab pulled up at the kerb, and the weight of Lois’s head lifted from Clark’s shoulder. He shook himself from the temporary cocoon of peace and looked out of the window. They were at his apartment.

Where Mayson had died.

Lois’s hand covered his, and he turned to her. Her smile — replete with understanding, support, and empathy — warmed his heart, further thawing its cold slab of isolation. “I thought you would like to get some different clothes,” she explained. “I have your keys. I got them from Henderson.”

Clark nodded mutely, and she directed the driver to wait for them.

A small crowd had gathered on the sidewalk near his apartment. From their midst, a voice called out, “There he is,” and the group swivelled towards him.

Lois’s hand burrowed into Clark’s again. She lifted her head high and marched them past the pointing, speculating crowd. She unlocked his door, hustled him inside, and shut it firmly.

Her hand slid down Clark’s arm and rested on his elbow. “You OK?” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Thanks.” He turned from Lois, his eyes drawn to the place where Mayson had lost her life. There was nothing to testify to the horror of what had happened here — no lingering bloodstain, no dent in the dark timber.

Lois nestled closer against his side. “It wasn’t your fault,” she said in a low voice. “Whatever the reasons for her being here, whatever happened, it wasn’t your fault.”

“If I’d told her sooner, she wouldn’t have been here,” Clark said.

“Told her what?”

“That I didn’t want to be with her like that.”

“What happened to Mayson is a tragedy,” Lois said. “But it wasn’t your fault.”

“I didn’t pull the trigger, but perhaps I deserve —”

“You don’t,” Lois said. She clasped his hand again and moved forward, guiding them around the spot where Mayson’s body had lain. At the bottom of the stairs, Lois released him and nodded to his bedroom. “Go and get some clothes.”

“I could shower here,” Clark suggested.

“No,” Lois said. “I don’t think you should be here any longer than necessary.”

He glanced into the bedroom, but didn’t move. His legs felt heavy, his feet felt melded to the floor. He and Mayson had spent time together. Here. Just a few days ago, she had cooked in his kitchen.

Now, she was gone.

Lois moved into his vision. “I don’t think we should stay here,” she said. “Get your clothes, and we’ll go.”

“Shouldn’t you be working on a subway story?”

As he reached the end of his question, Clark realised how utterly ungrateful he’d sounded. He held his breath, dreading that he’d pushed her away and she would leave him.

“The cab is waiting for us, remember? And I told Henderson and Wolfe I would stay with you.” Her smile appeared briefly. “It’s not because I think you’re a flight risk; I don’t. But I do think the team of Lane and Kent needs to be together for a while. I’ve hardly seen you in a week.”

On an intuitive level, Clark suspected there was something more to her insistence that they leave quickly, but his exhausted brain refused to cooperate, so he took the simple option and obediently moved into his bedroom. He gathered up jeans, a tee shirt, a jacket, socks, and underwear and shoved them into a bag.

In the bathroom, he took his toothbrush from the shelf where Lana had discarded it.

When he turned, Lois was there. She reached past him and opened the cabinet. Lana's cosmetics were gone, leaving the shelves forlorn and bare. He figured the police had taken them as evidence.

"Let's go," Lois said as she closed the cabinet door. She walked through his bedroom and up the stairs, keeping to the edge. At the top, she waited for him. Averting his gaze from the place where Mayson had fallen, Clark climbed the stairs, and he and Lois left his apartment together.

The crowd was still there. Still whispering. Still theorising. Still playing judge and jury. After Lois had locked his door, she grasped his hand again, and swept him towards the waiting cab without even looking in their direction.

Lois stared out of the window as the cab took them towards her apartment.

She'd known this — Mayson's death in his apartment and being the focus of the subsequent police investigation — would be a harrowing experience for Clark. She'd sensed his lostness when she'd hugged him at the police station. She'd felt his tension and uncertainty as he'd faced the hostile crowd and the damning headlines. She'd wanted to storm into the group outside his apartment and berate them for their thoughtlessness and hasty judgement.

She'd expected Clark to be shaken. Shocked. Dazed.

But she hadn't expected the moment in the cab — the moment when he'd allowed her to glimpse his desperate need to know what she believed regarding Mayson's death. The last time he'd been so vulnerable, so open, so unguarded, she'd rejected him.

She'd thought he would never again let her see past that barrier of self-preservation.

But he had. It had made her feel undeserving. It had tugged at her heartstrings, releasing little streams of her love for him — the love she had kept so tightly bound for so long.

The love that — by her own decree — would never be more than friendship.

While surreptitiously studying him, she'd discerned something else. Clark was worried.

About something. Or, more likely, someone. Probably the Prada woman. The woman from Clark's hometown. His former girlfriend. Lana Lang.

The woman he still loved. He was concerned about her, about where she was, about whether she needed him. About what she might have done.

Lois suspected that every instinct within him was primed, ready to spring to Lana's defence.

Perhaps that was why he'd wanted to stay at his apartment — hoping she would call, or come to him, or find a way to contact him.

Perhaps that was why he'd suggested Lois should be writing the subway story.

Perhaps that had been a hint that he'd wanted to be alone.

Perhaps he'd felt uncomfortable about his earlier moment of openness.

But, unless he stated outright that he wanted her to leave him, Lois was going to stick with him. In her estimation, having him worried about Lana was preferable to giving Lana the opportunity to convince Clark to sacrifice his freedom on her behalf.

The cab stopped, and Lois paid. They took the elevator to her floor in silence. As they reached her apartment, her cell phone rang. It was from Perry, but she cut the call without answering it. She pushed open her door, walked in, put her bag on the sofa, and turned to Clark with a smile she hoped would claw back a little of

the normalcy of their working partnership. "How about you go and have a shower?" she said. "Are you hungry?"

"A bit," he said, although it looked as if he'd only given her an answer because he thought she expected one.

"It's morning, but I don't feel like breakfast," Lois said. "I could order in a pizza."

"OK," he said with no discernible enthusiasm.

"And then, maybe we can talk?"

A little of the tension drained away in the glimmer of Clark's wry smile. "I figure you must have questions."

"Not about whether you killed Mayson," Lois said quickly. "But I think we should use this opportunity to share what we know. I'm sure that, together, we'll be able to find answers."

"Lane and Kent," he muttered.

Her phone rang, and Lois moved over to it. "I think this is Perry," she said. "Have a shower. Help yourself to anything you need. I'll order the pizza. We'll talk while we eat."

Clark nodded and took his bag into her bathroom.

Lois waited until the door had shut and then answered the phone. "Lois Lane."

"Lois." It was Perry's voice. "Are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

"Sure," Lois said, wondering what had worried him. "Why?"

"Are you with Clark?"

"Yes."

"My source told me he left the police station."

"Yeah. It finally dawned on Wolfe that his case isn't as solid as he had imagined it was."

"How is Clark?"

Upset. Disoriented. Hurting. Every time I look at him, I just want to hold him until he feels better again. "He knows this isn't over," Lois said, strangling her jangled emotions to keep them from clouding her words. "He's worried about what is going to happen. He's been questioned by the police as a suspect in a murder case. He's tired. And one of his friends was shot dead in his apartment. Altogether, he's not in great condition."

"But he seems ... OK?" Perry persisted.

"What are you worried about?" Lois asked as fear leapt up her throat. "Have you heard something?"

"Superman came here earlier."

"Oh?" Lois said. She turned away from the bathroom door and lowered her voice. "What did he say?"

"He was worried."

"About Clark?"

"About you. He said you were in danger."

"Danger from what?"

"That's the thing, Lois," Perry said. "He wouldn't tell me. It was as if he wanted me to know something, but he wasn't willing to come right out and say it."

"What feeling did you get?"

"I ..." Her editor paused with uncharacteristic indecision. "I didn't know. But I've been thinking about it, and ..."

"And?"

"And it seemed possible he was trying to say that ... that Clark ... He seemed to be hinting that Clark ... might not be himself exactly."

"He said *Clark* might hurt me?" Lois hissed, trying to keep her voice down.

"No, he didn't say that," Perry said. "But he took time out from the subway rescue to come to my office, so obviously, he thought it was important. He was worried about you. He said threats had been made by someone who was out of control."

"But he didn't actually say that person was Clark?" Lois said.

"No," Perry admitted.

Lois slowly shook her head. Had the entire world lost its mind?

"I knew Clark was at the police station," Perry said. "But

then I heard he had left ... and I ... Darn it, Lois, today has been a terrible day, and it's not even nine o'clock yet. I'm not taking any risks with your safety."

"You really think Clark would hurt me?" Lois asked, not bothering to temper her indignation.

"No. But then I didn't think Clark would be accused of murder."

"He wasn't charged," Lois said quickly. "He wasn't even arrested."

Perry sighed deeply. "Lois, just be careful. Please. I don't know what is happening today. I don't know what Clark did or his mental state, but I know Superman was worried, and if anything happened to you ..."

Lois softened her tone. "Clark won't hurt me," she said. "In fact, if Superman was right and someone has made threats against me, Clark is —"

"Lois, I hated calling about this. I hated even thinking it was a possibility, but in the last twelve hours the safest subway system in the US has collapsed and the most decent upright man I know has been implicated in a murder."

"I appreciate your concern," she said. "But there's nothing to worry about. What's happening with the subway?"

"A few lines are open, but the city is going to be in chaos for most of the day. Probably for most of the week."

"I guess Superman is still there helping," Lois said.

"I haven't heard," Perry said. "But when he was here, he indicated he would be occupied for a considerable time. That's why he wanted me to look out for you."

"I'm sorry I'm not there, getting you the story."

"You look after yourself. And Clark, too."

"OK. Bye, Chief."

Lois returned the handset, her thoughts in turmoil as she tried to assimilate this new development into a tangled landscape of her mind. She quickly picked up the phone again, dialled the number of the twenty-four hour pizza store, and absently ordered breakfast.

What did Superman know? Had he had contact with Clark?

Why had he gone to Perry with his concerns?

Why not come directly to her?

And when Wolfe had taken him to the station, why hadn't he used that opportunity to proclaim Clark's innocence?

Clark pulled his sweater over his head, glad to be doing something so mundane that it didn't make any demands on a mind that felt as if it had been battered to mush.

Lois didn't believe the accusations. He didn't understand why she hadn't spoken up for him in Perry's office, but that was a minor detail.

She'd investigated on his behalf. Wolfe had said he'd received 'new information'. Clark had no doubt it had been Lois who had uncovered that new information, brought it to Wolfe, and demanded he consider it.

He had felt trapped. Defenceless. Defeated.

But he hadn't known Lois was fighting in his corner.

That thought diffused sweet warmth through his heart, and his love for her surged again.

They were friends, Clark reminded himself.

Friends. Partners. Nothing more.

She'd said so when he'd thanked her for coming to the police station.

As he finished brushing his teeth, his mind wandered ahead.

Instead of facing Wolfe's questions, he was going to face Lois's.

Clark hadn't had answers for Wolfe.

Would he have them for Lois?

How much should he tell her? If she asked where he had been at the time of Mayson's murder, should he tell her the truth? The

whole truth? If she asked where he had been all night ...

He had to tell her.

They were friends.

She believed in him. But her belief was based on her assumption that she knew him.

When she discovered she didn't know him at all ...

When she realised he'd been hiding things about himself ...

Would that change everything?

He had to tell her. He owed her that much.

But actually saying the words. *Lois, I'm Superman*. Clark had imagined saying them so many times. And he'd imagined her response — dozens of them. And every single time, it had been enough to make him want to shrink back into the shadow of half-truths.

He could not imagine Lois feeling anything other than angry. And hurt. And very betrayed.

Right now, it seemed as if she were his only ally in an intimidating world of accusation and hostility.

He needed her friendship more than ever before.

But the time had come. He had to tell her he was Superman.

Lois waited for Clark to finish in the bathroom, trying to sort and catalogue the myriad of ideas and half-formed thoughts into something that would provide a framework for their investigation.

She knew Clark hadn't killed Mayson. She also knew that doubt would not be enough to save him. Doubt might keep him from a murder conviction, it might even keep him from being charged, but now that the Star had linked Clark Kent with the murder of Mayson Drake, the stigma of it would remain on him, contaminating his life, his work, and his reputation.

They needed proof. Incontrovertible proof.

Why had he been so uncooperative with the police?

Why hadn't he come right out and said where he'd been at the time of the murder? Where had he been last night?

Although she'd given answers to Henderson when he'd raised those questions, in her own mind, they weren't enough.

What was Clark hiding?

How was Superman involved?

Did Clark know Lana had killed Mayson? He must suspect. Or was there something else — another twist that Lois hadn't uncovered yet?

Lois searched every corner of her imagination, trying to formulate an alternative explanation for Clark's behaviour.

Every time, she came back to the same conclusion.

He loved the Prada woman. He knew she was in trouble.

Being Clark, he wouldn't save himself if that meant hurting her.

Lois was a little surprised he hadn't suggested trying to contact Lana. Surely, he would want to be with her. Perhaps he didn't know her whereabouts. Or perhaps he did know and was deliberately staying away to avoid leading anyone to her.

Clark emerged from the bathroom, looking breath-taking in his jeans and casual shirt. Lois swallowed down her army of regrets as she asked, "Are you feeling any better?"

The smile he gave her was tinged with pure Clark, and she realised afresh how much she had missed being with him. "Yes," he said. He moved closer to her. "Lois." He took in a deep breath. "Thank you. Thank you for everything."

Her tears surged. Tears for what she had lost. Tears for what he had endured. Tears because he wasn't hers and never would be. She brutally thrust the tears aside said lightly, "You know you're the only person I could ever bear to work with. I couldn't let Wolfe charge you with something you didn't do."

His hand lifted towards her, but it dropped before making contact.

Lois gestured to the sofa. "Let's go and sit down," she said. "The pizza will be here soon."

They moved to her sofa and sat, both perched on the edge, both turned slightly towards each other, both looking ill at ease. Something had changed between them.

He was no longer just her best friend. He was another woman's lover.

"Who goes first?" Lois said, trying to sound cheerful, trying to get them back on the easy footing they had been slowly reconstructing in the aftermath of the Luthor debacle.

"I will," Clark said. "I figure I owe you that, at least."

Lois fortified her heart, knowing that his declaration of love for Lana Lang was going to feel like an assault with a blunt club. She moulded her face to an expression she hoped was appropriately poised between concern and detachment. "How about you start around the time you arrived home last night?"

Clark was staring vacantly ahead. "They think I murdered her," he said. "They believe I could do that."

"They're cops," Lois said dismissively. "They're trained to be suspicious of everyone."

Clark didn't respond verbally. He stared at the floor, the depths of his anguish laid bare. Lois watched him, yearning to reach over and touch him. His leg. His arm. Perhaps take his hand as she had done in the cab.

But she had to remember. He was just her friend. Her partner. His heart belonged to someone else.

"Start at the beginning," she prompted.

"I left the office about nine-thirty," Clark said woodenly. "I walked home, so it was almost ten o'clock when I arrived. My neighbour, Mrs McCreadie was also coming home. She had taken her cat to the vet."

Lois reclined into the sofa, hoping it would relax both of them. She waited as Clark gathered his thoughts. She wondered if he was thinking about how good it had been to return home and find Lana there to welcome him after a long day.

"After we'd talked for a minute or so, I went into my apartment. I heard a noise in the bedroom. It was Lana."

He'd said her name. Without a trace of feeling, good or bad. "Were you glad to see her?" Lois asked cautiously.

"I was surprised."

"But ... but her cosmetics were in your bathroom."

Clark nodded grimly. "Yeah."

"You didn't want her there?" Lois asked as hope butted against her heart.

"I didn't want her moving in with me," Clark said. "But she had other ideas."

"So *she* wanted to be with you?"

Clark released a long breath. "Yeah," he said. "We used to date in high school, and she said she wanted us to be together again. She said we were going to get married. She had the whole future planned."

If Lana's plans had pleased Clark then, he didn't look pleased now. Perhaps he'd realised that those plans were now unlikely to come to fruition. Perhaps he was in shock that his future with Lana had been swept away from them. Or perhaps ... "Is that what you wanted?" Lois asked.

"She said she was pregnant," Clark said dolefully.

Pregnant? The word resonated around Lois's mind as her heart gave up the tiny seed of hope it had been nurturing. Whatever his feelings, Clark would never abandon the woman carrying his child. Lois had no doubt he would lie to protect his family.

"She said we were going to get married and raise the child together."

Clark had always wanted a family. "I'm sorry, Clark," Lois said.

He pulled his eyes from their sightless stare and looked at her. "I hadn't seen her in over a year. And suddenly, she's back in my life and telling me that we're going to be together."

"It ... it isn't your child?"

"No."

Lois's hope leapt onto the top of her heart and executed a little dance. "So ... what you feel for her is ... loyalty ... not love."

"I'm not sure what I feel for her," Clark said sadly. "Pity, perhaps."

Lois slumped into the sofa and stared at Clark. Lana Lang's reintroduction into his life had induced pity. "Why pity?"

"Because she was behaving erratically. She was almost manic. Happy one moment, angry the next."

"Did you consider her offer? Did you think there was any possible way it could work?"

"It wasn't an offer," Clark said. "It was a demand."

"Had you decided what to do?"

"I could never marry her," he said. "But I was trying to work out the best way to help her."

He would. He was Clark. "Why couldn't you marry her?" Lois asked gently.

"Because I don't love her. I will never love her."

He didn't love her.

He would never love her.

"Then why are you trying to protect her?" Lois asked. "Why didn't you tell the police she was in your apartment? Where were you all last night? You must have known she could have killed Mayson. Why didn't you —" Lois stopped, realising Clark's tension had cinched tighter with every questioning dart she had flung. "Sorry," she said. "Keep going."

"I hadn't seen her since I left Smallville. I'd barely thought of her. I don't want a future with her. I told her that, but she wouldn't accept it. She said that if I didn't do what she wanted, she would ..."

"She would what? Kill another woman who was interested in you?"

"No. She said she would tell —"

"That's what the screaming was about? It wasn't an argument between you and Mayson? It was between Lana and Mayson?"

Clark nodded.

"And Lana accused you of cheating?"

"Yes."

"But you don't love her?"

"No."

"And you didn't love Mayson?"

Regret washed across Clark's face. "No," he said sadly. "I didn't love Mayson."

"But you hadn't told her that?"

"No. I tried. But I just couldn't find the right words."

Because Clark knew what rejection felt like, Lois thought grimly. He knew what it felt like to watch the person you love be with someone else.

She had to tell him. The timing was all wrong. The last thing Clark needed was another woman pressuring him into something he didn't want. But she wouldn't demand anything of him. She would just undo something she had done and had regretted ever since.

With her heart thundering, Lois shuffled closer to Clark. He eyed her, his face a mass of questions.

When she was close enough that her knee was almost touching his, she smiled. She hauled in a deep breath. And then she said the three hardest words in the English language.

"I was wrong."

His face closed, shuttered by pain. "About what?"

"About you. About what I said." Lois smiled, but Clark didn't smile back. She inched a little closer. "That day in —"

A sharp knock to the door broke into her nascent confession.

"That'll be our pizza," Lois said.

"What were you saying?" Clark asked. "What were you working about?"

“I’ll get the pizza, and then we’ll —”
 “Open up,” came the harsh cry from the other side of the door. “Police. Open up.”

Clark groaned.
 “Don’t worry,” Lois said as she rose from the sofa. “They’ve probably come to tell us they’ve found the murderer.” She opened the door.

Wolfe was there. Henderson was there, his face pulled taut. A third cop was there.

“Is Clark here?” Wolfe snapped.
 “Yes,” she said, hearing Clark’s footsteps come up behind her. “We told you we would be here.”

Wolfe stepped forward, past Lois. He pulled a pair of handcuffs from his belt and slipped them on Clark’s wrists. “Clark Kent,” he said. “You’re under arrest for the murder of Mayson Drake. You have the right to remain silent, but anything you say ...”

Lois tuned out. She grabbed Henderson’s arm and pulled him away. “What is he doing?” she barked. “What do you have?”

“The murder weapon,” Henderson replied tightly. “With Clark’s fingerprints.”

Part 11

There was a fleeting second when Lois caught Clark’s eyes — a tiny second when, she hoped, she managed to telegraph everything that was important.

It’s OK.

We’ll beat this.

I will never believe you killed.

Hang in there; we’re not beaten yet.

Before she could detect any response, he was turned around and marched off between two cops.

Lois gripped Henderson’s jacket. “What about the clothes?” she said. “The Prada dress? Clark’s jacket and tie? Did you get them tested for gunshot residue?”

He nodded. “Inconclusive.”

“Inconclusive?” she hissed. “Either there was evidence of gunshot residue or there wasn’t.”

Henderson sighed. “There was nothing on Clark’s clothes. The dress had traces of something, but the area was small and almost twelve hours had passed since the shooting.”

“So you might not have the evidence that she did it,” Lois said. “But you know Clark didn’t.”

Henderson wearily shook his head. “No,” he said. “We can be reasonably sure that whoever shot Mayson wasn’t wearing Clark’s jacket and tie at the time. But the simple explanation is that Clark removed those items when he arrived home. Many men do that, Lois.”

“If he had done that, the residue would be on his shirt,” Lois said, making a move towards Clark’s bag.

Henderson stalled her with a hand to her arm. “Lois,” he said, “nothing we find on the shirt is going to change that Clark’s prints are on the murder weapon.”

“Will he be charged?”

“That depends on the DA’s assessment of Wolfe’s case. Naturally the DA’s department is very keen that the perpetrator be brought to justice in this particular case.”

“So am I,” Lois said grimly.

“We have opportunity, plus a very good witness statement, plus the weapon, minus a realistic alternative — that makes for a solid case.”

“Lana Lang is a realistic alternative,” Lois said forcefully.

“We have no evidence that Lana Lang is even in Metropolis.”

“Have you found her in Smallville?”

“Wolfe didn’t ask the local Sheriff’s office to try to locate her.”

“Why not?”

“Lois,” Henderson said in exasperation. “Even if we were

able to ascertain that Lana Lang isn’t in Smallville, it doesn’t mean she’s in Metropolis, let alone prove that she shot Mayson.”
 “It gives her opportunity.”

Henderson’s latent impatience bubbled to the surface. “I have to go,” he snapped. “I want to be there when Wolfe questions Clark.”

“Where did you find the gun?”

“In the subway.”

“The subway?” Lois gasped. “How did ...”

“After Clark is charged with murder, there’s every chance the next charge laid will be Superman with obstruction of justice.” Henderson turned and walked away, shutting the door behind him.

Lois marched to her phone and called Jimmy.

“James Olsen,” he said after answering.

“Jimmy,” she said. “Remember last year? The car thieves at Metropolis pier?”

“Ah ... hi, Lois.”

“Do you remember?”

“Sure, I remember. You nailed them cold.”

“I need the video recorder. I need it here in less than ten minutes.”

“I’m still working on the subway collapse, Lois. It’s a huge story. I got some great shots. It could be my big —”

“Jimmy, I need that video recorder. And I need it now.”

He sighed with resignation. “OK, Lois. Where are you?”

“I’m in my apartment. Bring the recorder and anything else you’ll need to hide it on my body.”

“Do you need the beard and moustache?”

“The what?” she said impatiently. “Oh. I remember. No, I just need the recorder and a tape. I have everything else.”

“OK, Lois. I’ll be there.”

“Thanks, Jimmy.” Lois slammed down the phone and went to search through her closet for exactly the right outfit.

The knock sounded on her door thirteen and a half minutes later. Lois quickly finished tying the knot in the black lace that weaved up her cleavage, pulling together the two sides of the shiny red halter-top. She hurried to the door and flung it open. “Jimmy,” she greeted. “Did you bring it?”

His eyes popped, and he seemed to have lost the ability to move.

Lois grabbed his arm and pulled him into her apartment. “Did you bring the recorder?” she demanded.

He jolted from his stupor, swallowed, and gave a stilted nod.

“Yeah,” he said. “I got it.”

“Good,” Lois said. “There’s a tape in it?”

“Yeah. You have thirty minutes. Will that be enough?”

“Yep.” Lois looked down, beyond the shiny red top and to the short black skirt that was cinched around her hips. “Where are we going to put it?”

“You want it somewhere *on* you?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Lois,” he spluttered with a helpless gesture towards her outfit. “There is nowhere to put it. Not if you want it hidden.”

Lois pulled at one side of the top, centring it. “It has to be able to go somewhere,” she said.

“You want the camera at the front?”

“Yes.”

His expression was that of a man who was being asked to achieve the impossible. “Can I touch?”

“Of course, Jimmy,” Lois said. “Just get it on me and get it hidden. I have to leave.”

He leant back and scrutinised her. “It’s probably going to be less obvious if it’s higher rather than lower,” he said. But he didn’t make a move towards her.

Lois thrust out her hand. “Give it to me.”

He did. Gratefully.

She released the knot. She loosened the laces and shoved the tiny video camera into her cleavage. “Is that going to work?”

“How much vision do you need?” Jimmy said.

“As much as I can get.”

“Sound won’t be enough?”

“No.” Lois pulled on the laces, tightening the sides of her garment around the camera. “I need to prove identity. For that, I need vision.” She craned her neck, looking down at the bump between her breasts. “Can you adjust the laces around the lens so there’s a clear view?”

Jimmy approached her and tentatively manipulated the laces. “OK,” he said. “The lens is clear.”

Lois arranged the bow over the sides of the camera. “Is that going to work?”

“You’ll only get vision of what is directly in front of you.”

“Is the camera obvious?”

Jimmy stood back, surveying her. “There’s a bit of a bulge,” he said.

“Is it noticeable?” Lois inquired anxiously.

He stepped sideways. “It is from this angle, but front-on, it’s not too obvious unless you’re concentrating on that spot.” His gaze dropped. “It’s not like there isn’t anything else to look at.”

Lois hitched up her skirt. “Is that better? Should I show more leg? Or more midriff?”

Jimmy’s cheeks coloured. “Ah ... perhaps more leg. Try to draw the focus away from the camera.”

“I press the button on the left side and it will record?” Lois said, feeling through the material to locate the button.

“Yeah. Same as last time.”

“Thanks, Jimmy.” Lois hooked her sparkly gold bag over her shoulder.

“Lois,” Jimmy said. “This looks dangerous.”

“No more dangerous than the car thieves,” she said, taking the handle of the small glitzy pink suitcase she had packed earlier.

“You were dressed as a guy, then,” Jimmy said. “Now ... well, if you were going for the guy disguise, you’ve failed completely.”

Lois paused before opening the door. “What do I look like?”

Her question lifted Jimmy’s eyebrows. “A woman on the hunt,” he said.

“Good,” Lois said. “That’s exactly what I am.”

Jimmy put a hand on her bare arm. “What if the hunter becomes the hunted?”

“That’s what I’m hoping will happen.”

“Lois!”

She walked out the door. “Are you staying here?”

Jimmy reluctantly stepped out of her apartment and followed her as she strode towards the elevator. “What are you going to do?” he asked.

“I’m helping a friend.” She hit the ‘down’ button.

“Clark?”

“What have you heard about Clark?”

They stepped into the elevator together. “That Mayson Drake was shot in his apartment.”

“She was,” Lois said. “But Clark didn’t do it.”

“The police wanted him for questioning.”

“That’s because of where it happened. Clark wasn’t there at the time.”

The elevator jarred to a stop, the doors opened, and Lois strode out.

“Does the Chief know about this?” Jimmy said, running alongside her to keep up.

“He knows I’m working on this case.”

“Does he know you’re going out dressed like that?” Jimmy said. “Alone?”

“You can’t come, Jimmy.”

“Someone should go with you. Clark wouldn’t let you go out alone dressed like that.”

“No one is coming with me. I need to go alone.”

“Are you trying to get yourself mugged?” Jimmy said in exasperation.

Lois hailed a passing cab. It stopped. “If that is what it takes.” She slipped into the cab as a pizza delivery vehicle drew up behind them. Taking a ten dollar bill from her purse, she shoved it at Jimmy. “Thanks for coming,” she said. “I ordered pizza. Have breakfast on me.” She slammed the door before Jimmy could respond.

Lois gave Clark’s address to the cab driving and sat back, meticulously reviewing every individual piece of information she knew about Lana Lang.

The revolver lay on the table between them.

Wolfe started the recording, gave the details of who was present, and then looked up at Clark.

“We know the bullet that killed Ms Drake was fired from this weapon,” he said. “We have two clear fingerprints — both yours.”

Clark doubted the forensic team had obtained absolute proof that this was the murder weapon after such a short time, but it was possible they had matched the remaining three bullets with the one that had killed Mayson.

“Do you have any explanation for how your prints came to be on this gun?” Wolfe asked.

Possible answers slithered through Clark’s mind. He rejected every one of them.

“We found the gun in the subway,” Wolfe said. “Between Northwood station and the tunnel collapse.”

Yeah, that was where Clark had left it before giving all of his attention to trying to help injured and trapped people, despite worrying about Lois, wondering about Lana, and mourning Mayson. The gun had slipped from the commotion of his thoughts.

“It was hidden behind a couple of loose bricks,” Wolfe continued, his tone cool, detached, and eminently chilling.

Clark shuffled uneasily in the seat.

“Do you know the whereabouts of Superman?” Wolfe said.

Clark crossed his arms.

“Did you put the weapon in the tunnel? Or did you give it to Superman?”

Clark had no answers to any of these questions. If he said Clark had put the gun there, he was going to open himself up to a barrage of questions about how it had been possible for someone to get through the security guards and enter the tunnel without being seen. If he said Superman had put it there, the superhero’s reputation was going to be just as sullied as Clark’s was.

“I didn’t shoot Mayson Drake,” Clark said dully.

“Your prints are on the murder weapon.”

He was cornered. Where was Lois? He doubted she would stay in her apartment. What was she thinking? If Lana heard he was at the police station ... If Lana had been watching his apartment and had seen them together. He had to try to protect Lois. “I took it from Lana Lang.”

Wolfe laughed — hard and cold. “Lana Lang again. We’ve established that she does exist. That she was raised in Smallville and you dated her. But the Smallville police officer we talked to said you hadn’t been together for a long time.”

“I told you,” Clark said. “Before she came to my apartment last night, I hadn’t seen her for over a year.”

“And the police officer was unaware of her pregnancy.”

Clark shrunk back into his refuge of silence.

“Who ended that relationship?” Wolfe asked.

“She did.”

“That’s what we were told. Perhaps you’ve dwelt on it all these years. Perhaps you were hurt by her rejection. Or humiliated. Perhaps, when the need arose for a scapegoat, you figured it was your opportunity for revenge.”

“That’s not true.”

Henderson moved forward to the table. “Clark, if you didn’t do this, you need to speak up now,” he said. “You need to give us an explanation for how your fingerprints got on that weapon.”

Clark heaved in a breath, feeling squeezed between silence that would indicate guilt or answers that weren’t believable. “I met Lana,” he said.

“After the shooting? Or before?”

“After.”

“When?” Wolfe fired. “Where?”

“When I was coming to the police station.”

“When you came in earlier this morning?”

“No. Before that.”

“What happened?”

“She said that if I came to you and told you she had been in my apartment, she would …” Clark stopped. All he had was the truth, but he was painfully aware of exactly how implausible it would sound.

“She would what?” Wolfe said.

“She would kill Lois Lane.”

Wolfe didn’t quite guffaw, but his scepticism reverberated around the room. “So you did what?” he asked.

“I saw a gun under her jacket. I took it from her. I had to try to protect Lois.”

“Let me guess,” Wolfe said. “This jacket she was wearing — it was your black leather one, right?”

Clark could only nod.

“The red baseball cap? Did she have that, as well?”

“No.”

The atmosphere tingled with disbelief.

“Are you going to charge me?” Clark asked, although he was sure of the answer.

“What did you do with the weapon?”

“I had to try to make sure Lois would be all right. I knew that once I walked into the police station, I wouldn’t be able to help her. I’d heard about the subway collapse, so I went there, thinking she would be there. I couldn’t find her, so I hid the weapon.”

“In the subway?”

“Yes.”

“You just walked in there — through all the rescue workers and crowds — and deposited the gun behind a couple of bricks?”

Clark had known these questions would be lying in wait if he chose this path. “Yes.”

“Why hide it? Why not bring it with you?”

“I knew I was the primary suspect in a murder case. I figured there was a good chance the gun I took from Lana was the murder weapon, and it had my fingerprints on it. I thought that if I came in here and brought it with me, it would be tantamount to admitting I had killed Mayson.”

“So instead, you concocted a story about the enigmatic Ms Lana Lang?”

Clark said nothing. Not even Lois’s belief in him could save him now.

“You’re going to be held in custody until we have completed our investigation,” Wolfe said. “I have a warrant for Superman’s arrest. Then, unless something changes, I’m going to charge both of you. You with murder. And him with being an accessory after the fact.”

The world didn’t know it yet, but Superman wasn’t going to be seen again for a long time. It was going to look as if he had run away, too.

Should Clark tell them? Should he say, “*I hid the gun. I’m Superman. I heard the cries from the tunnel and knew I had to*

help, but I couldn’t leave Lana with the gun because she was threatening to hurt Lois.”

No, he couldn’t say that.

For over a year, he had protected the secret of Superman. For nearly three decades, his parents had protected the secret of the alien living on Earth.

Once he said he was Superman, it could never be taken back. Everyone would know.

Even if he admitted he was Superman, it wouldn’t provide him with an alibi for the time of Mayson’s death.

If he were charged and found guilty, they would know a normal prison cell wouldn’t hold him. They would know they would need kryptonite.

His parents would be devastated if his imprisonment involved constant exposure to the green poison. They would be vulnerable to any criminal who wanted retribution against Superman.

And he would be helpless to protect them.

Lois would know.

Everyone knew she worked with Clark Kent. If everyone also knew that meant she was close to Superman, she would be a target.

She’d said she believed in him. Would she still believe in him when she knew he had been lying to her for so long? Would she still think Superman was a hero when she found out he had hidden evidence?

They were going to charge him with murder. They could establish opportunity. They had the weapon.

Until now, Clark had thought he would have a choice. To reveal his secret or to forego his freedom.

But he had no choice. Speaking up — divulging the secret was going to achieve nothing except guarantee that Superman would be brought down with him.

And suddenly, keeping the secret seemed more important than ever before.

So, Clark said nothing as they took him from the interview room and locked him in a holding cell.

Lois directed the cab driver to stop one hundred yards from Clark’s apartment and walked towards it with clipped and purposeful steps, her high heels tapping loudly on the sidewalk as the wheels of her suitcase jolted behind her.

At his door, she took the keys from her bag, dropped them, bent low to pick them up, spent a good twenty seconds selecting the right key, and let herself into his apartment. She closed the door but didn’t lock it.

She scanned Clark’s apartment, looking for any changes since she had been here with Clark. Seeing nothing obvious, she walked down the stairs, placed the suitcase on the sofa, and opened it. She took her jeans and sweater and hid them in Clark’s closet, returning to ruffle the remaining contents to make them appear as if someone was in the process of unpacking. She draped her lacy bra over the edge of the suitcase, its black colour providing a stark contrast to the pink.

Lois straightened and was about to move into the bathroom when she heard a noise outside the door. She scuttled towards the kitchen, pressing the record button on the video recorder.

At the sound of the opening door, she turned around, pushing surprise into her face.

A woman marched in.

A woman wearing Clark’s black leather jacket.

And oversized jeans.

Lois glanced to the woman’s feet. The legs of the jeans reached the floor, covering most of her shoes, but Lois could see enough to deduce they were saddle shoes.

The woman stopped at the top of the stairs. “Who are you?” she said.

“I’m Lois Lane,” she replied.

“You’re Lois? Lois Lane?”
 “You’ve heard of me.”
 “What are you doing in Clark’s apartment?”
 “I’m his girlfriend,” Lois declared. Then, figuring now was a good time to get a positive identification, she asked, “Who are you?”
 “I’m his fiancée. Lana Lang.”
 “Really?” Lois said in heavy tones of disbelief. “That’s strange. My boyfriend has never mentioned you.”
 “That’s probably because you aren’t important enough in his life for him to have mentioned me.”
 Lois let surprise tumble across her face.
 “We dated in high school,” Lana informed her. “Now, we’ve realised we never really fell out of love.” She put a hand on her stomach. “And we have a baby to consider.”
 Lois cackled. “You think Clark wants a baby?” she said scornfully. “With you?”
 “He doesn’t have a choice. It’s his baby.”
 “Clark’s with me now,” Lois said. “Nothing’s going to change that. Not even a baby.”
 Lana moved down a couple of steps and stopped right at the spot when Mayson had fallen. “Clark’s going to marry me.”
 “No, he’s not,” Lois said. “I was here with him just a short time ago. He insisted I move in with him today.” She gestured towards the open suitcase. “Perhaps his urgency had something to do with your regrettable reappearance in his life.”
 “That was *you*?” Lana said. “You were here with Clark?”
 “Of course I was with him. I told you — we’re together.”
 “You were dressed ...” Lana’s eyes drifted down Lois’s body. Lois shuffled across, facing Lana front on. “... differently.”
 “Yeah,” Lois said, flicking at her hair. “We were *working* then. But Clark likes me to dress differently in our free time.” She hoisted her skirt an inch higher. “He specifically requested that I wear this to celebrate us moving in together. He bought it for me.”
 “Clark ... bought ... *that*?” Lana gasped.
 “He loves it. He said it could have been made specifically for me.”
 Lana’s gaze flitted over Lois’s open suitcase. “Did you steal my softening foam gel?”
 “What?” Lois exclaimed.
 “My Toleriane range of skin-care products. I bought them in Paris. I put them in the cabinet. After you and the old guy came early this morning, the gel was gone.” She advanced a couple of steps. “I want it back.”
 “I didn’t take your gel,” Lois said. “The guy I was with is a cop. He took it.”
 “A cop?” Lana said, her upper lip curling as if she had burped up something particularly unpleasant. “Did he take my dress, too?”
 “Yes.”
 “Why did he take them?” Lana seemed genuinely puzzled.
 “For evidence,” Lois said, hoping this would lead to a discussion about the murder.
 But Lana’s attention had swung back to Lois’s outfit. “You said Clark bought that for you?”
 “Yep.”
 Lana scuttled down the stairs, her face wrought with shock. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “Clark wouldn’t have asked you to move in with him. He’s going to marry me.”
 Lois gestured to the open suitcase. “Guess you misunderstood.”
 “I didn’t,” Lana screamed. “And Clark would never want to be with someone who dresses like that. He gets uncomfortable around such immodesty.”
 “Really?” Lois said with a squeak of surprise. “He’s never seemed unappreciative of my lack of modesty.” She brushed at

her skirt. “Perhaps he just needs the right woman.” She looked at Lana, allowing her disdain to shimmer like the hot sun. “Clearly, that isn’t you.”
 With a swift movement, Lana pulled a small handgun from inside the jacket.
 “What are you going to do with that?” Lois taunted.
 “Clark is mine,” Lana cried hysterically. “He’s going to marry me. You can’t have him.”
 “I’ve already got him,” Lois said with calm certainty. “And he’s going to stay with me. And nothing you do is going to change that.”
 Lana lifted the gun and pointed it at Lois.
 “You’re going to shoot me?” Lois scoffed. “Because Clark wants to be with me and not you?”
 “He *does* want to be with me. I know everything about him. He’ll choose me because I’m going to have a baby and he doesn’t want me to tell everyone his secret.”
 “He has a secret?”
 Lana paused as confusion ironed out her scrunched-up anger. “You haven’t realised?”
 “I’m confident I know everything about him that I need to know,” Lois said loftily. “And I don’t need to blackmail him to keep him interested.” She hitched the skirt a little higher.
 The gun rose in response.
 “What will shooting me achieve?” Lois said. “Clark still won’t love you.”
 “Yes, he will,” Lana shrieked. “He has always loved me.”
 “How many times have you seen him since he moved to Metropolis?”
 “That’s not important,” Lana cried. “He has always loved me. He doesn’t love you. He doesn’t love the blonde hussy.”
 Finally, they were making some progress. “What blonde hussy?” Lois said, infusing her question with jealousy-tinged interest.
 “That blonde who was here last night. The one who was so stupid, she thought Clark wanted to go to a show with her.”
 “What’s her name?”
 Lana snorted. “I don’t know. She had a boy’s name. It was a bird.”
 Lois’s mouth fell open, and she held her pose for a breath. “Mayson Drake?” she gasped. “Mayson Drake came *here*? To see Clark?”
 “Yes,” Lana said, nodding importantly. A sudden smile dissolved her anger. “But she won’t be back. I made sure of that.”
 “You made sure of it?” Lois said, mixing a trace of admiration into her interest. “How?”
 “The same way I intend to make sure you won’t be with Clark.”
 “You *shot* her?”
 “She wouldn’t believe Clark was with me. She said she didn’t think Clark was the father of my baby.”
 “So you killed her?” Lois said.
 “Yes. Just like I’m going to kill you.”
 Having achieved her objective, Lois switched her focus to trying to get out of this alive. First, she needed to stall for time. “You said Clark has a secret,” she said. “If you’re going to kill me anyway, there’s no harm in telling me.”
 The gun dropped a few degrees. “You must know,” Lana said. “You must have worked out that he’s not like other men.”
 “He isn’t?” Lois shuffled closer to the meagre cover provided by the couch.
 “No. He’s different.”
 “How is he different?” she asked, eyeing the distance to the couch and wondering if she were close enough to risk a dive.
 Lana shuffled a step closer. “He’s scared of intimacy,” she said in a lowered voice.
 “He is?” Lois’s exclamation squeaked with surprise.

“I was with him for a long time,” Lana said. “I made it very clear I wanted our relationship to progress further. But he was never interested. Not once. I’d invite him to my home when my parents were out. I’d ask him to stop the car on lonely roads.” Her eyes rested on Lois’s chest, and Lois fingered the bow, using her forearm to try to conceal the bump. “And if I wore a top like that, he would make a point of staring at my face.”

“Maybe he just didn’t find you attractive,” Lois muttered under her breath.

“I thought there was something wrong with me,” Lana continued. “Until we broke up and I met other guys, and I realised he is the one with the problem.”

“So it’s not his baby?”

“Of course it’s not his baby,” Lana hooted. “Clark Kent won’t ever have a baby. That’s why it’s so perfect that we get married. He’s wants a family. I can give him one — and he won’t even need to get into all that stuff he’s so squeamish about.”

“Why would Clark want someone else’s baby?”

“Because he knows he can’t get deeper into a relationship than being friends; he can’t admit to his feelings. Can you believe he never once told me he loved me?”

Lois found that ridiculously easy to believe.

“Clark will marry me because he is scared I will go to the papers and give them the story,” Lana said, clearly impressed with her strategy. “He has a big profile in Metropolis. The moment I saw the posters, I knew I had him.”

Lois regarded Lana with a mix of scorn and pity. “Reputable newspapers don’t run those sorts of stories,” she said. “Clark knows that.”

“Then I’ll speak to the disreputable ones.”

“Did you tell him what you intended to do?”

“I told him I knew his secret,” Lana said with satisfaction. “It was obvious he was worried about it becoming public.”

Lois accepted that he had probably been worried. About Lana’s mental health. About the future for her baby. But he probably hadn’t figured Lana would shoot Mayson and try to frame him. “You can’t make him marry you,” Lois said in defence of her friend. “And I really don’t think he is going to care if you broadcast that particular insight across the entire United States.”

“Of course he is,” Lana said. “No man wants the world to know —”

“Maybe everyone will just assume it was you.”

Lana paled. “Excuse me?”

“Did you ever consider that people might think he doesn’t find you that attractive?”

“I’m pregnant,” she taunted in a singsong voice. “Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“How are you going to claim that it’s Clark’s kid in one breath and expose his terrible secret in the next?” Lois asked.

“Haven’t you realised they are incompatible?”

Blotchy crimson flooded into Lana’s cheeks. The gun jerked upwards. Lois dived to the floor behind the sofa.

The blast came, shattering the silence.

Lois heard a thud. And then a clatter.

She inched upwards, peeking over the couch.

Lana was prostrate on the floor. The handgun was on the floor, half a yard from her outstretched hand.

In the doorway was Mrs McCreadie, her feet apart, her arms forward, her weapon pointed. “Better call 911, Ms Lane,” she said. “Tell them we need the homicide detectives here.”

Homicide? Lana was dead?

Lois rose from behind the couch and moved towards Lana, taking the precaution of kicking the gun out of her reach. “Did you hit her?” she asked Mrs McCreadie.

“Nah. I’m a better shot than that. I was aiming for the floor right between her feet, and that’s exactly where I hit.”

Sure enough, there was a gouge in the floor between Lana’s ankles.

Lana’s head and shoulders lifted.

“But next time I’ll be aiming straight in the middle of her back,” Mrs McCreadie said.

Lana collapsed back to the floor.

Lois picked up her cell phone and dialled Henderson’s cell number.

“Henderson,” he said.

“I need you to get to Clark’s apartment,” Lois said. “Bring Wolfe.”

“Clark’s apartment? Is Clark there?”

“No,” Lois said. “You arrested him.”

“He’s in a holding cell. I ... I thought ... maybe ... Superman ...”

“I don’t know where Superman is,” Lois said. “But Mayson’s killer is here if you’re interested in coming and arresting her.”

“Mayson’s killer?”

“The Prada woman. AKA Lana Lang. The one you should have been investigating from the start.”

“Lois, if it’s just your word against hers —”

“I have proof,” Lois said. “I nailed her cold. *And* I have an excellent witness.”

Part 12

Lois replaced her cell phone in her bag. “You can handle that gun pretty well,” she remarked to Mrs McCreadie, who hadn’t moved from the top of the stairs or lowered her weapon from where she had it trained on Lana’s unmoving form.

“My husband was the only cop in Mount Bethel, Pennsylvania for over thirty years,” Clark’s neighbour replied. “When we moved there, he said he couldn’t be everywhere at once, so he insisted I learn how to handle a gun. I practised until I was the best shot in the entire town.”

That explained a few things — the detail and clarity of her evidence for starters.

Lana groaned from the floor. “I feel sick,” she said. “Can I sit up?”

“You can sit up,” Mrs McCreadie said. “But if you make one move towards the gun or Ms Lane, I will shoot. And the last time I missed what I was aiming for, it was 1979.”

Lana awkwardly rose to a sitting position. She hunched over her knees and whimpered.

Mrs McCreadie shook her head. “I can’t believe she’s still wearing the same clothes. Didn’t she know the police would be looking for her?”

“Maybe she figured they would be looking for a male,” Lois said. “So she took off the cap, put on a pink ribbon, and thought she would be safe.”

“I feel terrible that I got it so wrong,” Mrs McCreadie said, her eyes never leaving Lana. “Poor Mr Kent.”

“Mr Kent will be all right,” Lois said, smiling secretly as she imagined the moment when they told him he was no longer a suspect.

“Will you tell him that I didn’t mean to get him into trouble?”

“Of course I will,” Lois said.

“I only reported what I saw. But I nearly contributed to an innocent man being charged with murder. I should have been able to tell it wasn’t Mr Kent.”

“You saw someone coming from his apartment, dressed in his clothes at a time when you thought he was home,” Lois said. “It was an understandable mistake.”

“Thank you,” Mrs McCreadie said with evident relief.

“And your statement about what you witnessed here will help bring justice for Ms Drake.”

“I heard her confess to killing the blonde woman,” Mrs McCreadie said, gesturing the gun towards Lana. “I was hiding behind the door, listening.”

“Lucky for me, huh?”

Mrs McCreadie’s surveillance of Lana lapsed long enough for her to toss an inquiring look at Lois. “You planned this, didn’t you?”

Lana’s head shot up.

Mrs McCreadie’s arms jolted. “Don’t move,” she barked.

Lana flinched. Then her head dropped slowly back to her knees.

Mrs McCreadie’s attention returned to Lois. “You took an awful risk,” she said.

“I ... I thought there was a good chance Pannikin would still be too sick for you to leave her. And if you were home, I hoped ...”

“I would be watching?”

Lois shrugged an admission. “But I didn’t know you are so proficient with a gun.”

“What did you think I would do?”

“Call 911. That’s what you did last time. I was hoping I could stall long enough to still be alive when they got here.”

“You were lucky. I had dozed off. I only woke up ten minutes before you came. I was just settling back into my armchair with a cup of tea when I saw the black leather jacket.”

“Is Pannikin all right?”

“Yes,” Mrs McCreadie said with a relieved smile. “I think she’s going to make it.” Her gaze swung from Lois to the weapon lying on the floor. “Mr Kent must mean a lot to you.”

“He does,” Lois said. Fearing she had been too transparent, she quickly added, “He’s my partner, and I don’t like to see anyone accused of something he didn’t do.”

With a sudden grin that made her look years younger, Mrs McCreadie said, “Nice outfit. I didn’t recognise you at first. You would’ve made a great cop.”

“Thanks,” Lois said. “But I’m happy being an investigative reporter.”

“Understandable,” Mrs McCreadie said, nodding astutely. “When your partner looks like Mr Kent.”

Before Lois could think of an appropriate response, there was movement at the doorway behind Mrs McCreadie, and Wolfe, Henderson, and a uniformed officer appeared. “That was quick,” she said.

Wolfe pulled his gun from its belt. Mrs McCreadie calmly locked her weapon and offered it to him. “It’s loaded,” she informed him.

Henderson took it and unloaded it.

Wolfe surveyed the room, stopping briefly to take in Lois’s clothing. “What’s happening here?” he asked.

“This is Lana Lang,” Lois said.

Wolfe strode down the stairs, picked up the handgun, and crouched next to Lana. “What’s your name?” he said.

“None of your business, cop,” she spat at him.

He straightened and turned to Lois. “What happened?” he said. “And why are you dressed like that?”

“She was trying to steal my fiancé,” Lana said bitterly. “She thinks dressing like a hooker is going to attract him. I tried to tell her it wouldn’t work with Clark, because he —”

“I was actually trying to catch someone else,” Lois said, cutting in before Lana could repeat her allegations about Clark. “Clark told me Lana was jealous of what she believed was happening between him and Mayson, so I thought that if it looked as if I was interested in Clark, she might try to stop me in the same way she’d stopped Mayson.”

Wolfe shot her a scowl of disapproval. “You used yourself as the bait.”

“You were going to charge Clark with a murder I knew he hadn’t committed,” Lois shot back. “People kept telling me I wouldn’t be able to prove he hadn’t done it, so the only option left was to prove someone else had.”

“The clothes the woman is wearing are exactly the same as the clothes I saw on the person who ran from the apartment after the shot was fired,” Mrs McCreadie said from the top of the stairs. “All that’s missing is the baseball cap.”

“Do you have any form of identification?” Wolfe asked, addressing Lana.

“Nothing I’m willing to show you.”

“You need to come to the station with us,” he said.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” she retorted. “And I’m certainly not going to answer any of your stupid questions. I hate all cops.”

Lois stopped the tape and squeezed the video recorder out from under her top. She held it towards Wolfe. “I recorded everything,” she said. “On here, she says her name is Lana Lang. And she also says she killed Mayson Drake.”

Lana jumped from the floor and sprang towards Lois with a vicious howl. Wolfe and Henderson flew at her, pinning her arms against her side and restraining her.

“Get your filthy hands off me,” she screeched, adding a few choice expletives.

“Then stop struggling.” Wolfe’s calm response splashed like cold water against her fury.

Lana stilled.

“You all need to come to the station,” Wolfe said, taking the recorder from Lois and giving it to the uniformed cop. “I will call for another car.”

“I can’t,” Mrs McCreadie said from the top of the stairs.

Wolfe swung around to her.

“I can’t,” she repeated. “I’ve already left Pannikin far too long. She’ll be wondering where I have gone.”

Wolfe looked about to inform her that she *would* be going to the station when Henderson cut in. “You take the suspect,” he said to Wolfe. “I’ll stay here and get statements from Ms Lane and Mrs McCreadie.”

Wolfe frowned, but he nodded his agreement.

“What about Clark?” Lois said.

“Kent is in a holding cell,” Wolfe said. “That’s where he’ll be staying until I am convinced he had nothing to do with Mayson Drake’s murder.” He took out his handcuffs and slipped them on Lana’s wrists. “I’m arresting you for the murder of Mayson Drake. You have the right to remain silent, but anything you say may be taken down and used as evidence against you in a court of law.”

“I hate all cops,” Lana said, glaring at him with revulsion. “It was one of you who got me knocked up and —”

“You are pregnant?” Henderson said.

“That’s what ‘knocked up’ usually means.”

“One of the men from my station?” Wolfe asked quickly.

“Why? You want to make sure someone covers for him?”

“No. If you —”

“It wasn’t here. It was in Rome. A dirty lying Italian cop forced me and now I’m pregnant with his brat.”

“He forced you? It was rape?”

Lana nodded slightly.

“Did you make a report?”

“I tried to,” she said bitterly. “But they wouldn’t listen to me. They told me they weren’t going to allow my lies to destroy the career of a fine cop.”

“I understand that you’re angry,” Wolfe said gently. “But you still have to come to the station. Would you prefer that I get a female officer to accompany you?”

“No,” Lana said. “It doesn’t make any difference to me. You’re all scum.”

Wolfe assisted Lana up the stairs. “Your weapon will have to be processed,” he said to Mrs McCreadie. “I’ll inform you when it can be returned to you.”

“Can I leave?” Mrs McCreadie asked. “I need to check on

Pannikin.”

“I’ll speak to Ms Lane first,” Henderson said. “Then I’ll come up to take your statement.”

“Yes, you can go,” Wolfe said as he moved Lana through the door and out of Clark’s apartment.

“Thank you,” Lois called as Mrs McCreadie turned to leave. The woman waved and hurried away.

Henderson looked at Lois, slowly shaking his head. “You do the stupidest things,” he said.

Lois grinned. “But I proved that Clark didn’t kill Mayson,” she replied jubilantly.

“You could have been killed.”

“I didn’t know she would have another gun,” Lois said indignantly. “You told me you had the murder weapon.”

His look plainly spoke what they both knew — procuring a gun in Metropolis wasn’t difficult. “You should have informed me you intended coming here.”

“Do you think Lana would have come in if there had been even a sniff of the cops around?”

Henderson gruffly conceded that point as he moved towards the sofa. He stopped at the sight of the open suitcase and sprawling clothes. “All part of the ruse?”

“Yes,” Lois said, hurrying to shove her clothes back in and close the lid. “Do you mind if I get changed before you ask your questions?”

“I think that would be a very good idea,” Henderson said dryly.

Lois slipped into Clark’s bedroom and quickly changed into the jeans, sweater, and sneakers she had left in his closet. Waves of exhilaration washed over her. Clark was going to be all right. He would be saddened by Mayson’s death, and he would probably have to overcome some lingering feelings of responsibility because of his inadvertent part in it, but he wasn’t going to be charged with murder.

Everyone would know that he hadn’t killed.

Lois intended to write the story herself. Just as soon as she’d finished answering Henderson’s questions.

When she returned to the living room, Henderson was seated on the sofa, his pencil and notepad out and ready. “Sit down,” he said.

She did.

“When did you turn on the recorder you had hidden in your clothes?”

“As soon as Lana appeared in the doorway.”

“How long did you have to wait? After arriving?”

“Only a few minutes.”

“She was watching this apartment?”

“It seems so.”

“What made you suspect she would be watching? She could have been anywhere by now.”

“When I was here earlier with Clark — we dropped in to get a change of clothes for him — the remaining cosmetics had been taken from the cabinet. The most likely person to have done that was Lana.”

“You think she came in here?” Henderson asked. “She came back to the scene of the murder?”

“Perhaps she came back to get her Prada dress. Or her skin-care products. They seem important to her.”

“Why didn’t she get as far away as possible?”

“I think she might have been waiting for Clark. She mentioned something about blackmailing him to stop him going to the police. Perhaps she thought he would return here and they could run away together. She’s not from Metropolis, so she wouldn’t have necessarily known where else to go.”

“If she came back here, why didn’t Mrs McCreadie see her? Didn’t she think it was important to call us when someone wearing a black leather jacket went into Clark’s apartment?”

“Pannikin made a recovery,” Lois said. “Mrs McCreadie fell asleep.”

Henderson glared at Lois and shook his head. “You could have been k-”

“But I wasn’t.” She nodded to his notepad. “You said you had questions.”

Henderson tapped his pen on the pad. “How did you know she would respond to you dressing up like that and going into Clark’s apartment?”

“Because I looked at the motive.”

“The motive for the murder?”

“Yes. You said you had a strong case, but what possible motive did Clark have for killing Mayson?”

“Mrs McCreadie said she heard a female voice accuse Clark of cheating. Clark’s motive could have been to silence Mayson.”

Lois managed to refrain from rolling her eyes. “It wasn’t Mayson who accused Clark; it was Lana.”

“That’s what Clark told us.”

“In light of that, it’s obvious that Clark didn’t have a reason to kill Mayson, but Lana did. Jealousy. She believed Mayson was competition for Clark’s affections.”

“So after determining that Lana was jealous enough to kill a rival for Clark’s attention, you decided to provide her with another victim?” Henderson said sourly.

“I wasn’t sure you cops were actually committed to looking for her,” Lois said. “Particularly, after you found the murder weapon with Clark’s fingerprints on it. I couldn’t be sure I would be able to identify her — all I had was a vague description that could have matched half the women in Metropolis. As you said, it’s not difficult to change clothes, so I couldn’t rely on that. It seemed easier for her to find me.”

“Did she actually admit to killing Mayson?”

“It’s all on the tape. I think the exact words were that she’d finished her off. Then Lana pointed the gun at me and said she intended to do the same to me.”

Henderson jotted a couple of notes and then looked up. “OK,” he said. “I accept that Clark left this apartment after Mayson’s first visit. I accept that, unbeknown to Mrs McCreadie, Lana was here when Mayson returned. I accept that, in all probability, the person Mrs McCreadie saw running away after the shot was fired was Lana dressed in Clark’s clothing.”

Lois nodded, keeping her growing elation masked behind her deadpan expression.

“But what I don’t understand is what Clark did after leaving here. Why did it take him so long to come to the station? Why didn’t he just tell us where he was at the time of the shooting? Why did he refuse to say how he knew Mayson had been murdered? Why couldn’t he provide even a hint of an alibi or any details about where he had been after he left his apartment? Why did he do nothing to help himself?”

“I haven’t discussed it with Clark, so I don’t know for sure,” Lois said. “But I have a theory.”

“Go on,” Henderson said.

“When Clark left here, he was probably feeling agitated. Lana had arrived unexpectedly and announced she is pregnant. Not only that, she also informed Clark that he was going to marry her and be a father to her child.”

“But it’s not his child,” Henderson said. “She said the father is an Italian cop.”

“But Lana isn’t rational, and she seemed to believe that threatening to reveal things about Clark would him to comply with her wishes.”

“What things?”

“It didn’t make a lot of sense,” Lois said. “Everything I know is on the tape. But she seemed convinced that Clark would marry her because if he didn’t, she was going to tell the newspapers that when they were dating, he didn’t take up any of her offers of

sex.”

Henderson’s eyebrow rose a little.

“She said she had thought there was something wrong with her, but after dating other guys, she realised there was something wrong with Clark.”

“I think she had it right the first time,” Henderson said grimly.

“Yeah,” Lois said, thinking how difficult this situation must have been for Clark. And that was *before* Mayson had been killed.

“But if Clark knew Lana was unstable, why did he leave her here?” Henderson said.

“He was probably trying to think of a way to help her. It’s possible he called his parents and talked to them. They would know Lana.”

“Why didn’t he tell us this?”

“Maybe he thought it would look as if he was trying to manoeuvre the blame onto her because she had tried to coerce him into marriage. Or maybe he thought that if he told you about Lana’s state of mind, you would be more likely to think she had murdered Mayson.”

“So?”

“So, Clark couldn’t have known who murdered Mayson. Sure, he probably realised it was most likely Lana, but he also knew what it felt like to have people believe you’d killed just because you were the most likely suspect.”

Henderson scowled. “Our case was solid. Nothing we did was unjustified. And Clark could have made things a lot easier for himself if he’d been upfront with us.”

“Ah,” Lois said. “There’s the problem.”

“What problem?”

“Superman.”

“Superman?”

Lois nodded. “Superman found out Mayson had been murdered. Perhaps he saw the police cars heading to Clark’s apartment. Perhaps he listened in to the police radio, but somehow he knew.”

“He arrived here about twenty minutes after we did,” Henderson said. “Wolfe was suspicious that he’d already taken Clark somewhere so we wouldn’t be able to find him.”

“That’s why Clark was so reluctant to speak. He was trying to keep Superman from being implicated in this.”

“If Superman had deliberately hidden a murder suspect, he was already implicated.”

“I doubt he did,” Lois said. “I think Superman looked for Clark after he left here. I think he found him and told him Mayson had been murdered and the police wanted to talk with Clark.”

“Superman told Wolfe that if he saw Clark, he would advise him to give himself up.”

“That’s probably what he did,” Lois said. “But when Clark heard what had happened, his first thoughts would have been for Lana. Had she been hurt by the murderer? Or was she the one who had killed Mayson? Superman would have told Clark that Lana was no longer at his apartment, so they probably decided to look for her.”

“Instead of coming to the station and letting us look for her?” Henderson said with biting exasperation.

“Did Wolfe give Superman any details of the case against Clark?”

“No.”

“So Superman would have told Clark the police had already decided Clark was the murderer, but because they had no details, they couldn’t mount any sort of defence. It made sense to look for Lana first.”

“I suppose you have a theory as to how Clark’s fingerprints got on the murder weapon?”

“I think Clark came back to his apartment, knowing the police would be here.”

“Planning to give himself up?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “But instead, Lana was waiting for him. That’s when he took the gun from her.”

“He should have come to the station then.”

“But he was wanted for questioning about a murder and he was carrying the weapon that probably killed Mayson,” Lois said.

“He still should have come,” Henderson said. “He should have told us that Lana had been in his apartment.”

“He had no reason to think you’d believe him. Superman probably told him the police had already decided Clark Kent was the killer. If he’d gone to the station, he would have been in custody and there would have been no one to help Lana if she was innocent or find her if she was the murderer.”

“What about Superman?”

“He was occupied saving lives in the subway,” Lois said. “Which is why Clark didn’t come to the station sooner.”

“To protect Lana?”

“Actually, by then, he was trying to protect Superman.”

“Lois, Superman is invulnerable.”

“His reputation isn’t invulnerable.”

“Go on.”

“Clark knew he was the primary suspect in a murder case. He knew Superman was involved — perhaps they looked for Lana together, Clark had given the murder weapon to Superman. Clark knew Superman was going to be occupied with the subway disaster for a long time. He knew that if he were to go to the station, there was a chance of a leak to the papers — which did happen — about Superman being involved. So Clark held off from going to the police until Superman had finished the rescue, so that he, Clark, remained the focus of the investigation.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Henderson said.

“That’s Clark Kent.”

“He was wanted for murder, Lois. Every second he stayed away, the situation got worse for him.”

“Did Wolfe question Clark about Superman’s involvement?”

“Yes. Clark closed up. He refused to answer simple questions such as who had told him Mayson had been killed.”

“See?” Lois exclaimed triumphantly. “He was trying to protect Superman.”

“Really?” Henderson said, clearly not yet convinced.

“Clark knows how important Superman is to this city. He knows it is Superman’s heroic qualities, such as truth and justice and goodness, which make him universally trusted. Clark would be very careful about tarnishing that reputation.”

“Even to the detriment of his own reputation?”

“Probably. He suffers from Clark Kent Martyr Syndrome. If you look at Clark’s motives, it starts to explain where he was all night, why it took him so long to come to the station and how his prints are on the gun.”

“You think he took the gun from Lana? Or she gave it to him?”

“He probably took it from her. He knew there was a strong possibility that Lana had already killed, and he was worried about what she might do next. She was irrational, and she was armed. That’s a dangerous combination. So he took the gun from her, hoping to prevent another tragedy.”

“He could have told us,” Henderson said.

“Didn’t he? Didn’t he mention Lana? Isn’t that why you let him go after I told you it had been the Prada woman dressed in Clark’s clothes that had run away from his apartment?”

“Yeah,” Henderson admitted. “But Wolfe didn’t believe him. And with good reason. Clark was ducking and weaving and refusing to give straight answers.”

“Clark Kent doesn’t kill — he protects. He protects the people he cares about. Once you understand that, everything else

falls into place.”

Henderson grinned suddenly. “You know, Lois, you’re one of the most intuitive people I’ve ever met, but you are exceedingly blind when it comes to your own life.”

“You mean putting myself in front of a killer raging with jealousy?”

“That, too.”

“What else?”

“I think your theory skates around the truth,” he said. “But you’re missing the most important piece.”

“What piece?”

“Clark didn’t stay away from the station to protect Superman’s reputation.”

“He didn’t?”

“No. He was protecting someone else he cares about.”

“Who?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“Clark told us that when he met Lana, he took the gun away from her because she was threatening to kill you.”

“She knew about me?”

“Of course she did,” Henderson said. “There are posters.”

“Oh. Them.”

“Clark took the gun from her, but he knew Superman was in the subway and as you said, he knew that if he went to the station, he would probably be held there for a long time. So he spent the night making sure Lana didn’t hurt you. He said he went to the subway, looking for you.”

“You think he followed me all night?” Lois said sceptically. “I’m sure I would have noticed.”

“I think he either followed you or followed Lana. When Superman came out from the subway, Wolfe took him to the station. He questioned Superman for a while and let him go. Clark arrived about twenty minutes later.”

“Enough time for Superman to find Clark and for them to swap notes about Lana?” Lois mused. Except, after Clark had gone to the station, Superman had had to return to the subway, and so he’d gone to Perry and given him the cryptic message about the need to protect her. “Did Superman say anything about Lana?”

“No. Nothing.”

“Did he admit having had contact with Clark?”

“No.”

“He didn’t try to explain why Clark hadn’t come to the station?”

“No. He said he knew nothing. He said he’d been in the subway.”

“So Superman didn’t make any attempt to explain Clark’s reluctance to answer questions?”

“Well, to be fair, at that stage Clark hadn’t been asked any questions.”

“But Superman must have known that his part in this wasn’t going to escape scrutiny. I mean, Wolfe dragged him off to the police station within minutes of him emerging from the subway. Did he offer any information to help Clark?”

“He suggested the reason for Clark’s non-appearance at the station could have been that he was asleep.”

“That’s pathetic,” Lois said.

“He admitted having flown to Kansas to tell Clark’s parents, but he refused to say when he’d last seen Clark.”

“He refused?”

“Yeah. He said he hadn’t flown him anywhere that night.”

“Was he *trying* to make things worse for Clark?”

“He wouldn’t have known then if anything had happened while he was in the subway. He wouldn’t have had the opportunity to speak with Clark before Wolfe took him to the station.”

“If he’d believed Clark hadn’t done anything wrong, he would have realised they didn’t need to synchronise their stories. All he needed to do was to tell the truth.”

“I got the impression ...”

“What?”

“That Superman thought Clark was in trouble, and although he was willing to help privately, he wanted to stay out of it publicly.”

Poor Clark, Lois thought as her heart stirred with sympathy. Even one of his closest friends had had doubts about him.

“What are you thinking?” Henderson said.

“Ah ... about how difficult this must have been for Clark,” she said. “And what he did.”

Henderson shook his head. “Haven’t you yet worked out that Clark would do absolutely anything for you? Including it seems, risk being charged with a murder he didn’t commit?”

“I ...”

Henderson stood. “Clark could have made this a whole lot easier for everyone if he’d come to the station as soon as he found out Mayson had been murdered in his apartment.”

“Yes,” Lois said sombrely. “But if he’d done that, I could be dead by now.”

Henderson stood. “I have to talk to Mrs McCreadie.”

“Can I call you later for an update?”

“Are you writing the story now?”

“Yes.”

Henderson walked up the stairs. “Depending on what Ms Lang tells Wolfe, I might need to talk to you again later.”

“OK,” Lois said. “We will help each other.”

Henderson left the apartment without replying.

Lois stared at the closed door. Had Clark been protecting her? Had he put her safety ahead of the need to clear his name?

With anyone other than Clark, she would have been sceptical.

But this was Clark.

If he had spent the night guarding her, what did it mean?

That they were friends?

Partners?

Or that he wished they could be something more?

Lois put her suitcase in Clark’s bedroom and left his apartment.

For the first time in her life, she had a big story and felt strangely reluctant to write it. Not because it involved her partner being accused of murder — she intended to write the story in such a way that it definitively refuted every possible suggestion that Clark had been anything more than an innocent party caught up in a terrible tragedy.

But she didn’t want to write.

She wanted to go to the police station.

She wanted to be there when Clark was released from custody.

She wanted to take him back to the Planet and write the story together.

And most of all, she wanted to get him alone. To assure him of her absolute faith in his innocence. To find out where he’d been during those lost hours.

And to tell him what she had tried to tell him before.

How much she regretted spurning his declaration of love.

She climbed into the cab that had stopped at her bidding.

“Central Police Station, please,” she said to the driver.

Part 13

The door to his cell swung open, and Clark looked up to see Wolfe.

His heart plummeted. This was it. He was about to be charged with murder. His life was about to become a whirlwind of lawyers, police procedure, questions, cells, and court appearances — all with no foreseeable end.

Wolfe stood before him, looking down to where Clark was

sitting on the concrete floor. “You’re free to leave,” he said.

Clark scrambled to his feet. “Excuse me?”

“You’re free to leave.”

“But ... but what about ...”

“The murder of Mayson Drake? I have a confession from the murderer. She testifies that you weren’t there.” Wolfe grunted.

“Although in her rather twisted logic, she seems to think it was your fault she pulled the trigger because you refused to marry her and take responsibility for a child that isn’t yours.”

“Lana?” Clark asked, although he knew it had to be.

“Yes.”

“She admitted to shooting Mayson?”

“Yes.”

“And you believe her?”

“We’re waiting on some supporting forensic evidence — the leather jacket, her hands, other possible fingerprints on the revolver — but yes, I believe her.”

“What will happen to her now?”

“She will be charged. Probably as soon as I present my case to the DA.”

“She’s pregnant,” Clark said. “Will that be taken into consideration?”

“Not unless her lawyer tries to introduce it as a factor affecting her mental state,” Wolfe said.

“But she’ll be looked after? She’ll have access to medical care?”

“Of course.”

Clark took a step towards the door. Towards freedom. “How did you find her?” he asked. “How did you get her to confess?”

“I didn’t. Lois Lane did.”

“Lois?” Fear gripped Clark’s throat. “Is she all right?”

“Other than continuing to suffer from a chronic lack of common sense and good judgement, she’s fine.”

Clark’s fears receded. “Lana didn’t hurt her?”

“No.”

“Is Lois here?”

“No.”

Disappointment sloshed through the haze of his mind.

“Mr Kent,” Wolfe said. “Although I believe I have solved Ms Drake’s murder and identified the perpetrator, I also believe that your actions in not answering my questions with forthrightness and clarity were extremely foolish and could have led to the wrong person being charged.”

Clark nodded, accepting the detective’s rebuke.

“I don’t know what you were trying to achieve,” Wolfe said. “Henderson believes your actions were driven by the belief that Ms Lang intended to hurt Ms Lane.”

“Lana threatened to kill her.”

“When you took the weapon from her?”

“Yes.”

“This is Metropolis. It’s not hard to get another weapon.”

“Lana is from Smallville. I hoped she wouldn’t know where to get another gun. I couldn’t leave the gun on her — not after she’d said she knew Lois worked at the Planet.”

“Why didn’t you bring the gun to us? Why didn’t you tell us of Ms Lang’s threats against Ms Lane?”

“Because I didn’t think you would believe me. I knew I was your primary suspect. My prints were on the weapon, Mayson was killed in my apartment.”

“What did Superman have to do with this? Did he hide the weapon in the subway?”

“No. I did.”

“Did he help you hide from the police?”

“No. I chose not to come to the station because I was worried about leaving Lois unprotected.” Clark thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “I was trying to stop another murder.”

“Did Superman offer to help you evade police scrutiny?”

“I gave myself up. I walked into the police station.”

Wolfe took a deep breath. “I’m not sure Superman isn’t guilty of the crime of obstruction of justice,” he said. “However, this city needs him more than ever after the tragedy of the lives lost in the subway collapse, so I am going to overlook my suspicions and give all my attention to ensuring justice for Ms Drake.

But ...” He looked directly at Clark. “... you should inform your friend, Superman, that should there be a next time when I believe he has interfered with a police case, I *will* charge him.”

Clark nodded.

“There are some papers for you to sign at the front desk,” Wolfe said.

Clark walked out of the cell. Down the corridor. Past the closed doors of the interview rooms — one of which probably held Lana Lang. And to the reception area at the front of the police station.

He walked up to the desk, gave his name, received his watch and wallet, and signed the papers.

As he turned, four uniformed officers streamed from nearby rooms. “Another collapse in the subway,” they called in explanation to other cops. “Three workers are trapped.”

“Where’s Superman?” someone asked. “I thought he was there.”

“Don’t know. Maybe he’s trapped, too.”

Clark waited a couple of seconds after the officers had sprinted through the door and then followed them. He found a deserted corner, spun into his Suit, and flew to Northwood station.

Lois’s cell phone rang while her cab was stuck in traffic halfway between Clark’s apartment and the police station. “Hi, Perry,” she said after seeing his number on her display.

“Have you heard, Lois?”

“Heard what?”

“Another section of the tunnel has collapsed. Three rescue workers are trapped.”

“Isn’t Superman there?”

“I thought he was, but the word I’m hearing is that he left earlier this morning. I know you’ve been busy with Mayson’s murder, but my source told me a woman is about to be charged, so I’m hoping you’ll be able to get the subway story.”

“Sure, Perry,” Lois said, swallowing down her disappointment at the delay in seeing Clark. “I’m in a cab now. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“You have just saved my career, Lois,” Perry said with heartfelt appreciation. “I don’t think I would survive if I had to edit another story written by Ralph today.”

Lois made a low, throaty noise that she hoped sounded like sympathy. “I have the story about the arrest of Mayson’s murderer,” she said. “After I’ve finished at the subway, I’ll come into the newsroom and write up both of them.”

“Thank you,” Perry said with evident relief. “Have you seen Clark?”

“Not since the police took him after they found the murder weapon.”

“But he’ll be released now?”

“I hope so.”

“That’s great,” Perry said. “Bye, Lois.”

He hung up, and Lois instructed the driver to change direction and take her to Northwood station.

Would Clark be there? He could have heard about the latest collapse when he was at the police station. Had he been released yet? She had so wanted to be there to share that moment with him.

As the cab drove through the busy streets, Lois sat back and unleashed the floodgates of her mind, freeing her maelstrom of Clark thoughts.

Henderson said Clark had been trying to protect her.
 But Clark would try to protect anyone.
 That was just Clark.
 It didn't necessarily mean he loved her.
 It didn't mean he loved her the way he had loved her before she had rejected him and accepted Luthor's proposal of marriage.
 But he hadn't loved Mayson. And he didn't love Lana.
 That seemed hopeful.
 But perhaps she, Lois, had hurt him so deeply that he'd refused to allow himself to fall in love with anyone.
 The cab pulled up at the train station. Lois paid the driver and got out, searching for the familiar figure of Clark Kent.
 She couldn't see him.

With a sigh of regret, she went over to a group of rescue workers. "What's happening?" she asked.
 "Superman came," was the bright reply. "He's already gotten two of them out, and we're expecting he'll be here any minute with the third."

"Any injuries?"
 "Nothing major. A broken ankle and a couple of scratches. It could have been a lot worse."

Lois took her pen and notepad from her bag. "Where were they trapped?"
 "Near the front of the train. A section of the train gave way, and the tunnel came with it."

A woman took up the story. "Without Superman, it would have taken hours to get past the wreck to reach them. And the tunnel could have gone again."

As Lois watched, the familiar spandex-clad figure emerged from the station, carrying a middle-aged man. Superman took the victim to the ambulance and waited a moment, talking with the paramedics and the victim.

When he turned away, a cry rose from the gathered media. "Superman! Superman!" He strode over to where they were gathered, and Lois sprinted to join them.

They fired questions at him — about the condition of the victims, about the injuries, about what had caused the tunnel to give way, about the likelihood of it happening again. He answered all of their questions as he always had — simply, directly, and without undue emphasis on his part in the events.

The intensity of the questions dwindled, and with a nod, Superman turned to leave. Lois ducked around the reporters and went to his side. He turned to her. "Hello, Lois."

She looked around to check that no one could hear them. "Why didn't you tell the police you helped Clark look for Lana after Mayson Drake was killed?"

He looked as if her question had flummoxed him completely. "I ..."

"You knew Clark was going to be questioned by the police. He was deliberately evasive, trying to hide your part in this. If you'd been honest and told them you helped him look for Lana, he wouldn't have felt the need to dodge questions and this case could have been solved a lot sooner."

Superman's mouth fell open. Something in his dazed expression fired Lois's simmering annoyance.

"What were you scared of?" she asked. "That it might hurt the great superhero's standing to be linked to a murder? Or were you worried that Clark was going to be charged, and you just wanted to distance yourself from him?"

"Ah ..."

His stumbling word ran aground.
 "I can't believe you deserted your friend when he was in trouble," Lois said. "Clark tried to keep you out of it. But your only thought was for yourself."

"Lois, I ..."

"And to make matters worse, you went to Perry White and confused him so much, he thought you were warning him that Clark was likely to hurt me."

"No, I —"

"Clark needed you, and you were more interested in preserving your own reputation than helping a friend." Lois rammed home her point by poking his chest, above and to the left of his 'S'. It jolted her finger, which hurt, but it felt good to have expressed her frustration. "You might have saved a lot of lives in the tunnel, but when it comes to *real* friendship, you could learn a lot from Clark."

Lois turned and stormed away, feeling a measure of satisfaction that she had reduced him to speechlessness.

She looked around the crowd for Clark, but he wasn't there. Figuring he had probably left the police station by now, she caught a cab to the Daily Planet office.

Dressed again in his jeans and sweater, Clark walked numbly down the sidewalk, befogged by a cloud of confusion called Lois Lane.

He doubted he would ever fully understand her, but right now, he was so perplexed that no two thoughts seemed to fit together with any cohesion.

She'd told him she was wrong. He'd assumed she meant she was wrong about him being innocent. He hadn't been able to determine any basis for a change of mind — she'd said she was wrong before Wolfe and Henderson had come and arrested him on the strength of having found the murder weapon.

But when Clark searched his weary mind, he couldn't fathom what else she could have meant.

And then, there was his release from the cell. Wolfe had said that Lois had found Lana. His fears about what would happen if those two women came together had reared into panic until Wolfe had assured him that Lois was all right. Even so, when he'd emerged from the subway, he'd been immensely relieved to spot her in the crowd.

Had Lana tracked Lois? Found her? Threatened her? How had Lois escaped?

And then, tangling everything further was Lois's strange behaviour at the rescue site. For the first time ever, she'd seemed disappointed with Superman.

But her anger had seemed to stem from the belief that Superman had mistreated Clark.

Lois had berated Superman! In defence of Clark!

Yep, Clark decided. In the last twelve hours, the world had gone crazy.

He looked around, finally taking note of his whereabouts. He was a couple of blocks from the Planet office, although he hadn't consciously steered his feet in any direction.

Perhaps Lois was there. *That* felt normal — to seek out his partner and best friend.

If she were at her desk, what sort of a reception would he get? Was she, right now, writing up the story of Mayson's murder? And if she were, would she include any mention of Superman's part in it?

Would he, Clark, be able to convince her that public censure of Superman wouldn't serve any purpose?

It certainly wouldn't bring back Mayson.

He arrived at the doors of the Daily Planet building and went through the lobby to the elevator, his heart accelerating inside his chest. Perry and Jimmy must have heard that Clark Kent had been a suspect in Mayson's murder. Had Lois told them he hadn't done it? Did they have any lingering doubts about his innocence?

The elevator rattled upwards and stopped at his floor. The doors opened, and Clark stepped out. His head turned; his eyes sought.

Lois.

She was at her desk. As if responding to some sixth sense, she looked up from her computer screen, and their gazes met.

Around him, Clark was aware of the feeling of many eyes

following him and the whisper of many tongues announcing his arrival, but he ignored them. Only one person's opinion mattered.

She rose and came towards him, her smile warm. When she reached him, her hand ran down his arms. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Just a bit dazed."

"Did Wolfe tell you why they let you go?"

"He said you'd found the murderer."

She turned, putting a little pressure on his elbow and guiding him down the stairs, into the bullpen, and to his desk. "I've finished the story about the second subway collapse," she said. "If I send it to you, can you check it for me?"

"I wasn't there."

She smiled before returning to her desk. "Would you read it, anyway?" she asked. "I'd appreciate your input."

Was there a particular reason she wanted him to read her work? Had she included something in her story that was going to be controversial? Something about Superman? Or was she just trying to ease him through these first few minutes back in the office? "OK." Clark turned on his computer and waited to log on.

His patience ran out before his computer was ready. He stood and went to Lois's desk. She looked up from her monitor and smiled again. He tried to smile in return, wishing his mental state were such that he could fully appreciate the palpable concern emanating from her.

"You OK?" she asked.

"Lois, what did you mean when you said you were wrong about me? Did you have doubts about my innocence?"

Her mouth fell a little. "No," she said. "No, of course not."

The fog of his mind wasn't getting any thinner. "Then what did you mean?"

She stood from her seat, and came closer to him, hitching her thigh on her desk. "I'm not sure here is the right place for this discussion," she said quietly. "I promise you we'll talk later."

Clark glanced around the bullpen and realised that most people were pretending not to watch them. "Please, Lois," he whispered desperately. "It's been such a confusing day. Could you just give me something? A hint? Anything?"

"Remember the day at Centennial Park?"

There had been many days at Centennial Park, but one was lodged forever in his memory. "Uh huh."

"I was wrong," she said.

"Wrong about me?"

"About you. About how I felt. About what I wanted."

Clark felt as if he were trying to capture wisps of smoke and hold them tightly in his hand. "Wh...what do you want?"

"I want to be with you."

"As friends?" he said cautiously.

"As friends." She found his eyes and lingered there, igniting him. "And so much more."

"More?" he uttered, not daring to hope.

"I was wrong about only loving you as a friend. I was wrong about not feeling that way about you."

The cloud of Clark's confusion solidified. "Ah ..."

None of Superman's powers were useful in dragging something articulate from the congealed mass of his mind.

"You don't have to say anything," Lois said, her voice soft with understanding. "I don't expect anything from you. I know this has been an incredibly difficult day for you, and it's only natural that you're not going to want to deal with something like this now. I wish I hadn't spoken."

"You wish you hadn't told me?"

"Not then. Not now. My timing sucked."

He felt a hint of a smile begin, but he wasn't sure if it ever materialised. "You weren't to know the cops would turn up at exactly the wrong moment."

"While I was away last week, I had a lot of time to think. I

decided I was going to tell you, but when I got back, everything was in turmoil. Then we got a quiet moment alone, and you said you weren't in love with Lana or Mayson, and the words just spurted out."

He could never have loved either woman. But Lois ... "If Wolfe and Henderson hadn't interrupted us, what would you have said?"

"That I wanted you to know how much I regret what I said that day."

"Do you regret it because you know it hurt me?"

She nodded. "I will always regret that I hurt you. But it's more than that. I got it so very wrong, and ..." Her voice trailed off.

Clark leaned forward, aligning their eyes. "And?" he prompted gently.

"And I wish I could go back and have that chance again."

The implications of what she was saying were too huge for him to grasp. "Does this have anything to do with Mayson being murdered?"

"No." Lois's hand inched along the desk, and her fingertips settled over his. "How about we get these stories written and get to some place where we can be alone and talk in private?"

That sounded like the best idea Clark had ever heard.

Lois squeezed his hand. "I'll send you my story about Mayson's murder as I write it," she said. "That way, we can work on it together."

"But ... but I don't what happened. Wolfe didn't tell me —"

"We'll get the stories written — that'll give you some detail — and then we'll go someplace quiet and I'll answer every question you have."

Do you love me? Is that what you're trying to tell me? That we have a chance?

But Lois had slipped back to her chair, her fingers hovering above the keyboard as her eyes skipped over her copy.

Clark turned back to his desk, forcing reluctant feet to walk away.

"Oh, Clark?" Her voice came from behind him, loud and clear.

He turned.

"I never believed for one second that you had hurt Mayson."

He didn't know whether her firm declaration was for his benefit or for the benefit of the rest of the bullpen. "Thank you," he said, wanting his voice to be as loud and clear as hers, but finding it got lost somewhere in the ball of emotion that had risen up this throat.

She sent him a smile — full of everything he loved most about her ... and laced with something else, too.

His mind wasn't ready to believe it could be love.

But his heart was doing a celebratory dance around his ribcage.

He sat in his seat and opened his email account. Lois's story about the rescue of the three workers in the subway was there. He opened it and tried to force his attention to her words.

But mere words — even Lois's words — were not enough. He'd missed her so much. A whole week away from her ... and then hours of wondering if he would ever be with her again.

Then ... this.

I was wrong.

He had to connect with her again — even if it were the most mundane of connections. He rose from his seat and returned to her desk. She looked up at him expectantly, and he tensed, wondering if he'd annoyed her with his interruption. But her smile came, reassuring him. "Coffee?" he asked with as much nonchalance as he was able to muster.

"Sure. Thanks."

He pulled himself away from the lure of her lovely brown eyes and found his way to the coffee machine. He poured two

coffees from habit, glad he didn't have to give the task any thought. He left one cup at his desk and went on to Lois's. She gave him another smile as he put her cup on her desk.

"Thanks, Clark."

He had so many questions. Questions about how she'd managed to convince Wolfe to release him. Questions about what had happened with Lana. Questions about her feelings. Questions about their future.

"Did you read the rescue story?" she asked.

"I needed coffee," he said with an apologetic shrug. "I wasn't finding it easy to concentrate."

"That's OK," she said. "Just read it through, and if you think it's OK, could you send it on to Perry?"

Clark returned to his desk, wondering how she would portray Superman's involvement in the rescue. The email contained no comment, just the attached file, which he opened. Her story was relatively short and contained mostly facts. The condition of the tunnel. The condition of the workers who had been trapped. The forecast for when parts of the subway could be re-opened. A quote from the chief engineer about the stability of the subway system.

He deleted a comma, added a missing 'to', and forwarded it to Perry.

He checked his email again, but nothing else had arrived from Lois. He opened a couple of other — unimportant — emails that had arrived since he'd left last night.

Jimmy came up to his desk. "Hi, CK," he said tentatively.

"Hi, Jimmy," Clark replied, his tone even.

"I was sorry to hear about Mayson Drake."

Did he actually mean he was sorry to hear that Clark had been accused of murdering her? "Thank you," Clark replied woodenly.

"I'm so glad it worked out in the end."

It hadn't worked out — for either Mayson or Lana — but Clark could see that the kid was uncomfortable, so he gave him a solemn smile and said, "Thanks, Jimmy."

"If you need anything ..."

"Thanks."

"Although Lois seems to have it all under control."

"Yeah. She's writing the story now."

"The Chief said he wants to see you in your office."

Clark's heart dropped as he rose from his seat. He didn't want to face more questions. He didn't want to talk about Mayson's death. He didn't want to be grilled about why it had taken him so long to front up at the police station.

He tapped on Perry's door and entered when the editor invited him in.

"Clark," Perry said. "Sit down. I got Lois's story about the follow-up rescue. It came from your account, but your name isn't in the by-line."

Clark felt a measure of relief that the question was so benign. "All I did was look over it for her," he said. "It's her story."

Perry nodded. "Now she's working on the story of the arrest in the Drake murder."

It hadn't been a question, but Clark answered anyway. "Yes."

"She's an amazing woman."

"Yes."

Perry tossed his pencil onto his desk and focussed his attention squarely on Clark. "That girl would not believe for one second that you had killed Mayson Drake," he said. "The case against you looked conclusive, but she just kept on saying that Clark Kent didn't kill and he didn't run away."

Clark swallowed, gulping loudly and hoping Perry wouldn't see that he'd had to blink quickly a couple of times to keep his emotions in check.

"She simply wouldn't accept it. She was in here, rolling her eyes and tapping her foot as if she were having to restrain herself

from ramming the words back down my throat. I ... ah ..." If it had been anyone other than Perry, Clark would have thought the editor was trying hard not to squirm. "I ... I'm glad things turned out the way they did ... for you ... and I'm sorry ... Well, when you've been in this job as long as I have ..."

Clark nodded, unable to draft something appropriate from the blank of his mind.

Perry snapped back into Chief-mode. "Try to talk some common sense into Lois, will you?" he said briskly. "I've been trying for years and obviously, I've failed. Perhaps you will be more successful."

Clark doubted that. "I still don't know what she did that led to the arrest," he admitted.

Perry's sternness dissolved to an allusion of a smile. "I'm sure it will be in her story. You should get out there and see if she needs any help."

"Yes, sir." Clark stepped from Perry's office, his gaze snapping to Lois's desk as his mind rattled with unanswered questions and his heart expanded with love.

What had she risked in order to clear his name?

She'd never made a secret of the fact that she believed in Superman.

But after today ...

Perhaps she believed in Clark, too.

"I've just sent you the first part," Lois said as Clark approached his desk.

"OK. I'll look over it."

For the next half an hour, Clark read the incoming parts of Lois's story about Lana's arrest. Similar to the rescue story, it was mostly facts, briefly outlining how the deputy DA had been found dead, giving some details of the investigation, and finishing with the statement that a woman in her twenties had been arrested that morning. She'd reduced Clark Kent's involvement to being the owner of the apartment where the murder had taken place and a mutual friend of the two women.

But there was nothing that answered the questions burning in his mind. How had Lois proved Lana's guilt? How had Lois caused Lana's arrest?

According to Lois's story, she was only the reporter.

When he reached the end of her story, Clark rose and went to her desk. She had the phone tucked against her ear, but she smiled up at him. "I'm just waiting for Henderson to come to the phone," she said. "I need to check a couple of facts and see if there are any further developments I can include."

"You didn't mention Lana's name."

"No. I said enough to kill the Star's story claiming you were the murderer, but I figured it might be easier on her family if they didn't find out via the media."

Clark tried to keep the surprise from his face.

Lois chuckled. "Usually you're the one thinking about everyone's feelings and I'm the one demanding we be brutally professional."

Clark could only nod.

"Perry's running an afternoon and an evening edition today on account of the subway collapse," Lois said. "This story can go in the afternoon edition, and we'll do a follow-up when things become clearer."

"OK."

"Did you read it?" Lois asked.

"Yeah."

"And?"

"And it's a good story, but ..."

"But it didn't answer all of your questions?"

"It didn't really answer any of them."

She smiled at that. "That's why we're getting out of here as soon as I've sent this to Perry." She uncovered the phone, lurched to a straighter position in her chair, and picked up a pen.

“Henderson?”

Clark returned to his desk and quickly skimmed through Lois’s story again. He sent a copy, including a couple of minor edits, back to her.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Lois there. “No further developments,” she said. “They’re still waiting for some forensic work — more fingerprinting and a gunshot residue test on the leather jacket. Everything is moving slowly with the subway out of action.”

“Did he say how Lana is?”

“She’s asked for a lawyer. She confirmed you weren’t there when Mayson died, but then she got angry and refused to answer any more questions.”

“But she’s OK?”

“She said she was hungry.”

“Did they give her something to eat?”

“Yes,” Lois said, lightly squeezing his shoulder. “I asked specifically. Henderson also said they’d offered her a doctor’s check, but she declined.”

“I hope the baby is going to be all right,” Clark said dolefully.

Lois’s hand stayed on his shoulder, spreading lovely warmth down his arm. “It’s not your responsibility,” she said. “You didn’t make Lana do what she did. You didn’t —”

“I just feel as if there should have been a way to avert this whole senseless tragedy,” Clark said.

Her smile felt like tangible comfort. “Did you make any changes to my story?”

“Just a couple of typos.”

“Send it to Perry, and close down your computer. We’re leaving.”

“Did you OK it with Perry?” Clark asked. “It’s not even midday yet.”

“I didn’t sleep at all last night, and I’m betting you didn’t either. I haven’t eaten today. I need food and rest. I told Perry we’ll be back later to get him updates for the evening edition.”

We. That one word was the embodiment of everything Clark yearned for. He submitted Lois’s story and began shutting down his computer.

But as he waited, a vein of despondency seeped through his anticipation.

If there was to be anything between him and Lois — anything beyond being friends and partners — he had to tell her the truth.

He’d often worried that telling her Clark Kent was Superman would lower her opinion of Superman and provoke her annoyance with Clark. Now, it seemed possible that telling her could lower her opinion of Clark and cause her to be exasperated with both of them.

He wanted to be optimistic. He wanted to hope that this day would end with the way ahead becoming clearer for him and Lois.

But as much as he tried, he couldn’t grasp solid perspective from the fog of confusion and bewilderment.

Lois had said she regretted her actions that day in Centennial Park. She’d strongly alluded to wanting more than friendship.

Clark willed his spirit to celebrate, but the gloom wouldn’t shift.

There was one final hurdle. A huge hurdle. And Clark wasn’t at all sure they would be able to overcome it.

Part 14

Having decided against getting a cab and joining the dawdling, congested traffic, Lois walked alongside Clark towards his apartment.

He didn’t seem eager to talk, but she was unsure whether it was because he wanted to wait until the privacy of his apartment or whether he was using this oasis of silence to try to come to terms with everything that had happened in the past few hours.

Either way, his quietness suited her. It allowed her the

opportunity to grasp at the hazy assortment of idea fragments that were dangling just out of reach. She was missing something — a vital key that was needed to fit all the disparate pieces together.

Lois glanced up into Clark’s face. He responded with an unconvincing smile that didn’t smooth the anxiety from his eyes.

Was he worrying about what she had said? Was he, for the third time in a week, searching for the words to distance himself from a woman who wanted more than he was willing to give?

In little more than twelve hours, Clark’s life had been flung around like a tiny raft at the mercy of a raging sea. Before the storm had calmed, she’d blindsided him by announcing something she’d known for weeks — that her reply in Centennial Park had been hasty, ill-considered, born of fear, and just plain wrong.

Her timing could not have been worse if her deliberate intention had been to try to sabotage his already precarious world.

Even if — despite her actions — his love remained, starting a relationship was probably the last thing he wanted right now.

She wouldn’t push him.

She’d never had an abundance of patience, but she owed him time.

If he did still love her, he had waited and waited for her.

I have been in love with you for a long time.

She could still hear his words, could still feel his sincerity gently tapping on the doorway of her heart. Lois felt a smile pulling at her mouth as her mind skipped forward in time and threw together some snippets of possible scenarios if — by a miracle — Clark’s love had survived her rejection.

She longed to see him happy. And she yearned to be with him.

Was it possible that those two things could go together? Clark’s happiness and them being together?

A little thrill of possibility began to gather momentum, but the nagging questions refused to grant her the freedom to daydream. Lois had always been sure that Clark hadn’t killed Mayson, but that didn’t mean there weren’t gaps in her knowledge. Gaps demanding to be filled.

Why had Clark waited so long to go to the police station? Was it because he had been trying to protect Superman? Or because he had been trying to protect his partner from Lana’s threats?

How had the weapon ended up in the subway? Everything seemed to point to Superman having put it there, but Clark had told the police that he, Clark, had done it.

How could he have walked through the crowds and into the subway without being noticed? Henderson had said that Wolfe had had cops looking out for Clark Kent. The posters around town meant that Clark was becoming a familiar face. He and Lois had chased down enough stories, had been at enough rescue sites, to make it unlikely that not one of the police officers or emergency service workers had noticed Clark.

And surely, neither members of the public nor the press would have been allowed to just wander into the station and beyond, to the subway.

So how had the gun gotten to where the police had found it?

Was there a timing issue? Had Clark taken the gun from Lana before the subway had collapsed? Lois dismissed that line of thinking immediately. If the subway hadn’t collapsed yet, Clark could have gone to the police station, knowing Superman was available to watch Lana.

Had Clark lied to keep Superman from being implicated?

Had Superman taken the gun from Clark, but then Clark said he’d done it to protect Superman’s reputation from being sullied by being linked with a murder case?

If that was what had happened, why weren’t Superman’s fingerprints on the weapon?

Lois shook her head, trying to untangle the web of thoughts. She glanced up at Clark. He was looking ahead, his face set. They were closing in on his apartment — the place where his friend had been killed.

Facing it was going to be difficult. He must be physically exhausted. Mentally drained. Emotionally battered.

Giving in to her sudden impulse, Lois slipped her hand into Clark's hand.

His fingers closed around hers, and they both kept walking.

How had that gun gotten into the subway? If she asked Clark outright, would he tell her the truth?

She chuckled silently as an idea blossomed amid the weeds of confusion. There was only one way she could see to make it feasible that Clark had put the gun in the subway.

Perhaps he'd been wearing a disguise.

He hadn't been, of course. He'd worn the same clothes all night.

But it gave her some light relief from the nervousness that was building inside her.

She had declared her feelings for Clark, and now it felt as if they were wedged in a chasm. They were walking together, holding hands. The walking together was nothing new; the holding hands was unsettling testimony that things had changed between them.

The old had been left behind; the new lay ahead — unknown and scary.

"Does this feel strange to you?" Lois asked.

"Everything feels strange to me."

"Since last night?"

Clark didn't answer for a few steps. "Truthfully? Everything has felt strange since you left Metropolis a week ago."

"Any reason?"

A whisper of his smile flickered for tiny moment. "Other than the obvious, you mean?"

"The obvious being ..."

"That you weren't here. That I was working alone. Without my partner."

"Did you miss me?" Lois asked, figuring that, although it could be considered a question running contrary to her vow not to pressure him, he could answer casually if he chose to.

"Every moment," he said.

The solemnity of his reply settled around them, adding to the potpourri of emotions. "I missed you, too," Lois said. It was the truth.

They turned the final corner, and the door to Clark's apartment came into view. "Are you going to be all right?" Lois asked.

"Yeah. We were here before."

"But that was only for a few minutes."

"It's my home. I can't stay away forever."

They stopped at the door, and Lois took Clark's keys from her bag. Before she handed them to him, she said, "Don't underestimate how traumatic this has been. It's going to take some time to get your mind around what happened."

"I'll be OK."

"I'll stay as long as you need."

"Thanks."

"You don't have to pretend to me," Lois said. "We're friends."

He grimaced as if that word had the power to hack through his heart, causing further pain.

"Clark ..." Lois lifted her hand towards his arm, hovered in indecision, and then dropped it to her side. "You seem perturbed by what I said. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

Clark shook his head. "No," he said. "No. I appreciate your honesty."

"Then what's bothering you so much?"

His eyes fell. "I'm not sure you're going to appreciate mine," he said, despair and weariness cloaking his words.

"Oh." She stared at the keys, fighting back her tears. Had he lied? About why he hadn't gone to the police station earlier? About how his prints had gotten onto the gun? No — this wasn't about the murder. This was about them. Her mistimed confession. "You don't feel that way about me?"

He slipped the keys from her hand. "We need to talk."

Clark opened the door of his apartment and walked in.

The stairs loomed before him.

He doubted he would ever see them again without the image of Mayson's body assaulting his mind.

"Perhaps it would be better if we went to my apartment," Lois said from behind him.

"No!" he said. The vehemence of the word surprised him, and he turned to Lois to try to explain. "If I hadn't tried to dodge being honest with Mayson ..."

She placed her hand on his back and applied a little pressure.

The irony and sweetness of her touch — a gesture he had used so many times — broke into his gloominess and infused his heart with a trickle of fresh hope.

Perhaps it was going to be all right.

Perhaps his secret wouldn't erode their progress. Perhaps Lois would still regret her response in Centennial Park that day.

Her hand guided him down the stairs and to the sofa. They sat down, tilted towards each other, but not touching.

She waited for him to speak. The words boomed through his mind — *Lois, I'm Superman* - but he couldn't release them.

"Where do you want to start?" she asked.

When all the extraneous clutter was trimmed away, what he really wanted to know was if her feelings for him gave them any chance of being together the way he longed to be with her. But if he asked, and she answered, and then he told, and she freaked ...

Perhaps it would be better to honest first. Then ... if she still wanted to be with him, at least she would know the whole truth.

"How about you start at the beginning?" she suggested. "Just tell me what happened in your own words."

"OK," he agreed. If he started at the beginning, they would come to the point where Superman had been called away to help the child in the drain. That would lead to the much greater truth. Perhaps he could just slip it in and hope it looked natural.

Lois smiled her encouragement.

"I saw a fair bit of Mayson this last week," Clark said. "She wanted to go out on dates ... She came here and cooked a meal ... I cooked for her."

Lois waited, although Clark could almost see her curiosity driving questions around her mind.

"I realised she probably wanted more from our friendship, but I didn't love her." He looked at Lois, needing her reassurance. "I knew I would never love her."

"But you didn't tell her?"

"No. Walking home from the newsroom last night, I was thinking about it and I decided that the next time I saw her, I would tell her. But when I got here, Lana was here."

"With big plans?"

"Yeah. I hadn't seen her in over a year, and I'd barely thought of her in all that time. I was concerned about her — being pregnant and seeming to be so agitated and irrational. I was still trying to make her see reason when Mayson arrived."

"That didn't go well?"

Clark released a tight pent-up breath of apprehension at the memory of the two women facing each other. "No. Lana told Mayson that I was with her, Mayson got upset and left."

"You followed her?"

"Yeah. I tried ..." What had he been trying to do? "I couldn't fix anything because some of what Lana had said was the truth —"

I didn't want to be with Mayson in that way. I just wish I had told her earlier. It would have hurt her, but not as much as when Lana did it. And, perhaps she'd still be alive."

Lois's hand rested lightly on his knee. He shuffled an inch towards her, wondering how she would react if she knew how much he craved her touch. "You came back to the apartment?" she asked.

"Yeah. Lana was triumphant. In her mind, everything was settled."

"So you left?"

"Yeah." He should say it now. *I heard a call for help — a child — so I had to leave.*

"I guess you needed time to think."

"I needed to ..." He braved a glance directly into her eyes and was caught there in the outpouring of her concern. His heart exploded as the truth hit him. It was more than concern. It was love.

Lois loved him.

More than friends.

More than partners.

He felt as if he were drowning in a whirlpool of intense feeling.

Lois loved him.

And she was making no attempt to hide her feelings.

She leaned towards him. Her face came a little closer. Her hand reached for his cheek.

A tap on the door shattered their fragile connection.

Clark was jolted from the sweet snare of anticipation.

His shock was mirrored in Lois's face. "That ... that was the door," she gulped.

Please, he thought as he rose from the sofa, please don't let it be the police. Not again.

It wasn't the police. It was his neighbour, Mrs McCreadie.

"Mr Kent," she said. "I saw your arrive with Ms Lane, and I had to come and tell you how sorry I am that my statement got you into trouble."

He pulled a smile from the sea of his swirling emotions. "It's all right, Mrs McCreadie," he said. "You had to tell the police what you saw."

"But I should have known you wouldn't do anything like that."

"Thank you. How's Pannikin?"

She launched into a detailed account of her cat's progress. Clark listened, nodding occasionally and trying not to be too obvious is his desire to get back to his conversation with Lois.

As Lois watched Clark talking with Mrs McCreadie, her questions flooded back with all the force of a tsunami.

Why had Clark left Lana in his apartment?

Lois knew he had a propensity for suddenly running off. It was something he had never satisfactorily explained.

In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she realised there had always been gaps in Clark Kent's life.

And now, there was another big gap. Where had he been during the long hours between being told of Mayson's death and going to the police station?

What had he been doing?

What had been more important than declaring his innocence?

If he had been trying to protect her, why hadn't he come to her and told her Lana had threatened to kill her?

If he'd believed that Lana was capable of killing again, why hadn't he called 911 and had them both taken to the police station?

Mrs McCreadie finished her report on Pannikin's health, and Clark bid her goodbye.

He closed the door, turned, gave Lois a guarded smile, and then walked down the stairs, being careful to avoid the place

where Mayson had lain.

Another question flared in Lois's brain.

How did Clark know Mayson had been in exactly that position?

As he walked down the stairs, she tried to recall exact details of coming here to collect Clark's clothes. As soon as they'd walked in, his eyes had been fixed to the spot.

How could he have known?

Clark hadn't been in his apartment during the time Mayson's body had been on the stairs.

Superman had.

Had he told Clark where Mayson had fallen? Perhaps he had mentioned the stairs, but why would he have been so specific that Clark knew *exactly* where Mayson had died?

How had Clark avoided being seen at the rescue site?

How had he known the location of Mayson's body?

Where had he been during the hours when Superman had been in the subway?

Why hadn't anyone seen him?

Clark reached the bottom of the stairs, his head lifted, and his eyes found hers.

And then, she saw.

The truth.

The incredible truth.

Clark sat down on the sofa next to Lois. She was gazing at him intently, but her expression was unreadable. The love he had thought he had seen just a few moments ago seemed to have retreated behind a veil.

He needed to tell her the truth. "Lois, I'm —"

"I'm sorry I left in such a rush a week ago," she said.

He hadn't been expecting her to re-start their conversation with that particular topic.

Lois was gazing at her hands, where her fingers had coiled around each other as they sat in her lap. "I got a call, and ... It was Mom."

"It was a difficult week?"

"Yeah."

He capped her hands with his. "You OK?"

"It was just so distressing. Her life. Her pain. And the atmosphere was so ... so hopeless."

"She's in the right place to get the help she needs," Clark said.

"It was as if I were being shown a glimpse of the future. My future. And I really didn't like what I saw."

"Your future is going to be wonderful," he said, hoping he was speaking the truth for both of them.

"But ... it was so hard to see her so ... so angry and ..."

"She's fortunate to have a daughter like you," he said.

"I'm not sure that has always been true," Lois said with a trembling smile.

He squeezed her hand. She said nothing. Clark withdrew his touch and shuffled back a little, searching for words that wouldn't heartlessly dismiss her distress but could possibly lead them back to their discussion before Mrs McCreadie's interruption. "You seemed to have spent some time thinking."

"I did," Lois said. "About a lot of things."

"Including us? And that day in Centennial Park?"

"Yeah." She sat up straighter. "You must wonder how I could have agreed to marry Luthor."

Clark had obsessed over that until it had driven him to despair. "That was ... that was unfortunate," he said.

"That was fear."

He waited.

"When you said you had been in love with me for a long time, you also said that I had to have known." Her eyes lifted and crashed into his. "Of course, I knew, Clark. And more than that, I

knew that if I searched my heart — right down into the depths of it, under the calluses of past disappointments and hurts — I would discover that I felt more for you than friendship, too.”

“But?”

“But I was scared,” Lois said, her eyes shining so transparently, he felt as if he could see her soul. “I could see what we could have, and it terrified me. I knew your love would be eternal. Pure. Perfect. Steadfast. I knew that if I said ‘yes’ to you, it would be a lifelong commitment.”

“Any marrying Luthor wasn’t?”

She didn’t flinch at his tone. “I didn’t love Lex. Nothing he could do could reach my heart. But you ... you touched my heart with every smile, every word, every little act of concern, every kindness.”

“And that scared you away?” Clark said, grappling for comprehension. “Because I was too intense?”

“It wasn’t your fault. You had never pressured me before the day in Centennial Park, and you’ve been such a good friend since then. You even denied your love because you thought that would make it easier for me to go back to us being friends.”

Clark grimaced. “You knew about that?”

“Not until recently. And even now, I don’t know. Not for sure. But I have hope.”

His heart was thumping loud enough to set off earthquake alarms in California. “Hope for what?” he said.

“Perhaps your love didn’t die, even though I wanted you to watch me marry another man?”

“I don’t think anything could kill my love for you,” Clark declared. There, the truth was out. Some of it, anyway.

Lois took his hand and cradled it in both of hers. “Being friends is good. Being partners is wonderful. But maybe we could be more.”

“More?” he echoed, knowing that, if this were a dream, he wouldn’t survive the devastation of waking up.

She stood, and he stood with her, completely amenable to whatever direction she chose for them now. She released his hand, and it dropped to hang against his thigh. She reached over to his shirt. She unbuttoned the top three buttons as his heart detonated, sending shockwaves through his ribs.

She slid the flap of his shirt aside and leant forward.

She dropped a soft kiss onto his chest.

Right where she’d poked Superman.

She backed away. Her head rose. Her eyes burned. “Guess it’s a good thing you don’t bruise,” she said.

His head was spinning; his heart was leaping; his lungs had collapsed from lack of oxygen. He swallowed, peeling his tongue from the roof of his mouth. “You ... you ...”

A knock sounded on the door. They groaned together.

“We are going to my apartment,” Lois stated. “We are going to lock the door and take the phone off the hook.”

Clark dragged himself away from her. He looked through the door as he approached it and saw his parents. He opened the door, and his mother flew forward to wrap him in his arms. “Clark!” she said. “I’m so glad you’re all right.”

His father slapped his shoulder. “We went to the police station and talked to a detective called Inspector Henderson,” he said. “He said you’d been released and that Lana was going to be charged with Ms Drake’s murder.”

“Yeah,” Clark said, gesturing them into his home.

When his mom saw Lois, she ran down the stairs, her arms outstretched. “Lois,” she said. “Thank you for what you did for Clark.”

Clark and his father followed more slowly. After hugging Lois enthusiastically, his mom turned to Clark. “You are so fortunate to have Lois as a friend,” she said.

But friendship would never be enough. “Yeah,” he managed, aware of the deficiency of his response. He pulled up seats for

himself and his dad as the women sat on the sofa.

“This must have been so difficult for you, Clark,” his mom said. Her eyes swung to Lois. “And it probably wouldn’t be over yet if it weren’t for Lois.”

Lois gave a self-conscious smile and concentrated her gaze on the floor.

“Lois and I just got back here,” Clark said. “She hasn’t gotten around to telling me all the details of how the police found Lana.”

“Inspector Henderson said you were going to be charged,” Jonathan said. “But Lois kept working until she found the weaknesses in their case.”

“I ... I didn’t do much,” Lois said.

“You found Lana,” Clark said. “How did you do that?”

“I ... ah ...”

His mom jumped in. “She pretended to move herself into your apartment, hoping that Lana’s possessiveness would lure her out of hiding. And it worked perfectly.”

“You knew Lana was watching my apartment?” Clark asked, addressing his question to Lois.

“It seemed likely,” she replied. “When we came back here to get your clothes, the cosmetics had been taken from the bathroom, so I knew she had been here.”

Martha continued the story. “Lois was right. Lana was watching, and when she saw Lois, she came in here. She admitted to having killed Ms Drake and said she was going to kill Lois.”

Clark shot Lois an anguished look. She shrugged slightly.

“But what Lana didn’t know was that Lois was taping the entire encounter,” Jonathan said.

“How close did she get to pulling the trigger?” Clark asked Lois.

“It wasn’t anything —”

“Lo-is.”

“OK,” she said with an awkward chuckle. “She got pretty close.”

Clark looked up to the ceiling, trying to drive away the image of Lois, bleeding and lifeless as Mayson had been.

“I had to do something,” Lois said. “Once Wolfe had the weapon with your fingerprints on it, I knew we were never going to prove you hadn’t killed Mayson. We had to prove beyond any doubt that someone else had. For that, we needed a confession.”

“What stopped her from killing you?” Clark asked, his voice tightened by the razor wire curled around his heart.

“Mrs McCreadie.”

“Mrs McCreadie?” A couple of pieces fell into place in Clark’s mind. “She was watching my door, and she called 911?”

“That’s what I was hoping would happen. But instead, she came to your door, and it turns out she is a very good shot.” Lois pointed to a place on his floor. “Sorry about the damage. She said she was aiming between Lana’s feet.”

Clark didn’t care about the floor. “Mrs McCreadie didn’t hit Lana?”

“No. And Lana didn’t actually fire her gun either, so we were both OK.”

Clark shook his head, aware that annoyance and worry were rife in his expression. “Lo-is ...”

She gave him a little smile. “I couldn’t let them charge you,” she said. “The Star had already run the story about you being questioned. Even if you weren’t convicted, people would always wonder about you. I had to stop that from happening.”

Martha folded her hand around Lois’s. “Thank you, honey,” she said. “Thank you for helping Clark.”

Swallowing down his surge of protest at Lois’s actions, Clark said, “Have Ray and Millie been told their daughter is being charged with murder?”

His mom’s face lined with concern. “We haven’t heard. We’ve been on a plane most of the morning. When we arrived in

Metropolis, we went straight from the airport to the police station.”

“It’s going to be hard for them,” Jonathan said quietly. “I know Ray has been worried about Lana for a long time. That’s why he paid for her European vacation — he hoped it would help her settle down.”

Martha stood. “We should get back to Smallville,” she said. “We might be able to help them.”

Lois stood, too. “But won’t that take hours? Won’t they have left by the time you get back?”

“Perhaps we should stay in Metropolis and be here when they arrive,” Martha suggested with a glance at her husband.

Lois took a few steps away from the little group. “Why don’t you fly them home, Clark?” she said over her shoulder. “I’m going to order some Chinese takeout. I’m starving.”

His mom and dad spun to Clark, their faces vivid with questions. He responded with a baffled shrug. They all turned to Lois.

She had picked up the phone. When she finished dialling, she noticed them gaping at her. “Go on,” she said with a gesture towards the door. “You’ll be back by the time the takeout arrives, Clark. You must be hungry, too.”

She turned away and began speaking into the phone, giving the details of her order.

Utterly devoid of ideas about what he should do now, Clark obediently spun into the Suit, wordlessly picked up his parents, and flew them to Smallville, Kansas.

Part 15

Clark flew back to Metropolis at less than superspeed, giving himself some much-needed time to sort through the conglomeration of scrambled questions that were glugging up his brain.

Lois knew.

She knew he was Superman. She knew he had been lying to her for the entire length of their friendship.

She knew that, despite having declared himself in love with her, he hadn’t been willing to tell her the whole truth.

It had never seemed to matter to Lois that Superman was an alien. Would it matter that Clark Kent — her friend and partner, and the man she had risked her life trying to save — was an alien?

Clark didn’t know. He had always worried about being different.

Were those differences now going to rob him of everything — real and hoped for — he had with Lois?

Pulling stands of logic from the confusion, he managed enough equanimity to realise that his most pressing decision was how to re-enter his own apartment.

Did he fly to the balcony and walk in as Superman?

Did he fly to the alley near his home, spin into his jeans and shirt, and walk into his apartment via the door?

Or did he just appear in his living room?

Lois knew he could fly.

Lois. Knew. He. Could. Fly.

For over a year, he had worried because she didn’t know. Now that she did, the previously simmering tension had risen to boiling point. She knew his secret. He had wanted that. But he’d never been able to overcome his fear about what would happen after she knew.

He suspected it would be as ferocious and destructive as the detonation of a bomb.

How long had she known?

Had she worked it out sometime during the long hours of the night when Superman had been rescuing trapped train passengers and Clark Kent had supposedly been running from a murder charge?

Regardless of when she had realised the truth — truth that, in

some ways, had been playing out in front of her for a year — Clark was pretty sure the consequences were going to get ugly.

She was probably working up to it right now. She was probably recalling all the times he had been less than honest with her. Probably fuming over how he had continually deceived her.

What was he going to face when he walked back into his apartment?

Cold detachment? Fiery anger? Cutting sarcasm?

Would she even be there?

But how bad would it be? How long would it last? And what would be the eventual cost of the fallout?

She must have known when she’d pulled back his shirt and kissed his chest.

He’d been so shocked by her action that his memory of it had already lost clarity.

Would she ever kiss him again?

She had angrily poked Superman’s chest and inexplicably kissed Clark’s. Based on that, Clark landed in the alley, spun into his jeans and shirt, and approached his door with faltering steps as his heart thumped wildly in his chest.

He tapped lightly but didn’t wait for her to answer. He opened the door, slipped in, and carefully locked it behind him, praying there would be no further interruptions.

His apartment was empty.

Then he saw movement on the balcony, and Lois came through the door and walked towards him. “I know how you left without Mrs McCreadie seeing you last night,” she said.

Clark slowly descended the stairs, feeling like a man awaiting his sentence.

She continued past his kitchen and walked right up to him. “Good flight?” she asked.

He buried his hands in his pockets and forced himself to face her. “Lois,” he said. It was a plea for information. And understanding. And mercy.

“Yes, Clark?” she said as if she were oblivious to the fact that suggesting a flight to Kansas without the aid of an airplane was in any way unusual.

He swallowed. He could feel the explosion gathering momentum. “Please. Please don’t —” *Please don’t hate me. Please don’t reject me.*

“I know why you didn’t go to the police station as soon as you knew they were looking for you,” Lois said.

All he could manage was a nod as he desperately tried to discern his future in her face.

“I know how you managed to get the gun into the subway without anyone seeing Clark Kent.”

“Ah ...”

“I know why you keep running off at the most inopportune moments.”

“They were inopportune for me, too,” he said, hoping her resentment would leave her some capacity to glimpse his point of view.

“Yeah, I suppose they were.”

Clark couldn’t stand the tension anymore. “Lois, I understand if you’re mad at me. I understand if you’re hurt that I lied to you all this time. I understand if you want to redefine whatever it is we have defined about our relationship. Whatever that might be. Or not.”

“You’re babbling,” she said, her mouth twitching.

“Lois, I’ve wanted to tell you —”

“What I don’t understand is how you thought you could continue to be two people and not eventually face something like this.”

“I ... I can move pretty quickly,” he offered tentatively. “That helps.”

A knock sounded on the door, and Clark growled with frustration.

Lois's hand landed lightly on his arm. "See who it is," she suggested. "If it's anyone other than the takeout delivery kid, we'll ignore it."

Clark turned his head, lowered his glasses, and looked through the door. "It's the takeout," he said.

"Great," Lois said. She sprang away from him, grabbed her bag from the couch, and sprinted up the stairs. "I feel as if I haven't eaten in a week."

Clark watched in a daze as she paid the delivery kid and then brought the steaming boxes of food back to him. She set them on the coffee table and went to his kitchen to get cutlery and plates.

When she sat down, the normalcy of two friends sharing a meal felt like fate taunting him.

Everything had changed.

She knew.

Lois knew she was sharing this meal with Superman.

While she ladled the food onto the plates, Clark tried to calm his spinning mind. From his confusion, he managed to form the most important question.

She offered him one of the plates.

He took it without even looking at the food. "Does this change anything?" he asked.

"It changes everything," she said. Her calm acceptance cut deeper than the outrage he had been expecting.

"Everything?" he gulped.

"You won't have to make up lame excuses whenever someone needs Superman. At least, not to me. You can just disappear and leave me to make up the lame excuses."

"Lois, this isn't a joke."

She paused from filling her plate. "What is worrying you, Clark?"

"You *must* be angry," he said. "You've just put your life in danger because of your strength of belief about who I am, only to discover that you didn't know me at all."

She looked a bit surprised at his outburst. "I knew the important things," she said, sounding just a little defensive. "I knew you would never kill. I knew you would never run away from trouble."

"But I do," he exclaimed. "I run away all the time."

"You run *towards* trouble, not away from it," she said.

"Lois, I can't believe you're taking this so calmly. I think that when you realise how long I lied to you, you're going to be really mad at me."

She placed the serving spoon on her plate and contemplated him. "Why would you tell me anything about yourself when, the time you did open your heart, I trampled all over it?"

Surprise sucked away his stream of questions.

Her smile peeped out like the dawn of re-connection. "Clark, I wasn't honest with you about who I am either. I'm a lonely and fearful woman, who freaked out when real love threatened to crumble her walls of isolation. You uncovered the real me — which made me feel vulnerable and scared, so I ran away. Now, I've uncovered the real you. Maybe that makes you feel vulnerable and scared. Maybe you need time to realise that I'm not going to use what I know to hurt you." Her hand inched forward, and her fingertips pressed into the skin of his forearm. "But I'm really hoping you won't run away."

Clark stared at her, paralysed by her touch and astounded by her words. "I won't," he said in a voice that crackled with emotion. "I don't want to ever run away from you."

"I won't tell anyone," Lois said as the side of her thumb slid gently over his skin. "I promise."

"I never thought you would tell anyone ... write a story, or something like that."

"Of course I won't. It's going to be an adjustment for both of us. But I think we can do it."

"As partners?" Clark asked.

She nodded.

"And friends?"

"Best friends," she replied.

"And ... and ... you said you regretted the day in Centennial Park."

"Clark ..."

Now it looked as if she regretted her impulsive moment of openness just before Wolfe had barged into her apartment and arrested him for Mayson's murder. Clark could feel her backing away. He could feel his hopes slipping out of reach.

"Clark, you have to be really confused right now," Lois said. "You have to be grieving about Mayson and shocked about Lana and trying to come to terms with me knowing about Superman." Her hand slipped past his wrist to rest on his balled-up fist. "I just think you need some time. I promised you I wouldn't push you into anything."

"But ..."

"But when you've had some time ..." She gave him a little smile. "I think that what you need most of all now is a friend."

"Sometimes I hate that word," he said bitterly.

She didn't flinch. Didn't draw away. "I'm not running away from how I feel about you," she said. "I'm acknowledging the strength of our bond of friendship. It will always be there."

Clark released a breath. "Lois, Mayson paid a huge price because I couldn't be honest with her about my feelings."

"And you paid a price when you were honest with me about your feelings."

"What happened to Mayson ..." His grief rose again, a wave of sorrow, tainted with guilt and anger.

"... is not your fault."

"If only I'd —"

"If you'd told her you weren't in love with her, she could have been on the train that crashed in the subway," Lois said.

"We can't know the consequences of everything we do." Her hand squeezed his. "Even Superman can't see into the future."

"I wish he could."

Her smile flickered. "Would you like me to give you a glimpse of the future as I see it?" she said.

Clark nodded, hoping she wouldn't remove her hand.

"You need some time. You were friends with Mayson, and you need time to grieve for her. You're probably going to be concerned for Lana and her baby. I don't think you should make any decisions now. But when you're ready, I'll be waiting for you."

He needed more now. "Show me what happens after some time has passed."

Her hand lifted from his, and she reached up to glide her fingers through his hair, just above the wing of his glasses. "Then I think I'll take you somewhere and tell you how I feel about you."

As her arm lowered, he grabbed her hand, enclosing it in both of his. "What will you say?"

Lois smiled softly. "I might borrow some lines from you. How about something like ... 'I have been in love with you for a long time. You must have known.'"

Something had syphoned every last ounce of oxygen from his apartment. "What happens then?" Clark said in a breathy whisper.

"That will be up to you."

"Lois ..."

She stood. He followed her to his feet. Time slowed as she slid her arms around his neck and hugged him. His arms closed around her back, and he clung to her.

Very slowly, his tension seeped away, dissolving in the strength of her acceptance. The power of her love.

He would have been content to hold her for hours in silent celebration of the most wonderful friendship of his life. Too soon,

she slipped from his embrace. “Come on,” she said, yawning as she spoke. “Let’s eat before it gets cold.”

They sat on his couch and took their plates on their knees.

“Perry’s hoping for a follow-up story on the subway,” Lois said. “Does Superman have anything else to add that he might be willing to tell his two favourite reporters?”

Clark smiled, touched by her attempt to smooth their transition from a triangle of two reporters and a superhero to a difficult-to-define duo with three identities. “I didn’t see any sign of sabotage,” he said.

“Any cracks or weaknesses in the wall?”

“From what I saw, I think the most likely scenario is that a few bits of the tunnel fell onto the track. That was enough to derail the train. It crashed into the wall, bringing down a large section that was possibly already weakened.”

Lois chewed thoughtfully. “So it was just an accident?”

“I think so. I’m sure there will be questions about maintenance, but after all the angst and finger-pointing, I think they’ll realise it was just an unfortunate series of events.”

“We could write a story — use some Superman quotes — and try to shut down the worst of the speculation before it takes hold. If someone was negligent, that needs to be investigated. But if it were simply a terrible accident, all the conjecture isn’t going to help the grieving families.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Clark said. “If Superman says he didn’t see anything other than a tragic accident, people might be willing to accept that.” He didn’t add that Superman still had credibility because Lois Lane had managed to extricate him from an obstruction of justice charge.

She gave him a smile, and his thoughts slipped back to his question about whether everything was going to change. This had changed — they could talk openly as reporting partners without the spectre of his secret coming between them.

“Are you going to write a follow-up story on Lana as well?” he asked.

Lois nodded. “Yeah.”

“Are you going to include your part in getting the evidence that led to her arrest?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t think it’s relevant,” Lois said. “And I don’t think the other papers will run it either. Wolfe won’t want to reveal how close he came to charging the wrong person. Mrs McCreadie has already said she doesn’t want to speak to the papers. I think it’s best if we just let it drop.”

“You don’t feel ...” Clark wasn’t sure how to word the rest of his question.

“... animosity for Lana?” Lois finished for him. “No,” she said. “I did for a while — from what I knew, she didn’t seem to care at all about your life or how she affected it. But when I came here dressed as a tramp, it wasn’t about hurting her, it was about helping you.”

His gratitude for what she had done for him rose again, tightening his throat. “Lois ...”

She paused, her fork halfway to her mouth as she waited for him to continue.

He wanted to say so much, but words were hurtling around his mind at such speed, he couldn’t grasp any of them.

She lowered her fork back to the plate. “I think there’s a lot more to Lana’s story than just a self-centred woman who lost control when she couldn’t get what she wanted.”

“You do?” Clark asked, not knowing if he were relieved or disappointed that the moment had slipped away empty.

“She said she’d been raped by a cop in Rome. She said that when she tried to report it, the other officers refused to act on her report.”

“Do you believe her?”

“Yes,” Lois said after a moment’s consideration. “Yes, I think I do.”

“Poor Lana,” Clark muttered. “Dad and Mom said she had been acting erratically since she returned home from Europe.”

“Maybe she felt trapped. And abused. And angry.”

“I hope the baby is going to be all right.”

“Did she say whether she wants to keep the baby?” Lois asked. “Do you think she’d give it up for adoption?”

“She said she wanted to give it a proper family.”

The conversation halted. Clark figured Lois was thinking what he was thinking — that a prison was a long way from a ‘proper family’.

“Your parents said her family would be supportive,” Lois said.

Suddenly, Clark experienced a flash of inspiration.

“What?” Lois said. She was smiling at him, which made his idea all the sweeter.

“Ray and Millie — Lana’s parents — had three girls. Some summers, he’d pay me to go and help on his farm, and more than once, he said he loved his daughters, but he’d always dreamed of having a son to help him with the farm.”

“Did Lana mention if the baby is a boy or a girl?”

“No,” Clark said. “Ah ... I looked.”

Lois’s little spurt of shock quickly changed to a smile. “It’s a boy?”

“Yes.”

“So you think Lana’s parents might be willing to look after him?”

“I think so. Particularly if they can get a lawyer who can bring out the trauma of having been raped and get her a reduced sentence.”

Lois took another mouthful of food. Clark knew what she was thinking — that Lana was going to face a murder charge and there was very little chance of leniency. “Lana’s parents sound like good people,” she said.

“They are. They’ve been our neighbours for years. Having a grandson won’t make up for losing their daughter ...”

“... but at least the little boy will be well looked after.”

Clark put his empty plate on the table and sat back in the couch. He couldn’t remember tasting even a single mouthful of the food, but he felt better.

Perhaps it had been the food.

No — he didn’t believe that. He felt better because Lois was with him.

She knew everything about him.

And she still chose to be with him.

She also finished her meal and put her plate on the coffee table. “Lana said she tried to blackmail you into marrying her. She said she threatened to tell —”

“Is that how you knew about me?” Clark asked, suddenly alarmed. “Did she tell anyone else?”

Lois’s response was a placid smile. “You thought she knew about —”

“Did she?” Clark asked anxiously. “Is it on the tape? Did she tell Wolfe and Henderson?”

“Oh, she spilled your secret all right,” Lois said, still smiling. “And it’s on the tape.”

“Lois —” He’d meant her name to gush out, driven by the apprehension he should be feeling at the possibility of his secret becoming common knowledge. But Lois was smiling. Which meant she wasn’t worried. Which meant she had probably already dealt with this situation — just as she had dealt with him being accused of murder. “What did you do?” he asked, knowing he was very close to smiling.

“She didn’t actually tell you the secret she knew?”

“Not in exact words. But she said we had known each other for a long time. She said we knew things about each other that no

one else knew.”

“So you assumed she was referring to your penchant for tights?”

Lois’s teasing tone drove away more of the heaviness clustered in the corners of his soul. Everything *hadn’t* changed. So much that he loved had survived the storm. “My mother made the Suit,” he said, trying to sound stern. “You should show some respect.”

“Oh, I’m very respectful,” she said, looking anything but.

“What did Lana tell you about me?”

“She made some allegations about your lack of manliness because you were never intimate with her.”

“That was her secret?”

Lois nodded, her grin still playing around her mouth. But Clark’s relief was tainted with horror. It was better than Lana announcing he was Superman, but still ...

“Don’t look so worried,” Lois said.

“I ... She said *that*, and it’s on the tape?”

Lois nodded. She didn’t look perturbed at all. “Don’t worry about it,” she said.

“I’m not,” he hurried to declare. But ...

Lois moved along the couch, shuffling within easy touching distance, although her hands stayed in her lap. “Clark, I’m not sure what you were thinking when you said nothing could kill your love for me, but I was thinking that — at the right time — that sort of love would involve intimacy.”

Clark could only gulp and nod.

“So when people see us together — obviously happy — no one is going to give a second thought to what Lana said.”

“Do you believe her?”

“I believe that you didn’t sleep with her,” Lois said. “And I think I know why.”

“Why?”

“Because you didn’t want to get that close to someone who didn’t know everything about you.”

It was true, but Clark was more interested in what conclusions she might have drawn from that comprehension. “You know everything about me,” he said.

“Uhhh,” she said, her mouth tight, but her eyes giving away that she was enjoying his discomfort — just a little bit.

He had to tell her everything. “I haven’t ... haven’t ... gone the whole way,” he said, feeling his face and neck flame to deep red.

“I figured that.”

“You —” His exclamation crashed to a dead stop. “Does that change anything?”

“Yeah.”

“What?” He squeezed the question out from a tight throat.

“It makes it awkward for me to suggest what I had planned to suggest.” Before Clark could form any sort of response, Lois stood and began collecting up their plates. “I’m exhausted,” she said. She took the things to his kitchen counter. “I need to sleep. You might not be physically tired, but I’m sure you could use some rest.”

All Clark could do was nod as he straggled behind her.

“I don’t want to leave you here alone, and anyway, I’m sure I’d fall asleep in the cab before it reached my apartment.”

“You ...” Clark tried to look casual. “You want me to take you home?”

“No.”

“You want to stay here?”

Lois nodded as she gathered up the leftover food from the coffee table. “I promised Perry some stories later, but I can’t write anything until I’ve had some sleep.”

“You can have my bed.”

She deposited the boxes in his fridge. “Only if you come, too.” Clark clamped down on a squeak of shock. “Just to sleep,”

she said, hurrying on. “I can borrow some of your pyjamas. It would be fine. I’m too tired for anything else. And you must be exhausted —”

“I can have the couch.”

“No. If you’re on the couch, you’ll only be a few yards from where Mayson was killed.” She stopped in front of him and extended her hand towards him. “I think you need to be with your friend.”

Clark took her hand. “But ...”

“Even when we become more than friends, we will still be there for each other,” Lois said. “I’m not going to stop being your friend just because I have finally realised how much you mean to me.”

“Are you sure it will be all right?”

“I’m sure.” She covered a long yawn. “I *really* need to sleep.”

“I’ll get you something to wear,” he said, reluctantly slipping his hand from hers.

“Thanks.”

Five minutes later — unbelievably — Clark was in his bed with Lois by his side. He lay on his back, knowing there was no chance of him falling asleep. Not with her there.

She rose up onto her elbow and patted his shoulder. “Can I use this as my pillow?”

“Y...yes.”

“Clark,” she said. “I know this is weird, but all I’m trying to do is get some sleep without leaving you.”

“I know.”

“I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable.”

“Do I look uncomfortable?”

“Yes.”

He gave a hesitant smile. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just stop looking at me like I’m freaking you out.”

After everything she had done for him, he could do that for her. Clark squeezed her hand as it lay on his shoulder. “Come on,” he said. “Lie down.”

She snuggled into his side, put her head on the upper slope of his chest, and rested her arm across his stomach.

Clark closed his eyes. Immediately his mind filled with Lana and Lois. Lana, pointing a gun at Lois.

“It’s OK,” came Lois’s voice. “We’re going to be fine.”

Less than a minute later, her regular breaths told him she had fallen asleep. Clark tightened his arm around her.

She had been right. This was perfect. He needed her. He needed her to keep his imagination in check. He needed her presence to buoy his hope that everything was going to be all right.

Better than all right.

Lois hadn’t actually said that she loved him, but she’d promised that when the time was right, she would tell him that she had been in love with him for a long time.

Pure joy wrapped around his heart.

Lois loved him.

Lois believed in him.

Lois knew everything about him.

Clark rolled his head a few inches and dropped a kiss into her hair.

“I love you, Lois,” he whispered. “Thank you for saving me.”

Epilogue

Clark Kent stood in the drizzling rain as the casket containing Mayson Drake’s body was lowered to its resting place.

He had dreaded coming, but he had been unable to stay away. He’d feared his presence would add to her family’s pain, but he’d felt compelled to give them a chance to ask questions of him. Or vent their anger for his part in the tragedy of Mayson’s death. Or ignore him as being irrelevant to her life.

Other than having received the standard greeting as he’d

entered the church, no one had spoken to him or acknowledged his presence.

The casket stopped, the priest said the final blessing, a few flowers were thrown in final farewell, and the gathering of mourners began to disperse.

Clark turned away, and enveloped in a cloud of detachment from which there seemed no escape.

Lois checked the clock for about the hundredth time. She was in her apartment, but her thoughts were with Clark at Mayson's funeral.

There were smatterings of relief mixed in with her concern. The day had finally come. Perhaps after today, Clark would be able to move on.

Perhaps *they* would be able to move on.

A week has passed since they had slept in his bed, blanketed in the newness of shared knowledge — Clark was Superman and Lois loved Clark.

She had woken up alone. She had wandered from the bedroom and found him staring out of the window.

He had turned to her and given her a nebulous smile that hadn't had the strength or conviction to penetrate the haunted shadows lurking in his eyes.

Now, Lois regretted that she hadn't walked right up to him, taken him into her arms, and held him in resolute testament to the progress they had made.

But, determined to honour her promise not to pressure him, she had met Clark's smile with one just as full of uncertainty and agreed without question when he'd suggested they go to the police station and follow up the story of Lana's arrest.

They had both slipped back from the edge — back to the ease and familiarity of being friends and partners.

Of course, one thing was new. Now they were also fellow-conspirators in the world's biggest secret.

Although, Clark had avoided being with her as Superman.

Did he resent her uninvited presence in the exclusive group who knew that Superman had an everyday life as Clark Kent? Did he harbour even the slightest of fears that she would reveal what she knew? Or, more likely, did he worry that her knowing would somehow threaten her safety?

Lois could only speculate. They hadn't talked. Not about anything that really mattered.

Henderson had come to the Daily Planet the day after Lana had been formally charged, seeking answers for why Clark had been so uncooperative.

Lois had blathered on, citing his concern for Lana. His concern for Superman's reputation. His concern for his partner's safety.

In the end, she'd probably confused Henderson more than she had convinced him, but Lois thought she had probably done enough that the busy cop wouldn't give too much more thought to where Clark had been during the long hours of the night.

Clark had tried to help Ray and Millie Lang when they'd arrived in Metropolis.

Superman had visited at least a dozen people injured in the subway collapse, bringing a little excitement to their hospital-bound lives.

But as Lois and Clark had played out the charade of status quo, she had watched him carefully and one thing had become patently obvious. Although Superman was invulnerable in body, Clark Kent was very definitely not invulnerable in heart.

It hurt him deeply that people had believed he could have shot Mayson.

Being questioned by the police had shaken him.

Being unable to answer truthfully had eroded his confidence that he could be both Superman and Clark Kent.

And he was trapped in his guilt at having been the person

who had brought Lana and Mayson together.

Lois had hated the thought of Clark going to the funeral alone. She'd known how difficult it would be for him.

But they'd both known she couldn't go. Not to the funeral of the woman whose unrequited love for Clark had indirectly led to her death.

So Clark had gone, and Lois had stayed.

She looked at the clock again and sighed. It had advanced a only few minutes.

"Mr Kent?"

He turned. His heart plummeted. The woman who had said his name was young. Blonde. Pretty. And enough like Mayson to snatch his breath away. "Ms Drake," he said. "I am so sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," she said. "And thank you for coming. We appreciate the gesture."

Clark began to breathe more easily. "I will always regret my actions in the final few days of Mayson's life," he said.

"She was in love with you."

The woman's calm statement whipped across his heart. Clark had no reply.

"I know you didn't feel the same way."

"I ..." He'd had many opportunities to state his true feelings for Mayson. Now was not the time.

"Mayson was never a person to take a hint," her sister said with a sad smile. "You had to be blunt or she just continued on, happily believing that everyone was in the place she had designated for them."

"I didn't want to hurt her," Clark said, knowing how inadequate it sounded against the backdrop of her death.

"I'm guessing 'blunt' isn't your strong point."

Clark shook his head. "I wish ... I wish I had —"

Ms Drake gripped his arm. "Mayson valued life," she said. "That's why she wanted to be a DA — to get justice for those who had been hurt. She wouldn't want us to waste our lives with regrets."

Clark nodded tightly. Perry had told him that. His mom had said it, too. And he was pretty sure Lois had spent most of the past week thinking it.

"I'm very glad you were never charged with her murder," Mayson's sister said. "I knew you couldn't have done it."

"You did?"

"Mayson's job brought her into contact with the worst of people — murderers and rapists and people who abuse children. She could never have fallen in love with a man who could kill."

Clark could only murmur his appreciation for her insight.

Mayson's sister released her grip on his arm and patted him a couple of times. "Don't linger here, Mr Kent. Mayson has moved on. You should, too." She turned away from him and walked back to the sanctuary of her family.

Clark waited while all of the cars drove away, leaving him alone.

He turned around and faced the hole in the ground.

"Goodbye, Mayson," he said. "I'm sorry."

It was nearly two hours after the scheduled starting time for Mayson's funeral, and Lois was beginning to worry.

Has something happened?

Had someone recognised Clark? Had something been said that had caused him to sink further into the mire of self-recrimination?

Lois stood from her sofa with purpose. It was time to act.

Whatever had happened, Clark needed her. As his friend. And as the woman who loved him and wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

She quickly tidied the few stray objects lying around her

apartment and then set her table with a lacy cloth, candles, her plates with the hand-painted roses, her best silver, and two wine glasses.

Then, she went to search her wardrobe for her most romantic, most alluring outfit.

She loved Clark. He had said nothing could kill his love for her. Nothing. Not even an accusation of murder.

It was time to celebrate that love.

Pannikin was almost back to her normal self — prowling around the apartment in futile pursuit of non-existent vermin.

Mrs McCreadie sat in her chair near the window, drinking her late afternoon cup of tea and dividing her attention between her cat and her neighbourhood.

As she watched, Mr Kent, carrying a bunch of mixed flowers and dressed in a black suit and a smart charcoal overcoat, walked under her window and let himself into his apartment.

Mrs McCreadie smiled. She hadn't seen that nice reporter, Lois Lane, since the day the murderer had been arrested. Flowers were definitely a good sign. Mrs McCreadie eagerly stood from her chair and peered out of the window.

She waited for ten minutes, finishing her tea while she scanned the extremities of her visibility, but Lois Lane did not appear and Clark did not leave his apartment.

Disappointed, Mrs McCreadie returned her cup to the kitchen. Pannikin relented from her one-cat crusade against the rodent world and came over, looking for some affection.

Her purr-engine had just started when a knock sounded.

After a final glide over Pannikin's sleek flank, Mrs McCreadie went to the door and opened it. "Oh. Mr Kent. Clark."

He smiled. He pushed forward the bunch of flowers he was holding.

"They're for me?" Mrs McCreadie asked, feeling swamped by an odd mix of disbelief, delight, and dismay.

"They're to thank you for what you did for Lois," he explained. "I'm so incredibly grateful that you went to help her."

"Oh." With hands that trembled slightly, Mrs McCreadie reached out and took the bouquet. "Th...thank you, Mr Kent. I don't remember..." She'd been going to say she didn't remember the last time a handsome young man had given her flowers, but she chopped off her words. "That's very kind."

Clark slipped his other hand from his overcoat pocket and offered her a tin. "This is for Pannikin," he said. "The label says it's 'gourmet fish'." His smile was endearingly self-conscious — if Mrs McCreadie had been twenty-five years younger, she probably would have invited him in and locked the door. If she'd been fifteen years younger, she might have considered it.

Instead, she took the tin and gave him another smile of thanks. "I read in the paper that Lana Lang was charged."

"Yeah."

"And Ms Drake was buried today."

The spasm of pain that crossed his face made Mrs McCreadie wish she hadn't mentioned the funeral, but it was too late now.

"Did you go?" she inquired gently.

He nodded.

"Did Ms Lane go?"

"No. We decided... We thought it might not be appropriate."

"I haven't seen her for a few days."

"No. We... we've been busy. The subway collapse... There's always a story to write."

Mrs McCreadie thrust the flowers towards him. "Mr Kent," she said firmly. "Clark. These are lovely, but, please... I'm not the person you should be giving flowers to."

He appeared flustered for a moment, but he didn't take back the flowers. "I will. It's just..."

"Have you and Ms Lane had a fight?"

"No. No. Nothing like that. It's just..."

"Hard to forget? Hard to accept something so wonderful when you can't forget that one woman is dead and another is going to be in prison for a very long time?"

The young man nodded, his lovely brown eyes eloquent with confusion and regret.

Mrs McCreadie reached across the bouquet to rest a motherly hand on the sleeve of his jacket. "Go to Lois," she said. "Go and talk to her. Tell her everything."

"Tell her that I feel guilty because I couldn't be what Lana needed? Guilty because I couldn't be what Mayson needed? Guilty because I'm drowning in so much guilt, I can't be what she needs?"

"If that's what you're feeling, then, yes. Tell her that."

"She deserves better than that. She... she risked her life, for me. Without you..." He cleared his throat and studied his shoes.

"Would you have done the same for her?"

His head shot up. "Yes. But that's different."

"She loves you."

"What if I disappoint her?"

"Clark," Mrs McCreadie said sternly. "I think there is a much greater chance you will disappoint yourself than you will disappoint her."

His mouth opened but no sound emerged.

"Has she ever disappointed you?" Mrs McCreadie asked.

His nod was barely perceptible.

"Did you stop loving her?"

"No!"

Mrs McCreadie hid her smile at the vehemence of his reply. "What happened to Mayson Drake was a tragedy, but it wasn't Lois's fault."

"Of course it wasn't," he exploded.

"Then stop making her pay for it."

He stared at her, dumbstruck. Mrs McCreadie gathered the flowers closer to her face and inhaled deeply. "These are lovely," she said. "But on second thoughts, I think I should keep them. Go and buy another bouquet — I suggest red roses — and take them to Lois."

His smile simmered for a moment before gaining more strength. "I hope Pannikin enjoys the fish."

Mrs McCreadie chuckled. "I expect to see Lois as a regular visitor to your apartment from now on."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Go and get out of those black clothes and put on something cheery," Mrs McCreadie instructed. "Perhaps navy pants, a white shirt, that nice beige jacket of yours, and the vibrant blue tie with the beautiful red rose."

"You think so?" he asked dubiously.

"Yes." She shoed him away with the bouquet. "Get out of here. You have more important things to do than chat with an old woman."

He put a light hand on her shoulder. "Thank you," he said gravely. "Thank you for everything you did for us. I won't ever forget."

Feeling a sudden spurt of tears into eyes that hadn't cried since the day she had buried her husband, Mrs McCreadie nodded abruptly, stepped back, and shut the door.

She buried her nose into the flowers, allowing their sweet aroma to infuse calm through her dishevelled emotions. Then she straightened and bustled into the kitchen. "Pannikin!" she called. "Come and see what that nice Mr Kent has brought for you."

Lois slowly replaced her phone. She'd dialled Clark's home number, but he hadn't answered. She had refrained from calling his cell phone, just in case he was still at the funeral.

She checked the mirror again and despite her worries, she couldn't stop the little rush of satisfaction.

She looked great. Feminine. Sexy.

She had achieved exactly the message she wanted.
 A woman did not dress like this for a friend.
 A woman dressed like this for one man. One very special man.

A knock sounded, and her heart leapt.
 Lois hurried over to her door. She stretched to look through the peek hole and saw a red rose. Behind it, there was a splash of blue and red tie and a white shirt outlined with the lapels of a beige jacket.

It was Clark.
 With trembling fingers, Lois released all three locks and swung open the door.
 They both froze, suspended on opposite edges of the chasm, within one step of leaving ‘just-friends’ behind forever.
 Clark shyly extended the single — perfect — rose.
 Lois reached forward and accepted his gift.
 She examined its flawlessly formed petals and inhaled its beautiful scent.
 “I didn’t buy a bunch,” Clark said. She looked from the flower and into his face. “I ... I only have one heart, and ...”
 Lois waited.
 “... it’s yours.”
 Lois felt her tears rise — tears of empathy for all he had endured, tears of celebration for his strength, tears of hope that they had finally reached the place where they were both ready to move forward.
 “I’m sorry for ...” He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry about ...”
 Lois swallowed, easing the tension in her throat and making speech possible. “This last week?”
 Clark nodded. “I couldn’t get past —”
 “It’s OK,” Lois said. “I understand.”
 “Thank you,” he breathed. His hand lifted in brief salute towards her dress. “You’re beautiful.” His eyes meandered from her feet to her face. “You look stunning. Were you expecting company?”
 “Yes. You.”
 His responding smile was pure Clark, unfettered by doubts.
 Lois felt drawn to stare at him — to savour the knowledge that Clark had returned to her — but she didn’t want their open communication to become bogged in silence. “Thank you for the rose,” she said.
 Clark’s expression became more serious as he pushed his hands into the pockets of his pants. “I’m hoping it will say the things I have been so slow to say. That I need you. That you’re my best friend. That I want to be with you every day of my life.” A smile touched his lips. “That I have been in love with you for a very long time.”
 “I thought we had agreed that that was to be my line this time.”
 His smile billowed to full strength, mushing her muscles.
 “You can say it anytime you want to. I’m ready to hear it now.”
 Because this felt *exactly* like being with Clark, Lois couldn’t resist teasing him. “Say what?” she inquired with a little quirk of one eyebrow.
 “You said you had been in love with me for a long time.”
 “I did. I was. I am. I always will be.”
 Clark gripped her elbow as his earnestness swept away their banter. “Lois,” he said. “Thank you for helping me when I was in trouble. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for accepting everything about me. And although I can’t even think about Lana pointing a gun at you without feeling sick, thank you for risking your life to save me.”
 Lois plunged directly into those deep brown eyes. “I didn’t believe for one second that you had done what the evidence said you had done.”
 “Before you came to get me from the police station, that was

what terrified me the most. It wasn’t being charged with murder, it wasn’t facing a court and trying to defend myself when I couldn’t be totally honest, it wasn’t even the world finding out that I’m an alien. It was that my best friend and the woman I love might believe that I could kill.”
 “That is never going to happen,” she vowed. “Never.”
 He stared at her for a long moment, saying nothing, but conveying much. Then, with a touch of awkwardness, he said, “Do you mind if I come in?”
 With a smile of welcome, Lois stepped back. Clark entered her apartment, turning to shut the door behind him.
 When he faced her again, he gently placed his hands on her shoulders and captured her gaze. “I love you, Lois,” he said. “I have loved you since the moment I met you in Perry’s office. I will always love you.”
 Lois shaped her palm to his jaw and caressed his cheek with her thumb. “I love you, Clark,” she said. “It took me a long time to realise, but now I know I will always love you, too.”
 He sighed with quiet contentment, causing bubbles of elation to cavort across Lois’s heart. Elation and anticipation. Surely, now was the perfect time for him to seal their declarations of love with a kiss.
 He took the rose from her hand and carefully laid it on the table between the candles. “Did you order in?” he asked with a grin. “Or did you cook?”
 “Neither,” she replied, trying to smother her disappointment.
 “Neither?”
 “I thought Superman could take me to any restaurant in the world and we could bring our food back here for an intimate meal for two.”
 “Is that what you’d like?”
 “Yes,” she said gravely, knowing his question and her answer referred to more than just the details of food.
 There was a blur of evolving colour, and then Superman stood before her.
 Lois felt her mouth drop. “Wow!” she breathed.
 “Where would you like to go?” he asked casually.
 But suddenly, Lois didn’t want to go. Not now. She wanted to be alone with Clark for just a little longer. “You tripped up, you know?” she said.
 Superman didn’t look unduly worried by her assertion. “I did?”
 “I told Superman that my mom was in rehab. I never told Clark. But Clark said she was in the best place where they could help her.”
 Clark’s mouth fell open. “You were testing me?” he said.
 “That’s why you suddenly wanted to talk about your week away?”
 She nodded. “And you failed the test, giving me proof of my hypothesis.”
 Superman grimaced a little. “I’m sorry, Lois. It must have felt as if I didn’t want to share that part of my life with you.”
 “I figure the habit of protecting the secret is pretty engrained by now.”
 “Yeah. I just felt ... uncomfortable. I’d wanted you to know for so long, but I was scared it would change us — change our friendship.”
 “Change isn’t always bad,” she reminded him.
 “Is it going to matter? Can we still be ... us?”
 “Are you asking if I can love a man who is two people?”
 “I’m asking if you can love me, Clark Kent. That’s all I want.”
 “Yes,” she declared. “I love you, Clark.” She grinned. “And I can love Superman, too.”
 His smile was full. Lois waited. Waited for him to ease a little closer. Waited for him to take them to the next step.
 He didn’t move. Her overtaxed supply of patience withered

to nothing.

“Suddenly, I’m not so hungry,” she said. “We can fly later.”

“OK,” he said warily.

Lois twirled her hand in a circular motion. Superman spun, and a second later, Clark stood before her. She stepped up to him and rested her fingers on the knot of his navy blue tie. “Do I have to start undressing you to kiss you again?”

His shock lasted only a few moments before being dissolved by a wide grin. “No,” he said. “But please don’t let that stop you.”

“Clark!”

He just kept on grinning at her, looking happy and carefree and ridiculously pleased with himself.

“Don’t you think I’ve waited long enough for you to kiss me?” Lois demanded.

“You waited?” he exclaimed. “I waited so much longer than _”

She put her finger over his mouth, hushing him. Her hand slowly dropped away. His arms surrounded her. His hand cupped her neck. His lips met hers. Hesitant introduction flourished into comprehensive exploration as his mouth imprinted hers with wave after wave of his love.

Lois was swept into the whirlwind of Clark’s kiss. She met him eagerly, holding nothing back. She tasted him, becoming familiar in a new and exhilarating way with the mouth whose smile had brightened her world so many times.

When they eased apart, breathless and a little overawed, it was done. They had moved beyond friendship and into the dawn of something new. Something beautiful. Something strong. Something everlasting.

They were in love.

THE END