

The Pen Is Mightier Than the Heart

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Summary: After nearly marrying Lex Luthor and alienating her best friend, Lois feels lost and unsure of her own abilities. Attempting to sort out the answers as well as her own heart, Lois throws herself into finishing her novel. Deciding to model her male lead after Clark blurs the line between fiction and reality. Meanwhile a new and deadly drug has appeared in Metropolis — one that has devastating effects on Superman. Lois must learn to trust herself again in order to help stop this new menace. Can fiction help her to realize the truth?

Story Size: 80,359 words (431Kb as text)

Disclaimer: I do not own them, I am making no money from them, I just like to play with them...

Feedback: PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE!

Author's Note: This is dedicated to my AMAZING and WONDERFUL beta Sue S. I sent this to her when it was about 20 pages in length or so and through her help, suggestions, encouragements, and tireless patience has helped me to turn it into something completely different. It honestly would never have been finished in its former state had it not been for Sue. She has saved this story and made it something I am actually proud to post here. So thank you Sue. Thank you for your comments, you help, your encouragement and most of all, your sharp pointy stick. This one's for you :)

Chapter 1: Rejection

The wedding was a huge and lavish affair. No expense had been spared. And yet Liam Lancaster's bride stood at the end of the aisle, about to take her walk towards her intended, unable to force her feet to move forward. Wanda wasn't sure what her problem was. It was ridiculous not to want to marry this man. He had given her everything, turned a small-town nobody like her into a star.

"Stick with me, Wanda baby," he'd said to her over stale beer in the seedy pub in which she'd been singing. "I can make you powerful, successful, someone to be noticed...a star. You want that, don't you, Wanda?"

And she had. More than anything she wanted the recognition she deserved. She'd spent too much of her life in dives like that. Too much of it being used by mean men and taking comfort in cheap whiskey. She wanted out and Liam had promised to give her that. A life of luxury and a stage to perform on. The world adored her now and all she had to do to keep it that way, to ensure she'd never go back to that life again, was to marry the man who had given it to her. So why did she hesitate?

Why didn't she see Liam as her salvation? What was she waiting for?

Charlie...

No, she wouldn't let herself think of that good-for-nothin' traitor. She'd thought he was her friend, but life had taught her yet another harsh lesson. People couldn't be trusted. Best to just

move on, and do what you must to get to the top.

The music started and Wanda Detroit didn't hesitate any longer. Hundreds of envious eyes watched her as the former lounge singer made her way towards the man she would spend the rest of her life with. It was for the best.

And then suddenly she saw him — the Masked Figure. He'd been here all along, watching her. An elated smile spread over her face. He was what she had been waiting for. He was the reason for her hesitation. He was the man she loved. A man whose name she didn't even know.

"Dearly beloved..." the priest's voice was a low drone beneath the thudding of her heart. The Masked Figure moved towards her almost as if in slow motion. He was her destiny.

"What are you looking at?" Liam hissed, aware that her attention had wandered. She barely heard him. Turning, he noticed the presence of the Masked Figure, the man he had thought he had disposed of, and grit his teeth. Clearly more drastic measures would have to be taken to ensure that Wanda was his.

"You were not invited," his voice was cold and soul-less. Wanda shuddered and suddenly saw her fiancé in a frightening new light. He pulled out a gun from the inside of his tux and pointed it at the Masked Figure. "Leave now, and I will let you live. Take one more step and you will die, that I promise you."

"Liam, don't! Don't hurt him!" She knew she was begging, but she didn't care. He was the only thing in the world that meant a damn to her and she was not going to lose him. Not this time. "Please Liam, I'll do whatever you want, just let him live."

"Don't grovel for me, Wanda," the Masked Figure said softly, "I'm not worth it."

"But you are," she insisted, "and if I lost you I..."

"Enough!" Liam shouted angrily. The guests of the church watched the scene with a mixture of fascination and fear. The Masked Figure wasn't just Wanda's hero, but the hero of the entire city. Nobody wanted to see him die. "It's bad enough that you've constantly foiled my plans. You will not have my woman. She's mine! Mine, do you hear me? And you shall not live to see her say 'I do'."

And with gut-wrenching horror, Wanda watched helplessly as Liam pulled the trigger...

She closed her eyes, unable to watch, but the sound of gunfire, prompted by the sounds of a struggle, caused her to open them again. The Masked Figure and Liam were fighting viciously, the shot having missed. The gun had been knocked out of Liam's hand. Wanda watched helplessly as the two men dueled for her, praying to whatever deity might exist that the Masked Figure emerged the victor:

With a sharp blow to the jaw, Liam was knocked out cold. Wanda watched as the Masked Figure tied him to one of the church pews. He had triumphed yet again.

Wanda let out a cry of relief as she threw herself into his arms.

"I thought I lost you forever," she murmured into the hollow of his throat. "How did you know to look for me here?"

"Wanda baby, I love you," the Masked Figure said gruffly. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. Nobody can take you away from me. You're with me, angel, and there's nothing either of us can do about it."

Wanda stared at him, tears clouding her vision as the priest cleared his throat. It looked as if a wedding might take place after all...

"So what do you think?" Lois Lane bit her lip and stared at the woman in front of her in anticipation as she set the manuscript in front of her down.

"I think you have real talent, Ms. Lane," the young editor said gently, as she met Lois' eyes, "but I don't think we can publish this book."

Lois felt her heart sink as she realized her novel was being rejected for the fifth time that month. What had started as a back-of-the-mind past time had become a full-fledged obsession in the wake of Superman's rejection and her non-marriage to Lex. In less than a week she'd had her entire world turned upside down, all for the sake of a man who had turned out to be one of the biggest criminals Metropolis had ever known. The confusion and heartache over nearly marrying a man she had never truly known at all, Superman's coldness and Clark's refusal to attend her wedding needed an outlet. And Lois had always wanted to write a novel.

Wanda Detroit had been an idea she'd been toying with for a while, but after the entire wedding disaster it had become Lois' passion. She used it as an outlet for all her fantasies of what she wanted to happen in her life. All the things that had gone wrong in the past few months she could fix in her novel. If nowhere else, she had control when she was writing and that meant a lot to her, especially now. She hadn't managed to work through everything like she had hoped writing the novel would help her do, but she did manage to turn out something she felt might be good enough to sell. Most of all, she needed to feel as if her work was valued again.

She didn't put her real name as the author of course. She had chosen the pseudonym of Laura Landon. The editors she submitted the manuscript to had known her true name, but she felt it best if the general public did not. She was (or had been before she almost married Lex), one of the top reporters in the city. It wouldn't do to have her readers know that she used her spare time trying to work through her feelings by writing a romance novel. Not that she had written much lately to be respected anyway...

Her work at the *Planet* just hadn't been the same after everything that had happened. She had lost some of her old fire, and didn't know how to get it back. The only thing she had cared about at all was finishing her novel. Now that she had, it was beginning to look as if it all had been completely pointless. Nobody wanted to publish it. It felt like nobody believed in her anymore.

"If you don't mind me asking," Lois' voice was tentative and she hated herself for it. The old Lois had never been tentative. The old Lois would take back her manuscript, tell the editor she was insane and vow to find someone who would appreciate her talent. And the old Lois would have succeeded. This new, frightened Lois was not as strong. She shook her head and took a deep breath, refusing to allow the new Lois to make her back down. "Why is it that you can't publish it? You said I had talent."

"And you do," the other woman smiled with a genuine warmth that Lois just didn't trust. She was finding it hard to trust anybody these days, most of all herself. "But this is just not you."

"Come again?" Lois stared back in confusion.

"Look," she leaned forward. Lois glanced covertly at her nameplate realizing she had completely forgotten the woman's name. *Justine Carroll...* "I'll be straight with you. I don't think you put your soul into this."

"You don't think I... what?" She felt hysteria rise within her and fought to quench it. It wasn't Ms. Carroll's fault that she didn't know her, didn't know how hard Lois had worked on that novel. "I've put nothing but time, effort and energy into this for the last three months. It's been my whole life! How can you possibly know whether I put my soul into it or not?"

"Frankly, the potential is there," Justine replied, "but the passion, the realism isn't. This novel is nothing but a giant jumble of clichés and bad stereotypes. A lounge singer named Wanda Detroit? A rich philanthropist who is really a super villain in disguise? A mysterious hero who appears in the darkness, never shows her his true self and yet whom she loves completely? And what about her friend... the guy who sticks by her through thick

and thin and then just... deserts her for no reason? It just doesn't work for me. And it won't work for the readers either. They want complete characters, not caricatures."

"And you're saying mine aren't?" Lois' voice sounded remote and distant to her own ears. It hurt more than she cared to admit to hear this woman illustrate all the things that deep down she had known from the beginning were wrong with her novel.

"No, Ms. Lane, they aren't," Justine's voice was business-like, "but they could be. You have the potential to turn this into something with real depth. You just have to dig a little deeper. You're an investigative reporter, so I shouldn't have to tell you this. You need to give the readers more than just the bare facts. They need to care about Wanda. They need to understand her dreams and desires. They need to empathize with her. And they need to know why Liam is so evil. They need to know why her best friend deserted her. And most importantly, they need to know who the Masked Figure is, and what his motives are. That's honestly the largest problem with the novel."

"The Masked Figure is the hero," Lois said, though she knew it was a weak answer. "He's the man she loves."

"But why?" Justine asked her, not backing down. "Why does she love him? She doesn't even know him! Oh sure, he shows up and saves her when she needs him to, but what's his angle? Why does he fight crime? What does he do when he's not saving her? And why did she just drop everything and run off with him in the end? There are just too many questions."

Lois sighed, as she realized the truth in Ms. Carroll's words. She had written only the surface of her pain, hoping it would help her get to the root of it all. But how could she reach people on a deeper level if she wasn't even willing to do that with herself?

"You're right," she said finally after a long, painful pause. "I guess I just hoped that it would be enough. Thanks for taking the time to read it, Ms. Carroll."

"Please, call me Justine." The editor reached out and touched Lois' arm lightly, in an effort to keep her from leaving. "And I didn't say that you wouldn't ever be published, only that I couldn't publish this."

"What are you suggesting?" Lois' voice was controlled, but she felt her heart lift despite herself.

"Try again," Justine said simply, "but put your heart into it. Make these characters real people, with real hopes, fears and flaws. Make the readers feel what they feel and know why they feel it. Bring them to life. I know this is going to sound cheesy, Ms. Lane, but writers really should write what they know. Write something less outlandish and more real. Write something that's a part of you, not a fairy tale."

"Something real," Lois murmured more to herself than to anyone else. If only she knew... Justine nodded.

"I think it would work a lot better that way," Lois thanked her and gathered her belongings to leave. Justine spoke again before she did so. "And Ms. Lane? This is just my own personal preference, but... I'd ditch the heroine's name. Wanda Detroit is just... well, bad. And the Masked Figure is a little too... I dunno, comic-book like."

"But he's the main romantic interest," Lois protested, not liking the fact that her 'Superman' character was a problem in the book. He was the hero, the person who restored Wanda's faith in the human race. How could that be a problem?

"Yes, but he doesn't need to be there. You have the perfect romantic interest already built into the story, one that has far more emotional weight and depth of character than the Masked Figure."

"Who?" Lois wondered.

"Why, Charlie of course," Justine replied as if it should be obvious. "Her best friend! I mean, you had him confess his feelings for her and then he just disappeared. Look, I'm not telling you how you should structure your story, but I think it

would work a lot better if you transferred all the heroics and altruism to his character and had Wanda — or whatever you name her — fall for him. Women don't always want the super hero...Metropolis has one of those and he's not someone the common woman can relate to. They want the guy next door. That's Charlie. Think about it, would you?"

Lois nodded mutely and left the office, her mind mulling over Justine's parting words. Was Superman really so unrealistic? And why would she want her to make Charlie the hero? How could she salvage the work she had put so much effort and time into? Would it really help her move on?

Chapter 2: A New Threat

The news room was fairly busy and it took Lois a few moments of searching before she managed to find her partner, Clark Kent, who stood at the water cooler talking to Ralph with a kind of 'help me' look written on his face. Lois headed over, intending to save him from having to talk to their particularly annoying colleague when Perry's booming voice distracted her.

"Lois, I need to see you in my office."

He didn't sound very happy and Lois had a sinking feeling she knew why. She shot one last look at her partner. He smiled sympathetically and then turned back to his conversation with Ralph.

Does Clark know what this is about? she wondered to herself. She hoped that he hadn't been read the riot act for her mistake. And it was her mistake. She was certain of that as soon as she entered Perry's office. A copy of the *Metropolis Star* was sitting on his desk sporting the headline that should have been theirs: *Art Theft Ring Exposed!*

"What's up, Chief?" She asked, knowing full well what was up, but wanting to make it sound as if she had no knowledge of it. She already felt bad enough. She would *not* walk in there like a wounded dog, tail between her legs, begging for forgiveness.

"What's up is that I had to buy this rag to find out that we've been scooped." Perry's voice was a low growl of disapproval and Lois felt her face flush with embarrassment as he pointed to the paper in front of her. "What happened here, Lois? I thought you said that curator wasn't dirty."

"He wasn't!" She exclaimed then, realizing her mistake, redirected her thoughts. "I mean, he didn't seem to be."

"Didn't seem to be?" Perry echoed, clearly working up a good healthy angry face. "Honey, the way this rag reads he might as well have had 'arrest me' stamped on his forehead! Now how in the name of Graceland did you miss this?"

"I assume you've spoken to Clark," Lois replied, forcing her chin upwards in an attempt to keep her dignity.

"Clark is gonna say whatever he can to shift the blame to himself, you know that," Perry admonished, but this time there was no accusation in his tone. "I know better. Something made you hold back on this, instead of going after this guy with all you had. What was it?"

"I'm sorry, Perry," she said finally, her eyes unable to sustain his gaze. "I guess I just didn't trust my gut. It told me he was probably guilty, but I...it felt too easy...too cut and dried. Things just aren't like that." She didn't add the word that occupied most of her mind, though Lord knows she wanted to. *Things just aren't like that...anymore.*

"Lois, both you and I know that a reporter's best ally is their gut." His voice was softer now, and she could tell that although he was disappointed he was doing his best to be supportive rather than angry. It made her all the more furious to know that he thought her too delicate to yell at. She had screwed up. She deserved a good chewing out. "If you don't have your gut, you don't have anything. This is the third time the *Star* has gotten a scoop before us. Is there something you need to take care of...in your personal life?"

"My personal life is fine," she said not meaning for it to sound as cold as it did. "I just made a mistake, Perry. It won't happen again."

"I sure hope not," Perry said with a sigh. He seemed to sense the way Lois had closed herself off to him and decided the best thing to do was to push forward and concentrate on today's edition. "Our new owners are looking at us real closely, trying to find anything that might suggest they made a mistake in taking us on. We're the *Daily Planet!* I don't need to tell you why this paper is the greatest in the world. You and Clark have always done your best to make it that way. I need that one hundred percent from both of you, comprende?"

"Is the paper in trouble, Perry?" Lois was suddenly worried that her own problems might end up hurting the paper itself. It was the last thing she could ever want to happen.

"Not yet," he answered honestly. "But they were less than thrilled to find out our top story this week was a review of the city's annual budget while the *Star* ran this piece. Can you understand that?"

"I understand," Lois replied softly. "I'm sorry, Perry."

"Don't be sorry," he said holding up a finger and shaking his head. "Be Lois. Be the reporter I know you are."

She nodded and left his office, suddenly feeling even worse than she had the day before when her novel was rejected. If possible, every ounce of her once famous confidence had been kicked into the dirt.

She was so busy dwelling on her failures that she didn't even hear Clark approaching from behind until his hand touched her shoulder ever so gently. She jumped at the contact, then relaxed as she realized who it was.

"At least he didn't go too hard on you," he said, attempting to sound helpful. For about the millionth time since she had known him, Lois wondered if he possessed some of Superman's super hearing. He always seemed to know what was going on, even if he hadn't been around to see it.

"Why would you tell him it was your fault?" She looked up at him, hoping he couldn't see how Perry's disappointment had affected her. Clark shrugged, and looked away, slightly embarrassed.

"I didn't say it was my fault exactly, just that I should have...pursued the angle a little more even if you thought it was a dead end."

"Why didn't you?" she wondered. "Clark, you're just as good a reporter as I am, surely you knew that we needed to be investigating that curator."

"I thought about it," he admitted, "but you seemed so sure..."

"I seemed sure about Luthor, too, but that didn't prevent you from going after him and putting him in jail." She hadn't meant to sound so angry, but it seemed that her head and her heart were at constant war today, causing her to act first and think after. Clark looked slightly wounded at the harshness of her words causing her to sigh. "I'm sorry, that was my fault. I just...haven't been myself. And that's my fault too. Look, maybe us being partners isn't going to work as well as it did before."

"What are you saying?" He looked upset, but she wasn't sure if it was because of the Luthor crack or the comment about their partnership. She threw her hands in the air in a gesture of pure frustration.

"Let's face it, I haven't been half the reporter I used to be ever since this paper re-opened. I've been bungling stories, not following up on leads... You've been carrying me the entire time and that's not fair to you. This art theft story was my fault. I should have investigated it further and you know it. You shouldn't be held back by me."

"Lois, we're partners," Clark said resolutely. "Through good and bad. And you're just going through a rough patch. A lot has happened..."

“That’s no excuse for not doing my job properly. You know that as well as I do.” She sighed heavily. “I just hate to think that you might get chewed out by Perry again because I’m not as good as I used to be.”

“You’re every bit as good as you used to be,” he insisted softly. She looked up and saw his deep brown eyes were warm and caring. He was always so gentle, so forgiving. Even after the way she had treated him over Luthor. The way she had dismissed his declaration of love. Even after all that he was still there, still Clark. She didn’t deserve him, didn’t deserve his friendship or understanding, but couldn’t imagine going through life without it.

“I’m glad one of us thinks so,” she said at last with a partial smile. “Okay, we’ll stay partners, but do me a favour, Clark.”

“Anything,” he promised solemnly.

“If you think I’m wrong when it comes to a story, let me know. Don’t go along with me to avoid hurting my feelings or an argument. I can take it. I’m not made of glass. If my skills aren’t there, let me know. The *Planet* means more to me than my pride.”

“I promise, Lois,” Clark told her, “but I don’t think you have anything to worry about. Anybody can make a mistake.”

“Maybe,” she murmured, still unsure. Anybody could make a mistake, but not everybody nearly married mass murderers. Only she had that particular talent. How could she pick out a common criminal now when one of the biggest in the city had been right under her nose all along?

Clark was about to say something else when Perry leaned out of his office and barked their names.

“Lane, Kent! We got a dead body on Fourth Street, looks like a gang hit. I want you two on it!”

“A gang fight...” she scrunched up her nose slightly. Surely she hadn’t slipped that badly that she was being given stories that any rookie reporter could cover. “Isn’t that a little light as far as news goes?”

“We don’t pick and choose the news, Lois,” Perry shot back. “Get down there and get me something I can print.”

“On it, Chief,” Lois replied hoping her voice sounded sure and confident. As she grabbed her coat to follow Clark she waited for that familiar thrill that usually went with being hot on the trail of a story. It was absent. It hadn’t been there for so long now, she was beginning to wonder if it ever would be again.

The crime scene on Fourth Street had attracted quite a crowd. This surprised Lois, as violence in that part of town was an unfortunate normality and people didn’t tend to be overly impressed or intimidated by the random gang hits and shootings that occurred. The fact that there was a sizable mass of people crowding around the police tape told Lois that the sight they would be greeted with would be unusual.

She could make out Inspector Henderson’s profile as they approached. Although the body was within sight, she had yet to look down. She glanced at Clark out of the corner of her eye and saw that he too was avoiding the inevitable. They’d have to look down to see the body itself, but neither of them wanted to actually do it.

“Mr. Kent,” Henderson greeted Clark with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. Not for the first time, Lois considered how hard it must be for someone like Henderson to see this kind of thing on a regular basis. As a reporter she had seen her share of terrible things, but not with the frightening regularity of a cop like Henderson. She had never really gotten along with him, but suddenly she hoped that he had someone to go home to that night. Someone to help erase the look of pain she saw etched in the lines of his face. He turned to greet her and his smile slipped just a little. “Lois,” he said with a nod.

She wasn’t insulted. She had a tendency to cause trouble for Henderson, and she could tell he wasn’t eager to deal with her today. He didn’t have much to worry about. The scrappy Mad-Dog Lane part of her had taken a holiday and despite Perry’s

lecture had not returned. She would do her job, but her heart wasn’t in it the way it used to be.

“Hello, Inspector,” Clark said as he shook his hand. Neither of them had looked down yet. Henderson looked at them both and nodded.

“I hope you two haven’t eaten anything,” he grimaced and shook his head sadly. Lois felt her heart somersault.

“That bad?” Her mouth was suddenly very dry. He stepped aside and gestured to the crime scene as if he were Vanna White on a particularly morbid game show.

“See for yourself,” he stepped back. Lois was greeted by a sickening sight that she knew would never leave her memory.

The face itself was mangled beyond recognition. It looked barely even human. The only identifiers to that fact were the rest of the body and the clothing, soaked in blood. The streets were stained with it.

What sort of monster could do this?

She gasped at what she saw and, to her own horror, turned to bury her face in Clark’s chest as if the action could erase the vision all together. She gulped for air, trying to force her stomach not to rebel in front of Henderson and all the witnesses. She might in time forgive herself for hiding in the folds of Clark’s suit jacket, but she would never live down vomiting on the sidewalk in front of Henderson.

Clark didn’t say anything, but instead held her tight against him as if shielding her from the sight could erase it. It couldn’t, but she was grateful he tried.

After seconds that seemed like hours, she was finally composed enough to venture another glance. She stepped back and looked up at the face of her partner who, although still standing and composed, looked pale and stricken to the very core. He had been just as affected as she and that was slightly comforting.

She cleared her throat, unable to form any words of thank you for his support and looked down at her note pad, trying to think of questions she knew she should be asking as a reporter. Clark beat her to it.

“Do you know the victim’s name?”

“Jonathon French,” Henderson replied looking through his notes. “Only identifier was the wallet we found on him. He was nineteen years old.”

“Nineteen,” she murmured to herself, more than anyone else. Barely older than Jimmy and certainly too young to die. Summoning her mind to think critically, she looked back at Henderson.

“What would lead you to believe that this was a gang hit, Inspector? It looks more like an animal...got to him.” She wasn’t about to say ‘ate him’... It was just too graphic.

“Normally I would agree with you, Miss Lane,” Henderson replied. “But we’ve got witnesses from across the street who saw a man in a red jacket attack him and...well, from the way they described him, he was almost animal-like in what he did, but still human.”

“You’re saying he acted alone?” she asked. Henderson shrugged.

“The New Troy Soldiers wear red jackets. They’ve been doing small time stuff up till now...misdemeanors, shoplifting, disturbing the peace, occasional B&E...nothing of this magnitude until now. I can’t imagine why one of their members would do something like this. It just doesn’t track.”

“And what about Jonathon French?” Clark wondered. “Do you know if he belongs to a gang as well? Was this a fight for turf?”

“The investigation is preliminary at this point,” Henderson prefaced, “but it doesn’t appear that he was. His clothing gives no indication. We ran a check on him and didn’t find any criminal record under his name. We’re going to need dental records for

positive ID, but as of this point this appears to be completely unprovoked and unrelated to gang activity.”

“Do you have any leads as to why someone would do this? Or how?” Lois was getting back into her stride now, thinking only about the story and not about the sight at her feet. It was either that or be sick and fall apart completely and she wasn’t willing to do that. “I mean, it’s got to be rather difficult to...well, to destroy somebody’s face like that.”

“We don’t have anything concrete,” Henderson said hesitantly. “But witnesses said he had an almost inhuman strength. And that he was...glowing. Or at least his head did. I don’t know how much of that I believe just yet.”

“Could the enhanced strength and glowing appearance have anything to do with cyborgs? Or robots?” Clark wondered. Lois shot a look at her partner, impressed that his mind would go in that direction. She had just been about to ask the same question. Perhaps her talent wasn’t gone after all.

“Not one we are aware of,” Henderson admitted. “But we won’t rule it out. We’re going to be talking with his family to find out if he had any previous history that the police aren’t aware of.”

“Can you contact us when you know more?” Clark asked him and Henderson nodded shortly at Clark. Lois sighed, grateful that for now they had gotten all they could and were going to leave the scene.

Henderson was looking around at the gawking crowd as well as the other policemen that now swarmed the scene and motioned for the two of them to step aside where they would be out of earshot. They did so, and he pulled a bit on his tie as if to relieve some of the pressure.

“I really shouldn’t be saying this, seeing as it’s not exactly in sync with procedure, but whoever did this is a special breed of sicko and I want him caught. I get the impression you two are going to investigate this and pursue your own angles that are occasionally — how shall we say, less law-abiding than mine?”

“We don’t know what you’re talking about,” Lois said evasively. She didn’t want to admit to illegal activities, lest it come up in court later, but also wanted Henderson to know that she was on the same page as he was. He got the message.

“Yes, well...” he trailed off and looked around again. “I’m willing to work with you two...share sensitive information. Just this once you understand. I know your reputation and I trust you two to make sure you don’t print what needs to stay out of public knowledge. In return, you let me know of everything you find out, and don’t tell me how you got it. I don’t want to know. If I have any knowledge it could jeopardize the case in court. As far as we’re concerned whatever I get sent is anonymous and we never had this conversation. Is that clear?”

“This isn’t some gang hit,” Lois murmured, suddenly realizing the scope of what Henderson was suggesting. “This is something really big we’ve stumbled onto here, isn’t it?”

“I won’t answer that, but I will repeat that any information that I deem classified is not to be printed anywhere. Strictly off the record, do you understand that?”

“We understand,” Clark answered firmly. Lois merely nodded.

“Good,” Henderson said with a nod of his head. “I’ll be in touch with you.”

And with that he headed back towards the crime scene leaving Lois and Clark to stare at one another and try to forget the horror of what they had just seen.

“I don’t know about you Clark, but I feel like skipping lunch today, how about you?”

“Couldn’t eat a bite, even if I wanted to,” he agreed grimly. “Let’s get back to the *Planet* and let Perry know this one’s big.”

“We should also contact Bobby Bigmouth,” Lois added. “He might know something about it.”

“Good idea,” Clark told her, touching the small of her back gently to lead her towards where she had parked. She couldn’t

ignore the feeling of comfort that engulfed her whenever he did something like that, and briefly she thought back to her novel and the editor’s suggestion for making Charlie the romantic hero. She wasn’t fooling herself. She had based all her characters not so subtly after the men in her life and Charlie King had been her written representation of Clark.

Later, she told herself. Work on it later. You have actual investigating to do. The other stuff can wait.

But Lois had a feeling that her own inner psyche was trying to tell her something and didn’t want to wait until she had her novel written to tell her what it was.

Chapter 3: Late Night Observations

Lois stared at the empty computer screen and frowned. She and Clark had spent the rest of the day calling various sources and trying to figure out if there was any word on the street in terms of the death of Jonathon French, but had thus far come up empty.

The moment she got home, she had flopped down onto the couch in utter exhaustion, completely unable to devote another second towards the story. She didn’t want to think about it any more than she had to, didn’t want to dwell on the memory of the boy’s mangled body.

She thought she could get her mind off of it by taking a stab at revising her novel. As she re-evaluated it based on what Justine Carroll had said was wrong with it she realized that it would take even more effort to tweak it than she had originally anticipated. The prospect of starting over was slightly daunting. She just wasn’t sure that she had the energy or drive for it anymore.

She just felt so tired of it all.

But she was resolved to give it a shot at least, if only to keep her mind off of the day’s events. She had given the idea of basing her romantic lead off of Clark some real serious thought and decided there couldn’t be any harm in it. Even though she had told Clark she didn’t have romantic feelings for him, he was still her best friend in the entire world. That meant far more to her now than it ever had before she accepted Lex’s proposal.

Clark had very quickly become the one and only person she could trust almost implicitly to be there for her no matter what. It couldn’t hurt to model a romantic lead after someone like Clark. He already possessed all the qualities that she liked and admired in a man and, after all, it was fiction.

Creating a romantic lead based off of someone she knew and trusted in real life didn’t mean she was obligated to date him. More than anything she wanted the story to be strong and meaningful. It was true that Clark meant more to her at this point in her life than a lot of people. Justine was likely right that basing her hero off of Superman hadn’t seemed real. She still wasn’t sure he was real. She knew she loved his ideals and his beliefs, but he hadn’t been entirely wrong when he told her she didn’t know the real him. She had no idea what he did when he went home, what he watched on TV, (if anything at all) or what his favourite movie was. Those were things that helped define a person and anchor you to them. Take Clark for example. Lois knew exactly what his favourite movie was, and what he liked on his pizza. Personal details like that could only make her story stronger, right?

Staring at the screen though, she couldn’t think of a single place to begin. Where did she want to start? Should she keep the same plot as before? And what was she going to re-name her heroine? Justine was right in that area too. Wanda Detroit was a stupid name. She needed something more down to earth, more real.

She had based the character originally on her fantasy self... the person she had wished she could be. But if she intended to tell the truth, to make the story as true to herself as she could, she needed to keep the name similar, but different.

“Laura,” she mumbled, thinking of the pseudonym she had originally chosen. Laura was a good solid name for a character. She could pick another pen name to write under.

She sat back and sighed, unable to come up with anything else just then. Her mind was a frustrating blank and her hands would not obey her desire to type. She had complete and total writer’s block.

She was about to turn the computer off when the loud, shrill ring of the telephone startled her. She picked up the receiver muttering a distracted ‘hello’.

“It’s me, Lois,” Clark’s voice was hesitant on the other line, as if he wasn’t sure if it was okay to be calling. She checked the clock. Eight thirty... completely reasonable for phone calls.

“Hey Clark what’s up? Did anyone call you back?” She forced her mind back to the case and turned the computer monitor off, resolving to get some more work done on the story later.

“No, not exactly,” he told her. His voice sounded heavy.

“What’s the matter?” Her forehead furrowed with worry for her partner.

“I just... I can’t get the image of that boy out of my head,” he finally confessed. “I’m having a hard time thinking of anything else. How ‘bout you?”

“I’m...” she was about to say ‘fine’, but then realized that lying to Clark was almost impossible. He knew her too well. Might as well come clean. “I can’t stop thinking about it either.”

“Do you want some company?” He voiced his question softly, but there was an urgency in it that echoed her own need for human contact. She realized with a start just how badly she did not want to be alone right now and how much seeing Clark would make everything just a little bit better, a little easier to bear.

“Actually I do,” she replied, equally as nervously. She wasn’t sure why. She and Clark had spent many evenings together not really doing anything at all, but for some reason this felt different. There was an energy to the phone call that wasn’t there before and without thinking, Lois found herself glancing into the mirror and attempting to fix up her hair in anticipation of Clark’s arrival. Why would she even care what she looked like? He’d seen her in worse situations. “Did you... do you want to come over? Maybe bring a movie?”

“You sure it’s not too late?” She could hear the hope in his voice and found it mirrored her own. She smiled. “Of course not. I’ll order something to eat. See you in a bit.” Without saying good-bye, she hung up the phone and went to look for the number to the closest Chinese food place.

After ordering it, she paced her living room. The longer it took him, the more anxious she was to see his face. Things just seemed... easier when he was there. It was as if he could take some of what she was feeling and shoulder it himself. She knew she could count on him to understand her and still care about her.

Eventually she heard his knock at the door and felt her heart lift in anticipation. When she saw him standing out there, a smile spread over her face and she ushered him in. He still appeared a bit pale to her, and more haggard than she could remember, but he was still Clark and he was here. That was the important thing. He carried a plastic bag with some movies inside. She couldn’t see the titles. She didn’t care what they were, as long as they helped both of them to forget.

“I got all comedies,” he said as if sensing her thoughts. “Nothing heavy, depressing, or... bloody.”

“Good,” she replied with a quick nod. “I don’t think I could handle anything else.”

“Me neither,” he said as he sat down. The food came moments later and they soon found themselves sitting together on the couch in companionable silence as they watched the first of the mindless fluff films he’d brought and ate a late dinner. They’d

never get through all the movies, but it was comforting to know that the movies and Clark were there.

After the food was put away, Lois took a blanket from the closet and laid it out on the couch over herself and her partner. Clark gave her a quizzical look, but said nothing to object. She sighed feeling safe and warm for the first time since seeing the crime scene earlier that day. She was with her partner, curled up on the couch watching movies. Nothing could harm them here. He wouldn’t let it. And despite her firm belief in women’s lib and her own prowess in Tai Kwan Do, she thought that Clark would protect her was what made her feel safest of all.

She had gotten so lost in her own thoughts that she had barely spoken a word since they’d put the second movie in. It was “Hook”, one of Clark’s favourites.

“I just love Robin Williams,” she said softly as he appeared on screen. Strangely, Clark didn’t reply. When she looked over to find out why, she found a small smile tug at the corners of her mouth as Clark’s head lulled slightly to the side and his breathing came deep and rhythmic. He had fallen asleep.

She knew she should probably wake him up and tell him he should head home for the night, but didn’t have the heart to do so. Part of it was because he looked so peaceful that she didn’t want to wake him. But the other part was because she didn’t want him to go. It felt right with him here, for the first time in a long time, and she wanted to cling to that for as long as possible.

Slowly she got up and tip-toed to the bathroom to brush her teeth. On the way back to the living room she thought once more of her novel. She was basing the hero on Clark’s personality, so logic would dictate that she base it on Clark physically as well.

She let that thought play around in her mind for a few moments and realized she wasn’t averse to it. He was a handsome man by most women’s standards and would do well in terms of a romantic lead.

Inspired, she grabbed a pad of paper and a pen and padded back into the couch, seating herself beside him once more, pen poised.

She sat there for a few moments, staring at him and thinking of how to describe him. Finally, she looked down at the pad of paper and began writing what she saw.

Laura couldn’t help but stare as Charlie King first made his way into the police precinct. Since he was only a rookie cop, Laura normally wouldn’t even have noticed him. But Charlie had something indefinable that caught her eye. As frightening as the thought was, he looked as if he were genuinely a nice guy, something Laura did not believe existed in the world anymore — if they ever had to begin with. Five years on the force and a few broken relationships had taught her that men, whether criminal or not, could not be trusted, no matter how attractive they were. And Charlie King was certainly attractive.

He was tall, about 6’2”, with dark brown hair just this side of too long for him. On most men it might look scruffy or unkempt, but on Charlie it just made him look boyish...sweet, even. His smile was warm and inviting. Staring at it, just made her want to smile back, regardless of how she might be feeling. His eyes were a deep rich brown that a woman could get lost in if she weren’t careful. Despite the cut of the jacket and dress shirt he was wearing she could tell that underneath the casual clothes lay one hell of a well-defined man. It made her pulse speed up, just to think about it, which surprised her.

His voice was soft and measured, but not weak. She could tell that he was a man of incredible strength and depth, just by the way he looked at her and how he chose his words. Laura found herself drawn to him, and wanted to know more about him. Where did he come from? What was his family like? Questions swirled through her mind as the captain introduced him.

All she could do was smile back and shake his hand politely. She didn’t trust herself to speak yet and she got out of the

captain's office as soon as etiquette would allow, frightened of the depth of her reaction to a complete and total stranger. Somehow, without knowing it, Charlie King had gotten further under her skin in just two minutes than most men had in a lifetime and it terrified her.

Lois stared at the paragraphs in total bewilderment, wondering what in the world had prompted the quick spurt of inspiration. She didn't even know where the plot was headed, and yet the introduction of Charlie had just written itself. Re-reading it, she realized that not only was her physical description of Clark spot on, but that he was a very attractive man. This was something she had previously known on an academic level, but not quite as personally as she knew now.

Had she always known? Had she always felt this way about him? Had she felt that way when Perry first introduced him to the *Planet*? Or was she only thinking these things because her mind was training itself in that mind frame? She wasn't sure and, as her own eyes began to droop from lack of sleep, she found that she didn't much care either way.

Placing the pad of paper beside her computer she climbed in bed. Sleep refused to follow, however, despite how tired she knew she was.

After minutes of tossing and turning, she made her way back out to the living room and settled herself in the position on the couch beside Clark that she had been in for most of the night. She pulled the blanket up around her, and tucked it against him as well so that he wouldn't be cold in the night.

Then, without thinking, she pulled his arm ever so gently around her shoulder and settled into the crook of his shoulder, leaning against the solidness of his chest before peace finally came to her and her eyes closed.

She fell asleep that night marveling at how natural it felt to be in his arms and wondering just exactly what that meant.

Lois woke up the next morning, still on the couch but minus her partner. She frowned, distinctly remembering the feeling of warmth and belonging as she had curled up next to him. That feeling was as absent as Clark. She shook her head of those particular thoughts and wondered briefly where they had come from. Clark was her partner, and her friend. She should be grateful that he had gotten up first, lest she be embarrassed at waking up in his arms.

But for some reason, she had a feeling that had that occurred that morning, she wouldn't be. She had felt safe and protected the night before, so why should that be any different upon waking? *Because things are always clearer in the light of day* her mind told her. Briefly she flashed back to another morning in which she had woken up alone and grimaced as the painful memories manifested themselves to almost physical proportions.

She had thought she was in love that time. She had thought she had found someone she could share everything with, body, soul and work. But Claude had only one particular purpose for their relationship and it hadn't been a merging of the souls. Bodies, maybe, but not souls. She'd vowed after waking up so humiliated never to put herself in that position again and she had kept that rule.

She hadn't broken it with anybody, not Clark, not Superman...not even Lex. It all seemed so surreal now, that she had agreed to marry a man she had not even wanted to sleep with. And she knew now that was why she had asked him to wait until after the wedding. It wasn't to make it extra special, it was her way of putting off the inevitable, like it was some sort of chore she would get around to later.

Why had she agreed to that sort of marriage? She had liked Lex, admired him even (until she found out the truth), but she had never loved him and she knew that much at the time. So...why?

She had promised herself 'never again' after Claude. Never trust another man, never get involved with someone who could

hurt her, had power over her. And Lex had possessed more power than anybody. What had she been thinking? And how could she trust her own instincts when she didn't know why she had agreed to marry a man she didn't love? What kind of person did that?

She felt her outlook on the day plummet as the heavy thoughts invaded her mind. Just once she wanted to wake up without any worries, any cares. Just once she wanted to wake up and concentrate on nothing but doing her job, getting the story, winning the Kerth. It had always been about respect for her, respect she had known she deserved. But she didn't know it anymore. How could anyone respect a reporter who nearly married the biggest story of the decade and missed it completely? How could anybody respect someone who could no longer respect herself?

She sighed, and ran a hand through her hair, refusing to dwell anymore on the problems that had dogged her for the last couple of months. She was about to head into her room to change, when the warm smell of coffee invaded her senses and she realized she might have woken up alone, but the apartment itself was still occupied by more than just her.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw that Clark was in the process of making breakfast and she smiled softly.

He caught her eye, and her unexpected smile, and rewarded her with one of his own. She had always liked his smile. It was sweet, warm and completely unguarded. Like a gift from him to her that didn't expect anything in return. It could be infectious at times and, almost instantly, she felt her previous dark thoughts recede to the back of her mind for the time being. Clark was here right now. Everything was okay.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," he said to her as she stood up and headed towards him. He had put some toast in the toaster already. Opening the fridge, he held up some eggs. "Scrambled or fried?"

"Scrambled," she replied automatically. Then, realizing what was happening, amended, "Clark, you don't have to make me breakfast."

"Don't be silly," he said with a wave of his hand. "We have a lot of work to do today. Big story remember? Big stories deserve big breakfasts beforehand."

Big story her mind reminded her as the image from yesterday filtered back, unwanted. *Dead boy...right.*

Clark saw her expression darken momentarily and hastily set a cup of coffee in front of her.

"Thanks," she murmured as she sipped the beverage gratefully. It was perfect...just how she liked it and she often marveled at how he could make her coffee just the way she liked it better than she could.

"I'm sorry I fell asleep on your couch, Lois," Clark was saying as he cracked the eggs into the frying pan. "I should've gone home when I started to feel myself get drowsy."

She smiled at that. Trust Clark to apologize to her for something both of them were guilty of. She could have woken him up if she had really wanted him to leave. She could have slept in her room if she had been uncomfortable on the couch with him. She knew this. Instead she had curled up against him and slept with more ease than she had since...

She wasn't going to think about that. Either way, it wasn't his fault.

"You were exhausted," she said with a shrug. "We both were."

She instantly berated herself for the reply. Why could she never just say what she felt? Her answer made it seem as if falling asleep beside him had been a regrettable mistake instead of a reprieve from the nights of fitful sleeps she endured on a continual basis. Why couldn't she let him know how grateful she was for that? How comfortable she felt with him?

"Yeah, I guess so," Clark gave her an inscrutable look. Then

he turned his attention back to the breakfast he was making.

“Anyway, I thought that after we ate we could give Henderson a call and see if they’ve ID’d the body for certain. Once we know for sure that he was indeed Jonathon French, we can interview people who knew him and maybe they’ll know just what kind of trouble he might have been in.”

“We also need to get a hold of the autopsy report once it’s complete,” Lois added turning her attention to the story rather than the confusing thoughts jumbled in her head. “Maybe there will be some sort of trace evidence of whatever it was that was apparently causing his killer to glow.”

“Henderson can help with that,” Clark agreed. “It’ll be a few days before that information is available, so we’ll have to stick with what we know for sure. We should interview his family and friends as soon as we can.”

Lois nodded reluctantly. She hated that part of the job. She was not good with grief, and even less talented when it came to the realm of family loss. Her own family was so dysfunctional that she couldn’t begin to imagine them weeping over the loss of her or her sister. In her mind, were something to happen to either of them, all she could picture would be her mother drowning her sorrows in cheap wine and her father immersing himself in work, pretending the problem didn’t exist. Families in which emotion was blatant and abundant made her all the more uncomfortable for that very reason.

She was glad Clark would be there for that. He always seemed to know how to handle it or what to say. She knew she often came across as cold or unfeeling when interviewing someone in that sort of situation, but it was the only way she knew how to get things done. Clark seemed to have managed to find a balance between empathy for the person in question and rational objective questioning.

They ate their breakfast in silence. Lois realized with a sinking heart that she was not looking forward to work today. How long had it been since she had looked forward to going into work? Would the *Planet* ever feel like the refuge it once was? Or had it changed too much, both physically and in Lois’ heart for it to ever heal her again?

Chapter 4: Bobby Bigmouth

The cursor on Lois’ computer screen blinked impatiently. It was almost as if it wanted to move, wanted to follow whatever words she jotted down instead of staying stationary as it had been for the last fifteen minutes...but nothing came to her. She was at her desk at the *Planet*, but instead of doing work, she was trying to think of a better plot for her novel.

She hadn’t forgotten about the investigation — far from it, but they had no other choice at this point but to wait. Clark had called Henderson’s office as soon as they arrived, and had left a message with his secretary. They were still waiting on confirmation that the body was Jonathon French. Lois meanwhile had called all her contacts on the street but nobody had known anything as of yet.

So both she and Clark were in a holding pattern until one of their leads came through. Usually they would use this time to brainstorm and lob ideas back and forth until something came to them that could shed some light on things. But Clark had taken off almost as soon as they had gotten to the office, making some lame excuse that Lois had barely heard.

His disappearances, while only minor inconveniences before the Lex Luthor disaster, had now become major points of contention for her. It wasn’t that he had to rush off away from her. It was that he would lie to her about where he was going and why. Lois couldn’t understand it. What could be so important that he couldn’t trust his partner of over a year? Why make up those lame excuses at all? Did he really think her stupid enough to believe he had to leave work because he forgot to water his

hyacinth or program his VCR?

She was so tired of men who lied to her. So tired of people she couldn’t trust, who weren’t upfront with her right from the start. Sometimes Clark seemed to her to be the last honest man, and other times, like now, he just seemed to be like any other man.

She bit her lip and looked back at her screen in frustration. She needed a plot. She had made her protagonist a cop, something she had some knowledge about as her job shared some similarities (and the occasional clash or two) with police work. It was more logical for her to write about than a lounge singer trying to make it in the big city at any cost. She was doing what Justine had told her to do...writing what she knew. So now what?

Obviously she and her male hero Charlie needed a case to solve, and it couldn’t just be any case. It had to be something personal, something that she felt deep down and that the readers could connect to. A random murder just wouldn’t cut it. It had to be something that deeply affected her character. And her villain needed to be someone that her character would never suspect.

Lex?

Where had that thought come from? She shook her head as if to answer her own question. She wanted it to be based off the good parts of her personality, not make her readers think Laura was galactically stupid. And they almost certainly would if she had her main character dating the lead suspect of whatever crime had been committed. It was okay in the Wanda Detroit version as it had been more fantasy than reality. And Wanda had been too street-smart to ever be fooled, but if she wanted to truly make it seem real, then she would be forced to reveal a weakness in Laura’s character that matched her own.

And yet she couldn’t get the thought out of her mind. *Write something your readers will care about...someone they can empathize with.* Maybe she had been right. Her character couldn’t be perfect. How could anybody empathize with someone who never made a mistake? And maybe, just maybe, if she could manage to get her true feelings down on paper through Laura, then Lois too could find absolution in what she had seen as her biggest character flaw. It was worth a shot.

Okay, so Laura would be dating the bad guy. He had to be someone connected, someone who wasn’t what he appeared to be. Someone high up that nobody but the astute rookie cop she had been assigned to work with would suspect. Lois set her fingers down gently on the keyboard and slowly, with increasing speed, she began to type.

Liam Lancaster was everything Laura should have wanted. He was tall and handsome. He was never seen in anything but a perfectly tailored suit. He was smooth, charismatic and mayor of one of the largest cities in the United States. (Lois paused, and decided she’d figure out just what city it was later.)

She had met Liam at the annual policeman’s ball when he had made a speech and dedication to her father, Officer Landon. Her father had been a policeman for 35 years on the force, and was shot unexpectedly in a drive-by four weeks before he was to retire. The ball had been dedicated to him that year and, for that reason only, Laura had gone. Usually formal events were something she avoided like the plague. She hated the social pressures inherent in them when it came to a woman on the force. That event she could not miss, however, and Liam had made a beautiful speech commemorating everything her father had done for the city they all loved.

Her heart had been in her throat the entire time and she had to fight to keep from crying. Liam really seemed to care about what he was saying. He truly believed that the police were the cornerstone of their great city. He finished the speech by donating one hundred thousand dollars out of his own pocket to the police in her father’s name. Afterwards, she had approached him to thank him for what he had done. It was the least she could

do after his generous gesture. He merely smiled at her and told her that he wished he could do more.

She had believed it because it was so much easier to believe there was still good after all the evil she had seen. She didn't want her already crumbling faith in humanity to erode entirely.

They had talked together all night. Laura had confided secrets that she had previously only told her goldfish in her small and lonely apartment. Liam listened intently and smiled at her without judging her. It felt good to talk to someone after so long and Liam seemed so willing to listen.

At the end of the night he had asked to see her again. Without having to think about it, Laura had given him her phone number.

Now she stood in the doorway of her apartment, waiting for him to arrive to take her out for their date. Ripples of fear coursed through her. Why had she agreed to go out with this man? Just because he pitied her enough to let her whine on about how she missed her father and at the same time had lived up to his expectations? Liam had probably just asked her out to be polite. Or to raise his PR rating with the people. It was an election year after all. They would likely have a very dry evening, he'd say good night, throw her number in the trash and consider her vote accounted for.

It had been a stupid idea.

She was about to throw on a housecoat and pretend to be sick when the doorbell rang, eliminating her last chance to back out. It was all or nothing now. She took a deep breath and opened the door.

To her surprise she was greeted with an anticipatory smile that showcased how elegantly handsome he was. She felt slightly better about the night ahead of her and took the arm he offered.

The restaurant was one of the nicest places she had ever been to. It was sophisticated, like Liam, and it was clear by the way the staff treated him that he was a regular fixture about the place.

He probably takes all his dates here...

She shook the thought from her head and concentrated the attention on the man in front of her. He was a good conversationalist and very intelligent, something Laura found to be highly lacking in most men. He was someone she could easily come to admire.

Admire. Trust? Desire?

Well, maybe the first one. Laura felt that trust and attraction were things found only in cheap romance novels. The real world didn't necessarily work that way. Trust was an ability forever lost to her. And he was handsome enough that she ought to desire him. Certainly other women did. She felt certain that she would too. In the meantime she enjoyed his company. Wasn't that enough?

Shouldn't it be enough?

"Hey Lois, did Henderson call yet?"

Clark's voice startled her out of the trance that she had gotten into while writing. She flicked off her monitor before he reached her desk, hoping he hadn't seen it from far away. Eventually he would probably read it. If it got published, maybe everybody would. She just wasn't ready to let him see it yet. It was too new, too raw...

"Not yet," she replied, not meeting his eyes. For some reason, she felt guilty, though she couldn't for the life of her figure out why. "So did you..." she trailed off, trying to remember what it was he had zipped away to do.

"Program my VCR?" Clark supplied somewhat hurriedly. "Yeah, all set. I just hate to miss the X-Files."

Lois gave him a funny look at that comment.

"Somehow I didn't see you as a sci-fi geek."

"What can I say, shows about aliens and conspiracy theories interest me," came his somewhat lame reply.

"Maybe you should have worked for the National Whisper," she shot back, though it wasn't meant as a vicious comment. One

of the things she had missed the most during her engagement to Lex was trading easy barbs with Clark. Somehow they could tease each other effortlessly, never going too far, never being too harsh. It was a quality that she valued almost above all others. The fact that her wit didn't intimidate him, but rather challenged him, made him not only incredibly clever but her equal as well.

He was about to shoot off a response when Jimmy hurried over to them.

"Henderson on line one, CK," he said before rushing off towards the door of Perry's office. Clark picked up the phone and shot a pointed look in Lois' direction. She nodded, understanding the non-verbal signal, and quietly as she could, picked up the extension on her desk to listen in.

"Kent here," Clark said, his tone immediately business-like, but friendly.

"Glad you were in, Clark," Henderson replied. Then, after a pause said, "And you too, Lois."

"Good morning," Lois said shooting a sheepish look to her partner, who simply grinned.

"Look, I'll cut right to it," the Inspector was saying. "There's been a positive I.D. and he's Jonathon French all right. And as far as we know, this kid was as clean as a whistle. No drug history, criminal history, straight-A student and he volunteered at a retirement home to boot."

"I don't get it," Lois murmured to herself more than anybody else. "He sounds like the perfect kid. Who would want to kill him?"

"That's the four million dollar question," Henderson replied shortly. "Have you two heard anything on your end?"

"Not yet, but we've made some preliminary phone calls. If we don't hear anything by this afternoon, we'll be heading out to ask around in person," Clark's reply was grim but firm. Lois could see how tightly his jaw was set and knew that this information had bothered him more than he cared to show. Lois could understand why. From Henderson's description, the kid had been almost a carbon copy of Clark...or what she would have assumed Clark was like at nineteen. Innocent bystanders always hit Clark pretty hard. *And you as well, Lois*, her mind told her. She frowned. It was true. While she may be able to hide it better than Clark it bothered her just as much. But it also made her all the more determined to figure out who did this, and why.

After they'd hung up Lois crossed the room and placed her hand on Clark's in an almost unconscious gesture of comfort.

He looked at her, slightly surprised, but smiled nonetheless.

"That poor boy," she couldn't help but murmur. "What could he have done to deserve that?"

"We'll figure it out," Clark's voice was determined and confident. It sounded vaguely familiar, reminding Lois of someone she couldn't quite put her finger on. It wasn't that Clark wasn't normally a confident guy, far from it. But he wasn't usually so hard and firm the way he was right now. Whoever he reminded her of, Lois couldn't help but believe him. He seemed so sure and she found herself nodding in agreement, as if it were catching.

She was about reply when the ring of her phone caused her to jump slightly. She strode towards her desk and picked it up, announcing herself as she did so a little harsher than she intended to. It was Bobby Bigmouth.

"I got some information on that gang hit," he told her without preamble, "but it's big. Five course meal big, you get what I'm sayin'?"

"Just tell me what you want and where you can meet us," Lois said with a resigned sigh. Perry wouldn't like Lois dipping into the *Planet's* expense account to feed Bobby, but at this point she didn't have any other choice. He named the restaurant and Lois hung up the phone. Clark was already putting his coat on.

"I guess we're going to lunch earlier than we thought." She

grabbed her own coat to follow him out.

Lois' patience was wearing thin as she watched Bobby poke through the large bag full of food. She had done as he had requested, buying the meal and getting it to go and meeting him in the parking lot. She and Clark had done their part, now they wanted answers.

"It's all there, Bobby, you can trust us."

"Last time you forgot dessert." Bobby said, almost absently as he began to dig into the meal in front of him.

"I didn't forget it," Lois argued her annoyance at Bobby overtaking the matter at hand for the moment. "You were late and I hadn't eaten that day."

"Bobby...Lois..." Clark's voice sounded impatient and Lois felt slightly chagrined for being suckered into arguing with him. She wasn't sure why, but Bobby seemed to possess the singular talent of annoying the hell out of her, no matter what the situation. If he wasn't such a good informant, Lois would have given up on him years ago. "Can we save the dessert feud for later?"

"For your sake, Clark, I'll forget all about it." A liberal spray of crumbs left Bobby's mouth as he spoke and Lois scrunched up her mouth in disgust. The guy was such a pig!

"All right, so what do you know?" She asked, hands on her hips.

Bobby made a show of looking around to make sure there was nobody within earshot and then leaned forward before speaking.

"That kid that bought it down on Fourth Street..."

"His name," Clark interrupted with strained civility, "was Jonathon French."

"Yeah, right," Bobby waved a dismissive hand before continuing. "Word on the street is that it was almost definitely one of the Soldiers who was responsible."

"But why?" Lois wondered, feeling that it didn't add up to the information they had on French so far. "He had no criminal record, no drug history...nothing to tie him to a street gang as far as we know. Is there some connection here we're missing?"

"Yeah, a big one," Bobby said as he took another large bite of the roast beef sandwich Lois had delivered. "But what it is, even I'm not sure. I know guys who have contacts within the Soldiers. They're not exactly big players when it comes to crime, but I have been known to hear things."

"Like what?" Lois asked, tired of the cat and mouse game that Bobby seemed to enjoy almost as much as the meals they brought him.

"Like what kind of drugs are comin' in and out," Bobby replied, his voice dropping slightly to accommodate the more sensitive nature of the information.

"You know for sure they traffic drugs and you haven't told the police?" Clark's eyes were hard and his tone said he clearly disapproved of this fact.

"There ain't much payment to be had in snitchin' to the cops," Bobby said matter of factly. "And if anybody found out I ratted they'd kill me."

"They'd kill you if they found out you've been snitching to us as well," Clark pointed out. Bobby looked at the two of them, then back to the sandwich he was holding. And odd expression flitted across his face, and it suddenly occurred to Lois, that Bobby's motives for disclosing secrets to a pair of reporters might be different than what they thought. What man in his right mind would put himself in that kind of danger willingly and on a regular basis for a few random meals here and there? Could it be possible that Bobby had more of a conscience than he let on? Lois let that thought take root within her mind as she searched the snitch's face for evidence to support her theory. Bobby coughed and looked away.

"Yeah, well, I don't stick my neck out for just anybody," he

replied with a shrug. Then, gesturing to the bag of food, said "if I'm gonna rat, I'm gonna get paid for it."

Lois refrained from voicing her previous thoughts about the lackluster nature of their 'payment' out loud for fear that it might put Bobby on the defensive. He was like her in some ways and the knowledge of that softened her ever so slightly towards him. She almost felt bad for eating his dessert so many times.

Although when said dessert was a double fudge crunch bar it really couldn't be helped...

"What kind of drugs were they, Bobby?" Clark asked, interrupting Lois' stream of consciousness. "And how do they have anything to do with the killing?"

"That I don't know," Bobby said, obviously addressing the second question Clark had leveled on him. "As for the drugs, I don't know exactly what they were either. People come up with new ways to kill themselves all the time."

"Then why is this even important?" Lois asked, feeling frustration creep over her once more.

Bobby sighed as if he were speaking to a child and swallowed before speaking.

"Look, from what I know about the Soldiers, they've always been on the small-time end of the crime spectrum." He looked to Clark, obviously addressing the next part to him. "Any drugs they've sold in the past have always been small stuff...marijuana, mushrooms, that sort of thing. They've never touched the hard stuff. The guys they get their product from wouldn't know a big drug deal if it bit them on the butt. It's just not their territory."

"Drugs are drugs," Clark said stubbornly.

"Look, morals aside, I'm tellin' you about it now cause there's been an important development."

"What do you mean?" Lois asked.

"Their supplier," Bobby told them. "He was one of those aging hippy types who grew his own product, got the kids to sell it for him and used his percentage of the profits to pay the rent. No great cartel aspirations if you get my drift. The Soldiers used their take to finance small time operations, buy the colours and the clothes, and maybe some black market weapons. Only a couple of weeks ago their supplier died. Very mysteriously from what I've heard, and the Soldiers got in touch with someone else."

"Who?" Lois wondered, her curiosity piqued.

"Don't know," Bobby replied. His voice sounded honest enough. "All I know is that my contacts wouldn't tell even me, and nobody else seems willing to talk. That can only mean one thing."

"Intergang?" It was Clark who spoke and Lois instantly felt angry at herself for not getting there first. It had been a while since she had thought of working with Clark as a competition, but lately after her own uncertainty and failure she was determined to prove herself again. And as bad as it made her feel, it seemed the only way she could do that would be to assert her position as top reporter at the *Planet*. She had to get back to needing nobody's help and answering to only herself. She pushed those thoughts to away, and turned her attention to Bobby.

"I don't know for sure," he was saying, "but that would be my guess. What they would want with the Soldiers or that kid is beyond me though."

"What makes you think the Soldiers' drug supplier has any relevance at all?" Lois wondered, determined to ask more questions, gather more facts, stay assertive.

"Look, I gotta be honest with you — I don't," Bobby said as he finished the last of his sandwich. "I just think it's awfully coincidental that they go from small time dealers to having connections that even I don't know about. And then suddenly they end up being responsible for a killing this...weird. It's been my experience that anything this weird falls under the category of Intergang. The Soldiers might have been physically responsible

for the kid's death, but if you wanna find the orchestrators of this whole thing, my advice is you look to the top."

"I don't get it," Clark said with a shake of his head. "Why kill an innocent kid? What's to gain?"

"Do you know any more about the Soldiers that might have relevance here, Bobby? Anything at all?" Lois knew she was pleading with him and it galled her to have to do so but it was important. The facts just didn't add up and yet Bobby's information had never led them down a false path before.

"All I know is that it wasn't exactly a quick death. Oh...the killer had some weird coloured glow around his head, apparently."

"What colour?" Lois wondered if she might be grasping at straws, but plunged forward anyway.

"Dunno," Bobby replied with a shrug. "But considering they have a new anonymous supplier, it just gets more interesting does it not? I'll ask around and get in touch if I find out anything else, but you better keep these roast beef sandwiches coming. Something tells me this thing is gonna get weirder."

Lois rolled her eyes and turned to leave, not dignifying Bobby's comment with an answer. Clark excused the two of them and followed her lead.

"Fat lot of good that was," she muttered to herself, half-forgetting that Clark even walked beside her. "We're even more confused now than we were before."

"Not really," Clark replied. "I mean, we have it on pretty good authority that the Soldiers are the best place to start. I'm sure if we tell Henderson we got it from a reliable source he can bring them in for questioning...maybe even get a confession out of them."

"They're a petty street gang, Clark!" Lois exclaimed, annoyed that he didn't seem to see the big picture. "If Intergang is in charge of this thing, bringing the Soldiers in for questioning will only get them killed. We know they have cops on their payroll. There's no way we'd be able to get the information out of them before they got to them. And why? Why just...attack an innocent kid and rip him apart? And how? I mean, last I checked the only person strong enough to rip a kid's face off with their bare hands is Superman and I think we can rule him out."

"Lois..." Clark touched her shoulder gently, his voice soothing. "I know you're frustrated. I am too...but we WILL figure this out."

"I just..." she trailed off, feeling suddenly drained and exhausted. "I want to help this kid...bring these people to justice, but what if we can't? What if I can't? What if I bungle this like I did the art theft piece?"

"You won't," Clark said firmly. His grip on her shoulder tightened slightly and he turned her to face him. The intensity in his deep brown eyes caused a flutter inside her that she tried to suppress. He seemed to have such trust in her. Such complete and unwavering faith...she didn't deserve it. Not after everything that had happened between them. "And besides, it's not just you here. I'm here too. We're a team, remember? We're going to do this together because that's what we do. I won't let you down. If you need me to, I will carry you."

"I can take care of myself," she said stiffly, hating the compassion she saw in his eyes. She was not vulnerable and she was not weak. She would be damned if she'd let anybody, especially Clark, treat her as if she was.

"I wasn't trying to suggest..."

"Let's just get back to the *Planet* to call Henderson, okay?" She kept walking towards the car, refusing to look back at her partner.

Chapter 5: Blame

It was another day before Lois and Clark managed to reach Henderson with their information. As it turned out, Henderson

had already sought out the Soldiers for questioning. They had found all the gang members except for Peter Kampos. Peter was eighteen years old and had apparently been missing since a couple of days before the attack.

Henderson had been able to get the other Soldiers to agree to a lie detector test, which they had all passed with flying colours. The police had nothing further to go on, beyond the claims of the neighbours who had seen the crime from across the street. It was decided that was not enough evidence to arrest anyone nor to hold them any longer for questioning.

Lois was more confused than ever. She felt certain that if Intergang had their claws in this entire affair they would have found some way to kill the Soldiers in order to prevent them from talking. If they didn't care enough to allow them to take a lie detector test, that meant only two things. Either Intergang had nothing to do with it and Bobby's information had been wrong. Or Peter Kampos was the key...and Intergang had likely already gotten to him.

Either way, they weren't any further now than they were before. Lois felt like screaming. She knew Clark was frustrated as well, but he hadn't said anything to her about it. She suspected that he was hesitating right now when it came to her because of the way she had snapped at him after their meeting with Bobby. She felt bad about it, but her pride wouldn't allow her to apologize.

He couldn't possibly know how she was feeling right now. She knew that was partially her fault for not telling him. There were so many taboo topics between them that she'd have to do some fairly substantial editing if she were even to touch on it at all.

Before Lex had proposed Lois had begun to feel that she could tell Clark anything. She had told him about Claude almost instinctively when they first met. Not once had he brought it up or used it against her. He had kept his word and that meant everything to her. She never thought she would have trusted anybody so much as she did him. Part of the reason she reacted so harshly to his dedication of love was because, no matter what her response, things would have to change between them.

If she told him she had feelings for him as well, then they would likely end up in a relationship. She couldn't bear the idea of losing him once emotions were involved. She had backed away, knowing that anything beyond friendship would only end badly. Part of her was angry that he had to go and ruin everything by telling her how he felt.

They had a good friendship before that. It was solid and dependable. Just like Clark. Lois knew he would always be there for her, no matter what. Until then he had never demanded anything from her and the moment he did it shattered all of her previously conceived notions of security. No man was safe, and no man could ever be content to be just friends. She had seen Billy Crystal say that on "When Harry Met Sally", but she hadn't actually believed it.

No matter what her answer, Clark had gone and changed things between them...ruined them.

She could no longer tell him anything. She couldn't tell him about why she had agreed to marry Lex, nor what it was that had stopped her from doing so. She couldn't tell him about the hurt she felt when Superman rejected her. She couldn't tell him about the regret she had about telling Superman she would love him if he were just an ordinary man. She couldn't tell him any of that.

Because they weren't just friends...and maybe they never had been only friends. Feelings were involved and Lois still didn't believe that Clark told her he loved her just to stop her from marrying Luthor. He wasn't that type of man.

And now she longed to tell him how terrified she was, that she didn't want to be alone and she couldn't. If she told him that, he might think there could still be a chance between the two of

them. Lois couldn't allow that. There was something about her... some part of her that destroyed every single relationship that she entered into. She had driven her father away. She hadn't been good enough for Claude to love. The only man she hadn't driven away turned out to be a soulless killer.

Clark was too good. And she was far too flawed. Even if it seemed there might be a chance she felt...

"Lois?" Her head snapped up at the inquisitive tone and she was met with Jimmy's concerned gaze in front of her desk.

"Sorry Jimmy, I was...lost in thought."

"I noticed," the younger man said with a smile. "Don't worry 'bout it. I just wanted to let you know that CK had to duck out for a bit. Something about a missed dentist's appointment...that guy sure does seem to go to the dentist a lot. Don't know why, his teeth are perfect. I doubt he's ever had a cavity in his entire life. I wonder if it's just paranoia, or if..."

"Jimmy!" Lois said, interrupting his ramble. "Is that it, or did you have anything else to tell me?"

"That was it," he said with a slight flush. Lois felt instantly guilty for the way she treated him. What was it about her today that made her snap at everyone she talked to? She was about to apologize but Jimmy had already left, following the sound of Perry's curt voice, no doubt to run some sort of errand. Lois attempted to look through her notes on the case, but gave up halfway through.

She hated to admit it, but without Clark around to bounce ideas off of, her brain just did not want to function the way it had when it was just her. It made her even angrier to know she depended on him so much. She was too tired to attempt to change it. She set the notes down, and wearily turned to her computer and her novel.

Setting her fingers to the keys, Lois decided that she needed some relief from all the feelings of uncertainty, fear and anger that coursed through her on a daily basis and decided to skip ahead in the story, to something that required less thought. A scene that required no intricate plotting, or detailed character profiles.

Smut.

She was in desperate need of smut. Well, maybe not total smut. She was trying to be a legitimate author after all. But a sexy little scene between her heroine and her hero would surely clear her mind of all the confusion and heartache.

That's what fiction was for...to escape, wasn't it?

She thought for a moment or two, drumming her fingers on the keyboard and trying to come up with a plausible reason for her two protagonists to end up in each other's arms but not be completely 'together'. Not yet. She wasn't ready to write that just yet.

She wasn't yet sure how the story was supposed to end. Once she had known, but now...

She shook her head and concentrated on coming up with a reason to get Laura and Charlie together. A dangerous situation? A stakeout? A stakeout...

She smiled as a familiar memory passed fleetingly through her mind. Putting her hands to the keyboard once more, she began to type...

Laura wasn't paying much attention to Charlie, so she didn't see the way he stood with his ear pressed to the hotel room door, listening for possible intruders.

They weren't supposed to be in that room and she knew that if the captain caught wind of the fact that they were planting bugs in a suspect's hotel room without going through the proper channels first, she could lose her badge. Charlie had been the one to point that very thing out, but Laura had not wanted to listen.

She wanted to nail this bastard as quickly as she could. She knew that Charlie wanted to wait...that he suspected that

somebody higher up might be responsible for the recent rash of murders, but Laura knew better. She had been doing this far longer than he had, and sometimes a psychopath was just a psychopath.

It wasn't necessarily somebody prominent in society...and it sure as hell wasn't Liam Lancaster.

If she could just plant the bugs quickly she would have the proof she needed to arrest her suspect and prove Charlie wrong. So why were her hands shaking as she did it?

Charlie was a rookie cop. Why should it bother her that he seemed to have this ridiculous assumption that the mayor of the city was a corrupt murderer?

It wasn't like it was true. It wasn't true at all. Laura would never go out with a murderer. She knew how to read people. And she trusted Liam.

Didn't she?

She had one more bug to plant and then they could leave the room and Laura could switch her thoughts to something more pleasant...like what she planned to wear on her date with Liam that night.

She was about to turn around to plant the last bug, when a sudden weight descended on her, pinning her down to the bed. It was Charlie.

Before she could ask him what the hell he thought he was doing, his lips had captured hers in a searing, but gentle kiss.

Too stunned to react, Laura kissed him back, almost instinctively. His body was warm and vibrant. He felt alive, real and comforting. Laura's mind switched off as her body reacted to his. She pulled him closer, returning his kiss with equal fervour.

He smelled amazing, a mixture between whatever dryer sheets he used on his clothes and a warm, inviting smell that was completely and wholly Charlie.

She sighed softly, too engrossed in his kiss to notice the door open or the maid entering. She heard the surprised exclamation and hasty apology, but it didn't for a moment occur to her to stop the kiss.

It was just too powerful.

She'd never felt like this before. She'd never felt so completely wanted and accepted. They could lie there for hours, kissing and touching one another. Somehow she knew that Charlie would never demand more...never try to take more than she was willing to give.

It only made her pull him closer.

A soft hand reached up, to trail along the side of her face almost reverently and Laura felt her breath hitch. His hands were cool, but his touch left fire in its wake, a fire that Laura never wanted to put out.

She moaned softly at the contact and allowed him further access to her mouth. His tongue touched hers tentatively, then more assuredly as she reacted favourably to the intrusion. His kiss was intoxicating and she never wanted it to end.

"Laura..." his voice was a husky whisper as he broke off the kiss and started on her neck. She felt his body shift and wanted him closer, as close as she could get him. She sighed and ran her hands through his hair as he trailed kisses down her cheeks, chin and neck. She'd never realized it could feel so natural, so completely and wonderfully right.

"Clark..."

Lois jumped back from her computer physically startled to have typed Clark's name, rather than Charlie's. She hit the backspace key multiple times and replaced the name, but the mindset for the scene was gone and reality had set in once more. She took one more look at the writing sample in front of her, and sighed. She would finish this, but it would have to be another time.

She saved and closed the file and turned the monitor off, trying to figure out how to justify the slip in her mind. It had to

be because of the setting. Clark had kissed her much the same way to avoid the maid seeing the surveillance equipment the two of them were setting up in the honeymoon suite of the Lexor Hotel last year. She had used that memory as a template for her scene between Laura and Charlie. Obviously she had just confused reality with the fantasy.

The kiss between her and Clark hadn't lasted nearly as long as the one she had described in the story. It was just a kiss... nothing more.

She hadn't thought of that kiss in forever, so it couldn't have been that spectacular, right?

So why was it that when she thought of it now, remembered the feeling of Clark's body on hers and his gentle lips, she felt a shortness of breath that she hadn't felt before? What was happening to her? Why did she suddenly wish that the real kiss had lasted as long as the one in her novel? And how was it that Clark was starting to invade her imagination the same way Charlie invaded Laura's?

Clark was gone for a good long while, which only served to enhance Lois' agitation. She hadn't re-opened the file with her novel on it. Every time she thought of doing so, her mind would travel back to that day in the honeymoon suite of the Lexor hotel and those were thoughts that could never go anywhere good. Okay, so that wasn't true. They were good... a little too good, not to mention confusing as hell. Nope, best to stay away from the project for now. It was getting a little too personal.

The problem was, she couldn't do any work on their current story either. Other than Bobby, none of their sources had gotten back to them. Lois doubted that Henderson and the police would have figured out anything of significance from the information she and Clark had given them just yet.

Their best bet was Peter Kampos, but if his own people didn't know where he was, it was likely that Intergang had already gotten to him. Unless of course, the Soldiers had lied to the police about not knowing his whereabouts. She bit her lip. It was unlikely. Henderson had told them that the Soldiers had each individually taken a polygraph test, so unless they were all skilled and accomplished liars, it was doubtful they could all fool the machine so well.

No, Kampos was definitely missing. The big question was, was it of his own accord, or had Intergang taken measures to ensure he wouldn't be found? Lois shook her head and left her desk to get another cup of coffee.

It was the third cup she'd had in the hour since Clark had left. She gritted her teeth as she remembered Jimmy's excuse for his absence. Who the hell makes a dentist appointment for the middle of the work day anyway? *Clark Kent, that's who*, the voice in her head reminded her.

She took a sip of the coffee, forgetting it was still hot and burned her tongue, which only made her angrier. If he wasn't such a scatterbrain the two of them could be out there looking for leads. Theoretically she could go alone, but...

Why not?

Since when did Lois Lane ever need her partner's permission to go out in pursuit of a story? Since when did she sit around the newspaper office like a faithful pet, waiting for her owner to return?

Since you nearly married a killer and completely lost your edge...

She was really getting tired of that voice in her head. Especially since it tended to be right more often than wrong. Well, no more. She wasn't just going to sit here. True, they had no specific leads per se, but there were still other avenues that she could investigate, starting with the scene of the crime.

She and Clark had only been there the day they discovered the body. It had been so congested with people, police and ambulances, not to mention the body itself, that the two of them

had left as soon as Henderson told them what he knew.

There had been no helping it. It had been too crowded to do any serious investigating and the police would only have hindered their attempts. Not to mention the sickness that Lois felt crawl up inside her every time she pictured the body in her mind. No, she definitely couldn't have stayed behind to look around. Not with all the chaos and confusion.

But she could look now. She would look now. Even if all the evidence was gone, perhaps there was something the police missed. It wouldn't be the first time. If not, she could always interview the neighbours who had given statements to the police.

Filled with a renewed sense of confidence and purpose, Lois set down her coffee cup and headed towards the coat rack near the door.

She was about to push the elevator button, when it opened in front of her, revealing her partner on the other side.

"Clark!" Her voice came out high and startled, as if she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't have. Why should she be so defensive? After all, it wasn't as if she hadn't pursued leads alone before. *You were pursuing this one out of spite*, the voice in her head reminded her. She ignored it and made a mental note to make an appointment with her therapist to discuss it. If this 'voice in the head' thing was that pesky conscience that Jimmy Cricket sang about, then he could have it back. She watched as he stepped out of the elevator and adopted a bored tone. "Where were you?"

"I told Jimmy to tell you..."

"Dentist's appointment," Lois interrupted, sarcasm masking the annoyance she still felt over his random disappearances. "Well while you were out cleaning your teeth, I was actually doing some work! I was just about to head down to the crime scene to uh...to see if my theories hold any truth."

Okay, so most of that was complete fabrication. She didn't have any theories — that was the problem! But she wasn't about to tell him what she had really been doing. Especially not what she had been imagining. For the first time since he stepped out of the elevator, Lois met his gaze. Bad idea! The moment she did, the memories of the kiss in the Lexor hotel flooded back to her and to her own mortification, she found her face going bright red.

What the hell was wrong with her? She hadn't thought of that day in forever and now she couldn't seem to get it out of her head! It had to be simply a combination of the novel she was writing and the story they were working on. She didn't want to have to think about that horrible murder, so she was deliberately focusing on thoughts that were more pleasing instead. And that kiss had definitely been pleasing. She remembered that much at least.

"Lois?" Clark was staring at her curiously. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," she said more brusquely than she would have liked. "I told you where I'm going, now are you with me or not?"

"Not," Clark replied. Before she could utter a word of protest he continued. "While I was out I ran into Superman. I told him about the story and how Peter Kampos is our only lead, so he agreed to help us out. After my uh...appointment was over, he found me again and told me that he had searched the city and come across a kid Peter's age wandering around near the Hobbs River, completely out of it. The kid was pretty incoherent so he didn't get a name, but he fits the description pretty well. Anyway, Superman took him to the hospital to get checked out and I came back here."

"You think the kid is Peter Kampos?" Lois wondered.

"I don't know," Clark replied with a shrug, "but it's the only lead we've got."

"Then we go to the hospital to question him," Lois' voice was determined. In truth, she was grateful for the break. She hadn't been entirely certain that skulking around the crime scene would bring her anything but trouble, especially since the Soldiers had

been released from custody. It was technically their turf and Lois couldn't imagine that she would look as if she fit in down there.

Still, why was it Clark always seemed to appear with the answers? If she were a paranoid person, she might suspect that Superman had been coming to see her less and less since she had confessed her feelings for him. She knew that he wasn't the type of person to be petty about her declaration. The only reason she could think of was that he was hurt by her insistence that she would love him if her were just a regular man. Or maybe he was embarrassed that his refusal had led her straight into Lex Luthor's arms.

Maybe whatever respect he had had for her was gone now. She wouldn't blame him if it was, but it hurt nonetheless. She shook her head and pressed the elevator button, refusing to look at her partner. She didn't want to be distracted by him today. She just wanted to do her job. She would deal with all the confusion and heartache later when she had more time for it.

If he was bothered by her aloofness however he didn't seem to show it. In fact, as they hailed a cab to Metropolitan General, Lois became more and more annoyed by Clark's own taciturn behavior. She looked at him critically for a moment or two and noticed a few things she hadn't before. He was pale...very pale in fact. Was he getting sick? For some reason she thought it unlikely and yet she could only remember having seen Clark sick once in all the time she had known him. He was just as human as she was, and just as prone to colds and the flu. So why did the thin sheen of sweat on his face bother her more than she would like? What was going on with him today?

"What are you thinking about?" Her voice was soft, and concerned. She almost reached out to touch him, but refrained. She just wasn't sure how touching him would affect her right now.

"Just wondering..." He trailed off, lost in his own thoughts.

"Wondering what?" The cab arrived at the hospital and Clark exited without answering. "Clark!"

"If that kid in there is Kampos and he is responsible..." he looked at her and shrugged. "Superman said he seemed pretty scared. I know Superman felt bad for him. I do too. And if that was just an act...Lois what happened to Jonathon...only a monster could do that..."

And there it was. Clark, ever the empathetic farm boy, had felt bad for the kid. So had Superman. Lois understood completely what it was they were both feeling only too well.

"You're worried that you were taken in by a killer," she said, her voice low and oddly strong. "You're worried that you believed the lies of a murderer...felt pity for a murderer...liked and sympathized with a murderer?"

"Not just any murderer Lois..." Clark looked at her and she could see the distress in his eyes. "You saw what happened to Jonathon! I mean, who could do that?"

"You're wondering what type of person doesn't spot evil in someone like that right away, aren't you?" She gave him a searching look. Without thinking about it, Lois took his hand and kissed it, palm up. He seemed surprised by her gesture, but said nothing. It gave her the courage to continue. "It's hard sometimes...to see the truth behind all the lies. After you've been in this business a while, all the liars start to blend together until everyone is a suspect. And if they are all guilty before proven innocent, then you lose whatever it is you had in the first place. I guess the only way you can stay at the top of your game is to believe people...even the wrong people. Sometimes it's the only way you know you're still human."

"Lois, I didn't mean..." Clark swallowed hard, clearly seeing the identification she had made. "I don't think that you...I never thought that you...you know you're human right? That nobody blames you for..."

"Let's just go question Peter," Lois interrupted before the

discussion got too literal. She had never gone so far as to mention her feelings after nearly marrying Luthor, even in the metaphorical sense. On the one hand, she was glad to have gotten it off her chest. She even felt a bit better for being so completely blind in the first place. It didn't mean she wanted to talk about it. Especially not to Clark. He was looking at her in a way that made her both uncomfortable and warm at the same time. Lex had claimed to love her and had never looked at her the way Clark was right now. It was a powerful look, full of unspoken emotion and regret.

Part of her wanted to be held by him, to allow his strong arms to encircle her, protecting her from everything she was afraid of. Problem was, she was mostly afraid of herself, and not even Clark could save her from that.

It didn't matter. The spell was broken and she was already headed towards the front desk in the hospital lobby. Before they reached it, she turned back to Clark, this time all business.

"We're going to need to pretend we're family if we want to get in to see him." Clark was already nodding his agreement.

"If it is him we'll have to call Henderson as well," Clark added. "This is still a police investigation and they'll want to question him."

"I'm surprised that you didn't call him already," she agreed with a nod. "That's more like something I would do."

"I have my reasons," Clark replied, his jaw set firmly. He was looking a little better than he had in the cab ride over, but still not one hundred percent. Lois resisted the urge to reach out and put her hand on his forehead to check for a fever. If he were sick, surely he would tell her. In the meantime, they would keep their eyes on the story.

They managed to lie fairly effectively to the receptionist at the desk. Lois had done most of the talking, telling her that they were Kampos' brother and sister. If the boy Superman had brought in wasn't Peter Kampos, then they would know it before they ever came into contact with him.

Clark's suspicions proved true however, and they were given the name of the room that Kampos was in for observation. Lois knew that it was only a matter of time before the police were notified of Kampos being here, so they had to act quickly.

They reached the room, and Lois nearly ran headlong into the doctor who was exiting. She glanced at his nametag before putting on her most concerned face. She then apologized and attempted to look past him into Peter's room.

"Is that my brother, Dr. Adams?" she asked, looking as worried as she could without overdoing it. "Is that Peter?"

"You're family?" Adams looked slightly suspicious of her story, likely due to the age differences between them and Kampos.

"Peter's our step-brother," Clark interrupted.

"We're his only family now though," Lois added. "Is he okay? How did you ever find him?"

"He's going to be fine," Adams told them, now buying their story. "We're still not sure what happened to him though. When Superman brought him in, he had almost no memory whatsoever. Couldn't even remember his own name. One of the nurses had to go through his wallet just so we could register him. His memories seem to be returning though, albeit slowly."

"You're saying he has amnesia?" Lois frowned, not liking the way this sounded.

"Selective most likely," Adams confirmed with a nod. "He has absolutely no memories of how he got to the Hobbs River where Superman found him, or what he was doing a few days prior to that. We're running some tests on him to see if there is anything in his system that could contribute to the memory loss, but if I had to guess I would say that a large part of it is because of an emotional trauma."

"Can we see him?" Lois asked, anxious to talk to Peter face

to face before she could believe the doctor. Her gut instinct told her that he was responsible. But would she be able to spot a murderer just by looking in his eyes? Did she still have what it took to be an investigative reporter? Or was she next to useless now?

“Only for a moment,” Adams told them, eyeing them warily. “He’s been through a lot and I would prefer it if he wasn’t disturbed until he’s stronger.”

“Thank you, Dr. Adams,” Clark said as Lois brushed passed him. In truth, she had barely even heard what Adams had said.

The youth that stared back at her when she appeared in the room certainly didn’t look like a monster. He was short with unruly dark hair and tired eyes. He looked as if he had run the Boston Marathon twice and the exhaustion was still catching up to him. Most of all, Lois saw worry and fear in equal measure and it made her feel slightly guilty for wanting to see him as a killer.

“So you’re my brother and sister?” Kampos spoke first, his voice obviously not at full strength yet. “Somehow I don’t believe that.”

“You caught us,” Lois admitted, figuring truth was the only way to go. He didn’t look like an idiot, so attempting to pull a long lost sibling reunion likely wouldn’t work, no matter how poor his memory was. “We’re reporters from the *Daily Planet*. We’re friends of Superman. He told us you were here. We just wanted to ask you a few questions.”

“If you’re gonna ask me where I’ve been the last few days, don’t.” He sounded far more tired than an eighteen year old should. Lois wondered absently if it was because of the strain from the loss of his memories, or his life on the street. It didn’t matter. All that mattered now was finding Jonathon French’s killer, and despite her pity for him, Lois wasn’t entirely convinced that it wasn’t him. “Look guys, I’d love to help you out. I really would. But I have no clue where I’ve been.”

“Then maybe you could tell us a little bit about you and the Soldiers,” Clark ventured. The boy’s face lost all traces of being earnest and accommodating the moment Clark mentioned the gang.

“What do you wanna know?”

“We want to know who you’re getting your drugs from,” Clark continued. “Strictly off the record. We’re doing a story on trafficking and we heard from one of our sources that the Soldiers recently changed suppliers.”

“And you guys just expect me to tell you that?” Kampos’ laugh was harsh and hollow. “You must think I’m dumber than a sack of hammers. Yeah sure, I squeal and then end up in jail...or worse, they catch me.”

“Who’s they?” Lois asked eagerly. She had a feeling this was the information they needed...that it was all connected somehow. “Are you talking about Intergang? Look Peter, we can protect you. The *Planet* protects all of its sources.”

“Is this chick for real?” Kampos looked at Clark as if seeking validation for his incredulity. The look Clark returned was obviously not what he had been expecting. Out of the corner of her eye, Lois could see that almost all the colour had left Clark’s face and he was pale as a ghost once more. She ignored the worry she felt for him in favour of getting the information they needed and getting out of there. Kampos was still speaking. “Look lady, I know you’re supposed to be a brilliant journalist but if you think that you and your boy scout here can protect me from...then you’re dumber than I thought. I don’t have any information to give you. I don’t know a thing, all right?”

“Fine, don’t talk to us.” Clark swallowed heavily and closed his eyes. Lois wondered if she saw him sway for a moment. “But we’re not going to be the only ones asking these questions. The next people in this room are going to be the police, Peter, and if you lie to them, they’ll lock you up. You’re an adult now and can

be tried like one. Think about it.”

“No!” Peter sat up in bed, angry at Clark’s words. “You think about this! I have a few days of my life missing. A few days in which I can’t remember where I was, or what I was doing! If you think your threats about the police scare me, then you are deeply wrong, pal. Let’s just say I got bigger things to worry about.”

“If you’re involved in what we think you are, then you’re right.” Lois said with a sigh. “Come on Clark. Let’s go call Henderson. Maybe he and the boys in blue will get somewhere.”

“Yeah, okay,” Clark said, obviously still woozy.

Lois made the call and gave Henderson all the necessary information. After which, she made him promise that as soon as Kampos’ blood tests were in, to call them and let them know the results. Clark watched her do this, all the while leaning against the wall of the hospital for support. Lois even went so far as to suggest it might be a good idea for Clark to get looked at while they were there, but he vetoed that idea almost immediately.

She wondered briefly if pretending to be fine, even when they were clearly sick, was a thing that all guys went through, to prove they could handle anything. Looking at Clark, however, Lois knew that wasn’t the case. He had never been the type to go for macho pissing contests. Hell, he was the first to stop and ask for directions if they were lost. Whatever his reasons for not wanting to get checked out, it had nothing to do with his male pride.

Still, Lois refused to leave him on his own while he was feeling like this, and Clark did not object. It made her even more nervous to see that he was weak enough to want her to take him home to her apartment and watch over him for a little while.

“It’s a good thing you didn’t return all those movies you rented,” she murmured as they climbed into the cab. Clark managed a halfhearted reply and Lois squeezed his hand gently.

The rest of the ride passed in silence as Lois worried for her partner and Clark fell asleep on her shoulder

Chapter 6: Sleepover

Despite his claims to the contrary, Clark Kent was not fine. His colour had improved slightly on the ride home, but he was still fairly weak, making Lois loath to send him home alone. There was also a small part of her that wanted him to stay if only to appease the growing curiosity regarding just what Clark meant to her, but she suppressed those thoughts. Tonight was not about her ever-increasing emotional confusion, it was about Clark. And Clark was sick.

The moment he sank down onto the couch, Lois set to work preparing something for him to eat. Soup was likely the best option as anything else might not go down so well. He attempted to make a feeble joke regarding her cooking and its tendencies never to go down very well, but she ignored it. She’d smack him upside the head later. Tonight he was sick and could get away with such ludicrous tales. When the soup was ready she helped him over to the table and demanded he eat. Obviously too tired to argue with her, he complied.

He ate in silence and Lois took the time to watch him and contemplate. They’d had a moment earlier that day. It was a moment where his face said far more than words ever could. It made Lois terrified in a way she had never been before. She wasn’t even quite sure why.

Her feelings for Clark were different than any feelings she had ever had for someone. She had thought when he confessed his feelings in the park that she didn’t love him...couldn’t love him because they were friends. Surely when you get to a certain point with a friend of the opposite sex, love just leaves the equation entirely, right? At least that’s what she’d thought. She’d thought they were too close to have a romantic relationship. Now, she was starting to think she was wrong.

Physical attraction certainly wasn’t the problem. It never had been. Even when she denied it during the infancy of their

partnership it was obvious to anybody with eyes that Clark Kent was an incredibly attractive man. She had fallen head over heels for him when they got dosed with the pheromone potion because of that very attraction (though why he didn't seem to be affected when he was clearly attracted back, she'd never know).

So why? Why had she told him they could only ever be friends? Why, when at that point they were as close as two people could possibly be? Why, when she was attracted to him, and he to her? Why...why would she agree to marry Lex Luthor instead of her best friend? Her partner? Or nobody?

Why had she felt she needed to make a choice at all? Surely she could have simply said no to Lex entirely and just be single for a while? Why had she felt like it was a 'choose one or the other' scenario?

She had never needed a man before. Lois Lane had always stood on her own — or she had before the Claude fiasco. Maybe it all harkened back to that. Maybe, some part of her, deep down was terrified that if she didn't marry Lex Luthor she would never have another shot at marriage at all.

Except that Clark told you he loved you, the voice reminded her, you had a shot with him. You turned him down.

She sighed inwardly and looked over at Clark who sat eating his soup looking more tired than ever. Before she could think about it, she walked over to the table and gently ran her fingers through his hair. He looked up at her, surprised, but said nothing.

It was doing her no good to wallow. All the self-reflection in the world hadn't provided any answers, so why did she think it would now? Besides her own newfound insecurities, what was different?

She shook her head and sat down in the chair opposite Clark. He smiled weakly and finished off the last of his soup.

"I really appreciate this Lois, but it's late." He stood up, swaying slightly as he grabbed for his coat. He was a little better, but not much. Lois stayed his hand, knowing that nothing short of Superman himself showing up and offering him a ride would allow Clark to leave her apartment tonight.

"You're not well," she said calmly. "You're staying here, and you're staying in my bed. I'll sleep on the couch."

"No, Lois, I..."

She lifted a hand to silence his protests.

"You're staying. That's all there is to it."

"Are you sure? This will make two nights in one week Lois." He looked at her as if that should mean something significant. She shrugged.

"There's no statute of limitations on how many times you can spend the night, Clark," she replied reasonably. "We're friends, remember?"

"Yeah," his shoulders seemed to deflate somewhat at that comment. "We're friends."

She wasn't sure why, but she had the oddest urge to cup his face in her hands, and trail along his cheek down to his jaw. She almost did, but stopped herself in time. He was obviously already confused by the little physical intimacies she'd allowed him throughout the day, she certainly didn't want to confuse him — or herself — even more.

It was partially her fault. After the wedding disaster she had been too mixed-up to return their friendship to the level it was before he confessed his feelings. She became hyper aware of every touch and gesture, terrified he would read it wrong and be even more hurt when it turned out to be strictly platonic. He had wanted something from her that Lois had thought herself to be incapable of giving.

But what if she wasn't? Clark certainly made it seem easy for her to be capable. And tonight, she wanted desperately to offer him a comfort beyond the bounds of platonic friendship.

"You should probably get some sleep," she told him finally after a second's pause that seemed like hours. "There are a lot of

questions we still don't have answers for. And I'm certain that Kampos was lying to us."

"Yeah," Clark agreed, running a hand through his hair. "Are you sure you don't want the bed, Lois? I'm fine on the couch. In fact, I'm starting to feel a lot better now."

"Look at my face, Clark," she instructed him. "This is my 'resolved face'. It means you are sleeping in my bed, and I am sleeping out here. And you're going to wake up better tomorrow."

"That sounds almost like a threat," he said with a ghost of a smile. It made her feel better to see him joke with her.

"Yeah, well, you wait and see how threatening I can get," she touched him lightly, casually, on the shoulder. "You can have the bathroom first."

He nodded and left Lois to her own devices.

She took that time to grab something pyjama-like from her closet and waited for him to exit the bathroom for her turn to change. She stood watching, like a warden in a prison, for him to get into her bed, before grabbing a pad of paper and a pen and heading out into the living room.

It was an early night for both of them, but Lois wasn't anywhere near tired. She decided to use the time to add to her novel — which seemed to be writing itself a lot quicker than her previous draft. She wasn't sure if it was the catharsis she needed, or an escape from her troubles, but it really did seem to be helping.

She thought back to the sexy scene she had come up with at work, but felt too drained from the day's work to continue in that vein. She'd been thinking a lot about Lex today, so perhaps she could get some work in on Laura and Liam's relationship.

She removed the cap from her pen and began to write.

Her world was gone. Or it felt like it was at least. She had never even seen it coming. She had been so stupid! She and Charlie had planted those bugs without a hitch (unless you count the impromptu make-out session a hitch). They had listened to them, and from the information tracked down enough physical evidence to arrest Danny 'Mayhem' Manners. They thought the case was finished with. They had the killer. He had confessed. Case closed.

But Danny had not been responsible for everything. He answered to a higher-up. Charlie had been right all along, though Laura still did not believe that it was Liam who was said higher-up. Still, there was someone. And it was someone powerful enough to not only break Danny out of the holding cell they had him in, but also to blow up a large portion of the precinct.

A good number of Laura's friends had died in the explosion. After the death of her father, Laura's entire world had become the precinct and the people there. They were her family — the only family she had now. And now some of them were dead. Because she had been too proud to listen to her partner. Because she thought she knew everything...thought she was a better cop.

She felt hollow inside.

Charlie attempted to comfort her, but it only made her angrier. It wasn't his fault. None of it was his fault. But the fact that he had suspected something that she should have taken precautions against, only made her more furious with herself. She should have spotted it and they both knew it. Only Charlie was too nice a person to hold it against her. He forgave her for not listening to him.

He shouldn't have. He had been right, and she was wrong. She had pushed him away after the encounter in the hotel room and punished him for feeling things that they had both been feeling. She was with Liam and kissing Charlie had been beyond wrong. And yet, at the time, it had never felt more right.

She should go to Liam's tonight. He had heard about the explosion and told her he wanted to see her. He wanted to comfort her. She should be grateful that he cared so much. She

should be grateful that he wanted to be there for her after the loss of so many friends.

She told him she would come over later, just to appease his worry. In truth, she just wanted to be alone. She just wanted to be away from them all. It wasn't healthy, but it was what she wanted.

"Landon, you still here?" the captain's voice cut into her thoughts. She looked up, knowing she looked awful from his reaction, but uncaring.

"I couldn't leave. I just keep seeing it in my head, over and over."

"It's not your fault, Landon," the captain told her in that firm 'don't argue' voice. "There was nothing you could have done."

"You say that, but I don't believe it." She gave a shuddering sigh. "I can't believe it. Danny warned me it wasn't over. Even after he broke out, I didn't think...when he sent us that note, I thought he was just taunting...that a low level thug like him could never back up his threat. But Charlie was right. He has connections none of us even dreamed up. And now people are dead, people I knew! Parkers, Janson, Taylor, MacDonald...I saw those people every day! Parkers and I used to carpool in the morning. I just..."

Hot tears ran down her face, making her even more ashamed at her own weakness. Other cops didn't cry in front of the captain, she was sure of it. What the hell was wrong with her?

"You've had a rough couple of months," the captain said softly. "Maybe you should take some time off...personal leave."

"No!" Her reply was quick and furious. "I need to be here! I need to catch this guy! I won't be pawned off on psycho leave just because of a bad couple of months!"

"Come off it Landon!" The captain sounded almost angry. "You're not 'super cop', all right? Nobody in this precinct is, and nobody can handle everything. Not even you, so stop pretending. This was going to be a friendly suggestion, but now I think you need it more than ever. I want you to take two week's leave."

"You can't do this!" Laura stood up and met the captain nose to nose. Tears threatened once more but she fought them down. It felt like her entire world was falling apart in front of her. She didn't know how to do anything else, didn't know how to be anything else. All she had ever known was the life of a cop — even before she had joined the force. The captain couldn't make her leave now...not after everything that happened. She couldn't just stand idly by and wait for them to catch the killer.

"I can, and I am," the captain said gently. "I know this seems like a punishment, but it's not. I'm worried for you, Landon. King is too."

"Charlie? What the hell does he know?" Her words were cruel, and spat in anger, but she couldn't help it. Had they been talking about her? Conspiring against her? Had this been Charlie's suggestion? Just because she pushed him away after that kiss...

But no, Charlie wasn't the type to be petty like that. It made her wish that she could find just one flaw in him...to offset the many in her.

"He knows you better than you think," the captain was saying. "He knows you're burned out. He's worried about you. And so am I. Two weeks, Landon."

"What about the case?" She felt her shoulders slump in defeat. He could force her to stay away, but he couldn't force her to keep completely out of it. She wouldn't rest until she was satisfied and the killer brought to justice.

"To be honest, I don't even know." The captain shrugged helplessly. "There's been a lot of smoke damage to the wing that got blown up. A lot of our files were destroyed in the blast. We need to figure out what was damaged and what wasn't before we can do much of anything."

"But he'll get away!" Laura couldn't help the outburst. The

captain shook his head.

"I doubt it. He's killed already and I don't think he'll stop now. He thinks he's beaten us. He thinks he can get away with anything. There is a pattern to these killings and we will find it." He looked pointedly at Laura. "But you won't. Even when you come back, Landon, I want you to stay away from this one."

"Captain, you can't..."

"You keep fighting me on this, and your leave will become a suspension. You hearing me?"

"Just tell me one thing," she said softly. He nodded in acquiescence. "Would you send me on psycho leave if I were a man?"

"If he'd gone through all that you have gone through?" The captain shook his head sadly. "I'd send God himself on psycho leave. Go home, or to that boyfriend of yours. Get some rest. And come back ready to work."

She nodded mutely and gathered a few of her things before leaving. It had seemed a last resort only moments ago, but now, she couldn't wait to see Liam's face. One friendly face that had nothing to do with the force...she needed that right now.

Lois lifted the pen from the paper and stretched her hand out as she felt it cramp. She had written far more than she thought she would that night and she was feeling it. It was so much easier with a computer in front of her, but Clark was in her room and she didn't want to disturb him.

She yawned and set the pad down, snuggling into the corner of the couch before drifting off to sleep. Before it took hold completely she wondered how much of what she had just written was truth, and how much of it was fiction.

Although the blood tests had not come back yet, Peter Kampos was well enough he next day to be released into police custody. Henderston called them at the *Planet* to let them know of the change, though Lois could tell he was still mildly annoyed that they had questioned him before the police had gotten the chance to.

Despite his physical fitness however, his memory was still missing and the cause of it unknown. Henderson had been skeptical at first about the memory loss, so Peter volunteered to take a polygraph as well to prove it. He passed without a hitch, letting Lois and Clark know that he was at least telling the truth about that much.

Lois still wasn't sure about the rest. Everything inside her told her that Kampos was the guy they were looking for. Clark seemed less sure of, but Lois was glad he told her so, rather than tiptoeing around the disagreement.

"I just don't think that kid was capable of something like that," he said as he brought her a coffee and the last jelly donut. He was looking a lot better this morning and had managed to eat the disastrous eggs she'd attempted to cook, so Lois knew that meant he'd be able to work, and would sleep in his own bed that night. For some reason, that disappointed her slightly.

"Destruction to somebody's face like what happened to Jonathon French takes some serious strength. Peter Kampos is about ninety pounds soaking wet."

"There was just something about him," Lois insisted, unable to define what she was trying to get across. "Call it reporter's instinct. I know that instinct has been non-existent the past little while, but I'm certain of this, Clark."

"He passed the polygraph," Clark pointed out reasonably. "And Superman said he was wearing the same clothes when he left him at the hospital."

"So?" Lois didn't see the connection.

"So...they didn't have any blood on them." He paused and pointed to the crime scene photos that Henderson had been kind enough to fax over. Lois hadn't wanted to look at the sight again, but had seen the usefulness of having them handy. Swallowing hard, she looked down to where Clark was pointing. "There was

blood everywhere Lois. If Kampos had been the guy we're looking for, he'd be covered in it! But his clothes were fine... and his sweater was white. No way he could do something like this and not stain it."

"White sweater..." Lois frowned and thought for a moment. Something about that didn't fit. Then it dawned on her. "Clark he changed his clothes! He was wearing a red jacket...the same kind all the Soldiers wear, remember? You said you told Superman all about the case, so if he found a kid in a bloodied red jacket he would have been pretty sure it was the guy we were looking for...but he didn't. He found a kid in a white sweater completely free of blood! He must have changed his clothes and washed himself up before Superman found him."

"Even if that were true, Lois, he still passed the polygraph test." Clark shook his head. "He'd been gone for a couple of days. He probably had a change of clothes with him for whatever reason."

"I know this seems like a long shot, but go with me on this." She was on her feet and pacing, the old familiar adrenaline rush was back... "If he is the guy we're looking for and he did pass the test legitimately what if it's because he himself didn't know that he did it? The doctor said that his memory loss could be due to trauma. What if committing this crime traumatized him and blocked it from his memory? If that's the case, then he'd want to get rid of anything that could jog the memory, right? So he ditched the clothes and grabbed new ones...likely from a Salvation Army, or Goodwill. But where did he put the other clothes? He couldn't give them to either of those places as a trade...they'd never take clothing that bloody. They'd ask questions...call the police. So he'd have to hide them."

"Or burn them," Clark interjected. Lois shook her head.

"Not if he was too scared to think of that. What if he panicked and shoved them in a trash can somewhere near where he was found? Clark, if we can find those clothes we can prove he's the killer!"

"It still wouldn't prove why," Clark pointed out. "And we still don't know how Intergang fits into all of this."

"If at all," she shot back. She sighed at the look he gave her. "Look, I know this seems like the granddaddy of all long shots, but will you just indulge me on this? I've never felt so sure of something. And after all the uncertainty...I need to know that you still trust my instincts. Please?"

Clark gave a small smile at the look of pleading she gave him and she knew she had won.

"It's your call. What do you want to do?"

"We go down to the Hobbs River where Superman found Peter and look for his clothes."

"You don't mean..."

"Yep, dumpsters, garbages, sewer drains, anywhere big enough to hide bloodied evidence. Do you really think I would be suggesting this if I wasn't sure?" She gave him a pointed look and he was forced to concede defeat.

"Okay, but maybe we should call Henderson and tell him our theory. If he doesn't think it's crazy he might be able to spare some men to widen the search."

Lois nodded and picked up the phone. For the first time in days, she felt good about being a reporter again. She just hoped the feeling lasted.

Chapter 7: Insight

Newly found confidence or not, looking through the garbage for bloody evidence was not Lois' idea of exciting investigative journalism. She and Clark had split up the moment they got to the place where Clark claimed Superman had found Kampos. Lois had gone through eight separate dumpsters in that time, and was beginning to smell like it. Clark had promised to call Henderson and inform them of their hunch before searching himself. Lois

hoped he would agree to spare a few men to help in the search. It would be the least he could do since Lois had willingly given him enough fodder to make garbage cracks at her expense for years to come.

The things I do for my job, she thought with a suffering sigh. She was just about to start on the next garbage bin when she heard the sound of approaching footsteps behind her. Lois stilled. Although she knew some degree of self-defense, she wasn't in the best part of the city. If whoever was behind her carried any sort of weapon and intended bodily harm, she had to be ready. She then heard the person clear his throat and slumped with equal parts relief and annoyance. She knew that sound, and the person that accompanied it was about as welcome as a screen door in a submarine.

"Bobby," she muttered to herself. She wondered how the snitch knew she was here, but knew it was better not to ask. Normally she would welcome the idea of Bobby coming to her with information, but not at the moment. Not when she looked like a hobo and smelled like the city dump.

"I'm almost certain there's a logical and legitimate journalistic reason that you're digging through a dumpster, Lois," Bobby said with a slight chuckle. "Doin' a piece on mold growth and insects?"

"Not quite, Bobby," she replied with clenched teeth. "More like getting you your next meal."

"No dice Lane, you're gonna owe me big time after this," Bobby's tone was low and secretive. Lois sighed and turned around, fixing her gaze on Bobby with as much dignity as she could muster under the circumstances.

"What do you want, Bobby?" She asked, knowing that if she had to go and buy Bobby a meal right now it would seriously cut into her searching time. Still, if he had something they needed to know, she couldn't take the chance of not hearing it.

"Normally for this kinda thing, you'd be taken' me to the all-you-can-eat buffet down on Carver Street, but since you look so busy with your uh...work there, I'll accept a rain-check for the info I'm about to give you."

"What kind of info?" She asked him, still not convinced he wasn't wasting her time.

"The kid you're after? Kampos?"

"How did you know we were investigating him?"

"Please, I got eyes and ears all over this city," Bobby replied with a wave of his hand. "Anyway, you're on the right track. From what I hear, the kid was seen wandering around this area dazed and pretty bloody."

"I suspected as much," Lois replied. "That's why I'm looking here...for the clothes."

"Well, I dunno how lucky you'll be finding 'em, but I do know that Intergang won't like it if you do." Bobby shook his head. "I got no clue how this pieces together, Lane, but what I do know is that the Soldier's new supplier is indeed Intergang talent and apparently he's quite an expert in some sort of science I can't pronounce."

"Wait, the new drug supplier for the Soldiers' gang is a scientist?" That was the last thing Lois had expected. Bobby nodded.

"Don't know why, or how, but he's got quite a hold on them Soldiers." Bobby took a step back. "Pass on a message to your friend Kampos that if he knows what's good for him, his memory will stay gone...permanently if you get my drift."

She did, and nodded.

"Gotta fly Lois, but remember..." he winked at her. "You owe me dinner."

She sighed as he left and turned back to the garbage in resignation. Not only had he seen her looking so completely abhorrent, but he also had provided her with some admittedly useful information. It was so infuriating being in his debt!

A few dumpsters later, Lois had found what she was looking for. She would have felt more triumphant, were it not for the various insects flying around her. All her annoyance melted away however when she looked inside the plastic bag she held and found a red Soldier's jacket, along with a bloodied white t-shirt and a pair of bloodied jeans. The jacket likely had blood on it as well, though it was harder to tell because of the colour.

She smiled grimly, knowing that this discovery would make proving Kampos the killer a bit easier for Henderson and the rest of the force. If they could match the blood on this jacket to the blood on Jonathon French, then they would know these were definitely the killer's clothes. Add in the memory loss, the fact that Peter had been missing, and the clothing had been thrown away, and it made the answer fairly obvious. Lois wanted to be happy about that, but couldn't bring herself to be. A boy was still dead, and another boy not even old enough to drink, appeared to be the killer. No, it was all a little too tragic to feel any satisfaction.

So she was still a talented investigative reporter. She doubted that Jonathon French's family would find any comfort in that. It made Lois unable to either.

And it still didn't explain why Kampos would kill French. He had been questioned by the police, not to mention passed a polygraph in which he stated that he hadn't even known Jonathon French. So why kill him? And how did Intergang fit into this?

She climbed out of the dumpster and rooted through her purse to find a quarter. She dialed the number of Henderson's extension, knowing that if she delayed telling Henderson about her discovery for any length of time that he would be less willing to share answers with them in the future. Clark had set out in the opposite direction and although Lois would like to show him her find, she wasn't all that eager for him to see her in her current state. It wasn't terribly important that Clark see the clothing itself. The fact that she had found it was more than sufficient.

Henderson answered on the first ring. Lois frowned and attempted to straighten her disheveled hair. She wasn't going to ever hear the end of this, she just knew it.

"Not that you did anything to help me find it, but I have the clothing that I suspect you will find belongs to the killer of Jonathon French." Her voice was haughty and indignant. After all, if Henderson had actually spared some men to help with the search she wouldn't be the wreck she was now.

"Lois? That you?" Henderson sounded slightly amused, which only made her hackles rise even further.

"Of course it's me...you know any other reporters that would root through dumpster after dumpster to find bloody evidence?"

"You rooted through a dumpster?" Now he sounded like he was laughing.

"You want this or not? I think the clothes belonged to Kampos. Can't you check them for his DNA or something?"

"Yeah Lois, we're on our way." Henderson sounded business-like now, for which Lois was grateful. She'd get enough of his teasing in person, she didn't need it over the phone. "And just for the record, I told your partner Kent to hold off for an hour on the search. I would have had some guys out there helping you if you'd waited."

He hung up before Lois could hit him with a biting retort. Slamming the phone down, she resisted to kick something out of sheer frustration and anger. Henderson had told Clark that they would have help in an hour and he hadn't come to find her? She had spent hours rifling through some of the city's worst dumpsters and Clark was off someplace waiting for the police and sitting on his thumb! Well he could just forget a phone call from her telling him about what she'd found. He could just wait until tomorrow to hear about it.

Henderson showed up fairly quickly and thankfully didn't make quite as many jokes as Lois suspected he would. Perhaps he

noticed the virtual steam coming out of her ears and knew what was good for him. Either way, Lois felt grateful for the reprieve.

She headed home, tired of the entire story. It gave her no pleasure to know Kampos was the killer and it bothered her extremely that Clark hadn't even made the effort to try to find her give her Henderson's message. She thought they had become closer. She thought that something might be changing between them. It had scared her, but part of it had intrigued her, made her want to find out what it could be.

Now she just felt disappointed. Disappointed and emotionally drained. All she wanted to do was to escape.

Dropping her coat on the couch, she checked her messages expecting to find at least one from Clark apologizing for not coming to find her. No such message existed, which only heightened her anger. Where had he gone? They were supposed to be a team! She remembered her feelings of aggravation when he had taken off for his dentist's appointment and it only made her angrier. She had felt helpless then and annoyed at herself for how much she seemingly depended on him. Now she knew those feelings were unfounded. She depended on Clark yes, but not in the sense that she had thought she did.

She didn't need Clark with her to find the answers they were seeking. She knew now she could do it on her own...that she always could have done it. It was only her own lack of self-confidence that had hindered her. She was only dependent on Clark because she perceived it that way. But it wasn't true. That wasn't the problem at all.

She didn't need Clark. She wanted him. She wanted him to help her, to work with her on their stories because he was her partner. In every sense of the word, he felt like her other half. She thought that Clark was impeding her own drive to be the best, that he somehow weakened her, but now she knew it was completely the opposite.

Before she worked with Clark she had been driven, true. But it was a drive based purely on a need to distinguish herself among her peers, to elevate herself and let everyone around her know that she was untouchable. She couldn't be hurt because she was above them.

But Clark had touched her. He had broken through her defenses and showed her that it was okay to trust someone, and still be the best. After that, her drive to be the best came from her desire to get to the truth. She was a better reporter, but Clark was a better human being. He always saw the good in people, even when they didn't deserve it. Lois had wanted that ability. She wanted to know how to trust again, to believe in people...like Clark did.

Clark Kent wasn't perfect. Lois was starting to wonder just how much she really meant to him. She had thought he had lied to her outside the *Planet* the day it re-opened. She thought that he had told her he didn't love her in order to make it easier to revert back to 'just friends' territory after his declaration in the park.

Now she wondered if she'd simply been kidding herself. He'd been sick last night, and Lois had tended to him. She thought they had shared something that day, but maybe it had all been inside her own head. Maybe she was so desperate to connect with someone after what happened that she imagined feelings on his part that didn't exist.

After all, if he really cared, why wouldn't he have called her? Why did he keep disappearing while they were supposed to be working together? Why was he pulling away? And why did it bother her so much that he was?

She shook her head, refusing to think about him any more. He hadn't called, which led Lois to determine that he didn't care. She certainly wasn't going to call him. She would see him tomorrow at the *Planet*...if he deigned to show up, that is. In the meantime, she had a novel to work on...a novel that was starting to feel as if it was coming together.

Since being put on personal leave, Laura and Charlie had not been on the best of terms. They had arranged to meet a few times for lunch, but Laura was unable to keep from asking for information about the case, which only caused them to fight. Charlie still insisted that Liam was the one behind it and Laura just couldn't believe that.

She knew Liam was a good man. She had seen all the good he had done for the city. How could Charlie just ignore all of that? What was his problem anyway? Couldn't he see how important finding the killer was to her?

Apparently not. Every time she brought the subject into the conversation, he either changed it or refused to answer flat-out.

"I can't divulge information on the case, Laura," Charlie had told her firmly for about the umpteenth time. "You know that. The captain has all of us on strict orders. Nobody outside those of us working on the investigation can know anything about it."

"This is me you're talking to," she pleaded. She knew it was undignified, but she didn't care. Those people were her friends, damn it...couldn't he see how this was tearing her apart? "I knew them. I worked with them every day...I have to know that the right things are being done to bring this creep to justice. I won't say anything to the captain, you can trust me."

"That's just it..." the words sounded like they were dragged from Charlie's mouth. He refused to meet her eyes. "I can't."

"Can't what?" She felt her heart fall at the expression of pain on his face. Just what was he trying to say? "Can't what? Charlie!"

"I can't trust you okay?" This time he met her gaze and glared at her as if it were her fault he was forced to say this. "You're dating someone that I think might have some pretty deep involvement on this thing. I can't take the risk of any important information reaching Lancaster's ears and spooking him if I want to catch him."

"I can't believe you," she shook her head in disgust. She felt like she wanted to cry. It wasn't because he was accusing Liam of being involved...he had been doing that since the beginning. Rather, it was because he sincerely believed that she would report what he said to Liam. Even if Liam was involved, and Laura was still convinced he wasn't, she would never betray the department's trust. Didn't Charlie know that? Couldn't he see that the most important thing to her was catching the person responsible for the deaths of so many cops? "You make me sick, King, you know that? How can you think so little of me?"

"Laura, I..."

"No!" She lifted her hand as if to physically prevent him from speaking. "This is your opinion, so let's go with it. You think I run home every day to tell Liam about the cases I'm working on? You think we sit there and go over every detail?"

"I think you are dating him," Charlie shot back angrily. "And I think you're pretty serious. People who are in serious relationships talk to one another about their work. It's part and parcel of a committed relationship, you should know that. You have to know it. I wish I could say that I just didn't like the man... that he just rubbed me the wrong way, but I can't. I know he's involved in this. I don't have any physical proof, but I just know deep down."

"How?" She wondered. "How can you possibly know? You don't even know him! You've hardly ever said more than two words to the man in all this time that I've been with him! All you ever do is criticize him. My father spent most of his life on the force...dedicated himself to being a cop. It was all he ever cared about. He never made any huge arrests, or solved any major cases. He didn't even really die heroically, but Liam saw something in him. He honoured him and donated money to the precinct because of who he was. He believes in the police, Charlie, he believes that we truly make a difference every day. How can a man with convictions that strong be a killer?"

"Because you're only seeing what you want to see," Charlie replied with a sad shake of his head. "You want so desperately to see meaning in your father's death that you look for it where it doesn't exist. Oh sure, Lancaster donated that money, but he had other motives, I'm certain of it. And you were just the prize he won in the bargain. I wish it wasn't the case, but it is. You've been on personal leave for a few days now. Have you even been to your own house? He's stripping you of everything...one by one he's taking it all away from you and you're just letting him. What's more, you're clinging even harder!"

"Don't," she threatened, her voice trembling. She wasn't sure if she was angry or incredibly hurt. Perhaps it was a bit of both. "Don't you dare make me sound like some random prize to be won by the highest bidder. That is not why I started dating him and you know it."

"Do I?" He looked away. "I don't know."

"You know me better than that," she whispered, her voice hoarse. She didn't know why, but she desperately needed Charlie to agree. She needed to know he didn't see her as someone who would date a man, simply for material reasons. There was much more to Liam than that...wasn't there?

"I'm sorry," he finally said after a lengthy pause. "This isn't getting us anywhere. You're not going to change my mind on this, Laura, and I...I'm wasting my time. It's obvious the only reason you keep asking me out to lunch like this is to prod me for information about the case. I'm going to go now, all right? Besides, I'm sure your boyfriend is missing you by now."

"No!" She stood up before he could, startling him into silence for the moment. "You are not going to speak to me that way! You are not going to just...dump that on me and then leave. I asked you here because you are my friend. And my partner. I don't want us to drift apart just because I'm not working right now. I...I missed you. Yeah I wanted to know about the case. My friends are dead! And you are the only one who I have left, so don't you dare just walk away and think that you mean nothing to me. It's not true and you know it!"

"What do I mean then?" His voice was soft and questioning. She felt slightly taken aback by the question.

"What?"

"What do I mean to you? I need to know."

"Charlie...no," she shook her head and took a step back. "Don't ask me that, I...I don't want to do this."

"Do what?" His voice was still deceptively soft, but there was a new intensity to his gaze. "I'm just asking you a question. What do I mean to you? Am I just a friend? Or is there more to this?"

"You're..." she shook her head as if to take the question back by sheer force of will. "You're my friend. You're my best friend. You can't be any more than that, Charlie, I'm...I'm with someone else."

"Yeah, you are," he didn't even attempt to hide the bitterness in his tone. "But you can't deny there isn't something here, Laura. You kissed me. When we were in that hotel room, you kissed me."

"No, you kissed me," she reminded him. It was pointless. She knew that as well as he did. Semantics really, but she refused to give in so easily.

"And you kissed me back," he continued, pointing out the obvious. "You didn't have to. God, we nearly...but you pushed me away. You went back to him. And I keep playing it over and over in my head and I still can't figure any other reason but the money. I'm a good guy. I believe in justice, and doing what's right. I'm a damn good cop, and I know I don't have any horrible facial disfigurements, so the only reason I can think that you don't care for me the way I do for you is that I don't have the power he does...I don't have the money."

"You really do think that little of me, don't you?" She had

never felt so low. The way he was looking at her...

"Prove me wrong then," he challenged. "Give me one reason that he's a better man than I am. Damn it, I love you! Haven't you figured that out yet? Can't you see that's why I keep coming back? Why is he better than me? Why do you love him?"

"I don't..." she was about to say she didn't love him, but stopped herself. It wasn't for lack of truth in the statement. She didn't love Liam, she could admit that much to herself. But admitting that would lead to addressing the rest of the issue and that scared her to death. Charlie wanted her. He wanted her to love him, and he clearly loved her. But she would never be good enough. She would never be strong enough. She would screw it up somehow and then she would almost certainly lose the best friend and partner she ever had. She wouldn't do that. "I don't see how it's any of your business why I care for Liam."

"Did you even hear what I said to you, Laura?" He sounded small and frightened now. Like a child, asking a question, but fearing the answer. She wanted to crumble right then, but she held true to herself. Liam was safer than Charlie. He cared for her, but couldn't endanger her own heart. If she lost him, it wouldn't be the end of the world. She could go on. But Charlie... men like him didn't come along every day. It was men like him she would have to guard herself against.

"I heard you," she replied. Her voice was steady, but her hands were shaking. "I can't love you. I can't be who you need. I'm with Liam and that's all there is to it. If you want to think he's guilty of murder because you're jealous than you go right ahead. But don't ignore the facts. And don't shut me out, because your friendship means more to me than..." she trailed off, unable to finish. He wasn't even looking at her.

"I have to go," Charlie said, standing up abruptly.

"Charlie, please don't do this," she reached out, wanting to feel his touch, to know that he wasn't rejecting her. He pulled his hand away and stepped back.

"I tried, Laura," he whispered softly. "I tried to make you love me, but I can't force you. I can't make you feel something you don't. If you really love him, then... but I can't just sit around and watch you give yourself to a murderer. He's guilty. This isn't jealousy talking. I wish to God it was, but it's not! I can't prove it to you yet, but I will. And when I do...well, I'm sorry, Laura."

He stepped back a few more paces before finally meeting her gaze. His own eyes were filled with unshed tears. "I'm so sorry." And then he was gone.

Life without Charlie in it was lonelier than Laura had ever imagined. The days of her personal leave seemed to stretch on endlessly and Charlie had made no attempts to contact her. She had called him once or twice but always their conversations had been strained and awkward.

Charlie's declaration of love hung over both their heads, refusing to allow them to slip back into the easy friendship they had once shared. It broke her heart to think she might have lost him over a man she wasn't entirely sure she was in love with, but there wasn't much she could do.

She just wasn't convinced that Liam was the man Charlie thought he was. She had seen the good works he had done, all the money he donated to charities and foundations. She had seen how much he seemed to care over the friends she had lost to the killer terrorizing the city.

Despite his respect for her and her job, Liam was incredibly worried about her. So much so, he had been trying to convince her to take more time off, to stay away from it all together. Laura couldn't help but be grateful for his concern.

After all he had done for her, she couldn't believe Charlie could see him as a monster.

The last conversation they had ended in a shouting match with Charlie challenging her to do some investigating of her own. Laura had entertained the idea if only to prove to Charlie

how wrong he was about Liam, but in the end she had decided not to.

It wasn't up to her to show Charlie what kind of man Liam was. And it wasn't her fault that Charlie was too jealous to see what was going on in front of him. He was her friend, but Liam was her boyfriend. Liam was the man who seemed to be thinking in the direction of the long term, of marriage.

Charlie was just her partner. And partners came and went. They sometimes transferred out, resigned their badges...or died.

Their job wasn't the safest job out there and she and Charlie faced various dangers on an almost constant basis.

She cared for him as a friend, but it could never be more than that. It would only end painfully. They could break up. Charlie could be transferred, fired, or killed. And then Laura would be alone. She couldn't bear the thought of losing him that way. It was easier to keep her distance and treat him as only a friend.

Liam didn't present that kind of possibility. If he left her it might hurt, but Laura would be able to move on. He was a politician not a police officer so she didn't have to worry about him constantly getting into life and death situations.

Most importantly, she could survive the loss if it did occur. She would miss him, she might even mourn him. But she could live.

She wasn't sure she could do that with Charlie. She didn't know if that meant she loved him, or if she had just become dependent on him. What if she had just gotten so used to his trustworthiness, his goodness that she couldn't bear to see him go? Was she that clingy? Was Charlie just convenient?

She knew that couldn't be it. If he were only necessary like a piece of furniture, she wouldn't enjoy his company so much. She wouldn't be so hurt that they weren't currently speaking, and she wouldn't desperately miss his smile, his laughter or his gentle teasing.

Love wasn't something she knew a lot about, but there was a very real chance that she had felt it at one time or another for Charlie. And that couldn't be allowed to happen.

Liam was safe. Charlie wasn't.

"Deep thoughts?"

Liam's voice seemed to come out of nowhere. Laura was surprised at the irritation she felt towards him for interrupting her. She had been trying to work up the nerve to call Charlie, to try to convince him that their friendship was more important than his jealousy or her pride.

But she was too frightened that he would refuse her. She was too scared that he would tell her he wanted all or nothing. And if he did say that, she was too terrified that she might cave completely and do whatever it took to get him back. She had never felt so dependent on one person before.

She might have eventually gotten up the courage to pick up the phone if it hadn't been for Liam. What the hell gave him the right to interrupt her like this anyway?

Because he's your boyfriend her mind reminded her. And you're in his house.

"I was just..." she tried to make up a lie to explain why she hadn't come out of Liam's sunroom all morning but couldn't think of anything that wouldn't end in 'trying to get up the nerve to call Charlie'. Instead she shrugged and smiled, attempting to hide the sadness she was feeling from her eyes.

"You miss him, don't you?" He sat down beside her, but his smile was strained. For the first time, Laura really looked into his eyes. She wasn't sure what it was she found, but it made her nervous in a way she had never been around Liam.

"Who?" Liam didn't buy the attempted innocence, but his smile never wavered.

"Your partner." Liam shook his head and touched her cheek lightly. "You've been so far away ever since you had lunch with him the other day. Want to tell me what happened?"

“It’s nothing,” she lied. She knew that she should be able to tell Liam her problems. That was what people in relationships did — they shared each other’s problems. But Charlie was a problem that Laura wanted to keep to herself. She didn’t think that Liam could possibly understand how much he meant to her and to be truthful she was slightly worried about what he might do if he did.

“Laura,” his voice was low now. “Don’t lie to me. I can see it in your eyes. He’s your partner. Do you think I don’t understand that you miss him?”

“You...you do?” She couldn’t keep the surprise from her voice. She thought he might be jealous. Instead he simply seemed interested. Maybe she’d been underestimating him. Maybe she had been listening to Charlie too long, allowing his suspicious mind to cloud her affections toward Liam. She felt a surge of anger towards Charlie that she fought to suppress.

“Of course,” Liam smiled gently. “I’ve seen how upset you’ve been. Why don’t you just call him? Talk to him? Surely you can sort this out. What was it you fought about? You can tell me you know.”

Could she? He seemed so sincere right now. And Laura had been feeling so desperately alone. She bit her lip and decided to go with half-truths. For some reason telling him the entire story felt somewhat like betrayal.

“We fought about the case,” she admitted. “I wanted to help, to try to catch the bastard who hurt our people. Charlie told me it wasn’t my problem anymore. That the others could handle it.”

“He’s right, you know,” Liam replied. “I know you probably don’t want to hear this, but you’ve got to let him handle it. It’s his job now, not yours.”

“I’m a cop, Liam.” She reminded him. She should have known he wouldn’t understand what this meant to her. She should have known he wouldn’t be able to see why she had to follow it through. “And that is my case. I know I made some mistakes, but I have to know that everything is being done to catch those responsible. Friends of mine died. And more could still die. Charlie could...he could get hurt. And if he’d stop being such a stubborn jerk and let me help, maybe I could...”

“Stop,” Liam’s voice was firm and his gaze like steel. Laura suddenly wondered if she had ever really known him. Right now he seemed like a complete stranger. Right now his eyes were empty and cold. “You need to stop this. You need to get away from this. This case, this job isn’t doing you any good. Look at you! You’re a wreck and getting worse. Maybe...maybe it’s time to reconsider whether you belong on the force.”

“You mean quit?” Her voice sounded hollow as she spoke the words. It did make a certain amount of sense. After all that had happened it was highly possible that when she did go back to work, the captain would force her to submit to a psychiatric evaluation and put her on desk duty for a while. It could be months before she was back doing what she did before. And even when she was, would it really ever be the same? Charlie might be paired with another partner. She’d have to learn to work with somebody new. All her friends were dead. What did she really have there?

Did she still have Charlie?

“I...I can’t,” she finally said. “It’s all I have. It’s my life.”

“Maybe it was,” Liam conceded, “but there comes a time to move on in everybody’s life. Maybe this is yours. Think about it. Maybe you’ve gone as far with this career as you can. Your political ideas and thoughts are brilliant. I can use people like you in my office. You could work with me. You could still make the world a better place. And we...we could be together.”

“We’re already together,” Laura murmured. She hated the idea that she was even considering this, but he had a point. Maybe she didn’t necessarily need to be a cop to do some good. Liam had done all kinds of good as Mayor of the city. She’d

always been interested in politics. But did she really want to commit herself to Liam so completely? He was talking about working together, side by side. Did she care about him enough to become his partner the way she had with Charlie?

“You know what I mean, Laura,” Liam’s voice was soft and compelling. It sounded so easy. And Laura was so unsure. “I want to be with you. I love you. I wanted to tell you this some other way, some way more romantic, but if this is the best I can do then so be it. I realize you miss your work. And I know that you miss your partner, but there’s no reason you can’t still talk to him if you work for me. There’s no reason your friendship with him has to end just because you’re no longer a cop. I want this to go further. I want you to marry me. What do you say?”

“I...” she wasn’t sure she had ever been more shocked in her entire life. Liam proposing was something she hadn’t seen coming. Why wasn’t she elated? Why was she fighting back near-hysteria? Was it because it was too soon? Or was it because this was what she had been waiting for? “I don’t know.”

“Do you love me?”

It was a simple question. Laura opened her mouth but found herself unable to speak. Why couldn’t she say yes? And why couldn’t she say no? Why did she see Charlie’s heartbroken expression when she looked into Liam’s eyes? And what was missing from his eyes that she hadn’t realized was missing before?

“I think...” she meant to say ‘I think I might’, but couldn’t finish the sentence. Something just wouldn’t let her. Liam didn’t seem to notice. Seizing her hands, he spoke quickly as if trying to keep her from making a run for it entirely.

“I can see it in your eyes, don’t fight it,” he urged. “This is love. This...what we feel for each other. And I want to marry you. I know it’s a lot to take in, so don’t answer me just yet. Take a few days. Go and see your friend. Come to the office and see what I’m offering you. It could be good. It could be so good for both of us. Don’t say no. Promise me you’ll think about it.”

Laura nodded and swallowed though her mouth felt dry.

“I promise,” she said finally. “I’ll think about it.”

Chapter 8: Confusion

Lois was still fairly annoyed with Clark the following day at work, though writing her latest novel chapter had helped to temper the desire to personally remove all his organs in alphabetical order. She found herself a bit surprised by that. She had started the novel in an attempt to provide insight into her own feelings, maybe even figure out the reasons behind some of the decisions she’d made lately. And in some respects, that was what was happening.

What was even more surprising, however, was the level of insight she was getting into Clark’s mind and actions. After writing the last scene between Laura and Charlie, Lois found herself re-thinking the day in the park when Clark had told her how he felt. She knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that Charlie loved Laura, and it wasn’t just because she had made him the romantic hero. On that level, Charlie had to love Laura because Lois was writing it. It was a romance novel, so there had to be a happily ever after. It was pre-ordained.

But Lois only had so much power over how that happened. She was beginning to understand that being a writer wasn’t about manipulating your characters into doing whatever you wanted. It was far more complicated than that. She couldn’t make either Laura or Charlie do anything they didn’t want to do, or to feel anything they couldn’t feel. They were real people to her now, not just caricatures of herself and Clark. She felt proud of the fact that she had been able to put that much depth and reality into the two of them.

And yet, at the same time, she knew at their core they were herself and Clark. She had written them that way deliberately.

Only now it seemed the lines between what was real and what was fiction were becoming more blurred with every chapter she wrote. She wanted to put things right between herself and Clark after the chapter she'd written last night. She wanted that more than ever. Unfortunately she had no idea how. Even worse, she wasn't entirely sure what the 'right' way for things to be between them was. Did she want to return to the easy friendship they'd shared before the Lex disaster, pretending to have no knowledge of Clark's true feelings for her? Was he actually lying about those feelings like he said he was? Did she want to finally take their relationship further? Did she want Clark to turn out to be her own romantic hero? And how could she make her own story end when she didn't have the power that her pen usually gave her?

Before she had begun the novel, she had figured that when the time came it would be a simple matter of negotiating the two of them into each other's arms. It would be easy. She was the one in control.

But control was exactly her problem, or rather the lack of it. It was what had led her into the arms of Lex Luthor and it was what had kept her from seeing Clark as anything but a good friend until it was too late. She had blown it with him by telling him she couldn't feel the way he did for her. And now she wondered if she would be able to keep Laura from making the same mistake. Already it seemed she was too late. She couldn't control Laura any more than she could herself. And Laura seemed determined to make the same mistakes she had.

She was allowing Liam to manipulate her. Lois could see it all so clearly now. Just as Lex had, Liam was systematically stripping away of all the stability in her life. Soon the only constant left would be Liam. Laura was a strong, independent woman, but there was only so much she could lose before she had to cling to the one thing she still trusted and believed in, however misguided it may have been. And Lois understood that now. She had lost the *Planet*, had lost everything that had ever made sense in her world and as soon as it seemed was losing Clark, she had agreed to marry Lex, determined to keep the one thing that still seemed stable to her.

She had thought Lex was someone trustworthy and safe. And in a time when everything else was so uncertain, she had needed that. Even Clark had been something of a question mark to her. Without the *Planet* to keep them together, Lois wasn't sure that their friendship would be able to survive. She wanted it to, there was no doubt about that. But she had had so many other good friends in the past that had drifted away from her due to a change in circumstances. She was afraid that might happen with her and Clark.

It was terrifyingly simple. Lois couldn't believe she had been that easy to manipulate. She had always thought of herself as someone who had so many walls built around her that nobody could ever touch her, let alone hurt her. Turns out she had been an open book all along, and the two men capable of reading that were both incredibly dangerous.

Lex had used the knowledge to destroy her world, to make her dependent, and Clark... Well, Clark would never do that deliberately. But he still had the power. And that was what made him the most dangerous of all.

Lois desperately wanted to tell Laura that... to make her understand how much Charlie meant to her, but she no longer felt certain she knew how. The characters could only do what felt right to them and Laura didn't know what Lois did now. Laura was still vulnerable, still prone to making the same stupid choices that Lois had. She actually pitied her.

She sighed and closed the file of her novel, determined to forget about it and concentrate on work. Clark wasn't there yet, but Lois didn't expect him to be. She had come to work early that morning, determined to re-evaluate both herself and the novel before she added any more to it.

Henderson hadn't gotten back to her with results on the evidence she had found, but he didn't have to. Lois was certain it belonged to Kampos and was even more certain he was the killer. It wasn't the 'who' of it that was puzzling, but rather the 'why'. Why would an 18-year old kid do something like that to someone who seemed to have no connection to him? And how had he been strong enough physically to do it? There were so many questions.

She began to jot down some notes on a pad of paper, and as she did so, didn't hear the footsteps behind her until a hand on her shoulder caused her to jump. Turning, she saw Clark staring at her rather sheepishly.

"Sorry, I thought you heard me coming."

"Where were you yesterday?" Straight to the point. No point in beating around the bush. She might have come to a better understanding of Clark, but it didn't mean she was going to let him off the hook for ditching her yesterday in their dumpster search. "I found what we were looking for, no thanks to you. Why didn't you tell me that Henderson was planning on helping us out? Or was it just funnier to let me do the entire search on my own? What is it with you and shoving me in dumpsters anyway?"

"I'm really sorry, Lois," Clark told her. His voice certainly sounded sincere, though Lois did not want to forgive him that easily. She could at least get him to grovel a bit. She deserved that much. "I did try to find you, but by the time I'd gotten in touch with Henderson, I didn't know where you'd gone."

"There are only so many dumpsters near the Hobbs River, Clark," she pointed out. "You couldn't have looked that hard."

"Lois, I..."

"Forget it," she said with a sigh. She thought she wanted to see him squirm, but now that she had him doing so, she only felt tired. Why couldn't she even stay angry with him anymore? What was happening to her anyway? "Henderson is having the crime lab test the clothes. He said he'd get back to us as soon as he knows anything."

"I just wish we knew how Intergang fit into all of this," Clark mused, obviously grateful for Lois' reprieve.

Lois was about to tell Clark about her surprise meeting with Bobby, but was cut off before she got the chance by Jimmy calling their names.

"Henderson on line two for you guys," Jimmy told them, biting into a donut. Lois nodded and picked up the phone, as did Clark.

"Got some information that might be useful," Henderson told them without any preamble.

"What did you find out?" Lois asked, leaning forward in her chair and meeting Clark's eyes. Both were holding their breaths.

"We're still not completely sure," Henderson replied, sounding slightly bewildered. "When we brought Kampos in, there were traces of blood under the kid's fingernails. Even though we had to let him go, we were able to get a warrant to compel evidence and take a sample from him. The crime lab found the blood belonged to Jonathon French. On that alone, we can arrest Kampos for murder. Once the clothing tests come back, we should have enough evidence to get a conviction, however..."

"What is it?" Clark tapped a pencil impatiently on his desk.

"The blood tests the hospital did revealed that Kampos had something in his system... a chemical of some kind that may have altered his behaviour."

"A drug," Lois supplied, thinking of the information Bobby had given her the day before about Intergang hiring a scientist as the Soldier's drug supplier. "Something new, I'm assuming?"

"Very new," Henderson confirmed. "Our guys still aren't quite sure what to make of it. We've sent the sample to STAR Labs to see if their scientists can help figure out what sort of effect it may have had on Kampos."

"Could it have altered him physically?" Lois wondered, thinking back to when they met Kampos in the hospital. He was a

scrawny youth — hardly anything to him and yet, if he were responsible, he would have needed to have the physical ability to rip another human being apart. Something other than raw rage had to be behind it.

“It’s a definite possibility,” Henderson told them. “We won’t know for sure until we get our answers back from STAR Labs. I just thought I’d let you two know what we found in case you had any other information that might help.”

“We might,” Lois informed him. Clark gave her a surprised look. “I spoke to a source yesterday, right before I met with you. He told me that the Soldiers recently changed drug suppliers. Apparently this new guy is not only involved with Intergang, but is also a scientist of some kind. If I had to guess, I’d say his specialty recently changed from pharmaceuticals to illegal narcotics.”

“That would make sense,” Henderson said thoughtfully. “But proving an Intergang connection will be difficult.”

“If I were you, I’d pick up Kampos as soon as you can, Inspector,” Clark put in.

“He’s right,” Lois agreed. “If we were able to come to this conclusion then Intergang likely knows it. The best way to handle the situation would be to eliminate Kampos. He’ll have become a liability to them, whether he has his memory or not.”

“We figured as much already. My guys are on it.” Henderson assured them. “If you guys run into Superman tell him to keep an eye peeled. If there is a designer drug out there with the ability to cause that kind of damage, we’re going to need all the help we can get.”

“We’ll let him know, don’t worry,” Clark said grimly. The moment the call had ended, Lois called Jimmy over and began issuing orders.

“We’re going to need the name of every pharmaceutical scientist in Metropolis, especially any who have been recently fired or come into a lot of money. If Intergang is behind this, they’ll be funding him. Let’s hope he’s stupid enough to have left a paper trail.”

“On it,” Jimmy promised, rushing off to complete the request. Lois looked to Clark and bit her lip in thought.

“We’re going to need proof.” She finally said. “There’s a good chance that Kampos didn’t even know what he was doing. If he was under the influence of some new experimental drug, he might not even have intended to kill anybody.”

“Maybe not,” Clark said darkly, “but he did. An innocent kid is dead, Lois. Kampos will answer for it.”

“I’m not saying he doesn’t deserve to, I just...” she trailed off, unsure of how to explain herself. “If I’m right...if he didn’t mean to kill anybody, then jail won’t be the worst of it.”

“What do you mean?” Clark looked puzzled and Lois sighed, finding that part of her now felt some pity towards Peter Kampos.

“You heard what Dr. Adams said when we were at the hospital,” she said softly. “He was pretty sure Peter’s memories would come back at some point. Imagine having that image, that experience in your head and knowing that you had no control. Imagine living with what you’d done for the rest of your life. He’ll never escape that memory, Clark. He’ll never escape what he’s done.”

It wouldn’t be easy for Kampos to live with himself if he had any sort of conscience whatsoever. It only made Lois that much more determined to find out who was responsible for the drug and why.

Drugs were stupid in general, but the physical harm they caused tended to limit itself to the person consuming them. If this drug was causing the people who took it to kill others indiscriminately, however, then it couldn’t be allowed to get into the market. It was far too dangerous.

Lois met Clark’s eyes and knew he was thinking along the same lines.

“I guess I never thought of it that way,” Clark finally said. He shook his head, his expression conflicted. “I never thought any part of me would feel sorry for a murderer.”

“This isn’t just any murder,” Lois reasoned. “And we still don’t know for sure if I’m right.”

“I think it’s pretty likely,” Clark said with an ironic smile. “You’re just as good now as you ever were.”

“I wish I could be glad about that,” she admitted with a sigh. “I thought that if I could just get my edge back, that it would fix everything. If I could be the same reporter I was before...but that isn’t the problem. It never was.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Clark told her gently. Tentatively he reached out and took her hand in his, giving her time to pull away if she wanted to. She didn’t, and almost gasped aloud at the nearly electric feeling that touching Clark was suddenly bringing her. Had it always felt like this with him? Had she been repressing it, like she had so many other things? She swallowed heavily as he held her hand, trailing slow, lazy circles above her knuckles.

“The decisions you made, the people you trusted...they came from a place that had nothing to do with logic, or reason. Logically I knew what kind of a man Lex was, but I didn’t have the...attachment,” his voice ground out the word, almost like a curse, “to him that you did. I’m sorry if I’ve made you feel inadequate in any way for that.”

“No, that’s not it!” she exclaimed, not wanting him to feel guilty for something that was really nobody’s fault. She knew now why she accepted his proposal, and it was largely out of fear of her own feelings, not his. “You have nothing to be sorry for. There wasn’t an attachment...or at least, not the way you think. I didn’t love him. I wanted to, but I didn’t.”

“Then why...” he trailed off, nervously meeting her gaze. She hadn’t realized it, but she had moved closer to him as they spoke. Her knees were touching his now, and she was almost afraid to move, so frightened that it would shatter the spell that she suddenly found herself under. Never had she felt so alive, so nervous and warm in all the right places. Never had a pair of deep brown eyes been this mesmerizing. And never had she wanted to kiss somebody more than she did Clark Kent right now; despite the place, the time, and everyone around them. It was terrifying and exhilarating all at once. “Why did you agree to marry him?”

“Fear,” her answer came out a bare whisper, but she knew he caught it. The look in his eyes told her that he had never been listening more intently to what she had to say. She felt a surge of excitement, knowing that for once, she had his complete and undivided attention. She wondered if they weren’t in the newsroom, just how far that would go.

“Everything was changing. The *Planet* being bought out, the explosion, the two of us not partners anymore...I was so scared that I would lose everything. I thought if I married Lex, I could control things better. I could get you a job with me, we could still be partners, still be friends. Nothing would have to change. I thought, with those resources, I could keep everyone together. The fact that I didn’t love him was sort of secondary to that. I mean, we were friends, and enjoyed each other’s company. I know it probably sounds stupid to you, but I just didn’t want to lose it all. I didn’t want to lose you.”

“You agreed to marry Luthor to keep from losing me?” Clark let out a short, harsh laugh that caused her to shiver. The regret that swam in his eyes made her want to pull him closer. She had screwed up. Read all the signals wrong, she was sure of it now. Her fear had caused her to agree to marry a murderer. Her fear had caused this rift between them. And it had caused her to realize just how much he meant to her. Was realizing she loved him worth anything now? Was there still hope that he might still have feelings for her? Or was it all too little too late?

“Lois, if you only knew...I told you how I felt that day

and...” She nearly bit her lip when he trailed off and stopped. Then, a familiar look appeared on his face causing her heart to drop, and a lump to form in her throat. He wasn’t intending to finish this conversation. He was going to do what he always did, make some lame excuse and disappear just when things got personal. Well she wouldn’t give him the chance to know how he had hurt her.

“Lois, I...”

“Don’t bother,” she said with a heavy sigh. “Just go. Do whatever it is you’re going to do, but spare me the excuse. If you don’t want to talk to me, I can’t make you. Do me a favour though. If you see Superman, tell him to meet me at STAR Labs. I’ll be there, doing my job.”

She got up, retrieved her coat, and exited the newsroom, refusing to look back at her partner.

She had to fight the entire cab ride to keep the tears at bay. She had really thought she was getting somewhere. It looked as if he might tell her how he felt. It looked as if they might still have a chance. After all the fear and uncertainty, she wanted that chance. She wanted the opportunity to make things right, to do what she should have done the moment he told her he loved her.

She wanted the opportunity to tell him she loved him and mean it. She had never done that before. Not once had she said she loved a man and meant it with all her heart. She had thought she did before, but none of those men had made her feel the way Clark did. None of them had made her feel completely safe, yet totally vulnerable at the same time. Like going bungee jumping, but with the absolute certainty that the cord would never break. It would still scare her witless, but she’d make the jump because once the fear subsided, the thrill would be worth it. Clark Kent was the only man who could really make her fly.

And she had always wanted to fly. Once she thought that Superman could do that for her. But he had never really existed. He’d always been a fantasy, only as real to her as the Masked Figure had been in her novel. She still liked, trusted and admired him, but she knew now she didn’t really know him. It was the reason why she couldn’t make him a believable hero in her book. The motivation, the realism just were not there.

Laura could trust Charlie because Charlie was real. Charlie cared for her. He did nothing but back her up, believe in her, and stick by her through thick and thin, no matter what. No matter how many stupid choices Laura made. Just like Clark. Funny how it took a completely fictional couple to make Lois see what was right under her nose.

But despite all that, it looked like she was too late. Clark obviously had no intention of repeating the declaration he had made to her in the park. She wanted to think it was because he was afraid that she would reject him again. She wanted to think that he was just protecting himself, by making a quick exit before things got too serious. But in her heart she wondered if he had simply given up and decided she wasn’t worth the heartbreak or the extra effort.

Anger, white-hot and sharp, overtook her, helping her to successfully block the tears that threatened to escape. How dare he? How dare he just up and leave like that? Especially after she had opened up to him so completely! If he was too afraid, or simply uninterested, surely he could have had the guts to tell her himself! But no, instead he just ran off, without word or reason as to why.

Logically she knew the latter part was because she told him not to bother. But she wasn’t sure she could have been able to sit there and listen to him feed her another bogus story about forgetting to check his mail for cheese when she had just revealed so much of her own heart to him. She shouldn’t have to. She deserved better. If the fiasco with Lex had taught her anything it was that.

She didn’t deserve to be treated this way and she would not

sit idly by while he played games with her feelings. If he intended to run away every time she tried to tell him how she felt, then she wouldn’t bother. He would have to make the next move. She was sick of having her heart stomped on.

The cab reached STAR Labs in fairly good time and as Lois got out she resolved to think about the story and only the story until it was done. The other stuff could wait. She was a reporter and her job was to get to the truth.

She was about to approach the receptionist to try to find out which lab the clothing sample had been sent to, when she heard a familiar whoosh behind her. She turned around and nodded at Superman, who she knew would be standing behind her.

“I heard you wanted to talk to me,” he said brusquely, his tone business-like. She waited for the usual thrill she usually got from seeing him in the spandex, his arms crossed and his expression serious. It wasn’t there. All she felt now was annoyance. Annoyance that instead of being here himself, her partner had ran off to do God knows what, only caring enough about the story to deliver her message to Superman. It wasn’t Superman she wanted to see right now. But that wasn’t his fault, so she tried to soften her expression as she replied to him.

“We might have some information on the murder of Jonathon French,” she began. Then her curiosity got the better of her. “Clark obviously told you I wanted to see you, but how did he do that so quickly?”

“I was in the area,” Superman told her. She noticed for the first time that his eyes didn’t meet hers as he said that. It was odd, but she let it pass. “Clark saw me as he was heading out and gave me your message.”

“No doubt off to mow his lawn or something else equally thrilling,” she muttered, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice. Shaking her head, she looked back at him. He wore an odd expression, as if he wanted to contradict her, but couldn’t. “Anyway, I was just about to see if I could get access to the tests they did on the clothing that I found. Inspector Henderson thinks that a new designer drug made Kampos snap and physically strong enough to tear apart Jonathon French. If that’s true, then I thought I should warn you. There’s no telling how strong the drug might make somebody. I don’t want to see you get hurt. I guess I just wanted to say be on your guard.”

“Thank you,” he said finally meeting her gaze. “I will. Do you want to me to come inside with you? They’ll likely release the information easier if I’m with you.”

She opened her mouth to say she didn’t need his help, that she was fine on her own, but shut it. She might not need his help, but it would certainly go faster if she had it. Nodding, she entered the building, Superman right behind her.

It was relatively easy for the two of them to get into the room to speak with the scientist who was working on the clothing — a Dr. Bernard Klein. Lois had heard of his reputation as a scientist, but wasn’t prepared for the slightly bumbling and friendly man that greeted them. Most scientists she met were either crazy or too full of themselves to bother talking to the press, but Dr. Klein was neither. He seemed only too eager to answer her questions, and Lois found herself taking an instant liking to the man.

“I truly do think that this new drug caused Kampos to kill,” Dr. Klein was saying, “and the chemical mix does seem to account for the increase of strength. I’ve never seen anything like it, to be honest.”

“What’s in it, Doctor?” She looked apprehensively at the small metal box that held the shirt in question. “Why is this chemical mixture able to do this to people?”

“Well, it’s definitely alien,” Dr. Klein replied. He opened the box as he spoke. “The chemical that seems to be the active ingredient when it comes to the enhanced strength and the change in mental faculties is...oh...oh my...Superman, is something

wrong?”

Lois whipped around at the concerned and frightened look on Klein’s face only to watch Superman double over in pain, clutching his abdomen and backing away from the box. Lois instantly knew what it was that was in the drug that Kampos had taken to make him kill indiscriminately, and the realization hit her like ice.

Kryptonite!

“Shut the box,” she said, her voice sounding flat and calm despite the thudding in her ears. “The chemical you were talking about is toxic to him, Doctor! Shut the box!”

Dr. Klein did so, his face having gone ghost white. Within a moment, Superman was standing up straight again, and Lois was by his side, checking to make sure he was okay.

“I’m so sorry,” Dr. Klein said finally after he regained the ability to speak. “I had no idea it was...I mean, I thought it was a myth! I read that it might be able to hurt you, but...”

Please, Dr. Klein, you can’t tell anybody about this,” Lois pleaded. “If the public knew he was vulnerable to it...”

“He’d be a target, I know,” Dr. Klein nodded firmly. “I won’t say a word. But this is very bad news. If this was something that was in that boy’s system...”

“Then whoever is on the drug will be not only be extra strong, they’ll be unstoppable.” Lois’ heart felt like lead. The thought that the drug might prevent Superman from being able to stop it had never occurred to her. She had just assumed that whatever it was, he could handle it. Yet the image of Superman shot by Arianna Carlin’s Kryptonite bullet suddenly flashed through her mind, reminding her that not even Superman was completely invulnerable. Time was running out. They had to stop this drug from ever reaching the public. Once that happened it would probably be too late.

“I’ll find a way,” Superman was saying firmly in response to her statement. She shook her head.

“No, Clark and I will find a way. If you take on anybody under the influence of this drug they will kill you.” She turned to Dr. Klein. “Get these results to Inspector Henderson as soon as you can. The longer we wait the more we risk this thing hitting the streets.”

“Will do,” Dr. Klein promised. “Maybe I can also help in the prevention department?”

“How do you mean?” Superman asked, still eyeing the box and Klein warily. True, the man looked visibly shaken up by what had occurred and it seemed as if he genuinely wanted to help, but neither of them could be completely sure this was the truth. As it was, it was incredibly risky to Superman that Klein knew the truth of Kryptonite’s effects.

“Well, I can get a sample of the Kryptonite from the clothes and put it under the microscope. There’s a chance that I might be able to develop some sort of antidote or means of purging the drug from someone’s system once they’ve been injected. I don’t know for sure if it will work, but I’m willing to try. It might be the only option if the drug makes it to the streets.”

“How do we know we can trust you?” Lois demanded. She could see from Superman’s expression that standing there in front of the Doctor he felt vulnerable. Somebody knew about the one thing on the Earth that could kill him...somebody other than Lois. She knew that the idea of it must terrify him to death and at the same time, he appeared to be too polite, too Superman to ask the question of trust himself. Lois didn’t care if she came off rude, or aggressive. Superman’s life was on the line here. She’d accept being viewed as her own alter ego ‘mad dog’ if it meant keeping Superman safe. It suddenly occurred to her that Clark would be able to do that very same thing — ask Klein the tough questions while keeping tactful and polite. Where the hell was he when she needed him?

“You don’t, I’m afraid,” Klein replied nervously. “I wish I

could give you proof that I only want to help, but I can’t. I’m not looking to hurt anybody, or to make the news, Miss Lane. I just want to help keep this drug from hurting others. I know you’re worried, Superman...I don’t blame you. But if I am able to develop an antidote then I could save people affected by this drug! I could help to save lives...just like you do every day. I guess it’s up to you whether you’re willing to take that chance.”

Superman shot Lois a look that spoke volumes about his own inner conflict. All of a sudden she wanted desperately to approach him, and put her arm on his shoulder, to offer some physical comfort to help take the decision completely from his shoulders. But she and Superman had never been as familiar as that. They’d had one or two physical incidents in the past, but for the most part he kept her at a distance. All she could do was give him a look back that she hoped he’d interpret as supportive, regardless of what choice he made.

“Under the circumstances,” Superman finally said slowly, “I don’t see how I can not take that chance. I’ll let you do your experiments, Doctor. Call us if you are able to discover any way of reversing the drug’s effects.”

“You have my word,” Klein said while reaching out to shake Superman’s hand as if to seal the bargain of trust. “There’s one other thing though. From what I’ve observed of these clothes, the mixture of the drug is still fairly unstable. Now you say that the kid who wore them was under the influence of it?”

“We believe so, yes.” Lois answered.

“Then you need to get him to me immediately,” Dr. Klein said grimly. “It’s my understanding that although the immediate effect of the drug has worn off, he’s not out of danger. There’s no telling what kind of havoc it could wreak on his system. There’s a very strong chance it could trigger a heart attack and kill him, it’s still so volatile.”

“It was probably made that way,” Superman mused. “So whoever took it couldn’t be around later to testify against whoever sold it to them.”

“You’re probably right,” Lois said with a short nod. “Might want to tell Henderson to bring Kampos with him to you then. In the meantime I’ll head back to the *Planet* and see if Jimmy has come up with anything regarding the scientist responsible for this drug.”

“Superman, you should probably go,” Dr. Klein suggested nervously. “I have to show this to the Inspector and you can’t be around when I do.”

Lois looked at Superman, having almost forgotten he was there.

“If you see Clark, Superman, could you tell him I need his help?” Thinking a moment, she added, “That is if he still has any interest in this story.”

And with that she left to call a cab.

Chapter 9: Geoffrey Batchelar

Despite the fact that Clark had made it back to the *Planet* before she had, Lois didn’t say a word to him as she walked from the elevator to her desk. Before he could approach her and attempt an apology that she would almost certainly cave in to, she picked up the phone and called the police precinct. Clark had, as she anticipated, started towards her, but halted when he saw her expression. The anger in her eyes kept him back and that was good. His hesitation was really all that was keeping her from forgiving him. As long as she could maintain the illusion of anger, he would keep his distance. He had to keep his distance because Lois’ ability to resist the apology she saw lurking in his eyes was severely compromised by the full realization of her feelings for him.

She was in love with him. There was no getting around that. And he was so damned infuriating. One moment she’d be almost certain that he loved her back. She’d be on the verge of

confessing her own feelings, of reaching out to him, and he would ruin it by taking off somewhere and leaving her alone and questioning herself. She was mistaken about Lex. Was it possible she was mistaken about Clark? And if she wasn't, why was he hesitating? Was it because she rejected him before? She desperately wanted to bring it up, to tell him that she had been far too blind to everything but him to give him a proper answer. If she could do it all again, she would tell him how she felt. She would not let him get away.

But she couldn't do it all again. Unlike with Laura and Charlie she didn't possess the power to make everything right again with the stroke of a pen. If Clark did lie about not loving her, then she had to make the first move to show him her outlook had changed. And if he really didn't love her than doing that would almost certainly break her heart.

The question then became, was she courageous enough to try? She could face down killers, mob bosses, and all manner of things that would terrify the ordinary person. Could she tell Clark Kent she loved him? Was she that brave?

Henderson's voice came over the phone interrupting her thoughts, and Lois proceeded to give him the information she had gotten at STAR Labs. Clark slowly moved in closer behind her. Was he listening in on the conversation because he thought she wouldn't tell him about it afterwards? She was still mad, but he was her partner. She would have told him, even if he hadn't decided to listen in.

"We're going to have to double our search effort for Kampos," she was saying to Henderson. "If Dr. Klein's information was true, then he might not live to make it to court. Right now he's the only one that can implicate Intergang. If they don't get him, the drug's own side effects will."

"The rest of the Soldiers said they haven't seen him," Henderson informed her. "I don't know if they're lying or not, but from what you've just told me we don't have time to bring them all in for a polygraph test. We'll have to start searching the Soldiers' territory, and see if we can shake loose any information that way."

"Sounds good," Lois said with a nod. "If you do that, Clark and I will work on the scientist angle. Somebody's been cooking this deadly little cocktail and we need to find out who in case something does happen to Kampos." She didn't like the thought that something might, despite the fact that he was a killer. He deserved to suffer for what he had done, but not to die. Lois had never believed in that sort of eye for an eye scenario.

"Keep me posted," Henderson said. She imagined him nodding abruptly before hanging up the phone. She looked to Clark who, to his credit, still looked apologetic and sighed. She didn't want to deal with this right now. Not when so much else was at stake. Thankfully Clark got the hint and didn't address the tension between them.

"On the scientist angle, we may have something," he told her, sitting down beside her and flipping through a manila envelope. "While we were gone, Jimmy pulled the names of all the scientists in the area who have either been fired or quit their permanent positions with pharmaceutical companies. Then he cross-referenced it with anyone who has made a major financial purchase in the last few months. The list came down to three names."

Lois took the file from Clark's hand and skimmed over it, trying to ignore the tingle she felt when her thumb brushed his. *What is this, high school?* The voice in her head asked. *I mean, c'mon, you've touched the guy before...you've kissed him before. This is old territory for you two.*

But it wasn't. Not now. Not when her own awareness of him, physically and emotionally, was finally coming to the surface. She had been repressing it for so long that every look, every touch, every word from him felt like Lois was experiencing it for

the first time. And it was making it impossible for her to stay angry, despite how much she wanted to.

"Geoffrey Batchelar, James MacNeil and Robert Smith," she spoke the names out loud, trying not to think of the proximity of her partner and the kiss they had shared in the Lexor hotel. Suddenly she ached to add a new chapter to her novel, if only to further what Laura and Charlie had started. At the moment, the idea of living her fantasies vicariously through them didn't seem half bad.

"MacNeil and Smith were both fired from their respective companies, but they each have clean records. I think whatever large purchases they've made so far are legit. Batchelar on the other hand is a bit on the shady side. Seems he was arrested a few years back for trafficking narcotics on the black market but not convicted. The background is right and from what Jimmy could find, he was not only recently fired for suspicious experiments, but he managed somehow despite that to buy himself a brand new hundred thousand dollar town car. I think he's our best bet."

"I agree," she said with a nod. "We should interview him first. If we don't find anything that way, maybe we can break into his office later tonight and look through his files."

"Lois..." Clark began, clearly uncomfortable with her zest for B&E when working on a story. She waved away his concern.

"We might not have any other choice. If he's working for Intergang he's not just going to let all the juicy information we need accidentally slip. He'll be clever and he'll be careful. Once he knows we're investigating him, he'll want us out of the way as well. Best to try and find something incriminating as quickly as possible so he's locked up and unable to do any harm."

"You know I'd never let anything happen to you," Clark's tone was quiet, but she could hear the determination in his words. She looked at him, surprised by the look in his eyes. It was unsettling, to say the least. Normally he was mild-mannered to the point of passivity. But now, with the way he was staring at her, Lois had no doubt whatsoever that, if he had to, he would take on Superman himself to keep her safe. It was a heady thought and one that gave her an odd fluttering in her stomach. Just when she thought she knew everything about Clark Kent, she learned something new.

"I know Clark, but I'm not really worried as much about myself as I am about Superman." His gaze darkened slightly at the mention of the super hero, and almost at once the intimacy was gone from his eyes, replaced with an aloofness that felt like he'd just moved to Antarctica.

"I think Superman can handle himself, Lois." His jaw was tight as he spoke and, if she didn't know any better, she'd swear he sounded mildly bitter. She shook those thoughts away and explained what happened to Superman when she was at Star Labs. She hadn't mentioned the Kryptonite to Henderson for obvious reasons, but she needed to tell Clark so they could go over their options. If this drug got on the market, Superman would be helpless to stop its destruction. He'd likely die trying and Lois refused to let that happen. She might have gotten past her infatuation with him, but he was still one of her closest friends and she cared about him too much to let his foolish pride get him killed.

Oddly enough, Clark didn't seem to share her concern.

"I am sure Superman can figure out a way around this thing," he said stubbornly. "He's always come out on top before."

"He's been lucky, Clark!" she exclaimed, unable to believe he didn't share her fear for their friend. "He's not invulnerable. Not when Kryptonite is involved. I'm worried about him."

Clark nodded, apparently deciding not to press the argument. Lois could tell that he either didn't take her worry seriously, or that he resented it. Either way, the warmth was gone from his eyes, and she desperately wanted to reach out to him and bring it back. When had everything gotten so horribly complicated?

“Come on,” she finally said after a somewhat awkward silence. “Let’s go meet Mr. Batchelar.”

Geoffrey Batchelar’s office was across town, in the business district, and fairly upscale. It would mean a twenty minute cab ride and one in which Lois hoped she could get Clark to open up once more.

Clark had spoken to Batchelar on the phone when they had made the appointment and said that he had sounded a little too surprised to hear they were doing a story on the pharmaceutical company he was fired from. To Lois that meant that he knew they were coming and would be ready for them.

If he were responsible, then Intergang would already be on to them, and the interview would be a total farce. Lois wondered if the only reason he had agreed to talk to them was to size them up. They’d gone up against Intergang before, and knew that they didn’t do anything without knowing all the facts first.

Intergang would want to know how much they knew about Batchelar’s involvement and who else they might have told. She and Clark would have to be extra careful not to implicate anybody who could get hurt by them.

Clark had seemed mentally absent for most of the ride and Lois wasn’t sure why. He seemed to be conflicted about something, as if he wanted to tell her something, but was unable to do so. She had hoped he would come clean at some point about why he kept running away from her, but it didn’t look like that was likely to happen. She desperately wanted to ask him about it, but had a feeling he’d only retreat more into his shell if she did.

It was odd, as she was usually the one to close herself up and not reveal her inner thoughts to those who cared about her. Clark was usually so open and honest, so very clear-cut and straightforward. What you saw was what you got — an innocent, somewhat naïve farm boy with a heart of gold. This pensive, brooding Clark was completely alien to her.

She shook her head. It was her fault really. He had revealed his most private feelings for her and she had rejected him. She had not only rejected him, but had asked him to find Superman for her so she could confess her feelings to him. Clark obviously knew that and, even if he did still care for her, the idea that she was worried about Superman’s safety over her own likely didn’t sit too well with him. Why should he open up to her? She had never given him any reason to think he wouldn’t be hurt again. If she was in his position she would do exactly the same thing.

Until they had the time to sit down and sort it out, she’d just have to live with a taciturn Clark Kent. Didn’t mean she’d have to like it though.

“I hope Henderson can find Kampos in time,” she said finally when she’d been unable to take his silence for any longer. They were coming up to the street that Batchelar’s office was. “If he doesn’t…”

She trailed off when Clark didn’t add anything to the conversation. It was getting very difficult to pretend that everything was okay. Since when should she be feeling guilty for upsetting him? He was the one who disappeared earlier when she was desperately trying to tell him how she felt!

She was about to turn to him to tell him that whatever was bothering him he needed to suck it up, when the cab arrived at Batchelar’s office.

They slid out of the car in silence and entered the waiting room, both announcing themselves to the secretary at the same time. A smile crept across Clark’s face as they did so and Lois felt some of the tension ease.

It only took a few moments before they were ushered down a long hall way and into a semi-tidy beige-coloured office. It was empty, but for a desk, some chairs and a file cabinet. Seconds later, a man walked in. Lois frowned, regretting the lost opportunity to snoop without having to break in.

He was a tall man, with a five-o’clock shadow that suggested

he hadn’t paid too much attention lately to the way he looked. Lois wondered if that was because he’d spent too much time in a locked basement working on Kryptonite experiments. It certainly looked as if he hadn’t seen the sun in a while. He was very pale, and his clothing rumpled and in disarray.

But it was his eyes that really caught her attention. They were a deep, ice blue, piercing and sharp. And there was nothing behind them. No conscience, no soul. If she had ever doubted her reporter instincts in the past, that doubt was all but gone. She knew just by looking into his cold, empty eyes that he was the man they were looking for. Just as she knew looking to Clark’s warm, brown eyes that he was a man of great integrity and compassion. This man was the complete opposite. He was the man responsible for the Kryptonite drug. And he was more than just a little dangerous.

Here was a man who had no compunction whatsoever about killing whoever got in the way of his science. And by the look he was currently giving them, he knew they were onto him. He knew, and he’d want them out of the way. Lois shivered and felt Clark’s hand touch hers softly. She looked at Clark’s face and saw a hardness in his eyes that led her to assume he saw the same emptiness in Batchelar. He saw, and he wanted her safe. It might have been foolish chivalry, but it warmed her just the same.

“I’m Geoffrey Batchelar,” the man said holding his hand out. He smiled, but the smile was cold. Lois repressed a shiver and reached out to shake his hand. Clark’s jaw tightened, but he managed to do the same without revealing his discomfort.

“Lois Lane,” she said, and then nodding to Clark, “this is my partner, Clark Kent.”

“It was you I spoke to on the phone I believe, wasn’t it, Mr. Kent?” He tilted his head to acknowledge Clark, but Lois had the sneaking suspicion that his exchange of pleasantries was nothing but a dance to him. Go through the motions, before getting to the heart of the matter.

“It was,” Clark replied smoothly. Batchelar gestured to the empty chairs in front of his desk and sat down. Lois and Clark both followed his lead, while Lois removed a pad of paper and pen in order to take notes. “Ms. Lane and I are doing a story on Pharma-Tec, the company you used to work for. Given your accomplishments in the scientific community and your recent termination you can see why we would be anxious to talk to you.”

“To try to figure out if Pharma-Tec had been wrong in firing me?” An amused smile lit his mouth and Lois wanted to smack it right off his smug face. This was not a game to her. A boy was dead and it infuriated her to see this man make light of it, especially when he was likely the indirect cause.

“We’re not assuming anything at this point,” Lois told him firmly. “But it did make us curious. Pharma-Tec is known for making sound business decisions and you’ve advanced the company further than most. Why did they let you go?” She really wanted to ask *who did you hurt?* But she knew that would get her next to nowhere, and only put him on the defensive. They needed him open and willing to talk.

“They weren’t pleased with some of my recent research,” Batchelar replied vaguely. *I’ll just be they weren’t*, Lois thought angrily.

“What sort of research was it?” Clark asked him. Batchelar caught his gaze and smiled outright. It was almost as if he enjoyed this little cat-and-mouse game.

“Well, now you don’t expect me to just tell you that, do you?” He shook his head. “Pharma-Tec might have been too closed-minded to see what I have to offer, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t other companies out there who might. My product is completely without patent. If I were to tell you and you published it, who would stop people from producing it on their own?”

“If it’s dangerous, Mr. Batchelar, I doubt anybody will want

to,” Lois’s voice was curt and cold. She knew her composure was slipping and fought to remain her façade of journalistic indifference. She knew he saw through it, but it was the only thing keeping her from diving across the table and throttling him.

“One person’s dangerous is another person’s innovation,” Batchelar countered. He waved a hand as if to dismiss the entire line of questioning. “It was their loss. I will continue regardless.”

“And just how will you do that?” Clark asked. “Where is your funding coming from, now that Pharma-Tec has let you go? I noticed that car outside. Pretty fancy stuff for a guy without a job, to say nothing of these offices.”

“A generous benefactor who sees worth in my ideas that Pharma-Tec did not.” For a moment, his cold eyes glittered with insanity. Lois fought back another shiver and the impulse to move closer to Clark.

“And that benefactor is?” She lifted her pad, prepared to write it down, yet fully aware that Batchelar was not about to actually tell them.

“Unfortunately, Miss. Lane I can’t divulge that information,” he replied without missing a beat. “It’s in the clause of our contract that they wish to remain anonymous.”

Convenient, she thought cynically. She pushed on nevertheless.

“It wouldn’t happen to be Cost-Mart, would it? We noticed in our research that they have a history of enticing scientists away from other companies to develop products for them.” She bit her lip knowing that what she had just said was completely made up, but hoping that she could put Batchelar off his guard. If he thought that she had managed to legitimately link him and Cost-Mart together, then maybe he’d let something slip.

It was a false hope, as whatever surprise he had by her statement was carefully hidden.

“Like I said, Miss Lane, I can’t divulge that information.” He looked at the two of them for another moment before speaking again. “I thought that you were doing a write up on Pharma-Tec, but you seem more interested in my current research. Is there a reason for that?”

And just like that, Lois knew their interview was over. They had gotten as much from him as he was willing to give and they wouldn’t get anymore. She fought back the wave of frustration that hit her as Clark responded to his statement.

“We are, but we want to make sure we have the complete story. We’d hate to misrepresent anybody.”

“A noble intention, Mr. Kent,” Batchelar said standing up. “But I’m afraid there’s very little to misrepresent. My falling out with Pharma-Tec was simply a clash of ideals, nothing more. I am happier where I am now. I hope I have helped at least a little with your story.”

“You have,” Lois lied as she too stood up. She shook his hand once more, wanting to get out of the office and away from him as soon as possible. Clark looked as if he wanted the same thing and the two of them left the building, their strides long and swift.

Once outside, Lois let out the long breath she’d been holding and felt her shoulders slump.

She closed her eyes, trying to block out the image of the glassy stare that seemed to follow her even now and concentrated on her determination to bring Batchelar down.

“Lois?” Clark was watching her, his gaze concerned. She was surprised to discover her hands were trembling and she mentally cursed herself for her inability to successfully control her emotions.

“He did it,” she murmured absently, her voice slightly shaky. “God, Clark, just looking at him I know he did it. His eyes...his eyes...”

She trailed off, unable to look at Clark and began to walk again. Clark followed, refusing to be brushed aside. She suddenly felt sick inside, unable to do anything but get as far away from

that building as humanly possible.

Inside it was a man who was responsible for at least one boy’s death, maybe two. Inside it was a man who cared nothing for the lives of others as long as they could bring him profit. Inside was a man who enjoyed pain and suffering and thought of it as a joke. And thinking back on it, Lois realized that those cold blue eyes with their soulless hungry gaze, were just like Lex’s.

She felt faint and dizzy and had to stop and gulp in air to catch her breath.

And suddenly Clark was there, the heavy weight of his hand on her shoulder more comforting than anything she’d ever known before. She still couldn’t look at him, but his nearness and the warmth from his own body were helping to slow her racing heart.

“Are you okay?” He stepped a little closer. Close enough that she could lean on him for support. Close enough that she could just fold entirely and allow him to catch her, to sob into the warmth of his shirt, to feel his heartbeat beneath as she did. She held herself together. She wasn’t sure if she could handle his sympathy right now. Wasn’t sure if she wanted to look into his eyes and see that sincerity and truth. Not after staring into Batchelar’s eyes. It would only remind her how incredibly stupid she’d been. And how that stupidity might just have ruined everything between them.

“I’m fine,” she lied, trying to force the waver out of her voice, to sound convincing. “I’m just...he looked so cold. So inhuman.”

“Lois I’m not sure I understand,” Clark began softly. He must have realized he wasn’t going to get her to willingly look at him, so he reached out and tipped her chin gently to meet his gaze.

The worry in his eyes in contrast to Batchelar’s nearly undid her completely.

“He’s evil,” she all but whispered. She fought back tears of self-loathing. Clark was staring at her with such open concern, such affection and warmth. “He’s evil and he’s...”

She shook her head and blinked, allowing a tear to slip down her cheek. He brushed it away with the pad of his thumb, leaning forward as if wanting to kiss where the tear had been, but thinking the better of it.

And that was what caused her to break, the intense desire in his eyes to do something, anything to take away the hurt in hers.

“He looked like him, Clark.” She hated the weakness in her voice, but couldn’t seem to help it. She needed his understanding more than anything. “His eyes. I never realized how evil they were...how empty. But you did. How did you know?”

“Lois, what are you...”

“Lex,” her voice was so quiet she barely realized she’d said the name aloud. “And Batchelar. His eyes. They have the same... I almost married him. They have the same eyes, and I almost married him.”

“But you didn’t,” he said fiercely. “You stopped the wedding.”

“But I didn’t know until it was almost too late.” Regret coursed through her. “You saw it. You knew. You looked into his eyes and saw...nothing. I didn’t see that until today. I didn’t know. I thought you were just jealous. I thought you were lying to me, trying to keep me from...why didn’t I believe you? Why didn’t I trust you?”

“Don’t,” he almost begged. “Don’t say that. It’s not your fault. You did nothing wrong. I went about it all wrong, tried to force you to feel something you didn’t. I probably discouraged you from believing me by...” he stepped back, shaking his head, obviously afraid to go any further. Lois wanted to reach out and pull him closer, to bury her head in his shoulder and forget the world existed, but stood her ground.

“I should have seen it,” she shook her head and tried to ignore the emotion in his gaze. “It wasn’t up to you, it was up to me.”

“Lois...”

“No,” she said with one more shuddery breath. She’d fall apart later. Right now they had too much to do. She hadn’t done anything to stop Lex. She wouldn’t be as ineffective when it came to Batchelar and Intergang.

She’d done enough wallowing. It was time to stop him. It was the only way she could feel like she’d done any good. It was the only way she could live with herself after all that had happened. Clark was still staring at her, still brushing the side of her face gently with the tips of his fingers. The contact stirred something entirely different inside her, and one that wasn’t conducive to her newfound resolve. She stepped back, hating herself for it, but needing to focus.

“We have to stop him. And we have to find Kampos.” She set her mouth in a determined frown and Clark nodded in compliance. Obviously he sensed her emotional retreat. She regretted it, but it had to be done. She just wasn’t ready to put herself on the line like that. Not when that chapter of her life still needed closure.

“Let’s get back to the *Planet* and call Henderson.” His voice was quiet and his shoulders were slumped. Lois wasn’t sure if he was disappointed or relieved. She wished there was a sure way of knowing, but knew there never could be.

Swiping angrily at her face one last time, she headed for a payphone to call for a cab.

Chapter 10: Closer

Henderson couldn’t be reached for the rest of the day, but Lois couldn’t be angry about that. According to the person she spoke to at the precinct, he was out with a team scouring the streets in search of Kampos. She and Clark did the same for as long as they could, but the end of the day was drawing near and it had been an exhausting one for both of them.

Lois was determined to keep the focus of it on the search for Kampos so she and Clark hardly spoke at all towards the end of it.

The search yielded nothing however. They questioned the Soldiers once more, trying to impress upon them the importance of finding him for his own safety but if they knew of his whereabouts they weren’t talking. Either they didn’t believe them when they said it could be a matter of life or death or they did and just didn’t care.

She wasn’t about to give up on proving Batchelar was guilty, however, and had already started to formulate a plan for how she and Clark could break into his office to obtain the evidence they needed for Henderson to make an arrest.

Clark was dead set against her desire to break into the office, but she knew that she could get him to come around eventually.

Right now she just wanted to go home. She needed some time to unwind. She wasn’t sure she could pull off a successful break-in in her current state. She would give it a few hours and then call Clark and convince him that it needed to be done. She briefly entertained the idea of trying to get in touch with Superman to see if he could help them, but dismissed it.

He would want to help, she knew that much, but he would never compromise his morals by breaking into Batchelar’s office even if Batchelar was guilty like she thought he was. She should see it as an admirable trait, that his belief in the laws of society was so pure and complete, and yet for some reason it bothered her now.

Clark was just as moral, just as good as Superman, yet he knew that sometimes it was necessary to bend the rules a little for the greater good. He knew that sometimes it just wasn’t possible to do things by the book. Catching Batchelar was far more important.

She shook her head. It was weird. When she first met Clark she had constantly compared him to Superman and had always

found him wanting. He had never seemed good enough, strong enough, heroic enough or altruistic enough. Not compared to the man in the cape and the suit. After all, he used the powers he possessed to serve the world, devoted his life to saving others and asking nothing in return.

But Lois had been looking at it all wrong. Yes, what Superman did was altruistic and there was no doubt that he was a hero, but to elevate him above everybody else simply because of his abilities was foolish.

Clark was just as heroic as Superman and without any powers at all to back him up. Clark followed every one of her foolish schemes, despite that they almost always seemed to result in life and death experiences that required rescuing by Superman. Superman had been there for them when they needed him, but it was Clark that had risked his life at her side. It was Clark who went into the situations they did without Superman’s invulnerability to protect him. It was Clark who had confessed his feelings to her in the park that day, who put his heart on the line. It was Clark who had loved her then.

And it had been Superman she’d chosen.

But then again, if she wasn’t able to see true evil when it was right in front of her, why should she be able to recognize selfless heroism?

There was no doubt that Superman’s actions were heroic, and the world was a better place with him in it, but Clark was the one who did what he did without that recognition, never becoming bitter and never expecting any sort of public recognition.

But she was sick of dwelling on what was past. She had made a mistake. She had made many of them, come to that. But she was finished with all of that.

Her novel would be the first place she could fix those mistakes and maybe, just maybe her real life would follow.

She flicked on her apartment light and sighed as she sank onto her bed. After a few moments of relaxation, she forced herself upwards.

She needed to write. She needed to get her feelings and frustrations out somewhere. Finishing the book was no longer about publishing it. It was about personal catharsis and perspective, something she only seemed to be able to gain after writing a chapter or two.

She scrolled backwards through the story for a bit, allowing herself to get re-acquainted with what she had written last. As soon as she felt confident of it, she placed her hands on the keyboard and began to type.

Laura couldn’t make up her mind about Liam. One moment she would be seriously considering his offer, and the next the very idea of marrying him caused her to break out into a cold sweat. How was it that one little proposal could cause so much inner turmoil? What was it that made her so unsure?

Charlie

NO! She refused to even consider that he was the reason she was holding back. All he had done was confuse her, right from the day she met him. One moment they’d be the best of friends and the next, it was like she didn’t even know him.

Maybe that had been because he had feelings for her. She’d never stopped to consider how deep they might have been until he told her he loved her.

Something wasn’t right though, even knowing that. There was something else that kept her from trying to salvage their friendship, or from seeing whether there might be a potential relationship in the offing. She knew he was hiding something.

There was nothing else it could possibly be. How else could he be so convinced that Liam was a bad guy? Somehow, he knew something she didn’t. And he wasn’t telling her.

It infuriated her. If he had information — actual reliable information — she’d be the first person to want to nail Liam to the wall. But all he had done was tell her he knew it in his gut

and ask her to trust him.

Laura found that hard to do with anyone, let alone someone who was admittedly jealous of her relationship with the man.

If she were to be totally honest with herself, part of her was afraid — terrified that his information might be correct. If it were, it would mean Laura had been the stupidest woman in history to trust him. It would mean everything about her, as a person and a cop was a failure. If a rookie cop could see something that a seasoned vet like her couldn't, or wouldn't, then what the hell was she even doing on the force?

So yeah, maybe she was burying her head in the sand just a little bit. But it was no excuse for Charlie to just cut himself off from her entirely. And it certainly didn't make her upcoming decision any easier.

She was at a complete loss as to what to do.

Liam was offering her so much. Security. Safety. A job she'd be good at. What the hell was her problem? It wasn't as if the money was fantastic as a cop. And her relationship with her partner may very well be damaged beyond repair. So what was it?

It was Charlie. Part of her was unsure. Part of her trusted his instincts even when hers seemed to be betraying her.

She hated that it might come down to this, but she had to talk to Charlie before she made her decision. He had to know just what Liam had put out there. If he really did have information on him, he'd have to give it to her then and there, otherwise...

She drew a deep breath. Yes, that's how it would go. Charlie would do the deciding for her. If he were open and honest with her, then she'd tell Liam no and do everything she could to rebuild bridges with her partner. If he decided to give her the run around yet again, she'd give Liam a try.

Picking up the phone, she dialed Charlie's number with shaky fingers.

He picked up on the third ring.

"Charlie, it's me...Laura."

"I know," he replied. "I have call display."

"I'm surprised you picked up," she said softly. "You've been ignoring my calls all week."

"I've been busy," he said, but she could hear the lie in his voice.

"Me too," she took a deep breath. "Look, I know this is awkward and I'm partly to blame for that. I didn't handle our last conversation very well. But I need to talk to you. We have to sort things out."

"I'm not sure there's anything to sort out," Charlie said sounding weary and sad. "I told you how I felt. You don't feel the same way."

"It's more complicated than that and we both know it," she replied trying to keep from snapping on the phone and causing this already precarious conversation to crumble completely.

"Look, can you just meet me for lunch? Please? I need to talk to you and it has to be in person."

"Laura, I don't want to..."

"Liam asked me to marry him."

She hadn't meant to tell him on the phone. She had wanted to ease into it, but she knew that the only way she was going to get him to meet her was if she dropped a bomb. He was just going to avoid her any other way.

She heard a sharp intake of breath on the other line followed by a pause that seemed to last for hours. She felt like dirt for telling him this way, but it was the only possible option. Eventually he spoke.

"Where do you want to meet?"

The café they had met before was nearly empty which suited Laura just fine. She wasn't keen on having a bunch of onlookers observing yet another one of the 'Laura and Charlie specials' should another occur.

She was early so she ordered drinks for both of them and flipped through a magazine absentmindedly until a shadow fell over her, signifying Charlie's arrival. He sat down, and she gestured to the drink in front of him.

"It's your favourite."

"Thank you," he said, though he didn't seem to taste it as he took a sip. Instead, he leaned closer and narrowed his eyes.

"Why are you doing this, Laura?"

"Let's not start the conversation this way," she pleaded gently. She really didn't want a shouting match. All she wanted was for him to understand her position, to see where she was coming from. Why was that so hard for him?

"How would you like me to start it?" His jaw was set in a grim line and Laura desperately wanted to touch him, to get him to smile. Why should she be worried about how he was feeling? Why did she care so much that he was hurting?

"I'd like you to start it by asking me what I said to Liam after he asked me." She saw the surprise in his eyes and knew what he had automatically assumed. He confirmed it in his next statement.

"I thought...you mean you didn't say yes?"

"I would have told you I had on the phone if that were the case," she pointed out. "I called you because I needed to talk to you first."

"What am I, your girlfriend?" he spat, "and since when do you listen to any advice I have about Liam anyway?"

"Charlie, I'm trying to have a logical conversation," she sighed and met his eyes. "You're not making this easy for me. I don't know what I want here. All I know is that I'm being torn in two different directions and I need answers before I can figure out what to do."

"What kind of answers?" He was looking at her suspiciously now. Laura hated that.

"I need to know why you think Liam is the one behind the murders. I need to know the truth."

"I told you, I don't have any proof. If I did, I'd already have mounted an investigation." He shook his head. "You really don't need me here for this."

"No," she put out her hand and stopped him from getting up. "You're lying to me. I know you are, I can see it. Why won't you tell me what you know? We're supposed to be partners. Why don't you trust me?"

"You believe me then?" he asked, his voice low and hopeful.

"How can I when you won't tell me anything concrete?" She threw up her hands in a helpless gesture. "I don't think you're deliberately lying to me about him, but if there's something you know, I need to know it otherwise all I have to go on are my own instincts as a cop. Instincts that have kept me alive for a good long while. I know he cares about me, and he's offered me a job with his office. I wanted to make sure that accepting it was the right thing to do. If there's any...any chance that you are right I need to know. Otherwise..."

"That's it then?" He looked at her, a new sadness in his eyes that caused her own resolve to falter.

"What's it?"

"The only reason you wanted to talk to me," he sighed and shook his head. "The only thing stopping you from marrying Lancaster is the possibility I might be right. That's all?"

"What else is there?"

His head snapped up at her, his eyes blazing with part anger and part heartbreak.

"If you don't know, Laura, then there's nothing to talk about." He threw a few dollars on the table and stood to go.

"Charlie, no, please, don't go!" She was pleading with him but she didn't care. This wasn't the way it was supposed to go.

"Please, stay. I never said...I'm doing this all wrong."

"It's very simple," he whispered. "You either feel something

for me or you don't. You already know how I feel about you."

"I do, I just..." she trailed off, unsure of how to put her own feelings into words. "God, this is hard. I'm with Liam. I committed to that relationship first and I owe him that much to see it through, however it might turn out. My feelings for you are...complicated. I need to take each decision one at a time, and I need to do that based on logic, not emotion. I need to know if I'm marrying a monster."

"You are," he replied coldly. "But I can't prove it. You want to know what kind of guy he really is? Investigate. Do your job. I can't give you any other advice but that. As for making your decision...if you aren't making it based on your heart than you're not the woman I thought you were. I can't just sit here and listen to this. Call me if you change your mind. Good luck."

As he walked away, Laura scrambled to go after him.

"Chsasjkhfdkjh

Lois cursed under her breath as the knock on her door caused her typo. She sighed, saved her work and headed to the door to peek out the keyhole.

It was Clark.

She checked her watch, wondering just what had brought him here only hours after they had parted at the *Planet*. She had intended to call him after she had finished working on her novel, to try to convince him they needed to sneak into Batchelar's office.

From the look of him outside her door however, he had come determined to do just that.

She opened the door, trying to ignore the flutter that occurred when seeing him dressed entirely in black. The surprise on her face was difficult to conceal.

"Clark? What are you...?" She didn't get to finish the question. The expression on his face caused her heart to drop and it told her more than words ever could.

"We need to break into Batchelar's office." Clark's voice was quiet, but there was a barely controlled fury underneath. "Superman found Kampos by the docks an hour ago. He was ripped apart, Lois. He's dead."

"No," Lois whispered. She wondered if it had been Intergang's doing or the drug's side effects then realized it really didn't matter. Another boy was dead. A guilty one perhaps, but that didn't make it okay. This needed to stop. Her throat convulsed and it was a moment before she was able to speak again. "Superman...how is he? Did he get too close? Was there Kryptonite?"

"No," Clark said with a shake of his head. "He found him from the air and called the police, then came to tell me. Whatever this is, Intergang won't stop there. They'll try again. You and I both know that. We have to get evidence on this guy and we have to get it soon."

"Before not even Superman can stop it," she added, though she knew Clark was already thinking that. She met his haunted gaze, reached out and touched his cheek in a gesture of comfort. He leaned into the palm of her hand and kissed it softly, so softly she thought she'd imagined it were it not for the shiver of feeling that skittered up her spine, tingling in all the right places.

She knew there was no time to lose, but for some reason she couldn't bring herself to move. Slowly she stepped forward, and with her other hand touched his chest lightly. His skin was warm underneath his black turtleneck, vibrant and alive. His heart beat a shade more rapidly than it should and she felt hers echo it. It felt like he was calling to her, body and soul and she didn't want to do anything but answer it.

She stood there for what seemed like forever, lost in the solidness of his body, its proximity to hers, and the gaze in his dark eyes. Death had been their constant companion for the last couple of days. Both had been haunted by the image of an innocent boy, ripped apart for what seemed to be no reason at all.

Lois didn't know about Clark, but before they went after this guy she desperately wanted to touch him, to know that he was alive and healthy and close. She wanted to know that if she were to wrap her arms around him — to press her body against his and feel his breath warm on her neck — that he wouldn't pull away.

She wanted that connection so she wouldn't have to feel so alone anymore. She wanted to know that her work wasn't just about getting the story, that there was a purpose to it...some meaning. Clark was that meaning. Clark had taught her more about compassion and love than any other human she had ever met. And Clark was the one who looked lost right now. As if he had been the one to find Kampos' dead body, not Superman.

Clark was the one who needed her to touch him.

"We should go," he murmured, his lips still warm against her fingertips. Chasing away every last bit of fear, she leaned in on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to the underside of his chin in an almost feather-light kiss.

He sucked in a breath, almost like a hiss, and she felt his arms wrap around her, pulling her to him. His eyes were closed and his breathing quickened. He stood stock-still, as if moving would somehow break the spell they were suddenly under. Lois could understand it, but she needed more from him.

His arms fit so perfectly around her. She had never felt so terrified, yet so safe all at once.

Reaching up with her other hand, she tipped his face down to hers, and kissed him, this time on the lips.

His mouth parted slightly and the kiss deepened sending shivers throughout every part of her body. His arms held her tight and secure, yet Lois could feel a slight tremble in them, in every part of him. He was more than just a little affected by this and it only made her want him more.

She was running her hands through his hair now, unable to remain still in the embrace. It was wrong to be doing this now, when there was work to do, but Lois couldn't seem to bring herself to care. She had wanted this for so long. She didn't want to be anywhere else in the world.

Eventually, after what seemed to be an eternity of both pleasure and torture, Clark pulled away, drawing a shaky breath, his gaze darkened considerably by the kiss.

"Clark?" Her voice was a mixture between a throaty whisper and a plea.

"We...we need to go." He pulled back abruptly breaking the physical contact and Lois watched in desolation as he seemed to retreat back within himself. He was suggesting more than just stopping to break into Batchelar's office. It was clear he felt the kiss had been a mistake. She could see it in his eyes.

A second ago they'd been passionate and intense. Now, they were avoiding her.

"Did I do something wrong?"

He shook his head and backed out of the door.

"This guy needs to be caught, that's all." He nodded as if the matter were closed. "I'll wait out here."

Feeling her throat constrict, but not wanting Clark to see how upset she was, Lois simply nodded.

"I'll get changed."

Chapter 11: Can't Get Enough

Neither of them spoke on the ride over to Batchelar's office. Lois desperately wanted to mention what had happened back there, to find out if it had meant as much to him as it had to her, but part of her was afraid of the answer.

And his body language thus far had given her no reason to think she shouldn't be. He sat beside her, but he might as well have been in Siberia for all the connection she felt. Twice she had attempted to touch his arm, to meet his eyes, but both times she had felt him tense up to the point of rigidity before she pulled her hand away in frustration.

What bothered her most was that she wasn't sure what she'd done wrong. She had thought that he wanted this as much as she did. She thought she had been lying when he claimed not to love her. Even now, despite his remote body posture and attitude she couldn't bring herself to believe that he'd been telling the truth that day. There had been too much passion in his kiss, too much desperation in his touch. He had needed it as much as she had.

So why was he the one pulling away? Wasn't that normally her habit?

Her thoughts were interrupted by their pressing business and Clark made short work of the lock on Batchelar's office, allowing the two of them to enter it unhindered. She wondered how a man who seemed to despise any sort of deviation from law and order was so talented at breaking and entering, but hadn't bothered to ask him. In his current mood, she likely wouldn't get much from him anyway.

She set to work going through Batchelar's files methodically, knowing they didn't have much time, but not wanting to miss anything that might be of relevance. Henderson needed something concrete, something they could use to nail Batchelar once and for all. Two people were dead because of him and Intergang and more would follow if they couldn't prove it.

She glanced over briefly at Clark, but he seemed fairly absorbed in a file. She noticed the pile beside him, presumably of files he'd already gone through and frowned. He was way ahead of her. She hoped he was actually reading them, rather than just thumbing through and 'speed reading' as he claimed he was capable of doing. She'd always had her doubts on that score.

Turning her attention back to the matter at hand, she picked up another file and began to peruse it. On the third page, something caught her eye and she said Clark's name quietly, motioning for him to join her. Once he did, she pointed to the spot on the page in question.

"Look at this," she told him, "Batchelar talks here about a test and the use of human subjects. No mention of what the test was, but the first one was set for the same day that Jonathon French was killed."

"First one," Clark murmured. "I don't like the sound of that."

"There are more," Lois confirmed looking through the file. "A few more, and they look like they are supposed to happen fairly soon. No specific dates here though. You think Henderson could use this?"

"It's not hard evidence," Clark said with a frown, "but if we can find something to back it up, a date, a name, evidence of the drug, that's probably enough."

"Then I guess we keep looking," she said with a sigh. "You do that while I photocopy this page. If we take it, Batchelar will know we were here."

Clark nodded and went back to the files he'd been looking through while Lois waited for the photocopying machine to warm up.

As soon as she had finished copying them, Clark appeared behind her, grabbing her and shoving her against the wall beside the door, his own body covering hers completely.

Too waited to do anything, Lois waited and watched as the door opened, and Batchelar entered. The door covered them for now, but Lois was afraid that as soon as he closed it they were through. If he had any sort of weapon on him, they wouldn't get out of here alive.

Clark's breathing was slow and reassuring, allowing her to slow hers as well in order to keep from being heard. He felt warm pressed against her and Lois had to remind herself that they were hiding from a potential killer in his office, not out on some sort of date somewhere. He felt far too good pressed close to her that way.

His errand completed, Batchelar turned around and left the office.

Clark jumped back almost immediately and both of them let out sighs of relief. Lois was about to start on the files once more when Clark touched her hand lightly to get her attention.

"We should get out of here," he told her, urgency in his voice. "I have a feeling he'll be back."

She knew he couldn't be certain about that, but trusted him nevertheless. They had the one document and hopefully they could return another night to try again. They hadn't been caught. Somehow Clark had managed to get all the files back in the cabinet before Batchelar had entered so he hadn't noticed anything out of place. They had something for Henderson. Maybe it was enough for a search warrant that would allow them to go through the office legitimately. Either way, they had to get out of there. Tonight was obviously not their night.

The subsequent ride back to his place was just as silent and just as awkward. Lois desperately wanted to say something to him before she dropped him off, but for once in her life she found the words suspiciously absent.

Eventually as she pulled up to his apartment, she couldn't hold back any longer. Still unsure of what to say, she grabbed hold of his hand before he could exit the Jeep and pulled him close.

Startled, he complied, allowing her to brush her lips against his in a light, almost nonexistent kiss. He pulled back however and looked away uncomfortably.

"This isn't a good idea, Lois," he finally told her.

"Why not?" she asked him softly. "What did I do wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing, I..." he trailed off, obviously at a loss for words. Lois decided to take control. It was now or never. In her novel, Laura would take control. She'd fight for Charlie, Lois had already decided that. And if Laura could be brave enough to fight for Charlie, she could certainly do so for Clark.

"Do you love me, Clark?" Her voice was steady and strong, causing a shocked look to pass over her partner's face.

"What?" He looked as if he'd just been hit over the head with something blunt.

"Do you love me?" she repeated steadily. "I need to know."

"I can't..." he struggled to find the words. "I can't answer that. Please don't ask me that."

"Why not?" she demanded, feeling anger bubble to the surface. She was trying to be honest with him about her feelings. Why couldn't he have the simple courtesy to do the same? "You weren't shy about telling me how you felt when I was about to marry a killer, why not now? Or were you telling the truth afterwards? Did you only say that to stop me from marrying him? I need to know how you feel."

"What if I don't want to tell you?" He swallowed heavily and Lois could see the obvious pain in his gaze.

"I can't force you I suppose," she finally admitted. "But I thought we were getting closer. I thought we were becoming... we kissed back there. We kissed and it was... amazing. But I guess I was the only one who felt that then."

"No!" He exclaimed suddenly. "You weren't, I felt the same way. I just... I told you I loved you once. And you said you could never feel that way for me. Asking me to say it again is like an exercise in torture when I know you can't feel the same."

"Maybe I was wrong before," she ventured hesitantly, trying to suppress the waver in her own voice. This was looking like the moment of truth and Lois had never been more frightened in her entire life than she was at this moment. She'd been in life and death situations before, but always Superman had been there to save her. This time, the only person capable of that was Clark. And he looked just as terrified as she felt. "I wasn't thinking straight then. I made a lot of mistakes. I'm trying to fix one now."

"I'm not a mistake you need to 'fix', Lois," he said contemptuously. "You said you didn't love me. You said you couldn't. I'm supposed to believe that you just woke up this

morning and decided you were wrong?”

“I was wrong!” she exclaimed, shocked that Clark could really believe she was that indifferent towards him. How could she have made him feel so insignificant? “I was very wrong. I’ve been realizing that for quite some time now. Ever since we started this investigation, I...I’ve wanted to change our relationship. I feel very deeply for you. But I need to know if I’m feeling it all by myself. I need to know if I’m all alone here.”

“You’re afraid to tell me how you feel in case I don’t feel the same way?” His voice was quiet and his expression unreadable. Lois swallowed heavily and nodded. “I can’t do that for you. I can’t ease your fears this time. If you want to know how I feel, then you have to tell me how you feel first. I put my heart on the line once. It’s your turn.”

“I deserve that,” she conceded. She could see in his eyes just how terrified this conversation was making him and it made her heart ache to realize she was the reason for that fear. She was going to have to make the leap. Could she do it? Could she be brave enough to risk everything? She’d never felt for anybody the way she felt for Clark. He made her feel complete and whole. One look in his eyes could erase any pain or hurt she might be feeling. Was she willing to risk losing it all? What if he did feel the same and somehow it still didn’t work? What if she ended up screwing it all up and losing him forever? Could she live with herself if she’d been the one to change the relationship? What would Laura do?

She looked at her partner, really looked at him, trying to come to a decision. His brown eyes stared back, questioning, hoping. His lips were parted ever so slightly making her desperately want to kiss him. And it was the look in his eyes that told her she couldn’t stay silent. It was that look in his eyes that she had never seen in any of her previous boyfriends or lovers. It was acceptance, desire and most of all, love. She hadn’t noticed it in his eyes before because she hadn’t known what it looked like. Lex certainly had never looked at her that way. And somehow she knew that no matter what happened between them, even if it didn’t work, he would always look at her that way. He would always love her.

That made all the difference in the world.

“It’s okay,” he was saying sadly as he turned to open the door. She felt panic rise within her. Obviously he thought she wasn’t going to say it. She had waited too long.

“Clark, wait, don’t go!” She was pleading this time, but she didn’t care. She had to say this. Even if he didn’t say it back, she had to let him know.

“I love you. I’ve always loved you. I didn’t know it back when you told me how you felt. I should have, but I couldn’t see what was right in front of me. I wish I could go back there. I wish I could do it all over again. If I could, I’d kiss you instead of turning you away. I’d tell you I loved you back. I’d never ask you to get Superman for me. And I know I might be too late. I know you might not want me telling you this now. You might be angry with me. You might not want this anymore. I won’t blame you if you’re scared. I’m scared too. I’m terrified. But I had to tell you. I had to let you know.”

He said nothing as she spoke and his eyes gave nothing away. She wasn’t even sure he had heard her until she glanced down and saw that his hands were shaking. For good or bad, what she said had affected him. If only he’d respond.

“Say something,” she whispered, her heart in her throat. “Tell me you don’t love me. Tell me you hate me. Tell me that I’m crazy, but say something. Tell me...tell me you love me too. I’d give anything to hear that.”

“Lois,” his voice was hoarse with emotion and his jaw was rigid. She could tell he was fighting to keep steady, to stay in control. It only made her want to touch him, to pull him closer and take away that control. To make him whisper her name again,

that same way, with that same huskiness. “I could never hate you. And I could never tell you that I don’t love you. When I said it before, I...I had my fingers crossed. It’s juvenile, I know but it was the only way I could think of to salvage our friendship. I’m sorry. You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to hear you say that you...that you love me.”

“Does that mean...?”

“I love you,” he murmured tenderly. “From the moment I saw you in Perry’s office I loved you. And if you really feel the same way...”

“I do,” she whispered, moving closer. “Let me prove it.”

The kiss was gentle at first, as if both of them were too afraid to admit it was happening. Slowly, agonizingly slowly, Clark deepened the kiss, his tongue gently entering her mouth, making her feel things throughout her entire body. She was suddenly reminded of the day in Lexor Hotel when he’d kissed her on the bed, the way he’d made her feel, his body on top of hers, his lips strong and unyielding. She wanted that now, wanted all this tentativeness to disappear, to be replaced only with strength and passion.

She ran her hands through his hair, over his shoulders and to the center of his chest. She pressed herself eagerly against him, wanting the warmth of his body to wrap around her as well.

He growled low in his throat and the sound sent shivers up her spine. She felt as if she were on fire, and only Clark’s kisses could save her. She wanted to remove the coat he was wearing, to run her hands under the black sweater, to feel his hot skin under her fingertips, to hear him moan at her touch.

Instead of pressing closer to her though, he moved back, breaking the kiss before it got too heated.

“Clark?” she met his gaze, knowing he had been just as affected as she had. She couldn’t understand why he’d pull away. She’d told him she loved him and he loved her. What more was there to say to one another? Why couldn’t they just be together after waiting so long?

“We’re in your car,” he told her between ragged breaths.

“Oh!” She looked around, realizing for the first time that she had been perfectly willing to strip him down in her car parked outside his apartment in a residential neighbourhood. It had been one hell of a kiss. “Maybe I could...come up?”

He shook his head regretfully, refusing to meet her eyes. She felt her heart plummet.

“I...I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” he told her.

Why didn’t he want her to come up? Why was he rejecting her? After what they had said to one another, why couldn’t they do this?

“I don’t understand,” she said, knowing she sounded small and scared but unable to hide her fear.

“I just...” he ran his hand through his hair, trying to find the right words. “There are some things I haven’t told you. And some things I haven’t...experienced yet. This is still really new for me. I want this...more than you could know. But I want it to be special. I want to take this slow so that we’ll remember it forever. Can we...can we just give it a few days? When we’re done with this story I’ll tell you all I need to tell you. And if you still want me...if you still love me...”

He shook his head and kissed her gently one more time before getting out of the car. She watched him go, unsure of what to do or say. His statements about having something important to tell her still frightened her and made her wonder just what it was he was hiding from her.

He was only a few feet away from her when he turned back, looking at her with that loving gaze once more before speaking.

“I love you,” he murmured. “When this is over, remember that, okay? I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

It was late when Lois entered her apartment, but she was far too restless for sleep. She knew she should be thinking about the

information she and Clark had gathered from Batchelar's office. There were the upcoming 'tests' that they needed to learn the locations and times for so that they could stop them. She knew she should have her mind on stopping Intergang from getting the drug onto the streets where it could do an immense amount of damage, but she couldn't bring herself to focus.

All she could think of was how amazing it felt to be with Clark tonight. The memory of his body pressed against hers in Batchelar's office, his breathing slow and even, and the feel of his heartbeat underneath her fingertips. He had been so warm, so strong, so responsive to her. Every touch, every kiss, every caress had felt like she was awakening something inside him that had previously been dormant. She was feeling things with Clark that she had never felt with any man before, and judging by what he'd said to her while getting out of the car, she was guessing he felt the same. There had been a look in his eyes tonight, a newness in his expression that told her he wasn't used to feeling this strongly for someone — emotionally, or physically. It reassured Lois, as she was still feeling shaky from those kisses.

She was still feeling restless... warm... anxious. She had gotten a taste of Clark Kent and now she feared she was addicted. Part of her wanted to just show up on his doorstep wearing a long trench coat and not much else and see how he'd react, but common sense prevailed. She knew he'd been just as affected by the kisses, if not more. It had killed him to pull away like that, she could tell. He must have had a legitimate reason for it. The cryptic comment towards the end about still having things to tell her gave her pause, allowing her to ignore her hormones and stay far away from Clark Kent, even though all she really wanted to do was jump him.

Still, it was difficult to just put those feelings on the shelf entirely, especially when she was feeling so frustrated at the moment. Clark was likely taking a very cold shower right now, which made her smile ever so slightly. Unfortunately it didn't really work the same way for her.

She decided to attempt some more work on her novel as a means of exorcising her own frustrations. She briefly considered writing a sex scene for Laura and Charlie, but knew that doing so would only serve to drive her even crazier when her own personal means of release had put a stop to their physical intimacy for reasons unknown.

Besides, Laura and Charlie still had too much unfinished business for such a scene to be possible. There was still the problem of Laura agreeing to (or planning to agree to) marry Liam Lancaster. She had planned for Laura to back out of the wedding at the last minute, just as she had done where Lex was concerned, but she still wasn't quite sure why.

For herself, it had been because she had looked around the giant church and had seen very few of her own friends and loved ones in attendance. It had occurred to her then that no man was worth the absence of all of those she held dear to her, and certainly not a man she didn't even love. She may have respected Lex, but respect could not build a life with someone, especially when one's friends had all but disappeared. When she was really truthful with herself, she knew it was Clark who had caused her to reconsider.

He had been the only one in her thoughts as she had walked down the aisle to stand beside her fiancé. It was profoundly wrong to think of another man on one's wedding day, a realization that had come to her just in time before she could do something incredibly stupid.

She didn't want Laura's epiphany to come that way, though. She already knew why she hadn't married Lex. She knew she had gotten out at the last minute, but she hadn't known of his true nature even then. She had pulled out because it had simply felt wrong on every level. Although she was trying her best for this novel to be honest and realistic, she wanted Laura to do what she

hadn't. She wanted Laura to investigate Liam and discover his evil herself. She wanted Laura to be someone her readers could admire. She wanted Laura to have the redemption she craved even now.

She hadn't had the chance to act on the challenge that Clark leveled at her the day she picked him up in the car Lex had given her. She'd only half-heartedly looked into it. She remembered even now how angry he had sounded when he reminded her she was an investigative reporter. She hadn't listened to him then and had only escaped marrying a murderer by listening to her heart.

But Laura existed as a fictional character that Lois could live vicariously through. Laura was not going to sit passively by and marry Liam Lancaster when there was some doubt as to his moral character. Laura was going to expose him. Laura would redeem her.

Laura was finding it very difficult to objectively investigate the man she was involved with. She had taken Charlie's advice to heart, refusing to accept his marriage proposal until she knew exactly who and what she was getting into bed with figuratively and literally but it wasn't as easy as she thought it would be. She had assumed because she saw him so often that it would be an easy enough thing to be able to rifle through business records when she was inside the house. Unfortunately that was not the case.

Any time they spent together was spent with Liam clearly anticipating an answer to his question, which only made things very awkward. Added to that there was hardly a moment when she was left alone to attempt to investigate. It puzzled her as he was usually fairly preoccupied with city matters to devote his full and undivided attention to her. That had all changed ever since her last conversation with Charlie, which made Laura wonder if somehow he knew what Charlie had challenged her to do. It was a paranoid thought that she should have felt ridiculous for having and yet its presence in her mind only made her more determined to carry through with it.

It was pretty obvious by the third or fourth day after that conversation that searching his home while he was there was going to be next to impossible. After realizing this, Laura immediately went to work getting a spare copy of Liam's keys made without his knowledge so that she could sneak into the house while he was at the office and look then.

She didn't tell Charlie about any of it. She didn't want him to know she was giving credence to his theories if he turned out to be wrong. She didn't want him to know that her faith in her relationship with Liam was so tenuous that she needed to investigate Liam for potential criminal activity before agreeing to marry him. And she didn't want him to know that should Liam come up clean she couldn't think of any valid reason not to marry him, other than that she didn't actually love him. For some reason that bothered her most of all.

She managed to get into the house relatively easily. She knew the days that the household staff had off, as well as their break schedules, to the point where she was able to get all the way up to Liam's office without being noticed by anybody in the house.

After an hour or so of searching various political documents that made her fairly sleepy, Laura began to seriously consider giving up. She found herself oddly surprised that Liam appeared to be as clean as a whistle and wondered what it meant that she had half expected to find something incriminating. Was it simply Charlie's conviction that Liam was guilty? Or had Laura herself seen something in his nature that caused her mind to come to that conclusion? Either way, it appeared to be false and Laura did not want to be caught there when Liam returned from the office.

She set to work putting everything back the way she had found it when the sight of something odd underneath Liam's desk caught her eye. Curious, she knelt down and saw that it appeared to be a release valve.

As soon as she pressed it, a hidden drawer opened within the desk revealing a sizable stack of manila envelopes that made Laura's heart beat double-time. It only took her a few moments looking them over to convince her that everything Charlie had been saying all along was right. She felt her heart grow cold as she stared at the irrefutable evidence before her that said that the man she had been dating for months was not only guilty of murder, but of the murder of her friends and colleagues.

She swallowed the lump she found forming in her throat and stuffed the envelopes in her purse. She'd have to show these to Charlie. It was after all, his case now. She didn't relish the idea of admitting he was right. She didn't want to hear any 'I-told-you-so's...not from him.

She had ruined not just one relationship by not listening to him, but two. Charlie had made it perfectly clear that she had blown it with him. The fact that she knew now for certain that she loved him and not Liam would mean nothing to him. She had nearly chosen a man she didn't love over Charlie. The fact that he turned out to be a murderer almost felt like an afterthought. Why wouldn't she have just chosen Charlie to begin with?

Because she was scared, that's why. And her fear had cost her two relationships, one she was happy to see go and one that made her want to break down and cry at the loss of it.

How could she have been so stupid? How could she ever make it right?

Once she was clear of the house, she found the nearest payphone and proceeded to call Charlie. He wasn't at his desk and nobody seemed to know when he was expected back. She felt like screaming. All she wanted to do was turn over the evidence she had and curl up in her apartment to sleep for days. She didn't want to deal with any of it anymore, least of all wait for Charlie to answer her call. It wasn't even certain after their last conversation whether he would answer it or not. She'd have to be proactive about the situation.

Despite the fact that the captain told her he didn't want to see her near the precinct again for another few days, he didn't say anything when she entered. She had a feeling the look on her face might have something to do with it. People who saw her moved quickly out of her way which gave her some indication as to how she must look to others at the moment.

Thankfully she didn't have to wait too long. She couldn't have been there for more than half an hour before she spotted Charlie's tall, powerful frame approaching the desk. One look into his eyes changed his expression from surprised to see her there to compassionate which almost undid her completely. She didn't want compassion from him. It was almost worse than an 'I-told-you-so'.

"Laura..." He looked at a loss as to what to say. "What are you...I thought your leave wasn't up for a couple more days."

"It's not," she replied, her voice almost robotic. She dropped the envelopes down onto his desk. "I just came to give you these. I think you'll find it useful. After you arrest him, I'll be tendering my resignation from the force. It has been a pleasure working with you, Charlie."

"Resignation? Arrest him?" Charlie gaped at her, obviously shocked. He reached out and picked up an envelope, leafing through it as quickly as he could. His face went from shocked, to grim, to sadly determined. Looking up at her, the depth of caring and tenderness in his eyes nearly made her break down in tears. He looked genuinely upset. "Oh, Laura, I'm so sorry."

"Don't lie to me," she said coldly. "You wanted this. You wanted him to be guilty. Well, you have it. I hope you're happy."

"I didn't..." he insisted shaking his head, "I didn't want this. I didn't want you hurt. God knows I didn't want that. I only wanted you to be happy. I really wanted him to be innocent. I didn't want you to have to see this."

"Well, I've seen it," she said with a weary sigh. "It's all right

there. You won, okay? Enjoy your victory. And enjoy the collar. I don't want anything to do with this bust. I'll come back another day to let the captain know I want to resign."

"But you can't!" He exclaimed. "This is your life! You can't let this discourage you."

"I blew a major case," she reminded him. "Not only that, but I dated the main suspect for months before even bothering to look into what you were telling me all along. I don't know how you knew what he was, but it only goes to show that whatever instincts I may have had as a cop are gone now. Maybe they died with my father. Maybe I never really had them. Either way, I can't continue to be a cop when I miss this kind of thing. If it hadn't been for you, Liam would have continued to hurt, even kill people without being stopped. If it hadn't been for you..."

"You would have married him," Charlie murmured, anguish in his eyes. Laura knew that for him, that last part hurt most of all.

"No," she said shaking her head. "I don't think so. I thought I might have, but when I found the evidence you needed, I realized I didn't actually plan to marry him. If I had, I might have felt even worse about losing him. As it is, the only thing I feel really bad about is being so stupid and not noticing what was right in front of me to begin with."

"That's all you regret?" He asked, his dark eyes boring into hers with an intensity that made her shift her gaze.

"I can't tell you all the things I regret," she replied sadly.

"But the main regret? Losing you. If I had known that it would make me feel so...lost, I...things might have been different."

"What are you saying?" Charlie asked softly. His gaze was so gentle, so hopeful that Laura felt her own heart respond to his. She knew now that it was Charlie she had wanted all along. It was Charlie who made her heart speed up whenever he looked at her. It was Charlie who had always been there, who she could trust above all others. It was Charlie who believed in her even now, even after she'd been so very wrong. And it was Charlie she had run away from in favour of a monster she'd once thought was a man.

"Why does it matter?" she murmured, trying to fight back the tears of bitterness the threatened themselves. "I screwed up. I can't ever make it right. I can't ever change the way you look at me. You must think I'm some horrible person! I mean what kind of human being nearly agrees to marry someone like Liam Lancaster? And you'd be right. I don't know who I am anymore. I know how I feel about you now, but it's too late. I'm sorry. For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"Slow down, Laura," Charlie said tipping her chin up and softly tracing the curves of her face. "First of all, I don't think you're a horrible person. I never did. And if I ever made you feel ashamed about the choices you made, that was my fault. I wasn't trying to make you feel guilty. And I don't want you to think that you have to have feelings for me just because I happen to...well, you know how I feel."

"That's not why I have feelings for you," Laura replied. She smiled at him, hoping that the look in his eyes meant there was still hope for the two of them. "I know I just found out my would-be fiancé is a killer, so if you don't believe me I'll understand, but...I love you. I have loved you from the moment I met you. I didn't want to admit it because it scared me. And the more I loved you the more I ran from you. When I think about how terrified you made me the day you kissed me on that bed..."

"Terror was the last thing I was feeling that day," Charlie said, his voice husky with the memory. "God, if you knew how long I've wanted to hear you say that...to hear that you loved me..."

"I do," Laura repeated, realizing that saying those words the second time had replaced fear with elation. Now he knew. Whatever else happened, he knew how she felt. "Do you...I

mean, does this mean there's still a chance for us? That you still love me?"

"Not still," Charlie said as he leaned in for a soft kiss.

"Always."

"Always," she whispered back. "I like that."

Pulling him down to her, their lips met once more in a kiss that was far more powerful than anything Laura had ever experienced. They were eventually forced to break apart by the various catcalls and hooting that could suddenly be heard throughout the station. When she pulled back, she was embarrassed to see the captain staring at the two of them. His mouth was set in a stern line, but his eyes were smiling, giving Laura the impression that he'd been hoping for a development such as this.

"Break it up, Landon," he said with mock severity. "This is a police station, not a motel. What do you think you're doing here anyway? Aren't you on personal leave?"

"I uh...I have something that you guys can use," she told him handing over the evidence and watching as he flipped through it.

"Landon, this is..." he looked up at her and gave her a compassionate smile. "I'm really sorry. I'm glad you brought this to us though. I'll uh...I'll send someone to pick him up right away."

"No, wait, captain..." she said putting her hand out to stop him. "I want to do it myself. I know it's not my case anymore, but if it's okay with you, I'd really like to bring him in."

"All right," he said with a short nod. "But take King with you in case he resists. I don't want to take any chances where this scum bag is concerned."

Normally Laura would resist the implication that she needed somebody with her for backup, but when she looked at Charlie, she realized that it wasn't about her own inabilities as a cop, it was about having someone there for you, through thick and thin no matter what. Laura realized she liked that aspect of having a partner and found herself smiling at Charlie as the captain headed back to his office.

"When this is all over," he said as he picked up his gun and placed it in the holster, "we need to sit down and talk. There's a lot I need to tell you."

Lois stopped typing and stared at the last sentence curiously. She hadn't meant to write it, but there it was, looking more cryptic than she had intended it too. Maybe it was because of what Clark had said to her as he left, but somehow Lois felt that Laura and Charlie's story, despite the apparent happy ending was still slightly unfinished.

She rubbed her eyes and realized that she was exhausted. She saved her work and turned off the computer. She had expected her own personal frustrations to have disappeared, unfortunately that wasn't the case. She suspected that she was never going to get enough of Clark Kent.

She went to sleep that night with a smile on her face at the thought.

Chapter 12: Mice in the Parlour

Lois slept in the next morning, arriving at the *Planet* half an hour after her usual time. She had a feeling it was partly because she had stayed up half the night working on her novel and partly because she was reluctant to face Clark right away. It wasn't that she didn't want to see him. In fact, it was the exact opposite. She was so anxious when she did wake up that she spent a lot longer in the bathroom fixing her hair and makeup than she usually did.

She wasn't sure why — he had seen her in every situation imaginable, including a particularly embarrassing scenario for which he was at fault involving the sewage reclamation facility and a wild goose chase. Why then, should she be so anxious about seeing him now? It was silly, but that didn't keep the butterflies from swirling through her stomach as if they were

caught in a wind tunnel. Everything was new between them now. They had a whole other relationship, beyond partners and friends. Lois desperately wanted to see his face that morning, to see him smile at her without having to hide how he felt for her, to be able to smile back. At the same time part of her was still terrified that something might go wrong...that she might somehow screw it up.

When she finally did meet his gaze as she crossed the busy newsroom, all her fears and doubts receded to the furthest part of her mind as she felt her entire body being warmed by the intense love she saw in his gaze. He was looking at her as if she were the most precious thing in the world to him, and she had no doubt that she was smiling back at him the same way. She wondered briefly as she approached him if the entire newsroom could see the incredibly goofy grins that were no doubt on both their faces, but decided that for once she didn't care what anybody else thought. Let them talk. Better yet, she decided to give them something to talk about.

"Good morning, partner," she murmured as she pulled his face towards her for a brief, yet excruciatingly tender kiss. He seemed surprised by her forwardness, but not displeased. When they broke apart, she could see a few shocked stares, and a giggle escaped her as she considered turning and telling the gawkers to 'take a picture — it lasts longer'. She resisted the impulse however, and instead turned back to Clark who was still looking at her with that smile on his face.

"You never cease to amaze me, you know that?" he was saying as he reached for a cup of coffee that he'd been saving for her. She took it, surprised that it was still warm and turned her attention back to him.

"Why's that?"

He shrugged, obviously at a loss as to how to explain what he was feeling. She placed her hand on his hand, and felt it curl into a soft squeeze.

"I just...I never thought that you'd be so..." he trailed off again, flustered in a way that Lois decided was perfectly adorable. "You're just...amazing. I mean, I've wondered how you would act towards me at work if we were involved like this. I thought you might be...hesitant. Never in a million years did I think you'd be so open, so completely...you."

"Well I don't intend to drag you into a storage closet and have my way with you, but you can't expect me to keep my hands completely to myself," she said with a mischievous smile. "Especially since you got me coffee."

"Hmm," he grinned wickedly back at her in a way that sent shivers up her spine and made her reconsider the last statement about the storage closet. "And just what will you do to me if I were to have saved you the last doughnut?"

He handed her the pastry in question before she could answer him. Touching his tie lightly, she licked her lips in a way intended to drive him crazy.

"Mmm," she said pretending to ponder the thought, "shame we're in a public place."

"Lo-is," he said only half complaining, "how am I going to work with that thought in my head?"

"You'll just have to learn how to multitask, farm boy," she told him simply as she started to shift her brain away from 'jump Clark' mode and back to 'work' mode. "After all, I've been doing it for months."

Before he could comment on that particular admission, Perry's sharp bark caused the two of them to come face to face with the stern expression of the editor-in-chief.

"What's up, Chief?" Lois said, wondering just how much he had seen of their office flirting. She'd have to tell Perry sooner or later about their new relationship, but explaining it right in the middle of the newsroom was not exactly how she'd pictured it.

"You two have anything more concrete on that Intergang drug

story?”

She let out an inner sigh of relief.

“Not yet,” Clark replied before she got the chance to. “But we’re going to give Henderson a call and see if the information we dug up last night is useful in any way. We should have something for you very soon.”

“You’d better,” Perry said gruffly. “You’ve already spent more time on this without results than I normally like. I need something I can print soon, you hear me?”

“Believe me, Perry, we know how crucial time is on this one,” she replied resolving to concentrate one hundred percent on the investigation until they had Batchelar locked away for good.

“Good,” Perry said with a curt nod. He turned to go, then turned back and gave them a knowing smile. “And uh, I’m glad to see you two are getting along so well.” With a wink he headed back towards his office and Lois felt her face turn red. She turned to see if Clark’s was doing the same, but he was already busy calling the police station, head down as he did so.

Henderson seemed to think that the information they had dug up the night before might be enough to get a search warrant for Batchelar’s office issued, but it would take time...time that Lois didn’t think they had. If what happened to Jonathon French and to Kampos had been part of a test of the drug, then they were due for another fairly soon. Lois had no doubt that Batchelar would make his move as soon as possible, especially considering their visit would have indicated they were on to him.

“We need to get into that office again.” She spoke mainly to herself, but Clark was already nodding his agreement.

“But how?” he wondered. “We don’t really have a lot of time. Waiting until tonight might be too late.”

“Then we stake out the office now,” she declared, realizing that without proof there was not much else they could do. “We wait until Batchelar leaves the office for any reason at all and we break in. Anything we can find to prove his guilt we use to nail him with.”

“What about the Intergang connection?” Clark asked, sipping his own coffee thoughtfully. “We still haven’t been able to prove Batchelar is connected to the organization.”

“Right now I think we should concentrate on stopping him,” she said with a regretful sigh. “I’d like to be able to prove a connection, but this drug is just too dangerous to chance it. If we find anything in his office that points us to Intergang, great but if not...well, we have to stop Batchelar from getting that drug onto the streets first and foremost.”

“I agree,” Clark said with a nod. Lois finished off her doughnut, took one last gulp of her coffee and grabbed her coat. She waited as Clark did the same and as they headed for the elevator, trying not to think of all the wonderful non-stakeout type things that could be done with Clark in her Jeep. It was going to be a long day.

It was a few hours into the day before they saw any activity in Batchelar’s office. Lois hadn’t gotten much sleep the night before, so Clark had offered to watch the office while she took a quick nap snuggled up against his shoulder. She had fallen asleep almost immediately after leaning against his solid form, she was so tired. She didn’t know how long she slept, but eventually, the soft touch of Clark’s thumb on her cheek trailing down to her lips caused her to stir.

“Lois,” his voice was warm, cocooning her in her still-drowsy state and causing her to smile and nuzzle her head into his shoulder. She loved how the faint scent of his aftershave seemed all around her, caressing her. She had totally forgotten where they were and why. All she could feel, smell and sense was Clark.

“Lois,” his voice was a little firmer now and she felt him gently and with some reluctance, lifting her head off his shoulder. Her eyes opened despite her internal resistance and it all came

rushing back to her — where they were, and why. *Damn*, she thought as the dream of waking up next to Clark disappeared only to be replaced by reality. What would it be to really wake up beside him? She shook that thought away, and looked his way to let him know she was awake. He pointed to the door of the office where they could see Batchelar locking it and heading away from it.

It was now or never and there likely wasn’t a lot of time.

They managed to make their way across the parking lot and to the door before anybody could see them. Clark once again proved to be invaluable when it came to picking the lock and within moments they were back inside the office, this time with daylight present to aid their search.

Clark set to work on the filing cabinet, while Lois attempted to pick the lock on one of the wooden drawers beside the desk. Eventually it popped open with a click and Lois pulled out a small metal box, eyeing it curiously.

Motioning for Clark to join her, she popped the lock on the box and opened it, only to gasp in shock as she came face to face with a glowing green rock that she would never forget the sight of as long as she lived.

It was Kryptonite.

“Oh God, Clark, I think we’ve found his supply.” She stared at it for a few more seconds, eventually turning to see why her partner hadn’t responded. What she saw caused her mind to blank almost completely with shock.

Clark was doubled over on the floor, clutching his sides and moaning, clearly in a great deal of pain. His face had gone ghost white, and sweat poured down the sides of his temples freely like raindrops. She shook her head, unable to think of anything beyond that Clark was sick — very sick and she had no idea what was wrong with him.

“Clark! Oh, God, Clark! What’s wrong?” Panicked, she knelt down to touch his head, and almost pulled her hand back in shock at how warm it was. “What can I do? Clark? Clark, what is it?”

“The...box...” he ground out through gritted teeth. “Close... the...box...”

“The box?” she repeated, trying to figure out just what it was he meant. Eventually it dawned on her and without thinking, she snapped the box containing the Kryptonite shut.

Within seconds, his colour seemed to return to him, and Lois allowed herself a large breath of relief that was immediately succeeded by a heavy feeling that everything was about to change. The implication of what had just happened eventually hit her full force when she replayed the scene in her mind.

Clark had been fine until she opened the box. The box had Kryptonite in it and the moment Clark had been exposed, he’d been forced literally to the ground with the pain of exposure. It wasn’t until she closed the box back up again that he began to recover. But how was that possible? The only person affected that way by Kryptonite was...

No!

It couldn’t be...

But it was.

It dawned on her all at once, and Lois let out an inarticulate sound of surprise as she glanced down at her partner, still lying on the ground in a fetal position, unable to move just yet.

Only Superman could be affected by Kryptonite that way and yet...there was Clark.

Clark Kent *was* Superman.

And then her shock was immediately succeeded by anger. And not just any anger...white-hot rage that he would keep something like this a secret from her for so long. Looking down at him, she felt it overcome her all at once, rendering her unable to speak

“You...” she fought for the words, desperately needing to express the rage and fury she was feeling. “You unimaginable

bastard.”

“Lois, I can explain...”

“Save it,” she said coldly. “I don’t want to hear any of your lies. Let’s just get out of here.”

“Lois I...”

“Well, well, look what we have here,” a cold, almost robotic, voice interrupted them. Lois turned to see Batchelar staring at them with those empty eyes of his, and a small, cruel smile on his face. “Mice in the parlour. Perfect. Just what we need for today’s test.”

Three very large men with semi-automatics flanked Batchelar, and Lois went still. One she could handle, but four of them with weapons like that? There wasn’t a chance.

Fear, icy and cold took root as she realized what he meant by that. She looked back over at Clark, still unable to move and swallowed hard.

“The police know where we are,” she lied, hoping that she could buy some time to...what? In any other situation like this, she’d already have called for Superman...or he would have shown up inexplicably seeming to know they were in danger. Or Clark would have somehow managed to get the weapon out of the bad guy’s hands, or break out of their handcuffs, or...

The full weight of the situation settled on her as she realized that she couldn’t call for Superman, and he couldn’t just knock Batchelar and his men out, or break out of the handcuffs should Batchelar decide to use them. He was too weak to do anything.

Lois was on her own. It was up to her to get them out.

But how?

“Do they now?” Batchelar said maliciously. “Well, we’ll just have to move this little party elsewhere then, now won’t we? Wouldn’t want the police to find out just yet.”

“What’s wrong with this one?” One of Batchelar’s men had approached Clark and was poking him cautiously with his foot. He groaned, but didn’t move.

“Food poisoning!” she exclaimed, moving closer but knowing she was helpless to protect him. “Leave him alone!”

She was still angry with him. Hell, she was furious. But right now he was helpless and they were in deadly danger. Trying to protect him was sheer instinct. Even if she never spoke to him again after today, she would get the two of them out alive or die trying.

However angry she was, she still loved him.

Before she could react, the three men moved closer, surrounding her and Clark. She positioned herself between him and Batchelar knowing it would do little good, but needing the illusion of protection.

“Don’t do this, Batchelar,” she said knowing the words were useless, but desperately trying to stall. How long would it take for Clark to regain his strength? Would he regain it?

“Yeah sure, Lane, that’ll work!” Batchelar said with a chuckle. “Now say pretty please.” He motioned to the men and grinned. “Knock them out. They’ll be easier to transport if they’re unconscious.”

“No, please!” Her cries were useless as the first man knelt down and hit Clark mercilessly with the butt of his gun. He let out one more groan, before sinking into unconsciousness.

She pitched forward, onto her knees to try to touch him, to make sure he was okay. All of a sudden she felt a rag at her mouth, a strange sickly sweet smell and then everything began to fade. Her last thought before darkness took her completely was *please don’t let them hurt him.*

Reality came back to her in pieces. The first thing she felt was her hands bound tightly behind her back. She then opened her eyes to nothing but an empty, cold, dark, room. Memory flitted back reminding her of what had happened.

Batchelar and his men were nowhere to be seen which was reassuring, but Lois wasn’t sure how long they’d be gone. She

attempted to tug at her restraints, but they were indeed handcuffs and there was no way she’d be able to get her wrists free. She was trapped for now.

Frantically, she looked to her side and felt some measure of relief at the sight of her partner, who was beginning to stir.

“Lois?” His voice was a drowsy mumble and the relief she felt melted away, replaced by anger and hurt as she realized the truth.

“I’m here,” she said stiffly. “Wherever here is.”

She looked over once more and watched hopefully as he attempted to free himself of the handcuffs. Her hopes were dashed however, when he was unable to do it, letting her know that his powers had still not returned. He was still helpless. For some reason, the idea that he was Superman and yet not able to do anything to save the two of them only made her angrier.

“I can’t get out,” he told her dejectedly.

“I noticed that,” she replied curtly. “Guess your little secret isn’t going to be of much use to us right now, is it?”

“Lois, I didn’t mean to...”

“Don’t you dare tell me you didn’t mean to keep this from me,” she hissed, not caring where they were or how much danger they were in. Some things needed to be said and he had to know just how betrayed she felt. “You had almost two years to tell me who you were, Clark! Two years! I can understand you not saying anything at first, but once we got to know each other... once we became friends...”

“How could I?” he countered, “how could I when all you wanted was Superman? I have wanted you from the very moment I saw you, but all you saw was him. If I told you who I was, and you suddenly decided that you did want to be with me I’d never know if it was because you actually cared, or because I could fly.”

“You really think I’m that shallow?” She felt like she’d been punched in the gut.

“I don’t know,” he exclaimed in frustration. “I don’t want to think so, but when I told you how I felt you turned me down and that very same day you told me you loved me as Superman...that you would love me if I was just an ordinary man without any powers. But I knew that wasn’t true...that you couldn’t.”

“Well that only goes to show how wrong you were,” she said coldly. “It might have taken me some time to see it, but I thought you were twice the man Superman was. I thought that because of how human you were...how ordinary...and how heroic. But I was wrong, wasn’t I?”

“Maybe you were,” he said sadly. “I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you who I was every single day, but after time passed it just got harder and harder. I didn’t want to lose you.”

“That was why you put the brakes on last night, wasn’t it?” It was suddenly far too clear for her liking. She was grateful she had, for she’d be far angrier if he had slept with her under those false pretenses, but at the same time she felt a great sense of loss. Now she might never get the chance to be with him. If they lived through this situation, she wasn’t sure she’d ever be able to trust him enough to let him get that close.

“I didn’t want to be with you without you knowing,” he admitted quietly.

“Then you were going to tell me?”

“After this was all over, yes,” he answered. “Not that it means anything, but I wanted desperately for there to be no secrets between us.”

“All this time,” she murmured to herself, trying to hold back the tears. “All this time, I thought you were the last honest man. Luthor turned out to be a liar, but I thought you...I thought you were reliable. I thought I could trust you.”

“Reliable...what am I, State Farm?” he said angrily. “You put anybody up on a pedestal like that, Lois, they’re going to fall. I’m just a man and I make mistakes like anybody else.”

"This is a little more than just a mistake," she replied, acid dripping from her tone. "I mean how many times have you disappeared and made me think I'd done, or said something wrong to make you leave? How stupid do you think that makes me feel? That my best friend, the man I loved could have been two different people this entire time, right under my nose and I didn't know? I thought that I was wrong in losing faith in my own ability to see beyond the exterior, but how could I have been if I misread both you and Luthor so completely?"

"I wish I could take it back," he whispered sadly. "I wish I had never caused you one second of pain. I never wanted that. But don't for a moment start to doubt yourself. It wasn't your fault. I consciously created a completely different personality so different from my own that nobody would notice. I did that...me. You did nothing wrong. If you want to be angry at someone, be angry at me, not yourself."

"Oh I am angry at you, believe me," she said with a hollow laugh. "I'm just thinking of all those times...all those locks you were able to pick, all those coffees in the morning that were just the right temperature. Well, if nothing else you certainly are useful."

"I'm not a kitchen appliance," he shot back. "And I might not be human, but I still have feelings. Do you think it didn't hurt me every time you turned me down for him? Do you think it didn't kill me to watch you choose my fake plastic persona over me?"

"You think he's just a fake?" she asked, shaking her head. "You really don't get it, do you? Superman might have been a disguise, but he's still you. He's the part of you that needs to help...to use his powers for the greater good. I admired that part. I may have confused admiration with desire, but it was still you. And last night...well, it doesn't really matter anymore, does it?"

"It matters," he murmured. "If we get out of this..."

"Don't..." she said, wishing she could block him out entirely. "I don't know what you want me to say, but just...don't ask me to say it. I don't think I can. I can barely look at you right now, without being reminded of how you lied to me, how you tricked me. Asking for anything from me right now is a little too much."

"Fine," he said, barely audibly. She watched him struggle some more against the handcuffs, obviously hoping for some measure of his powers to return.

"Anything?" she asked, after a few moments of trying. He sighed heavily and shook his head.

"It always takes my powers a while to come back after being exposed," he admitted. "And I've been exposed for the last few days on and off now. I don't know if I can get us out of this."

"It's not up to you to save us every time," she told him, swallowing the lump in her throat. For some reason, as angry as she was at him, she couldn't bear the thought of him thinking it was his fault if anything happened to either one of them. He might have lied to her, but the Kryptonite exposure had been an accident. She wouldn't let him beat himself up over that.

"If anything happens to us, I..." he broke off, his voice a ragged whisper, "I want you to know, I'm sorry and I love you."

"Nothing will happen," she said firmly, ignoring the fact that it still warmed her completely to hear him say that. "I'll get us out somehow."

Just as she said that, the door opened and Batchelar entered, carrying a small medical case with him.

"Oh good," he said with a chilling smile. "You're awake. Perfect. It's time to play."

Chapter 13: Victims

Lois stared at Batchelar, her mind racing as she tried to figure a way out of the situation. It really did seem pretty hopeless. Despite her earlier bravado, nobody knew where they were. They hadn't told Perry or Henderson their plans. Not even Jimmy knew where they were and they'd been unconscious when Batchelar

brought them here — wherever here was. It looked as if they were completely at his mercy, a thought which chilled Lois to the very core.

At the moment, Batchelar was opening his medical bag and setting the contents out on a small folding table he had brought in to him. All she could see of it was a small syringe, the rest of the items were too far away.

"What do you think you're going to do with those?" she asked, willing to keep her voice from shaking. She had to appear confident on the outside or she'd fall apart completely and she couldn't afford that.

Batchelar looked at her and smiled a cold smile.

"You two couldn't have picked a better time to nose around," he told them, "I had to postpone the second tests because I couldn't seem to find any willing subjects. The Soldiers didn't want to buy from me anymore, can you believe that?"

"Gee, I can't imagine why," Lois said sarcastically.

"You really do think you're amusing, don't you, Miss Lane?" Batchelar sneered.

"I have my moments," she retorted tipping her chin in an attempt at courage. He seemed to be taking his time preparing the needle, which was just fine with her. It occurred to her suddenly that the Kryptonite hadn't yet been added to the drug as it wasn't making Clark sick yet. He must not have it in the room yet. She bit her lip. Maybe if she could get him to move closer she could kick him, step on his hand, anything to get him doubled over in pain. She had to try to get free...it was their only hope if he really was planning what it looked like he was planning.

"What about Kampos?" Clark was asking. His voice was still slightly weakened and she hoped that Batchelar wouldn't be able to see anything out of the ordinary in him. "Was it you who killed him, or the drug?"

"It was the drug I'm afraid," Batchelar said almost gleefully. "A wonderful side effect of my own devising. Ties up all the loose ends possible. Both assassin and target are eliminated in one go. And the best part is that it looks like something else killed him. Terribly painful to watch...if you're into that sort of thing. If it weren't for you two, it would've gone over without a hitch. Now I've got a little more cleaning up to do than I normally like, but hey...we all have problems, right?"

"Some of us more than others," Lois muttered.

"I like you, Miss Lane," Batchelar told her as he set the syringe down and approached her. Closer, closer...but stopping just shy of being able to do any good. "You're...feisty. Just what I like in a victim."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I've never been a victim a day in my life," Lois glared back. "I'm not about to start now. We'll get out of this."

"Bold words," Batchelar said calmly, shooting a look at Clark as if they were politely discussing the weather. "She always like this?"

"Wait till you get her mad," Clark said darkly. Lois felt a slight warmth at his words.

"Well in that case, why don't I make this a little more sporting?" Batchelar threw up his hands as if an idea had suddenly hit him. "You both know I plan on using the two of you for the second test of my little drug. One of you is going to be the assassin and the other is going to be the uh...'victim'." He lingered on the last word and Lois had to fight the rising fear within her.

She looked over at Clark, but he didn't see her. He was staring at Batchelar with an intensity she'd never seen in his eyes...a look bordering on hatred emanated from him causing her to shiver. How far would Clark go, even in his weakened state, to protect her?

"Still, Miss Lane here has proclaimed that she is not a victim," Batchelar continued, oblivious to Clark's gaze. "So,

perhaps she has her heart set on being the assassin. Either way, one of you is going to be injected with this drug and once that happens, you will tear the other person apart. I will leave it up to you to choose which one of you kills the other.”

“It won’t work,” Lois said with a boldness she didn’t feel. “We know what the drug does and we’ll fight it.”

“A noble statement, but you’re not that strong,” he said with a cold chuckle. “Why, this little cocktail is so powerful, not even Superman himself could fight it. It would just kill him. In some ways, he’d be the lucky one. I’ll give you two the chance to talk it over amongst yourselves while I go and get the last little part of the drug. When I come back, one of you will volunteer, or I will choose for you.”

With that, he grinned and gave a small wave as he exited the room. Her stomach sank as she suddenly realized they were about to become guinea pigs in Batchelar’s sick experiment.

“Quick, Clark,” she said urgently as she began to tug against the handcuffs, “try to get out of the cuffs. Maybe some of your strength has come back. If we can get out before he gets back...”

“It’s no use,” Clark said quietly. His voice held a soft resignation to it that nearly took her breath away with desolation. “My strength is gone for now. I can’t get out of these cuffs. There’s only one thing I can do to keep you safe.”

“Clark...” she felt icy fear grip her as she tried to meet his gaze and found him unwilling to return it. “Clark, what are you suggesting? Don’t you dare say what I think you’re about to say, because I’ll...”

“I’ll take the drug,” he told her, his tone not wavering in the slightest. “It’s the only way.”

“The hell it is!” she exclaimed furiously. She’d be damned if she was going to just let him die on her like that. “We’ll find some other way!”

“There is no other way!” he burst out, unable to keep the fear from his tone this time. He met her eyes and Lois could see the desperation within them — not for his own life, but for hers. She knew in that moment that he would do anything to keep her safe. It was something that might have comforted her in the past, but now it only terrified her. She would not let her partner do something so foolish and idiotic.

“You always have to play the hero, don’t you?” she snapped, fighting to keep her voice from breaking or the tears from escaping. “Damn you, what do you think you’re trying to prove here? You’re not invulnerable to this, do you realize that? If he injects you with that drug, it will kill you! Do you even care?”

“Of course I care!” His eyes were wild and anguished. “Do you think I want to die? But there’s no other way. Either way I’m dead, Lois. Think about it. If he injects you with that drug, you’ll kill me. You’ll tear me apart just like Kampos did to French. Can you live with that?” He shook his head rapidly, thoughts coming to him in quick succession. “But it won’t even matter, because you won’t have to. The drug will kill you, too. It will tear you apart and make it look like someone else did it. It’s what killed Kampos and it’s what will kill you. I can stop it. I can keep you alive. That’s all that matters.”

“I can’t... I won’t...” her voice broke as her tears began to flow in earnest at the thought of what he was about to do. “Please, no. There has to be another way. There has to be something...”

“Lois, don’t,” he sounded on the verge of tears now himself. “Don’t cry for me, please. Not now. I don’t know if I can bear to hear you like that...not over me.”

“What do you expect?” she hissed, “after you tell me you’re going to kill yourself? You want me to throw a party? Jump up and down? Don’t you dare spring this on me and then tell me I can’t cry. I’ll damn well cry if I want to!”

“Lois...” his voice broke entirely and he hung his head, his shoulders shaking with silent tears.

In that moment nothing that had transpired before mattered. She no longer cared that he’d lied to her, no longer cared that he’d kept his identity from her a secret. None of it meant a thing because she was about to lose him forever. And there was nothing she could do to stop him. Nothing she could say to convince him she wasn’t worth dying for. And neither of them could hold or comfort the other as they cried, maybe for the last time.

For a few long agonizing moments she sat there, unable to look at him, unable to compose herself. Eventually, his head came up slowly, so slowly, and he glanced at her, his dark eyes even darker through his tears.

“I only wanted for you to be happy,” he admitted softly. “Even when you looked like you were going to marry Luthor, if it made you happy, I...”

“It wouldn’t have,” she interrupted. “You knew that when I didn’t. And you saved me. You always save me. Why?”

“I love you,” he whispered with heartbreaking simplicity. “And I always will. Don’t forget that okay?”

She was about to respond, when the door clicked once more and Batchelar entered, carrying that same small metal box they’d found in his office. His eyes brightened when he took in their tear-stained faces. In that moment, if she could have, Lois would have killed him and not felt any remorse for it. It was a scary thought to have and one she suspected had crossed Clark’s mind as well.

“I see you two have talked it over,” he said with a smirk. “Which one of you will be my little white mouse?”

“I will,” Clark said lifting his head and squaring his shoulders. Lois had to bite her lip to keep from crying out, from pleading with Batchelar not to hurt him. She wanted to promise him anything — everything if it just meant Clark would be safe. If she thought it would accomplish anything she’d have volunteered herself in his place, but Clark was right. If she were injected with the drug she’d only kill him in the chemically induced fury. There was no other option and she bitterly resented being the one chosen to live through it.

Batchelar’s face lit up, letting Lois know he was immensely pleased with the turn of events.

“I always suspected you would be the coward, Mr. Kent,” he said gleefully. “Don’t want to be ripped apart by your girlfriend here, that it? You want to be the one doing the ripping?”

“Maybe it will be you I rip apart,” Clark’s voice was a dark growl that Lois found genuinely unnerving. “The drug is pretty random after all. Maybe I’ll take you with me.”

“Correction,” Batchelar said calmly, “It *was* random. I’ve made some modifications to it since it was last tested. All I need to do is add Ms. Lane’s DNA to the mix and inject you with it. Once I do that, she’ll be the only thing in the world you’ll be able to see...and the only thing in the world you’ll want to tear to shreds.”

“Batchelar if it’s the last thing I do...”

“Oh come now, no more empty threats, please.” Batchelar threw up a hand to silence Clark, as if he was bored of his fury already. “In fact, I’m willing to make this a little more fun for all of us. I’ll release Ms. Lane from her handcuffs after I inject you. She’ll even have the opportunity to run! Of course, the fun will be when I get to watch you stalk her, hunt her down, and kill her. I’m really looking forward to that.”

“I’ll never hurt her,” he whispered softly, but with deadly assurance.

“We’ll see,” Batchelar replied equally confident. “Let’s put it to the test, shall we?”

He approached her as if savoring every step and slowly, cut her cheek just below her eye, allowing for a small drop of blood to fall into the solution. Lois felt her heart break as the blood mixed with the drug. He was really going to do it and she was really going to lose him. She closed her eyes, trying to keep from

panicking, trying to stay strong for her partner.

She finally opened her eyes to see him holding the box, unlocking the latch and opening it.

If Batchelar heard the soft gasp of pain that came from Clark's direction, he didn't let it show. All his focus was on the task before him, so much so that he didn't notice the sweat that had now reappeared on Clark's brow as the Kryptonite affected him. It didn't matter...he'd likely just write it off as fear on Clark's part even if he did see it. It made her even more furious to think that even though he was a murderer, to him Clark would die a coward.

She didn't want to watch, but couldn't seem to help it as Batchelar approached Clark, syringe in hand.

"If it helps at all," he said as he lowered the needle and pierced Clark's skin with slow deliberateness, "the two of you are helping me to make massive scientific advancements." He then removed Clark's handcuffs and leg restraints.

He stood up and stared at Clark a brief second as if to admire his handiwork then turned to Lois, keys in hand.

She heard a slight rattling sound behind her and seconds later, her hands were freed followed by her feet. A quick glance in her partner's direction told her he was suffering, but desperately trying to hold it together until Batchelar left to give her a chance at escape. Batchelar was looking at her as if he expected her to attempt just that, but her feet were rooted to the spot, refusing to let her move. She couldn't leave him there to die alone. She just couldn't.

"Go," he ground out, his jaw tight with pain. "Get out of here, now!"

"I won't..." she trembled, unable to bear the pain in his eyes. "I won't leave you!"

"Don't make this for nothing, Lois!" he cried desperately. "Run!"

"By all means, my dear," Batchelar said, exiting the room and standing outside the door. "Go for it. It will only take Mr. Kent a moment to catch up, I am certain of it. In the meantime I am going to go to my office to make a phone call to my business partners at Intergang to let them know this little problem has been taken care of. I'll return for your bodies later. Oh, and feel free to attempt to escape. Even if you do manage to make it out of the warehouse, there's nothing between us and the city but corn fields. Mr. Kent will likely get to you before you get that far however, but I thought it was worth pointing out so you don't get your hopes up needlessly. Enjoy the chase, Mr. Kent. It was a pleasure meeting you, Miss Lane."

He nodded swiftly and headed briskly down the hallway without looking back, leaving Lois to stand there and watch as her partner whimpered and crumbled to the ground, curling into a fetal position, all colour drained from his face completely.

"Clark!" Her voice was nearly hysterical, but she couldn't help it. She knew he wanted her to leave, but she couldn't do it. She just couldn't leave him to die.

"Get out," he rasped. "Please...just get out."

The sheer helplessness in his tone made up her mind for her. There was nothing she could do for him now...he'd been injected with the Kryptonite drug and it was slowly killing him. She couldn't save him, but neither could she let Batchelar just get away. She'd stop him whatever the cost.

"Lois, please..." he was mumbling softly, almost incoherently now and it broke her heart to have to leave him.

Kneeling down, she pocketed the handcuffs, smoothed the hair back from his forehead and kissed it softly.

"I love you," she whispered before leaving the room to go after Batchelar.

She kept her footsteps soft and swift as she made her way through the hallways and corridors looking for Batchelar's office. It was fairly empty as far as warehouses went, which made Lois

wonder exactly what its purpose was. If it belonged to Intergang there wasn't much here she could use to help bust them. It looked as if it had been abandoned for a while. She had a feeling Intergang kept it around for situations such as this one where they needed an out of the way place to dispose of people who got too close to their operations.

Gritting her teeth, she thought of Clark lying in the room helpless and hurting and vowed not to let Batchelar get away with this. She would find his office and she would take care of him. But first, she needed a weapon.

As she approached a small room, she found herself to be in luck as the room was in the process of being remodeled. Various tools and blunt objects lay strewn about, giving Lois her pick of makeshift weapons. She eventually settled on a fairly solid and thick plank of wood that she hoped would be enough to knock him out if she could sneak up from behind.

She gripped it tightly and left the room, heading around yet another corner. She was in luck as she spotted a room at the end of the hallway with a light on and a shadowed figure inside. As she got closer she could see through the shaded window on the door that it was Batchelar on the phone to his Intergang contacts, likely bragging about the job well done.

She fought to quell the rage inside of her as she pictured Clark's face yet again begging her to get away while she still could, not to allow his sacrifice to be in vain. It wouldn't be. She'd stop Batchelar if it was the last thing she did. He would not be allowed to get away with the distribution of the drug. He would rot in jail, hopefully making special friends with a weight lifter named Biff if she had her way about it. She had to catch him by surprise.

She knew there was no way she could do that if she just flung the door open. He'd see her coming and there was a very good chance he had a gun in there should anything go wrong. It wouldn't do Clark, or the citizens of the city, any good if she were to get shot before she could stop him. So how to get him out of the room? If she could just do that, she could hide beside the door and hit him in the back of the head as he came out of the room.

She needed a distraction and she needed it fast. Her mind went through all the various possibilities, until eventually she looked down at her feet and got an idea.

She lifted her foot, removed her shoe and pulled her arm back, launching it as far down the hallway as she could. The clattering sound it made as it hit the wall echoed loudly through the building the way she hoped it would. She allowed herself a small smile as she heard a startled cry from Batchelar, then quickly flattened herself against the wall, hoping he hadn't seen her.

Heart hammering, she watched as he slowly opened the door and cautiously stepped out, looking to and fro for the source of the sound.

Just a few more steps, she thought as she bit her lip and raised the plank of wood. *Just a few more...bingo!*

With all her strength, she brought the wood down aiming straight for the back of his head. He must have known she was there however, as he turned around just before the plank connected and caught the wood with his hand so that it hovered right in front of his face.

"Ah, ah, Miss Lane, that wasn't very polite. Your partner should be catching up to you any moment. I'd appreciate it if you were to cease these ridiculous attempts and just die already."

"Sorry to disappoint you," she growled as she put all her weight into shoving the plank of wood he was still holding directly towards his face, "I don't perform on command."

The plank connected with Batchelar's nose with a sickening *crack* letting Lois know that she had almost certainly broken it. Blood spurted down his face almost immediately and he swore

loudly as he reeled back, clutching his face in pain.

She resisted the urge to jump up in triumph, choosing instead to pull the plank back and swing it at his head once more, hitting him as hard as she could on the side of his head.

He groaned and she was certain she'd delivered a knockout blow. As she watched him sink to the ground, she made sure she kicked him in the shins for good measure and nodded with grim satisfaction. He was out.

Quickly as she could, she dragged his unconscious form back into his office, sitting him in the chair and using the handcuffs she'd kept with her to secure him to the heating pipe behind the desk.

Smoothing her hands over her pant legs, she grabbed the phone and quickly called Henderson, praying to whatever deity existed that he would be at his desk, and able to take her call.

Luck was with her, and she was transferred through to Henderson fairly quickly.

"Lois, what do you have for me?" Henderson asked the moment he picked up. Clearly he thought she was calling him with yet more information on Batchelar.

"I have Batchelar, chained to a pipe after trying to kill us." She spoke quickly, knowing that if she was to help Clark at all, she didn't have any time for niceties. She didn't even know if he was still alive, but if he was, she was going to do anything she could to try to save his life. Her mind raced, trying to think of something — anything that could help him at this point.

"You have what?" Henderson's voice rose ever so slightly. "Start at the beginning, okay? Where are you?"

"I don't know, and I don't have time to explain everything," she said urgently. "I was unconscious when he brought me here. You're a cop, can't you just trace the call?"

"I know how to do my job," Henderson drawled. "And if you have Batchelar chained up like you say, what's the big rush?"

"Superman is hurt!" She wasn't sure why, but she didn't want to say it was Clark that was hurt. Where could they take him if they thought he was Clark? The hospital? It was unlikely they could help him there. They wouldn't know the first thing about what was wrong with him. So...where?

And then it hit her.

STAR Labs...Dr. Klein.

He had told her and Superman (Clark really) that he would attempt to use the evidence provided by Kampos' shirt to find some sort of antidote for the drug should it make it to the streets despite their best efforts. Maybe, just maybe, he'd been able to do that. It was a long shot, but if he had, maybe it would work on Superman as well. She had to think there was some hope. She couldn't...she wouldn't believe that Clark was going to die. Not now.

"Please, Henderson, he might be dying. You have to trace the call and get an ambulance here to take us to STAR Labs right now. They're the only ones that can help him!"

"All right, calm down, Lois," Henderson said, his tone reassuring. Lois was grateful he didn't ask just how it was that Superman of all people could be hurt. She didn't have the time to explain about Kryptonite, nor did she want to. "I'm tracing the call right now. I'll get somebody to you as soon as possible. You just get Superman to hold on."

"I have to go to him," she told Henderson, knowing that there was every chance that they might be too late. If they were, she wanted his last moments to be with her holding his hand.

"All right, just leave the line open. We're coming to you, okay?"

"Hurry," she said into the phone before setting it on the desk and heading back towards the room Clark was in.

He was pale, and barely conscious, but still breathing, which gave her some hope. She knelt down and checked beneath the collar of his shirt, relieved to see he was wearing the suit beneath

it. With shaky fingers, she unbuttoned the shirt and undid his tie, until the 'S' was exposed to her sight.

It shouldn't have taken her long to remove his suit, but in her panicked state her hands refused to co-operate like she wanted them too. She tried to curb her frustration as she tugged his trousers down.

"This isn't how I wanted to undress you for the first time," she murmured, wondering if he could even hear her. "Believe me, I had pictured it going very differently. Thank God you're wearing the suit though...hopefully they won't wonder why you're missing the cape. Where do you keep that anyway? And the boots?"

She was babbling now, saying anything she could to keep her mind off the way his breathing became more and more difficult, trying desperately to ignore the erratic pulse she felt beneath her fingertips as she clutched his hand. He had to hold on. He had to stay with her. Henderson would get here in time. He just had to.

It didn't take Henderson long to make it to them at all. It was likely only about fifteen minutes or so in total, but to Lois it felt like hours had passed. Clark's breathing had almost stopped entirely and she felt herself on the verge of hysterics as the paramedics lifted him onto a stretcher and wheeled him out towards the ambulance.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Henderson leading a still handcuffed Batchelar towards his police cruiser. He was still only half conscious and Henderson had to practically carry him, but she took no pleasure in the sight. All her focus was on Clark.

She made sure the paramedics knew to take him to STAR Labs, rather than the hospital and Henderson assured her that he had gotten in touch with Dr. Klein to let him know of the situation. Klein promised to be there when they arrived, which helped to calm Lois somewhat.

"You tell him that we're all pulling for him," Henderson instructed as she climbed into the ambulance beside Clark. "That man is a hero."

"Yeah," she said between hiccups. "A brave, idiotic, hero."

Chapter 14: Lies

The ambulance ride felt like it took hours. In truth, the warehouse was surprisingly close to STAR Labs, but not close enough for Lois' comfort. The paramedics had hooked Clark up to all kinds of machines, one of which was helping him to breathe. It terrified her to see him like that, helpless on an ambulance gurney with no cape, no boots, his hair loose rather than slicked back, his pulse uneven and frighteningly weak. He might have been wearing the suit, but to Lois he looked anything but Super. He looked weak...vulnerable. Superman wasn't supposed to be vulnerable.

One of the paramedics was looking at him, his gaze dispassionate and clinical. Lois knew that he was watching Clark's vital signs, monitoring them in an attempt to keep him from slipping away even further, and yet she hated the fact that others could see him this way — even if they were helping him. She felt the urge to cover his body with hers, and to tell the paramedic to back off, to leave him alone.

She held back from doing so however, and concentrated on holding Clark's hand tightly, running her fingers over his arm, and praying that he could feel her touch. She hoped it might keep him in the world, keep him here with her. She couldn't lose him just yet. Whatever their problems might be, he was her partner and her best friend. He was...Clark. Even in the suit, with the 'S' boldly drawing most people's attention from looking at anything else, all she saw right now was Clark.

And all she could feel was Clark slowly slipping away. She'd never been so helpless in her entire life.

Klein was waiting for them as the ambulance pulled into the

parking lot of STAR Labs.

Once they had wheeled Clark into the main lab area, Lois recounted the entire story of what had happened, minus the part where Clark was Superman, of course. As far as Klein was concerned, she had snuck into Batchelar's office, Superman had caught her there and then Batchelar had shown up with his henchmen and Kryptonite in tow. It was as close to the truth as she dared get without revealing Clark's secret.

Klein listened to her intently, his eyes frequently darting back towards the limp figure on the table. It was clear that seeing him this way was unnerving to him as well. Lois bit her lip to try to keep the tears from welling up once more and concentrated on telling Klein what he needed to know in order to attempt to heal him.

Can you help him Dr. Klein?" she found herself asking before she could descend into incoherent babbling. "Can you save his life? Were you able to develop an antidote?"

"I..." Dr. Klein stammered, sweat breaking out on his features betraying his fear. "I was able to develop a prototype that might cure those injected by the drug, but it's very preliminary and it's designed for a human being who becomes injected not... well, he's not even from this planet, Ms. Lane, I don't know if it would work on him or if it would kill him!"

She felt a stone weight settle in her stomach as he rambled uncertainly. She had been holding herself together by counting on Dr. Klein being the one person who might be able to help him. She had put all her hope into a cure being available, and now it looked as if it might not even exist.

No, she wouldn't think like that.

"Please, Dr. Klein," she said, grabbing his arm and not even caring that she sounded desperate. "You have to help him. There has to be some way you can modify it so that it might save him. You have to try!"

"I just don't know," he repeated, shaking his head. "The solution has to be injected into the blood stream in order to possibly cure anybody affected by the drug. If it works, it will do so by causing the Kryptonite in the blood stream to dissipate, yet leaving the blood itself unharmed. The Kryptonite is the key to the drug, so with it gone the drug becomes harmless. Because he's Kryptonian though, I have no idea how the solution will react to his blood. It might dissolve the drug and leave his blood untouched, or there could be some part of his blood that my solution reacts badly with. This is all assuming he has relatively the same physiology as a human. I mean, I've never seen his blood under a microscope...there could be a hundred different reasons why the solution could do more harm than good. Don't you see, Ms. Lane? There are just too many questions."

"It's risky, I understand that, but..."

"Not just risky!" Klein interrupted, his voice slightly frantic. "Insane. Utterly insane, I mean if I had some time, if I could just study his blood for a little while then maybe I could figure something out, but..."

"We don't have time," Lois interrupted, her voice now steady and her mind made up. There was no other option. However dangerous this solution of Klein's was, they had to try it. The alternative was to just stand there and watch Clark die and she was not prepared to do that. Not when there was even the smallest chance. "Look, I wish you could have the chance to refine this as much as you do but we just don't have that luxury. He's dying, Doctor, can't you see that? You are his only hope. You have to give him the solution. You have to at least try. We've got nothing to lose...what are you afraid of?"

"I don't want to be the man who killed Superman," Dr. Klein said quietly, eyes on the floor unable to look at Lois.

And in that instant Lois knew for absolute certain that Dr. Klein could be trusted. Stepping forward, she took his hands in his, and forced the older man to meet her gaze.

"You are not a killer. You are not responsible for what has happened to him. If the solution doesn't work, it will not be your fault, do you understand me? The only person responsible for what has happened to Superman is the man that injected him with the drug. He's to blame. You will not be the one who killed him. But he will certainly die if you don't at least try to cure him. Think about it. If this works Doctor, you could be the one to save him."

"I..." he swallowed heavily and nodded. "I'll do my best. If this doesn't work though...I'm deeply sorry, Ms. Lane."

"Me too," she said, the words sounding hollow to her own ears as Klein readied the solution to be administered.

Lois watched, heart in her throat, as Dr. Klein prepared the anti-drug solution. His eyes were worried and unsure, but his hands never wavered from their task, which reassured Lois somewhat. She got the impression that while the doctor might come across as erratic and absent-minded in daily life, when it came down to science, he knew his craft and he knew it well. Whatever happened, she had no doubt that Clark was in the best hands possible.

It still didn't mean he would survive. After injecting Clark with the solution, Lois watched with apprehension and fear for some sort of sign that the drug was having an effect — whether good or bad on her partner. She didn't get one.

He didn't stir.

"What do we do now?" she asked, hoping the lack of movement or response was something Klein expected, or at least something he wasn't fearful of.

"We wait," he said grimly. "I've only been able to test the solution in controlled environments. As I told you before, I've never even tested it on a live subject. I have no idea how long it might take to work, or what the physical reaction will be if it does. I can tell you that he is already very weak and the next twenty-four hours are crucial. I'll keep a close watch on him and call you if his condition changes. You should go home and get some rest. You don't look too far from a hospital bed yourself."

"I'm not leaving!" she exclaimed, shocked that Klein was expecting her to even entertain that notion. She couldn't — not when her partner was near death. But then he didn't know it was her partner. She had to keep reminding herself that to Klein and everyone who saw him, the man on that table was not Clark Kent. He was Superman and Lois Lane might be friends with Superman but not as closely as she was with Clark. He wouldn't understand the intense need she had to be with him, to hold his hand whatever happened. Well, she wasn't about to leave no matter what Klein said. "I can't leave. He saved my life, Doctor."

"I realize that, Ms. Lane, but..." he trailed off, only to see that the determination in her eyes was not to be argued with. He nodded slightly in acquiescence. "I'll get you a chair to sit on if you like."

"Thank you," she replied gratefully. "And can you get something for Superman as well? A pillow and maybe some blankets? I realize this isn't a regular hospital but I want him to be as comfortable as we can make him."

"Of course," he nodded and started to leave.

"And a pad of paper and a pen?" she called out as he got to the door. She wasn't sure why she should want to write at a time like this, only that she had to do something to keep her mind off the man lying helpless and sick in front of her. Writing seemed the obvious solution as it had helped her through so much already.

"I'll be right back," he promised.

She sighed and paced the room until he returned with all the things she'd requested, including the paper and the pen. Sitting next to the table where Clark lay, she took his hand, softly stroking the top of it as she tried to think of just what it was she should write while she waited.

Her story between Laura and Charlie was done. Complete. They had their happily ever after. They had caught the bad guy and discovered one another. What more was there to tell?

Except, they hadn't. If Laura and Charlie were supposed to be a mirror of her and Clark then she had been severely mistaken in thinking the happily ever after had come. Laura and Charlie were together but she and Clark were not. Even if he survived the Kryptonite drug, there was no guarantee that their relationship would survive. She loved him, that much was never in doubt.

But he had lied to her for almost two years about something so fundamental as who he was. He had made her think he was somebody else. He had actively lied to her to protect his secret and worse, he had used that lie of a persona to convince her that he was the last trustworthy man.

It hurt immensely to think of all the times she had looked right into his eyes as he told her some lame excuse rather than the truth. She could understand him keeping it from her at first — you didn't just tell your partner whom you'd just met that you could stop bullets and swallow bombs without blinking. That wasn't really the best way to begin a conversation. But after they'd gotten to know each other — gotten to trust each other — he had still lied. He had still kept her in the dark.

She had trusted him, but he hadn't trusted her. And a relationship without trust was not a very solid one. She was just so conflicted.

On the one hand, when she looked at him, lying prone and helpless, she couldn't imagine staying angry with him if only he would wake up. But when she closed her eyes and thought of all those times she had been made a fool of, had been lied to or tricked, she felt anger burn within her and knew it was still there, no matter how worried she might be for his life.

Maybe that was why she needed to write. She and Clark didn't have their happily ever after, so maybe it was a little too soon for Laura and Charlie's. She had thought at first that the ending would be a matter of putting the two of them together, regardless of what was going on in her life. It was fiction after all. She could do what she wanted with the two of them.

Now she knew it wasn't true. She could leave the story the way it was. She was pretty sure Justine would publish it. She had a lot more confidence in it now than she ever had before. But the story was unfinished. Incomplete. It would always be so to her, unless she addressed her own issues with Clark through Laura and Charlie.

For that to happen, Charlie had to be a liar as well.

Well now was as good a time as any to write that particular revelation. Taking another look at her partner, she was slightly comforted by the fact that his condition hadn't changed. No change meant he wasn't getting worse. She just hoped it meant he would eventually get better. Until then, she would write...

The arrest took place in Liam's office as he was sitting down to lunch. He looked fairly surprised to see Laura there waving her badge once more, and even more shocked when she announced that he was under arrest. His eyes narrowed when he saw Charlie and the other cops with them enter the office, but Laura didn't pay much attention.

All she cared about was getting Liam locked away so that he couldn't do any more damage or hurt any more people.

To her surprise however, when she began to handcuff him, he laughed.

"You know that I can make bail, right?" he said conversationally. "I'll be out tonight."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," she muttered. "You disgust me, Lancaster, you know that? I actually trusted you. I believed all the bull you fed me. I can't believe that I thought you were an honest man. I sure know how to pick 'em."

"Everybody lies, Laura," Liam said darkly. "Everybody. You might not like the truth, but you'll never find someone completely

honest. They just don't exist."

"That's what you think," she replied glancing at Charlie out of the corner of her eye. He smiled, but kept his eyes trained on Liam, as if he expected him to grow wings and fly away at any moment. "I happen to know there are honest people out there. My father was an honest man and a good cop. And my partner has just as much integrity as he did. If only I'd listened to him in the first place. He could see through you, even when I couldn't."

"Your partner," Liam chuckled darkly. "You really are dense, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?" Fear settled in the pit of her stomach and Charlie glanced at her nervously.

"C'mon, Laura, let's just get him out of here."

"In a minute...what did you mean?"

"I meant, you think your boy scout partner is an honest man?" he laughed again in a way that sent shivers up her spine. "He really got you, didn't he? Played the bumbling rookie card so well and you just bought it. You believed it! You really aren't too good at this whole detecting business are you?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" she demanded, her voice a little louder this time.

"I'm talking about your partner," Liam replied sarcastically, "Mr. 'honest man' over there. Did you never ask yourself just how he knew to suspect me? Did you never wonder why he was so intent on busting me? What evidence he had?"

"Oh and I suppose you know?" she retorted, suddenly afraid that he might actually have an answer to those very questions that she'd been asking herself ever since Charlie mentioned his suspicions regarding Liam.

"I do," Liam told her calmly. "He isn't a rookie cop. He's Internal Affairs. He hasn't been investigating me all this time... not directly anyway. He's been investigating you."

She felt her entire body go cold at Liam's words. She wanted to tell him he was wrong, that in no way could Charlie be what he said he was, but one look at her partner, one look at the guilt in his eyes told her that everything he said was true. Charlie had been spying on her this entire time, looking for a chance to arrest her. She'd been a bloody suspect in his little game!

Not only had her boyfriend turned out to be a sociopathic killer, but her partner, best friend and potential lover had turned out to be assigned to her to investigate her. Was nobody in this world who they seemed to be?

"I..." Charlie cleared his throat, attempting to explain himself. "It's not exactly like he says. I mean, yes I'm IA, but there's more to this than you know. If you'll just let me..."

"Save it," she said wearily. She was simply too tired to fight with him right now. And she certainly didn't want to give Liam the satisfaction of watching as the last normal and good thing in her life dissolved into yet another pack of lies and deception. She'd tell him off later. Right now they had an arrest to complete. "Let's just get this creep to prison."

"You know it won't hold me," he said again, his voice low and threatening. "I'm still the mayor of this city until proven guilty. I'll be out by tonight. And when I am...well I hope for your sake that you don't go home alone. This isn't over by a long shot."

"Get him out of my sight," she told one of the uniforms that had accompanied him. He led Liam out, reading him his rights as he did so. Charlie attempted to approach her, to touch her arm, but she shoved him away.

"Please, Laura, don't shut me out."

"Go home, Charlie," she said softly. "I don't want to see you right now."

Despite the fact that she was more than proficient in the art of self-defense, and promised the captain not to let her service revolver out of her sight, the captain insisted on providing her with round-the-clock protection after hearing of Liam's threats.

In any other circumstances, she might have fought the decision, believing herself fully capable of taking care of whatever dangerous situations might come her way, but she was far too drained emotionally to bother.

If the captain really wanted to put a uniform outside her door to protect her, she wouldn't argue. It just didn't matter all that much anymore. Nothing did really. Not since she found out that the one sure thing in her life was no more real than the image of the philanthropic boyfriend.

Charlie had lied to her. Worse, he had deliberately gotten close to her in order to find out if she were a dishonest cop. He had used her emotions, used her fears and desires. He had made her fall in love with him.

What had he planned to do after the case was wrapped up? Go back to IA and report that 'well, the subject appears to be innocent, but hey, she might be in love with me'? Did he really think so little of her as to use her feelings as tools to his own ends? And how dare he think she was the kind of person who might legitimately be in league with Liam Lancaster? If she had known what kind of man he was...

But she hadn't and Charlie had. Another thing she couldn't get past. Charlie had known all along. Had known he was responsible for the murders, for the deaths of her friends and he hadn't done anything. She wondered if the captain had been in on it as well. He would have had to have been. Did he put her on personal leave because he genuinely suspected her? Or was he merely trying to protect her by taking her out of the line of fire?

Either way, it really didn't matter anymore. She was so sick of police work she could never imagine going back there for any reason whatsoever. She was just too tired of being lied to.

A knock on the door jarred her out of her dark thoughts and she nervously approached it, wondering if it was Liam somehow returned to make good on his threat.

When she opened the door and saw Charlie standing on the other side, she immediately proceeded to close it, but failed when his foot interceded and stopped it from closing.

"Laura, please, we need to talk."

"I don't think we do," she told him coldly. "Please take your foot out of my door or I'll call the police...the real police."

"I am the real police," he said patiently.

"No you're not, you're the police's police." She glared at him. "You're here to keep us in line, not the city's criminals. Is that why you're here? Do you still suspect me of something?"

"I didn't...I don't..." he shook his head, trying to collect his thoughts. "Can you just let me in, please? I just want to talk to you, to explain myself. If you still hate me after that, then by all means throw me out, but at least give me a chance."

"You have ten minutes," she said as she opened the door wider to let him in. She knew she would never have any peace until she did, so she might as well hear whatever crap he intended to feed her and then send him on his way.

"Thanks," he said as he entered.

"Don't thank me yet, the clock is ticking." She tapped her watch to emphasize the point and he exhaled in frustration.

"I guess I should start at the beginning," he said as he placed his hands in his pockets.

"Start with the part where you lied to me to get close and investigate me," she countered, her voice hard and angry. "I'm sure it will be my favourite part."

"I did lie," he acknowledged. "I can't defend that. I've been IA for almost a year now. And Liam Lancaster has been under investigation for even longer than that. When IA found out you were dating him, they wanted a man inside to make sure that he hadn't begun to buy the police force like he had the underworld. They sent me because I hadn't been there long and I could pass easily as a rookie cop. I didn't like the assignment from the beginning, but we couldn't take the chance that Lancaster had

managed to buy a cop."

"I can't be bought!" she exclaimed hotly.

"I know that now," Charlie told her. "And incidentally so did your captain. He didn't like the assignment either, but he didn't have any other choice. I was to get close to you, to find out the nature of your relationship with Lancaster and discover whether or not you were in his pocket."

"It's nice to know that I am thought of so highly in my profession," she growled. Charlie's shoulders sagged.

"I didn't know what kind of person you were when I took the assignment." His voice was soft and repentant. "And you of all people should know that even the most honest-looking cops can sometimes turn out to be dirty. IA just couldn't take the chance. Once I met you though, I..."

He swallowed heavily and looked away a moment, trying to compose his thoughts.

"I knew you couldn't be a part of Lancaster's game. I just knew it. I could see you genuinely believed he was a good person and I put that in my preliminary report, but IA wasn't satisfied. They wanted to use your connections to him to their advantage so they asked me to stick around and..."

"What?" she demanded as she watched his expression become one of guilt and regret. "Spy? Poke into my life, my affairs, and report them? Lie to me about your own feelings just to get close? You're just as bad as he is, you know that?"

"I didn't want to!" Charlie protested. "You have to believe that. I thought it was just as disgusting as you did, but if it helped to catch Lancaster I had to do it. He's a murderer. He killed cops...your friends."

"Don't you dare bring them into this," she seethed. "Not when you thought I might have had something to do with it."

"I don't know what more I can say to apologize," he said sadly. "I wish to God I wasn't given that assignment, but I was."

"There's nothing you can say," she told him sadly. And she was sad that it couldn't be rectified. The feelings she had for Charlie were still there, buried under all the anger and pain and she knew that once she had had a good cry they would still be there to torture her through the rest of her daily life. She would miss him for the rest of her life, but she refused to live any more lies. "You used me. You used my emotions and my feelings for you to get close to your killer. You've got him so you don't need me anymore. Please, just...go."

"You think my feelings for you were a lie?" he whispered.

She could see the naked emotion on his face and turned away from it before it could get to her. She would not succumb to him again. She just wouldn't.

"Why not? Everything else was."

"No," he murmured tenderly as he took a slight step forward. She folded her arms across her chest and kept her gaze turned away. "It wasn't. I cared about you. I still care about you. They even wanted to take me off the assignment towards the end because they thought my judgment was compromised."

"So why didn't you let them, if you hated it so much?" her voice had softened slightly, but the edge was still there.

"Because I was worried about you," he admitted. "You weren't in his pocket, but you were involved with him. I began to suspect that he had done some checking up on me and I was afraid if he found out I was IA he'd do something to you, either attempt to bribe you or hurt you when you refused. I couldn't walk away. Not until he was behind bars."

"Well you can walk away now," she said trying desperately to keep the hoarseness from her voice. "I don't need any more liars in my life, for whatever reason. He's in jail and I don't need you to protect me. Please leave, okay, Charlie?"

"Laura, please, I..."

"Just go." Her voice was firm, but tired. Nodding he turned to leave and in that moment, Laura learned what it felt like to

have her heart break.

She wanted to call out, to tell him to come back, but Lois' pen slipped as a sharp, beeping sound brought her out of her thoughts. Looking up she saw that the numbers on one of the diagnostic machines Dr. Klein had Clark hooked up to were going haywire.

Fighting back the panic, she dropped her notebook and moved closer to him.

"Doctor!" she called out, voice high and tinged with hysteria. "Doctor, quick! Something's going wrong! Dr. Klein!"

He was in the room within seconds of her call, checking the machines and pressing various buttons. She didn't fight him when he pushed her aside, but she could tell from the pale colouring of his own face that what was happening to Clark was worse than she thought.

"Doctor, what's happening?" she asked, trying to control the tremble in her voice but failing. "Doctor?"

"The solution isn't dissolving the Kryptonite, it's burning it." Klein's voice was grim and flat. "I'm losing him."

Chapter 15: Worth Dying For

"No!" To her surprise her voice came out angry, almost furious. She felt that anger rise within her and didn't even bother to try to quench it. Anger she knew how to handle. Anger would keep her grounded, keep her sane. Anger would refuse to let her give up. "No! No you don't. Don't you dare! You will not die on me! You hear me? You are not going to die!"

She resisted the urge to stamp her foot to enforce the point, choosing instead to grab hold of his hand once more and grip it for dear life, hoping she could somehow transfer her own resolve to him.

Around her Klein moved at a frantic pace, adjusting this and that. She had no idea what it was he was doing or if it even would help, but she made sure as he did that she kept out of his way and that she never let go of Clark's hand.

After minutes that seemed like hours, he seemed to stabilize once more. She blinked once or twice, realizing that she'd been biting her lip the entire time and allowed herself to relax. Her lip was bleeding ever so slightly, but it hardly mattered. All that mattered was the expression on Dr. Klein's face and what it could possibly mean for Clark.

"Doctor?" her voice was hesitant and unsure. If the news was bad, she didn't know if she wanted to hear it. Right now she didn't know if she could take it.

"He's stable," he replied quietly, "but he's very weak. If the solution did its job, despite the method it came by it, he might just have a chance. If the Kryptonite is still there however, I can tell you with absolute certainty that he will not survive the night."

"Isn't..." she swallowed hard, her throat feeling like it was full of cotton. "Isn't there some way of finding out if it's still there or not?"

Dr. Klein was already opening a drawer and removing a needle and syringe. It was the second time that day that a needle might determine the fate of her partner's life and she hated the site of it. It was a comfort however, to know that it was in the hands of a man like Dr. Klein.

"A blood test should let me know fairly conclusively whether it's still in his system or not."

He spoke without even looking up as he deftly took a sample of Clark's blood and headed over to one of the lab tables that held a microscope and various other instruments. "How can you be sure?" she wondered. "You said yourself that you've never seen his blood under a scope before."

"I haven't, but I've seen Kryptonite," he reminded her. "It's all I've been looking at the last couple of days. If there's any trace of the element still left in his system I'll see it."

"Oh."

She didn't know what more to say, so she said nothing. Instead she watched, Clark's large hand in hers, as Dr. Klein examined the blood, knowing that the outcome of the test would determine her partner's fate.

In the short time it took for Klein to complete his examination a thousand thoughts raced through her mind. She realized for the first time since she'd left him in the warehouse to go after Batchelar that she might have to accept that there was a possibility she could lose him. Until now she'd refused to allow herself that kind of negativity as if it might contaminate his chances of survival. Now, she knew that it just might not be possible. Batchelar might have won after all.

And if he didn't make it, she'd have to be the one to tell everyone. Not only about Superman, but about Clark as well. She'd have to come up with some kind of plausible reason as to why Clark had died the same day Superman had. Superman would be easy enough to explain, and the world would mourn him.

But Clark? What could she say? How could she tell Perry and Jimmy?

She'd also have to tell his parents.

That thought alone left her cold and frightened. They would know, of course, that Superman's death meant the death of their son. She couldn't let them find out with the rest of the world however. It would be far too cruel for them to learn something like that on the news. No, she'd have to call them. She'd never make it out to Kansas in time to tell them in person before they found out on the news. Something like this couldn't remain a secret for that long. As impersonal as it might be, the phone would be her only option.

How could she bear it? To lose him and then to have to tell his only family? To have the entire world mourning a lie while the real man, the true hero, died quietly with only a handful of close friends and family to grieve for him.

She shook her head, blinking away the tears that threatened once more as Dr. Klein stood up and walked slowly towards her. His expression was unreadable. Then he spoke.

"I don't see it." His voice was low and intense. "I don't see the Kryptonite anywhere. I think... he's going to make it, Ms. Lane! He's going to survive!"

"Are you sure?" she could scarcely breathe, so terrified was she that he might take away his proclamation at any moment only to trade it for one of doom and gloom. "Are you sure, Doctor?"

She had started to think about his death. She had started to plan her story, started to decide what to tell people. It almost seemed unreal that seconds after those thoughts entered her mind that Dr. Klein could pronounce his survival.

"I don't see it," he repeated, his eyes alight with triumph. "He's very sick right now and he'll remain so in the coming weeks. I don't know how long it might be before he's up to full strength again, but he's going to make it."

"When will he wake up?" she whispered, looking over at his face and for the first time allowing a smile to cross her lips. He was only sleeping. He was sick but he was only sleeping. He'd get better, and he'd wake up. He'd be okay.

It was almost too much.

"I don't know," Dr. Klein told her. "Could be anywhere from ten minutes to a day or more. I don't know just how strong he is. Only time will tell that. But he will wake up. However long it takes him, he will wake up."

"I..." she swallowed back the emotion she was feeling and met Klein's tired but elated expression. "Thank you. Thank you so much. You saved him."

"He's a great man, Ms. Lane," Klein replied obviously uncomfortable with the praise. "And he's a fighter. I only did so much. The rest was up to him. Look, we're both tired. I'm going to try to catch some sleep on a cot I have folded up in my storage

closet. If you want to go home and get some sleep yourself, I can call you when he wakes up.”

“That’s not necessary, I’ll stay.” Her voice was firm and decided, leaving Klein little room to argue.

“Would you like the cot then?” he offered politely. “I can sleep in my office chair. I do it enough when I’m here for all hours of the night.”

“That’s okay, Dr. Klein, you keep the cot,” she looked over at her partner once more. “I think I can fit on the bed beside him. I’ll just lay down there.”

Klein blinked in slight surprise as he realized what she was proposing. She knew that to him, it looked as if she were going to cuddle up next to Superman. He would have no way of knowing that it was simply her partner she wanted to fall asleep next to. And she couldn’t tell him that.

“Forgive my presumptuousness, Ms. Lane, but are you and Superman…”

“No,” she said quickly — a little too quickly? — “we’re just good friends. And I think he’d like to wake up next to someone familiar. He doesn’t really have too many close friends, you know?”

“I understand,” Dr. Klein said warmly. “You’ll let me know when he wakes up? I want to examine him again when he’s conscious.”

“I will,” she promised. He yawned loudly, reached over and squeezed her hand and smiled.

“Thank you for not letting me give up,” he said quietly.

“Thank you for not giving up,” she whispered back. And with that he turned and left the room.

It was a tight fit, but she managed to squeeze herself onto the bed beside Clark, her head nestled against his shoulder, comforted by the ever-increasing stability of his breathing. She put her arms around the middle of his chest and felt exhaustion descend on her. Whatever might happen next, Clark was alive.

It was the only thing that mattered right now.

The relative discomfort of her position made it impossible for her to sleep long. The bed just barely allowed for the two of them, and although she loved the way her head felt snuggled against Clark’s shoulder, she dared not move too much lest she disturb him.

He was finally breathing normally now, low and deep and Lois didn’t want to do anything that might hinder his progress. So there she lay, exhausted, cramped, and drifting in and out of consciousness.

Eventually the crick in her neck forced her to sit up and shift position. She intended to just lie back down once she found herself in a more comfortable position but instead she found herself looking into Clark’s eyes, dark and fathomless as they stared back at her.

“Didn’t think I’d actually see your face again,” he said quietly. His voice had a slightly dreamlike quality to it. “And here you are…in my arms when I wake up. It’s nice.”

“Clark!” Her voice came out a high-pitched squeak and she suddenly forgot all earlier reservations as she flung her arms around his chest and clutched him fiercely.

She must have hugged him a bit too tightly as she heard him let out a small ‘oof’ causing her to pull away, worrying that she might have cracked or bruised something.

“Did I hurt you?” she ran her hands gently over his torso as if to reaffirm that he was still in one piece. He smiled at her and shook his head. He pulled himself up into a sitting position. She did the same, sitting on the edge with one leg tucked close, the other dangling off the edge of the bed.

“I’m sore, but I’ll be fine,” he assured her. He looked around, as if taking in his surroundings for the first time. “Where am I? And how did I get here?”

“STAR Labs,” she replied as she launched into the entire

story of Batchelar’s capture and Dr. Klein’s cure. He listened quietly, his eyes never leaving hers. She was so caught up in her explanation that she almost didn’t notice when he took her hand in his and brought it close to his chest, holding it as if it were something incredibly precious. She tried not to be affected by the way her hands seemed to fit in his, or how warm and safe it made her feel. She had almost lost him and yet here he was, holding her hand, warm, solid and whole.

When the story was finished, he fell silent, his mind obviously elsewhere as he stared beyond her, lost in thought.

“Clark?” she finally ventured.

“I’m sorry, I…” he trailed off and drew a deep breath. “You saved my life. You…God, that was brave. Foolish, risky, downright dangerous, but…brave. I guess I was just trying to think of the right way to thank you…but there isn’t one.”

“I only got you here,” she replied, feeling uncomfortable by the intensity in his eyes. “It was Dr. Klein that saved you. If he hadn’t discovered that solution you’d be dead.”

“I owe him a lot,” Clark acknowledged softly.

Suddenly it was too much for her. A moment ago she’d been beyond relieved to see him sitting here and in one piece. In a split second that changed and all she felt was anger — anger at him for putting her in that situation in the first place. She couldn’t imagine going through something like that again. It had been the most terrifying and emotionally draining experience of her life and it burned her up inside to know that none of it would have been necessary had it not been for Clark’s own foolhardy sense of heroism.

Snatching her hand away, she slipped off the bed and began to pace the room. He looked surprised by her reaction, but said nothing, choosing instead to sit quietly and watch her.

“Do you even know how close you came to dying?” she demanded, trying to keep the tremble out of her voice. It wouldn’t help her lecture if she broke down in the middle of it. “Is that all you can say? You owe him a lot? You owe him more than a lot! You put both of us through hell! You and your stupid self-sacrifice. Damn you! I nearly watched you die in front of me. I couldn’t do a single thing to help you. Do you know how helpless I felt? How useless? Don’t thank me, Clark, don’t you dare thank me. I didn’t do anything but sit here and watch you nearly fade away completely.”

“You think I wanted it that way?” he asked, his voice rising in incredulity. “You think I wanted to leave you? It was the only way I could think to keep you safe.”

“It’s not your job to keep me safe,” she replied coldly. She could see the hurt in his eyes that her words were causing, but it was far easier to be angry with him than to break down the way she wanted to. She was feeling so many things now that he was awake that it was hard to define which emotions were strongest and which were worth giving in to. “I can do that just fine, thank you. And even if I can’t, your life is something you can’t afford to take lightly. You’re not just one man. You’re Superman. You belong to the world. It needs you and you just chose to abandon it. And for what?”

“For you,” he repeated, his voice firm and unwavering. “Because I love you.”

“Don’t,” she warned, throwing up her hand as if to physically deflect the emotion in his tone. “I can’t hear that right now. I’m too…I just can’t deal with that, okay?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say then,” he said sadly. “That’s how I feel. It’s how I’ll always feel. I may have screwed it up completely but it won’t ever change.”

“Why?” she wondered, her voice small and scared. “Why me? Why care so much? I’ll I’ve ever done is treat you horribly. All I’ve ever seen is that Suit, clouding my judgment and missing you completely. Why give up your life for someone like that?”

“You don’t get it,” he said with a small smile and a shake of

his head. "It's not what you see. It's who you are. It's a woman who would rather go after a dangerous and unstable criminal than give up on me. It's a woman who would go above and beyond to protect my secret and save my life when I was dying. It's a woman who would lie down next to me and hold me close, even though she was furious at me. I watched you sleeping and it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in my life. If I could wake up next to you every morning like that, I..."

He shook his head, obviously checking what he was about to say. Lois fought the lump in her throat caused by his words. Damn, but he had a habit of taking her from wanting to personally throttle him to wanting to throw her arms around him and make sure he never felt sorrow or pain again.

"Please don't," she whispered moving close to him once more, despite herself. "I have trouble thinking straight when you say things like that."

"I'm not trying to mess with your head, Lois," he told her, his voice husky with emotion. "I'm just trying to tell you how I feel. If for no other reason than to finally be honest with you."

"Don't bring honesty up, Kent," she bit off as her anger rose to the surface, fresh and new. "You don't have a leg to stand on in that department."

"Maybe not, but I..."

"Ahh, you're awake," Dr. Klein's voice interrupted whatever Clark had been about to say, startling Lois. She looked to see if he had heard her using Clark's last name only half a second ago, but if he had he hid it extremely well. She was already learning that Dr. Klein wore his every emotion and expression on his sleeve so that put that fear to rest. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore," Clark answered, adopting his 'Superman' voice as he spoke to Klein. Lois marveled at the change that overcame him as he switched personas effortlessly. She could see how he had managed to fool her for so long, and yet at the same time he was so very obviously Clark right now as well. It was surreal.

"Yes, well you went through a lot," Dr. Klein acknowledged. "I'm assuming your abilities have been severely compromised as well?"

"I don't have my powers right now if that's what you mean," Clark answered. Klein nodded.

"Have you lost them before?"

"It happens whenever I'm exposed to Kryptonite," he replied. "Although how fast they return usually depends on how long I've been exposed to it. In this case, I have no idea how long it will take before I'm one hundred percent again."

"Will you allow me to examine you?" Dr. Klein asked.

"Of course," Clark said. "Lois tells me I have you to thank for my life."

"Well," Klein turned an endearing shade of pink under the praise. "If it hadn't been for Ms. Lane's forcefulness I would have been too afraid to even try the solution. She's the real hero here. I just did what she said."

"Sometimes that's a wise choice indeed," Clark told him, amusement evident in his tone. "But however persuasive she is, thank you. I'm alive because of you and I won't forget that."

"If you boys don't mind, I'm going to wait outside," Lois said, grateful for the emotional reprieve. "I'm desperately in need of some fresh air and I'm sure Henderson would appreciate a phone call to let him know that Superman's alive and well."

With that, she nodded slightly and left the room, refusing to look back as Dr. Klein began his checkup.

After speaking to Henderson, Lois called Perry to let him know that they were both okay and would be at the *Planet* with the full story after she and Clark took a much needed day off. It was now nine the next morning, which surprised Lois as it felt like it had been a lot longer than that since she and Clark had first gone to stakeout Batchelar's office.

Relieved that his two star reporters were alive after such a

'hair-brained scheme', Perry was more than willing to let them take the day and even tried to insist they take another in order to recover completely, but Lois would have none of that. She only wanted the day to give Clark some time to rest up and recuperate. She could conceivably go to work if she had to, but Clark was still very weak. He'd never admit it, but a day's rest was essential.

It was also a lot easier to take a day off to rest so that she wouldn't have to deal with the unfinished emotional business that still existed between her and Clark. If they were both at home, then they weren't working together side by side in the newsroom. That meant less inner conflict on her part. She might have just gotten him back, but the idea of spending too much time in his company remained unwelcome.

She loved him, but she didn't know if she could trust him. It was a bitter thought to have, and she desperately wished she could sweep his revelation under the rug and go back to looking at him as just Clark. Sweet, naive, trusting Clark. But he wasn't just Clark. He was Superman. He was the strongest man in the world. He was a man she had always thought of as being morally above the rest of the world. Part of it might have been her own assumption that his alien nature was what kept him from the pettiness of most human emotions and therefore made him better somehow.

Didn't really matter now what she had thought. She'd been wrong. Superman was not the perfect moral specimen she had thought he was. And he was far more human than she had ever wanted to admit. In some ways she'd lost both men in that revelation. Superman could no longer be perfect... and neither could Clark. Both were tarnished slightly by the lie and Lois wasn't sure if she even wanted to bother to make the effort to move past it.

Was it worth it? And if it wasn't, could she and Clark go back to being friends the way they had been? Or would she lose him completely if she rejected him a second time?

She shivered at the thought. It wasn't one she particularly liked, but at the same time she couldn't allow the threat of losing his friendship to blackmail her into a relationship she wasn't sure she wanted. Trust was essential and she wasn't sure she had it when it came to him. They definitely needed to have a long discussion about the entire thing, but now was certainly not the time.

She was still too shaky about nearly losing him. There was still too much in her that wanted to hold and comfort him every time she saw him. And there was still too much of her that wanted to slap him for being so foolish though she refrained knowing it would only hurt her hand to do so.

She sighed, realizing that a day's rest was even more essential to her than she had thought a moment ago. Maybe some work on her novel might help to shed some perspective on her own feelings towards her partner. Heaven knows Laura was going through something relatively similar.

She wasn't even sure why she had done it. She could have easily finished the story without throwing that obstacle in, but somehow it felt necessary. The novel had become so much a part of her that she knew she couldn't finish it without coming to some sort of personal conclusion in her own life as well.

Maybe that was how she would spend her day.

"Ms. Lane?" Dr. Klein's voice cut into her reverie as he poked his head out of the door to the lab where she stood in front of the payphone. "I'm finished examining Superman. I figured I could give you a ride home if you like, seeing as he doesn't have his powers, nor does he have his boots or cape."

Lois smiled at the man, resisting the impulse to hug him. She had wondered if he had noticed Clark's lack of boots and cape. Not only had he noticed, but he too realized that if Clark were forced to take a cab home, he'd risk being seen however briefly

in his weakened and more human state. Her own illusions as to the truth of him might have been shattered, but to the rest of the public he was a near God. And near Gods didn't have to take taxis home while missing parts of their clothing.

It would have been humiliating to Clark and damaging to his image which helped to keep the public trusting in him, rather than viewing him as some sort of alien threat. Dr. Klein had obviously sensed that as well with his offer to drive them home. He had seen Clark already, and knew the reasons why. He knew the full measure of Clark's strength now, as well as his willingness to fight. If there was anyone that Clark did not need to prove himself to it was Dr. Klein.

"That would be nice, Doctor," Lois simply answered not knowing how to adequately thank him.

"I'll get the car and bring it up to the south entrance." Klein replied with a nod. "You go get Superman and meet me there."

Lois nodded and waited until Dr. Klein had left the lab before going back in herself.

Clark was sitting on the bed, clearly deep in thought. It took him a second or two before he met her eyes and Lois suddenly felt slightly nervous in his presence, though why she wasn't quite sure.

"Dr. Klein is giving us a ride home," she told him. "He's bringing his car to the south entrance. We should probably head there now to meet him."

She turned to head back towards the door, when Clark jumped down from the bed and touched her hand gently, causing her to stall.

"Lois, we need to talk."

"You're right, we do," she acknowledged. No use denying that much. "But not now. Not here."

"Why not?" he asked, throwing his arms up in frustration. "We almost didn't have a now or here."

"I'm aware of that," she said coldly. She resisted the urge to point out that it was because of her that he was even able to demand they talk things out. She didn't say that because she didn't need to. Clark already knew.

"I just don't want to waste any more time," he admitted, for the first time sounding frightened in a way she had never heard him sound before. "I could have died without anything ever being solved between us. When I look at you, I see that I have another chance. I don't want to blow it."

"I know it might not seem like it, but we have all the time in the world." Lois assured him, feeling her own will to argue with him being drained bit by bit. His deep brown eyes were pleading with her to drop her own defenses and she wanted nothing more than to comply and allow herself to fall into his arms and seek comfort he was all too willing to give. But it would be false comfort because he was the problem. The problem and the solution. No, her life wasn't too complicated. "I'm not going anywhere, Clark. You'll see me tomorrow at the *Planet* and the day after that. We still have this story to write so you won't get rid of me that easily."

"Just gives you more time to pull away from me," Clark said sadly. "I can see it happening already. You're building your defenses, putting up walls. It took us so long to move past that and I don't want to have to fight those walls again. Not now that I've seen the woman beneath them."

"Well you might not have a choice." Her voice was hard and tinged with hurt. "Those walls came down for a man I now know doesn't exist. You're going to have to earn my trust again. And it won't be easy. I can't talk to you right now because I'm still too raw. Any other day, but not now and you'll just have to respect that."

"Okay," he said with a deep breath and a nod. She was surprised to see him give up so easily. "You win. We'll talk another day. I just want you to think about one thing before we

do."

"What's that?" she asked, holding her breath at the level of emotion she saw in his gaze.

He leaned forward to kiss her and she didn't stop him. His lips touched hers with a feather-light tenderness that took her breath away. The kiss deepened as her own lips parted to allow his tongue to slip inside, exploring her tentatively, but with no less reverence.

It was a short kiss, barely long enough to allow her to register why it shouldn't have happened. When he pulled back she could see was just as affected as she was however.

"Think about how that made you feel," he murmured roughly. "Because if it was half as powerful for you as it was for me, then it's worth fighting for. Worth dying for."

Chapter 16: Fears

Lois arrived back at her apartment with a lot to think about. Dr. Klein had dropped her off first in order, she suspected in the hopes of figuring out where exactly Superman lived. She knew Clark would likely just ask him to be dropped off at his friend Clark Kent's apartment instead. The general public knew of their friendship with the superhero, so it wouldn't seem odd to see Superman going into Clark's apartment, though they may wonder why he was using the front door rather than the window.

She also suspected that Klein had other medical and scientific questions he was eager to ask the hero without Lois in the vicinity. He probably thought some of the questions were too delicate to ask in a reporter's presence, even if she was Superman's good friend. She couldn't blame him. Klein was being more cautious about protecting him than she ever could have hoped for. He was a good man and Lois couldn't fault him for his curiosity. It also might be beneficial for Clark if he were to be in Klein's confidence just in case something similar happened to him again. Klein could be of use if he were to study Clark's reactions to Kryptonite.

But the decision to participate in that sort of thing was up to Clark and Lois was grateful to get away from the two of them for the time being. She was physically and emotionally exhausted and yet when she lay down in bed, she found herself completely unable to get any kind of sleep.

Eventually she gave up and made herself some breakfast instead, choosing to attempt some more work on her novel. She was feeling the pressure to finish it now, if only to discover how Charlie and Laura's story ended. She wasn't under any kind of deadline but her own and yet she felt as if time was running out.

After she finished eating, she pulled out the pad of paper she had written the latest chapter down on at the hospital and read it over to refresh her memory before opening her word program and putting her fingers to the keyboard. She was resolved to fix at least one couple in the scenario the found themselves in.

She wanted to call out, to tell him to come back, but she couldn't. And before she could give it enough thought to change her mind, he was gone. Out of sight, out of mind. Or at least that's how it should have been. It was certainly how she wanted it to be. She sighed and closed the door, hoping that her resolve to forget him would take hold any moment now. But it didn't.

She tried watching TV, reading, listening to music. She even tried meditating but nothing helped. She kept seeing his face, the heartbroken expression in his eyes as she told him to walk away. Had she really been wrong in believing his feelings to be as false as his job? Had she spent too much time around liars and killers to spot a good man for what he was? Was one little mistake a legitimate reason to ruin one of the best things that ever happened to her?

All of a sudden it was too much for her. Charlie King had been the only man to ever give a damn about her, fully and completely. Whatever the lie of his job had been she owed him

more than just a 'so long, see you in hell'. She had to get him back.

She had to go after him. She meant to go after him.

But the moment she stepped outside her apartment, she felt a giant hand clamp over her mouth, keeping her from uttering any sort of noise or alarm. Her gaze was able to drift downward before she was yanked back inside her apartment to see that the cop that had been posted in her hallway for her protection had been killed. As the door shut behind her and her assailant let her go, she felt a chill suffuse her entire body. She knew who it was that had her. And she knew he wasn't about to let her leave alive.

"I told you I'd be out on bail, my dear." Liam Lancaster's voice was silky and dangerous. She forced herself to face him with a defiant glare, rather than the cold fear she was feeling in the pit of her stomach. She'd been stupid. She'd assumed that all was said and done where Lancaster was concerned. He was in jail and everything was fine. End of story.

But she should have known that wasn't it. Liam Lancaster was not the type of man to take something like that lying down. And he certainly had more than enough money to make bail and come after her. Why had she sent Charlie home? How could she have been so stupid? Now a cop was dead right outside her door and who knows how many others he'd killed to get to her? She swallowed slightly at the thought.

"Yeah, you keep your promises," she said through gritted teeth. "Imagine...the only politician that does. You must be very proud."

"It's why the people voted for me," Lancaster replied with a grin that sent chills down her: How could she have fallen for this man? How could she have seen truth where all that existed in him were lies?

"So now what? You going to kill me?" She glanced down at the gun in his hand — the only thing that had so far kept her from attempting any sort of self-defense maneuver in an attempt to escape. She cursed herself mentally for leaving her own gun in her bedroom, completely inaccessible to her now.

"What makes you think that?" Liam asked quietly. His face was unreadable. "I just want to talk. We left things between us so very unfinished."

"We don't have anything between us," Laura spat angrily. "Not anymore. The moment I found out what you really are all I've felt for you is hate."

"Such a strong word," Liam replied with a 'tsk tsk' sound. "I don't think you hate me. I just think you don't understand me. I can change that. Everything I did, I did for us. You'll soon see that. Just as soon as I explain everything you'll understand. And then we can pick up where we left off."

"You really are insane!" she exclaimed, fully realizing the measure of the man's depravity. "If you think I'm going to come back to you after you killed innocent people then...well, you had best just kill me because it will never ever happen."

"Oh it will," Liam said, his voice turning dark and angry as he advanced on her. "Just let me kiss you...let me convince you. You'll remember. You'll want me again."

She backed up, but only had so far to go before her back touched the wall that separated her living room and kitchen. She tried to stop her racing heart, to think clearly and logically, but all she could see was the naked intent in his eyes that terrified her to the very core. He really did intend to 'show her' whether she liked it or not. Disgust rose in her and she quelled the urge to spit in his face. It would only make him angry and he was far too unstable right now to attempt that. Best to try to talk her way into a position where she had the upper hand.

"Back off, Lancaster," she said trying to keep the shake from her voice. "I don't want you anywhere near me, let alone kissing me."

"We never got beyond that," Liam continued as if he hadn't

even heard her. "But we will. You'll see. You'll miss me."

"I said stay away," she exclaimed, louder this time. "If you want to kill me, then do so, but if you think for a moment I'm going to let you touch me, you're sadly mistaken. I'll fight you."

"Will you?" He cocked his head to the side. "You might. Let's test it."

And with that he took another step. Laura's closed her fists together, planning on attempting an uppercut to his jaw the moment he was close enough. She accepted that she might die tonight, but she would not accept Lancaster raping her. She would not allow that. She'd have that much control at least.

And maybe if he was close enough she could get hold of his gun. Maybe she could turn this to her advantage after all. Maybe it wasn't completely hopeless. Just another step and she could try. She almost dared him to do it with her eyes.

He didn't back down.

One more step and she readied herself. Just one more and she'd have him or die trying.

And he took it.

Before she could think, she was swinging her fist upward with as much force as she could muster. He must not have expected an actual assault because when it connected he cried out with fear and pain as it hit — and hard.

He retaliated quickly, his hand shooting out before she could stop it and hitting her in the face with a painful smack. Her head snapped to the side from the force of it, but she wouldn't be deterred from her purpose.

As swiftly as she could, she stepped down hard on his foot, then brought her knee up into his groin. He groaned and tried to keep from doubling over as he shoved her back into the wall, and closed his hand around her throat in an attempt to keep her still while he recovered.

"You'll pay for that," he growled.

"Don't bet on it," she shot back before taking a huge bite out of his hand. He pulled it back with a yelp of pain and she saw her opening. Lunging forward, she grabbed his other arm, the one that held the gun, and brought her hand down hard at the bend in his elbow. The crack that resulted told her she might have broken it. Either way, he was unable to hang onto the gun and the moment he dropped it, she was down on the floor retrieving it while he nursed his wound.

She had to take a few calming breaths once she held it to keep herself from pulling the trigger. It was over now. She would not become like him. She would not take his life. He would spend the rest of his days in jail knowing that he couldn't break her.

"You really thought it would be that easy, didn't you?" she said as she caught her breath. "You're dumber than I thought."

Before he could respond to that, a large bang could be heard outside her apartment and seconds later, the door burst open and cops swarmed in, guns at the ready. Charlie was at the forefront of the group.

"How'd you know?" she asked as the last of the backup filed in. She had sent him home hours before she had decided to go after him. The cop outside her door had obviously been killed so quietly that not even the neighbours hadn't heard it. So...how?

"I came back later to try to talk to you," he admitted. "I didn't want things left that way between us. When I saw Davis dead outside the door I called for backup. He must have been waiting around the hall way for you to come out. I'm sorry they didn't get here sooner. He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"Does it look like he did?" she gestured to the injured man before her. His lip was bleeding from where she had hit him in the jaw and his arm really did look like she'd broken it. She felt somewhat satisfied with herself. "But thanks for the rescue, however late. It's appreciated."

"Anytime," he flashed her a thousand watt smile and she knew the moment she saw it that things between them were not

finished. The moment this place was cleared of cops and killer, she would sit down with her former partner and have a long talk.

“So...” Charlie stood awkwardly in Laura’s living room after everyone else had left, clearly searching for the right thing to say. “I guess I should probably go. I mean, you never really needed me here in the first place. Sorry to have broken your door like that. I can pay to have it fixed if you like.”

“Charlie, stop.” Her voice was strong and decisive. She’d almost been killed that night and talking about repairing door fixtures really wasn’t in the forefront of her mind. He was. And she had to figure out just what it was that existed between them, and whether it was worth risking her heart for. “I don’t care about the door. That’s not important.”

“Do you...” he swallowed nervously. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No,” she replied. “I’d like you to stay. I think we need to talk — really talk. Before when you were here, I...I wasn’t willing to listen. Whatever happens between us, I owe you that.”

“I wish like hell I could take it all back,” he said, his voice low and intense. “If I could go back, I’d never have taken the assignment. I never wanted to hurt you. And if nothing else, you have to believe that I only ever wanted to keep you safe.”

“I know,” she told him. And she did. Thinking back, after everything that was said and done, Laura realized she understood his reasons for not telling her who he was and even respected them. It wasn’t a question of that at all. “But it’s not just about that. You lied to me. Whatever your reasons, you still lied to me. And you did it so very easily, partly because I was too blind to see the truth, but that isn’t the point. Liam lied to me that easily as well. It’s all he ever did and when I think of how well you got away with the rookie cop charade, I just wonder what else you lied about. Or what else you could successfully lie about in the future.”

“I’m nothing like Liam Lancaster, Laura,” his eyes were dark and she wasn’t sure if her statement had made him angry with her or not. She knew it was a horrible comparison but at the very core of it what the two of them had done had been very similar. Surely he couldn’t expect her to just ignore that? “And worrying about what might happen in the future will only ever keep you miserable. All I ever wanted...all I ever want, is to make you happy. There’s no lie in that. Lancaster lied to you about everything — who he was, how he felt, what he did...there was nothing about him that had any truth to it. The only lie I told you was about my job. What I do for a living...that’s all. Everything else, every word I ever spoke to you was complete and utter truth. I love you. I did then and I do now.”

“I just don’t know if it’s enough,” she whispered fearfully. “I don’t know if I’m too damaged to see the good in people any more. What if all I ever see from you is a man who hid himself from me until the truth was foisted out by a murderer?”

“I was going to tell you the truth,” Charlie insisted. “If Lancaster hadn’t spilled it then, I would have told you the moment we got back to the station.”

“That isn’t the point...”

“You’re right, it isn’t,” he continued, “the point is whether you can accept that I am just as flawed as every other human being. Do I regret what I’ve done? Yes. Do I wish I could take it back? Yes. Do I love you? Yes. Will I always love you? Yes. Can I promise never to lie to you ever again? No. I wish I could, but nobody can promise that. Nobody. All I can promise is that I will never ever lie to you if I can help it. I will never intentionally hurt you and I will never stop loving you.”

“I...” she swallowed back the tears she felt forming at the earnestness in his tone. How could she resist the pleading in his gaze, the tenderness in his eyes? “I want to be unaffected by this whole thing. I want to trust you more than anything in the entire world. I don’t want to be someone who is terrified to love

somebody.”

“Then don’t,” he said softly, moving forward and putting his arms around her waist. “Be the woman I know you really are. Be the warm, caring, courageous woman who didn’t back down tonight. Be the strong woman who discovered who Liam truly was and did something about it. Be Laura Landon. You’re not someone to be frightened of a challenge. Loving me...that’s a challenge, I realize after all you’ve gone through, but please don’t push me away.”

“I do love you,” she admitted, knowing that was one secret she just couldn’t keep from him. “I think I always have. I just don’t know if I...”

Before she could finish her sentence he was kissing her. It wasn’t a gentle kiss like ones they had shared before, it was urgent and powerful. Pulling her against him, he deepened the kiss, exploring her mouth in ways he had never dared to do previously. There was a fear in his kiss that Laura knew stemmed from his worry that this might be the last kiss they ever share.

But it wouldn’t be. She knew that the moment she moaned softly into his mouth, the moment she felt his hands on her sides trailing gently down her body, making her tingle from his touch. There would be far more kisses to come. Because she couldn’t live without this. He was the only man who had ever made her feel like this. She’d be an idiot to just let it go.

It was worth the risk.

“I’m sorry,” he said once he drew back. “But I couldn’t just let you run away without showing you what you were running from. The way I felt with you there...the way I know you felt with me...that’s something rare.”

“I know,” she nodded, knowing now that she had no other choice but to give in to the way Charlie made her feel. He was someone worth risking it all for. “And I’m not going to run. I want this to go forward. I love you.”

“I love you,” he murmured, happiness lighting his gaze.

She leaned forward to kiss him once more, surprising him with her own boldness. After they broke apart she could see he was preparing to leave, obviously worried that to stay any longer might risk the new relationship they were both beginning to accept.

“It’s late, I should...”

“What, leave me here with a broken door?” she fixed him with a mock glare and he grinned back.

“I said I’d help you repair it.”

“But until that’s done, I certainly can’t stay here, now can I? What if Lancaster breaks out or something? I think I’d be much safer if I went home with you.”

“Do you...” he swallowed with a nervousness that was completely endearing. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

She moved against him, pressing her body to his and smiling in a way that let him know full well just how good an idea it was. Leaning up to him, she whispered huskily in his ear, “I think it’s a very good idea.”

And then she moved to grab her coat.

The following days were less exciting than the content of her novel. Lois may have written her happy ending for Laura and Charlie, but her own ending with Clark still seemed a million miles away. She went back to work at the Planet, and although she and Clark collaborated briefly to polish the copy of the Batchelar story there was very little interaction between them that didn’t count as being ‘work related’.

She kept her distance and Clark respected that, staying within the boundaries of colleague and friend though less friendly than they were used to being, even before the Luthor incident.

He kept their contact minimal and reserved. If Perry noticed the cooling off between them he didn’t say anything. Their work hadn’t suffered any, but their friendship had. Oh sure they talked, but always within the realm of casual ‘water cooler’ conversation

and never about anything personal.

She wasn't sure why it made her angry that Clark would do as she asked. She had told him she needed time to sort things out and he was giving her that. So why did it bother her that he made no moves to speed things along between them? Why did it bother her that when she walked into the newsroom, the first thing she saw was not her partner, waiting at her desk with a smile she now knew existed only for her? Oh he'd say hi to her if she looked over at him. He'd glance up, wave and go back to whatever it was he was doing, always leaving her feeling empty and unsatisfied. She was getting what she wanted...so why did it feel like he was rejecting her?

And how did she really feel about him anyway? She had told him that she needed time to reconcile the knowledge that he was Superman with the fact that he had lied to her for almost two years, but she wasn't sure that much was true. She had come to accept his other self fairly easily. It had made sense. All those times he had disappeared, all the stuff he seemed to know without her telling him, all the locks he'd been able to pick, all the files he'd been able to read, the fact that she'd never seen the two of them together. It made sense. So why should she need that time? What was holding her back?

The lies? It was what she had said held her back before, but the more she thought about it, and the more she re-read the last chapter of her novel, the more she realized that his reasons for keeping his secret from were valid. She could understand why he hadn't told her. What's more, she had a feeling that if she had given him a little more time, he would have. He had put the brakes on their physical activities that night in her jeep because he had said they needed to talk; that he had to tell her something. Surely that meant he had planned to come clean. Could she really stay angry with him for keeping a secret that protected not only himself, but those closest to him?

She hadn't had to deal with the other aspect of his personality just yet. Maybe that was what held her back. His powers hadn't returned to him and Lois had a feeling it would be at least a few more days before that happened. He had been exposed before, but never like that. The Kryptonite had never been in his system like that — not even with the Kryptonite bullet that Arianna Carlin had developed. She'd gotten that out in time and he'd been fine. But this time it had been in his bloodstream and for longer than just a moment or so.

Superman had yet to appear in public since the confrontation with Batchelar so she hadn't had to watch him get *that look* on his face, only to go running off to perform some super feat. She wasn't sure if that would change her opinion of him once his powers did return. She was so unsure of so many things at present.

All she did know was that she missed him. She missed him what they had had. And she didn't know if she would ever have it with him again. So much had changed between them. Could they salvage their friendship if the relationship didn't work? Lois was terrified at the prospect of losing every part of him and yet the idea of a relationship with him scared her even more.

In fact, it scared her to death. She'd been having nightmares for the past few days — nightmares in which she found herself in that warehouse once more, kneeling on that floor, watching Clark slip away from her as the Kryptonite invaded his system, unable to do anything.

In those dreams she never did call Henderson in time. Either no ambulances ever showed, or there was no phone in the warehouse with which to call for help. Either way all she could do was sit there and watch as he died in front of her, helpless to do anything to stop it.

Every night she had that dream she'd wake up in a cold sweat, her breathing heavy and terrified. And she'd long to call Clark, to hear his voice on the other end and to know that he was

all right. She even picked up the phone once or twice, intending to do just that, but stopped herself before she did so. He would certainly think her fears were silly. After all, he was Superman.

It was those nights she was grateful that his powers hadn't come back, because she knew where he was. She knew he'd be in his bed, safe and sleeping, not out there facing God only knew what kind of criminals who had potentially gotten their hands on Kryptonite. And if Batchelar could come across something like that, than Intergang clearly knew about it. They wouldn't stop with just one man.

They would see the rock again, Lois knew it for certain. It was only a matter of time. And it made her tremble every time she pictured it.

Maybe that was what held her back. Maybe the threat of his powers returning was why she held herself so aloof. While they remained absent he was still just Clark Kent, farm boy from Kansas turned investigative reporter. He could be just a regular guy. But once his powers returned he'd be Superman once more. And Superman didn't just go home after work and watch a movie. Superman flew over the city, stopped dangerous criminals and put himself in the middle of every tornado, hurricane and natural disaster that he could. Superman put himself on the line every day, and apart from his parents, Lois was the only person out there who knew that not only was he not invulnerable, but he was her partner.

What if he went out to stop a criminal one day and didn't come back? Could she handle it if she lost him like that? The pain over nearly losing him had almost been unbearable. Could she go through that again?

She honestly wasn't sure.

She was so lost in thought that she jumped up in surprise as Perry barked her name and gestured towards the conference room in exaggeration. She checked her watch and got up from her desk realizing that she'd been holding up the entire morning meeting while she sat and daydreamed.

Clark was already in the newsroom and as she took a seat opposite him, she felt her heart drop at the ever so slight nod of recognition that he gave her. It was as if they hadn't ever shared anything more meaningful than a stick of gum and it made her want to yell in frustration.

She suppressed the slight giggle that threatened itself as she imagined the expression on Perry's face if she let out a very loud 'ahhh'! in the middle of the morning meeting for seemingly no apparent reason. It was official: Clark Kent was driving her insane.

"Alright people let's get down to the nitty-gritty," Perry was saying. Lois forced herself to pay attention. She might be on the verge of strangling her partner but at least her work was no longer suffering. She felt like she could tackle any story that came her way after that last piece. "Do we have anything...anything that might even remotely resemble something newsworthy? Because at the moment I'm looking at a possible front page story about a food poisoning epidemic at some place called 'Ralph's Pagoda'." He scrunched his face up as if to indicate this was not something he was thrilled about.

Lois looked around, but nobody in the newsroom was venturing any story ideas. She knew it was a long shot, but she spoke up anyway.

"Clark and I could continue to work on Geoffrey Batchelar's Intergang connection," she looked over at her partner, but his expression seemed pre-occupied. He wasn't even looking at her — rather, he seemed to be staring off into nothing in particular. "I'm sure we can find something to prove he was working for them."

"Lois, honey you know I don't doubt your instincts for a second, but I just can't devote any more of the *Planet's* resources to what looks to be a dead end." Perry's voice was regretful as he

spoke. She opened her mouth to voice an objection, but he cut her off before she could get it out. “It’s not my call. If it were up to me, I’d say go for it, but the men upstairs want you two on other things... things that look like they might produce results. I just can’t give it the okay unless either of you have something concrete to go on.”

“So you’d rather Clark and I investigate Ralph’s Pagoda?” she couldn’t keep the scorn from her voice. She looked to Clark for some backup, but to her surprise he was no longer there. She wondered if anybody else had seen him leave, but if they had, nobody had said anything.

Perry was looking at his empty chair as well now and Lois had a feeling he was about to inquire as to his whereabouts when Jimmy burst into the conference room, face flushed with excitement.

“You guys gotta see this!” he exclaimed. “Massive earthquake in China... worst thing they’ve seen decades!”

“Jimmy you sound almost happy about that,” Lois admonished.

“You don’t get it, he’s there!” His face had lit up as he spoke and Lois had a sinking feeling that she knew exactly who he meant. “Superman’s there! I mean he’s been gone for a few days but he’s back now! Superman’s back isn’t that great?”

The rest of the conference room scrambled to the door to go watch the main television in the newsroom, but Lois stayed in her seat, unable to move. Her heart felt like lead.

Clark’s powers were back. It must have been recent that they returned or he would have been seen before that. He never even told her. He never said a word.

And now, she’d have to watch him on the television just like everybody else to find out if he was okay or not. Now if something happened to him, she’d find out like everybody else.

How strong was he right now? Were his powers even fully restored? What if he faltered mid-rescue?

“Lois?” Perry’s voice cut into her thoughts and she looked down to see that she’d been clutching her fists so tightly she’s started to draw blood. “Honey, you okay?”

“I’m fine, Perry,” she replied, ignoring how hoarse her voice sounded. “I, uh... I’m going to go cover the public’s reaction to Superman. I’ll get you something for the front page.”

She couldn’t look him in the eye as she gathered her things and made her way out of the newsroom, fighting back tears.

Chapter 17: Healing

She didn’t cover the reaction to Superman’s rescue of course. She hadn’t intended to and she had a feeling Perry knew it. The look on her face must have told him that something was very wrong though there was no way he could ever begin to guess what it was.

Instead she went home and turned on the television, flipping through the channels until she came across the earthquake footage. She didn’t want to watch it. It was probably the last thing she ever wanted to see in the entire world. But Clark was there, right in the thick of it and if anything happened to him...

She’d what? It occurred to her as she saw the red and blue blur zip past the screen that if something were to happen to him, she was completely unable to do anything. This time she couldn’t save him by knocking out the bad guy and rushing him to STAR Labs. This time he was in China, lifting tons of rubble and debris. If he was still weakened from his encounter with Kryptonite and something fell on him, or suffocated him, all she could do was watch.

Helpless.

Lois Lane was not comfortable with helplessness. She was even less comfortable with waiting. She hated the entire situation and what’s more, she hated that he hadn’t told her his powers had returned. She’d never forgive him if he died without allowing her

the chance to say goodbye.

She wanted to scream in frustration. She wanted to cry, but her own personal dignity prevented her from doing either. So she did the only thing she knew how to do when it came to coping with a difficult emotional situation. She got angry.

Switching the television off, she stood up and began pacing the room, forcing herself to ignore the terror and uncertainty coursing through her. It would do her no good to fall apart. She was better than that.

Sure she had pulled away at first after learning who he really was, but who wouldn’t? He’d lied to her on a constant basis about who he was! It was only natural that she would need time to sort things out. But what kind of guy actually listens to that? If Clark Kent had really cared about her, then he wouldn’t have paid any attention to her request for space, he would have...

Her shoulders slumped with defeat as she realized how ridiculous her thoughts were. It wasn’t her fault, nor was it Clark’s. She had needed time away from him. She had needed that time to realize just how much he meant to her. And she needed to know that he would respect whatever choice she might make. And she knew that now. If she told Clark Kent that she no longer wanted to be with him, he would respect that.

What terrified her was the thought that he might be able to live with it. Because now she knew that she couldn’t. She couldn’t live with just a friendship between them. She couldn’t live with just a working relationship. And she couldn’t live without him in her life at all. She could function, certainly. She could do her job, and live her life. But Clark made everything better — brighter. He made her see so many things she’d previously been blind too. He’d shown her that people can be good, that they can be trusted. He restored her faith in so many things.

If he didn’t come back, would she lose that faith? Would she go back to being the hardened reporter, caring nothing for anything but her career, her respect and her position on the paper? Would she go back to lonely Christmas dinners in her apartment with only her fish for company? Would she ever have another best friend?

She wanted to turn on the television, to see if there was any more news about the earthquake, but her fingers shook when she picked up the remote and she was unable to bring herself to do it. She couldn’t watch, but neither could she just sit there, alone and terrified.

She threw on some casual clothes and grabbed her coat, resolution taking hold. She had to wait, that much was without question. It wasn’t like she could just run off to China. But she didn’t have to wait here. She’d go to his apartment. And if he returned home — *when* he returned home, she would be there waiting for him.

It didn’t take her long to get to his place and even though it was locked, Lois had no trouble getting inside. Checking her watch, she saw that he had been gone for over three hours, something that didn’t help to calm the anxiety coursing through her.

Ignoring the urge to turn on the television, Lois found herself wandering into his bedroom, removing her coat and climbing under the covers of his bed. She inhaled deeply, allowing herself to be comforted by the presence of Clark that could be felt throughout the apartment. It didn’t make her forget the danger he could possibly be in, but it did allow her to relax.

Eventually, she was able to fall asleep clutching a pillow that smelled faintly of his aftershave and hoping against hope that when she woke up, he’d be there.

She woke up to the sound of his voice, calling softly to her and the warmth of his hand familiar on her shoulder. Rolling over, she found herself reaching out to touch that hand, pulling it close and murmuring in appreciation as it softly caressed her

face, pushing her hair back and cupping her cheek.

“Lois,” she could hear him more clearly now and his voice was more welcome to her than it ever had been. She opened her eyes, the reason for why she was laying in his bed returning to her memory as she took in the sight of him standing there, looking battered and exhausted — but alive.

His hair was a mess. It was windblown, and full of dirt and debris. His face was covered in grime as well as his suit and although it wasn’t physically damaged, it looked like he’d been through hell. He’d never looked more beautiful to her than he did at that moment.

“Clark, you’re here!” She sat up, trying desperately not to notice how weak and tired he looked. It would only reinforce her fears if she allowed herself to see that. He was in the suit, and he was here. Surely that meant he was okay now. His powers were back and they’d stay that way.

“I live here, Lois,” he reminded her, sounding a bit bemused. “Remember? What are you doing here?”

“Am I...” she swallowed heavily suddenly wondering if the cooling off between them had been more than Clark simply respecting her wishes for space. What if that had been the last straw between them? What if he had kept away from her at work because he was simply tired of the ins and outs of their relationship? “Am I welcome here? Because if you want me to leave...”

“You are always welcome here,” he told her. There was something in his eyes that told Lois he meant it in a way that went far deeper than the casual sentence suggested. “I just didn’t expect to see you. You’ve been so distant at work.”

“I’ve been distant? *I’ve* been distant?” she didn’t mean for her voice to rise. She tried to suppress the emotion that threatened to bubble over after holding it in for so long. She didn’t want to yell at him, not after everything that had happened...not after she had finally gotten him back to her, safe and sound. Despite all that, she couldn’t seem to stop the words from coming. “You’ve barely even looked at me for days! I’ve felt completely invisible to you, even when I’m standing right in front of you!”

“You wanted time to think,” he pointed out. She hated how he could be so reasonable about everything. “You asked me to give you space.”

“But you didn’t have to listen!” she exclaimed, frustrated at the entirely male part of him that seemed unable to comprehend the idea that ‘leave me alone’ can sometimes mean ‘try harder’.

“I’m sorry,” he said, exasperation creeping into his tone as he sat down on the bed beside her. “I can do a lot of things, but I can’t read minds. It’s not one of my powers.”

“Your powers,” she said softly, the fear and hurt coursing through her anew. “You got them back and you didn’t even tell me. Are you even at full strength? I mean, you look hurt, you look...God, Clark, you could have been killed! I was so scared. I saw you on TV and I couldn’t do anything, I couldn’t help...”

“Lois?” he sounded surprised by her reaction.

“I was scared,” she whispered, hating her own vulnerability. “Why do you think I pulled away like that? I always thought you were invulnerable, even though I knew about Kryptonite. But when that psycho got us and you were injected, it was like...like seeing my worst fears come to life. And I’ve been terrified since that it could happen again — at any moment. It’s out there. That rock is out there. And when you didn’t even tell me that your powers were back and I saw you on that television screen...”

“I’m sorry,” he interrupted, taking her hand and squeezing it gently. “I never thought of that. Usually I’m the terrified one that sits back and watches you dive headlong into dangerous situations. If my hair ever turns grey, it will be because of you, do you realize that?”

“So what, are you saying not telling me your powers were back was payback?” she spat the word out angrily.

“No!” he protested instantly. “Of course not. I just never thought I’d be on the other end. I never thought you worried about me like that.”

“Did you think I didn’t care?” she asked softly. He shrugged and looked away and it broke her heart to think that part of him was still as horribly insecure about their relationship as she was. Why was it so hard for both of them to believe that they loved each other? “Because I do. I care so much that I’ve been having nightmares ever since Batchelar took us that something could happen to you. I pulled away because of those nightmares — because I was so scared. I don’t want to lose you. Not ever again.”

“What about...” he trailed off, and looked down at the dirty blue and red suit he was wearing. She knew what he was referring to.

“The lies?” She voiced it before he could. Before he could say anything, she found herself reaching out to touch the ‘S’ on his chest, trailing along the letter slowly, as she attempted to form the words she wished to say. “I forgave you the moment you woke up beside me in that lab. I might not have realized it then, but I did. I know why you kept it secret. I might not have liked it, but I understood. You were protecting more than just yourself. It’s what you do and I can’t fault you for that. But you have to let me in if we are ever going to have any kind of relationship. I can’t keep having to find out what’s happening to you on the news. What if you hadn’t come back today?”

“But I did,” he told her quietly. “I’ll always come back to you.”

“That’s not the point,” she said, needing him to see things from her point of view if they were ever to continue their relationship. “And you can’t actually promise that. But there is something you can promise. Can you promise me that this is it? The end of the lies, the end of the half-truths? I need that assurance. Are you ready for that kind of commitment?”

She met his eyes boldly, refusing to back down from her convictions. She wanted Clark Kent. She wanted him more than she’d ever wanted anybody in her entire life. But she wasn’t about to settle for anything less than all of him and she needed him to know that. She needed more than half of him, be it Clark Kent or Superman.

What she saw in his eyes as he looked back nearly caused her to cry with relief. It was there in his expression, in the way he placed his hand gently over the one that still lingered on his chest. All the love she had seen in him before she found out his secret was still there. It had always been there. She knew his answer before he even spoke.

“I’m ready,” his voice was deep and filled with emotion. “I love you. I always have and I always will.”

“Then let’s start that honesty now,” she said taking a deep breath. “Are your powers back in full? How much of a risk did you take by going to help in that earthquake?”

“Lois, I couldn’t not go...”

“That’s not what I asked you,” she said interrupting his protests. “I asked how much of a risk it was. You owe me that much.”

“It was a risk,” he finally conceded. “My powers are back, but only just. I...I barely managed to fly back. And even now, I’m...weaker than I’d like.”

“Will they come back the way they did before?” she wondered, “or is this permanent?”

“Doctor Klein says they will return like before, but it takes time.” He looked away as he spoke as if he knew she wouldn’t like to hear what he had to say. “That earthquake set me back, but I had to go. I couldn’t just sit here. You have to understand that.”

“I do,” she assured him. “But it still scares me.”

“I know,” he returned, sitting closer to her and caressing the back of her neck. She could feel the tension drain wherever he

touched her, being replaced ever so slowly with that tingling feeling of anticipation she always got whenever they shared any kind of physical contact. It only occurred to her now to remember that they were alone together, in his bedroom, on his bed...and being completely honest.

How far would the honesty go? Would she be able to tell him just how badly she wanted him? How badly she had always wanted him?

“So I guess we’re stuck, huh?” she met his eyes and licked her lips unconsciously as his hands gently kneaded the back of her neck and shoulders, causing her heart to beat faster. “I mean, I’m never going to stop being scared for you — even if you are Superman.”

“And I’m certain you’ll never learn the meaning of ‘stay here,’” he said with a soft, rueful chuckle. “So I’ve no doubt I’ll be watching you put yourself right in the middle of things, no matter how dangerous.”

“But we’re willing to do this?” she whispered, stopping his hand from its ministrations and kissing the tips of his fingers gently.

“Yeah,” he replied, his voice slightly hoarse. She watched his breath catch ever so slightly as she placed a lingering kiss on the palm of his hand and knew that he was every bit as turned on as she was. “I want to do this.”

There was no longer any question as to what ‘this’ was. She could see the raw need in his eyes and it echoed her own. They had danced around each other for far too long and there was no more denying it. Reaching out for him, she pulled him close, kissing him softly but with definite promise before pulling back.

“Are you...” she trailed off, suddenly feeling like a nervous teenager. “Are you okay? What you went through today...do you need to talk about it?”

“I don’t want to talk, Lois,” he murmured his voice husky and his eyes dark. “No more talking.”

He dipped down to kiss her once more, this time taking the initiative and pulling her hard against him. She could feel the rapid beat of his heart through the suit and it felt good to know that she was the cause of that. Whatever he had seen today, whatever horrors he had encountered, he still wanted her. He still needed her with him. And from the way he kissed her, with that slight edge of desperation, she had a feeling that after a day like today he needed her more than ever.

She wouldn’t let him down.

She sighed softly into his mouth, deepening the kiss and reaching up to run a hand through his already windswept hair. It didn’t matter that he was covered in dirt and filth. All that mattered was the way his body felt against hers, the way his arms tightened around her, and the way her lower body reacted to his kiss.

She might not have cared how he looked, but the same couldn’t be said for him. She protested as he pulled away from her, regret swimming in his eyes as he did so.

“Clark?”

“I want this,” he assured her. “Believe me I do, but I really should shower first.”

“A shower sounds great,” she whispered, surprised by the sensual tone her voice had adopted. “Okay if I join you?”

“Really?” his eyebrows leapt to the top of his forehead and she almost laughed at the nervousness in his voice.

“I want you,” she told him. “All of you and I’m tired of waiting. Unless you have some other deep dark secret to tell me, then there isn’t anything that should stop us from making love. Not anymore.”

“I don’t know how deep or dark it is, but there is one other thing I haven’t told you,” he admitted. She could see fear in his eyes and it caused her to grow nervous all over again. What else could he possibly have not told her? What more could he be

hiding?

“What is it?”

“I uh,” he looked away then back at her, squaring his shoulders as if bracing himself for something. “I’ve never done this before. Making love, I mean. I’ve been... waiting, Lois... waiting for the woman I loved. I’ve been waiting for you. But you need to know that before we do this. I’m scared. I’m more scared now than I was dealing with that earthquake.”

“Oh, Clark,” she said with a relieved laugh. Here she had thought he was about to impart some other, more catastrophic secret. “That’s great!”

“It is?” he was looking doubtful and a little hurt. It only then occurred to her that what he had told her would be a sensitive topic for any man and she had just laughed at it.

“Oh, no I didn’t mean...” she trailed off, feeling embarrassed and tongue-tied. How was it that she could tell him flat-out that she wanted to make love to him, but the moment he admitted his sexual inexperience she suddenly became shy? “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to come out the way it did. I just meant that I’m scared, too. I thought you were going to tell me something along the lines of you having extra ‘male’ parts, or maybe even none at all.”

“You thought I was a eunuch?” he scrunched up his face slightly but there was a smile hiding behind the feigned annoyance.

“Well, how do I know?” she said defensively, trying to withhold her own amusement at the misunderstanding. “After all, you *are* Kryptonian so it’s not like there were any guarantees that the physiology would be the same.”

“Believe me, Lois,” he said dryly, “I am equipped like any human male.”

“Promises, promises,” she teased. Then, upon realizing that he didn’t intend to act on the mutual need between them until his confession was addressed, she took a deep breath. “I’m scared, too. I mean, I’ve done this before...but those experiences were never what they should have been. I never loved the men I was with — who by the way I could count on the fingers of one hand. I thought I did at the time, but I guess I just didn’t have the certainty that you did. I wish I had.”

“Lois...”

“No, please let me finish. I want you to know that of those experiences...none of them were with Lex. I didn’t...I couldn’t...not with him.”

“You don’t need to tell me this,” he assured her. If it were possible she loved him even more for that.

“I know,” she told him. “But I wanted you to know. You were always able to see the truth of things...the truth of me. I’m sorry that I couldn’t wait for you the same way you waited for me.”

“I don’t care about that,” he replied. She gave him a skeptical look, then realized he was serious. Another thing that differentiated him between every other man on Earth. Most men would claim they didn’t care about their partner’s sexual past, but when he said it, she could tell he meant it. “If you say you love me now, then I believe you. You start fresh, just like me.”

“Start fresh,” she tested the words on her tongue. “I like that.”

“You’re still going to have to give me a few pointers though,” he said with an impish grin. “You’ll be corrupting an innocent after all.”

“Somehow I have a feeling it might be you doing the corrupting,” she shot back, feeling the mood lighten considerably. “Innocent as you may be, you certainly kiss like you know what you’re doing.”

“Well I’m not a monk,” he reminded her, as he placed a gentle, yet sensual kiss on the nape of her neck. “And I’m sure I’ll get the hang of this after a few practice runs.”

“As many as you need,” she promised breathlessly as he

kissed a little lower, closer to her collar bone.

“We might need to practice all night,” he murmured into her skin. She tightened her grip on the bedspread as his tongue raked agonizingly slowly over her flesh. “After all, I’m very inexperienced.”

“Mmm,” was all she could manage as he lifted his head to meet her own lust-filled gaze. “We should get started now then. We have a...long night ahead of us.”

“You said something about a shower?” His eyes were dancing now with a mixture between desire and the satisfaction that he’d been able to reduce her to such an incoherent state with a few simple kisses to the neck and collar bone.

“Actually you mentioned the shower,” she corrected him, regaining her power of speech momentarily. “I merely asked if I could join you. The offer still stands.”

“I do need to get out of this suit,” he admitted.

She grinned. “Music to my ears.”

With that she stood, taking him by the hand and led him into the bathroom. He followed quietly, his eyes dark and intense, but said nothing.

Chapter 18: Charlie’s Tale

It was a quiet morning between the two of them. Lois felt no need to speak and break the companionable silence and it was clear that he felt the same way. Rather, she was content to meet his eyes over eggs and bacon, smile stupidly and sip her coffee as she reflected on everything that had happened.

When they arrived at her apartment, Lois didn’t think twice about leaving her bedroom door open as she changed, nor did she find it strange that Clark would sit on her bed, staring appreciatively at her as she did so. After all, she could quite happily watch him get dressed over and over again, though truth be told, she much preferred the process in reverse.

She was in the middle of buttoning her suit jacket when Clark absently moved the mouse of her computer, causing the screen saver to vanish and her novel to appear on the screen, cursor blinking as it awaited her final touches.

She could see he had tried to avoid looking, but the expression on his face told her he read too fast not to have caught some of it. Before last night she might have felt exposed and vulnerable by the idea of him seeing it. Now, however she only felt proud of her accomplishment and actually wanted to show it to him.

She had started the whole thing in a desperate attempt to come to terms with all her inner confusion and turmoil. She had thought she had needed to do something to prove she still had the talent and the fire her job required. If she could publish a novel, she could do anything, right?

Now, she realized that although she desperately wanted Clark to read it, she wasn’t sure that she necessarily wanted everyone else in the world to. It all seemed so personal now and she knew that she didn’t need her name on a novel cover to prove her own worth.

She didn’t need Clark Kent by her side to do that either, though her world was that much brighter with him there.

She approached him and sat down next to him, pulling his hand into her lap and absently running her hands along his arm. Leaning in, she kissed his neck and leaned her head against his shoulder.

“I was writing a novel,” she told him, nodding her head toward the computer screen, “about my experiences with Lex... with Superman... with you. It started out very differently than it ended up and it helped me to figure a lot of things out about myself and my feelings for you. I...I was going to publish it. There was an editor I spoke to that I’m sure would be interested in it. But I’m not so sure about it now.”

“Why not?” he turned to face her. “I know you’ve always

wanted to publish fiction.”

“I...” she trailed off, trying to think of how to explain it so that he would understand. “I’m not sure I need to anymore. But I would love for you to read it, Clark. Maybe you can help me decide.”

“Are you sure?”

She smiled at the complete love she saw staring back at her and nodded.

“I’m sure. In some ways, it’s as much your work as it is mine. After all, you were my muse.” She kissed his cheek softly and moved into the computer chair to email the attachment to him. After she had done so, she turned back. “And if you think I should publish it, I will.”

He nodded and stood up.

“I’ll read it tonight and let you know.”

It didn’t take long for Lois to conduct a post-earthquake ‘interview’ with Superman in order to provide Perry with something worthy of the front page. He didn’t seem to question her as to why she hadn’t actually bothered to interview members of the general public like she had said she would when she had excused herself to leave the night before. It seemed like ages ago that she had seen that story on the news and felt the icy grip of fear as she watched Superman fly onto the scene.

That fear wouldn’t leave — she knew that. But she also knew that Clark was worth that fear and more and that knowledge helped to quell it ever so slightly. Perry noticed the change between the two of them and made a sly Elvis and Priscilla comment before heading into the conference room to start the morning meeting.

It went the same as it always did, but somehow everything seemed new and different to Lois. There was a new energy to her job now that had never been there before, not even in her ‘mad dog’ hey day. She couldn’t wait to get out there and get to the bottom of things, to ferret out the truth and expose the evils of Metropolis. It was as if she’d previously been idling and now the engine was not only working, but raring to go.

Mostly she wanted to get to the bottom of Intergang and expose them. She wasn’t satisfied with having put Batchelar away. It wasn’t enough. They had hurt too many people for too long for Lois’ peace of mind. She desperately wanted to prove the Intergang connection to Batchelar and bring the entire empire down but Perry remained reluctant on that front.

Clark argued just as vehemently for the story and eventually Perry relented, telling them that as long as they could bring him front page news, they were free to pursue whatever angles they thought might turn into a story later. That wasn’t a problem. Superman was always front page news and Lois knew that if necessary Clark wouldn’t hesitate to be ‘interviewed’ in order to allow them to pursue their true goal.

They wouldn’t let this go. Knowing that Clark wanted to bring them down just as much as she did was heartening. They were on the same page professionally and personally and Lois had nothing but high hopes for where both fronts would lead. Where once she was convinced she had to choose between love or career, now she knew she could have both.

She could have Clark, as well as be a respected journalist. Maybe someday she would even win that elusive Pulitzer. Maybe they both would. Whatever happened they would do it together and she loved the thought.

The rest of the day went by rather quickly, which Lois was grateful for. They had agreed to go home separately, but had planned on having dinner together at Lois’ apartment after Clark read Lois’ novel.

She knew that he could read incredibly fast so she wouldn’t have to wait long. She had just enough time when she got home to change into her favourite pair of jeans and a sweater, pull her hair up into a pony tail and order some food before the tell-tale

knock at the door told her that Clark was here.

Butterflies congregated in her stomach as she opened it to let him in. He was carrying a stack of papers, no doubt her novel. He had obviously printed it out after reading it. Whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, she wasn't sure.

And she was suddenly sure that she'd never been so nervous in her life, though she knew that she almost certainly had.

Before either of them could say anything, he set the manuscript down on the coffee table and reached out to cup her face, pulling her close for an intense, breathtaking kiss.

They eventually parted, but he refused to let her go, holding her tightly and delivering soft kisses to her eyelids, cheeks and ears.

"Publish it," he whispered, his breath soft on her ear.

Reluctantly she stepped back to meet his gaze which was rich and filled with love for her. She felt her own heart swell in response and squeezed his hands.

"I...I take it that you liked it?"

"I loved it," he answered honestly. "It was like looking into your soul. The way you described everything...the way you felt about some of the things that happened...I feel like I know you now, so much better than I even did this morning."

"You really think I should make it all public?"

"Nobody but me and you will know there's anything but fiction behind it," he replied softly. "I think you need to put it out there. But it's up to you. Even if you don't publish it, thank you for letting me see it. I know it's too late now, but if I could change what happened between us...do things differently, I would. I never realized just how much pain I put you through."

"Stop right there," she said, placing her finger on his lips to silence him. "That's not why I wanted you to read it. Everything that happened — all of it — is over. It's done. The past is the past and it should stay that way. I don't want you apologizing for anything. We're beyond it now. Promise me that we'll only look towards the future from now on. Promise me that and I'll seriously consider publishing it."

"I promise," he said holding his right hand up to his heart as if taking an oath. She giggled slightly at the solemn expression on his face and he too relaxed with a grin.

"Let's just eat dinner and we'll decide all of this later, okay?" she gestured to the table where the take-out was growing increasingly colder and they both moved to sit down, but not before Clark used his heat vision to heat it back up.

They didn't speak of the novel at all as they ate, choosing instead to discuss possible angles they could take when it came to the Batchelar/Intergang story. Lois suggested that maybe Superman could talk to Batchelar in an attempt to get him to roll over on his Intergang contacts, though neither of them thought he would actually give up that information.

It was worth a shot however, and Henderson would likely have no problem letting Superman talk to the man though he'd likely balk at the idea of Lois asking if she could interview the man. Lois wasn't sure she could be in the same room with him without actively trying to kill him anyway so it worked out just fine.

After dinner Lois' mind was moving towards more pleasant, physical pursuits with her partner when she saw a familiar far-away look enter his eyes and knew with sinking disappointment that it meant Superman's services were needed.

She kissed him as she told him to go and shivered slightly when he promised to come back, no matter how late it was. She decided to sleep on the couch just in case he did, pyjamas optional.

As she set to work cleaning the take-out cartons from the coffee table, she picked up her novel to move it to a safer place and was surprised when a loose group of papers fell out. Bending down, she picked them up and saw Clark's name on the front.

Above his name a simple title read: *Charlie's Tale*.

Intrigued, Lois sat down and flipped over the title page to the body of it where she tucked her legs underneath her and began to read.

Charlie King was not prepared for this assignment. He hadn't liked the idea of it right from the beginning, and now that he stood inside the captain's office staring at his soon-to-be-partner Laura Landon, he liked it even less. He was not a liar or a deceiver by nature and this particular assignment caused for just that on a prolonged basis. He'd reluctantly accepted the assignment, realizing the necessity of capturing a potentially dirty cop and bringing Liam Lancaster to justice.

But he hadn't prepared himself for what he saw before him. He had expected anybody that Liam Lancaster dated would be cold and unfeeling. He had assumed that any woman that monster was with would be attractive, but in an impersonal museum-like way...nice to look at, but no emotion or soul to be seen. In short, he wasn't prepared to actually like his new partner.

And he certainly wasn't prepared for how breathtakingly beautiful he found her.

It was her fire and warmth that drew him in beyond anything else. When the captain mentioned he was to be her new partner she fought like a lioness against the idea, insisting up and down that she was far too experienced and professional to warrant being stuck with a rookie like himself. He bit back a retort, content to simply watch the fireworks as she fought tooth and nail to keep her professional independence.

She was shorter than him by almost a foot, but still fairly intimidating despite that. Her hair was a glossy dark brown that he longed to reach out and run his hands through and she wore little make-up, save for dark red lipstick that made her appear incredibly sexy and alluring.

Her eyes were deep and unnervingly honest, something that he definitely hadn't expected. She was trying to appear tough and independent, but Charlie could see a fear in them that she tried desperately to hide behind false confidence and bravado. She was a talented cop, of that he had no doubt, but he could tell that inside she wasn't nearly as sure of herself as she pretended to be. She had a vulnerability in those eyes that he desperately wanted to touch, to reassure.

She was vibrant and alive and most of all, he could tell right off that she was not a woman who could stand by and willingly watch injustices being committed if she could help it. In less than twenty minutes and with absolutely no proof whatsoever, Charlie King knew without a doubt that if Laura Landon was dating Liam Lancaster, she had no idea what kind of a man he truly was.

She couldn't know. She was too good, too strong...too perfect.

Charlie King was definitely in trouble. He had fallen in love, and had been completely unprepared for it.

Lois ran a hand through her hair as she read the last sentence over and over. Her entire body felt warm as she read his words and she wished desperately that he had written just a little bit more.

But wait...he had. There was another page! Turning to look at it, she saw it was an author's note from Clark.

Thought I'd give you the same look inside my mind that you gave me. I loved you from the beginning, Lois. From the very moment I saw you. And however long it took for us to find each other, none of that matters now. I know it's your decision, but I truly do hope you'll publish your novel. It's part of you and I think it's a part of you that others can learn from. People will love your story because it's honest and it's real. And if I do say so myself, you have one heck of a romantic male lead. Take the last step, and tell the world your story. If they're anything like me they'll love you even more for it.

*Love,
Clark. (Charlie)*

Wiping away the tears, Lois picked searched through her phone book, picked up the phone and dialed Justine Carroll's number.

THE END