

Regarding Clark

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Rated PG-13

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Summary: Lois and Clark finally make it to the altar. Clark learns that getting to the honeymoon requires a bit more effort and a few sacrifices. Lois proves that she will fight with everything she has if it's anything regarding Clark.

Story Size: 105,716 words (557 Kb as text)

This is my first story submission in three years. I was forced to take a hiatus for personal reasons, but have recently gotten the L&C fever again. I was posting this story to the message boards when life took over. I want to apologize for not finishing it up there. It was just easier for me to send it straight to archive. I want to thank anyone who helped me this. I've lost many of my notes so I can't name each of you. I do appreciate it and appreciate anyone who read parts of this before and those who left comments. This story was inspired by a movie (big surprise). I'm not sure who wrote it, but I thank them for such inspiration. This is also intended to replace the clone/ NK arc. I felt it should have been handled a lot differently on the show. It is rated PG 13 because some of the conversation throughout is very much adult content, as are some of the situations. I hope I've kept it under the guidelines and do not offend anyone. Thanks for reading. Comments are encouraged. Most of the characters are not mine and no infringement was intended.

Part 1 — Regarding Clark: Union

"Come on, Lois. You have more than enough vacation time built up," Clark moaned as he held the door open for Lois to enter before him.

"It's not about the time, Clark," she returned as she started to shrug from her jacket the second she stepped into Clark's apartment.

He closed the door and began tugging off his own coat. "We could really use the time."

"For what?" she asked and looked up at him. When he arched an 'I can't believe you asked that' brow, she smirked. "Never mind," she mumbled and kicked her shoes off before bounding down the stairs into his living room.

"I just think that as busy as we'll be, throwing an investigation into the mix might be begging trouble." Clark headed toward the kitchen. She had told him on the way here she was hungry.

"Do you forget who you're marrying?" she asked him, digging through a box of her things that she had brought over the day before. They were going to spend their first few weeks or months as a married couple in Clark's apartment, mainly because she liked it more than her own. That was probably why she had practically been living here for a month.

"Now how can I forget that?" Clark asked with a touch of humor in his voice.

"Watch it, Flyboy!" she remarked with a grin.

He smiled back before ducking into the cabinet.

"You know, I do realize we could use the time," Lois said.

"But you also know I'm already so anxious I feel like I'm going to blow up."

Clark put the items he held down on the counter and walked the few steps to his future bride. "I'm anxious, too," he admitted.

"And excited," he said with a little grin.

"And... nervous?" she ventured.

He lifted his hands to rub up and down her arms. "Very nervous," he told her. "Lois, this is the biggest thing I've ever done."

"What about lifting a space shuttle into space?" she challenged with a glint in her eye. "Or saving the whole world from a rogue asteroid?"

"This..." He leaned to kiss her softly. "Is the biggest thing..." Another kiss. "I've ever done." He lifted his hands to hold her face while he kissed her more sensually.

She smiled up at him when he drew back. "I keep thinking... 'Hurry up! Somebody else is going to figure out how great he is and snatch him up.'"

"I don't think you have anything to worry about." He lifted her left hand, tracing her ring with his thumb. "You're wearing my ring."

Lois glanced at it before she laid her hands on his chest. "I would rather be wearing you," she whispered and leaned in to another kiss.

He moaned and relaxed into the encounter, groaning loudly in protest a second later when a knock resounded on the door.

"Jimmy," Lois said through a chuckle.

"Probably," Clark agreed as he rubbed her arm before jogging up the stairs to open the door.

"Clark Kent?" the man on the other side asked him.

"Yes?"

The man extended a box. "Have a good one," he said and turned to leave even before Clark had a good hold on the item.

"Ah..." Clark glanced at the box he held. "What about a tip?" he asked the delivery man.

"Taken care of," was tossed over the man's shoulder as he hurried away.

Clark sighed and turned, shutting the door behind him. "You didn't have to send me flowers," he told Lois.

She looked up from digging in her box. "Sorry. I didn't," she informed him.

"Oh..." He moved over to the table and lifted the lid from the box. "Wow," he deadpanned.

"What?" Lois moved over to look with him. She whistled loudly when she saw the two-toned, purple flowers. They were gorgeous.

Clark lifted the card. "Thornless and perfect, just like you. And soon you'll know how much I appreciate that perfection."

"Give me that!" Lois snatched the card from his hand. "What hussy had the gall to send you flowers? With such blatant admiration?" She looked up at him, her expression asking for an explanation.

"Don't look at me," he told her, pushing the flowers across the table. They weren't from Lois; he wasn't interested.

Lois looked at the purple beauties for a moment. "Your mom?" she threw out.

Clark had moved back to the kitchen to start their dinner. "I don't think so. She would never tell me I was perfect."

"I agree there," Lois said with a snort.

"Gee, thanks," Clark drawled.

With a shrug, Lois went back to emptying a couple of boxes while Clark cooked their supper.

It wasn't until they had both finished eating, plates forgotten, that Lois turned to Clark where they sat on the sofa. "No idea who your admirer is?"

"None," he responded. His hand rubbed across her shoulders. "Frankly, I couldn't care less because you didn't send them to me."

She smirked at him. "Kissing up, Kent?"

"Oh, if I was kissing up, you'd know it." He waggled his brows at her and he leaned to nuzzle her neck. "Remind me again

why we still haven't made love?" he whispered in her ear.

Her arms surrounded him and she turned her face, nearly inhaling him. When she drew back, she lifted a hand so that she could wipe his lips with her thumb. "Jimmy interruptus."

Clark grasped her hips, shifting her to straddle his lap. "He *does* have an uncanny ability to know when we're about to become intimate, doesn't he?"

"Uncanny," Lois responded as her expression told him, undeniably, that she wanted him. "You know, we've made it this far..."

"Yeah," was Clark's answer even as his hands slid back so he could cup her buttocks.

Lois stared into his eyes for a second, groaned, then dove back in. Her tongue shot into his mouth and she slid closer to him. He wasn't a bit shy either, tugging her until they were both groaning at the contact between their bodies. She drew away and grabbed his shirt to snatch it open, brows rising when the rasp of Velcro filled the air.

"I've lost too many buttons from your impatience," he explained with a grin.

She giggled, pushed the material to the side, and leaned in to kiss the top of his chest. He sighed and dropped his head back in pure bliss. They had been so close so many times... He had gone to bed in literal pain more than once.

Lois was right. They had made it this far.

Of course, it was so hard to think when he could feel the heat from her body!

Clark shoved his hands under her skirt, searching for her bare skin. God, he loved it when she wore skirts!

His hands grasped naked cheeks — he loved thongs, too — and he grinned at her.

Lois grinned back. She loved doing this to him. They had been in this position so many times... They had been closer even. But she never got tired of the looks on his face. The 'wow' look almost sent her stripping in seconds.

His hand slipped toward the front, the anticipation causing her breath to leave her in a rush. Just as he moved down, toward the goal they both craved...

THE
DAMN
PHONE
RANG!

They both stilled, groaned silently, then burst out laughing.

"Please tell me our bungalow in Hawaii is so far off the beaten path we can't get phone reception," Lois said as she took a deep breath.

"Further," Clark replied as he laid sideways so he could reach the phone on the end table. They had agreed to answer the phone for the next few days in case it was about something involved with the wedding.

"Hello?"

"CK?"

Clark chuckled. He should have known it was Jimmy!

"As if the traffic wasn't bad enough," Ellen Lane complained as she climbed from the Jeep at the entrance to the Diamond Hotel in downtown Metropolis. "It just had to be pouring rain."

"Mother, please," Lois quipped as she tugged a suitcase from the back.

"And just where is this future husband of yours?" her mother kept on as if she hadn't heard her.

"He's off getting sloshed so he can put up with you," Sam replied.

"Daddy!" Lois shot at him.

"Well, too bad I quit," Ellen said to Sam. "I would have joined him so I could stand to look at *you*!"

"God, help me," Lois whispered as she held her head back

and took a deep breath.

Martha laid a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay to stop and do that any time you need to."

That seemed to give Lois the reprieve she needed. Her head leveled and she smiled at her future mother-in-law. Jonathan stepped up next to them, offering his silent support with that easy smile of his. With the renewed energy to tackle the next few minutes, Lois followed her parents and in-laws into the hotel.

Three or four minutes later, Lois was about to blow her stack. "What do you mean you don't have any rooms?" Lois nearly yelled at the poor man behind the counter.

"There are several conventions in town. Not to mention the visit from a very important dignitary."

"I couldn't care less about whatever convention is in town or whatever dignitary feels he needs to interrupt my plans!" Lois was beyond frustrated now. "I booked these rooms weeks ago."

"I know, Miss, but the guests in those rooms haven't checked out." He waved a hand toward the front. "If you haven't noticed, we are also in the midst of the worst storm of the season. With the temperatures falling, there's too much ice on the runways at the airport..."

"Look," Lois yelled and slapped her hand down. "I don't care how much ice is at the airport. All I care about is getting what I've asked for. Six rooms. I have more family coming in. I need six rooms!"

"I'm sorry..."

"Sorry? You don't know what sorry is!" She was just about to climb over the desk when a pair of strong hands grasped her shoulders.

"Take a deep breath, Lois," Clark said softly and coaxed her to lean against him. His face fell beside her ear and he spoke softly. "It's all right. You just need to relax, calm down so we can figure this out."

Lois closed her eyes and took several steadying breaths. She needed this man more than he would ever know. And he seemed to show up just when she needed him. When she felt she could face the world again, she turned to smile at him. "Thanks."

His hand lifted to cup her face. "Any time," he returned with a smile.

"Why couldn't you be more like that, Sam?" Ellen asked her ex-husband. "Do you see how lovingly he calmed her down? Of course, it's a bit controlling for my tastes..."

"Sheesh," Lois groaned and leaned her head over on Clark's chest. He just chuckled and reached up to massage her neck.

"No rooms at any of the hotels or motels I've called," came Jonathan's voice as he and Martha walked back up to join everyone at the counter.

"No luck either," Martha added, then reached up to lay her hand on Clark's shoulder. "Hey, son."

"Hi, Mom," he said with a smile and leaned over to kiss her cheek, not completely drawing away from Lois. He wanted to stay close to give her silent support in case she needed another breather.

"That's just great," Ellen barked. "I knew I should have made you keep a place in the city," she told Sam.

Sam gave her an evil look before facing his daughter again. "I'm sure the insane asylum has a couple of empty beds. I would be more than happy to sign the admission papers for your mother."

"Why you sorry, no good excuse for breath!" Ellen nearly shouted.

"Stop." They all clamped their mouths closed when Clark gave the order. He lovingly rubbed Lois' shoulder from where he stood beside her. "You guys will just have to stay with us."

"Can your folks stay with me?" Lois asked him softly.

He smiled at her as he bent to pick up a suitcase. "I'm sure we can find a few rooms by tomorrow."

“Let’s hope so. Our other guests arrive the day after tomorrow,” Lois said as she followed along behind the Kents toward the exit.

A little while later they were all walking into Lois’ apartment, Sam and Ellen still griping with one another.

“Why don’t I make us all some tea?” Martha wanted to know as she headed toward the kitchen.

“Oolong,” Lois replied. “I think we could all use something.”

Clark laughed softly before reaching out to grasp Lois’ hand. He lifted it to his mouth and kissed it softly.

Ellen had noticed the exchange and moved over next to the younger couple. “Are you two sleeping together?”

“Mother!” Lois squawked at her.

“Are you?” she wanted to know. “What am I saying? In this day and age everybody sleeps together.” She looked pointedly at Clark. “Just remember to be extremely discreet when you start having your affairs.”

“That’s it!” Lois said and smacked the counter.

Clark reached out and wrapped his arms around her body; she was about to attack her mother. He swung her around, buried his face next to hers, and spoke. “Calm down.”

“Calm down? Clark, she just...”

“I know.” He rubbed her face before drawing away to look at Ellen. “With all due respect, Mrs. Lane, our love life is really none of your business. Lois and I are four days away from our wedding date. We’re excited about that. And we’re affectionate.” He squeezed Lois’ hand. “As far as I’m concerned, there is no other woman in this world for me. Lois is where my life began. She will sustain me and she will be where it ends.” He looked at Ellen with an expression that defied her to contradict him. “This will be the last time that subject is mentioned.”

Ellen stared at the young man for a long moment before she huffed out her indignation and turned to stomp from the apartment.

“Mom!” Lois called after her.

Clark tugged her back toward himself. “Let her go. She’ll be okay.”

“Thank you,” Lois told as she rubbed his cheek.

“That’s what I’m here for.” He smiled and leaned to kiss her briefly.

Martha sighed and moved into the kitchen to prepare water for tea. Maybe they could share that cup now.

Beyond that, things would be just fine. Lois was the woman on this Earth that had been made for her boy and she couldn’t wait to see them finally embrace as husband and wife.

“I didn’t expect to see you two here today,” Perry said as his star reporting team stepped into his office.

“We didn’t expect to be here either.” Clark glanced at Lois. “At least I didn’t. My beautiful fiancée needs something to get her mind off things for a while.”

Perry looked over at Lois.

“The hotel was booked up and my folks are at my apartment.”

The editor laughed aloud. “Say no more.” He turned and picked up a file from his desk. “I have a nice little nugget that should keep you busy for the day.”

“We’ll take it,” Lois said, snatching the folder from his hand. She opened it to read the brief. “Frogs?” she asked incredulously.

“Not just any frogs,” Perry informed her. “Those particular frogs are very rare, very valuable amphibians. Something or other to do with genetics research. Just hustle over to Pet Palace. The manager will fill you in on everything.”

“Thanks, Chief,” Clark said as he followed Lois out into the bullpen. The last place he had wanted to be was here today, but Lois needed a break from her mother. And so did he.

“So when I came in this morning, I noticed the glass on the door was broken and the frogs were gone,” the manager of Pet Palace told Lois and Clark.

“What makes these frogs so special?” Lois asked him.

“These are Doppelbuufo frogs. They are used in genetics research, but unless you are a scientist, you probably wouldn’t know that.”

“You think whoever took them might be a scientist?” Clark asked.

“Or a budding one. The Doppelbuufo has an incredible metabolism that enables them to be used in cloning research. I’m told they’ve been used to successfully clone mice. If I were a mad scientist...”

“Yeah,” Lois cut him off, eyeing him closely. He certainly looked the part.

“They also contain an enzyme that constantly needs replacing.”

“And let me guess,” Lois said with a sarcastic drawl. “They eat each other to replace it?”

The man’s face lit up. “Why yes!”

“Figures,” Lois said as she closed her notepad.

Clark recognized she was done with her questions. “Thanks for your help,” he told the man before hurrying to catch up with the woman who had left him already.

On the sidewalk, Lois turned toward him. “Why did Perry give us this piece of garbage?”

“It was something to keep you busy for a while,” Clark told her.

“We’ll be done long before lunch, Clark. There’s nothing here but the theft of some weird frogs. It’s like the man said, some mad scientist probably took them trying to clone his long lost pet or something.”

Clark reached over and pulled her close to his side. “Maybe he’s trying to clone his long lost mother,” he said with a grin.

“Now *that* would be a great story.” Lois laughed with him as they walked along. “I hope my mother behaves herself at the rehearsal later.”

“And the dinner after,” Clark put in.

“I’m sorry she’s so... crazy,” Lois said.

“She’ll come around. No woman can resist my charms for long.”

She snorted at that.

“Okay. Hopefully it won’t take her two years.” He squeezed her and they laughed again.

Lois stopped at the corner and turned to play with the lapel on his coat. “Have I told you today that I love you?”

“You have. But you can tell me every two seconds if you want to.”

She held the material and leaned up to kiss him, sighing heavily. “Remind me of that constantly. I’m feeling a bit anxious.”

“Are you having second thoughts?” he asked her, rubbing his hands up and down her arms.

“No, no. I just feel... I don’t know, like something is going to happen I won’t like very much.” Her eyes flashed as she looked at him. “We’ll probably be interrupted on our honeymoon.”

“Not a chance,” Clark said and cupped her face as he kissed her again. He drew back and grinned at her. “Come on. The sooner we get this piece wrapped up, the sooner we can go neck for a while.”

“Yeah, right,” she said with a humorless chuckle. “My mother would love that!”

Clark laughed heartily as they made their way down the sidewalk. They would speak with the responding officers about the robbery and hopefully put a nice little bow on this story.

And maybe they would steal a few heated kisses after the rehearsal.

Across town a gray-haired man answered his cell phone. “Things are on track,” he said at once.

“If they’re so on track, why did a pet store get robbed last night?” came the reply.

The man felt a bit of panic. “I had no choice. To sustain the tissue, the specimen needs the enzymes from the frogs.”

“This should have been mentioned. We could have gotten a larger shipment.”

“We need a larger shipment,” the man deadpanned.

“Obviously. You’ll have what you need by the end of the day, but anymore slip-ups and we’ll be forced to take action.”

Before the man could say another word, the connection was cut. He sighed heavily as he lifted his eyes toward the door. How had he gotten himself into this?

Lois eased the Jeep forward in the line of traffic in mid-town. They were on the way to their wedding rehearsal. While she was excited about that, she was still feeling a bit off. That strange sensation that something was about to happen seemed to be getting worse. To top it off, her mother had called complaining about the flowers for the wedding.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Clark asked her as he reached for her hand.

She glanced at him and smiled. “Just thinking that after the wedding is over, I won’t have to see my mother again until Christmas.”

“Aww,” Clark crooned and rubbed her hand with his other one. “Is that who you spoke to earlier?” She had taken a call at the precinct.

“Yeah. She was having a cow about the flowers for the wedding. She doesn’t like the arrangements that will be put on the ends of the pews.”

“She picked them out,” Clark said helpfully.

“Oh, I know.” She glanced at the line of cars moving in the opposite direction. They inched forward a couple of spots. “I thought by allowing her to have so much control, she would be more... not herself.”

“And your father really seems to like provoking her.” Clark shook his head with a grin.

“Oh, he does,” Lois told him. “When Mother quit drinking, they started this constant attack.”

“Lois, I will never intentionally make you feel inferior in that way. I will be as open and honest with you as I can because I want our marriage to be very different.”

They had pretty much stalled for a moment, so she turned to look at him. “Our marriage *will* be different.” She lifted his hand and kissed the back. “We have to talk though... all the time.”

“All the time,” he vowed as he smiled at her. He accepted the kiss she offered, then sat back a bit as she moved forward in traffic again. Glancing out the window, he noticed an ATM in the middle of the block. “Lois, wasn’t there an ATM across the street from Pet Palace?”

“Yeah,” she answered as she turned right to head toward the church. “Why?”

“ATMs have built in cameras.”

Lois grinned at him. “I like how you think, Mr. Kent.”

He grinned back. “You sure know how to sweet-talk a man.”

She let out a snort of laughter as they made the rest of their journey a little quicker on the side road than the main street.

Clark called Jimmy to tell him to check on the ATM across from Pet Palace and see if they could get a copy of the tape from its camera.

Lois and Clark parked around the corner from the church and walked arm in arm the short distance.

“Lois!”

Lois looked up at the excited squeal and grinned widely, pulling away from Clark. “Lucy!” she yelled back and met her sister in an excited hug.

“Look at you, girl,” Lucy said as she leaned back.

“Gorgeous.”

“And you? What’s different?”

“I have finally found my life’s passion.”

“Besides the next Mr. Friday night?”

“Funny.” Lucy pushed at her playfully. “I’m putting that degree to use.”

“You’re teaching?” Lois asked in disbelief.

“I am. Second grade.”

“Oh, Luce, that’s great.” Lois hugged her again. Clark had made it to them and she glanced at him, reaching to tug him close. “You remember Clark.”

“I certainly do.” She stepped forward and gave him a warm hug. “Thanks for putting up with this hard case.”

“We put up with each other,” Clark said as he rubbed the hand stuck through his bent arm.

“I can’t imagine you needing somebody to put up with you.”

Lois gave him a sideways glance. “He has more going on than you think,” she said.

Lucy laughed and moved to take Lois’ free arm as they continued toward the church. “And Jimmy? What’s he having going on right now?”

They all laughed as they headed up the steps into the chapel.

Once inside, Lois wanted to turn and run for the hills. Her mother was barking orders, her father was making snide comments to make the situation worse, and the Kents looked so embarrassed they wanted to scream.

“Sorry I’m late,” came a hurried voice from behind them.

Lois turned to see Perry and Jimmy coming in. “Late?”

“I forgot to tell you,” Clark spoke up. “Reverend Bob cancelled on us, so I asked Perry to fill in.”

“In case you’ve forgotten, this is a wedding. We need a minister,” Lois pointed out.

“You have one.” Perry pulled out his wallet and dug inside for a card. “I’m an ordained minister.”

Lois took the card he was offering and smirked. “The Church of Blue Suede Deliverance,” she read. “I should have known.” She handed the card back and glanced at her mother. “She’s going to love this.”

“She’ll be okay.” Clark urged her toward the altar, greeting everyone when they got there. He took control for a moment to get things rolling. It stunned Ellen so much, she couldn’t say a word.

Perry directed everyone where to go, what to do. They moved through the motions, enjoying every second. Ellen made a couple of comments only to have Clark remind her that this was a happy occasion and he was — very happy!

“And then you can kiss your bride,” Perry said after telling them what the actual ceremony would entail.

“Absolutely,” was Clark’s reply before he captured Lois’ lips in a kiss. She giggled and dove in for more, wrapping her arms around his neck. He pulled her closer as the kiss continued.

“Do you two have any decency?” Ellen barked at them.

Clark drew back enough to look at Lois. “Oh, she’s more than decent.”

Lucy snorted at the comment, which only stoked Ellen’s mood.

Lois laughed and stole one more kiss before drawing away.

“Come on, Mother. Unlike you and Daddy, Clark and I still enjoy one another.”

Clark made a face, waiting for the tirade, but Lois grasped his hand and hurried toward the exit.

“We’ll see everyone tonight for the rehearsal dinner,” Lois called over her shoulder, more than ready to get away from Ellen.

Behind them, Lucy laughed softly. “Way to go, Lois,” she said softly.

Jimmy eased a bit closer to her. “Will you be at the dinner tonight?”

She grinned at him. “Depends on how quickly you can get me out of here.” Her mother was ranting again and with Lois gone, the older woman would redirect her annoyance at her younger daughter.

The young man smiled and grabbed her hand so they could hurry from the church without looking back.

The gray-haired man poured himself another drink as he listened to the angry string of words coming through the phone at his ear. “Yes, yes. I understand,” he said.

“You better understand,” came the silken voice on the other end. “I have spent a fortune to make this happen.”

“It will happen,” he assured her.

“It better, Mamba, or the only research you’ll be doing will be on what type of casket you want.”

Mamba blanched when she slammed the phone down in his ear. He knew too well what was at stake... at least for himself. He had no idea at all what the ‘Boss’ wanted from all of this. With any luck, this would be his final creation.

Lois and Clark sat at the table in the conference room sifting through the notes they had on their current story. “This isn’t much,” Clark said of their little information.

“I know,” Lois sighed. “Any other time I should be more than happy to just put a nice little bow on a story like this. I should be happy, blissful even, over our dinner tonight and the final preparations tomorrow and Thursday, but...”

“Why don’t you talk to her?” Clark asked her.

She sighed and looked up at him. “One doesn’t talk to Ellen Lane, you talk *at* her. And she very effectively deflects it.” Lois leaned over and put her head in her hands.

Clark sat forward to rub her back in sympathy. “Do you want me to talk to her?”

“Yes... no,” she said without lifting her head.

He was about to say something else when Jimmy stepped inside. “CK, I just got that tape you wanted.”

Clark turned to take the tape. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem,” Jimmy said and left again.

Clark stood to put the tape in the machine, noticing Lois had gathered herself together to watch with him. They ran through the frames to the correct spot and froze the image.

“Figures,” Lois commented. “Someone’s there and the image is so distorted we can’t see it.”

“Oh, really?” he asked with a wiggle of his brows. She blew out a breath as she watched him lower his glasses. “Well?”

“Guy Foley,” Clark told her. “And a license plate number.”

He scribbled the tag number on a notepad, ripped the paper off, and stood to call Jimmy. When the young man came, he shoved the paper in his hand. “Run this for me, Jimmy. Please.”

“You got it, CK.” He turned and hurried from the room.

“Guy Foley?” Lois asked when he turned around, clearly not recognizing the name.

“As in runner for Intergang,” Clark reminded her.

“Remember we thought he was involved in that Slum drug influx last summer?”

“The one we couldn’t tie him to?” she wanted to know.

“Yeah.” Clark threw his hands up. “This is just our luck. Days before our wedding we might have stumbled onto the biggest story of our careers.”

“How does Guy Foley stealing research frogs translate to biggest story of our careers?”

“If Foley’s involved, so is the possibility that Intergang is.”

He was pacing. “If Intergang’s involved, this is going to get

bigger. Bigger is not a good thing now, not with the wedding around the corner and the honeymoon.” He looked up at her. “I *am not* missing my honeymoon.”

“Me neither,” she said and walked up to him, sliding her hands up his chest. “But, Clark, honey, no matter how big this story is, it’s not bigger than us.”

“What did you say?”

“I said it’s not bigger than us,” she repeated and pushed her arms up around his neck.

“Before that,” he said and grasped her sides.

She thought back, smiling when she realized what she had said. “What’s wrong? Can’t see yourself as a honey?”

He smiled at her. “I just never saw you calling me that. My... little tornado reducing herself to a love struck, endearment-spouting mushy wife.”

“Love struck?”

“Love struck,” he repeated as he leaned closer. “Can you see yourself as a honey?”

“Maybe,” she replied with a grin. “And you a sweetie?”

“Or darling?”

“Or sexy?”

He chuckled at her. “Will you call me that one in public?”

“Not a chance. I’ll use *Big Sexy* in public.”

His hands smoothed over her back. “I don’t know. I’m kind of partial to Stud Muffin.”

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s better than snookie,” he said and kissed her nose.

“Or hunky.” She shuddered as she remembered what Mindy Church had called Bill.

Clark backed her against the table, placing his hands on the surface so he could nuzzle her neck. “I like baby,” he whispered.

“And breathed at precisely the right moment, it lets me know my assessment of you as Big Sexy is dead on.” She moaned and reached up to hold his face while she kissed him. She drew back to look at him. “Lucy was right. You have changed me.”

“I like to think that I gave you the strength to finally let the real Lois out to play.” He kissed her again, enjoying the taste of her lips. He was about to deepen the next one when Jimmy cleared his throat. Clark groaned and turned his head to look at their young colleague.

“Sorry,” Jimmy apologized at once. “That number you wanted me to run... goes back to Isaac Mamba. And get this; Mamba is a renowned physician in the field of genetics, specifically cloning.”

Lois and Clark shared a glance, their eyes flashing with the discovery. They had caught a break and Clark had been right. This story looked much bigger than a simple robbery.

“One other thing...” Jimmy started. “The restaurant where the rehearsal dinner was supposed to be called. They’ve been shut down by the Board of Health.”

“What?!” Lois shouted.

“But CK’s mom called and said to relax, that she had everything under control. Dinner is at seven at CK’s place.”

Lois turned to grin at Clark. “Your mom is so great.”

He smiled back before looking to Jimmy again. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

“No problem. See you guys tonight,” he tossed over his shoulder as he hurried back into the newsroom.

“Why didn’t we ask your mother to plan this wedding?” Lois wanted to know.

Clark laughed softly as he moved to the computer. “Let’s see if we can find Mamba and go talk to him. I’m more curious than ever now. A known Intergang associate linked to a renowned physician...?”

“Guess you were right,” Lois admitted as she leaned over his shoulder. “This is bigger than we thought.”

Lois and Clark located Mamba's address and made their way to the plush upscale neighborhood on the popular 'Grand Avenue'. The housekeeper told them that Mamba was out of town working and had been for nearly three weeks. She didn't know anything about the car. It was the one Mamba had left in.

Striking out there, they headed toward the research lab the doctor often worked at. He wasn't there either. They were told that he had retired from his position at the lab nearly two years earlier — a retirement he had been planning all of two minutes.

"That was strange enough," Lois commented as they made their way toward Clark's apartment. They had gone back to the Planet for more research on Dr. Mamba. And they had written up a small Superman rescue that had taken place en route. Lois had mentioned the fact that the Man of Steel seemed to be on hiatus. Clark told her he was more than happy to take a break.

They stepped through the door of the apartment to find everyone standing or sitting around talking and laughing. Even Ellen and Sam were being amicable.

"Are we in the wrong place?" Lois asked as she handed her coat to Clark.

He laughed and they headed down toward the table his mother had set. She had gone all out. "This is great, Mom," he said as he stepped up to her side and gave her a kiss.

"Where did the table and chairs come from?" Lois wanted to know.

"Rental company," her mother replied. "And your father hasn't complained a bit about writing the check."

"Not today," Sam said with a wide grin. "My little princess is getting married."

Lois arched a brow at him. "Have you been smoking something?"

Sam laughed heartily and reached out to pat Lois' arm. "Let's eat."

For the next hour, Lois was transported to another place. The tension from the last couple of days had receded, replaced with an air of pure bliss. Everyone seemed happy to let everything go for the night so they could celebrate this happy occasion. And Lois was more than willing to embrace the new atmosphere. It made that uneasiness she had felt seem a bit silly now.

Jimmy pushed his chair back and stood up. "I'm told the best man is supposed to make a toast — usually at the reception..." He glanced at Clark. "But I wanted to say something tonight." He paused briefly before continuing. "When Clark asked me to be his best man, I was stunned. Yeah, we're friends; we've been through a lot, but for that honor — to stand up next to him when he marries his other half..."

Clark smiled over at Lois... That smile she adored and cherished.

"That's what she is... his other half," Jimmy went on. "Lois was a complicated woman before CK came along. Those first few days I saw the way he looked at her and I thought, 'Give it up, man. You don't stand a chance'. But then I saw something I never thought I'd see. Lois looked at him. She didn't glance at him or look past him or over him the way she had always done before. She looked *at* him." Jimmy reached down to lift his glass. "It took another couple of years and I have no idea where he gets his patience..." That caused a round of laughter. "But CK stood his ground and Lois was forced to admit what some of us had already known — Lois Lane could not live without Clark Kent."

"So true," Lois said as she lifted her glass with a smile.

Everyone took a drink from their glasses before Sam cleared his throat.

"I know these last few years have been difficult..." he began.

"Last few years?" Lucy asked him.

"Okay," he relented. "Our life as a family was difficult," the man corrected as his eyes fell on Lois. "But even I have to admit what a fine person my little princess has grown up to be. For a

while I was worried. You were so focused and so driven, I just knew you would waste your life away working like I had done. Then Clark here came along." He smiled at the other man, grinning wider when Clark shared a little smile with Lois. "I never looked at your mother the way he looks at you," he said to Lois. She cut her eyes up at Clark. "Pure heat jumps between you two. So, I say... hold one another close. And keep looking *at* each other. If you have to say it every day so you don't forget, remember what today feels like." He lifted his glass. "To a long, passionate, loving marriage."

"I'll drink to that," Clark said as he lifted his own glass. He was holding Lois' hand under the table and ran his fingers over the back, conveying with his touch just how much this moment meant to him.

"And the groom's father?" Jonathan asked. He shared a look with his son, a look that said he was proud of him and loved him. "I remember the first time Clark came home after he had met Lois. She was all he talked about." He laughed a bit. "He complained. Said she was stubborn, pigheaded, domineering, and brilliant. It wasn't so much the way he said it than the look in his eyes... I saw this night *that* night." Lois leaned into Clark's side.

"He was always a popular boy, even if he was shy. The girls called for him relentlessly and even though he had a couple of girlfriends over the years, he never had that look in his eyes when he talked about them. That look that says 'This woman is my everything'. Even then, just a short time after meeting her, she was his everything." He lifted his glass. "When we come back in thirty years, fifty years, I'll say the same thing. That's how much confidence I have in this love. Congratulations, son."

"Thanks, Dad," Clark said and held up his glass toward his father.

"I think it's your turn, CK," Jimmy told him.

Clark looked at Lois, his love burning through him. "All I can say is that I am humbled Lois has agreed to spend the rest of her life with me."

"I love you," she said and leaned forward to kiss him.

"Okay, okay," Perry drawled. "Cut that right now or we'll get a preview of the honeymoon."

Lois drew back and grinned at Clark. They shared a laugh before turning back to listen to the hum of conversation start back up around the table. A while later, Clark tugged on Lois' hand and led her out to the balcony. No one seemed to notice when they left. Or they accepted the couple's need to be alone for a few minutes. Clark pulled her to the wall and immediately kissed her. After a few moments, she drew back to grin at him.

"I can't wait to become your wife," she told him.

"I can't wait to become your husband." His hand went up, his knuckles moving over her cheek. "We have been through *so* much. There were times I didn't think we would make it."

"We haven't made it yet," she reminded him and turned in his arms to look over into the dark alley. Clark wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to his body.

"Jimmy will probably interrupt," he joked.

She laughed and reached up to hold his arm that was across her chest. "I'll kill him."

"I know." He leaned to kiss her neck. "Do you know how much I want you?" he whispered.

"Probably as much as I want you," she returned.

His hand went down to splay across her stomach. "I can't wait to feel you."

"Clark," she breathed. She loved it when he talked to her like that, told her what he wanted. They had done it more than once and she had gotten so worked up... "We need to stop." She turned her face further into his.

"Yeah," was his answer as he stuck his tongue into her ear. "I can't wait to taste you... all of you."

"Shut up," she whined.

He laughed softly and sucked on her neck. "I want to do that right here," he told her, rubbing his fingers down the side of her leg.

She was about to respond when Jimmy called them.

"That damn boy has awful timing," Lois said and turned, taking Clark with her. She was helping him carefully conceal his excitement until his body calmed down. By the time they faced Jimmy, his hands were innocently perched on her sides. "Yeah?"

"I think everyone is about to head out," the younger man told them.

"We'll be there in a second," Clark told him, not dropping his eyes until Jimmy was inside again. He let out a frustrated breath and eased Lois forward. He needed to cool down and he couldn't do that with Lois pressed against his excited body.

"Poor baby," she said in a little girl voice when she turned to face him.

"After the first time, I'm gonna show you why I'm called Superman," he said with a glint in his eyes.

She laughed as she walked toward the door. "You forget, Big Sexy, I'm the one who named you."

Clark just shook his head before he followed her in to say goodnight to their guests. He was in so much trouble.

Lois pulled Clark just a bit closer, clinging to his shoulders. He was kissing her hungrily as his hand slid down her side, over her hip.

"Lois," he breathed as he drew away a bit. "Don't you want to wait?"

"For what? Clark, I'm in pain here," she told him. "Please," she begged.

He stared at her for a moment before leaning back down to kiss her. His hand moved around to grasp her bottom and pull her even closer- if that was possible- causing them both to moan. Lois nearly growled and thrust her hands under his shirt. She was about to push the material to the floor when...

SOMEONE
KNOCKED
ON
THE
DAMN
DOOR!

Clark lifted his head, eyes closed, and struggled to catch his breath.

"Are you kidding me?" Lois yelled aloud. She glanced around Clark toward the door. The shadow of a person was clearly visible.

"Sorry, baby," Clark said and reluctantly drew back to sit on the far end of the sofa. They had settled to watch TV after their guests had left earlier — Martha and Jonathan had gone out with Ellen and Sam for drinks — but ended up making out. And of course, the incredible sexual tension between them was so strong, they wanted to consummate their engagement.

Lois sighed heavily and forced herself to her feet to go answer the door. Clark was in no shape to get up. She opened the door to see another messenger.

"Clark Kent?"

"This is his home," she replied.

"Good." He pushed the box he held toward her. When she had taken it, he turned and hurried away.

"Guess he didn't want a tip either," she mumbled as she closed the door.

"Who was it, honey?" Clark asked as he stood up to approach her. He had finally gotten himself under control enough to stand.

"Delivery for you."

Clark grinned as he took it. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. I was well on my way though." She huffed in frustration as she watched him sit back down on the

sofa, plopping the box on the coffee table.

Clark's brows bunched together when he saw the destroyed object inside.

"Just great," Lois said as she reached for the broken cake topper. "Somebody's idea of a sick joke!"

"One I don't appreciate at all," Clark added. The bride on the topper was broken into pieces, but the groom hadn't been touched.

"Me either." Lois threw it back in the box, the uneasy feeling of earlier coming back full force. They were still staring at the box when Clark's phone rang. He reached for the cordless set on the table.

"Hello?" He listened for a few moments before disconnecting. "That was Jimmy. He said that the lab Dr. Mamba was conducting research at was traced back to none other than Lex Labs."

Lois' brows shot up. "Don't tell me that sick, sadistic, psycho had Mamba trying to clone something else for him." They had long ago figured that Lex was behind the Superman clone.

"Well, not sure. Lex Labs was divided and sold. Jimmy says the list of stock holders, at first glance, is front companies. He's going to work through them to see if anything jumps out."

"We have to speak with Mamba," Lois deduced.

"That was another reason Jimmy called. Mamba's missing. He went for lunch today and didn't come back."

"Now what?"

"I think we should track down Guy Foley. Maybe he'll spill something if I *lean* on him a little." He waggled his brows at her.

She rubbed his arm. "I love it when you talk like that," she said in a sexy rumble.

"You love it when I use my powers to help us with a story," he corrected her.

"That, too." She lifted his hand, palm up, and kissed it. "Do you think those abilities will come in handy in the bedroom?"

Clark promptly blushed. They had talked dirty more than once, and he colored every time. "Maybe." He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear when she leaned to kiss his hand again. "You're not scared I'll hurt you, are you?"

Lois' head snapped up and she stared at him as if he had two heads. "Are you serious?" she asked incredulously.

"We haven't really talked about it," he said with a sour expression.

"Are you scared you'll hurt me?" she challenged him.

"A little," he admitted. "I seem to... zone out when I... when I'm alone..." And he turned bright red at that admission. "But I feel sure I won't lose complete control."

"First of all..." She leaned to kiss his chin. "You admitting that you have to... handle things alone — is sexy as hell." She smiled and was rewarded with another blush before Clark dropped his eyes to their joined hands. "Clark, we've been close, really close, and you've never suddenly snapped."

"I know, but I've never been naked with you. Or to the point of no return with you."

Lois moved to straddle him, holding his face to force him to look into her eyes. "It's going to be passionate and loving and yes, even super. But, honey, you won't hurt me."

Clark's hands squeezed her hips. "You have so much faith in me."

"You're my future, my life, my hero," she said softly. "And when we make love, the only control you'll lose is your resolve."

"You do realize the first time will probably last all of three seconds?" he wanted to know as he pulled her closer.

"You do know you're Superman?" she returned matter-of-factly.

He laughed softly and turned his head when she leaned to kiss his neck. God, he loved this woman. And he was more than ready to make love with her.

Two more days, he told himself.

Or maybe two more minutes. She was unzipping his pants. And she didn't seem at all inclined to stop. Her hot little hands seemed to be everywhere. It felt so good, he was sure he would float through the ceiling.

"You have got to be kidding me?" Lois said in disbelief and looked down, noting with wide eyes that his male anatomy justified his name alone.

"Wh...?" Clark could barely think, let alone form a coherent thought while her hands were on him.

Her eyes moved up to his face. "Clark, you're... you're..." His expression changed, his head tilted, and she groaned loudly. "You're about to be super in a completely different way than I want you to," she said in frustration.

He looked at her with a pained expression. "I'm so sorry, honey. It's a fire... a bad one."

She zipped him back up and pushed herself to her feet. "Go." He stood and kissed her quickly. "I love you."

"I love you, too." She grinned at him and the relief in his eyes made her feel special. He was actually more worried about their interruption than she was. Superman was part of the package. And she wanted the whole package.

He disappeared in a rush of air, causing Lois to sigh. She was much too wound up to sleep and too wound up to get in bed alone. The last thing she wanted to do was lay there and think about her future husband.

But boy wasn't she going to be incredibly satisfied when they *finally* made love?

She decided that she would make a few calls, maybe see if she could find a lead on Guy Foley. Bobby Bigmouth could probably tell her where to find him.

She should have waited for Clark, but waiting had never been her strong suit. So, Lois was crouching beside a dumpster in the alley outside the Ace of Clubs. Bobby had told her that Foley liked to hang out at the trashy bar near the docks. It was a drug hotspot, which meant Foley was still on his game. Clark was right. This was getting bigger by the second.

Foley was standing twenty feet away talking with another man—a man Lois knew very well. Carl Marlow—former personal assistant to Bill Church. She and Clark had pegged him as Intergang wing man a long time ago.

"The boss wants this to go off without a hitch," Marlow told Foley.

"Tell the boss everything has been taken care of."

"Good." He was about to walk away when he heard a noise.

Both men jerked around, but could see nothing. They heard the fast pounding of shoes, most likely coming from the alley on the other side of the trash bin. Marlow hurried to see if he could make out a figure in the dark, but only caught a glimpse of the back of a dark head as the person hit the sidewalk and ran toward downtown.

"That's the last thing we need," Foley observed.

"We didn't say anything to implicate anyone," Marlow replied.

"Who do you think it was?"

"I have a good idea," he answered.

Foley looked at him. "Should I make plans to deliver a message?"

"Yes. A very personal message." Marlow turned and headed toward the car at the end of the row of buildings. Foley followed and climbed into the dark vehicle behind the other man so they could make plans to eliminate their little rat.

Lois stepped into her apartment, leaning against the closed door to take a breath.

"Lois, I'm not coming to your wedding," her mother said as

she came into the living room from the kitchen. She hadn't given her daughter time enough to catch her breath.

"What?" Lois asked her as she pushed off the door.

"I am not coming to your wedding. I can't listen to another cruel remark from your father." Ellen plopped herself down on the sofa.

Lois went over to sit beside her. "But you two seemed to be getting on so good tonight."

"We were." Ellen sighed heavily. "Things changed at the bar. Some little floozy spoke to him and it was like Sam became another man altogether."

"Mom, you know how Daddy is," Lois began, but stopped at her mother's expression. "Sorry, bad thing to say."

"Do you know that's why I had such a hard time with the divorce? I knew exactly how he was. I had seen it, even before we got married." She smiled sadly. "I was so young and so naive. I believed I could change him if we were married. I would show him how good life could be and he wouldn't want to stray."

"We can't change others," Lois pointed out.

"I know." Ellen looked down at her hands. "I knew it then, too. I just loved Sam so." Her expression changed and she stared at Lois. "What do you know about Clark? I mean, *really* know?"

"I know he loves me. I can feel it when he looks at me. And when he touches me..." Lois smiled to herself. "Clark is not Daddy," she pointed out. "He will cherish and adore me..."

"I hope you're right. As brash as you were before, I can't imagine how you would be if Clark betrayed you."

"Mother!" Lois said through clenched teeth. "You are *so* difficult sometimes."

That seemed to burst through Ellen's tough exterior. "I don't mean to be. I just..." She let out a breath and wrung her hands. "You have to admit our relationship has always been a bit rocky. To have you want me to share so much with you... I'm just not sure how to do that."

"You start by being my friend," Lois said and reached over to lay her hand on both her mom's. "And I expect my friends to be at my wedding." She smiled when Ellen turned a bright expression toward her. Their exchange was interrupted when someone knocked on the door. Lois' smile faded and she glanced over at the door. "Who is calling this late?" she wondered as she stood up to go look through the peep hole. When she didn't see anyone, she unlocked the door so she could look out. It was a huge mistake and she knew it, but it didn't stop her. She gasped when the man just to the side of the door grabbed her.

"Nice to see you again, Ms. Lane," the man drawled. He was holding her around her neck, a gun pressed against her temple.

"Who is it, Lois?" her mother asked.

"No!" Lois yelled, but it was too late. The man drew back and smacked Ellen hard, knocking her out. Lois took advantage of the slight distraction and tried to twist from the man's grasp. When he tightened his arm across her throat hard enough to make her eyes hurt, she calmed.

"Good girl," the man told her. "Now, let's take a ride."

He led her out the back way, to a waiting car. He handcuffed her to the door handle before climbing behind the wheel.

"Now," he began. "Yell for Superman and I'll put a bullet in that pretty little head of yours. Think he can make it that quickly?" He grinned smugly at her.

Lois turned and looked out the window. Why had she gone out to look for Foley on her own? She turned her head back toward her captor. "What do you want?"

"A nice peaceful life would be nice, but since you're alive and working, that's not going to happen." He had pulled the car onto the road and pointed it toward the docks. "You know, this is going to cost us. The boss wanted us to fly under the radar..."

"You should have thought about that before you had your picture taken," Lois told him.

“My picture?” he asked, not sure what she meant. “We should have known better than to believe we could have done this without alerting you. You’re like some kind of... mad dog or something.”

Lois almost snorted at that. “This? What is this?”

He grinned at her. “You’ll love it. Or maybe not... considering how things worked out the first time.”

“What first time?” she wanted to know.

He didn’t answer, just kept smiling like a cat who had eaten a canary. He didn’t speak again until he pulled to a stop outside a warehouse. “Being as how you’re not gonna live too much longer... You’re about to lose the biggest scoop of your life. The kidnapping of the President.”

Lois’ eyes widened at his implication.

“Only no one will know it,” he went on.

No one will know it? What was he babbling about?

Then it hit her. Mamba. Cloning. Kidnapping the President... Intergang was going to exchange the President for a clone! But...

“Why?” she asked aloud.

“The boss is repaying a debt,” was his answer before he jumped out of the car and ran around to her side. He unlocked the cuffs and snatched her to her feet.

Using every bit of her self-defense training, Lois leaned back and kicked forward as hard as she could. She connected with Foley in his stomach with a solid kick, sending him flying backwards. He landed with a thud and yelped when his head popped a crate. He was out like a light.

Lois hesitated for a moment before hurrying over to make sure he was still breathing. Assured she hadn’t killed him, she jumped back in the car and sped back downtown. Along the way she called Clark’s place. Luckily, Foley hadn’t taken her cellphone from her pocket where she had placed it during her snooping earlier. Martha answered and Lois told her to let Clark know she was on her way to the Diamond Hotel. She had remembered that the hotel was hosting an important dignitary. It had to be the President. She told them about her mother and placed a call for someone to go check on Ellen.

She sped to the hotel, hoping she wasn’t too late. If Intergang was really going to replace the President with a clone, how would she know if they hadn’t already? A clone was an exact replica.

It wasn’t easy to navigate the hallways to the correct floor — that had been time consuming. But with a bit of careful timing, Lois finally found the correct place, identification made easier by the presence of Secret Service men.

“You’re not supposed to be here, Miss,” one of the men said when he saw her.

“I have to warn the President,” she said. “He’s in trouble.”

“Not on my watch,” the man assured her. A shocked expression lit on his face and he stared at her for a long moment before he fell to the floor.

Lois yelped and looked around, every one of the others were on the floor, too. Carl Marlow was standing in the doorway of the stairwell half way down the other side. He stepped out and smiled at Lois.

“Nice of you to join us, Ms. Lane,” he drawled and waved her closer with the gun he held. He noticed she kept staring between the fallen men. “Don’t worry. They’ll wake up. I just put them to sleep for a while, not permanently.” He trained his gun on Lois as they headed toward the room the President was in. “We have to get him down to the basement. His replacement will be here in...” He glanced at his watch. “Ten.” He knocked on the door and forced his way through another agent. The President came to the entrance of the bedroom, along with two more agents. The agents drew their weapons and immediately a gunfight broke out, Marlow outmatched.

Lois dropped and covered her head with her arms — like that would do her any good if a bullet ripped through her skin!

Suddenly she heard a rush of air and everything was quiet. She slowly lifted her head to see Superman looking down at her with a concerned expression.

“Are you okay?” He ran his eyes over her, obviously checking for wounds.

“I’m fine... thanks to you,” she replied as she stood up.

He gave her a look before turning to check on the President. The next hour or so was spent giving statements. Agents poured into the Hotel, and the President was whisked away to a safer location. It was after two in the morning when Clark dropped Lois off at her place. She was relieved to see her mother sleeping soundly, apparently okay from their earlier ordeal. She and Clark discussed the case briefly, deciding that there was no way Marlow had acted alone. And the man had said as much when she had overheard Marlow and Foley talking. There was a mention of a ‘boss’. But who?

The infamous criminal mastermind, known as the ‘Boss’, had once been Lex Luthor. But Lex was still in prison. Clark had checked. That left Bill Church, but he was dead. Lois and Clark had long believed his bereaved widow wasn’t as ditz as she made out like she was. They suspected that she had taken over her husband’s business. With the Intergang runners involved, it was obviously someone was running the show. And they would bet money the grieving widow was behind it all. They planned to do a bit of research tomorrow in hopes of finding something to point them in the right direction.

And research was all they would do. It was the last day before their wedding. They had a few things to take care of before they could walk down the aisle. Clark had opted not to have the traditional ‘bachelor party’, choosing instead to have one together. He had told Jimmy, when the young man complained, that he had no desire to ‘get drunk’ the night before his wedding. He wanted absolute clarity when he turned to Lois to vow his life to her. The younger man couldn’t understand his passion, but he respected his friend’s decision. Therefore, he had appointed himself official party host. Perry was even allowing the celebration to take place at the Planet.

“I cannot believe this happened,” the woman shouted at the man delivering the bad news.

Foley had the grace to look ashamed of himself. He reached up to rub his head, still not exactly sure how that Lane woman had gotten the best of him.

“I needed Marlow,” she said. “He knew the plans inside and out.” She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot impatiently.

“I know the plans,” the man insisted.

She let out a bark of laughter. “You have no idea.” She uncurled and walked over to the table where several pieces of paper and pictures were scattered on the surface. She glanced up at the other man in the room. “Has our little problem in Glendale been taken care of?”

The man nodded. “Consider your debt repaid in full.”

“Good. And the information?”

“I have guys retrieving it as we speak. You’ll have it by breakfast time.”

“Very good.” She glanced at her watch and frowned. “We might as well work on the next part of the plan.” She glanced at Foley. “Sit down. I have no choice but to let you in on this.”

The man almost smiled, but thought better of it. The boss didn’t take kindly to things like that.

Lois pushed her hands under Clark’s shirt, almost growling at the feel of soft skin. He had left the Suit home tonight!

His hands moved down to grasp her hips as he continued to plunder her mouth with his tongue. He had her backed against the wall of the storage closet at the Planet, where they had gone off

to sneak a couple of seconds alone. Of course, with them, alone always led back toward their tightly coiled sexual tension.

“We shouldn’t,” Clark said as he moved his lips down to her neck.

“We won’t,” she said even as she pulled him closer.

They had been in the middle of their ‘bachelor’ party when Clark got that look in his eyes. The look that meant he needed to breathe Lois in for a second or he would explode. She had recognized it immediately and sauntered across the room to ask him to walk with her to the restroom. Not one person thought anything of their departure. They were all having a good time on their own.

As soon as they had rounded the corner toward the restrooms, Lois had grabbed his hand and hauled him into the closet for a brief interlude.

Clark’s hand moved up her side, the heat from her body threatening to overwhelm him. “God, you smell so good.”

That stoked her fire even more. He had meant that his super senses were working overtime, letting him know exactly how excited she was. He had told her a while back that he could do that. She had made a face, but he had chuckled and assured her it wasn’t something he could do all the time. Or he probably could, he just chose not to until they were in a heated moment.

Lois laid her head back against the wall and sighed, her body rushing close to the elusive relief she had been seeking for a while now.

Clark recognized the change in her. He’d had her this close before. Of course, someone always interrupted.

And just about then, there was a knock on the door!

“Come on, guys. I know you’re in there.”

For once it wasn’t Jimmy.

Lois growled in frustration as the spell between them was broken. Yeah, they could stay in here — the door was locked. But after hearing Ralph’s annoying voice, it took something away from the moment.

Clark laid his head over on her shoulder, taking deep gulps of air to regain control.

Lois kissed him right behind his ear. “We might have to take an extra week off for our honeymoon.”

He chuckled and lifted his head to kiss her below her eye.

“No doubt,” he agreed before he took a step back.

Ralph was still knocking, still shouting at them. They stepped out a few moments later and the man grinned like a fox. Lois gave him a glare and tugged Clark back toward the party. Just a matter of hours now and they wouldn’t be interrupted. She would be able to claim what was hers.

Clark dropped Lois off at her place later that night. They exchanged a long kiss at the door before he left to do a quick patrol. He wanted things nice and calm tomorrow. Nothing was going to spoil their day.

And that included work. They had done a bit of research on Mindy Church earlier, but had firmly decided that once the file was closed, it would remain that way until they returned from their honeymoon. Both were only too happy to keep that promise.

Lois was entirely too keyed up to sleep though. Her parents had moved to their hotel room, the one that was now available because of the conclusion of the conferences, the mess with the President being wound up, and the break in the weather. It was still cloudy out, but at least the rain had stopped. And for the moment, there was no snow either.

She and Clark had discovered that Mindy was remaining off the radar lately. She had made some appearances, mostly for charity work, but that was it. Clark had suggested that maybe she wasn’t head of Intergang after all. Lois knew better. Mindy just wanted things to die down before she made her next move. Hopefully that wouldn’t be for two weeks.

Or three, according to how insatiable Lois became after her

first taste of the man she wanted desperately. Flashes of the last few times they were together flitted through her mind and gave her pointed direction. Tonight she might search out her release alone, but tomorrow she would show Clark that Lois Lane had a super power of her own — desperate craving of her husband.

“Look at you,” Martha crooned as she straightened her son’s tie. It was already straight — she had done so three times.

“Come on, Mom,” he said softly, smiling down at her.

“I know I said I wouldn’t do this...” She lifted her hand to cup his face. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Mama,” he whispered. She had tears in her eyes and it unsettled him, even though these were happy tears.

She sighed and grasped his arms. “Remember to tell her every day that you love her, even if you’re both angry with one another. Kiss her often, especially when there’s no chance it’ll lead to anything deeper. Touch her — those gentle caresses that let her know she’s cherished.” She smiled at him. “And even if both of you are about to explode, don’t rush the first time. Cherish every second.”

“Mom,” Clark whined and blushed a bit.

“You can tear through the second time, but that first one...” She pulled him into a hug. “Savor everything you feel, hear, see, and taste. You only get one first time.”

Clark leaned back to grin at her. “How do you know we haven’t had that first time already?” he asked her.

“Because you can’t hide the gleam in your eyes. Or the apprehension.” She patted his cheek. “If you do as I told you, she’ll have no complaints.”

He sighed and closed his eyes a second. “I hope not.”

“She won’t,” Jonathan spoke up as he edged closer to his son. Martha moved over to give them a second alone. The older man dug into his pocket and pulled out a smooth rock. “Worry stone,” he explained as he held it up to Clark. “I’ve carried this thing since the first time I saw your mother.” They both looked down at it. There was a visible indentation on one side. “I have rubbed this thing more times than I care to admit.”

“Rubbed it?” Clark asked, glancing into his dad’s eyes.

“When I was feeling... wound up,” he said as his eyes danced. “I’d rub this stone.”

Clark grinned at him.

“She was a looker,” Jonathan said with a wide smile. He lifted Clark’s hand to place the stone in his palm. “It might help you through your worst moments.”

“I wish I’d had this a month ago,” Clark mumbled as his hand closed around the stone. His eyes went up to his dad’s. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Thank you...” He grasped the side of Clark’s neck. “For being our son. The best thing that ever happened to me, besides marrying your mother, was the day you fell from the sky.”

“Daddy,” Clark said, much the way he had breathed his mother’s name. It wasn’t often Jonathan got so emotional.

“We’re proud of you and we love ya’, boy.” He pulled him closer and kissed his forehead. “Now, get out there and marry that girl or I’ll have to have your brain examined.”

Clark laughed aloud, then took a deep, cleansing breath. “I’m more than ready to marry that girl,” he returned.

“I know,” Jonathan said and stepped back to allow Clark to head out in front of him.

Lois made the final adjustment to her gown before she turned to smile at her mother.

“You look incredible,” Ellen gushed.

“Thank you.” She couldn’t believe how relaxed she felt. After all the uneasiness of the past few days, she was calm.

Well, not exactly calm. She was excited beyond belief!

“Let’s go get you hitched,” Lucy told her with a grin.

They all laughed as they headed toward the door.

Ellen stopped Lois and looked at her. "I might not say it much, but I'm proud of you."

"Aw, Mom." Lois hugged her mother close before both of the other women left the room. Lois could hear the music start. Her mother would be escorted down the aisle, then Clark's mother. Once Jimmy and Lucy started down the aisle, her father would tap on the door to get her.

Clark was already at the altar. He went out first. That's the way they wanted it — to symbolize him taking position at the head of his house and awaiting his future. They had briefly toyed with the idea of walking the aisle together, but Clark had been the one to protest, stating Sam might feel cheated.

The soft tap on the door let her know it was time. She took a breath and stepped out. Sam smiled tenderly at her, held up his hand. They took position just behind the closed doors of the sanctuary, her hand tucked in the crook of his arm.

"In case you didn't know, I love you, Princess," her father said.

Lois gasped and looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "I love you, Daddy."

"Clark is a fine man and today I'll trust him with my heart." Sam patted her hand just as the doors opened.

With a breath for courage, Lois turned her head to gaze at her future.

He was there, at the end of her journey.

Clark stood with a wide smile on his face as he awaited his future bride. She was a vision he'd had so many times. Was she as nervous as he was? With each step she took toward him, his heart beat faster, harder.

Lois locked her gaze on him, her eyes filling with tears again. She could see their future, but she could also see their past — their time together — volatile, unpredictable, full of danger and mayhem. It had also been incredible — full of passion and love. It had taken them so long to get here. Did he have any idea how much she loved him?

Lois and Sam reached the altar and Clark stepped down the two steps to them. He held his hand out, giving her the final choice — always allowing her the final decision.

Sam stepped aside, his hand lingering just a second on hers, then leaned to kiss her cheek. She gave him a smile before she reached for her future.

Clark's eyes fell to where her fingers wrapped around his. He had literally taken his entire life in his hand. He gazed at her before holding her hand up in front of them as they stepped back onto the podium in front of Perry.

She hadn't worn a veil, had told Clark it wasn't something she would like. And he was glad she hadn't. Her simple headdress was much prettier and he was allowed to bask in her beauty as he stared at her. They turned toward one another, held hands. Lois had passed her bouquet off to Lucy, her need to hold Clark too great not to.

"Dearly beloved, we've come today to celebrate life. Two hearts will unite, two souls will acknowledge to the world that they are intertwined forever." Perry was prouder than a peacock in his role and it showed. "Just as one man has accepted his bride, another has agreed to share his daughter." He looked at Sam, who hadn't sat down yet. "Do you agree to share her heart with the man she's chosen as her husband?"

"Her mother and I both agree to share her heart," Sam told him with a grin.

Perry beamed before turning back to the couple. Of course, they were still looking at one another. "Clark came to us a short time ago, full of dreams and excitement. He was completely unprepared for what he found." There was soft laughter from the crowd. "Though now I'm pretty sure he knows exactly what he's found.

"Lois — what can I say about her?" Perry gazed at her with love in his eyes. "She's the daughter I never had. She's the fire that keeps us jumping. And today she'll discover new focus." He held up his hand to Clark.

Clark's thumbs rubbed Lois' hands as he stood there trying to decide what to say. "I wrote my vows down, deliberated over them, agonized over them. I was so nervous with the thought of telling you how I feel in front of so many people." He glanced down at their hands. "But when I closed my eyes and simply thought about you, I decided that telling you what's in my heart was easy — crowd or no crowd." He released her left hand and reached up to cup her face. "You're the air I breathe, the next thought I take. And the last one was of you." His thumb stroked her cheek. "Never would I have imagined that you were out there, that you were the exact person I was supposed to meet, to love, to cherish."

He moved his hand away and turned to hold it out to Jimmy. The best man smiled as he laid Lois' wedding band in Clark's palm. Clark turned back, poised to push her band onto her finger. "With this ring comes the promise of unending love, unexplained passion, unequalled adoration. Today, tomorrow, forever." He pushed the ring onto her finger. "I take you not only as my wife, but as my everything. In return, I promise my future, my devotion, and my fidelity."

Lois had to reach up with her other hand to wipe her cheek. Clark knew how to say the things that moved her, calmed her. She lifted his hands and kissed them before looking at him. "I think every little girl dreams of her perfect wedding, with her beautiful groom. And beautiful is the only word I can use to describe you. Handsome would only say how you look, but beautiful... It lets the world know that you are handsome, you are strong, you are pure- you have this quiet spirit and gentle strength. You adore me, at the total exception of others." She grinned at him. "You're there to calm me, to make me smile, to stoke the embers of my desire." He blushed and ducked his head, causing another round of laughter. "I can't remember my life before you. I can't imagine my future without you."

She released his hand and reached for his wedding band. Lucy smiled at her as she handed it over. "This ring holds my promise to you, that no matter how far you go, I will be there when you come back. It promises devotion, fidelity, and love. It promises a future..." She pushed the ring into place. "... together." She lifted her eyes to his. "I accept you as my husband."

"And I accept you as my wife."

"Into my arms, my life, my soul," Lois went on.

"From my past, within my present, into my future," Clark finished.

Perry let out a breath and grinned widely. "And with those promises and the permission of this state, Lois and Clark have severed their individual lives to create one. From this day forward, they are man and wife." He leaned closer. "You may kiss..." And laughed because Clark had dove in.

Lois sighed and wrapped her arms around his neck, melting into the kiss. She felt her body and mind relax completely.

Clark drew back to look at her, his thumb rubbing her cheek. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you," she returned just before he kissed her again. Both were oblivious to the loud clapping and cheering behind them.

They finally drew apart and laughed. Lois took his arm and they turned toward their audience.

"I give you Mr. and Mrs. Clark Kent," Perry said loudly. "I give you Clark Kent and Lois Lane — I was told I had to remind everyone that she might be half of a whole now, but she still stands out all by herself." That brought everyone to their feet and more clapping and cheering.

Clark slowly led Lois down the steps, stopping for her to receive kisses from her parents. He leaned to his left to receive congratulations from his own parents before continuing their first walk as man and wife. They stopped in the vestibule and kissed for several moments before Jimmy — of all people — broke them up. They were ushered into the garden to take pictures. It was nearly an hour later before they climbed into the limo to head toward the reception. Their celebratory gathering was being held on the bottom floor of the Planet, in the huge conference hall. It was seldom used, but Perry felt it was the perfect place to have the reception.

Clark drew back from their kiss to look at Lois. It still felt so surreal that she was now his wife. “God, you’re beautiful,” he told her softly, his hand lifting so that he could smooth his knuckles across her cheek.

“So are you,” she returned.

“And you told everyone I was,” he said with a grin.

“I felt they should all know, just in case they couldn’t see it for themselves.” Her finger trailed a path down his neck. “Are your parents staying an extra night?”

“Yeah... at the hotel. Mom’s enjoying the accommodations.” He pulled Lois a bit closer, rubbing her hip. “I was thinking we might actually spend tonight at my place.”

“Me, too,” Lois returned. “I don’t think I can wait to get to Hawaii.”

“We can be there in five minutes,” he said as his hand stroked her side. Thank God for privacy screens in limos, he thought.

“We can be in your apartment...” She moved her hand down his chest. “In your bed...” And leaned forward to kiss his neck. “Naked in five minutes.”

He closed his eyes as the warmth from her breath threatened to send him soaring. “Good point.” He sagged back against the seat as she became a bit more adventurous. “God, Lois, I’m about to explode.”

“I know. Me, too,” she said before leaning forward to nibble on his neck again. “Why don’t we get the driver to circle the block a few times?”

“It would only take me one,” he told her, glancing down to where her hot hand was branding him.

“Let’s find out,” Lois said before attacking him.

“Ah, God,” Clark breathed as she dove in for her prize. She grinned at him wickedly before dropping her head. “No, you’re not,” he said incredulously, but she was a woman on a mission. “Lo-is,” he couldn’t help but hiss. She was incredible and she was shamelessly giving him a glimpse of their future — in the limo on the way to their reception!

“Honey...” He breathed as sensation got the better of him. “My God,” he whispered. She was going to kill him before they had fully consummated their marriage.

She lifted her head to smile at him and Clark dove in to kiss her, trying to express just how much she had moved him. With a little super effort, she was beneath him as he moved aching hands over her body.

Lois clung to him, put her mouth next to his ear. “To finally have you in my arms like this...”

Clark moaned when her tongue dipped inside his ear, further stoking his raging inferno. If he was this excited now, how would he survive the actual act?

She moaned and tried to devour him in a kiss. Her heart was pounding; he could hear the blood rushing through her veins. Her body trembled in sensation. It was incredible!

The driver announced through the intercom that they were about to pull up in front of the Planet.

“To be continued,” she said as she gazed at him.

He looked at her for a long moment before tilting his head and sealing his mouth over hers. He had never kissed her quite

like he was doing at that moment. She could barely get enough.

By the time the car stopped and the driver opened the door, both were carefully controlled and put back together. Clark grinned at her, climbed out, then held his hand to help her. A few of their guests were already waiting to greet them and clapped when the couple stood arm in arm beside the car.

Clark looked down at her with a wide smile. “I love you.”

“I love you,” she said and reached over to touch his cheek.

They headed toward the building, oblivious to anyone or anything other than one another.

Oblivious even to the man watching them from across the street.

The reception was incredible. Lois reluctantly admitted. Even though she was hyper aroused, she was glad they had shared this time with their family and friends. Jimmy took tons of pictures — there was even a video being made. Their mothers had gushed on and on. Lucy caught the bouquet. Perry caught the garter and promptly kissed Alice senseless. The first dance was shared, dances with their parents, friends... The cake was cut, the toasts made. Soon enough, both Lois and Clark were more than ready to leave.

They grinned widely at one another as they signed their marriage license. Even Perry enjoyed that part.

Now they were sharing a final dance, interspersing gazing at one another with tender kisses.

“Can we leave now?” Lois wanted to know.

“Please,” Clark begged without lifting his lips completely away from her neck. He loved her neck.

A loud commotion broke out on the side of the hall and they looked up. Ellen was barking at Sam, who looked a bit disheveled.

“Not now,” Lois whined.

Clark chuckled and drew further away from her. “Go.”

“This is a switch,” she said with a grin. “Speaking of...”

“I couldn’t have been super if I had wanted to,” he was quick to tell her. “I think I’ve heard every breath you took today.”

“Aww...” She caressed his face before turning to hurry over and diffuse the argument taking place.

Clark smiled, sighed heavily, then went to find his folks to say goodbye. With any luck, in ten minutes he would be well on his way to total satisfaction.

Okay, she hadn’t said anything when they climbed back in the limo to head toward the apartment. She had thought maybe he wanted to make out again on the drive over. She had snuggled up next to him. He had smiled, he rubbed her hand, her arm, but that was it. He had tilted his head for her to kiss his neck, his cheek, his chin, but he hadn’t attempted to kiss her.

She hadn’t said anything when he walked them to the apartment, across the threshold — he hadn’t carried her. But now she was looking at him. Something was wrong.

“Clark, are you okay?” she asked him.

He looked up at her and smiled. “I guess the last few days have finally caught up with me.” She stepped closer to him. He was taking off his tie, cumber bun, and cuff links at the dresser in the bedroom. “It’s as if the wind to my sails was suddenly cut off.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” she asked him.

His eyes met hers. “Can any time with you be a bad thing?”

There he was! Those eyes... She moved, about to reach out to wrap her arms around him when he stepped back.

“I’ll be just a second,” he told her and headed toward the bathroom.

WHAT?! For a man who’d had trouble keeping his hands off her for the past month, he acted like he was barely attracted now. What changed from the dance floor to here?

He reentered the bedroom a few moments later wearing the silk boxers they had picked out for tonight, minus the little robe. “You are incredible,” Lois breathed, unable to stop herself. She couldn’t get over how gorgeous he was.

He blushed, ducked his head, and stepped around her toward the kitchen. “Why don’t I pour us some champagne while you use the bathroom?”

O- kay, she thought.

Or why don’t you get over here and kiss me senseless?

She turned with a huff of frustration and went to change. She had bought a skimpy little gown that was barely legal and couldn’t wait to see his face when he saw her in it.

But it wasn’t exactly the reaction she had hoped for. When she came out of the bathroom, Clark was lying on his side, sipping from his glass. She cleared her throat and he glanced up at her with a nice, *chaste* smile.

And he went back to his champagne!

What the hell?

Maybe he’s nervous, she thought. Now that the moment was finally, *finally* upon them, it might have spooked him a bit. He had never done this after all. Was he worried about pleasing her? About hurting her? Knowing Clark that was exactly what was wrong with him.

She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and sauntered over to climb onto the bed. She eased across on her hands and knees, kissing his arm, his neck, his ear.

“Did we plan to... attack one another all night?”

She looked up with furrowed brows. He was holding a box of condoms. It was a very large box. “We bought those weeks ago.” She kissed his arm again, then what he said registered: ‘Did we plan to...?’ He had said it in the past tense.

“Anxious, huh?”

What?

He laughed and tossed the box back on the nightstand. “Champagne?” He held up a glass to her.

“Clark, I don’t want champagne.” She took the glass and put it back on the table. She was about to lean in for a kiss when he drew back.

“Slow down,” he told her.

“Slow down? Clark, we have been constantly interrupted for the past month. If I don’t feel you soon, I’m going to explode!”

His brows rose toward his hairline. “How much will you feel with my body wrapped in latex?”

Now he wasn’t making any sense. She leaned back, brows knitted in confusion. “We’re not using the condoms.”

“What?”

“We talked about this and I went to the doctor for a prescription for the pill. We both wanted to feel this moment as completely as we could.” She drew back a little to stare at him.

“I guess I forgot,” he said with a blush and turned toward his side.

Forgot?

She reached out to smooth her hand over the side of his face. Was he that overwhelmed?

“That feels good,” he said, eyes closed.

“I can make you feel better,” she said as she moved up to kiss his neck again. He let out a breath and she would swear he tensed a bit. She pushed that insane thought away and pushed her hand under his arm so she could feel his chest. When she moved it in more sultry touch, Clark’s hand closed over hers.

He didn’t say a word, just lay there with his eyes closed.

“Clark?” she questioned him.

“You feel so good lying with me,” he said softly.

“You would feel better if we weren’t just lying,” she whispered before nipping his ear. When he didn’t respond much, she leaned up. “You usually respond a bit more when I kiss you.”

“I guess I’m really tired.” He squeezed her hand. “Aren’t

you?”

“I’m not that tired, honey,” she said with a grin and tried kissing him again. When he failed to respond after several moments, she lifted her head again. “Are you really that tired?”

“Sorry,” he offered and pulled her arm up closer to his chest.

Lois was stunned. Absolutely, totally, and completely stunned!

Her husband wanted to go to sleep on their wedding night! A wedding night they had waited so long to get to. A wedding night they had anticipated with aching loins! A wedding night they had taken the edge off of in the back of the limo!

With a sigh of frustration, Lois lay down, her head next to his. “I love you, Clark.”

“Love you, too,” he mumbled, sounding half asleep already.

She wanted to growl in frustration, but instead she pulled him closer. When he rolled over and laid his head on her shoulder, she wanted to melt. He trusted her enough to just hold him, if that’s what he needed.

And obviously it was exactly what he needed tonight. She lifted her hand to cup his cheek and turned her head to press a kiss on his. She supposed there would be enough time to make love. She planned to be married to this man the rest of her life. If he needed something other than passion tonight, she would give it to him.

With a satisfied sigh, Lois closed her eyes.

Clark’s eyes snapped open and he stared across the room, his dark orbs completely void.

Part 2 — Regarding Clark: Duplicity

The first thing Lois became aware of was the male body pressed against her back. His hand was resting very gentlemanly on her stomach. She giggled and moved it up a little higher.

And she felt Clark wake up. He was still a moment before he drew away.

Lois turned over, running her hand up his stomach and chest. “You don’t have to be so... Clark now,” she told him softly.

“You’re allowed to touch me. We *are* married.”

“I know,” he said and smiled at her. He sat up, hands poised on the cover. “I’m going to make some coffee.” He started to get up, but Lois stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Clark, I don’t want coffee. I want you.”

He sat there for a second before he turned to look at her. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

Okay, everybody needs to do that, she thought. But it came out: “Fine!” She turned the other way and shot to her feet. “I’ll make the damned coffee while you’re in there,” she snapped and stomped around the bed. She couldn’t help it. She was so wound up she felt like she was going to explode. What in God’s name was wrong with him?!

Clark sighed and stood up to go into the bathroom. He closed the door and leaned back heavily. “This isn’t as easy as it was supposed to be,” he whispered. He took several deep breaths before pushing off the wall. Maybe he would stay long enough to give her a chance to calm down. The last thing he wanted was her to be angry with him.

“Repeat that,” was the controlled order from the woman as the man stood before her. The poor guy was literally shaking.

“We tried, we really did,” he began. “But the only chance we had was at the reception.”

She turned and looked at Guy Foley. “Are you telling me they are legally married?”

“It would seem so,” he told her regretfully.

She stood there, simmering in anger for a long moment before she pulled a small gun from her pocket and fired at the runner Foley had hired. When the guy crumpled in a heap on the floor, she moved her eyes back to Foley. “That’s what happens

when one fails to do his job,” she snapped. “Now, it took me years to get to where I am. I’ll be damned if an idiot’s mistakes will cost me my ultimate goal.”

“You have what you wanted...”

“I have the prize, yes. But the element of irony is completely lost now!” She huffed and turned to storm from the room. She couldn’t remain in the presence of that idiot a second longer.

Foley sighed a breath of relief. He would have to choose his people more carefully from now on. The boss was cutting through them so fast he couldn’t keep up.

In a room down the hall, Clark groaned and opened his eyes. Everything seemed to spin and he had to take several breaths to get control before he could sit up. He looked around the sterile, white room in confusion. How had he gotten here?

He remembered dancing with his wife, kissing, going to say goodbye to his folks. Pain cut through his head again and brought back the memory of the wave of nausea from the night before. He had felt it the time he had stepped into the hall to go to the restroom. Only one thing made him feel like that.

Then nothing... nothing but black.

His head snapped up when the door clicked and opened. A woman stepped in and he stared in disbelief. Although he could totally believe it.

“Nice to see you’re awake, hunky,” she said in that grating, child-like voice she used.

“Cut the crap, Mindy. I don’t feel up to it.”

“Fine,” she said, dropping her little accent. “We’ll cut the crap.”

“What did you do?”

“I had my men invite you to come visit with me,” she said as if the answer was obvious.

“Why?” he wanted to know.

“You and I have things to do,” she told him with a grin. “So, rest up. Eat. You look like you could use it.” A man came in to set a tray on the small table along the far wall.

“What are you going to do when my powers come back?” There was no sense in pretending with her. If she managed to get him here, she knew exactly who he was.

“Please. Do you think I’m that stupid?” She stared at him for a moment, then shook her head before leaving him sitting there in stunned silence.

“The story of my life,” he groaned and dropped his head in his hands. His powers weren’t coming back any time soon. He could feel a bit of Kryptonite even now. She’d had it put in the room with him in some form or other to keep him nice and docile.

But why? What did Mindy Church want with him? She had already tried to kill him, just a few weeks ago. If it hadn’t been for Sam Lane and Lois’ love...

Remembering that love, he closed his eyes and willed her to hear him. ‘Lois’.

Across town in the apartment, Lois lifted her head from staring unseeingly at the morning paper. Glancing around, she could have sworn she had heard Clark. But he was still in the bathroom!

She sighed and stood up to walk into the bedroom. She sat on the window seat and stared at the bed. She was supposed to be so sated this morning she could barely walk.

Well, she could barely walk, but extreme frustration was the cause. She leaned forward to hold her head. What was going on? Why was Clark being so withdrawn and evasive?

And did anybody need to take a thirty minute shower?! She lifted her head to look at the bathroom door. Maybe she would join him.

Part of her didn’t want to experience yet another rejection

from him. But the other part, the part that was literally screaming for him, lifted her to her feet. She smiled as she reached for the door handle.

She almost shouted aloud when she found it locked!

Something was seriously wrong with Clark. When he came out, she intended to find out.

If he ever came out...

Lois had dressed and was sitting at the table when Clark finally decided to join her. He was completely dressed, in a suit, as if he was headed in to work.

“Clark?”

“Thanks for making the coffee,” he told her as he grabbed a cup from the cabinet.

“We need to talk.” She put the paper aside so she could look at him.

“No time right now.” He took a sip of his coffee.

“We have two weeks.”

He looked at her for the first time. “We have about half an hour.” He glanced at his watch. “Why aren’t you dressed?”

“I am dressed,” she pointed out.

“For what? It certainly isn’t for work.”

“I’m not going to work.” She stood and walked toward him. “We have a honeymoon to start.”

“About that,” he said as he made a face. “I cancelled the reservations at the hotel.”

“You what?!” she shouted.

“We need to get on this President thing — find out who was behind it. There’s no way Marlow was in charge of that operation.”

“We decided all of that could wait until we got back from Hawaii.”

“And just how were we getting to Hawaii? I couldn’t find the airline reservations.”

WHAT?!

She stared at him as if he had lost his mind.

“Come on. We’ll be late,” he urged her and started for the door.

“I’m not going,” she repeated, fully prepared to explode for a different reason.

“Fine. I’ll see you tonight.”

And in stunned disbelief, she watched him walk out of the door.

“Who the hell was that?”

That thought made her pause. Clark was acting like a totally different person. He didn’t know about the condoms — had gone to sleep when he was finally able to experience ultimate pleasure with his wife. He went to work — on their honeymoon. He didn’t know how they were getting to Hawaii. Had the man hit his head? On a green rock? If so, it must have been some rock.

Clark forced himself to eat a little. He was so weak. If he didn’t eat, he was afraid he would pass out again. He was being exposed, not enough to make him truly sick, but enough to keep him powerless. Given that he and Lois suspected Mindy had been the one behind his Kryptonite poisoning when he had nearly died of a cold, she must have someone with the knowledge to concoct just what she needed. But why?

His head snapped up when the door opened. Mindy stepped just inside. “Come on. We’re leaving in a little while.”

The last thing he wanted was to go with that woman, but he struggled to his feet. Maybe he would get an opportunity to get away.

He sighed heavily. Who was he kidding? In his current state, there was no way he was going anywhere.

They walked down the corridor and into a large room that reminded Clark of a communication room of some sort.

“Why am I here?” he asked her as they stood before some kind of map board on the wall.

“You see this?” She pointed to the board. It was a map of Metropolis, with red and black markings on it. “The black used to cover over ninety percent of this board, but slowly and carefully, it has given way to the red. It wasn’t easy though. The black had a strong hold on the city.” She turned to look at him. “As more of the red took over, the black realized the seriousness of the situation.”

Okay, he was following her... a little.

“The red was poised to wipe out the black and the black knew it. The black sought out the red for one last effort to sway things back to the dark side.” Mindy smiled triumphantly. “That’s when I knew I had him.”

Clark had listened and when she used ‘I’ and ‘him’ instead of red and black, he figured out what she meant. “Luthor... He asked you to help him do something.”

Mindy laughed softly. “Gorgeous and brilliant.” She reached up to caress his face. “I knew I made a sound investment.” She turned and walked back toward the board. “He wanted her... your precious Lois.”

“He’s always wanted her.”

“But to have her, he had to be out of that prison. When he mentioned his insane idea to get out, I thought he had truly lost his mind.” She looked back at him. “When the first experiment worked, I thought ‘hey, this could be useful.’”

“What does any of that have to do with me?” Clark asked her, too tired and too sick to stand here much longer.

“Well, while we waited on the experiments to... mature, we had to watch and listen. It was during that time I put a few things together.” She sat down and looked up at him. “When I tried to kill Superman, Lois Lane tucked him away so that *her* father could treat him. She stayed with him, all the while you were missing from that cozy picture. I thought about other things, other times and something occurred to me. I’ve never seen you and Superman together at the same time.” She smiled again. “And because you’re standing here now, proves my theory was correct.”

For his part, Clark didn’t flinch, didn’t even blink. She knew who he was. They had already established that. So, it wouldn’t do any good for him to let on how much that scared him. Not for himself — for those he loved. And the fact that he was here could only mean things would get a whole lot worse before they got better.

If he was here, where was Lois? What was she thinking? What was happening to her?

Mindy was still looking at him, a predatory leer on her face when the doors opened and a man walked in.

Clark’s head turned and he felt as if he would pass out!

“I thought I told you not to come here,” Mindy barked at the man.

“I know you did, but I can’t do this. I can’t do what you want me to,” he whined.

“You can and you will,” Mindy told him as she stood up and walked up to him. “You will keep her busy.”

“But she thinks we’re married...”

Clark’s eyes fell to his left hand. His wedding band was gone. How had he not noticed that?

“And she wants to... to... kiss and other stuff,” the clone complained.

“You know what to do.”

“Yeah, but...” He made a sour expression and lifted his eyes to Clark. “She’ll know I’m not him,” he whispered. “They’ve done that before.”

Clark felt as if he would lurch. This man, this duplicate of himself was talking about having sex with *his* wife!

“By then it’ll be too late.”

“I think she would know long before then. She’s so attuned to him.”

“What do you know about a woman being attuned to a man? You’re barely a week old!”

“I know what I feel and I can almost feel that woman. If they’ve been together two years, she feels him, too.”

“Bed that woman,” Mindy grated out between her teeth. “I don’t care how, but you do it!” She poked him hard in his chest.

“Ow,” he whined and placed his hand over the spot she had poked him. “She’ll know for sure then.”

“And it’ll be too late! Now go!”

He looked at her warily, cast an unreadable expression toward Clark, then left.

“It’s hard to believe that walking mass of useless space is your clone,” Mindy complained.

Clark just stared at the door, unable to breathe. The clone was with Lois; she didn’t even know he was gone yet.

Mindy eased up next to him, running her hand up his arm. He jerked away, staring at her defiantly. “Don’t be that way, hunky.”

“You switched me with a clone! How am I supposed to be?” he demanded.

“You should keep an open mind...”

“An open mind?” he shouted. “You sent another man to be with my wife. You brought me here and have me so weak I can barely stand. You do know prolonged exposure will kill me?” He didn’t say the word, couldn’t say it. Afraid that if he did, the pain would get worse somehow.

“I have it all under control,” she told him. “And as far as your wife’s concerned, she’s getting exactly what she deserves. She took everything from me, so I’m returning the favor.”

“This is about revenge?”

“What else is there?” she asked innocently.

“What happens when she figures it out?”

“You’ll be so far from Metropolis, with no trail, she won’t find you.”

“She’ll look. You know that?”

“And if I ever feel in a playful mood, maybe I’ll let her find you.” She ran a finger down his chest. “In my bed with me.”

“I don’t think so,” Clark told her.

“Oh, believe me. After a while, when the pain is starting to cause you such unbearable agony you can’t breathe, you’ll beg me for relief.”

“You kidnapped me, switched me with a clone just because you want me to sleep with you?” he asked, glaring at her.

“No, no. Well, that, too, but if you remember correctly, I wanted you dead, so that you would not interfere with my business anymore. When I learned certain facts about you, I decided you would be more useful as a play toy.” She reached out again, touching his cheek. He jerked back, but she grasped his face hard. “Such poetic justice for the Man of Steel to be reduced to desperate groveling just to take his next breath.”

Clark dug deep and found that inner strength that defined who he was. He jerked his face from her hand and moved within an inch of her face. “I would rather die than beg you for anything.”

“You might not beg for your own life, but tell me. Would you beg for hers? I will bring them with us, install them in a room next to yours with a glass wall so you can watch him rape her over and over.”

Clark’s eyes flashed, but he didn’t flinch.

“Better yet. I’ll threaten your life — see if she’ll beg. She would. She would willingly bed your duplicate to save your life.”

This time he couldn’t help the fleeting expression that crossed his face. Mindy was right. Lois would do whatever she felt she had to do to save his life.

Mindy grinned wickedly and turned to walk to the end of the table. Another man had entered the room, carrying a large

envelope. “But that is in the future. Right now, you have thoughts of your wife giving herself to that thing and not even knowing she’s done it until it’s too late.” She took the envelope, lifting her eyes back to Clark. “With all of that Midwest chivalry and morality, would you divorce her if she defiled herself like that? After all, infidelity marks a marriage very deeply, no matter how strong it is. Will your morals allow you to forgive her such an indiscretion?”

She laughed when Clark turned his head, refusing to answer her. The thought of Lois with that man at all nearly made him ill. To think of her being hurt...

“What is this?” Mindy yelled. “That no good, double-crossing son of...” She growled loudly and slammed the papers she held down on the table.

Clark watched her reaction carefully. “What’s wrong? Your carefully laid plans falling apart?”

Mindy’s eyes met his and pure fury crossed her face. “Get him out of my sight!”

The other man moved over to grasp Clark’s arm. On the way past Mindy, he couldn’t help but smile smugly at her, making her scream at him again. Whatever was wrong, she didn’t like it. That meant he did. And he didn’t even know what it was.

Back in his little room, he slumped against the wall. However Mindy was poisoning him, it came in waves. He had begun to feel better earlier before he had left his room. Now he was feeling sick again. He closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. He had to figure out what to do. Lois would find out before long that he was gone, but it might be too late by then. Yeah, he wanted to get out of here and go back to her, but he didn’t want her to be hurt either.

He would forgive her. God forbid she fell victim to the clone. But he would forgive her. There was no way he would be able to hold something like that against her.

And he would die before he would allow Mindy to do anything to him. Pain or no pain, he wasn’t about to bed Mindy Church to save his own life.

He wasn’t about to betray Lois like that — not willingly.

He lifted his head, tears stinging his eyes. Would he have to bed Mindy to save Lois’ life? God no! He prayed he wouldn’t have to find out if he could actually do it.

That thought terrified him. Could he do it? Could he give something so precious — something that belonged to Lois — to that vile woman if it meant Lois would die if he didn’t? God help him, he couldn’t answer for sure.

Lois wouldn’t want him to, no matter her fate. She would rather die than see him do that. Would he have to make the choice?

How was he going to get out of this one?

“Lois,” he said aloud.

Sitting behind the wheel of her Jeep at a stoplight a few blocks from the Planet, time stood still for Lois. She had heard it — her name — softly spoken, slightly desperate. She and Clark had shared this connection once before. There was no mistaking it; he had called out to her.

The light changed and she sped the remainder of the distance to the Planet. She hurried up to the newsroom and stopped when she stepped off of the elevator. The place was a madhouse, even more so than usual.

“What’s going on?” she asked Jimmy as she made it down the ramp.

He looked up at her, a bit of surprise to see her in the newsroom on his face. “Lex Luthor was found dead in his cell this morning.”

She stopped and stared at him. “What?”

“They had thought he’d hung himself, but now it looks like he had help.”

“I’ll be damned,” Lois said and dropped on her chair.

Jimmy’s expression changed and he sat down on the edge of her desk. “Why are you here anyway? I thought you and CK were in Hawaii.”

She looked around. “Have you seen him?”

“Not today.” His brows furrowed. “Trouble already?”

“It’s a long story, Jimmy.”

The young man held up his hands in surrender. “Consider me out of it,” he said and backed away. “I’ll get everything we know about Luthor for you... since you’re here.”

“Might as well,” she said in a defeated tone. She tried to concentrate on something, anything, but it wasn’t quite working for her. She was still thinking about Clark. She hadn’t heard things; he had called to her. Why? Was he in trouble? She had checked the news wires several times and there was no sign of him anywhere. Was it something else?

After a couple of hours of mostly useless busy work, Lois decided to head home. Maybe Clark was back by now and they could talk.

Or she would talk and he could listen. She had a lot on her mind, and much like her frustrated body, if she didn’t get it out soon, she was going to blow up.

A little while later, she opened the door to the apartment and gasped audibly. All of the curtains were drawn, candles were lit everywhere, a gorgeous table had been set, and soft music was playing in the background. Clark stepped into the doorway of the bedroom, a slightly apprehensive smile on his face. He was dressed in black slacks and the black pull over she loved so much. His hair was perfect. And he was holding a red rose.

“I wanted to make up to you how I’ve been acting. I guess I really was out of sorts,” he said as he took a couple of steps toward the stairs. “Come dance with me,” he told her.

She was speechless. He looked so good. He had left his glasses off. He knew how much she liked for him to do that from time to time.

She dropped her coat and bag at the banister and stepped down in front of him.

He held the rose up to her, his smile a bit more sure now. “Welcome home,” he whispered, traced her hair with the tips of his fingers.

She had to close her eyes. She was so worked up, having him this close was threatening to take her breath away. She lifted her hand to take the rose and he moved his left hand to splay his palm across her lower back. He stepped close enough for her face to touch his chest.

“I like to feel you breathe,” he told her.

She whimpered; she couldn’t help it. God, she loved this man.

He moved his other hand around to hold the one still between them. He enclosed her fist — one of the sexiest acts she had ever experienced with him.

“You smell so good,” he told her. His face moved down next to hers. “Do you feel me breathe, Lois?” he wanted to know, his feet starting to move just a little.

She swayed with him, sighed, and reached out to grasp the back of his head. “Clark,” she breathed.

He released her hand and moved his up to cup her cheek. He leaned up, tilted her head, and bent to kiss her.

Slowly, gently, and so incredibly tender she felt as if she would cry. Whimpering again, she dropped the rose she held and it fell to the floor. She reached up to pull him closer. She licked his lips and when he sighed, she dove inside his mouth, drawing deeply so she could savor this man.

And she froze. Her tongue withdrew, a slow drag across his.

“Baby,” he whispered and moved to kiss her neck.

She had been so worked up, so engrossed in what she was doing...

Drawing back enough to see his face, she truly looked at the man before her. He smiled at her, lifted his hand to trail his fingers over her cheek. He dove back in for another kiss, confirming what she had thought just seconds ago.

She turned her face away, and he took it as invitation to explore her neck. His hand went up, moving her blouse to expose a bit more skin on her shoulder. He kissed her there.

"I want you, Lois," he said and cupped her face with both hands, diving in again. This time he was hungry and impatient.

She groaned, but he mistook the sound for pleasure and increased his actions. His left hand slid down to her chest as he turned and backed her against the wall just beside the bedroom. He captured her lips again as his hand moved from her chest down further.

"Clark," Lois managed when he searched out her neck again.

"God, baby," he said and moved his body against her hip.

He was excited and he seemed to be on a mission.

"Clark," she tried again to stop him. She was not about to do this. "Clark," she said more forcibly, but he wasn't listening. He was lost. She tried pushing against him, only to have him pin her hands above her head. He lifted his eyes to look at her and if she hadn't known it before now, she would have then.

This man was not her husband!

"Stop," she told him.

"No stopping today," he said and leaned to kiss her neck again. When he moved against her again, it seemed to stoke something deep within her. With a quick lift and jerk, Clark stilled. The pain etched through his features and he stared at Lois in disbelief.

Lois' eyes widened. He wasn't super either.

And he was in pain. She watched as it seemed to wash through him. He dropped her hands and reached out to brace himself with a hand on the wall.

"Lois?" he questioned when he could gasp a bit.

"I'm sorry," was her immediate response. Hesitantly she reached up to rub his head. He leaned forehead to lie against her shoulder. Her first instinct was to push him away, demand to know who he was, why he was here? But right this second, he was here and Clark wasn't. That meant however this Clark got here, he probably knew something. She needed to find out what he knew because he might be her best shot of finding her husband.

"I asked you to stop," Lois went on.

"I know," he said without lifting his head from her shoulder. He pulled her into a hug, shocking her more. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have tried to push you, make you feel rushed. The dancing was good. We could have done that a while longer." He gave her a final squeeze before drawing away. His fingers came up to trail down the side of her face. "I'm sorry," he told her again.

She was so torn. He wasn't her Clark, but he was still Clark. If her guess was right, he was an exact copy of her husband. Well, not exact because he wasn't super. And he might be a bit different inside, though essentially he was still Clark. "Me, too," she found herself saying.

"Will you have lunch with me?" he asked as he stepped back and took her hands.

She sighed inwardly. She would rather demand he tell her what was going on, but if she did that, she might never find Clark. "I'd like that."

His smile burst across his face. He glanced around the room, noticing her rose on the floor. He hurried over to pick it up and within moments, it had a new home in the middle of their table.

Lois warily moved over to the table. She would have lunch with him. She would watch him, listen to him, even help him navigate the waters of his short life.

And that made her stop. She stared at him with growing

horror. Remembering the clone of Superman Lex had created, she was suddenly heartbroken. This man, this copy of her husband, this... Clark was probably going to die soon. The other clone was flawed and after a short time, his tissue started breaking down. Had Mamba figured out how to stop that degeneration?

Mamba? Intergang? Luthor? What did it all mean? Who had made this copy? Why?

If there was a copy of Clark Kent, did that mean they also knew he was Superman?

"Hey." Lois jumped when Clark reached out to touch her hand. "What's wrong?" Her eyes met his. "You look so sad."

At that moment, so did he. She couldn't help herself, she smiled sadly at him. "Do you mind if I have a hug?" She just couldn't help herself. And she didn't trust her emotions right now. She needed to focus if she was going to figure this out, not break down in front of this man.

His face split into a smile and he picked up his chair to move it next to hers and opened his arms. She fell over on his chest, inhaling deeply. He was so much like her husband. She just couldn't be cruel to him.

Clark moved his hand up to smooth the side of her face.

"Better?" he asked her.

"A little." She pulled him closer. She had to get her husband back, but she didn't want this man to die either. No one deserved that.

He kissed her head and sighed, proving to her that he was indeed part of Clark. Only he would do that.

What was she going to do now? What direction did she go in?

And how would she ever explain to Clark that she had kissed this man? Allowed him to hold her?

"Clark," she breathed.

"I'm here," the man holding her said softly.

That made her want to cry. Where was he? Was he safe? Hurt? Did he know he had been replaced with a clone?

Where did she start in her quest to bring him home?

On his bed in his 'prison' Clark's eyes popped open. She had called to him- he had heard her. He sat up and dropped his feet to the floor. She was... sad, worried, scared.

"Oh, Lois," he sighed. She didn't 'feel' threatened. Did that mean the other Clark hadn't hurt her? Or did it just mean he wasn't hurting her at this moment?

Did she know he wasn't him? Had she figured it out?

Or had she been too far gone? Had he relaxed into his role enough to fool her?

Had he made love to his wife?

Clark's stomach rolled in waves of nausea just thinking about it.

What if he had... raped her?

Extending his mind so that he could feel her more, he easily picked up on her confusion and helplessness. Was that because she was shocked that the man she thought was her husband had taken advantage of her?

Was it because she had realized, after it was too late, what she had done?

He looked down at his hands, hot tears stinging his eyes. Had the clone been right? Would Lois know him? Or would his hands touch her? Hold her? Would his lips kiss her?

Clark thrust himself to his feet. He and Lois had waited so long to be husband and wife, to share themselves with one another. Looking back now, he wished they had taken the time, made the effort, to become one. If they had, maybe they would be able to feel one another more than they did now. Maybe he would have never been able to be switched. Maybe...

There were a lot of maybes and only one truth. He was stuck in this damn room, too weak to get himself out, while his clone

romanced his wife.

Martha was talking to Jonathan when she stepped into the apartment on Clinton. She stopped and looked around. “Jonathan, I don’t think those two have left.”

“No, we haven’t.” Lois entered the living room from the bedroom, and went straight to her mother-in-law for a hug.

“What’s wrong, dear?” Martha knew immediately something was wrong.

“Where’s Clark?” Jonathan asked her as he set down the gift he held. They had dropped by to leave a couple of gifts for the couple before heading to the airport. They were headed home today.

“I sent him to the store.” Lois guided them to sit down. “Clark is not... Clark.”

Jonathan smiled and looked at her. “He’s probably a bit nervous. He’s wanted you for so long...”

“No, Jonathan,” Lois stopped him. “He’s literally someone else. I think he was switched with a clone.”

“What?” Martha asked in disbelief.

“We’ve been working on a story about a doctor who does research in genetics, namely cloning. We had thought we knew what he was up to, but...” She sighed and took a breath. “At the reception, Clark and I decided we couldn’t wait to get to Hawaii, even if it wouldn’t have taken two minutes...” She smiled shyly, causing both the other adults to do the same. “We said our goodbyes, after I diffused that blow-up with my parents, then came back here. I noticed on the way that Clark had grown quiet. And we rode in the limo instead of flying. I mean, we had both been a bit impatient... up until then.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “We got ready for bed and he... says he’s tired.”

“Maybe he was, dear,” Martha tried to help.

“He forgot the form of birth control we had planned to use,” the younger woman said pointedly. “He wouldn’t kiss me, pushed me away when I tried to kiss him. And believe me, he hasn’t had a bit of trouble in that department for the last few weeks. We’ve heated the moments so much, we haven’t needed electricity.”

Jonathan chuckled softly.

“This morning he avoided me, dressed for work, cancelled our hotel reservations for our honeymoon, and asked about the airline tickets.” Lois made an expressive gesture with her eyes. Martha and Jonathan both stared at her as if they didn’t believe her. “Yeah,” she answered. “Then he leaves and I go to the Planet for a while and when I come back, he’s set up this romantic interlude. And I think, okay. Whatever was wrong with him is better and... we danced and God, I was so sure things were back on track. Then he kissed me.” She sighed and lifted her eyes to the couple. She had sat down on the coffee table to look at them both. “If there’s one thing I know, it’s that. My mind started whirling and I froze and before I knew what was happening, he was trying to...” She waved her hand. “And I asked him to stop and he kept going and...” The others looked horrified to hear what their son had done to his wife. “I kned him in the groin. He felt it.”

“He felt it?” Jonathan wanted to know.

“He’s not Clark,” Lois told them again.

“But he’s... a clone?” Martha asked her.

“Yes. And he’s so similar it’s scary and God, I almost slept with him!” she breathed. “I almost cheated on my husband.”

“Lois, honey, don’t,” Martha told her. “I think at this point you should concentrate on our Clark being missing.”

“You’re right.” Lois sat up straighter. “That’s why I didn’t let on that I knew he wasn’t Clark. I need to watch him, see if he goes anywhere so I can find my husband.”

“Any ideas who did this?” Jonathan asked her.

“I have a pretty good theory,” Lois told him. “But I have to be careful trying to prove it. If I tell anybody else so they can

help me, they won’t believe me. I mean, this man looks exactly like Clark.”

And at that moment, the door opened.

“Lois, honey, I couldn’t find...” He stopped and looked up from the bag he was rummaging in. “Mom? Dad?”

They both faltered for only a second before they stood. “We came to drop off a few wedding gifts,” his mother told him.

“We’re headed home today,” Jonathan spoke up, then glanced at Lois. “Unless you two need us to stay here for anything.”

Lois stepped closer to Clark, even reached out to put her arm around him, causing him to look down at her and smile. “No. I think we’ll be fine.”

“Sure we will.” Clark pulled her closer, dropped a kiss on her head before he drew away to head into the kitchen.

Martha stepped closer to Lois and whispered, “Are you sure?”

“Positive. Watch.” She turned to look at the back of the man in the other room. “Clark?” she whispered. She got nothing. The man kept moving up and down the counter, whistling softly. “Clark, honey?” Still nothing.

“I’ll be,” Jonathan remarked.

The younger man turned around and walked back toward them, smiling at Lois as he did. “I hate you guys have to go back,” he told his folks.

“A farm doesn’t run itself,” Jonathan spoke up.

“No, I guess not.”

Lois stepped forward and hugged Martha. “I’ll keep you informed,” she whispered in her ear.

Martha drew away and smiled at her. She moved her eyes toward Clark.

“Be careful and call us when you get in,” the man told them, not attempting to move to offer them a hug.

Lois saw the expression on Martha’s face and knew the other woman had confirmed what she had said for certain. She ushered the couple out, then took a deep breath before she turned to face Clark. He was standing at the bottom of the stairs smiling at her.

“Would you like to do something?” he asked her. “We could... book flights somewhere else if you want. Or Hawaii’s good. Or we...”

“Could watch a movie here?” she asked as she stepped down to him.

“We can do that,” he answered with a smile. “I’ll even sit through a chick flick with you.”

So much like Clark, she thought. She smiled at him and lifted her hand to his cheek. “You choose. I’ll make us something to drink.”

“Okay.” He grinned and headed toward the entertainment center.

So much like her Clark and yet, so much like a child. Mamba or somebody that knew anything about cloning needed to be contacted.

Clark moved up behind Lois, wrapped his arms around her, and leaned close to her ear. “We could dance,” he said softly.

Oh, God, anything but that. She longed for her husband so much there was no way she could dance closely with this man. She turned in his arms and smiled at him. “Maybe in a while.”

“Okay,” he agreed readily, then leaned to kiss her briefly.

“Let’s make popcorn,” he said in excitement and headed to the kitchen.

Lois sighed heavily and went to help with drinks, wondering if she would be able to keep him busy long enough to find her husband.

The effects of the poisoning were getting better. He could feel it constantly sucking at his reserves, but the nausea was getting better. And his head didn’t hurt all the time like it had. Had Mindy stopped her torture? Or just toned it down a bit?

The door opened and Mindy stepped in. She tossed some clothes on the bed. “Shower and change,” she told him and turned when a man brought a chair in for her. She sat down and the door was closed behind them.

Clark moved his eyes from her to the clothes, then toward the very open bathroom in his room. Did she expect him to shower and change now? With her in the room?

“Don’t be so modest, Superman. I’ll eventually see it all anyway,” she told him.

“I think I’ll wait until you’re gone.”

“You’ll do it now.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small device that looked like the clicker for a car. She pressed the button and Clark felt a stab of pain shoot through his eyes. For a second, he was completely blinded. His hands went up to grab his head as he struggled to breathe. “The clone has one of these... with Lois. Should I call him and get him to press the button?”

“No!” he shouted. Absolutely not! He couldn’t put her through this. “Turn it off.”

“Are you going to do what you’re told?” she asked him.

God help him, “Yes,” he answered.

She clicked the button again and the pain receded. He slumped in a relieved rush. He had to take several deep breaths before he was able to focus. He finally looked up at Mindy. “I cannot believe you want to get your jollies like this?”

“It’s about the balance of power,” Mindy explained to him. “Someone like yourself... so in control, so poised, so morally centered — to have to be reduced to showering in front of your captor... You get the picture. Now get on with it.”

Clark held her gaze with steady determination as he stood and headed toward the open space used for bathing and bodily functions. Essentially there was a toilet on a wall in an alcove set off from the rest of the room. There was also a sink, and a shower with a half wall. Being as it smelled of fresh paint, Clark was sure Mindy had the space created for just this purpose — to humiliate him.

He laid the clothes he had brought with him on the sink and slowly divested himself of his shirt. He nearly jumped from his skin when Mindy touched his shoulder.

“I do have to admit, you have a nice package.” Her hand moved down his arm. She leaned against the sink, arms crossed to watch him.

He sighed heavily and leaned to take off his socks. He had taken his shoes off a long time ago. His instinct was to turn away while he took his pants off, but the defiant part of him wouldn’t let him. He opened his pants and pushed them down his body, off to lie in a heap on the floor.

“I would have guessed boxers,” Mindy commented.

Clark glared at her before he moved toward the shower.

“No, no, hunky. Lose the tighty whites, too.”

Clark stopped at the opening to the shower, almost growled in frustration, then pushed his underwear off. “They’re not white,” he barked as he tossed them on the floor. He gave her another angry glare before he stepped into the shower stall. Mindy was right, he was thoroughly humiliated. Standing there, washing while she watched.

And she was watching. She had moved over to lean on the wall so she could see it all.

“Wow... I’d have never guessed that,” she said in admiration. “Your package is even better than I thought!”

“You made the damn clone. Did you give him a small one?”

“No, no, he has a very nice package, too. And he knows what to do with it.”

Clark stopped and looked at her. “You actually had sex with him so he would know how?”

“Not me, but he was... broken in.” She had been staring below his waist, but lifted her eyes to his. “Lois will be very

pleased... if he doesn’t throw up on her.”

“What did you expect him to do? He’s essentially a baby, a child.”

“I suppose. I tell you though, after he relaxed, he was incredible.” She waved at him. “Wash everything now.”

He glared at her, then turned around to wash his private parts.

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Mindy whined.

Clark finished his shower and stepped toward the opening, snatching the towel Mindy held from her. “You can force me to do this, but I’ll fight you before I sink to having sex with you.”

“In time, hunky. In time.” Mindy went back to drop on the chair while Clark dressed. When he was done, he sat back down on the bed and stared at her.

“Plans have changed,” she told him. “We’ll be here a bit longer than I thought we would.”

“Carefully laid plans of mice and men,” Clark said sarcastically.

“I can put her in so much pain,” she warned him.

He just glared at her. “What are you going to do when she figures it out?”

“Oh, she’ll know way before then. I need her now.”

“Leave her alone!” Clark warned her.

“I was perfectly content to just leave her with the clone, let her flounder when she realized what she had done. But there’s something I want; she has to get it for me.”

Clark sat there thinking about that before he smiled. “Luthor double-crossed you, didn’t he?”

“Luthor was a pragmatic imbecile!”

“If you’re sweating like this, I’d say he was pretty smart. What do you need Lois to get? Information? Money?” Her eyes flashed and he smiled. “Money? But Intergang is thriving. Surely you don’t need money.”

“I wouldn’t if my dear stepson wasn’t draining me dry! He’s spending an outrageous fortune on his legal team. Like that will help him! When Luthor approached me, I saw my chance to get my own money.”

“Why not just kill your step son? Everything would be yours then.”

“He still has certain information I need. Until I get it, I have to keep him alive,” Mindy told him.

“So, let me get this straight. Luthor needed help to get out of prison and get Lois. He promised you an enormous fortune and you decided to get rid of him and take the fortune for yourself. All the while, you fulfilled a sick little fantasy to have Superman as your play thing.”

Mindy grinned widely. “See. That’s why Perry White put you on his team.”

“Lois will figure it out.”

“Yes, very shortly.”

“I take it Luthor had it fixed so that she was the only one who could access the money.” When Mindy smiled wider, Clark shook his head. “I swear, just one uninterrupted night,” he mumbled.

“You know...” Mindy moved her chair closer to him. “I could always just bring Lois with us. I’m sure there would be a huge market for a porno featuring intrepid reporter Lois Lane and Superman.”

Clark just stared at her. God, help him, he would die if he was put in a situation like that.

“I’m guessing right about now, people are wondering where their hero is.”

“I had started cutting back some time ago, so that Superman wouldn’t be missed while Lois and I were on our honeymoon.”

“Speaking of...” Mindy looked down at her watch. “Your wife should have consummated her marriage by now. Or should I say committed her infidelity?” She grinned wickedly at him.

“She would know long before she made it to his bed,” Clark said, even though he wasn’t sure of that fact.

“Maybe, maybe not. Now...” She ogled him hungrily. “Let’s see if you work like a regular man.”

Clark just stared at her, not even daring to swallow. He had no idea what she was planning, but he knew one thing for sure... he would fight to protect what belonged to his wife.

“Undress.”

“What?” he asked her.

“Take it off, all of it.” She sat there, waiting for him to do what he was told. When he didn’t move, she pulled out the clicker again.

“Press it. I would rather fight the pain than undress for you again.”

She pulled out a cell phone, slowly dialing a number.

“Stop!” Clark told her and stood up. He angrily jerked his clothes off. The thought of Lois in that kind of pain was more than he could stand. Mindy’s body language didn’t at all suggest she was going to force him to have sex with her — at least not now. He could subject himself to her open perusal if it meant Lois was not in pain. He sat back down and stared at her.

Her eyes flashed down, then up again. “Get it up.”

“Not happening.”

She opened her phone again.

“Not happening because of the situation,” he told her. “I can’t just do that because you say to.”

“Self-stimulation doesn’t work for your kind?”

“Not while I’m being threatened with the life of my wife.”

He continued to stare at her, forcing his embarrassment to the back of his mind.

“You know, I should have thought to put a camera at your place. We could have watched your wife’s performance with your double.”

Clark gritted his teeth together, the anger swelling within him.

Mindy moved her chair closer, until her knees were between his. Still he hadn’t moved. When she reached down to grasp him, he glared more, breathing heavily in anger, not excitement. She seemed amused by his reaction and grinned at him.

“Very nice package,” she told him.

He almost snorted in anger. He wanted to stop this, wanted to shout she had no right to touch him like that. His wife was the only woman that was allowed that access. Yet, picturing Lois writhing in pain...

He sat there, barely able to control his shaking. Mindy just continued to grin wickedly. When she failed to get any kind of reaction from him, she sat back and looked at him.

“I guess Superman’s a stretch.”

“You’re not the right woman and my body knows it,” he clipped out.

“We’ll see about that.” She stood about the same time someone starting pounding on the door.

“I know you’re in there.”

Clark! Or the other Clark. He was back. What did that mean?

Clark quickly pulled the cover across his body as Mindy stomped to the door.

“What?” she barked at the double after she had flung the door open.

The clone glanced inside, his eyes widening in surprise. “Are you giving him lessons, too?” he wanted to know.

“It’s none of your business. Now why in hell are you here?” Mindy demanded.

“I told you she would know. I tried. I really did. It was working, too, but the second I kissed her...”

Clark dropped his head, taking deep gulps of air. Lois had kissed the clone.

“She knew. She tried to act normally, though. Or she might have been surprised by my forceful nature!” the man almost yelled. “I cannot rape that woman,” he said forcibly. “I *will not*

rape that woman!”

Mindy moved her hand up quickly, touching the clone with a device, causing him to yell out in pain. “Maybe I’ll have someone rape you,” she told him. She jerked the device away and the clone bent to hold his neck. “It doesn’t matter now anyway. I need her.”

The clone shot straight up and stared at her. “No! She’s mine,” he barked.

“She’s not yours. You’ve said so yourself.”

“But I can *be* him.” He waved at Clark. “In time, I will learn to be him. She’ll be mine then.”

“But I need her now.” She eased closer, lifted her hands to the clone’s chest. “I need her to do something for me.”

“You said she wouldn’t be brought into any of your plans,” he whined.

“And she wouldn’t have, but things have changed. I need her to do something for me. She won’t be harmed a bit if she cooperates.” Mindy moved her hands over him. “If you can get her to do this, you can have her.”

The man’s face lit up in a brilliant smile. “For always?”

“For always. Now, go. Don’t say anything yet. I’ll let you know when you have to convince her.”

“Okay.” He glanced at Clark. “She’s going to be so hurt that you’ve done this.” He waved at him.

“Yeah, well, I’m not exactly happy with her. She’s playing house with you.”

The man opened his mouth as if to say something else, then shut it and hurried away.

Clark sighed and dropped his head. What now?

“I’ll be back. And you *will* respond then.” Mindy slammed the door behind her and Clark slumped in a heap on the mattress. He had to figure a way out of here and in a hurry. Just having that woman look at him made him feel dirtier than he ever had in his life.

“God, Lois. How do I get back to you?”

Lois had followed Clark through the city. When he had suddenly said he was going to purchase them another video, she had decided to go after him. He had seemed nervous and unsure of himself, even more so than he had been since coming to the apartment the night of their wedding. *Her* wedding — and Clark’s. She held tightly to the fact that they really had taken their vows. She was married to her Clark, and no one could take that from her.

This Clark had changed trains three times, doubling back on himself. She had lost him somewhere in the transfer station at Tenth and Main.

Giving up on trying to find him, Lois headed to the Planet. Maybe she could do a bit of research.

Perry and Jimmy were headed up the ramp to leave. She was a bit surprised they were wrapping things up so early. Six was early for Perry.

“Lois, honey, what are you doing here?” Perry wanted to know.

“Long story.” She kept going toward her desk. When the elevator dinged, she sighed heavily. Even before looking, she knew who it was.

“Lois!” Clark hurried down the ramp toward her. “Honey, why are you here? I thought we were...” He glanced up Perry and Jimmy. “Hi.”

“You two have the strangest life,” Jimmy said aloud, although the couple ignored them.

Lois smiled at Clark. “We are. I just needed to do something first.”

“I think it can wait,” Clark said and took her hands.

He really liked holding her hands, she thought absently.

“Let’s get out of here, have a quiet dinner... cuddle a little,”

he finished in a whisper.

Jimmy leaned close to Perry. "They've had a fight," he whispered.

"I know," Perry returned.

Lois squeezed Clark's hands. "You know what would be good? Some of that really good Chinese from the Palace in China Town."

"Okay," Clark agreed quickly. "Why don't I go get it and you head on home to... do whatever you need to do?"

"Sounds good." She forced a bright smile.

Clark lifted her hands to his mouth and kissed each one. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too," she returned and when he had gone, "I do miss you," she said to herself.

Perry and Jimmy moved closer to her when Clark was gone.

"Lois, you know you can tell us anything," Perry said.

"I need your help," she started and sat down to tap her keyboard furiously.

"Name it."

"I need you to help me find Clark."

"Ah, didn't he just leave?" Jimmy asked her.

Lois looked up at them. "That is not Clark."

"What?"

"That man is not the man I married. Or is he?" She snatched up her bag and rummaged through it until she found what she was looking for.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but have you been hitting the bottle?" Perry asked her.

Lois was reading a piece of paper and smiled through tears. She did marry Clark. His signature was on the marriage license. *Clark's* signature. And she could clearly remember she was with him until right before they left the reception...

"The clone," she said as she turned to the men. "The one Mamba made... we thought it was of the President so he could be switched for whatever reason." She waved her hand at the elevator. "Clark was the one cloned."

Jimmy snorted out. "Yeah, right. Why would anyone clone CK?"

"Think about it, Jimmy. Clark and I tick off a lot of people."

"The only person with that much power and control is Luthor and he's dead," Perry told her.

"And who killed him?" They couldn't answer that one.

"Clark and I saw two different Intergang associates during that case. Marlow was Church's right hand man. And who runs Intergang now?"

Jimmy dropped on the edge of the desk. "Do you think that's what happened? Mindy Church cloned CK and switched him to get revenge on you two?"

"That's what I'm thinking," Lois told them. "And that means Clark, *my* Clark is out there somewhere."

"Where would Church take him?" Perry wondered aloud.

"Intergang headquarters?" Jimmy suggested.

"Most likely, but we can't just go ask for the police to go in and look. The clone is here and he looks so much like Clark, they would never believe me," Lois said.

"Then we have work to do," Perry stated.

Lois reached for his hand. "Thanks for believing me."

"Lois, if there's one thing a woman should know, it's her husband. As much fire and passion there is between you two..." He stopped and his eyes widened in horror. "Aw, honey, please tell me you figured it out long before..."

"Yeah." She smiled at him sadly.

"That blows," Jimmy said in disgust. "Church is a sick witch. Wonder what she's doing with Clark."

"Jimmy!" Perry bellowed.

Jimmy realized what he had said and jumped to his feet.

"Sorry, Lois. I'll just... go dig up something on Intergang." He

hurried away before she could say anything.

"He didn't mean anything."

"I know, Perry, but he's right. Obviously Mindy had no intention of me knowing he wasn't Clark. If he hadn't acted so strange..." She dropped her head as tears filled her eyes. "He'll do just about anything she wants him to do if he thinks she's going to hurt me," she said softly.

"Oh, honey..." Perry reached out to rub her shoulders. "Hang in there. We'll find him."

Lois wiped her face and sat up with renewed determination in her posture. "We'll find him," she confirmed his statement.

Clark sat on the bed staring at the wall across from him.

Mindy had sent someone to get his clothes. He was forced to sit in the nude.

If that wasn't bad enough, he was forced to listen to the nasty videos being streamed into his room. There was a television that had been hidden behind a panel on the wall. It was behind a layer of glass so that he couldn't turn it off or turn it down. Pornographic videos had been playing for an hour. He guessed it was Mindy's sick attempt to get a response from him.

The only way he would respond was with Lois. He wasn't about to reveal that. If he did, there was no doubt Mindy would have her here in a second.

He closed his eyes and thought about their last few moments together. He had been so excited, so blissful. He had married the only woman he had ever truly loved. They were poised to spend their life together. He had relived their time in the limo over and over. He could almost still feel Lois' lips wrapped around him... But thinking about that was dangerous. It would cause him to swell for sure and give Mindy what she wanted. There was no way he would do that.

Instead he chose to think of the future... with Lois.

Did she know the marriage was legal? To him?

Did she ache for him the way he ached for her?

The clone said he had tried to... to get close to her. Did that mean she knew now? Did she figure it out? The other Clark said he wouldn't rape her. Did that mean they still hadn't... had sex?

To think about her with him... His double might be an exact copy of himself, but he was still just that — a copy. Imagining Lois with another man pierced Clark clear to his soul.

She had kissed him. The clone had said that much.

And Mindy had touched him.

"We're some pair," Clark said aloud. He laid over on the pillow. Maybe he should kiss up to Mindy to get himself out of here. He was positive he could distract her long enough to pin her down somehow.

But the thought of doing anything remotely intimate with Mindy Church made him want to hurl. If he couldn't figure anything else out, he might not have a choice. He needed to get out of here before Lois got hurt.

He found himself hoping the other Clark was enough like him that he would try to keep Lois safe. The man had said he wanted her, so there was a bit of hope. If he was truly his clone, the desire to protect Lois ran deep.

"Hang on, baby. I'll figure out how to get back to you," he said into the room.

Clark had gotten a variety of Chinese and took it home to set up an elaborate table for Lois. When she didn't show up after a couple of hours, he headed back to the Planet to find her. She was sitting at the conference table, staring out the window into the dark sky. She had cut the lights in the room, but what little drifted in made it easy enough to see that she'd been crying.

Her head lifted and she seemed to focus on something, as if she was hearing something.

Was her connection with him so great she could hear him as

well as feel him?

He had seen her earlier... read the marriage license. He had also seen her slip her wedding band off.

She knew. She knew he wasn't her husband. Why hadn't she said anything?

That one was easy enough. She wanted to learn as much as she could, see if he would lead her to her husband. Part of him wanted to do just that. Seeing her so distraught was pure agony.

He had been scared of this woman to begin with. She was nothing like Mindy, nothing like the young woman Mindy had made him bed.

That had been so humiliating. Mindy had watched, instructed him what to do, what to say. It hadn't gone too well until Mindy left them alone. Once he had relaxed and begun to feel the things she had done to him, he had responded.

He hadn't known at the time Mindy was still watching. By the time he knew, it was too late. He had learned to give in to the pull of his body. And he had done it several times.

Why did he feel a bit ashamed now?

Looking at Lois, he knew why. He was supposed to be her husband. His body was supposed to be hers. If he hadn't hesitated that first night... if he had drawn from his time with the other girl...

Who was he kidding? She'd have known. Lois would have known he wasn't Clark Kent.

He sighed, thrust a hand through his hair, and headed out. He would leave her. What else could he do? He wasn't the one she wanted.

"Put these on," Mindy barked as she flooded the room with bright light.

Clark squinted as he sat up. "What's going on?"

"We have to go."

"What? No more performance tests?" he spat as he tugged on a pair of underwear — boxers — he hated boxers as underwear.

"Just get dressed."

He tugged his pants on, shirt, and socks and shoes. When he was done, he stood but immediately slumped back on the mattress, a wave of pain and nausea washing through him.

"Sorry. I needed to give you a little jolt. In case you got any ideas." She pushed the little device she held back into her pocket and reached to grab Clark's arm. "Come on."

"Give me a second," he breathed, gasping to catch his breath. He wasn't sure what she had done to him, but it was nasty. When he could stand, he gingerly moved toward the door. They made their way through the hallways, coming to a place he recognized from being here before after Mindy had tried to kill him with that virus. She had stopped to open a safe on the wall. He looked around, not seeing anyone or even hearing anyone. She was so sure she had him under control, she had foregone assistance.

His eyes flashed to a small statue on a table. He moved quickly, so he wouldn't have time to think about it, snatched up the statue and swung it toward Mindy. She was caught on the side of her head and dropped like a ton of bricks. Clark panicked for a second, his first instinct to check on her. Then he thought about what was going on and he turned to hurry as fast as he could from the bunker. His progress was slow, his limbs felt so heavy from the Kryptonite exposure. When he burst through an exit, he stopped and stared. This was not the same place he and Lois had been to before. Obviously she had created an exact copy of her hideout somewhere. Or it had always been here.

Why did bad guys do things like that? Sometimes they were just so predictable.

And that's what he needed to focus on now — the predictable things Mindy might do. That's what he should have done all along. Of course, Mindy was far from predictable.

He was in the warehouse district, but not a section he had

been to very much. He chose a direction and set out. He had to hurry, get as far away as he could before they came after him.

He wished he had realized he would be cold without his powers. It was bitterly cold out. The wind was whipping and a light snow was falling. He had only a thin shirt on. He would be lucky if he didn't die from exposure before he could get help.

Forcing himself to focus, he ducked between two buildings and kept pace. With any luck, he would reach an area with a pay phone. He could call Lois to come get him. She knew the city so well all he would have to do is describe his surroundings and she would find it.

He would worry about whether she believed him when he was able to actually speak with her.

By the time anyone found Mindy, she was coming to. She sat up, rubbing her head, and barking angrily at her associates.

"Where is he?"

They all looked terrified. She growled and ordered them to find him. When she was able to stand, she got up and gathered what she would need before yelling for someone to get a car ready. There was only one place Clark would go.

Twenty minutes later, she had one of her men push through the door of the apartment on Clinton. The other Clark was lying on the sofa and shot to his feet from the sudden intrusion.

"Where is he?" Mindy demanded.

"Who?"

"Kent!"

"He's not here," the clone told her with a wide-eyed expression.

"Where is Lois?"

"She's at the Planet." And he regretted telling her immediately. Why hadn't he lied to her? Sent her on a wild goose chase? If Mindy was looking for Lois and was angry...

"You idiot. You were supposed to keep her close. Never mind." She turned and stormed back through the door, leaving Clark staring after her.

Should he warn Lois? Mindy was really angry. She would hurt Lois for sure.

And she had lost Clark?

The other Clark went to the phone, his instinct to protect Lois coming naturally — even if he didn't realize it. He picked up the phone and realized he didn't know the number. He searched through the apartment until he found Clark's cell phone. He dialed the number stored for Lois only to get her voicemail. He dialed the one marked Planet. No answer.

What now?

Clark had meant to just call for Lois to come get him, but with every car that approached, he felt sure it was Mindy coming after him. He just kept going, ducking into the shadows to hide when someone was near. He passed a few bums, a few paid women and their dates, and a couple others up to no good. He reached an area he knew well. Within ten more minutes, he was rounding the corner across the street from the Planet. It was so cold. He would go in there and call Lois. He would be safe in the Planet.

"Maybe you should take a moment to watch this."

He turned to the voice when it spoke behind him. He closed his eyes as dread washed over him. It was one of Mindy's cronies. They had found him.

"Look," the voice ordered.

He lifted his eyes just as the door opened on the Planet. Lois stepped out and he gasped. He never failed to have a reaction when he saw her again after being apart.

Foley walked up beside her, spoke and led her toward the alley. They stood just in the entrance, Foley talking. Lois glanced across the street and moved that way when she saw him there.

“Lois,” he breathed and took a step toward the curb.

“Stop or she dies,” the voice told him.

Foley flashed his hand up and he knew, though he couldn’t see it, that Foley held something. Foley said something else to Lois — she just stood there on the sidewalk watching him. Even in the dark from across the street, he could tell she was starting to cry.

“Now, turn and walk down the sidewalk. Don’t look back. When you reach the boss, kiss her. And make it look so convincing even I think you like it.”

Clark looked in the direction he was supposed to go. A car had pulled up to the corner and Mindy was climbing out. “No,” he said defiantly.

“Okay.” He waved a hand and Foley held his up. Lois immediately clutched her head, staggering in pain.

“Stop!” Clark yelled. “Stop.” Foley waved again and Lois was able to recover. Clark knew what that pain felt like. Lois couldn’t withstand it long. He waited until their eyes met, gave her a longing glance, then turned away. Mindy was standing beside the car smiling at him when he reached her. He didn’t say a word- just lifted his hands to her shoulders — he wouldn’t touch her face — and leaned in to kiss her. He kept his mouth tightly closed, but he moved over her in a way that looked as if the encounter was deeper than it was. He drew back, glared at her, then ducked inside the car.

And he never looked back.

“Not bad, hunky,” Mindy said when she crawled in with him. “Almost makes up for this lump on my head.”

Clark had slid all the way to the other side of the car, staring out the window as hot tears rolled down his face. That was one of the most painful things he had ever had to do. He just couldn’t allow them to hurt Lois. That pain through his head had been so intense... ‘Forgive me, Lois’, he thought. ‘I did it because I love you.’

On the sidewalk, Lois felt as if her whole world had been ripped away from her. When Clark kissed Mindy...

She looked away and choked back a sob. She didn’t realize she wasn’t alone now until a warm hand landed on her shoulder. She lifted her eyes to see Clark — the other one — the one that wasn’t hers — the one that hadn’t kissed Mindy Church.

“I’m so sorry,” he said softly.

He knew. He knew that she knew and... “Did you see?”

“Yeah.” His hand moved up to cup her face under her hair.

He gave her a sad expression, then urged her toward him. She hesitated a second, then fell over. He wrapped his arms around her while she sobbed openly. “God, what have I done?” he said aloud. He bent and lifted Lois in his arms and headed back toward the Planet building. They would sit a while for her to calm down, then he would take her home. He would hold her all night if she needed him to.

And he would find Mindy tomorrow. Make her set this right.

Part 3 — Regarding Clark: Repetition

That smile... did she have any idea what that smile did to him?

‘Don’t fall for me, farm boy. I don’t have time for it’... too late — way too late.

‘What is this?’

‘It’s my word’... as if the answer was obvious.

‘Tell him I love him’... he felt it. It had taken him long enough. In so many ways, they had been alike. She was oblivious to the secret he kept and he was oblivious to how deeply he had been tucked away in her heart.

Those tears... He had seen them too many times. Once was too much. Though he wasn’t naïve enough to believe she would never cry. It just tore at his heart to see her do it.

Those hands... Just a touch and he would lose all reality. Just

one and he was lost.

Just one and he was completely found.

Had his father had any idea this woman might exist when he had tucked his baby boy inside that capsule? When Jor-El launched his precious Kal-El across space, did he imagine the day his boy became a man and lost his heart to a woman?

To a woman like Lois?

He could absolutely understand why men fawned over her. He completely agreed with Lex Luthor in his obsession. Lois was a woman to obsess about. Lois was a woman to dream about, to live for, to cherish...

And she was one he needed to get back to.

Would she ever forgive him for what he had done?

He had purposely walked up to Mindy Church and kissed her. Some might argue it was just a kiss. It wasn’t just a kiss to him.

A kiss- he had changed his perception of that act a while ago- the first time he had truly kissed a woman.

The first time he had kissed his future.

A kiss — it was, in a lot of ways, even more intimate than sex. At least it was for him. It was an act that should be savored, cherished, experienced in a deep, emotional way that left little doubt it was something special. He had done that with Lois.

Some of their kisses had been almost magical.

God, he loved her kisses.

Clark rolled over on the bed he was lying on. Mindy had moved them. Her intention was to get them on a plane and take them as far from Metropolis as she could get them, but there was business she had to attend to first. She needed Lois to get money for her. Clark was nearly sick with worry that Lois would be hurt. He silently willed the clone to protect her. It felt foreign to have to trust her life to someone else. He had protected her for so long...

He eased to sit up on the side of the bed. He wanted to shout out in frustration and pain. Mindy had brought them to Luthor’s underground bunker- the ‘ark’ he had built under Lex Towers. She had installed him in the apartment that replicated Lois’. How she had gotten her hands on the place he would never know.

To sit here, in such a familiar place...

Why here? Why Luthor’s sanctuary? He just couldn’t figure out what Mindy was doing? She was getting money, and a lot of it. She had killed Luthor. She had kidnapped Clark. She had created a clone and left him with Lois. None of it was related. Was she just that sick and twisted?

He snorted out a sarcastic bark of laughter. She was worse.

But at least for now she had left him alone. She had locked him in, of course, but he was fully clothed and alone. That was better than being naked and forced to listen to porno all day while thoughts of his wife ran through his head.

“Lois,” he breathed aloud and fell back over on the bed, curling himself into a fetal position.

Would he ever see her again?

Lois sat straight up and looked around the apartment. Clark was immediately at attention, standing from the window seat to check on her. For a split second a thrill shot through her.

Until she realized it wasn’t him.

She groaned and moved to drop her feet on the floor.

“Are you okay?” Clark asked her, sitting gingerly on the bed beside her.

“As okay as I can be at the moment,” she answered, a snappy reply that made him flinch. She just couldn’t help it though. He wasn’t who she needed him to be.

The phone rang and she almost sighed in relief. She didn’t want to talk to Clark right now... to this Clark.

She picked up the receiver from the nightstand. “Hello?”

“Lois, honey, we wanted to check in. We’re so worried.”

“I saw him, Martha,” she said.

“When?”

“Last night, outside the Planet. Mindy Church has him. I don’t know why, I don’t know where, but I’m going to find out.”

“And the other... Clark?”

She glanced at him. “He knows I know.”

“We should come back,” the woman told her.

Her first instinct was tell them no, but this was their son. He meant the world to them, too. “If you feel you need to...”

“What happened when you saw Clark?” Jonathan asked, indicating for the first time he was on the line, too.

“He was there, across the street. I was going to him when Guy Foley approached. Foley’s one of Mindy’s goons. He told me that Clark was where he wanted to be, that Mindy had made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.” She choked back a sob. “He told me Clark wanted me to stay with...” She glanced at the man beside her. “That I should embrace my husband and he would do what he needed to do.”

“That’s insane!” Martha almost shouted.

“Clark would never leave you,” Jonathan assured her.

“Not unless he was being forced to,” Lois put in. “Foley told me Clark was going with Mindy — that it was what he wanted to do. There was a man with Clark across the street and he waved his hand. When he did, Foley pressed some sort of device he had and I was in so much pain for a moment I thought I would die. The pain stopped and Clark walked to the corner. He...” She stopped and took a deep breath. “He kissed Mindy, climbed in the car with her, and they pulled away.”

“He only did it to keep you safe,” Martha told her.

“I know. I’m not sure of a lot of things, but I know three things for sure: Clark would not have left or would not stay gone without a good reason. He loves me. And he would do anything to keep me safe.”

“And you would do anything for him,” Jonathan spoke up.

“That’s how it is when you love somebody.”

“I can’t live without him,” Lois breathed through tears.

“We’re coming back,” Martha told her. “You need someone there for you.”

“Okay,” was all she could manage.

“You can do this, Lois. You can find him. Just keep believing that,” Jonathan told her.

“Close your eyes and feel him. You’ll find him,” Martha said. “We love you.”

“And I love you both.” They cut the connection and Lois stared down at the phone in her hand.

“I’m sorry,” the other Clark told her after a while

She looked up at him. “I want to be angry with you, but I can’t. I know this isn’t your fault. Mindy did this. And if my guess is right, you’ve only been alive a few days.”

“Yeah,” he answered and dropped his head. “Everything she told me... it’s all jumbled up in my head.”

“I know.” Lois laid the phone aside and turned toward him. “Do you know where they’re at?”

“I know where they were,” he said softly. His eyes moved back over to her. “She was planning to move them.”

“Anything is better than nothing. If we can search where they were, we might get a clue to what she’s up to.”

“She said she needs you to do something for her. I would guess she’ll be contacting you soon.” He shifted to face her, an expression of worry on his face. “She’s dangerous. You have to be careful.”

Lois smiled at him. She couldn’t help it. That was just so Clark — to worry about her. “I will.” She reached out tentatively to lay a hand on one of his. “But you understand that I have to find him?”

“Yeah,” he nodded sadly. He stared down as he moved his fingers over her skin. “He’s a lucky man.”

“I’m a lucky woman,” she told him.

He looked up at her and smiled.

She smiled back before standing, drawing her hand away from his. He wasn’t her Clark, but he was Clark. And seeing him so sad made her want to comfort him. Right now she needed to focus on finding her husband. They would worry about this man later.

“I need coffee,” she said.

Clark shot to his feet. “Why don’t I make it and some breakfast while you shower?” He didn’t wait for her to answer before hurrying to the kitchen.

She smiled again. So much like Clark, she thought as she headed toward the bathroom. And he seemed to want to help her. If that wasn’t Clark Kent, she didn’t know what was.

‘Hold on, honey’, she said silently. It might take her a little while, but she was going to bring him home.

And she would go through Mindy Church to do it.

The bunker in the warehouse district was searched, but of course, it was empty. Lois had enlisted the help of Perry and Jimmy to help her. They didn’t want to make Clark’s disappearance public yet. They felt keeping it quiet would give them more leverage. Although, Mindy already knew that they knew. Still they went in alone.

When the search didn’t yield any results, they went back to the Planet to do research. Clark — the cloned one — even came along to help her. He had been so apologetic when they hadn’t located Clark at the bunker.

It was so strange to have this man, this duplicate of her husband, work to help her bring his double home. It was hard to deny when she looked at him that he felt something for her. If he was a copy, it was natural for him to.

But he had been completely respectable. He hadn’t taken any liberties and he had fallen over himself to help her.

“It’s so strange,” Jimmy commented as he looked out of Perry’s window at the man sitting at Clark’s desk. “He looks just like him.”

“Acts a bit like him,” Lois commented. “But he’s... a child, floundering to learn the rules to a game he was forced to play. I feel so bad for him.”

“What kind of life will he have?” Perry asked from his desk.

Yeah, Lois thought. What kind? She wouldn’t tell Perry and Jimmy what she suspected about Clark’s grim future. The last thing she needed was for them to feel sorry for him. She didn’t have time for sympathy. She needed everyone focused.

Her cell phone rang and she jerked it up immediately. “Lois Lane.”

“Lolo, girlfriend, we need to talk,” came the squeaky little voice over the line.

“You’re damn right we do,” Lois snapped.

“Tonight. The gazebo at the lake in the park. Ten o’clock. Oh, come alone or a certain someone you know will be *green* for a while.”

The connection was cut and Lois stood there staring at the phone. Green for a while? Had Mindy just hinted she knew who Clark was? How? When? It might explain why she had him.

And it would create dozens of other questions. One being— one that she had asked herself several times — why didn’t the clone have Clark’s powers? Had Mindy made him without them on purpose? Or was the clone flawed that way?

“Lois?” Perry coaxed her.

She looked up at him. “That was Mindy. She wants to see me.”

“You can’t go alone,” was Jimmy’s immediate reply.

“I have to, Jimmy. She said she would hurt Clark.”

“You’re going to meet with Mindy?”

She whirled to see the other Clark in the doorway. “I have to.”

"I'm coming with you," he said.

"No. I have to do this alone."

"Then I'll watch from a distance. She's a dangerous person..."

"I know." She sighed heavily. "We'll work something out." That made him smile a bit. So much like Clark, she thought.

"We need a plan," Perry announced.

A plan... a miracle... a cop — to keep her from choking the life from Mindy Church's body!

She pushed those thoughts away and set out with the others to come up with a plan. They were going to get Clark back... one way or the other.

Mindy was sitting on the bench under the gazebo when Lois got there.

"Glad you could make it." The woman had shed her girly accent in favor of her more threatening natural tone.

"Cut the crap," Lois told her at once, standing with her arms crossed barely a step onto the structure. She couldn't show this woman an ounce of fear. Of course, she was angrier than she was scared, so it wasn't very difficult.

"There's a bank account at a downtown institution that has a bit of cash that I want."

"Go get it," Lois snapped.

"I plan on it," Mindy shot back. "With help from the account holder."

Lois stared at her for a moment before it dawned on her why she was here. "I don't know why you think I can get it."

"Maybe because that lowlife Lex Luthor fixed it that way," Mindy spat as she rose.

"Lex put money in an account under my name?"

"Rainy day account," Mindy explained. "That couldn't be traced back to him very easily."

Lois had to admit that was something she would have never thought of. Pacing a few steps away, and running everything she knew through her head, Lois turned back to Mindy and grinned. "The double-crosser was double-crossed."

Mindy stepped within a foot of her and nearly growled, "You will get me my money!"

"You will give me back my husband!" Lois shot right back at her.

They stared at one another for a moment before Mindy smiled evilly. "He is one hell of a man," she let Lois know. "And has the body of a god."

She's only trying to goad me, Lois thought, carefully keeping her expression as threatening as she had felt a second ago.

"I completely underestimated the man." Mindy turned and walked a few feet away. "Brilliant and super — what a perfect package." She faced Lois again. "How *did* you manage to wrangle a man like that?"

"Unlike you, Mrs. Church, I don't have to *wrangle* anyone. Now, you want your money, I want my husband."

"Tell me, Mrs. Kent," she stressed. "Are you willing to forgive him his shortcomings?"

"Clark has no shortcomings to forgive."

"I don't know. You saw that kiss. Pretty hot." Mindy sighed dreamily. "But it was nothing compared to what he can really do." She closed her eyes and swayed, exaggerating her statement.

Lois wanted to smack the blonde right out of the woman's hair. Mindy was pulling her chains.

Mindy opened her eyes, staring at her. Her brows furrowed and a sad expression crossed her face. "You don't believe me?"

Lois purposely ran her eyes up and down Mindy's body. "Ah, that would be a no."

"Come now. You know the lengths he'll go to when he thinks you're in danger."

That one registered... just a tad. And Mindy saw it.

"And believe me, he is magnificent when he thinks he's saving your life." Mindy sighed in contentment. "That cute little freckle on the bottom of his stomach is kind of sexy, too."

It was all Lois could do to keep from reacting. Clark would die to protect her. Would he... sleep with Mindy Church, too? Something had happened. Mindy knew about his freckle. Lois had found that little mark one day when they were making out on her couch. She had thought it was cute, and Clark had blushed when she talked about it.

Mindy's expression cleared. "I've gotten what I want, so yeah, I guess you can have him back. Tomorrow. Nine o'clock sharp, First Bank of Metropolis. As soon as I have my money, I'll have Foley drop Clark off in the alley behind his building."

"Why? Why do you need Lex Luthor's money?" Lois asked her, as much to take her mind off the picture Mindy had painted as it was to get information.

"Who wouldn't need 200 million dollars, Lois? And since Lex doesn't need it..." She trailed off and shrugged before taking a step toward the stairs of the gazebo. She turned back to leer at Lois. "I promise I won't wear him out too much tonight. I'm sure you'll be anxious to get back to your... honeymoon when he comes home."

She left Lois standing there seething in anger. Hot tears stung her eyes as she fought to maintain control. Had Clark really felt she was going to die? Enough to... have sex with Mindy?

Oh, God, she wailed silently. If he had, that witch had taken his virginity.

Her stomach rolled and she had to take several breaths to calm herself. The thought of Mindy taking that from him...

"Are you okay?"

She looked up at the other Clark. He was staring at her with concern in his expression. So much like Clark...

"I'm okay," she assured him. He and Perry and Jimmy had drifted in the shadows so they would be close enough in case something went wrong.

"Perry and Jimmy followed her," Clark told her.

"Good. Maybe we can find Clark tonight." She gathered herself together and set out toward the exit to the park. She was quickly forming a plan. Lois knew the manager of the First Bank of Metropolis. She would call him and see if this account really existed. If it did, she would have him transfer the funds to another account in a different bank somewhere. Then when she went with Mindy tomorrow, he could tell the battle-ax that it was gone. If they set this up carefully, it would look as if Luthor or one of his cronies had double-crossed her again.

"Lois?"

She stopped on the sidewalk near the crosswalk when Clark spoke. "What?"

"I, ah, I heard what Mindy said."

Just how close had he been? He didn't have powers so he'd had to be pretty close to hear. "She wants money," Lois confirmed what they both knew.

"Not that." He looked a bit nervous.

"She was jerking my chains, Clark. My Clark would not defile himself like that."

"Are you sure?" he asked as he lifted his eyes to hers.

"Yes! I'm sure," she almost yelled at him.

He made a strained expression. "I'm not so sure."

"You do not know Clark. You might be a copy of him, but you don't know who he is."

"I know what I saw though."

That stopped her. Her brows furrowed and she looked him. "What?"

"I saw him... in the room."

"You've been to the bunker since she had Clark?"

"Well, yeah," he said. "Before I started helping you. How else would I know where they were?"

Okay, Lois, focus, she told herself silently. Getting mad at Clark all over again wasn't going to get her Clark back any sooner. But what did he mean?

"I went to see Mindy after..." He glanced down. "She wanted me to rape you," he said softly.

"Is that why you were so forceful?"

"Yeah," he said with a nod. He lifted his eyes back to hers. "I'm so sorry. I didn't want to do that. I know how it feels..."

"Oh, God," Lois gasped. She automatically reached out to him. "What did she do to you?"

He laughed nervously. "It doesn't matter. But I told her I couldn't hurt you. She was with... Clark."

"With Clark?" she questioned.

"In his room." He glanced away. "And he was... naked."

Lois knew what it felt like to get hit by a two by four, without a single piece of wood.

"I told him you wouldn't be very happy with that," Clark rushed to tell her. He tentatively reached up to grasp her arm. "He said he wasn't very happy with you because you were with me."

She felt as if she couldn't breathe. She couldn't think. What had Clark done?

With a nervous laugh, Lois pushed around Clark. "It wasn't what you thought it was." Was it? It couldn't be.

"It's what I saw," he insisted as he hurried after her. "I'm sorry, but it is."

She whirled around to glare at him. "It wasn't what you thought it was!"

He nodded and dropped his head. "And if I hadn't been so nervous that first night...?"

"I would have known," she insisted.

His eyes went up to pierce hers. "Before or after it was too late?" he asked her.

Damn him, Lois thought as she glared right back at him. That was a question she honestly couldn't answer. If he had been more confident, more like he had been at lunch, more like he had been in the limo, if she hadn't suspected something was wrong already... She had been so worked up...

She whirled around again and stomped down the sidewalk. The Planet was only a block over and she could use the time to vent.

"I'm sorry," Clark said as he caught up with her.

She stopped and stared at him. "Just go home."

"I don't have one," he said with a strained expression, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Why did he have to say something like that? And stand there looking so much like Clark she wanted to scream?

Pushing everything but finding Clark from her mind, she set out again. This time she didn't stop until she had reached the Planet. She dropped in her chair and leaned to put her head in her hands. Had Clark really had sex with Mindy? He had been naked with her... what were they doing if it wasn't sex? She was almost sick to think he might have done that, even if it was to save her life.

What had she told him? That the clone would snap her neck? Did Mindy think the clone was super?

And she had ordered the double to rape her? Humiliation, irony, revenge — she could understand Mindy's motivation for that. But why take Clark? More revenge — that was understandable. For sex? Was she that crazy about Clark's super side? Or was it Clark she was interested in? More than likely she simply wanted to do it just to get on Lois' bad side. That went back to revenge.

That went back to the long list of questions she couldn't answer.

Clark sat down at his desk and she wanted to scream. She was angry with him for pointing out that she might have crossed that line — the one that she would have never been able to

traverse again.

And she was angry with herself for believing she might have done it. Yeah, she knew the clone was not her husband when she had kissed him, but that was after their confusing night together and equally confusing morning. She had wanted to believe she would have known; she would have stopped before it was too late. The truth was, she just didn't know.

Turning her head to glance at the man across from her, she couldn't help but sigh. He didn't ask for any of this. Mindy had created him simply to hurt him. More than likely he wouldn't even live long enough to realize that. Lois couldn't help but ache for him. Part of him was completely Clark and it hurt to know his fate.

He lifted his head and their eyes met. She smiled at him sadly and he smiled back. She gave a jerk with her head and he jumped up to come to her.

"Grab a chair. You can help me go through these files," she told him.

His smile lit brighter as he retrieved his chair. "I'm not sure I can help much."

"You'll do okay," she told him and couldn't resist reaching over to pat his hand. He offered her another smile before they set to work. They needed to go through Intergang's holdings and see if they could figure out where Mindy might have taken Clark. With any luck, they would have him back soon.

Clark had finally given up on sleeping and started pacing the apartment. It was so much like Lois'. Every piece of furniture, every room, every detail brought back a memory of them together.

The window where they had stood and watched the carolers — Lois had held his hand, laid her head on his shoulder... She had sighed in contentment, with him — not Superman.

The fish tank that was as unusual as the owner. He smiled as he touched the glass. Of course, this one had simulated water and fish in it.

The sofas where they had sat so many times — where he had slept when he had lost his vision and Lois had cared for him.

The counter where he had prepared her coffee countless times.

The refrigerator that held the chocolate treats she liked to eat so much. He was going to feed her chocolate ice cream in bed when he got back to her. *If* he got back...

If she would have anything to do with him.

The bed — the one they had attacked one another on in the virtual world. The one he had laid her down on a few weeks ago. They had been on a date — to a jazz club in the entertainment district. They had come back to her place; she had played more jazz on the stereo. They had danced, they had kissed, and Clark had laid her across her bed. His hands had moved over her body.

That's the first time he had ever touched her intimately. Of course, the touch had been through her clothes, but they had been well on their way to finally crossing the intimacy threshold when sirens all over the city went crazy. A massive fire had broken out at an apartment complex that night. They had both gone — he as Superman, she as the best half of Lane and Kent.

Clark lifted his hand and stared at the finger where his ring should be. He could still feel her fingers slipping it on.

He whirled when the door opened and groaned when Mindy stepped in.

"I won't beat around the bush," she said at once. "Lois has agreed to get my money. I should have it in hand by ten o'clock tomorrow. We'll board a plane to Switzerland as quickly as we can get to the airport. If you try anything tomorrow, I will send Foley to get Lois. And I will have the clone break her spirit right in front of you. Is that understood?"

"Mindy, I don't care what you do to me... as long as Lois is

safe.”

“Good,” Mindy said and walked up to him. She held his gaze while she reached down to grab him. “And as soon as we land, you *will* submit to me.”

Clark closed his eyes as revulsion washed through him. Maybe once they were out of the country it would be okay for him to fight her. She would kill him if he did, but that was preferable to sleeping with the woman.

It was preferable to watching another man rape his wife.

He opened his eyes and looked at Mindy, saying with his expression what he couldn't with his mouth. Mindy smiled, released him, and left the apartment. Clark sighed once she was gone. Would this hell ever be over?

Unable to sleep a second longer, Lois rolled over and dropped her feet to the floor.

“Couldn't sleep?”

She looked up to see Clark sitting on the window seat looking at her. “How long have you been there?”

“Just a bit. I went to the bathroom and couldn't stop myself from sitting here a moment.”

Lois sighed and stood to go over next to him. She sat and turned her head to look at him. “Clark...”

“Don't,” he interrupted her. “I know you love him. I accept that. I just can't help how I feel. You've literally been the center of my whole world since I've been alive. You can't expect me not to feel something. I am Clark's clone.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I don't want you to have any illusions.”

“I don't. But you have to understand that the part of me that *is* Clark, desperately adores you. I can't stop it.”

“I know.” She reached out to take his hand. “I do love you, that part of you. I can't love Clark and not love you.”

He lifted her hand to his face and closed his eyes. He sat that way for a moment before he kissed her skin and laid her hand back on his lap. “We'll find him,” he whispered.

She leaned her head over on his shoulder, grief and despair washing through her. Would this Clark live long enough? He was starting to fade already. His skin color had changed a bit, the lines on his face were drawn. Would he be in pain like the Superman clone?

God, she hated Mindy for doing this to him.

“Tell me something about him,” Clark said softly. “Tell me what you love so much about him.”

“He's... strong. He has this gentle grace. I love the way he loves me.”

“Why is it I understand that and nothing else?”

“It's part of you, part of him. Like your eye color or hair color. It just... is.”

“I hope he knows how lucky he is.”

“I'm the lucky one.” She tightened her fingers around his.

Clark moved his other hand over to trace paths on hers with his fingers. “I don't think he's had sex with her. I've thought that over. He would fight her, unless he knew you were truly in danger of dying.”

“Yeah,” was all she could say because she just didn't know.

“Would you, Lois? Would you do anything to save his life?”

“Anything,” she answered at once.

“I wouldn't. If Mindy said I had to hurt you like that, even if you had agreed to do it to save Clark, I wouldn't hurt you like that. She would have to kill me.”

Lois lifted her head to look at him, tears making paths down her cheeks. “I wouldn't want to hurt you like that either.”

He lifted his hand to cup her face. “How is it possible for a man to feel like he's going to die if he doesn't make a woman happy?”

“Clark,” she breathed and leaned forward. Her head landed

on the top of his chest and he leaned to drop a kiss on her hair.

“I love you,” he whispered.

She pushed her arms around his neck and cried into his shoulder. He pulled her close, her whole body shuddering. This was so hard — hurt so much. He wasn't Clark, but he was. And she was going to lose him. She was going to lose a part of Clark and that hurt so much.

She would call Jimmy first thing, get him to find another geneticist. Maybe there was some way they could help him, save him.

By nine the next morning a definite plan had been put in motion. Lois knew she was playing a dangerous game, but what else could she do? She had to get Clark back. And if she let Mindy keep the upper hand, she didn't think she would ever get him.

She paced back and forth outside the bank waiting on Mindy. When a black car pulled up to the curb, she stopped and waited. Foley climbed out and approached her.

“Where's Mindy?”

He looked to his left and pointed. Another car was sitting at the next corner. The back window lowered and Mindy stuck her head in view.

“She says to tell you as soon as she sees the bag with the money...”

“Bag?” Lois asked. “She expects me to get \$200 million in cash?”

“She wants \$10 million in cash and the rest will go to this account.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card.

Lois took it and turned to head into the bank. Nearly forty minutes later, she exited. Lois walked straight to Mindy's car, Foley protesting loudly behind her. She pounded on the window and waited for it to lower.

“Here's your damn money.” She stuffed the bag through the window.

Mindy looked down at it. “It's locked.”

“And I'll give you the combination as soon as Clark is safe.” She leaned to peer in the car. “Where is he?”

“Not here,” Mindy said, stating the obvious. “Is the rest in my account?”

“Check it,” Lois told her.

Mindy whipped out her cell phone, made a call, and listened for a second before snapping it closed. She motioned for Foley. He approached and leaned to listen to her.

“Take Kent to the drop.”

“Got it,” he said and turned to head back to the other car.

“I wish I could say it's been a pleasure,” Mindy told her.

“See you in the headlines,” Lois snapped and turned to head down the sidewalk.

A confused woman watched her a second before lifting her window and ordering the driver to leave.

Lois made it back to the Planet and waited. She'd had more help than just a little bit today. The account Mindy wanted ‘her’ money transferred to was a decoy. Checking it would tell her it was there. But that money was locked up tight in another account.

And there was nothing in that bag but blank receipts. Lois was banking on Clark's release before Mindy discovered that bit of information.

She paced across the conference room again. Clark had tried to get her to calm down a bit — just like he would do. Perry rocked back in forth in his chair and Jimmy was running around gathering information about Intergang related events of the last few weeks. Lois felt if she could gauge what Mindy had *been* doing, she might be able to figure out what she was *going* to do.

Her phone rang and she flipped it open, putting it on speaker. “Lois Lane.”

“You signed his death warrant. I won’t kill him yet. Your saving grace is the money in the account. But in a year or two, when I’ve completely broken his super spirit, I’ll take pity on him. And if I’m in a really good mood, I’ll send his body back to you... just to see you suffer.”

The line went dead and Lois dropped the phone before her legs gave out on her. Clark caught her before she could hit the floor, holding her while she sobbed.

“Get Henderson down here,” Perry told Jimmy, who had come to the door when Lois’ phone rang.

Clark held her until she was cried out. He released her when she pulled away and she headed in the direction of the ladies room without a word. Slowly he stood up, anger washing over him in waves. Mindy would pay for this. He would kill her himself. He hurried up the ramp and to the elevator.

Mindy was boarding the plane when Clark reached the airport. He had known about her private jet and which hangar she kept it at. He wasn’t sure why she had allowed him that bit of knowledge, but he had accomplished what he’d set out to do. He had found her.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded and hurried down the steps of the plane. She looked around. “You could have led her here.”

“I should have, but I didn’t want any witnesses.”

“For what?”

“For this,” Clark said and reached out to wrap his hand around her neck. “Let him go,” he demanded.

Mindy gasped, clutching at his hand. It took a minute, but she finally got her bearings enough to retrieve her stun device from her pocket. She stuck it to his side and he yelped and dropped to the ground. She took several breaths to get control of herself before kicking him in his other side.

“You idiot!” she spat. “You should have known better than trying to get the best of me.”

Clark looked up at her. “Let him go. You don’t need him.”

“No, but it’s so much more fun knowing I’m making her miserable.”

He struggled to his feet and glared at her. “Why would you want to keep him when he doesn’t want to be with you? He’ll never willingly give himself to you. He would die first.”

“How would you know?”

“Because I would! And he would die to save her.”

“Yeah, well, save her or not, you don’t have a choice.”

Clark closed his mouth and stared at her. “What?”

“Whether you save her or not, if he does or doesn’t, it won’t matter to you. You’re already dead.”

He took a half step back. “What?” he asked again.

“You’re a clone, a flawed clone. You have a life span of about two weeks. The way I see it, you can do whatever you want to and it won’t matter. You’ll die, I’ll have Clark, and Lois will be completely alone. How’s that for the ultimate irony?” She delivered her last words with an evil, satisfied grin, then turned to head back toward the plane.

Clark couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. Her words pierced through him and sank to the pit of his stomach with agonizing clarity. Was she telling the truth? Was he really dying?

He looked down at his hands. Was that why his skin was changing? He had noticed the subtle change in color.

Rage like he had never known shot through him. He should just kill her... right here... right now. If not for the six different goons with guns, he would probably be successful, too.

“She beat you,” Clark yelled at Mindy.

She was half way up the steps of the plane again. She stopped and faced him. “I have her precious husband and my money while the only thing she has is a dying lump of useless cells. I don’t think she beat me.”

“She beat you at your own game,” Clark said with a smile he didn’t feel. “You have nothing. You have a man who will never stop protecting the woman he loves and you have a worthless piece of paper. Yeah, she beat you.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets and turned to walk away.

“What?” Mindy shouted at him, but he didn’t look back.

“Answer me!” she demanded, but he disappeared between two hangars. “That ungrateful...” she fumed as she headed inside.

The real Clark was strapped to a seat near the front, but he had heard their conversation. He had watched the other man walk away and part of him cried out. The clone was part of him, and he was dying. Clark had known he probably would. The Superman clone Lex created had died — he had been in a lot of pain. Was this one?

One thing was for sure, the clone was definitely part of him. His first instinct was to protect Lois.

And so was his. Clark found himself wanting Mindy to get this plane in the air. If they were out of the country, Lois would be safe. He had looked himself over carefully. However Mindy was making him sick, she was doing it with that device. If that device was in Switzerland, it meant Lois was safe. Mindy could have somebody go after her, but the woman seemed to get a thrill out of knowing everyone else suffered. As Clark had watched out the window earlier, she had been happy when she told the other Clark he was dying — happy with his pain.

Clark laid his head back and took a deep breath. He wasn’t sure what he would do, how he would get out of this, but he had to. If he knew Lois, she had added the other Clark’s pain to her own. She would hurt because he was dying, because he was part of her husband and he was dying.

“Lois,” he breathed aloud. “Listen, baby... Hear me... Feel me.”

Lois had sat on a toilet in a stall in the ladies room for a long while, trying to comprehend how she felt, what she had done. She was so sure her plan would work. She should have known not to trust Mindy. The woman was playing by her own rules.

Her head snapped up when she heard Clark’s voice. She closed her eyes and listened. And she heard him with absolute clarity.

“I do, honey, I do.” She sat, lost in those feelings, allowing them to guide her.

And she rose when they seemed to pull her in a certain direction. She left the ladies room with new determination.

“Lois,” Perry called to her as she headed toward her desk.

“Not now, Perry,” she said and snatched up her bag and coat.

“Henderson’s put in the call to ground all planes, trains, and buses. Toll roads are going to be locked down and the city is going to be turned upside down. We’ll find him, honey.”

“Keep me posted,” she said as she made her way up the ramp. “There’s something I have to do.”

She stepped into the elevator and closed her eyes. It was still there, his essence, pulling at her, tugging her toward him.

Just as she stepped onto the sidewalk, her cell phone rang.

“Lois Lane.”

“Lois, honey, Jonathan and I made it back just a bit ago and we found Clark — the other one — sitting on the balcony in the snow. He’s just staring ahead. He won’t talk, won’t move. There’s something wrong with him.”

Dammit! Lois cursed silently. She didn’t have time for this.

Then again, if she could feel Clark, he might be able to do it, too. Maybe he could help her. She hailed a cab and headed toward the apartment.

Clark was sitting on one of the chairs on the balcony in nothing but a thin dress shirt. Knowing he must be freezing, Lois grabbed a blanket and went out. She draped half of the blanket around him and pulled the other half around herself as she sat

down beside him. She leaned into his side, grasping his cold hand.

“What’s wrong, Clark?”

He was silent for a long moment. “Clark... That’s not my name,” he said sadly.

“It is,” she said.

“Why? Because I’m part him?” He sighed and glanced down at his feet. “Look at Luthor’s holdings. You’ll find Clark.”

“You know where she took him?”

“No. All I know is overseas.” He stared back up at the snow. “When you get him back, don’t obsess over what you don’t know. Ask him, believe what he tells you, and move on.”

She wasn’t sure why he had said that, but when she got Clark back, she was going to hold him and she wasn’t sure she would let him go for a month or two.

Clark moved the edge of the cover aside and tugged the wedding band from his finger. He turned Lois’ palm over and laid the golden ring in it. “You’ll need this.”

“Thank you,” she said as she closed her hand around it.

She looked up at him and Clark reached out to cup her cheek. He stared at her for a second before he leaned forward to kiss her. He smiled at her, then stood up. Turning to kneel in front of her, he pulled the blanket tight around her.

“I’m glad I knew you, Lois Lane.”

Her eyes searched his for a long moment. “You know.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“The way you’ve treated me makes sense now,” he said sadly. “Clark...”

“It’s okay,” he told her with a smile. “For a man whose entire life spans just a few days, having you feel anything for me was very special.” He smiled at her again, then stood to walk away.

Lois watched as he stopped to gaze at Martha and Jonathan before continuing on to the door. She was finally jarred into action and jumped up to hurry inside.

“What was that about?” Jonathan asked her.

“He’s dying,” she told them.

“What?” Martha asked with wide eyes.

“The viability of his tissue is only a couple of weeks. He’s already starting to fade. His color’s changed and he’s started shaking a bit.”

“That poor boy,” Martha said as she looked toward the door.

“He’s not Clark, but he’s part of him and this hurts so much,” Lois told them. She looked down at the wedding band in her hand. “He’s not coming back.”

Jonathan and Martha wouldn’t say a word. They, too, felt a little bereft that the double would lose his life.

“I have to go,” Lois told them. “I have a hunch I’m working on.”

“Go. Do what you need to do,” Martha told her. “We’ll be here if you need us.”

“Keep the phone close,” Lois said as she grabbed up her bag. She tucked the wedding band into a safe spot and hurried through the door. Digging deep, she reached back inside and found that connection to her husband. Following the tug, she set out to bring him home.

Mindy was so angry she couldn’t speak. She slammed door after door, threw a few things across the room, and when her fury built to uncontrollable, she shot one of her people. Clark was left to stand with his hands cuffed together, staring at her. She was livid because the MPD had shut down the airport, grounding all flights — commercial and private. They had just barely gotten out of there before they were spotted.

They were back at the bunker under Lex Towers. Mindy had been shouting and ranting about not being able to leave the city, but now she was completely gone. It seemed Lois had taken a page from the bad guy’s playbook — she had double-crossed

Mindy at her own game. Clark couldn’t help but smile in pride.

“She’s going to give me that money,” Mindy said again. She whirled around and held up the little device in her hand that caused Clark so much pain. She pressed the button and he slumped in pain. “Teach him a lesson,” she ordered Foley.

The man grinned evilly before stepping in front of Clark. The first blow felt like a bat had hit him. The second felt like a knife piercing his side. Another, another, and another.

“Lois,” he breathed just before he passed out.

Lois stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. “No!” she cried aloud. She could hear him — the pain and despair. She could feel him — the unbearable pain.

What was wrong? He hadn’t been in physical pain before. He was now. He was dying!

She ran down the sidewalk, following her pull toward him. Why hadn’t she begged Clark to come with her? He would have if she had asked him to. She could really use him right now.

God, she was in agony over him.

And agony over her husband. She had to find him. If she didn’t soon, he was going to die. She could feel it.

Her phone rang and she flipped it open. “What?”

“Lois?”

“Jimmy,” she said and stopped to take a breath while she spoke. “What is it?”

“Henderson stormed a private jet at Langer Field. It belongs to Bill Church, Jr. Apparently Mindy was trying to get out of the country.”

“They have her?” she asked, though she was sure she knew the answer.

“No. They got away before the cops got there. Listen, CK, the other one... he came in here a bit ago, ran through something on the computer, then left again. He looked... lost.”

“Yeah, Jimmy, he is. What did he pull up on the computer?”

“I’m not sure. Hang on...” There was silence, then she could hear Jimmy tapping the keyboard. “Well, I’ll be darned.”

“What, Jimmy? I’m in a hurry here.”

“He pulled up the address for Lex Towers.”

“Lex Towers?” Why Lex Towers? “That’s it?”

“Yep. Just the address.”

“Okay... Thanks, Jimmy.”

“No problem. We’re still combing the city. We’ll find him.”

“I know. Got to go.” She snapped the phone closed and stood there staring in the direction of Lex Towers. Why there?

What Clark had told her on the balcony came back to her... “Look at Luthor’s holdings”.

“That’s it,” Lois said aloud and began running in the right direction. Luthor was dead. Yeah, part of his holdings had been divided and dealt out to various holdings, but the Tower — there was a secret bunker under the tower. If Luthor had been planning some kind of escape from prison, he would have needed a hideout. Being as the place had been sealed by police, no one would have thought to look there. It was the perfect place for Mindy to hide.

As she got closer, the pull toward Clark got stronger, further solidifying her theory might be correct. Once there, she wasn’t so sure how to get in. Luthor had taken her down an elevator from inside the one time she had been there. But surely there was another way in.

She jerked out her phone and called Jimmy, asking him to look up the original plans for the old bunker. It had once been a fall-out shelter and there were still records of it. She ducked inside a cafe on the opposite block so she would be out of sight and so she could watch the building. If someone came or went, she would see.

It was nearly twenty minutes later before Jimmy called back.

“Sorry, Lois. According to the plans, Lex built his elevator

shaft over the opening.”

“Nothing else?” she asked him.

“Nothing.”

“Look again. See if there are modified plans from later additions. Check some of Lex’s old stuff. He might have a plan somewhere.”

“Got it.”

She had just closed her phone when she noticed one of Mindy’s goons stop at the alley next to the Tower. He looked around, then ducked down the narrow opening. Lois tore out of the cafe, crossing the street as quickly as she could — and causing a few tires to squeal. She entered the alley just in time to see a dumpster at the back move. She headed that way and reached out to grab the large, green vessel. She put her weight against it and it slid slowly to the side. Under it, next to the building, was a slab of steel lying on the ground. What was odd was the slab had a handle.

She was about to grasp the handle when she heard Clark’s voice telling her to be careful. Taking out her phone, she dialed Jimmy.

“First time for everything,” she mumbled when she closed it a moment later. She told Jimmy where she was, what she was doing. He would send the cavalry.

It was heavy, but she managed to heave the steel to the side enough to reveal a set of stairs leading down. She dug around in her bag until she found her small flashlight, took a deep breath, and headed inside. The pull to Clark was so strong now, there was no way she could have waited for back-up. She was going in.

The passage barely had an incline, going nearly straight down for what she guessed was at least two stories. When she reached the bottom, she was in a small space, a single door in front of her. She pressed her ear to the slab and listened for any noise on the other side. When she heard nothing, she tugged it open. Bright, white light flooded through, blinding her in the dimness of the room she was in. She stepped inside, recognizing the elevator on the other end of the long hall. There was a hallway about half way down that went right and another went left. The one to the right led back to the replica of her apartment. She clearly remembered that much.

Closing her eyes, she reached out for Clark. He was there, in a lot of pain. She latched on to that pull and headed toward the hall on the left.

In the hall behind her, the cloned Clark stopped to look around him. He was lost, had gotten turned around and wasn’t even sure how to get out again. He looked in all directions, then set out once again.

Lois navigated the passages, allowing her connection with Clark to guide her. Just when she thought this was a dead end, she heard voices.

“I want you to go get that woman,” she heard Mindy say. “Bring her to me. I’ll make her watch me humiliate her husband, then she’ll tell me how to get that money.”

Lois heard feet moving and pushed a door open, praying no one was there. The room she entered was empty — a storage closet of some sort. She held her breath as the men hurried past her. Satisfied they were gone a moment later, she stepped back into the hall. Mindy was pacing back and forth in an expansive room at the end of the hallway. The space was decorated to resemble a living room, complete with simulated fireplace on the far wall. When Mindy turned around, Lois pressed herself up against the doorway of another room. The other woman was so worked up, there was no way she would notice her.

Lois hadn’t seen much — just Mindy. Where was Clark? Where was Foley? The rest of her goons? She could have dozens for all Lois knew. Though her research the last couple of days would suggest Mindy’s resources were growing thin. She might not have as many minions at her beck and call as she had once

had. Lois hadn’t seen anyone until the two men ran out. Mindy couldn’t have too many others around.

Digging around in her bag, she found her pepper spray. If she could get within ten feet, she would blind that witch.

She took a deep breath, her hand in her bag around her spray can, and stepped into the room. “Where is my husband?”

Mindy turned and for a second, surprise flashed on her face. Then she smiled — that evil smirk that made Lois’ teeth hurt.

“Lois, how good of you to join us. I just sent a couple of fellows out for you.”

“Where is Clark? I know he’s here.”

“He’s here, but he’s not doing so well.”

Mindy moved around to one side of the room and Lois took a step closer, whipping out a card. “Is this what you want?”

“If that is the number on a certain account where you’ve hidden my money, it is.”

“Go get Clark, and I’ll give you the card.”

Mindy stared at her for a long moment before she stuck her hand in her pocket to extract a two-way radio. “Bring Kent in here,” she said into the device. The whole time she kept her eyes on Lois. “It’s too bad. He and I could have made beautiful super babies together.”

“Clark would have never given you what you wanted.”

“No, but taking can be just as much fun.”

They both looked when they heard feet moving their way. Foley was dragging Clark along beside him. Clark’s head was drooping and it was all he could do to walk.

“Clark,” Lois breathed and moved toward him.

His head snapped up and he looked at her. “Lois,” he said and relief washed over him in a visible wave.

Lois moved to him, cupping his cheek to look in his eyes. “They hurt you,” she said through tears.

“I’m better now,” he told her softly, offering a slight smile. He reached out with his cuffed hands to grasp the material of her coat.

She stared at him for a moment before facing Mindy again.

“Take it.” She flipped the card at her; it landed on the floor.

“We’re leaving.” She grabbed Clark’s arm and started toward the door.

“Not so fast.”

Looking back, she couldn’t help but roll her eyes. Mindy had pulled out a gun. Why were villains always so predictable?

“I don’t think I want you to leave. I think I want you to stay here with me.” She eyed Clark pointedly. “That video is sounding better every second.”

Clark glared at her, but didn’t speak.

“Just shoot us,” Lois said sarcastically. “Otherwise, we’re leaving.” They turned again, but Clark yelled out in pain and fell to his knees, clutching at his head as best he could with his hands bound.

“Stop!” Lois yelled as she leaned over him. “You’re killing him!”

“Why isn’t she suffering, too?” Mindy snapped at Foley.

“She must have washed the medium off.”

Mindy pressed the button again, causing Clark to cry out louder. He fell over on his side on the floor, gasping in pain.

“Stop, dammit,” Lois cried through tears. When Clark kept suffering, Lois jumped up and ran toward Mindy.

The next few moments passed in a blur. Mindy leveled her gun and fired. A solid mass lunged in front of Lois. And Mindy was knocked off her feet. She dropped the device she held and Clark uncoiled from the intense pain. He rolled over to look for Lois. Foley was standing in front of her, gun aimed and ready to fire.

“No!” Clark yelled and, calling up every ounce of energy he had left, jumped up to run that way. Two shots rang out, Lois was dragged to the ground, then a barrage of bullets filled the air.

It was over in seconds. Lois scrambled to her knees and looked around. “Clark!” He was lying beside the clone. She crawled over between them, trying to gage if either was hurt. Clark was lying face down, his head turned away from her.

The clone reached out to grasp her arm, dragging her eyes to his. They were full of pain, but he smiled. “I guess I’m proof Clark Kent would die for Lois Lane.”

She glanced down and noticed the blood pouring from his chest. “Oh, God,” she breathed.

“Take care of him, Lois. He needs you more than you think.” His grip on her arm loosened and his eyes closed as the last breath left his body.

Lois gasped, touched his face briefly, then moved over to check on Clark. His eyes were open, staring unseeingly straight ahead.

“Lois?”

She glanced up to see Henderson. Then she noticed a flood of officers had filled the room.

“Move back and let the medics work,” Henderson told her, gripping her arms to ease her away from Clark.

She watched as they carefully rolled him. That’s when she noticed the blood oozing from the tiny hole above his left eye. She gasped in horror when she saw the blood stain on his shirt. He had been shot!

She heard somebody say they were losing him, looked on in horror as his shirt was ripped open. A tube was forced down his throat, his body jerked as they shocked him.

Her own body began to shake. Someone shouted and the whole building rumbled.

“There’s been an explosion. We have to get out of here,” came somebody’s cry.

Clark was snatched up, she was tugged to her feet, and everyone hurried to the narrow exit passage. The building shook again, then another rumble. They had all just reached the sidewalk when they heard a loud explosion. Buildings on the whole block shook.

But she was oblivious. Her eyes were glued to the young man who had climbed on top of Clark on the gurney, giving him CPR on the way to the ambulance. He was loaded inside, shocked again. The last thing she remembered before her world went black was someone yelling ‘we’ve lost him’.

Lois came back to herself right before the ambulance reached the hospital. They had managed to get Clark’s heart started, but he was in critical condition. The vehicle had barely stopped when the back doors flew open and Clark was rushed inside. She stepped off to the side of the entrance and called Clark’s parents. All she told them was that she was at the hospital with Clark. Next, she called Perry. Clark might be vulnerable right now, but he was still very different from humans.

Maybe not so different as he was... more. She had to protect him.

Perry hurried into the hospital a few moments later, having already been on the way to Lex Towers. The hospital was only a few blocks away.

“Lois!” he called as he reached her.

“Perry,” she said and waved a hand toward the trauma unit. “He was shot. His heart stopped and...”

“He’s strong,” Perry assured her as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder to lead her into the waiting room.

They sat on the edge of the bench chair next to the door. Lois was much too nervous to sit still and in less than a second, she was trying to stand up again.

Perry tugged her back down. “Have you called Dr. Klein?”

She turned to look at him, a stunned expression on her face. “Dr. Klein?”

“Bernie Klein,” Perry said with a straight face. “Clark will

need him.”

Lois just stared at her boss for a long moment before she spoke. “You know?”

“I didn’t become editor of the Planet because I can yodel, honey,” he pointed out.

She shouldn’t be surprised. Of course Perry knew. He knew everything... unofficially.

“The most important thing right now is getting Clark well. Everything else will have to wait,” her boss let her know.

She just nodded. He was right. The only thing that mattered right now was Clark surviving.

The Kents made it to the hospital a little while later and together, they all paced the waiting area.

Martha sighed and went back to staring out the window.

Jonathan made the turn on the other side of the room and passed Lois on his trek back.

“How’s he doing?”

They all turned when Perry came back in. He had been to make a few calls.

“We haven’t heard anything,” Lois told him.

“Lois, honey, I called Bernie Klein. He and I talked and he assured me he would take care of Clark. He’s in there now.”

“You told him?” she asked him with wide eyes.

“I don’t think we had a choice,” he said, rubbing her arms.

Lois glanced at Clark’s folks. “Perry knows.” When Martha’s brow arched in question, Lois nodded. Understanding fled across the woman’s face, but she didn’t say anything. She was just too worried. Jonathan moved over to wrap an arm around her shoulder and pulled her to his side. None of them could believe Clark had been shot... twice... once in the head.

They continued their pacing, their waiting. It was nearly an hour later before Dr. Klein opened the door. Lois felt her heart sink when she saw the expression on Bernie’s face.

“He’s alive,” the doctor was quick to relieve them.

“But?” Lois questioned him.

“The bullet to his head caused damage to his frontal lobe.”

“Meaning?” Jonathan spoke up.

“There was some damage to the area that controls behavior and restraint. We won’t know the extent until he wakes up.”

“And the other one?” Lois asked him.

Bernie let out a deep breath. “That’s the one that did the damage. The bullet hit his subclavian vein, which caused excessive bleeding. The bleeding led to cardiac arrest.”

“He had a heart attack?” Martha screeched.

“The attack caused anoxia, or lack of oxygen to his brain.”

“Meaning?” Perry said.

“There will be damage.”

“Brain damage?” Lois whispered.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “We don’t know how much yet. We should know in a couple of days.” He reached out to grasp Lois’ shoulder. “I’m not sure what form of Kryptonite she used, but he is completely vulnerable. Even as he recovers from the exposure, this damage will remain.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “He’ll recover from the Kryptonite exposure and he’ll get better. You’ll see.”

“Lois,” he sighed. “I ran the blood tests countless times. Mindy used a synthetic form of Kryptonite. It’s affected him differently than the normal stuff. Right now, he’s unable to recover as he normally would.”

She just stared at the doctor, unable to believe what she had heard. Her husband, her beautiful husband had been reduced to this. And they didn’t even know yet what *this* was.

“He won’t ever recover?” she asked him

“For a normal man, I hope so. For a superman...” He shrugged. “Only time will tell.”

Dr. Klein talked with them for a bit longer, but Lois barely heard him. She was so numb. Could she have gotten him back

only to lose him again?

Her phone rang. She wanted to just let it ring, but it might be Henderson.

“Hello?” she said in a low, toneless voice.

“Lois? Honey, are you all right?”

Mother! She was the last person Lois wanted to talk to.

“No, Mother.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s... something regarding Clark.”

Part 4 — Regarding Clark: Unforgettable

A young man stopped next to a building deep in the middle of Suicide Slum. He had just completed the hardest mission of his life. It had been the longest three days as well. But maybe the dame was satisfied... for the moment.

He entered the building at the end of the block and hurried up to the second floor. He entered the nasty little hole in the wall and set his bag down. “I brought burgers.”

“Is everything set?”

He turned to face the woman staring out the window. “It wasn’t easy. Hell, I didn’t think we would make it out of there. Every cop in Metropolis must have been there. Just who is that guy?”

“Have you been in a hole?”

The man smiled. “As a matter-of-fact...” He might as well have been. He had just come back from a South American hell hole when he was called to do another job. This chick was high maintenance.

“Did you find the doctor?”

“Not yet, but I will.”

“The records I told you to get?”

“Freed up by four.”

“And the bank account?”

“Not one. The number on the card was actually a phone number, without the hyphens. And get this... it goes back to one of your numbers that has been disconnected. Lady’s smart as hell. I’ll give her that.”

“Not smart enough to get one over on me. She’s been trying that for years.”

“Yeah, well, this time it might have worked. Your picture is plastered all over the city. They say the Kent guy’s in pretty bad shape.”

“Good,” she remarked before turning and dropping in a chair. She lifted a cigar, lit it, and drew deeply, making a face when she did. Kent deserved everything he got. So did his *wife*. They had put this jagged scar down the side of her face. And for that, they would pay.

Lois turned the page of her book, reading softly as she did. ‘Chicken Soup for the Journalist’s Soul’ - Clark liked the Chicken Soup books. They were his style. She had already read two to him already.

She looked up at him and smiled. He hadn’t woken up yet. It had been three days and so far nothing but the steady hum of the machines. She had come to like the sound of those machines. As long as they buzzed along, it meant Clark was alive.

He had improved, but the low activity in his brain had caused Bernie great concern. He had told Lois and the Kents to brace for the worst when he woke up... *if* he woke up.

He would wake up. He had to. She couldn’t lose him like this.

She finished the story she was reading and closed the book. It was time to give Clark his bath. She rose and prepared the pan of water, grabbed a cloth, and went back to his side. She forced herself to think about happier times as she lovingly wiped his face. When she pulled the cloth down from over his eyes, she gasped. He was staring... not at her, but at something.

“Hey there,” she said softly and reached out to cup his face, turning his head more toward her. His eyes were still fixed, glassed over. “Clark?” Nothing. She felt tears prick her eyes. He blinked, giving her just a bit of hope. She leaned forward so that she was in his line of vision. He still didn’t really see her. “Honey?” His reply was a glob of drool that oozed from his mouth. Lois choked back a sob, wiped his mouth, then went in search of Dr. Klein. For a second she was ashamed of herself. She’d had the fleeting thought that maybe he would have been better off if...

And it wasn’t the first time either. God, help her, in those first few hours, when things were so tense... His heart had stopped again. The oxygen saturation in his blood was off. His blood pressure, kidney function, fluid retention... for a while his body seemed to be shutting down. And for the briefest moment, she had wondered if maybe it would have been better if he wasn’t suffering at all. If he had just drifted peacefully from this life the way the other Clark had.

No! She wouldn’t think that. Clark was alive and Clark alive was better than Clark dead any day. And she could still feel their incredible connection. It was faint, like a whisper, but it was there. And as long as it was, Clark was still there.

He was going to be all right. He was going to recover — somehow, some way.

Dr. Klein was in with Clark for nearly an hour. Lois stood outside the door, unable to be in there and see the true extent of his condition. She would break down. She had done that so much lately.

Her head snapped around when Bernie stepped into the hall. His expression told her all she needed to know. It wasn’t good.

“There is significant brain damage.”

Lois’ eyes filled with tears and she glanced through the window at the man lying on the bed.

“However, there is a fair amount of electrical activity in the areas where it needs to be. With the right therapy, he could regain a very fulfilling life.”

“I hate when doctors say that,” she told him, wiping her cheek. “Just give it to me straight.”

Bernie sighed. “Okay. Clark will have to start over. He can’t speak, can’t walk, can’t even move right now. Essentially, he’s a baby. Since the right pistons are firing, he can be taught... to move, walk, talk...”

Lois gazed through the door at her husband. “But?”

“But... he will likely sustain a fair amount of damage. He’ll probably have anger issues, become easily frustrated when he can’t do something. He might yell or cry. He might even display more... outrageous behavior — urinating in public, banging his head against the wall, sticking things in his mouth that he shouldn’t. In short, he might behave like an unruly child.”

“Will he be... a danger to others?” Lois asked him.

“He could be. You’ll have to watch him closely until we gauge his new personality.”

“His personality hasn’t changed, Bernie.”

“He has,” the man told her. “Lois, he doesn’t remember anything. That’s not right. He’s a blank slate. It’s as if he truly is a baby, born today with an empty mind. He knows nothing, knows no one.”

Lois watched Clark for a long moment before she said, “How does he come back from this?”

“He might not.”

Her head snapped around and she pierced Bernie with her glare. “He *will* come back,” she insisted.

Bernie had the grace not to argue. “He’ll need intense therapy, both physical and mental. I’ll make some calls, find the best facility in the country.”

“Facility? He has to be hospitalized?”

“For a while, yes. It would be better.”

“Why can’t I take care of him?” she wanted to know.

“Lois, Clark is... a baby. He can’t move, can’t tell you how he feels, what he needs. He can’t go to the bathroom. For a while he’ll need a catheter, to be bagged, and he’ll have a feeding tube. His heart will still need to be monitored, as well as his other organs to make sure he’s back up and running in that aspect. But the medical conditions aside, you would have to clean him, feed him, clothe him. Let’s find a place for him that will get him up and moving. Then if you want to take him home...”

Her eyes filled with more tears, but she finally nodded.

Bernie was right. There was no way she could attend to Clark alone. She could hire help.

With what? she asked herself. Their insurance might cover a bit of this...

What was she saying? Clark didn’t have insurance. He didn’t need it.

How would she cover this? And a top notch facility would probably cost a small fortune.

She thanked Bernie and went back in to finish Clark’s bath. He was staring toward the window, more drool making a track down his face. She wiped it away and leaned over to press a kiss to his cheek, choking back a sob as she held against him a beat. Her hand moved up to smooth his hair off his forehead while she looked at him.

“You listen to me,” she began. “You have to fight. You have to fight now harder than you ever have. You dig down and find your love for me and you hold on. I will pull you back if you hang on. We can do this. We can come back from this.” She kissed him again and leaned up to continue his bath. She talked to him softly as she washed him. He just lay there.

Somehow, some way, she thought as she smoothed soap between his fingers. Whatever it took, she would get him what he needed.

She stopped abruptly and stared at his hand for a long moment. It was his left hand — the one his wedding band went on. That reminded her of another wedding — another man.

“I have money,” she whispered. “I have a *lot* of money.”

She had planned to turn that money over to the police, but if she needed it to help Clark...

Could she do that? Could she use that blood money?

And just whose blood had spilled? Her husband’s... And the clone — he had paid with his life.

God, she ached for that Clark. They would have to honor his brief life in some way.

But for now, she needed to make sure her husband received the best care in the world.

“Oh, Clark,” she said as she rinsed his hand. “We’ll come back from this.” She lifted his hand and held it to her cheek, crying softly. They *had* to come back from this.

Just as Lois did with most things, she dove into Clark’s care with a fire just short of an inferno. She researched his condition, possible treatments, and the doctors and facilities best able to handle his care. She learned that the Metropolis Neuroscience Center was one of the best in the country. Dr. Michelle Deter had been heralded for her work with brain damaged patients. She was praised for her recovery rate. Lois discussed Clark going to the Center with his folks, with Bernie. Dr. Klein agreed that Deter and MNC was a terrific place. There was another facility deemed a bit better, but it was in California. To send Clark there meant they would be separated or she would be forced to go with him. While she would absolutely drop everything and go with him, there wouldn’t be much for her to do during the long days of his therapy. Bernie had told them not to expect significant progress for at least six months. If she kept him in Metropolis, she would be able to work- keep her mind busy. And he would be close to Dr. Klein.

The two weeks of their honeymoon was easy to cover as far as Superman was concerned. Lois managed to piece together a feasible excuse for his absence for the time being. With Perry’s connections, the announcement was given a bit of validity. It was believed Superman was helping with an international drug investigation. He had gone undercover to help ferret out some major players in the world. The story was even more believable because of the deaths of several known cartel members in several cities in Mexico and South America. A week into the tale Perry informed her things had gotten relatively quiet, with the assumption most of the criminals were looking at every man who passed wondering if he might be Superman. It was rather comical if you thought about it.

Lois spent a great deal of time talking to Perry about the money Luthor had stowed away in her name. She spoke with Clark’s folks, who asked all the right questions. She even mentioned it to Henderson, who told her that it wouldn’t benefit a thing if the existence of the money became known. Being as the money was legally hers, there was nothing the law could do to make her give it up. So, in the end, the need to care for Clark won out over whatever reservations she had held onto, and she tapped the stash to pay the astronomical price to have him cared for at MNC. When he recovered, he would be upset she had used it. But that was a bridge she was willing to cross when they got to it.

Clark wasn’t released from the hospital to the Center for two weeks. In that time, Lois was with him as much as she could be. She had learned how to feed him through the tube and clean it. She had even learned about his colostomy bag and his catheter and how to care for Clark where those things were concerned. Those things weren’t very pleasant, but she had vowed to care for him, and she would.

She would bathe him, she would help change him, and she would talk to him. His hair was lovingly brushed, his face carefully shaved, his nails clipped. She would read to him, bounce ideas off him, and hold his hand. She would sit for hours holding his hand against her face. She would tell him they wouldn’t put their wedding bands back on until they could say their vows to one another again... no matter how long it took. There were days when she thought that day would never come. But the day he was transported to the Center, as she held his hand to her face, his fingers tightened around hers. She had been so happy. His eyes were still unfocused, but she saw it as a sign. One she would cling to.

“I chose the Center because it’s the number two facility in the country,” Lois told Dr. Deter as she walked with the woman. Clark had been installed in his private room the day before. She had chosen a private room because it would allow her to stay with him from time to time. His room was more like a suite, complete with sitting area, dining area, private bath, and queen sized bed. One of the philosophies at the Center was that most patients should have constant familiarity. Recoveries were almost always less extensive where there was tremendous outside support to accompany the therapy.

“We will take good care of him,” the woman assured her. “He will have physical therapy as well as mental exercises daily. We’ll start with three sessions of each. As he progresses, we’ll cut it to two. But even when he is ready to leave the Center, he’ll probably need therapy daily for quite a while.”

“Whatever he needs,” Lois told her.

The doctor smiled at her. “I do have to caution you... memory is a temperate thing. It’s imperative that, should he reach the point of understanding...”

“*When*,” Lois interrupted her. “*When* he reaches the point of understanding. My husband *will* recover.”

The doctor made a face. “Ms. Lane...”

“Kent. In my husband’s world, I am Mrs. Kent,” she told her

quickly.

“Mrs. Kent... I’ve read his file, studied his treatment up to this point. I’m not sure why Dr. Klein was treating him, but Clark is in serious condition. There has been no progress, no recognition since he woke up two weeks ago.”

“You’re a doctor, so you wouldn’t notice things that I would. I’ve seen the subtle changes. I *feel* the difference. And Dr. Klein is a trusted family friend. He will serve as advisor throughout my husband’s time here.”

“I have to voice my objections,” Deter cut in.

“So noted, but he will remain his advisor,” Lois told her adamantly. “You work your magic and Clark will work his.” She left Dr. Deter staring after her. She had let a woman hurt her husband once. Another one wouldn’t get the chance.

“This is serious, White,” thundered Franklin Stern, owner of the Planet.

“You don’t have to tell me, Mr. Stern. I have half the newsroom on this.”

“I want Lane.”

“Ah, well, she’s got so much on her mind right now.”

“As I know. Kent’s loss has hit us all hard. But Lane is the best. I want the best on this. It’s crucial we get to the bottom of this immediately, before it causes too much damage. We’ve lost enough money as it is.” He turned to leave and was stopped when Lois stepped through the door.

“Mr. Stern,” she said in greeting.

“Lois,” he said, instantly shedding his hard veneer. “How are you?”

“I’m... here,” she answered, a sad smile on her face.

“And Clark?”

“He starts intensive treatment tomorrow.”

“Good. You keep us up to date.” He reached out to grasp her upper arm. “You hang in there. Clark’s a tough one.”

“Thank you,” she answered softly, trying desperately not to cry. Stern left and she faced Perry.

“No change?” he asked her.

She shook her head dejectedly.

“Are you up for a little work?”

“Yeah. I think I need it. The slow stuff you had me on isn’t working anymore.”

Perry gave her a sad expression before turning to lift a file from his desk. “A second delivery truck burnt up this morning.”

“Another one?” Lois asked as she took the file. Two of the Planet’s delivery trucks had burnt up following a mini explosion of some kind. Both shipments of papers had been lost, cutting deeply into delivery and production schedules. That translated into deep cuts in profits. She read a few minutes before looking back up at Perry. “I’ll head down to the forensics lab and see what I can find out.”

“Talk to Eduardo. He was on the scene this morning.”

“On it, Chief.” Lois left to go to work. She hadn’t really done that since the wedding. And right now, she needed it.

Bernie Klein flipped through Clark’s file. “I don’t like this,” he told Dr. Deter.

“He’s my patient.”

The man lifted his head to look at her. “I’ll be first to tell you brain injuries are not my specialty. But I also know what the electrical analysis says. Clark has functional activity. If you keep feeding him these drugs, he might not for long.” He opened the file and began to write. “I’m stopping these meds and putting him on a low dose regimen of neuro enhancers. I’m going to prescribe a personal PT assistant. He needs activity if there’s any hope he’ll ever get up.”

“With all due respect, Dr. Klein, you cannot change his medication.”

Bernie looked at her again. “Yes, I can. Lois had the paperwork changed so that I am Clark’s primary physician. You’re here as his psychological specialist.”

“I cannot treat him like this,” the young woman complained.

“I would suggest you take it up with Mrs. Kent, but I don’t think that would do much good. She is probably as versed in his condition and the care he needs as we are. If I hadn’t read his file today and made changes, she would have done it.”

“She is not authorized to read his file.”

“On the contrary... she is his wife, his medical power of attorney, and legal care provider. Just as he can read his own medical chart, she can, too. And believe me, she will.” Bernie closed Clark’s file. “I’ll do a recheck in a week. I expect to see something.” He laid his file down on the counter. “Get him up out of that bed.”

He turned and walked away, leaving the doctor seething in anger. How dare that man come in here and take over her patient?!

Lois looked over the charred remains of the delivery truck that had burnt up that morning. Like the first one, there was some kind of explosion under the hood, then it was burning out of control. No warning, no nothing. It was rolling along one second, in a pile of charred metal the next. The two trucks were similar in that they both burnt the same way. Other than that, nothing. With nothing to go on, she headed back to the Planet to speak with Eduardo. Nothing unusual really jumped out at him at the scene either. He had also covered the first fire the week before. It was the same.

The forensics guy at the lab called her. He had found a lump he believed was the device that started the fire. Once he analyzed it, he would let her know what he had found. She thanked him and did a bit of background work on the cost of those fires to the Planet.

When she had gotten as far as she could, she decided to call it a day. She phoned the Kents for their daily update on Clark. She would have given anything for them to stay with her. She had even offered to give them enough money to do so- it wasn’t like she didn’t have it now. But they had needed time. Time to come to grips with this situation. Time together, to build the strength they would need to get through this. And time to take care of the farm.

She grabbed a sandwich and headed to the Center.

Clark was still lying on the bed, still staring up at the ceiling. An occasional blink was the only indication he was alive.

“Hey,” she told him and kicked off her shoes. She had purposely chosen a suite with a queen sized bed so that it was large enough for her to crawl up beside him. She did and plumped the pillows next to him so she could eat her dinner. She had glanced at the chart on the wall that indicated he had already been fed through his tube for the evening. He would continue to be fed that way for now. At least until he learned to eat again.

“So... there was another truck fire.” She chewed a second. “Destroyed another shipment.” She chewed more. “So far we have nothing.” She finished her sandwich, then turned to sit cross legged beside him. “Your folks said to tell you hey and they love you.” She reached out to rub his arm. She massaged him as much as she could, to keep his system stimulated. “Jimmy said ‘hurry up and get well, CK,’” she told him in an imitation of Jimmy’s voice. “Are you ready to get up? I’m ready for you to.” She moved her hand up his arm, over his shoulder to his cheek. She gasped when he turned his head toward her.

“Oh...” she said through tears. His eyes moved... so that he was staring at her. “Oh...” She repeated and leaned closer. “Hi.” He blinked and she wiped her face. Her hand had moved down to grasp his and his fingers tightened on hers ever so slightly. “What, baby? What do you want?” He squeezed again. “Do you

want to touch my face?” She moved his hand up to rest against her cheek the way she did every day. He blinked again and seemed to sigh. Lois had to close her eyes, a relieved warmth she had never known washing through her. It wasn’t much, but it was everything to her. He had wanted to touch her; he was satisfied when he had.

She held his hand against her face and he continued to stare at her. She could feel that whisper of a connection flare slightly, giving her more hope than she’d had since he was hurt. After a while, his fingers squeezed, then his eyes slid shut. He had fallen asleep. She choked back a sob and moved to lay her head on his shoulder, his hand tucked between both of hers. She fell asleep for the first time since he was hurt with something other than fear on her mind.

Dr. Michelle Deter was one of the leading neurology physicians in the country. It was ironic that Mr. Kent’s wife had put him in the Center. Dr. Deter was supposed to help him, but she just didn’t think there was much hope. That fact made it easier to do what she was going to do. He hadn’t shown a bit of improvement, in part because of her. She read over his chart again and turned to head toward his room. Lois stepped out just before she reached the door.

“Mrs. Kent, what are you doing here so early?”

“I stayed with him last night,” Lois told her, lifting her head and tucking her hair behind her ear.

“I really have to object to you doing that,” the physician told her.

“Object all you want. As long as I’m paying for the privilege, I will stay when I want to.”

The doctor let out a frustrated breath. “I wanted to discuss something else with you as well. Dr. Klein has changed his medication, ordered intensive physical therapy...”

“He called to tell me. I read over his file last night and I agree.”

Deter’s brows rose. “Are you a specialist in this area?”

“I’m a specialist in the area of my husband,” Lois said sternly. “Dr. Deter, last night Clark turned his head and looked at me. At *me*. He squeezed my hand because he wanted me to touch his hand to my face. I do that... sometimes for hours at the time — just hold his hand against my face. It’s worked. He’s responded to what *I’ve* done. Not your medicine.”

“Then maybe you should take him home and care for him yourself,” the other woman told her, rather coldly.

“Maybe I should. And if I don’t see more improvement very quickly, I will. I’m paying good money for you to conduct the mind exercises you’re known for. I would suggest you get started.” She pushed around the woman, leaving the young doctor seething in anger.

Just who did Lois Lane think she was? Deter asked herself. She was no doctor. She didn’t have any idea what was best for her unresponsive husband.

She pushed the door open to Clark’s room. The nurses were in with him, getting him cleaned up and changed. He had his head turned, staring out the window. What was so special about this man for everyone to make such a big deal over him? She had no idea, but as long as the checks kept coming, she didn’t really care.

The dingy apartment in Suicide Slum hadn’t improved very much since she had come here. It wasn’t the mansion she was used to, that was for sure. She looked up when the door opened and her assistant stepped in.

Reggie... his name was Reggie and he was better than Foley and Marlow put together. Why couldn’t she have found him before she had set her last plan into motion?

“Is it done?”

“It will be.” Reggie emptied the grocery bag. “He understands what he’s supposed to do.”

“Good.” She smiled and reached for the remote for the television. It was time for the soaps.

“I honestly don’t see why you’re going to all of this trouble for those two. She writes a few articles — so what? And he’s a blubbing idiot now, from what I’m told. How can they possibly hurt you any longer?”

“It’s not about them hurting me. It’s about delivering a message... and \$200 million dollars.”

“From what I hear, she’s burning through some of that money.”

“That prude would consider it immoral to spend that money, even if it is legally hers.”

“I don’t know, Mindy. That place Kent’s at costs a small fortune. And they don’t have an outstanding balance.” Reggie took a snack cake from a box and went to flop on the couch.

Mindy stared at him for a second. Was he right? Was Lois really spending the money Luthor had squandered away in her name? To think she might be kind of made Mindy proud for a second. It would mean Lois Lane had a pair.

Of course, it would also mean Lois might be more of a problem than she had first anticipated. Mindy needed to form some kind of plan to get her hands on that money soon. She would inflict her pain and get the hell out of Dodge. While being the head of the largest criminal organization on the east coast had been a blast, she would be more than content to live out her days under an umbrella on a pristine beach somewhere.

Maybe she would have the good doctor up Kent’s medication, kill off what few brain cells still worked.

She couldn’t help but smile. Now *that* would be sweet irony.

“I don’t know about you, but I happen to think that Peggy, down in C-wing, is one fine looking woman.” The PT assistant Dr. Klein handpicked for Clark was a large, black man with a fascination for women. He talked about them constantly.

He had started Clark’s therapy, mostly moving his limbs, the day after Dr. Klein disagreed with Dr. Deter. Since then, the two doctors had squared off several times. Lois had been brought before an administrative panel to discuss her husband’s care. She had told them that while she had entrusted her husband’s fragile mental state to Dr. Deter, she agreed with Klein that his body needed to be pushed. She had also told them that Klein would remain her primary physician, essentially reducing Deter to an assisting position. She hadn’t wanted to upset Deter, but Clark needed more than a constant barrage of medication and bed sores. The panel had agreed and left Clark’s primary care in the capable hands of Dr. Klein... and his wife.

George, the PT guy, leaned over on Clark’s foot, pushing down. “Let’s really stretch it today, CK.” He had met Jimmy and liked what he called Clark. He had even asked if it was okay if he used the name. He bore down a bit more, bending Clark’s leg close to his chest. Doing so caused Clark’s face to bunch under the pressure.

“Well I’ll be damned,” George said with a grin. “I knew you were in there somewhere,” he told him as he eased off the leg. “One more time.” He leaned back in. This time Clark’s face bunched and he grunted audibly. “That’s what I like to hear.” Clark’s eyes actually seemed to focus on the other man and he looked relieved when the pressure was off his leg.

George climbed from the low PT table and clapped his hands. “Your wife and Dr. K wants you out in the sun a little while every day, so...” He leaned to lift Clark’s shoulders, sitting him upright. He reached back for Clark’s wheelchair and when he did, his hand slipped off Clark’s shoulder. He was about to lunge for him, fully expecting him to fall, but stopped. Clark was sitting up — by himself.

George pulled a camera out of his pocket and snapped a picture before kneeling in front of Clark. Clark's body was slumped over and he was staring at the floor. But he was still sitting, breathing heavily as if it was an effort to stay that way.

"I've been doing this all wrong," George told him. "I've been coddling you. That's not what you want, is it?" He reached down and grasped Clark's hands. "Hold on." He pulled back a bit, causing Clark's hands to snap back into his body. "Come on now. You can do better than that." He tried again. This time Clark squeezed his hands and held on a bit longer. "Nice, CK!" He stood and grasped his shoulders. "Let's get you outside."

He heaved Clark over into his chair and strapped his legs to the rests. Clark's muscles would relax or contract and his feet would slip off. George positioned his hands on the arms and made sure he was sitting as straight as he could. "Let's hit it. I hear Debra has court duty today. Now that's a fine woman right there."

He pushed Clark down the corridor and out into the courtyard. As soon as the sun hit Clark's face, he tilted his head back. "That's it, CK, soak it up. And when you get tired of the sunshine, take a look to the south." George looked that way and grinned. "Umm mmm... Claire — one more fine woman right there."

They walked around the court slowly, stopping here and there for George to introduce Clark to other patients — some just as unresponsive as Clark. But George felt no matter how far a man got from his mind, he was still in there somewhere. The more stimulation he got, the faster the recovery.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Reporter Man, you are going to be chasing down leads again before you know it." He glanced toward another woman. "And helping me appreciate all these gorgeous woman. Fine, fine, fine," he said with a chuckle. "Let me tell you about this one time..."

Dr. Klein had chosen well. George was one of a kind. He would not only stimulate Clark's body, he would probably do more to stimulate his mind than even Dr. Deter could dream of doing.

Lois looked around what was left of a burnt out newsstand. The stand, belonging to Mr. Froy on Sixth and Turner, had been torched that afternoon. Witnesses said a young man in a dark hoodie, eyes behind black glasses, got out of a van in front of the stand, whipped out a small flamethrower, and set it ablaze. He crawled back in the van and left.

They had found the van two blocks down. It, too, had been torched. Lois was here to see if this incident might somehow be related to the truck fires. If it wasn't, that in itself was one heck of a coincidence. This made three hits to Planet sources in three weeks. One couldn't help but wonder what in the world was going on.

She drilled everybody she could with the usual questions, then headed back to the Planet. She followed up on her research, which wasn't much. The forensics guy had called back to let her know that the device used to torch the last truck was a tiny bomb. He couldn't deduce much because of the damage, but he said it had been very complicated in design. He sent over a copy of what he did have and Lois called Jimmy over to make a few inquiries to see if he could locate a possible source for such a thing.

Stern visited Perry in the newsroom, once again bemoaning the fires. The door was closed, but even Lois could tell how serious the conversation was. When Stern left, Perry called her into his office.

"Any progress on the fires?" he wanted to know at once.

"The device used to torch the last truck was a small bomb. Forensics couldn't tell much, but somebody had to make that thing. That's our lead. Jimmy's working on it now."

"Good, good." Perry looked up from his desk. "Stern is fit to

be tied. He wants results yesterday. I keep telling him we can't find what isn't there." He sighed and walked around to lean against his desk.

"Now, tell me about Clark."

"Results are as slow as this story," she said with a sigh. She had sat down and she leaned forward to place her arms on her knees. "Some days I think he's making leaps and others I'm wiping the drool from his face." She lifted tear filled eyes to him. "How does such a strong man get reduced to this?"

"Lois, I'm not an overly religious person, unless it's something about the King..." He smiled when she gave him a bit of a quirk. "I do know things seem to happen for a reason. And whatever the reason on this one, Clark, and you, have to go through this. I can't help but believe you'll come out the other side much, much stronger than you've ever been. Just hang in there, honey."

"That's all I can do, Perry." She sighed, wiped her face, and stood up. "I'm gonna make a few calls — see if anybody knows what's going on."

"That's my girl." Perry smiled at her as she left his office. He saw her lose a little more faith every day. Hopefully Clark would start to improve soon. He wasn't sure she could keep up this pace much longer.

Lois entered the Center later that evening extremely exhausted. She couldn't ever remember being as tired in her life. She had almost stayed home tonight, but on the way toward the apartment, she had felt a familiar pull. She felt it often. Even though Clark did nothing but lay there, something within him still called to her. It had been a whisper at first, but had fanned into a small flame. Tonight was the strongest pull she had felt since the shooting. There was no way she could ignore it.

She pushed the door open to his room and almost dropped her bag. Clark was sitting up in bed against the pillows. When she gasped, he turned his head toward her. He didn't do anything but stare at her, though that was more than enough. She closed the door and crawled on the bed to look at him. His eyes had followed her the entire time.

"Hi, Sweetie," she said through tears, reaching out to touch his face. "Look at you." He looked so good, so strong. He'd had a shower, they had shaved him, and cut his hair. While she was a bit perturbed she hadn't been the one to do all those things for him, she was thrilled to see him this way.

He grunted at her and glanced down.

"Oh," Lois responded and followed his eyes. He was holding something in his hand. She reached down to loosen his fingers on the picture he held. It was of him, in PT that day, sitting on the table. "Clark, baby, this is incredible." She held it up to get a better look. When she moved her eyes to Clark, his eyes were twinkling. He was smiling! She gasped, dropped the picture, and reached out to grasp his face. Leaning close to look deeper into his eyes, she laughed softly. "I'm so proud of you." He widened his eyes a bit and she leaned forward to kiss his lips. There was no response, but when she leaned back, he seemed to be studying her closely. Her hands moved over his face. "I had begun to think... Never mind what I had begun to think. Clark, honey, this is amazing." His eyes flashed again and he grunted. "What?" She reached down and grasped his hand, lifting it to her face. "Is this what you wanted?" Again, his eyes flashed. She had placed his hand palm down on her cheek and when his fingers flexed, she closed her eyes.

This... this was the miracle she had been dying to see. He was going to get better. It might take a while, but her husband was going to get better.

Things began to improve after that, slowly but steadily. Clark sat on his own more and more. His eyes seemed to focus and

moved from one thing to another. He would turn his head at the sound of voices and flex his fingers. It took another couple of weeks until he was able to grip things with more control. A week later, he would lift his arms a bit. He grunted and groaned more to indicate things he wanted or that he was in pain or discomfort of some kind. Lois was so thrilled. Each day he seemed to take a leap forward.

When she reached the Center that night, she was anxious to see what new accomplishment he had made, but was frustrated beyond belief with work. Another stand and another truck had been torched and so far nothing more concrete than she had known in the beginning. It was maddening not being able to find a lead.

She entered Clark's room and almost burst into sobs. He was sitting on the side of the bed, hands perched on each side. His muscles were taught, as if he was flexing in an effort to sit there. He looked up at her and smiled. Not a quirk of his lips, not a shadow, but a full smile.

"Clark," she breathed. She dropped her stuff and rushed to kneel on the floor at his feet. Her hands went up to rub his knees and he grunted. His eyes closed and he breathed hard through his nose. She rubbed again and he made a strangled sound. "Oh, honey. You're hurting." She looked into his eyes and he blinked twice to let her know he *was* in pain. "Then why are you sitting here?" Slowly, with pain filled eyes, he lifted his hand to touch her face briefly. He couldn't sustain the effort long, so his hand fell away as his arm dropped, but Lois understood completely. He had been sitting there for her — to show her what progress he had made today. Her love for him swelled and tears rolled down her face. She stood, grasped his face, and leaned to kiss him.

"Thank you," she told him. "This was a very special gift that I really needed today." His eyes flashed and he smiled again. She smiled back before withdrawing to help him lie down. "Let's get you relaxed so I can rub your legs." He grunted and groaned, rather loudly a couple of times, as she lifted his legs to the bed. She had gotten quite adept at moving him and within a couple of seconds, he was lying on his pillows and she had climbed on the bed. She began rubbing his legs, massaging the way that brought him a bit of relief. He groaned and grasped the covers from the pain, but slowly he began to relax.

"This fire case is about to drive me crazy," Lois told him. "I was so frustrated I almost didn't come tonight." His eyes widened as he looked at her. "I'm sorry. Seeing you tonight, that very precious gift you gave me- I realize now that you need me much more than I realized. I'll come. I'll always come." He smiled slightly at her.

She lifted his leg to put it on her shoulder so she could rub the bottom side. "I used to love my job, and I still like it. But lately... I don't know." She rubbed up the back of his thigh, pressing deeply. "I need more." He patted the bed a couple of times and she looked at him. "Yeah, you're the more I need." He smiled again. "Is the pain lessening?" He blinked twice. "Good." She looked down at his leg. "God, you have beautiful legs." She turned her head and kissed his knee. Her eyes met his and they stared at one another.

He had definitely been what she had needed tonight. He had calmed her as much as her massage calmed him. Lois needed Clark much more than he needed her. She would come to him from now on, no matter how frustrated she was.

Lois left a little later the following morning. She chose to stay and help Clark with his shower, although he had made it clear he wanted the nurse to help him. Lois didn't understand that very much. Was it because he was improving and felt conscious of his state of undress with her? Did he feel their relationship more intimately, therefore was uncomfortable being naked with her? She would go back and read up on that aspect again. It was

crucial she understand every single detail of his recovery. So, she was forced to help him after he was dressed. She combed his hair, put his shoes on, and fed him through his tube. He had sent her off with a smile, putting her at ease again.

She stepped into the hallway and headed toward the exit. Just outside she ran into Dr. Deter.

"Mrs. Kent, I see you're here again."

"And I'll be here over and over until I can take my husband home," Lois told her.

"You do realize that he probably doesn't even know who you are?"

"He knows I'm someone who comes to see him. He looks forward to that. I'm not going away just because he might not remember things."

"Then you know it's important for him to recall things on his own?"

"Yes, Dr. Deter. I have read the studies. I know the risks of causing more damage by confusing him." Lois shifted her bag on her shoulder. "I think we're making strides though. He's sitting, he recognizes me, turns at sounds, and he's able to let us know a little of what he needs."

"While his physical gains are quite remarkable," the doctor said. "It's his mental stability that is most in jeopardy."

"Dr. Deter, he's making progress. Why can't that be enough? You seem to want him to fail."

"That's ridiculous," the doctor said. "I am simply being realistic."

"Oh, I know. You realistically told me that you highly doubted he would recover. But he's doing just that. And he'll keep doing that. Clark is an amazingly strong person. He will come back from this." Lois pushed past the doctor, not giving her another chance to say anything else. That woman really grated her nerves.

Behind her, Deter sighed. What now? Nothing had gone the way it was planned. She would have to salvage something soon or she would be in the room down the hall.

"Lois!" Jimmy came running across the newsroom. "There's been an attempt to torch another stand across town."

She shot to her feet. "Attempt?" she questioned him as she grabbed up her things.

"Yeah. Seems some by-stander recognized the situation and rushed the man," Jimmy told her as they made their way up the ramp. He had grabbed his camera to go along with her. "A few others held him down until the cops got there."

"We might have just caught a break, Jimmy," she said excitedly as they boarded the elevator. Half an hour later, they were on the scene of the latest attempt.

"What ya' got, Henderson?" Lois asked, poised with pen and pad in hand.

"A whole lot of what the hay," he replied. "The torcher was hauled down to the precinct and they had no more than stepped through the door when he collapsed."

Lois looked up at Henderson with wide eyes. "What?"

"Out cold. He's at Met Gen now. But I'm told it doesn't look good." He turned toward the van. "Van was stolen from a parking garage in mid-town. We're gonna comb it to see what we can find, but I'm pretty sure it'll be lot more of what we have now."

"Thanks, Bill," Lois told him and turned to go find Jimmy. "Wrap it up, Jimmy. We gotta roll."

Jimmy finished snapping his pictures and ran after her, jumping in the Jeep as it roared to life. "Where to?"

"Met Gen. The torcher collapsed."

"Wow. This gets stranger by the second. I'm told he couldn't have been more than twenty years old."

"Yeah. So why did such a young man take a nose dive?" Lois wondered aloud. She concentrated on navigating the traffic on

her way to the hospital.

“Hey, ah, how’s CK?”

She glanced over at Jimmy and smiled. “He’s making so much progress. He recognizes me, turns his head at sounds, and he’s sitting up alone.”

“It’s hard... seeing him like that. I try to stop by every couple of days.”

“Thanks, Jimmy. I’m sure he appreciates it.”

“I’ll be glad when he acts like recognizes me. He looked at me last time. He’s never done that before.”

Lois reached over and patted Jimmy’s arm. “Don’t act like you’re afraid of him. Talk to him like he’s the same old CK. He seems to want that. George told me since he started pushing him a bit, he’s been making leaps in his recovery.”

“I’ll remember that.” Jimmy was quiet for a long moment before he shifted toward Lois. “How are you, Lois?”

People rarely asked her that anymore. Perry did occasionally and Martha all the time, but everyone else wanted to know about Clark. She smiled sadly. “It is tough, Jimmy. I was so frustrated with work and the pressure of caring for Clark and the loneliness... I started not to go to the Center last night. But I went anyway and Clark was sitting on the side of the bed, holding himself up straight. There’s no telling how long he had been that way and he was in pain. I asked him why he had done it and he touched my face.” She blinked back tears. “He had done it for me.”

Jimmy’s grin spread across his face. “CK sure does love you. It doesn’t matter what’s going on with him... in pain, in good times, in bad... Hell, even a clone of him...” He reached over to grasp Lois’ hand. “Love like that doesn’t come around often.”

“No, Jimmy, it doesn’t.” She squeezed his hand and smiled again. “Speaking of love, are you still seeing my sister?”

Jimmy blushed full on, ducking his head a bit. “God, Lois, Lucy is so... incredible.”

“Sounds like somebody else is smitten with a Lane woman.”

“I am,” he admitted. They had been seeing each other since the wedding. “I know it hasn’t been long, but I can’t wait to get off work every night so I can get over to her place.”

“Good for you.” She made the turn into the parking lot of the hospital and parked the car. “Jimmy, spend as much time with her as you can. Life is so short and it can change in a split second.”

“Thanks, Lois. You’re a good friend, even though you have all this stuff going on.”

Lois gave him a warm smile. Jimmy was a good friend, too. She really was a lucky woman. “Let’s go to work.”

Mindy was mad as hell. Reggie had just told her the latest job had been botched. “Did you at least take care of that imbecile?”

“Oh, yeah. He’ll be babbling in the bed next to Kent next week.”

“Good.” Mindy turned and walked toward the window. “I cannot believe that with all the people who used to work for me, I can’t get a single one of the shmucks to do a bit of computer work for me. That money should be a piece of cake to find then.”

“I’ve told you I’ve looked. Lane’s got it behind so many encrypted accounts we might never find it. I did find something interesting. Every month a large deposit is made into her personal account. She pays all of her expenses through that, including for the facility where her husband is.”

“Then the deposit would have to be quite large,” Mindy said.

“It is... six figures. Get this... she paid up Kent’s care for three months. What she draws out each month now is for incidentals. She’s amassed quite a personal account.”

“Anything else?”

“She sends money to Kent’s folks on the first. They usually fly out for two days every other week to visit with their son.” Reggie moved around the kitchen to gather the items for a

sandwich. “Speaking of payments...”

“I know you want your money,” Mindy told him. “It’s hard getting any when I have to fly under the radar.”

“Well, I have to eat,” he said as he put mustard on his bread. “Get me some money by the week’s end or you’ll be slumming it by yourself.”

She crossed the distance between them and jerked on his arm. “Don’t push me!”

“You don’t push me,” he retorted calmly. “I can make your life much too miserable to breathe.” He finished assembling his sandwich and lifted it to take a bite. He smiled at her before turning to walk into the living room.

Mindy huffed in anger and snatched her phone from her pocket. She dialed a number and tapped her fingers on the counter until the other party answered.

“You shouldn’t call me this time of day,” was the immediate response.

“What is taking so long?”

“Look, his wife keeps such a tight rein on his care...”

“I don’t care about his wife. Reduce him to a blubbing idiot.”

“I can’t do that. Klein comes in twice a week and if he starts regressing, he’ll run tests. They would find the drugs and she would haul him out of here so fast it would make your bottled blonde hair turn blue.”

“Don’t you get smart with me. I’m the only reason you’re still at that damn Center.”

A sigh from the line. “I know. If he keeps improving, I can start with hypnotic suggestions.”

Mindy smiled slowly. That idea held much more potential. “Can you help him along?”

“Unfortunately, the mind is a mysterious beast. It can be coaxed, but it still won’t cooperate unless it’s ready.”

“Fine. Just do what you need to do.” She snapped her phone closed and glanced at Reggie. She sauntered over to him, standing firmly in front of him, blocking his view of the television. “I still have one form of payment you seem to like.”

He smiled at her. “Now you’re talking.” He stood up, grasped her sides, and walked her backwards toward the bedroom.

Dr. Deter looked over at Clark. He was staring out the window again. His sister-in-law had visited earlier and since then, he had been a bit unresponsive. She figured he was probably thinking about Lois.

“Clark?”

He slowly turned his head to look at her. “Good. You know your name. You do know that’s your name?”

He nodded. He had recently begun doing that.

“I’m Dr. Deter.” Another nod. “We have to do these exercises to help you get well.” He shook his head. “Why not?” He shrugged at her. “Are you tired?” Another shake. “Do you want to see Lois?” He slowly smiled and nodded his head. “Do you know who she is?” He shrugged. “You just like seeing her.” Another nod and smile.

Deter sighed heavily. Even in his oblivion, this man was crazy about his wife. He had no idea who he or she was, but he knew he liked that woman.

“I can take a hint,” she finally relented. She just couldn’t bring herself to mess up the progress he had made. Yeah, she was a bit scared, but that sicko didn’t understand the workings of the mind. She could stall her a bit longer. Maybe by then someone would have caught up with her.

She picked up her phone and called for George to come get Clark.

“Would you rather go outside?” Clark nodded. “Okay. We’ll work more tomorrow.” He offered her a smile and sat patiently until George got there.

“CK, my main man.” The PT man grasped the handles of his chair and wheeled him toward the door. “See ya’ around, Dr. D,” he said and pushed his charge into the hall. “All right, buddy. We are going to learn how to feed ourselves today. Up for it?” He glanced down and Clark nodded. “Good. It’s time you learn to lift a fork so you can ask that knock-out woman who comes to see you to have dinner with you.” George smiled at a passing woman. “Um um, Sherrie... one fine woman right there.”

They headed to the dining hall, which was empty. It was two in the afternoon, lunch long over. George picked out a few things for Clark and set them down on the table. “Applesauce, so you’ll have to use a spoon. Fries, so you’ll have to use a fork. Grapes, so you’ll have to use your fingers.” He glanced up at Clark after he had sat down across from him. “Ready?” Clark nodded and looked down at the food. “You’re trying to impress that lady, aren’t you?” Clark looked up at him and smiled. “Hey, damn good reason to improve. Okay, hit it.”

Clark sat for a long time before carefully lifting his hand. He had been working hard and had mastered most hand movements the last few days. He grasped the spoon and slowly moved a helping of the applesauce toward his mouth. Just as he got it close, he lost his grip and it globed on his shirt. He snorted in frustration and went back in for more.

“That’s it. You have to learn how to walk before you can run,” George encouraged him.

Again, the food fell. Clark lifted his other hand up and repositioned the spoon in his fingers. When a third try failed, he got angry and swiped the entire tray into the floor.

“That’s it,” George told him. “Get mad as hell!” Clark fumed and slammed his hand down on the table. “Come on, you can do better than that.”

He took a few short, hard breaths, looking around in total frustration. His anger kept building until finally he yelled.

“Hot damn! That’s it,” George yelled.

Clark yelled again. Then reached out to grasp the table. “Nnnnn...” A string of incomprehensible syllables left his mouth. George kept encouraging him. “Nnnnoo!”

“Yes, sir! Again.”

“Nnnnoo!” It was stronger this time. A slow smile replaced his angry expression and he looked at George. “No,” he repeated firmly.

“No. Now, do you want to try again?”

Clark stared at him for a long moment before he nodded.

“Uh uh,” George disagreed. “Tell me what you want. Do you want to try again?”

“Yyyeahhh,” he finished in a groan when he couldn’t get it out.

“Come on,” George coaxed.

“Yyyysss.” He let out a frustrated breath. “Yyyeess,” he managed and grinned at George.

“Stop the presses. The man has spoken!” He lifted his hands and turned back and forth in his chair. “Again.”

“Yes,” Clark managed after a brief struggle.

“All right then.” George went to get more food.

It took a couple more tries, a bit more anger, but Clark finally reached his mouth. He smiled at George.

The man was on his feet. “Did you see that? My man is feeding himself!” he told one of the cleaning ladies. She stopped mopping and clapped for him. Clark grinned wider and reached for more.

By the end of the session, he could deftly feed himself.

It had taken her a week, but Lois learned that the young man who had tried to torch the newsstand was Carlos Menendez, a two bit runner for Intergang. When she learned that, her wheels began spinning. If Intergang was behind the fires, why? More importantly, who was behind Intergang? She had made all the

calls, even a visit to the prison. Church, Jr was not calling the shots. In fact, there were no shots to be called. Other than this connection to Intergang, the organization seemed to be dormant. But she couldn’t get that lucky.

She decided to call it a night early. Lucy had called and said she had gone to see Clark right after lunch and he looked incredible. Lois was more than ready to see for herself how incredible he looked.

When she got to the Center, the nurse at the station called to her. “Mrs. Kent?”

“Yes?” Lois stepped over to speak with Peggy. She was on a first name basis with most everyone.

“I’m supposed to call Mr. Kent’s room before you go in.”

“What?” Lois arched a brow at her.

“George is still in with him. He’s been with him all afternoon. I think they’re up to something.” Peggy grinned at her as she lifted the phone.

Lois waited patiently by the counter. A few minutes later, George came walking her way.

“Mrs. K.” He reached out to grasp her hands. “You’re looking fine today, girl.”

“Stop it, George,” she said with a grin. “How’s our boy?”

“I think you’ll be surprised. He doesn’t want me to tell you. He wants to show you.”

“Are you remembering not to give him too much information?”

“I am. But honestly, Mrs. K, I think he would improve quicker if you told him more.”

“I’ve read all the studies...”

“Come on. We both know that’s just information.” George reached out to grasp her shoulder and guide her toward Clark’s room. “Nobody knows Clark better than you. He worked hard today for you. And that’s with him not knowing you’re his wife. Think what he would do if he did.”

“I’ll think about it, George.”

“Good. Now go. He’s waiting.”

She smiled and headed down the hallway. When she stepped into the room, she almost collapsed. Clark was sitting at the small table, food in front of him, food across from him. He looked over at her and smiled brightly. Her legs wouldn’t cooperate to move her; all she could do was stand and stare. He lifted his hand and waved her to come over.

“Oh, God,” she said and dropped her things in a heap before heading that way. “You want to have dinner with me?”

“Yes,” he told her.

“Clark,” she breathed and kneeled beside his chair. “You spoke.” Large tears rolled down her cheeks as she smiled at him.

“No,” he said and lifted his finger to wipe a tear away.

“I can’t help it. This is so great.”

“Eat,” he said and pointed toward the other chair.

“Okay,” she told him and stood to take her seat. The table was small, but she didn’t feel close enough. She moved her chair around toward him and he smiled at her. “Do I need to help you?”

“No,” he replied and reached out to lift his fork. Dinner was mashed potatoes, sliced beef with gravy, and peas.”

“Look at you.” She watched him for a moment, thrilled with his accomplishment.

“Eat,” he told her after a moment and he waited until she had taken a bite to continue with his own meal. They ate for several moments before Clark wiped his mouth. His movements were still a bit jerky, but he had fed himself! “Good?” he asked her.

“Yes. Very good. Thank you.”

“Welcome,” he managed after a moment.

“I can’t believe this. You’re doing so well.”

And as if that was what his body had been waiting to hear to keep from cooperating any longer, his hand jerked and the potatoes on the way to his mouth plopped on his shirt. He grunted

loudly in frustration.

“It’s okay,” she said and reached to wipe him up. He pushed her hand away and did it himself. It hurt that he didn’t want her to help him, but she sat back and let him do it himself.

Ten minutes later and a third accident sent him into a mini rage. He picked up his cup and hurled it toward the window in frustration.

“Clark, don’t.”

“No!” he yelled at her when she tried to help.

“You can’t expect instant improvement.”

“Yes,” he insisted.

“No.”

“Go!” he shouted at her.

Lois’ brows rose and she stared at him. “You want me to leave?”

“Yes,” he answered, staring at her with an angry expression.

Her first instinct was to cry, but she defiantly pushed that away and shook her head. “No,” she told him. “I’m not leaving.”

“Yes,” he yelled and reached out to swipe the table empty. “Go!”

“No!” she yelled right back.

They were in a face off until his expression changed to one of horror. His eyes glanced down and his face turned bright red.

Lois glanced lower and wanted to die. He’d had an accident. When he had started sitting up, his catheter had been removed. When he started eating regular food, his bag had been removed. Dr. Klein and George both said control was an important part of his recovery. Or rather learning control. But this accident, on top of his set back feeding himself, was going to make this really bad. “Clark, baby...”

“Go!” he said again. “Go,” he croaked.

“No, I won’t.” She stood up and grasped his chair to push him toward the bathroom. “I’m going to help you shower...”

“No,” he said in a strangled tone.

“Yes,” she insisted.

“No,” he repeated.

They had reached the bathroom and she kneeled in front of him. “I am. And you can fight me if you want to. I need to do this. You need me to do this.”

“Bbbb...” He sighed in frustration. “Bbbaaddd,” he forced out.

“I don’t care how bad it is,” she told him. “I’m going to help you.”

He stared at her for a moment before sighing and looking away.

He did fight her. He slapped her hands, yelled at her, and tried to push her away. She reached down and called up every ounce of strength she possessed and managed to get him undressed and in the shower. She collapsed on the bench next to him, getting soaked, clothes and all. He was staring at her.

“Are you done?” she wanted to know, letting just a bit of anger slip into her tone as she stood up to wash him. He sat passively while she moved the cloth over his body. When she moved below his waist, he grasped her wrist. Her eyes met his embarrassed ones.

“Wh... wh... why?” he finally got out.

“It’s what you do when you... care for somebody.” She had almost said love, but she still wasn’t so sure she should just blurt out everything to him.

Slowly he released her arm so she could continue to bathe him. He closed his eyes, blinking out a tear as he did.

His tear tore at Lois’ heart. Maybe she should tell him more. She would speak with Dr. Klein. If he agreed, she would tell Clark why she cared so much. Until then, she would clean him up and get him dressed for bed.

He helped her, but didn’t say a word or even look at her. When she dropped him back against the pillows on his bed, he

turned his head away from her. She sighed and headed back to the bathroom to change. She called for an orderly and a while later, the room was clean and she settled in bed beside him. He was still ignoring her, so she pulled out her notes on the fires. It was a long while later that Clark shifted and leaned over toward his nightstand. She noticed there was a stack of notes. He picked them up and laid back to look at them. He flipped through them, as if he understood what they said. He chose one and turned to lay it on her file. She lifted it to read: ‘I’m sorry for getting upset.’

She lowered the card and looked at him. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

He chose another card.

‘Will you have dinner with me again?’

“Absolutely,” she told him.

‘Thank you for having dinner with me tonight.’

“You’re welcome,” she said and looked at him. “Did George help you make these?”

“Yes,” he said aloud and dug to find another card.

‘I like when you’re here.’

“Oh, honey. I like being here,” she told him, shifting toward him. She took the next card.

‘Even if you have to wipe my butt?’

She couldn’t help but chuckle. That one was all George.

“You have a very nice butt,” she said and reached out to play with the hair above his ear.

He blushed with a wide grin. “You?” he asked after a bit of a struggle to get it out.

“Is my butt nice?” He nodded. “I don’t know.” She giggled at him. “You want to see it?”

“Yes,” he said at once, the smile fading from his face.

Lois held his gaze for a long moment before scrambling up on her knees and lowering her shorts enough for him to see her butt. She couldn’t help but wonder what category this kind of therapy would fall into.

Clark’s eyes locked on her flesh. Slowly he moved his hand over to lay flat on a pert cheek. Lois’ breath hitched. He flexed his fingers and she sighed.

She hadn’t expected him to touch her. Fire shot through her body like a bolt of lightning. He had touched her naked butt before, slipped his hands under her clothes when they were making out on his couch. Hell, he had done more than that in the limo on the way to their reception. But none of that compared to this. This was way too much. Lois pulled her shorts up and couldn’t help but hear the sigh from Clark. She turned around to settle beside him again. His eyes were smoky and he stared at her.

“Nnn... nnniiiccee,” he hissed out.

“Thank you,” she said with a grin. He grinned back before he lifted his hand. He wanted her to take it. She did and moved it to her face. “Tomorrow, I think we should eat and you should spill something on yourself so you’ll get upset, then we can work on learning to calm down.”

“Yes,” he said and moved his hand against her face.

She reached out to touch the cards lying on his stomach. “Can you read?”

“Yes.”

She looked at him. “You can read?”

“Yes.”

“Want to read... something from work?”

“Yes.” He put the cards on the table again.

“Do you want these back?” she asked him, holding out the others.

“Yes.” He added those to the pile and started working to sit up. Lois helped him and when he was settled, she handed him the file. He read for several moments before looking at her. “Tttt...” He stopped. “Tttoo...” He sighed. “Toommy.”

“Tommy?” He nodded. “Tommy who?”

“Tooorr...” He sighed heavily.

“Tommy Torch!” she exclaimed and he grinned widely. She grabbed the file. “Why didn’t I think of that? You’re right. It’s his MO... until the kid that collapsed.”

Clark flipped the pages until he found a picture of the flamethrower. He tapped it several times.

“It’s him,” Lois remarked and Clark nodded. “Who hired him?” she wondered aloud. This time Clark pointed to the word Intergang. “Yeah, but thing is, I have no idea who’s running it. The two Bills aren’t. All the right hand men are dead...” Lois stopped and looked at him for a long moment. Something occurred to her that hadn’t before. He was reading, he understood. Yeah, she had read that some patients do that. But he knew things...

“Clark, do you know who I am?”

“Lo...sss.”

“Yes, Lois. But... do you know who I am to you?”

He grabbed the cards again.

She took the one he offered. “Friend,” she read aloud, her heart sinking a bit. “Do you know who you are?” Another card — ‘Clark’. “Clark who?” she asked him. He shrugged. “How is it you know so much and don’t even know your name?” she wanted to know.

His expression seemed to turn sympathetic. He pulled out another card. ‘I’m sorry’.

“Oh, honey, there’s nothing to be sorry for.” She leaned forward to cup his cheek. “It’ll come.”

“Wh... wh...nnn?”

“When is anybody’s guess.” She kissed his lips softly. “Soon, I hope.”

He reached up to cup her face and smiled at her. He tugged her forward, wanting her to lie against him. When she was, he wrapped his arms around her. It was the first time he had done that since before their wedding weeks ago. She sighed and clutched him tighter.

“Nice,” he said softly.

“Very nice,” she replied and closed her eyes. This was very, very nice. Tomorrow she would speak with Dr. Klein. She had to get a better understanding of Clark’s mental state. What did it all mean? When did partial comprehension come back to him? And why couldn’t he remember other things? It was all so frustrating.

But tonight, she would enjoy lying in her husband’s arms again.

The following morning Lois woke up to find Clark sitting up on the side of the bed. She could tell from the tense pull across his shoulders that something was wrong. She sat up and reached out to him. “Clark?”

“No!” he shouted and jerked away.

“What’s wrong?”

He sat there, drawn up on himself. The way he was sitting... “Have you had an accident?” She moved to sit beside him and he tried to turn away from her. “I thought we talked about this last night.” He shook his head vigorously. Both his hands were covering his groin. “Clark?” She reached out again.

“Stop!” He hadn’t used that word and his eyes met hers in surprise.

“You’re a quick learner,” she said with a smile. He just sat there, a look of absolute horror in his eyes. She glanced down to where he was hiding himself and slowly realization took place. “A different kind of accident?”

His eyes widened and he turned his head away from her. She reached out to grasp his cheek and turn him back. “It’s perfectly natural.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I... I...” His eyes glanced down.

“You woke up uncomfortable?” He didn’t answer. “Or did you get that way after looking at me?” He tried to pull his face away from her and she knew that was it. “Did it surprise you?” He nodded. “That you felt it or that it happened?” He shrugged. “You’ve done it before.” His eyes widened in shock. “You just couldn’t feel it. If you felt this one, that’s a good thing. It means you’re getting sensation back everywhere.”

He snorted at that, a silent tear slipping through his lashes.

Lois used her thumb to wipe it away. “Don’t be embarrassed.” He nodded. “No.”

“I... I...” He lifted a hand and made a motion that let her know he touched himself while he was aroused.

“You touched yourself because it was... different?” His eyes moved away. “And the other happened?” He sat for a long while before he nodded. “That’s what’s supposed to happen when you do it.”

“No.”

“Why? Because you were lying next to me?” He nodded. “It’s okay. It means you’re getting well. Don’t you want to get well?” He nodded again.

His eyes moved down to where his hands still covered his body. He lifted a hand and pointed toward the bathroom.

“You want to shower?” He nodded. “Can I help you?” He nodded, but didn’t look at her. He worked with her this time and in no time he was clean, redressed, and sitting in his chair. Lois showered and changed and went out to find him going through the cards at the table. “Clark, did you push yourself over here?” He looked up at her and nodded. He moved a card in front of her.

“Will you have breakfast with me?”

“I will.” He smiled and moved another card. “Will you help me make more cards?” “Absolutely. But why don’t I help you learn more words, too? I’ll call for some breakfast first.” She did, then moved her chair over and turned him so they were facing one another. “What should we learn first?” He laid his hand on her shoulder. “My name?” He nodded. “Lois.”

“Looosss.” He sighed. “Lo- is,” he managed after a moment.

“Good.” He smiled. “Let’s try yours. Clark.”

“Cark.”

“Close,” she said through a laugh. “C l ark.”

“C l ark,” he repeated.

“Faster.”

Cl...ark.”

“That’s good. Practice that today. How about George?”

“Goge.” He tried again. “G... or...ge.”

“Very nice,” she said with a grin.

He grinned back. He reached up and cupped her face. That seemed to be the way he liked to express things. Or to feel connected. His smile faded and he leaned closer. Lois met him for a soft kiss. When they drew apart, he sighed. He touched her lips, then his.

“Kiss,” she told him.

“Ksss.” He touched her lips again. “K... iss. Kiss.”

“That’s it. Oh, honey, I’m...” She stopped when his fingers covered her lips. “You want to say that?” He nodded. “Honey.”

“Hunee,” he drawled out. And kissed her again.

“Do you like kissing?”

“Yes,” he said with a smile.

“And it’s exactly something he shouldn’t be doing.” They both looked up to see Dr. Deter in the doorway.

“I’ll have to remember to lock that door,” Lois mumbled as she stood up to face the other woman.

“Lois, this is a clinical hospital...”

“I know that.” She glanced at Clark. “Do you mind if I speak with Dr. Deter alone?”

“Yes,” he told her.

Dr. Deter’s eyes widened in surprise. “He’s talking?”

“He is. You’re his doctor. Didn’t you know that?”

“No.” Deter moved around to sit in Lois’ vacated seat. “Do you understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Can you say more words?”

“Yes,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Do you know who she is?” Deter looked up at Lois.

“Lo-is,” he hissed.

“Yes, but do you know who she is to you?”

Clark’s eyes went up to Lois’. They softened a bit and he smiled before looking back at the doctor. “Mine,” he replied just as clearly and effortlessly as any word so far.

The doctor’s brows rose toward her hair.

“He knows some things and some he doesn’t. He can read, for instance, and understand everything he reads. He knows things about our work...”

“You’ve discussed work with him?” Deter wanted to know as she stood back up.

Lois stared at her for a moment before continuing what she was saying. She and Deter would speak later. “Then there’s a lot that he doesn’t know. Personal things seem to be out of reach right now.” She had told her without really telling her that Clark didn’t remember his life. She glanced at Clark and he was holding up the ‘I’m sorry’ card. She moved over to kneel next to him. “I’m not. You’re awake and getting stronger and that’s all that matters right now.”

He smiled and lifted his hand to cup her cheek.

“We should start therapy as early as possible today,” Deter interrupted them.

“Will you do that for me?” Lois asked him. “Work hard today?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Good.” They were sharing a loving gaze when her cell phone rang. It was Jimmy and he had something on their case. “This time I’m the one that’s sorry,” she told Clark.

“Go,” he told her.

“I’ll see you tonight.”

“Yes,” he replied.

She leaned to kiss him, despite what Deter had said. She gathered up her stuff and left, feeling lighter than she had in weeks.

Deter turned back to Clark when Lois was gone. “We can have a mini session right now,” she told him and sat down. She looked at him a long moment before she opened her mouth. The words that followed worked to undo the progress Clark had made so far.

George stared at Clark as he worked on his legs. Clark had barely acknowledged that he was here, let alone anything else. Not one word in the nearly fifteen minutes they had been working. George had been sure Clark would have rattled on constantly today. He had looked forward to finding out how the date had gone. Finally George laid Clark’s leg down and lifted Clark to sit.

“CK, what’s wrong?”

Clark stared at the floor for a long moment before he lifted his eyes to George’s. “Lois.”

“You want to see Lois?”

Clark shook his head in the negative. “Wh... wh... wh...t?”

George’s brows furrowed for a moment before he figured out what Clark was trying to say. “You want to know who she is?” Clark nodded. “She’s your best friend.” Clark stared at him for a moment.

“No.”

“Yeah, CK.”

“Doc... s... s... say no.”

George’s brows rose toward his hair. “What? The doctor told you Lois wasn’t your friend?” He nodded. “Who did she tell you

she was?”

Clark sat there for a long moment. He knew what he wanted to say, but the words just wouldn’t come out. “O... o... l... d,” he pronounced each syllable slowly. “G... g... ir... l.”

“An old girlfriend?” He nodded. George watched him struggle for a moment before he felt sure he knew what Clark was trying to say. “An old girlfriend you broke up with?” A nod. “That was... upset when you broke up with her?” Another nod. “And now she’s... trying to win you back?” Clark nodded with a sigh. “Hell no,” George told him at once. “CK, you hear me now. Lois is your best friend in this whole world. She takes care of you, sleeps with you, kisses you. Do you think an old girlfriend would do that?” Clark shrugged. “Trust me on this one, buddy.” George rubbed his leg. “How about going in the hot tub while I make a call?”

“Lois?”

“Yeah. She needs to speak with Deter and with you.” Clark looked as if he was going to argue, then finally nodded his head. George got him settled in the hot tub and asked Peggy to keep an eye on him while he went to phone Lois.

George stepped into the small office reserved for him while he was working with Clark and dialed Lois’ number. He got her voice mail and sighed in frustration. “Hey, Lolo, this is George. Listen, as soon as you get this, get on down here. We have a problem with that Dr. Deter.” He hung up the phone after leaving his message. He was so angry right now he could seriously hurt somebody’s feelings. Clark was making amazing progress. To have Deter do something to him to set him back had almost messed up weeks of hard work. For good measure, he phoned Dr. Klein and told him he needed to speak with him at his earliest convenience. Bernie assured him he would be there later that day. He hung up and went back to Clark. Maybe he could keep his mind off what Deter had said until Lois could speak with him. She would have to tell him the truth now.

Just outside the door, Deter had overheard the man talking on the phone. She had known it had been risky trying to speak with Clark without hypnotizing him, but if she hadn’t done something soon, it would have been too late. She hurried away from the door when George hung up the phone. She really had her work cut out for her now. What was she going to do?

It was late that afternoon before Lois got the message from George. She dropped everything and sped across town to the Center. She was breathless when she went in. Peggy called her down, informed her George wished to speak with her the second she got there. The nurse called to Clark’s room and a few moments later, the large physical therapist came out.

“Let’s go to the patient conference room,” he told Lois. She followed him down the hall into the small, private area and waited until he had closed the door.

“What kind of problem?” she wanted to know immediately.

George looked at her with a worried expression. “Deter told Clark that you are an old girlfriend that he broke up with. You took the break-up badly and when he was hurt, you saw it as a chance to try to get him back.”

“What?” Lois almost yelled.

“I’m not sure what her game is, but she’s crossed the line. Doc Klein agrees. We think it’s time to tell Clark the whole truth. I’ve made more progress with him in a few days than Deter has the entire time he’s been here. Take him home. I’ll work with him full time.”

“Is that the best thing, George. I don’t want him to regress.”

“Too late. He hasn’t talked since telling me about Deter, nothing before then. He won’t exercise, he won’t make more cards, just sitting in there staring out the window. Lois, Clark’s mind is intact. He just has memory loss.”

“I’ll have to discuss this with his parents first.”

“You’re gonna have to talk to Clark, too.”

She nodded and tucked her hair behind her ear.

“Go,” he told her. “See if we can start to fix this.”

Lois gave him a grateful expression before hurrying down the hall to Clark’s room. He was sitting at the window, staring out. He didn’t even turn toward her when she came in.

“Clark?” He just sat there. She put her things down and walked over to him. Still nothing. She pulled a chair over and sat down. “Will you look at me?” Nothing. “Whatever she told you, it’s not true.” Still no response. “Clark, I’m your wife.” That got his attention. His head snapped around and he stared at her. “We were married right before you were hurt. You were shot protecting me.” She wiped a tear away that had slipped down her cheek. “I should have died instead of you being here, like this.”

Clark reached over to grasp her hand. “No,” he told her softly.

“If you hadn’t taken those bullets…”

“No!” he said more sternly. She dropped her eyes to the hand holding his. His fingers played with the engagement ring on her finger. He tapped it, then lifted his other hand to indicate he didn’t wear a ring either.

“Dr. Deter told me that it was imperative that you recover your memories on your own. If we had been wearing the bands, you would have asked questions I wasn’t supposed to answer.”

He stared at her for a long moment before he moved to the table to get the cards. He flipped through them, but grew frustrated when he didn’t find one to express what he wanted to say.

“What?” she wanted to know.

He looked at her a moment before he moved closer. He reached out to pat her chest, then patted his own. “You,” he said. He patted his chest. “Me.”

She stared at him with furrowed brows for a second before she realized what he was saying. “Do I love you?” He nodded. “I love you more than life itself.”

He stared at her before saying, “Me.” He patted his chest. “You.”

She grinned at him slowly. “You took two bullets for me. What do you think?”

He went back to the cards, shoving one toward her.

“I know you don’t remember,” she told him. “You asked me to have dinner with you last night. You asked me to have dinner again. You said you like kissing me. You told Dr. Deter I was yours. Don’t you like me?”

He sat for a long moment before he shrugged.

“You’re confused by what she told you?” He nodded. “I’m so sorry I let this happen to you. Will you let me take you home?”

His eyes widened, the fear jumping out at her. He shook his head quickly.

“Why?” she wanted to know.

He searched the cards. He sighed, but handed her one.

“Even if you have to wipe my butt?” she read. She was confused for a second. “I know there’s a lot you can’t do. George has agreed to work with you full-time. I’ll research all the best comprehension exercises. We’ll get you well.”

He turned to look out the window. He shrugged at her, telling her he just didn’t know.

“Clark, I can’t leave you here for Deter to cause more damage.”

He sighed and looked at her. “No go,” he told her.

She blinked out the large tears in her eyes. “Do you want me to keep coming to visit you?”

He looked away from her, out the window again. He finally shrugged.

“Do you want me to stay with you tonight?”

He dropped his head and shook it.

Lois gasped and jumped to her feet. The pain seared through

her like a hot knife. She backed toward the door, jerked up her stuff, and hurried out. She was in too much pain to stay another second. He didn’t want her here. She knew it was irrational for her to feel the way she did, but she just couldn’t help it. With all the progress they had made, for him to do this was almost unbearable. Why had Deter told him those things? Did the woman have some kind of agenda? Was she angry because Lois had taken charge of Clark’s care, undermining the good doctor’s authority? No matter the reasons, that woman had no right to do what she had done. By the time Lois reached the end of the corridor, she had allowed building anger to replace the blinding pain. She changed directions and went to Dr. Deter’s office. The woman’s head snapped up when the door banged back against the wall.

“Mrs. Kent!”

“I have no idea what you told my husband, but you have crossed a line you shouldn’t have. I will ask for a review of your treatment first thing in the morning. You will be supervised while you’re treating Clark from now on.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re talking about,” she said and leaned back in her chair.

“Oh, I’m sure you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Lois turned and stormed back out. She headed straight for the nurse’s station. “Peggy, make a note that Dr. Deter is not to go into my husband’s room without an escort until after the formal review tomorrow morning.”

Peggy’s brows rose in surprise. “Aren’t you staying with him tonight?”

“No. Deter said something to him today and he doesn’t want me here. Do *not* let her be alone with him.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll personally watch out for him.”

“Thank you.” Lois glanced toward the door at the end of the corridor before turning to leave. Once in her Jeep, she broke down. Full racking sobs shook her body. It was a good ten minutes later before she was able to drive herself home. She called Bernie before crawling under the covers and hiding away from the pain. Just when she thought she was getting Clark back, he was stripped from her again. How much more could she stand?

When Lois reached the Center the following morning, the Kents were standing at the nurse’s station arguing with the duty nurse.

“Martha, Jonathan,” Lois called. “What are you doing here?” She hugged Martha tightly.

“We came early this week. Martha had a bad feeling,” Jonathan told her. He eyed the nurse. “And it looks like she had reason.”

“What’s going on?”

“They won’t let us see Clark,” Martha told her.

Lois turned to the nurse with a questioning expression. “Why can’t they see their son?”

“Dr. Deter gave strict orders no one sees Clark until after the review.”

“Oh, she did, did she?” Lois wanted to know.

“Review? What review?” Martha asked her.

“Deter is a taco short of a combo meal. She’s told Clark a bunch of lies and now he doesn’t want to see me.”

“Oh, honey. I knew something was wrong.”

“Not for long.”

Twenty minutes later, Lois was staring at the table in front of her in shock and disbelief. The review board had sided with Deter, believing Lois to be too emotionally attached to be objective in Clark’s care. What was more, they had cut all visits. Clark had been deemed lucid enough to make decisions about his care on his own, and this was what he had said he wanted — for Dr. Deter to keep treating him. Lois had asked to hear that from

Clark himself, but was told he was a big boy. He didn't have to justify his decisions with her. She reminded them she was his wife. They reminded her that as long as he understood, he could make his own medical decisions. Lois was stunned, unable to believe Clark didn't want to see her.

"Come on, honey. Let's go make some calls." Martha helped her stand and they started for the door.

Lois passed Deter and whirled to face her. "I don't know yet what you've done, but I promise you this... if you hurt him, I will forget my own morals." The doctor had the gall to smirk at her. If not for Jonathan, Lois would have lunged for her. He carried her, kicking and screaming out the door — out the Center.

She called Bernie to let him know what had gone on. He instructed her to file a medical injunction to take Clark out of the Center and out of Deter's care. He would sign the papers stating Clark was in no position at this time to make serious decisions about his care. By end of business, the papers were filed.

Lois sat on the window seat in the bedroom of the apartment staring at the empty bed. Martha came in to sit next to her. They were quiet for a long while before Lois began to speak.

"Do you know we waited? It wasn't that we planned it or anything. Something always seemed to interrupt us. Maybe that's all we've ever been destined to be, interrupted."

"Oh, honey, this is temporary."

"Temporary? It might take three weeks to get a hearing. She'll have him bowing to her by then."

Jonathan came in and sat on the bed in front of her. "I've been thinking about this. Deter was heralded as one of the best physicians in her field. Why did she suddenly start doing something that could ultimately end her career?"

Lois' eyes met his. He had a point.

"Is it possible she's being paid to sabotage Clark's recovery?"

Slowly dawning flashed for Lois. "She has to be! There's no way a brilliant doctor would throw away her entire life." Lois jumped up and went in search of her laptop. She flipped it open and called up a program. "If Deter is being paid, it should be easy enough to find."

"That's my girl," Jonathan told her as he and Martha moved over to read with her.

"Nothing," Lois declared a few minutes later. "No big deposits, no multiple accounts, new cars... nothing."

Jonathan reached up to squeeze her shoulder. "Keep looking, honey. There's something. I just didn't get the vibe the first time I met Deter that she was particularly obsessed with Clark enough to do what she's done."

"There was something," Lois said, thinking back to the times she had spoken with the doctor. "It was like she was scared of something."

"Is it possible she's being blackmailed?" Martha wanted to know.

"Very possible," Lois stated and tapped on the keyboard. "But how do I find something like that?"

Martha and Jonathan looked at each other moment before they both blurted, "Jimmy."

Lois snorted aloud. Even her in-laws knew what Jimmy was capable of with a computer. If he could help her find a way to solve this case, she would have to go to bat with Perry to get the kid a raise. He deserved it.

Abandoning her search, she picked up the phone to call Jimmy. If Deter was hiding something, Jimmy would find it.

And God help the woman when he did. Nobody was going to mess with Lois over her husband- not even Clark- and it was time everyone found that out.

Lois ran a frustrated hand through her hair as she listened to the man on the other end of her phone line. George had called her

to inform her that although Dr. Klein had actually approached the review board at the Center, he was dismissed as primary physician. George had been dismissed as PT assistant to Clark as well.

"He had made so much progress," George said in a defeated tone.

"I know, George. I'm doing all I can. And when I get control back, I want you working with him again."

"Hey, Mrs. K, you get him back and I'll have him walking, talking, and dancing before the engine's cool on the car you pick him up in."

Lois couldn't help but smile. She liked George. He was a good man and an incredible therapist. "Thank you, George."

"I like CK. I like you. I want you two put back together again." Lois had to swallow the lump in her throat. "While you're waiting for the incredibly swift wheels of our outstanding justice system..." Lois grinned. "Make him some more cards — things you think he would say or ask. You know him better than anyone. Hold on to that."

"I will, George. And thanks for reminding me that's what I need to do."

"No problem, Mrs. K. Sorry... I need to go. Little Margarie is walking around here looking so fine, I'd be half a man unless I followed her for a while so I can make sure her pants fit just right."

Lois was still laughing when she hung up the phone. George was one of a kind.

She picked up the phone and dialed the Center. The nurse she talked to was less than cooperative, but she eventually put Lois through to Dr. Deter.

"I don't think we have anything to discuss," Deter told her at once.

"You are caring for *my* husband," Lois clipped out. "I think we have a lot to talk about."

Deter sighed heavily. "What do you want?"

"I want to know how Clark's doing."

"He's stable."

"Stable? What the hell does that mean?" she wanted to know.

"It means he is progressing as he should."

"Translation: he's properly medicated and lying in a damn bed," Lois fumed. "So help me, when this is over, you and I are gonna have the most intense conversation of your life." She slammed the phone down in anger. When Lois got her hands on that quack, she would have to have therapy for the rest of her life. And then she would be lucky to die in a puddle of her own drool.

After several cleansing breaths, Lois called out to Jimmy. They would work on figuring out why Deter had suddenly decided to effectively commit professional suicide so she could get her husband out of there.

And just in case she didn't have enough on her mind, another paper truck was burned the next day. It was exactly the same as the others. It fit Tommy Torch's MO to the letter — even the fact that there wasn't a clue left behind. The explosive device this time was a charred lump. Mr. Stern was livid. He ripped into Perry pretty good over the situation, as if Perry could do something about it. Lois had passed frustration, moving on to being disgusted. She wanted things to happen, only it was the wrong ones that kept jumping up at her.

Jimmy dropped onto a chair near Lois' desk and sighed. "I have traced the man's movements. Up until three months ago, he was very easy to pinpoint. Then it's as if he disappeared."

"Have you tried his known aliases?" Lois asked him.

Jimmy's face split into a grin. "Lois, this is Jimmy you're talking to."

She smiled back at him. "Okay, okay." She shifted some papers on her desk. "Anything?"

“One very interesting fact... Tommy Torch was born Thomas Reginald Sandborne. I put out some feelers and got a call back. The guy told me that a cell mate of Tommy’s at Stryker’s a while back called him Reggie. So, I did a bit of magic and found another alias — Reggie Sanders. I’m working on tracing his movements now.”

“Good. Let me know what you find,” Lois told him, moving over to tap on her keyboard.

“How did you finally deduce that the fires matched Tommy’s MO?”

She looked over at him. “Clark made the connection.”

“Really?”

“Yep. The night before... things changed, I found out he could read, understand a lot of what he reads, and some of that was what he knew of work.”

“Isn’t it crazy how the mind works?” Jimmy asked her.

“It is. Dr. Klein told me that it’s usually the closest memories one tends to lose and be unable to grasp again before anything else.”

“So, he’s got all this knowledge — reading, understanding, historical events, work stuff — but there’s this huge hole in all that? The hole that’s his life?”

“Yeah,” Lois answered softly. “It’s like he’s living the part in a movie and the script is made up as he goes. And he can’t remember the parts that came before.”

Jimmy sat forward and reached out to grasp Lois’ hand. “We’ll get him back.”

“I know, Jimmy. I have to,” she said softly, tears pricking her eyes.

She had to. She wasn’t sure she knew how to live anymore without Clark. It had been all she could do the last few weeks. At least when she was able to see him, able to see his progress, there was hope. She had something to look forward to each day. Now... all she had was hope.

And that was quickly fading.

Clark stared out the window, his mind buzzing with so many confusing thoughts. Dr. Deter had hypnotized him today. It was the next step in his treatment. Or so she told him.

He had told Dr. Deter that Lois said she was his wife, that he had been shot protecting her. The doctor told him that was a lie. He had been shot in an attempted robbery when he had gone into the store to get milk.

That didn’t feel right. Yet, at that same time, he could picture the robbery.

The doctor had told him Lois was just an obsessive ex-girlfriend who had wanted to get married, but lost it when he refused. He and Dr. Deter — Michelle — had been seeing one another before he was shot. He could clearly see an angry Lois, yelling at him about one thing or the next. And he could see him and Michelle together.

If he had been involved with Michelle, why had Lois been allowed to stay with him? Why had she bathed him? Why had she kissed him? He hadn’t asked Michelle and she hadn’t offered an explanation.

He closed his eyes, silently wishing he could just turn his memory off. It would be so much easier to not have to think about anything.

And why wasn’t he working with George? He wanted to get up out of this chair. Maybe if he could get around, he could remember more. He would be able to go places, see things that might be familiar, that might bring something back.

For now he was confined to this chair, to his jumbled thoughts.

Tomorrow... maybe tomorrow would be better.

Working helped Lois keep what little sanity she had left, but

it was quickly losing its effect. She wanted Clark home or at least in a facility where she knew he would be taken care of properly. The ache was starting to make her bones hurt. She had always thought the saying ‘die of a broken heart’ was just that- a saying. She was quickly beginning to believe it was possible.

She picked up the phone and called the Center. It helped to hear the tiniest tidbit, even from Deter. It also gave her tremendous satisfaction to know she was aggravating that woman by calling every day. Maybe she would start making several calls.

Peggy answered today. Lois liked Peggy.

The nurse sighed. “If Deter finds out I spoke to you... He’s not doing well at all, Mrs. Kent. He hasn’t been out of his room. He lies in bed or sits and stares out the window. Deter has at least four sessions a day with him. I don’t like it. She can’t be helping him, not like that.”

“Peggy, please. I need you to sign a statement so I can get the hearing pushed up.”

“I can’t. I’ll lose my job,” she whined.

“I’ll talk to Bernie Klein. If you happen to lose your job, we’ll get you one at Star Labs. Please, Peggy. She’s going to kill him.”

There was a long silence before the woman said, “Tonight. I’ll drop it at the front desk of my apartment building. Ask the guard for the payment for redecorating my kitchen.”

Lois couldn’t help but smile. This woman was a natural. “Got it.”

“The Georgian Towers.”

“I’ll find it. Thank you, Peggy. When this is over, Clark and I will take you to dinner anywhere in the city.”

“Just get him well.”

She cut the connection and Lois pumped her fist in triumph. She made a call to the lawyer Bernie and Perry had set her up with. He told her that with Peggy’s statement, he was sure he could get the hearing within a week. Before she could dwell on that too long, her phone rang. A source had come through. She was up and out of the newsroom to chase down a possible lead on Tommy Torch.

Dr. Deter had just left another session with Clark when her phone rang. She sat down behind her desk before she answered.

“Is everything still under control?” Mindy asked her.

“Everything is fine,” she returned.

“What does fine mean?”

“It means he’s slowly conforming to the therapy. He’s nice and docile.”

“So he’s not improving any longer?”

“No. Just sits or lies there staring.”

“What happened? I thought he was on his way back to some kind of life,” Mindy said.

Deter sat forward on her chair. “What?”

“You told me he was starting to move and talk.”

“You can’t have it both ways, Church. You said you wanted him to be a slobbering idiot. Which is it? We both know that if his health improves too much, his mind won’t be far behind. I don’t think either of us wants that.”

“Just stick to the plan,” Mindy warned her.

“Which plan? You change your mind so much...”

“Don’t forget your place, Deter. I can still make your life a living hell.” With that, Mindy cut the line.

Deter hung up and sank back in her chair. She hated being forced to play games with Mindy Church. But what choice did she have? Mindy could destroy everything she loved.

By eight the next morning, Lois’ attorney had a copy of the statement Nurse Peggy had made. With her implication, a hearing was imminent.

Lois called to speak with the Kents for a bit. They had stayed

an extra couple of days, but they had finally had to go back to the farm. Unfortunately, things hadn't stopped because Clark was in trouble.

She worked on the case for a bit, spoke with Jimmy about where he was in his research, then sent out for lunch. Since Clark had been hurt, she hadn't eaten very well and she had lost a few pounds. Dr. Klein had mentioned it the last time she had seen him. And Perry mentioned it quite often. If she was going to care for Clark when he came home, she would need to be strong.

Perry stormed off the elevator, shouting at everyone he passed. Something was wrong; Lois saw it right away. She followed him into his office, closing the door behind her.

"What's wrong, Perry?"

"Stern. He wouldn't know an American institution if it fell on him!" Perry had made it behind his desk and he snatched up a file. "He's talking about selling the Planet because the fires have plugged into the bottom line a bit too much."

"He can't sell the Planet!"

"If I can help it, he won't. I'm working on the board members now. If I can get them to hold out..."

"Just a bit longer," Lois was quick to tell him. "I'm close.

And everybody in the city is keeping their ears open for us."

"And I'm doing all I can," Perry added. He was about to say something else when his phone rang. "White here," he barked when he snatched it up. He listened for a second, then held the receiver out to Lois. "It's your attorney."

Lois grabbed the phone quickly. "Yes?" She listened and a smile slowly spread across her face. "Yes. I'll be there." She hung up the phone and grinned at Perry. "I have a hearing at two."

"Ah, honey, I'm so thrilled."

"I have to call Bernie. When we get him out of there, we need a place for him. He has a lot of work ahead of him."

"And you," Perry pointed out.

"Yeah." She turned toward the door. "I have to call Bernie. But I'm gonna get this case wrapped up, too." She left Perry smiling behind her. A bit later, she had set up arrangements for Clark's transfer and set out for the hearing a full hour early.

It only took the judge five minutes to read the petition and sign the order for Lois to be placed back in charge of her husband's care. She hurried from the courtroom, phone in hand to call Perry, but it rang before she could.

"Lois, I found it. The connection between Church and Deter. They're sisters!"

Lois stopped her trek toward the parking area. "What?"

"Both born to Patsy and Clarence Deter. Mindy was the troubled one, borderline personality disorder. She got into some trouble at sixteen and had to serve some time. When she was sprung, she didn't go home. Anyway, seems mental instability runs in the family. Michelle is bipolar with some serious anger issues. Turns out Mindy's trouble was actually Michelle's. Mindy took the rap because of Michelle's future potential — she was brilliant — and to save her graces in the eyes of their parents."

"So, Mindy did time for Michelle and now? Mindy was in that building."

"Was she? We both know that the villains are always so slippery they even manage to slip out of the clutches of death."

"You might be right, Jimmy."

"I know I am. And Bobby Bigmouth called. He said there's a dude that's been coming into the IHOP on Grange in Suicide Slum that could pass for Tommy Torch's brother. He's been ordering food for two. Bobby tracked him to... Dexter and Vale, the apartment building on the corner."

"Jimmy, you're the best. I need you to call the Kents and tell them I had a hearing today and we have the injunction. I'm having Clark moved to Star Labs."

"Oh, wow! That's great, Lois. He'll get well now."

"I know, Jimmy. I know."

She cut the line and headed toward the Slum. She would much rather go get Clark, but Bernie had told her he would call her back about his admission to Star Labs. While she waited, she would see if she could see Tommy Torch. And today, instead of jumping into the deep end without checking the water level first, she would call in the cavalry.

It hadn't been ten minutes since she had pulled to a stop across the street from the location Jimmy gave her when Lois spotted a woman she recognized all too well. She might have her bottled blonde mop tucked into a red haired wig, but Lois would know her anywhere. Mindy Church was with a man Lois felt sure was Tommy Torch. She had only seen pictures of the man, but he looked like those images. They made their way down the sidewalk and into the building Jimmy had told her about. Before she knew what she was doing, Lois was across the street. She made her way up the stairs, following the sounds they were making. She peeked down the hall just in time to see the apartment they had entered and hurried down to listen at the door. The nice thing about the apartments in the Slum was that if you needed to listen in on something, it was possible with the thin walls.

"We found enough to keep us going for a while," she heard Mindy say. "We'll go get Kent tonight. And snatch Lois tomorrow."

She didn't wait to hear more. She eased down the hallway to the stairs, and called Bill Henderson as she went. She had to get to that Center and get Clark. If Mindy got her hands on him again, he would never come home.

Lois and Perry burst into the Center a little while later. Peggy wasn't on duty, but the nurse who was, immediately moved from behind the counter to protest their arrival.

"I've come to get my husband." She thrust out a copy of her paperwork.

The nurse read for a moment before lifting her troubled eyes to Lois. "He's not here."

"What?"

"Dr. Deter said he was being transferred to a facility outside of Metropolis. She left with him."

"When?"

"Around ten this morning."

Lois threw her hands up in frustration before heading toward Clark's room. In her hurry to leave, Deter had left all of his stuff. Lois had one of the hospital orderlies paged and asked if he could pack up Clark's things and send them to the apartment. The man assured her everything would be taken care of.

Henderson was still tied up with the Mindy/Tommy thing when Perry called him about their current situation. Bill left another officer in charge in the Slum and headed to the Center. An official report had to be made before an APB could be cast for Deter. Lois stayed until she wasn't needed any longer before rushing back to the Planet. She had already called Jimmy to get him chasing down places Deter could have taken Clark. Her house had already been checked and it was empty.

Lois couldn't suppress the growl of frustration that bubbled through her. It seemed she was still stuck on this never-ending wheel of disappointments and setbacks.

Michelle Deter smiled down at Clark. He was sleeping. She had sent him into dreamland after their last session. He had been upset that she was taking him from the Center. But when she had gotten the call about the hearing, she knew she had to get him out.

Her phone rang and she smiled when she saw who it was. "Yes?" she answered.

"Where the hell are you?"

"Somewhere I needed to be," was the answer.

“Don’t try me, little sister.”

“You don’t try me!” Michelle shouted back. “I’ve been dancing to your music for a few years now, and I’m ready to sit one out.”

“Have you forgotten the ones I’ve danced to for you?”

“How can I? You throw it up at me all the time.” Clark moaned and moved, causing Deter to reach out to touch his arm. He fretted a bit more, but finally relaxed again. “It’s time to play my game now.” She snapped her phone closed and smiled. For the first time in her life, she felt free. She wasn’t scared of Mindy anymore. What she had done was nothing short of professional suicide, but if she was going down, she was going down on her own terms. Her dear sister would have to live with that.

Mindy fumed when Michelle cut their connection. How dare that woman? Did she not know she could be brought to her knees for crossing big sister?

The commotion across the street made her turn and watch. The cops hauled Reggie to a waiting police car. She had gotten a call just moments before their hideout was stormed. She had made an excuse to get out, leaving Tommy Torch to take the fall for everything they had done. Of course, there was always the possibility this might blow up on her.

Right now though, she needed to figure out where Michelle had taken Clark. She would get him back, tuck him away somewhere safe, then go after his dear wife.

And if Lois gave her that money quickly, she would allow the intrepid reporter to die with dignity... after the appropriate amount of torture first, of course.

Part 5 — Regarding Clark: Sacrifice

Mindy Church paced back and forth in the small apartment on the lower west side. It was only slightly better than the hovel in the Slum, but at least it was not somewhere anyone would look for her. Her last confidante in the world, a dispatcher for the MPD and runner for Intergang, had stepped up to help her. She had called dozens of people until the young man agreed. He had managed to get his hands on some money she had hidden away in a couple places. And he had offered her a safe haven until she could get what she wanted and get out of town. Once she had Luthor’s millions, everyone would line up to help her.

She was also carefully forming a plan to handle her sister once and for all. Michelle would eventually fold. She just didn’t have the fire to spar in a grown-up arena. Mindy was pretty sure she knew where Michelle had taken Kent. Mindy would send her newest patsy to see if her guess was right.

She planned to let things die down for a while. She would get Kent. With him, Lane would come easily. She was going to thoroughly enjoy torturing those two. They deserved any and everything she could inflict upon them for all the trouble they had caused her.

The door opened and the young man who had been helping her stepped inside. She gave him a sugary sweet smile, making him blush a bit. He was a cute little thing. One she was going to enjoy breaking in. At least she had a distraction until she could make her move.

Clark blinked a couple of times before he was able to focus on the woman in front of him. Her beautiful smile made him feel warm all over. He had begun having more and more reactions to her lately. His uneasiness from being with her had begun to ease a bit, too.

If he could just stop having flashes of another woman...

What was her name? He couldn’t recall, hadn’t been able to all day. He could see her face though.

She was beautiful, too, even more so than Michelle. That caused him to feel a bit anxious. He couldn’t tell Michelle that.

Well, he couldn’t really tell Michelle much of anything. He

could still only say a few words. And trying new ones was just too stressing. Michelle had told him there would be time.

When? He slept nearly all day and night. When he was awake, Michelle conducted therapy or fed him.

That was an experience he wasn’t very fond of. She shoved the food into his mouth faster than he could chew it. He had gotten choked so many times.

And today he’d had an accident. Michelle had been livid, cursing loudly as she retrieved him a change of clothes. Thank goodness he was able to move enough to shower with use of the shower stool. If not, he was afraid he would still be soiled. Michelle had tossed the clean clothes on his lap and stormed from the room in disgust.

He sighed heavily and turned his head to stare out the window. He didn’t know where they were, but Michelle had told him they would soon leave here to go to her place in France.

France? Had he ever been to France?

Lois spent nearly two hours talking with Henderson about Tommy Torch’s arrest. So far the man wasn’t talking. She couldn’t really have cared less about the fires. What she wanted to know was where Mindy had disappeared to. The police were able to make a connection between Tommy and the materials used in the fires. After calls from a couple of reliable sources, there was even a connection made to the young man who had collapsed while trying to burn a newsstand. That meant Tommy was going to take the fall for Mindy’s plots.

The blazing headline declaring the Planet torcher had been arrested was splashed across the front page. Mr. Stern was restored to his usual, bland self. Perry was thrilled with the turnaround and to have his top reporter producing front page stuff. Jimmy was on cloud nine because his photos had accompanied the article. And Lois was hollow inside.

Clark had been missing for three days. Most of the city had been turned inside out with no sign of him. Deter owned three different properties and all had been raided. Jimmy had moved on from personal property to familial real estate. Clark needed to be found and found soon. The longer he was with Deter, the more damage the woman could inflict. He had a long enough road ahead of him without being told a string of lies by a crazy woman.

Another piece about Superman’s supposed undercover operation was produced to keep the masses happy and clueless. It wasn’t something Lois particularly enjoyed, but what choice did she have? The world couldn’t find out Clark Kent was Superman.

“Lois, honey, you need to go home and get some rest,” Perry told her, gently rubbing her shoulder. She was hunched over her desk, the same place she had been for over three days.

“I can’t rest until I find Clark,” she told him, rubbing her face to loosen the cobwebs. She had been at the Planet for over twenty hours straight. As much as she could use the break, there was no way she could go home to their apartment.

“I’ll have Jimmy go get you something to eat.”

“Thanks, Perry.”

“Not a problem. Henderson called to say that there have been a couple of reports about Mindy. He’s chasing down those leads as quick as he can.”

Lois nodded, too drained to speak anymore. She leaned her head over on her hands, reaching out again to find the connection she had used to find Clark before. It wasn’t there. She couldn’t ‘feel’ her husband the way she had felt him before. Was it because of his injuries?

That wasn’t right either. She had felt him at the Center. So what was Michelle doing to him? What *had* she done?

Was Clark strong enough to survive Dr. Deter?

With nothing else to do, she decided to give Bernie a call.

“Clark’s mind is much more complex than that of an Earth human. I just can’t tell you for sure if what recovery he has made is enough to sustain him through this... nothing. I do know from what you’ve told me and because he is who he is, his capacity to heal is remarkable. The fact that he knew certain things is proof that the brain damage wasn’t as significant as I had first thought.”

“So that’s a good thing?”

“A very good thing. It probably has more to do with his biology than anything else. I had ordered George to get him out in the sun and when he did, that’s when we started seeing remarkable gains in recovery. If he’s being exposed to a bit of sunlight, he should fare much better.”

“Thanks, Dr. Klein, for everything you’ve done.”

“It’s the least I can do for everything Clark’s done for this world. As soon as you know something, we are on go. We’ll jump right back in with intensive therapy.”

“I’ll let you know right away.” She cut the connection and sat there, hopelessness washing over her. She had never been one to feel hopeless, but what else could she do at this point? If she ever got her hands on Church or Deter...

Someone yelled that there was a breaking story so she focused on the monitors.

‘Metropolis Police have issued a state wide APB for Dr. Michelle Deter and former Church matriarch, Mindy Church. Deter kidnapped a patient from the Metropolis Neuroscience Center three days ago. She left the Center without authorization with former reporting sensation, Clark Kent. Kent was kidnapped in February by Mindy Church, who we have now learned is Deter’s sister. In a rescue attempt to save Kent from Church, he was shot protecting his wife, Lois Lane, the other half of the Lane and Kent reporting duo. We are told Kent was in the MNC for therapy resulting from his injuries when Deter decided she alone should be in charge of his care. Church escaped certain death when the bunker below Lex Towers collapsed following an explosion. It is believed Church was holed up in an apartment in Suicide Slum until a raid days ago. In the raid, Thomas Reginald Sandborne, AKA Tommy Torch, was taken into custody and charged with the recent string of fires associated with the Daily Planet. So far he remains silent, protecting Church, who is said to have footed the bill for the destruction.’

Lois turned away from the monitors as pictures of both women and her husband were displayed. She had never felt so anxious in her life. Where was he? What was Deter doing to him? He was no doubt confused. They had made such wonderful progress to have it all shot to hell by a megalomaniac.

Jimmy walked up and plopped down a take-out tray. “From Mr. Chow’s.”

She smiled at him. He was only trying to help and any other time she would have been thrilled with his selection. She loved Mr. Chow’s. “Thanks, Jimmy,” was all she could manage.

He didn’t respond, just opened the carton and took out her cutlery. “I know you don’t feel much like eating, but you need your strength for when we find CK.” Jimmy stuck a straw in the drink he had brought to wash her dinner down with. “Come on... take a little.”

She gave in to his pleading expression and picked up her fork. Half the food was finished before she stopped.

“That’s a girl,” Jimmy said with a warm smile. He had sat down next to her and kept urging her on.

When did he grow up so much? Lois thought as she looked at him. “If I ask you for something, will you take it the wrong way?”

“Lois, I’m here, for whatever you need,” he assured her.

“I could really use a hug,” she whispered through a barrage of tears.

“Aw, Lois,” Jimmy said softly and leaned forward to encompass her in his embrace. If any of the few people that

remained at the Planet thought it unusual for him to be offering Lois comfort, none indicated it. He tucked her head against his shoulder while she cried softly. Perry stepped to the door of his office and Jimmy lifted his eyes to look at his boss. He and Perry exchanged a worried glance, then the older man sighed and headed back toward his desk, snatching up his phone.

It was a good three minutes before Lois finally drew back. She reached for the tissue Jimmy had produced from somewhere. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

“Hey, I’m not CK, and my hugs probably don’t feel half as good, but my arms are here any time.” He reached out to grasp her hand, waiting for her to look up at him. “Day or night.”

She offered him a sad smile. “If we don’t find him soon, I might be camping out on your couch.”

“I’ll make sure to keep a blanket close.” He smiled and stood up. “I’m going to hit the computer again. I have a couple of things I want to check on.”

“Okay. Thanks again.”

“No problem. We’ll find him, Lois.”

She smiled and nodded, watched him walk away. He had become a good friend. And if things kept going so well with her sister, he might be her brother-in-law before long.

With a deep breath, Lois called up a program on her computer. Deter couldn’t hide forever and she was going to find her. It was time to reach deep and find that Mad Dog resolve inside. Clark needed her.

‘Don’t fall for me, farm boy. I don’t have time for it.’

‘You’re always editing my copy.’

‘You are a strange one, Clark Kent.’

‘I love it that you care!’

‘You know, I have a funny feeling you didn’t tell me your biggest secret.’

‘You’re my best friend.’

‘Our byline is gonna look great on a Pulitzer someday.’

‘You’re asking me out?’

‘I want you to know that I love you. And you’re not alone anymore.’

‘Even when a huge part of you didn’t make any sense, there was a part deep down that did.’

Clark woke with a start and sat straight up. Those images had been the most realistic ones yet. He could see her face... her expressive brown eyes... her sincere, caring expression...

And it wasn’t the face of the woman he had been with the last few days. There were images of her, images that seemed strained, as if he was on the outside looking in. He couldn’t feel her the way he could the other woman.

Why couldn’t he remember her name? It was there, on the tip of his tongue. Who was she? Why did he keep having visions of her?

Why did he want to keep those visions to himself? The last time he told Michelle, she got angry with him. It wasn’t as if he could stop the images or call them up whenever he wanted to. They just came to him, usually when he was asleep.

He sighed and pushed a hand through his hair. Despite his mind’s ability to cooperate, his body seemed to be (WHAT HERE?) whether he wanted it to or not. He was getting physically stronger by the day. He still couldn’t walk or talk much more than he had done before, but the parts that worked were working much better every day.

If only he could remember that woman...

She was so tired. Had she ever been this tired in her life?

Maybe it was time to call it a night or day or whatever it was now. She had been here nonstop for four days. They had searched and searched and searched and so far and nothing.

“I think I have something,” Jimmy said excitedly as he ran up

to her desk. “Deter and Church’s mother had some holdings left to her by her sister, Doris Knox. The properties were placed in Knox’s daughter’s name.” Jimmy looked up at Lois. “Knox’s nonexistent daughter’s name. I’m thinking tax liabilities, but anyway... the properties include a townhouse in Georgetown, a warehouse in the shipping yard, and three storage facilities downtown.”

“We need to call Henderson,” Lois said, moving to pick up her phone.

“Done. They should be half way to Georgetown by now,” Jimmy told her.

Lois smiled at him. “Thanks, Jimmy. I’d be lost without you.”

“Hey, it’s what we need to do to find Clark. And we will.” He reached out to squeeze her shoulder.

They were left to wait to hear from Henderson.

And it was nearly an hour later before he called.

Lois replaced the receiver of her phone a few moments later, a stunned expression on her face.

“Well?” Jimmy wanted to know.

She looked up at him as large tears spilled over. “They found him.”

“The townhouse?” Jimmy wanted to know.

“Yeah,” she said softly. “I have to go.” She stood and grabbed her jacket and bag. When she had come to the Planet, she was dressed casually in jeans and a blouse. She had told Bill to transport Clark to Star Labs. Being as the Labs was one of the leading testing facilities in the country, and it was also an actual clinic, nothing was said of her strange choice. But she had decided long ago that Dr. Klein would treat Clark from here on out.

She reached Star Labs right behind the ambulance that brought Clark in. Dr. Klein was in with him, carefully examining him to see what kind of damage Dr. Deter had managed to inflict.

“Lois,” Bill called as he stepped over toward her.

“How is he?” she wanted to know at once.

“He’s lucid, seemed to understand what was happening. He asked why we were taking him.”

Lois nodded and looked toward the room they had told her he was in. “Deter?”

“Wasn’t there? We have men combing the area as we speak, but so far, nothing.”

“Just keep looking for her.”

“Oh, don’t worry. She and Church are going to share a cell, for a long time,” Henderson assured her. He reached out to pat Lois’ shoulder. “Take care of him. We need him back on the beat.”

“I will, Bill. And thank you.” Lois gave him a small smile, then turned to stare at the door behind which her husband was. He was no doubt confused and maybe a little upset. If Deter had given him hypnotic suggestions, there was no telling what he believed now. They had their work cut out for them.

It was nearly fifteen minutes before Bernie stepped into the hallway. His expression told her all she needed to know. It wasn’t good.

“She’s done a number on him,” Bernie told her. “He believes he and Michelle were involved in some kind of personal relationship.”

Lois growled in anger and frustration, but otherwise kept quiet.

“I haven’t told him anything. I do believe we should tell him some... Who you are, that you’re his wife... introduce him to his folks, Perry, Jimmy... And when he asks a question, tell him the truth.”

“You don’t think that will cause any damage?”

“At this point, it might undo the damage Deter’s done. He’s confused and needs the truth repeated over and over before he’ll

begin to believe it or until his mind starts to clear. With his incredible capacity to heal, I think that will happen sooner rather than later. His body has continued to progress, probably more so than he realizes. I want to get George back with him and really push him.”

“I completely trust your professional opinion, Dr. Klein. Whatever you feel he needs.”

Dr. Klein gave Lois a tentative smile. “His prognosis looks promising, Lois. I feel he’ll recover. It just might take some time.”

“Thanks.” She glanced toward the room Clark was in. “Can I see him?”

“Please.” He held up his hand for Lois to go ahead of him.

Lois pushed the door open to find Clark sitting in his wheelchair next to the exam table. When the door opened, he lifted his head to look at her. His eyes widened and he stared at her. She stepped closer, fighting desperately to keep the tears of relief at bay.

“Hi,” she told him softly.

“Hey,” he answered, surprising her that he could still speak. She didn’t know what she had expected, but for some reason, for him to still have the ability for speech wasn’t it. He was still staring at her, as if he was studying her.

She eased closer, grabbing the physician’s stool and pulling it in front of him so she could sit and talk with him. “How are you?” He shrugged. “That’s understandable.” She laid her bag on the exam table. “Do you know who you are?”

“Clark,” he said.

“Clark who?” Another shrug. “You’re Clark Kent. You’re a reporter and you live here in the city.”

“You?”

“I’m Lois. I’m a reporter. We work together.”

“More?” he wanted to know.

She smiled at him. “Yes, Clark, we’re married.”

His eyes widened in shock and he looked spooked. “M... Michelle?” he sputtered.

“Michelle was your doctor and for some reason when she treated you, she told you lies about your relationship with her.”

Clark shook his head. “No!”

“Yes,” Lois told him. “You don’t have to believe it right now, but you will eventually. Slowly you’ll start to remember.” He just stared at her as if he didn’t believe her. “Do you know how you got hurt?” He shook his head. “You were shot.” His brows rose toward his hair. “You were deprived of oxygen to your brain and it caused a lot of damage. When you first woke up, you couldn’t move or speak at all.”

He looked down at his legs and his hands before lifting his eyes back to Lois.

“Did Michelle help you exercise?” He sat there for a long moment, then finally shook his head. “Will you work with Dr. Klein now? And your therapist, George?” He shrugged. Lois couldn’t stand it any longer. She eased to kneel on the floor in front of him and reached out to grasp his hand. He jerked it away from her, staring at her as if she had no right to touch him. She bit down on her disappointment and pain, reminding herself that he was lost and confused right now. “It’s okay,” she told him. She stood up and smiled at him, despite how she felt. “Even if you don’t want to see me, as long as you’re safe and working to get well, it’s more than enough for me.”

He just stared up at her, a blank expression on his face.

“Do you want me to leave?”

“Yes,” he said.

Lois gulped down a sob and reached for her bag. “I’m so glad you’re safe,” she told him. “And I love you. The nurses will have my numbers in case you want to talk to me or see me.” She gave him another tentative smile, then turned toward the door.

“No.”

She stopped and faced him again. “No?”

He took a deep breath. “You... I see you.”

She moved back over in front of him. “You see me? Where?”

“Sleep,” he struggled out.

“When you sleep?” He nodded. “You dream about me?” she deduced. Again, he nodded. “See? Somewhere inside you know me.” He shrugged. “I know you don’t remember me, but it will come back.”

He dropped his eyes to his lap, reminding her of how far gone he was in the beginning. Damn, Michelle Deter!

“Do you want me to come see you some?”

His head lifted so he could look at her. “I stay?”

“Yes,” she told him. “For a while. George will help you learn to walk again. When you can care for yourself, I’ll come take you home.” He looked so lost, so wounded. She kneeled again. “Do you want to come home now?” He shrugged. “Do you want me to come stay here with you?” He shrugged again. “Oh, honey.” His eyes snapped to hers. “I wish I knew what to do.”

“Me, too,” he managed. He stared at her for a long moment before he grabbed the wheels of his chair. “Go,” he said softly and turned away from her.

“Clark,” she whined.

“Go,” he repeated, sounding more defeated than she had ever heard him. He was so confused.

She bit down on her pain and gathered up her bag to head toward the door. She stopped and looked back at him sadly.

“Give him time,” Dr. Klein said softly. He had stood just inside the door while she spoke with Clark.

Lois nodded. “I’ll call his parents. They’ll probably hop the first plane they can get.”

“Good. He needs familiarity. Come see him, whether he wants you to or not. Even if you do nothing but come in and say hi and you love him, do it as often as you can.”

She offered Bernie a smile and glanced back at Clark before stepping into the hallway. She had held out hope that when she found him, things would fall into place. But she supposed this was to be expected. Deter had done a number on him and it was going to take a while to get him back on track. Until then, she had to keep telling herself not to take it personally. Clark was hurt and needed time to heal.

Michelle Deter paced back and forth in the dingy motel room. She’d had a small amount of cash and had driven just north of the city to lay low. When she had gone out earlier, she had never dreamed the cops would be waiting when she returned. Luckily the townhouse was in the back of the complex, so she had seen the lights and vehicles long before she reached a point of no return. She had watched from a strategic position as Clark was taken out of the building and loaded into an ambulance. She had been unable to learn where he had been taken and had lost the ambulance when she had been tailing it. No doubt Lane had squirreled him away at some high security place no one could get into.

Her phone rang and she cursed aloud. “What?” she answered.

“A little on edge, I see,” came the voice on the other end.

“Just save it, Mindy.”

“Save it? I’m not the one that lost an entire person.”

“I didn’t lose him!”

“Oh, that’s right. He was taken from you!” Mindy took a deep breath. “I should have known you would hide out in plain sight.”

“What do you want?”

“From you? Nothing,” Mindy was quick to tell her. “I’ll get what I want myself. Obviously you are not capable of handling things.”

“Go to hell!”

“My, my, my,” was the snarky retort. “Just keep your butt hid-

If you lead them to me...”

“I want as much to do with you as you do with me.”

“Good.”

“Good!” Michelle snapped her phone closed and fumed in anger. Her sister was infuriating. Yes, she had helped her out a time or two, but the woman was insufferable. When all of this was over, she would finally give Mindy what the woman deserved.

That thought alone was enough to improve her mood a bit.

Clark was lying on his bed, staring out the window at the pouring rain. He had spent his first night in this new place and he was absolutely miserable. He was so confused he wasn’t sure what to think. He felt sick and anxious. And more than a little scared.

The woman from his dreams — Lois — had come to see him! She had told him she was his wife. Was that why he had been dreaming of her? But what about Michelle? Had she really lied to him? If so, why?

Maybe Lois had lied. Why would she? She had looked so serious when she had told him she was glad he was safe.

She had told him she loved him.

There was a lot he didn’t know, a lot he didn’t understand, but he understood that. Or at least what it meant. Or he thought he did.

The door opened and he turned his head to see a large black man.

“CK, my main man!” The man walked up to the bed and grabbed the cover. “Time to get up.”

“No,” he told him. He didn’t want to get up. He wanted to lay here and think.

“Oh, yes,” the man told him. “Do you remember me? I’m George. And I’m going to make your life a living hell,” he told him.

“No!” Clark yelled at him, pushing his hands away.

“Yes,” George insisted, tugging Clark’s legs over the side of the bed.

“Stop!”

“No.” They tussled for a moment before Clark finally stopped and stared at George, breathing heavily. “We are gonna do this,” George told him again. “You don’t have to like it, but you will work and you will work hard.”

Clark stared at him for a long moment before he huffed in frustration. He gave up fighting with George and helped himself to his chair.

George made him feed himself breakfast, even though he made a huge mess. He stretched until he was in so much pain he was sick at his stomach. The hot tub helped provide a bit of relief before they headed to the cafeteria for lunch. He didn’t make as big a mess as at breakfast, which helped with his sour mood. He spent the afternoon lifting weights to build the muscles in his arms and moving his feet just to get his leg muscles to cooperate. George forced him to give himself a shower, then took him back to his room. He collapsed thankfully on his bed.

“Don’t get too comfortable,” George told him. “Lois is coming to stretch you out so you won’t get tight on me.” He gave him a wink. “I’ll tell you, CK, that is one more fine wife you have.”

Clark jerked his head around to glare at George.

“See,” the man said with a wide grin. “I can tell you that ‘cause you laying in that bed and can’t get up and shut my mouth for me.” He was gathering up the things Lois would need to stretch Clark’s muscles and rub them down. “I’m gonna keep talking about that fox until you can stand up and tell me to hush.” He clapped his hands together. “Get some sleep. I’ll be back at dawn. We’re going for a little boat ride before breakfast.”

Clark was left to stare after George because he was gone. The

door opened not more than two minutes later and Lois stepped in.

“Hey,” she told him with a smile on her face. She dropped her things on the chair and headed straight for him. “George said we have to stretch those legs because he worked you pretty hard today.” He didn’t say a word, but watched everything she did. She kicked off her shoes and climbed up on the bed. “Ready?” His answer was a glare. “Have it your way,” she said and reached to bend his leg. She pushed back until he grunted. “Unless you speak up, I’ll keep going until I hear a sound.” She relaxed the leg and pushed back again. Another grunt. “So, I called your parents. They’ll be in tomorrow.” She looked at him. “You did know you had parents?” He shrugged and she kept working on his leg, moving through the different stretches George had taught her.

“Perry — that’s our boss — said to tell you to get back on your feet so you can get back to work and keep me straight. Like I need you to keep me straight.” She snorted out. “Jimmy’s so stoked you’re here. He works with us — a good friend. He’s been dating my sister, Lucy, since our wedding.”

He grunted and shifted a bit. She glanced at him, but kept moving. “He and I are working on a case about an apartment fire in an uptown tenement. The landlord had just about let the place fall down. The fire killed six people.” She moved to his other leg. “My mom and dad both asked about you.”

“Ow!” he yelled and drew up in pain.

“Too much?”

“Back,” he answered with his eyes clenched tightly closed.

“It pulled in your back?” He nodded tightly. “Lean up a bit.”

He did and she smoothed her hand up and down the spot he had indicated. He sighed when the knot released itself. “Better?”

“Yes,” he answered and lay back down.

“Good. We’ll ease up just a bit.” She worked on his legs a few more minutes before she reached for the massage oil. “Time to rub you down.” She poured some oil in her hands, rubbed them together to warm it, then moved her palms over his thigh. He closed his eyes and let out a long breath. “Feel good?”

“Yes,” he answered and opened his eyes to look at her. He could clearly remember her doing this before. “You help? Before?”

“Of course,” she answered and kept her hands moving. “I’ve helped with your therapy since you were hurt.” She retrieved some more oil and moved to his other leg. “George told me we should practice talking. He said start with short, easy sentences. Try... My name is Clark Kent.”

He looked at her for a long moment before he sighed. “My... name... is... Clark Kent.” He had struggled a bit, but he finally got it out.

“Good,” she said with a smile. “Again.”

“My name... is... Clark Kent.”

“Nice,” she said with a satisfied expression. “My birthday is February 28th.”

“Really?” he asked her.

“Yeah, really,” she told him. She moved down to his calf and rubbed deep. He grunted, so she eased off a bit.

“My... birth... day... is... Feb... wary 2-8.”

“Close,” she told him. “We’ll work on that one.” She switched to his other leg. “Anywhere else you would like me to rub?”

He lifted his hand. “Hand.”

“Is it sore?”

“Yes.”

She took his hand and massaged it carefully. He sighed and closed his eyes. When she was done with his hand, she moved up his arm. His eyes opened and he looked at her when she moved over his bicep and shoulder. She had moved off the bed to stand next to it so she could reach him. One arm, then the other after she went around the bed. She talked about the weather, the traffic,

the need for new tires on the Jeep, and an upcoming trip to Costmart. When she was done, she went to wash her hands.

“So, I’ll be here tomorrow night.”

“You leaving?” he asked her.

“Do you want me to stay?”

He stared at her for a second before he nodded. “Read... you... did that.”

“I did do that. I read to you all the time before you woke up and so many times after.” She moved over to her bag and dug out a notebook. “I have the perfect thing.” She pulled her chair close to the bed and sat down. He had a full bed here at Star Labs, but given his state of mind, she wasn’t going to make assumptions. If he wanted her closer, he would tell her.

“Wide and bright, demanding, serene... I’ve never seen anything like them before,” she read. “I’ve always heard the eyes were the windows to the soul, but I just never believed that until now.

“The deep, dark pools that stare at me seem to see what no one else can. She’s looking at me the way I’ve always dreamed she would. And I can’t believe how good it feels. That smile... Does she know what that smile does to me? A simple expression — that smile could melt ice. When my world is dark, that smile lights the way. Those eyes lead and I follow. If there was one word to describe her, it would be perfect.”

She looked up at him. He was staring at the ceiling, but she could tell he had a lot on his mind. “Did you like that?”

“I... wrote it,” he said without looking at her.

“You did. Do you remember it?”

“No. I... know... I wrote it.”

“This whole book is full of stuff you wrote,” she told him.

“Do you want me to leave it so you can read it?”

“You read it,” he managed after a moment.

“We can do that. I can read a little to you every night. How’s that?”

Clark nodded and finally moved his eyes to look at her. “Sleep now.”

“Okay,” she said with a smile as she stood up. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” He nodded. She reached out to stroke his face. “I love you,” she said softly, withdrew, and left him there.

A silent tear eased from the corner of his eye as more pain and confusion washed over him. He wasn’t sure what to think. He had so much stuff rolling around inside him.

She had come — Lois had come. She had come before. If she had lied to him, why had she come before?

And if Michelle meant so much to him, why wasn’t she here? Why hadn’t she come to help him?

Why hadn’t she told him she loved him? She had told him she loved her, but not the other way around. She hadn’t touched him the way Lois had either. She hadn’t smiled at him with an expression so tender it *felt* right.

He closed his eyes, willing himself to remember. If he could remember, none of this would matter. He would know the truth.

“I can’t,” Clark told George as the man reached down to lift him up.

“Sure you can.” The large man struggled a bit, but finally managed to get Clark settled in the boat. He had brought Clark to the lake on the Star Labs property. It was used for a variety of things. Today it was going to be used so that Clark could row George across the water. “Man, you’re heavier than you look,” he said as he wiped his brow. He rechecked Clark’s lifejacket, then snapped his own into place. “Grab the oars.”

“I can’t,” Clark said again.

“Your arms work,” George told him. “Quite well, I might add. The oars are in the anchors, so you won’t lose them.” He pushed the end of the boat further into the water. Clark’s eyes widened a bit in fear. “Lois said you are a fantastic swimmer.”

“Not now,” Clark told him.

“Maybe if you fall out, it’ll get your legs moving.” And before Clark could protest more, George shoved the boat into the water and stepped in, settling on the front seat facing Clark. Clark just stared at him. “We can drift, but eventually you’ll have to row to get us back.” He motioned at the oars. “When you row, you’ll have to lean forward before you draw back. This will help with body strength.”

Clark stared at him a long moment before he huffed in frustration and grabbed the oars. There was no use arguing with him. He would have to do it anyway.

“That’s it,” George said when Clark leaned forward and drew back the first time. “Ease into it.”

The first few strokes were tentative and unsure, but twenty minutes later, Clark was crossing the water like a pro. The lake was quite large, but he had managed to make it to the other side and had turned them to head back.

“Damn, CK, you’re a pro!” George grinned from ear to ear. “I can’t wait till those legs are working so you can take us jogging.”

“Bite me,” Clark retorted.

“Hey, hey! Listen to you! I do believe the man has just come alive, folks,” he said loudly. Clark pressed on, sweat pouring from his head. “Hey, did I tell you about Lauren. That’s one more fine woman right there. She calls me up and says, ‘I need some dinner and you’re buying’. And let me tell you, boy, that was some good stuff.” He sighed in satisfaction, a large smile on his face. “Tell me about Lois.”

“I can’t,” Clark said, indicating his lack of knowledge of his... whatever she was.

“Sure, you can. You can tell me what you do know.”

“She... helps me.”

“Sure, sure. Does she do a good job?” he asked with a sly grin.

“Hurts,” Clark told him, bearing down to draw back again.

“Even the rub down?”

“No,” Clark answered simply, remembering her hands on his legs the night before. “She rub... my... hand,” Clark got out.

“Was your hand hurting?”

Clark half shrugged as he worked.

George broke out into a wide grin. “You ole sly dog, you. CK, I’m pretty sure she would rub whatever you wanted her to.” His eyes widened a bit. “Keepin’ it clean, now.”

Clark’s eyes met his and slowly he grinned.

“That’s my man! You’re in there — all of you. We just have to get it out here. So, keep talking. I’ll say something and you finish it. Okay?” He thought for a second. “Lois is...” He waved a hand at Clark.

“P... p... ur... dy,” Clark struggled out.

“Very pretty,” George agreed. “I like her...” He waited for Clark to finish.

“Eyes,” he answered him.

“Gorgeous brown that stare right through you,” George finished and grunted in pleasure. “If I could do anything, I’d...”

“K... kick... G... George butt,” Clark told him.

George roared in laughter. “That’s what I want to hear.”

Clark grinned at him again, glancing back to see the shore.

“All... the way?” he wanted to know.

“Up as far as you can get us.”

Transition back to the wheelchair was easier because Clark helped George. He wheeled himself up the path and back to the building. Breakfast was better — not as messy. He lifted few weights before the hot tub, lunch, and leg strengthening in the afternoon. When Lois arrived that night, Clark was eating his dinner.

“Hey,” she said with a smile.

“Hey,” he said, concentrating on not dropping his Jell-o.

George insisted on Jell-o- to help him with his control. He worked for a few moments before lifting his eyes to see Lois watching him. “Jell-O... is... tricky.”

“Yeah. You did a wonderful job though,” she said with a smile. “Are you done?”

“Yes.” He watched as she cleared away his tray and the table before his bed was lowered for her to crawl up to stretch his legs out. They worked for a few moments — Clark even voicing his limits. Finally, he was the one to start the conversation. “How... was... work?”

Her eyes met his and she smiled. “Work was very productive today. Jimmy and I learned that the landlord of that building pushed back several repairs because he was too cheap to get them taken care of. We have a list of the things the inspectors said were supposed to have been done. Constance Hunter — do you remember her? She did some work for you once. She’s a lawyer. Anyway, she’s filing suit on behalf of the families of the victims.”

“My... folks?”

“Oh, there was a storm in Kansas. Their flight won’t get in until tomorrow morning. Your mom called and said to tell you she was sorry and they loved you.” She bore down on one of his legs, causing him to grunt. “Too much?”

“No... It’s fine.” He pushed back a bit against her pressure.

Her eyes snapped to his. “Wow. You really are improving, but don’t push too much. We’re supposed to be stretching you out.”

He relaxed and allowed her to finish up before she moved to his rub down.

“Could you... rub my back?”

She smiled at him. “I can. George told me about the trip on the lake.”

“I’m... sore.”

“Can you roll over?”

He nodded and did as he was told, using his pillow to prop on. Lois pushed his shirt up and started to rub. He groaned aloud, the feel of her hands causing him to melt into the mattress.

“Good?”

“Mmm,” was his answer as she continued to work. He had asked George about Lois today and the man told him he would have to ask her. He wanted to know what kind of person she was, but could he ask her that? Would she be honest with him?

“Lo-is?”

“Yeah?” She was intent on her task, and lost in the feel of her husband’s body beneath her hands. She had missed touching him, and it felt glorious to be able to do so again.

“Tell me... ‘bout you.”

“Oh, wow. Let’s see... I’m strong willed, driven...”

“Pig... headed,” he finished.

She smiled at that. He was remembering something he had said. Bernie had told her earlier he might do that, increasingly more as he continued to heal.

“I love my job, but recently discovered my true passion is loving you.”

“How long... we work...?”

“We worked together for two years before we became more than friends. And it took us a year to get to the altar.”

He laid there for a long moment before he spoke again. “Was it... nice wedding?”

“It was... incredible,” she breathed. “I was so happy.”

“Not so much... now,” he said sadly.

“Oh, honey, I am happy. I’m sad that you’re hurt and have to work so hard, but I’m happy because you’re here with me.”

He lifted up and reached toward the table beside his bed. For the first time she noticed the cards George had helped him make when he was at the Center. She had given them to Bernie to help with Clark’s therapy. He flipped through the deck and turned on his side to hold out a card to her.

‘Even when you have to wipe my butt’... Tears filled Lois’

eyes as she looked at the words. He remembered.

Slowly she lifted her eyes to his. “Even then,” she assured him.

He stared at her for a moment before he tapped the card. “None all day.”

She laughed softly. “That’s good.”

He slowly smiled at her. “Want to read?”

“Sure.” She wiped her face and held out his card to him. He took it and shifted to lie on his side while she got his notebook. She settled on the chair and cleared her throat.

“I stood on the sidewalk and stared up at the building as if it was some magical place. I guess it is. It’s the place I’ve dreamed of working since I was old enough to know I wanted to be a journalist. And just moments ago, I looked at her for the first time.

“I inhaled her for the first time, too. The chaos is overwhelming, but it’s my speed. I feel like this place can move as fast as I can.

“Perry White was intimidating to say the least. I didn’t impress him much, but I have a plan.

“If I can manage to organize a thought, I’ll put that plan into action. Right now, I’m still recovering. I was introduced to my future, to my world. I was so stunned at first I had to blink several times to bring her into focus. And when she crystalized before me, so did the rest of my life. I have a purpose... Her name is Lois Lane.”

She looked up at him and he smiled at her.

“I liked you... at once.”

“You did,” she confirmed.

“Not you,” he said.

“No,” she said with a chuckle. “I didn’t look until much, much later. And when I did, I was very impressed. I just hid it because it scared the hell out of me.”

“Now?”

Her eyes went to his and she gazed deeply. “Now, I can’t imagine living my life without you in it.”

It was a long moment before he nodded. “I am... tired,” he told her.

“Okay.” She stood and reached down to rub his arm.

“Goodnight, Clark.” She turned toward the door, but stopped to look back at him. “I love you.”

He watched her turn back, a sad expression on her face. Or was it a longing expression? No doubt this was hard on her. And if it was as hard for her as it was confusing for him, she had every right to look sad and maybe a bit anxious. He wasn’t sure how he would act if their places were reversed.

Lois got up every morning, dressed for work, trudged uptown to investigate the latest hot topic, then headed toward Star Labs. For nearly a week, she had helped Clark stretch while they made small talk. He would ask a question now and then and she would answer as honestly as she could. She had read to him, then she would say goodnight. But she always told him she loved him. He would just look at her — that cold, blank stare that let her know he still didn’t recognize her a bit. George told her he asked about her, talked about Michelle, and brooded a lot. He was working hard physically, though he held back otherwise.

He had met Martha and Jonathan, listened while they talked to him a bit. He just didn’t seem extremely interested in them or the stories of his life they would tell him. They had allowed his reaction to sting more than they should have, so they only visited for half an hour each day. They had planned to stay a little over a week before heading back to the farm. Lois felt so bad for them.

Perry and Jimmy both had visited him. Of course, he hadn’t responded much to them either. Lucy had gone for a visit, but unlike the others, his reaction didn’t bother her as badly. She had never known Clark well to begin with, so she was getting to

know him just like he was her. Lois asked her mother to wait to visit — that would have been a disaster. And Sam was in Chicago, which suited Lois just fine.

Lois dragged herself through her day once again before heading toward Star Labs. She pushed the door to Clark’s room open to find him standing... Standing! He held tight to the walker that helped him balance and he was looking out the window. His head turned and he looked at her.

“Wow,” she gushed as she went further inside. “Look at you.” She made her way over to stand in front of him.

“My legs... are... cramping,” he said slowly. “When... I lay... it hurts.”

“You must have worked hard today,” she deduced.

“Yeah.” He grimaced and shifted. “I took... six steps... to here. More earlier.”

“That’s wonderful,” she told him.

He looked at her and she could tell the pain was causing him distress. “Would you... rub?”

“Absolutely,” she agreed and went to get the massage oil. “Do you want to remain standing?”

“Yes,” he answered.

Lois quickly poured some oil in her hands, rubbed her hands together, and kneeled behind him. When she reached out to grab the first leg, he sighed heavily. “I can feel the knots,” she told him.

He sucked in a breath and leaned heavily on his arms. “There,” he said when she hit a sensitive spot. “Ahhh,” he groaned as she rubbed deeper. She worked for several moments before he felt like he could move. “Sit,” he told her urgently. In a second, his chair was behind him. He slowly lowered himself down and sighed heavily in relief. He gingerly stretched his legs out.

“Wow,” Lois said as she watched him. He moved one back and forth, then the other. “George really has been pushing you.”

“Yeah,” he said and made a face when he stretched out his leg. He sighed heavily when Lois sank back to her knees and continued to rub. “Ah,” he grunted. “There.”

She would rub deep, up the back of his thigh, then back to his knee, down to his calf before the return trip up his leg.

“You must... be tired... of this,” he said and grunted again when her fingers hit a sensitive spot.

“As long as you’re improving, I’ll never be tired of this.” She smiled at him before switching legs.

She rubbed for a moment before Clark reached down to grasp her hand. He didn’t say word, just started rubbing her the way she had done him. He kneaded the muscles in her palm, moved over her fingers.

“That’s... oh wow,” she moaned and closed her eyes.

He worked up to her wrist, back over hand, then moved to the other one. “Lo-is?”

She opened her eyes to look at him. “Yeah?”

“When I can walk... can I... come home?”

Wow. Where had that come from? He had seemed so... disconnected. But if he wanted to come home, she would have him there in a second. “You can come now if you want to,” she was quick to let him know. “You would have to come to the labs every day for therapy.”

“I’ll stay... till I can walk,” he said and kept rubbing her hands.

“Okay,” she agreed and sighed again. “That’s good.”

He gave her a little smile. “George said we should... work on my speech.”

“Okay. What did he want us to do?”

“You say... some... words, I finish.”

I say something and you finish it?” she asked him. He nodded. “Let’s see... Clark Kent is...”

“A reporter.”

“Good,” she said with a smile. “He works for...”
 “The... Daily Planet.”
 “Very good,” she bragged. “His parents are...”
 “Upset with him.” Her eyes met his. “I... don’t mean... to hurt them.”
 “They know, honey.” She used her free hand to rub his arm. “They know you’re working hard, but are still confused and dealing with everything.”
 “George... played a... game with me today.” He worked his thumb in the space between her thumb and forefinger. “He put pictures on a table.”
 “And?” George had told her about the game. She spoke with him first every day before seeing Clark.
 “I picked out... your picture.”
 “Is that all?”
 He stopped his fingers and stared at her hand. “I didn’t know Michelle.”
 “Does that tell you something?”
 He shrugged as he turned her hand over. “Where is... your band?”
 “My wedding band?” He nodded. “I took it off before you were hurt.”
 “Why?” His eyes went up to hers.
 “Right after we were married, this woman that’s obsessed with us because we’ve exposed some of her criminal activities — she kidnapped you. I didn’t know it right away because she replaced you with a clone.”
 “Clone? Of me?”
 “Of you,” she confirmed as she looked at him.
 “He was... with you?”
 “He was and...” She stopped when Clark released her hand and sat straighter in his seat. “Clark, no. He wasn’t with me like that. He *was* with me right after our wedding ceremony — on our wedding night — but nothing happened. I was so confused when he wanted to go to sleep instead of...” She blushed and glanced down. “We had been looking forward to that night and for him to want to sleep instead...” Her eyes lifted back to his. “I thought it was you and I was confused as to why you didn’t want to... do that. I figured out pretty quickly he wasn’t you.”
 “After you... and he...?”
 “No!” she rushed to tell him. “Yes, I did kiss him- that’s how I knew he wasn’t you. But that was it. I didn’t do anything else with him.”
 He stared at her for a long moment before he looked at his own hand. “My band?”
 “I have it. He gave it to me.”
 “Where is he?”
 “He’s dead.” Clark’s head lifted and his shocked eyes bore into hers. “He was shot the same time you were.”
 “Why?”
 “Why? Why were you shot?” He nodded. “You were protecting me.”
 That seemed to hit a nerve. His eyes glazed over as he looked at her. “And the other me?”
 “He took a bullet for me, too,” she told him softly.
 Clark’s eyes seemed to say things he couldn’t, things he didn’t even know for sure. He reached out with a finger and rubbed the back of her hand where it rested on the arm of his chair. “Are you... okay with that?”
 “That you took a bullet for me?” He nodded. “Well...” She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. “I am... grateful and I feel guilty that you have to suffer for such a selfless act.”
 “Is that... why you... help me?”
 “No,” she said as tears filled her eyes. “Yes, I would help you even if we were just friends, but I help you because I love you.” She moved her hand to his arm, rubbing lightly. “I promised to protect you and care for you for the rest of my life. I’ve protected

you by getting you away from Dr. Deter and that other woman. And I will care for you until my last breath, whether you’re in this chair or move on two good legs.”
 “Would I... do the same... for you?”
 Her tears slipped through her lashes and down her cheeks. “You never thought twice when that gun was fired. And you have protected me so many times in the past. You care for me to the point of it aggravating me to death.” She laughed softly. “But I’ve finally learned that’s your nature — that’s who you are.”
 He looked down to where her hand was lightly stroking his arm. “If I stay in... this chair... will you... stay with me?”
 “The only way I would leave you is in death,” she told him.
 “What if... I didn’t want... you?”
 She took a deep, steadying breath. That thought nearly killed her, but it was one she had to face. This new person, this man who couldn’t remember his life might very well decide he didn’t want to be married to her. “Well, I would fight like hell to change your mind.” She squeezed his arm as fear washed through her. He hadn’t reacted, hadn’t moved. “Is that what you want? For me to... leave you?”
 He sat for such a long time she was sure he would tell her yes. He finally shook his head in the negative. “I am... confused.”
 “I know.” She moved her hand up his arm, to smooth back and forth over his upper arm.
 “I like when you come,” he said softly and without much difficulty. His head lifted and he smiled at her. “I practiced that.”
 She smiled back at him. “I feel very humbled that you would do that for me.”
 He nodded. “I... need to go.” He waved toward the bathroom.
 “Sure.” She jumped to her feet and grabbed the handles on his chair to push him toward the bathroom. She went inside, stopping him just in front of the toilet before locking the brakes. “Do you need help?”
 “I can do it,” he told her.
 “Okay. Just yell when you’re done.” She stepped out and pulled the door closed. She released a deep breath she hadn’t known she had been holding. He didn’t want her to leave. He liked when she came... And he had asked to go home. That was more than enough for her, for now. This much meant he was making progress. And the more he made, the sooner he would be comfortable... with her... with himself. Lois had begun to think that was the key to his complete recovery- for him to feel comfortable with himself.
 The door opened and he wheeled himself through the opening.
 “Wow, look at you,” she gushed.
 “Even washed.” He held up his hands with a smile.
 “Do you want me to rub your legs some more?”
 “No. I want to rub your legs.”
 Her eyes widened at that. “Really?”
 “Yeah.” He moved his chair over to the bed, and with a bit of work, lifted himself up to the side. He worked and shifted, even moved his legs, to get himself in the middle of the bed. He patted the mattress in invitation. Lois blushed furiously as she glanced down at herself.
 “Let me change,” she told him and waved toward the bathroom. She grabbed her bag and disappeared behind the door. She kept a change of clothes in her large bag, including a pair of shorts. She wanted to be prepared at all times if she ever needed to stay with Clark.
 Or if he ever wanted her to stay. She certainly wanted to- the way she used to do at the Center.
 She went back out to find Clark leaned back on an elbow. He had placed a pillow at his feet. Obviously he wanted her to lay in the opposite direction. He watched her as she climbed up and lay

down. He only hesitated a second before he lifted his hand to move over her leg. She couldn't suppress the moan that escaped her lips as he rubbed. After a moment, he sat up so he could use both hands.

God, she had missed his touch. She hadn't known how much she had needed this. She groaned aloud and he laughed softly. Her eyes opened to look at him.

"How exactly does this help you in your therapy?" she wanted to know.

"It makes me feel good," he replied, pressing deeper. "You have nice legs."

"Thank you."

"What did... I like... best... about you?"

"Physically?" she asked aloud. "Oh wow. I'm not sure. You told me so many times I was gorgeous and you liked this or that. What do you like best now?"

"I don't know. I haven't... seen it all."

"Not lately," she said with a fierce blush.

He leaned back a little and seemed to study her, from head to toe. She fought the urge to cover herself. For him, at this time, it was the first time he had seen her.

"Eyes," he finally said and urged her to roll on her side toward him. "But maybe that, too," he mumbled, eyes flashing to her butt.

"You told me once it was nice."

"You let me... see it?"

"Of course. We *are* married."

He glanced at her before smoothing his hand up, just under the edge of her shorts so that the very bottom of her cheek was exposed. "Very nice," he said before stretching out to lie beside her. He looked at her for a long moment before he reached out to rub his knuckles over her cheek. "Is it... okay for me to... touch you when I want?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Did we... have sex... before we married?"

"No. Not for lacking of trying." She smiled at him. "We were always being interrupted by someone or something."

"We tried?"

"Oh, yeah... so many times," she replied a bit dreamily.

"I see us... in my dreams."

"Together?"

"Dancing, touching... kissing."

"But you don't have dreams of us making love?" she asked him.

"No." He laid his hand on top of hers where it lay between them. "Then I was hurt... and still..." He trailed off as he looked at her. "You must... really care... for me."

"I really, really love you. And someday, when we make love, it will be so incredible." She pulled his hand up to kiss it. His fingers automatically tightened around hers.

"I have... control problems," he said.

"Me, too," she shot right back.

That made him stare even deeper. He finally smiled at her before rolling on his back. "Want to... play a game?"

"Sure. What game?" She rolled onto her back, too.

"I say a word, you say... first one in your head."

"Okay."

"Work."

"Planet," she threw back at once.

"Smile."

"Clark."

He turned his head to look at her. She smiled at him. "Lois." "Clark," she said again. "I can't help it," she told him with a shrug.

He laughed a little. "Paper."

"Source."

"Walk."

"Legs."

"Fly."

"Super..." She stopped when she realized what she was about to say.

"What?" he probed.

She rolled to look at him. "My turn," she tried to cover for her near slip. "Work."

"George," he answered with a grin.

"Clark."

"Lois," he said.

She reached out to rub the side of his face. "Alive."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Alive," he breathed.

Lois scooted closer, gently laying her head on his shoulder, her hand moving down to take his. "I'm so glad you're alive," she whispered.

He turned his head so that his cheek rubbed her hair. "Me, too," he replied. He sighed again, squeezed her hand, and closed his eyes. He had thought of little else for days. If she wanted to lay with him, he wasn't going to push her away. He was still very confused and knew very little, but one thing he had learned fairly quickly — he liked Lois Lane. And George was right. She was one fine lady.

Lois let go a breath it seemed she had been holding for weeks. To be here with Clark like this again... They would analyze it tomorrow. Tonight she was going to enjoy being close to her husband.

The first thing he became aware of when he woke up was that the warmest sensation was whispering over his neck.

"Oh, Clark."

His eyes popped open when he heard her speak. Lois was still with him. She was lying mostly on top of him, her face buried against his neck. Her hand was moving over his stomach. She kissed him, right below his ear. Again, then her tongue touched the shell.

"I've missed you," she whispered before sucking his lobe in her mouth. Then her hand moved down... down over him... down further.

His own hand shot down to grasp hers. The shock of her touch had sent him into hyper drive. Every nerve ending was on edge and completely alive. He felt her tense, then her head shot up.

"Oh, God," she breathed. "Oh, God."

She tried to withdraw, but he held tight, forcing her to look at him. "It's okay," he told her.

"Clark, I'm..."

"Making your husband... feel good." He pressed to flatten her hand out on his body.

Her eyes glanced down, then back to his. "This..."

"Is nice," he let her know.

"I know, but..."

"But..." He sucked in a breath. To have her touch him was amazing. He'd had a reaction in the shower a couple of days ago. That's when he had learned he was still a sexual being despite his injuries.

"We shouldn't," Lois said, though now she was the driving force behind her movements.

"I've... done this... with you." His eyes met hers as another time flashed in his head.

"Yes," she replied.

He rolled over, laying her on her back so that he hovered above her. "I was... stupid."

"For what?"

"Letting all those... interruptions... stop us." His hand went up and he caressed her face. "Did we... kiss a lot?"

"Oh, yeah," she couldn't stop herself from breathing.

He smiled, then leaned to touch his lips to hers.
 And so many things happened in that moment...
 At least half a dozen memories assailed him — of them kissing.
 His body grew warm all over — letting him know that this woman was someone who moved him deeply.
 A surge of protectiveness roared to life within him — his need to protect Lois, even from himself.
 He drew away, shifted and dropped his feet to the floor.
 “Go!”
 “What?” she stuttered, unable to grasp his sudden change of mood.
 “You don’t... need this!” he shouted at her.
 “You?” She scrambled off the bed to kneel before him. “I need you so much.”
 “Not like this,” he insisted.
 “Clark, you’re alive and you’re getting stronger every day.”
 “I’m... a baby,” he spat.
 “No.” She reached up to rub his face. “You’re a beautiful, wonderful man. You saved my life. You love me, even if you don’t know it yet.”
 “You don’t need this,” he insisted again.
 “I *have* to have this,” she told him desperately, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I don’t know how to live without you.”
 He sat there, staring into her wide, expressive eyes. He could clearly see them in his mind — in so many different situations.
 And he could see the love. She didn’t just love him, she adored him. She cherished him and what they had.
 Clark lifted his hand to grasp the side of her neck, leaning his head forward to touch hers. “I’m so scared I won’t remember you,” he whispered.
 “Oh, honey,” she murmured, warping her arms around him. “You keep me close, keep working hard. You’ll remember.”
 He moved his hands up her back and pulled her closer. “If I don’t... will you still love me?”
 “As long as I breathe, I will love you,” she told him, turning her face into his neck. “And even after then.”
 He squeezed his eyes tightly, hoping desperately, that someday soon he would know this woman when he held her. She was someone vital to his very existence. He had accepted that. He wasn’t sure where Michelle Deter came in or why he had visions of her, but he knew without a doubt, Lois Lane was keeping him going.

Mindy paced back and forth in the dirty alley, waiting for her sister. She was tired of sitting around waiting. She needed to make something happen... soon. She had called Michelle, demanding they work together. Michelle had argued, of course.
 “This will be the last time we speak.”
 Mindy whirled around to face her younger sister.
 “I did what you wanted.”
 “I don’t have Clark Kent,” she stressed.
 “Not my fault. You had him and you lost him, too.”
 “I can make your life a living hell,” Mindy warned her.
 “More hell than it already is?” Michelle snorted aloud. “I have lost my job and when they find me, my freedom. And for what? I didn’t really like the man myself. He was too much work.”
 “Oh, but he possesses a remarkable ability for recovery,” Mindy said with an evil leer.
 “Then you can have him.” She turned to walk away.
 “I’ll tell them where to find you.”
 Michelle stopped, anger bubbling within her. She would just love to slap the blonde out of her sister’s arrogant head.
 “You help me get him back or I will call Lane.”
 Deter fumed for a moment before she turned. “I will help you get him and that’s it. No more!”

“No more,” Mindy agreed with a grin. “I can take it from there. I have sources that tell me he’ll be going home soon. That recovery of his is amazing. In the three weeks since he’s been under the care of Dr. Klein, he’s completely mobile and talking again.”
 “Amazing,” Michelle said with a shake of her head. “You can find out things no one else can.”
 “And don’t you forget it.” Mindy stepped over a pile of trash with an expression of distaste. “I’ll let you know when he’s back home with Lane. You can watch them and when the opportunity presents itself, lure him away.”
 “What do you plan to do with him?”
 “Get that lovely wife of his, to start with. Then I thought it would be fun to torture them both the way they’ve done me over the years.”
 “As long as it gets you your jollies.” Michelle turned and walked toward the back of the alley. “Stay out of sight.” She left Mindy standing in the middle of the filth.
 “That woman,” Mindy said with fury in her eyes. “When this is over...” She let her sentence trail off as she made her way back onto the sidewalk, carefully flipping her dark hair over her shoulder. Apparently the wig was working because no one had given her a second glance.
 When she had her money, everyone who had ever doubted her would feel her power.

Clark lifted his head when the door to his room opened. He had been sitting on the side of the bed waiting for Lois to pick him up. He was going home today. A flicker of disappointment flashed across his face when he saw it was George.
 “Ah, come on, CK, don’t be like that... after all we’ve shared.” George walked over and clapped him on the shoulder. “Ready to go?”
 “Yeah,” he answered. He didn’t struggle with his words anymore. George had worked him relentlessly, and so had Lois and his folks. He and his parents had talked and they had reached an understanding. He had agreed to get to know them and they had agreed to tell him about their son. Their week together had been great, and he had talked to them on the phone every night since.
 He had been walking quite well for a week now and he had told Lois the night before he wanted to go home. She had told him she needed to get the apartment cleaned and ready for him.
 “You don’t have to do that,” he’d told her.
 “I’m trying to impress you here,” she’d said with a grin.
 He had been unable to deny her.
 “Remember, I’ll drop by three days a week for a while, so you don’t regress.”
 “I know, George.”
 “And you woo that beautiful wife of yours,” he said with a wide smile. “She shore is one fine woman.”
 “Hey... that’s my wife you’re talking about,” Clark joked with him.
 “And you’re a lucky son of a gun, CK.” George held up his hand, waiting for a manly shake. Clark didn’t disappoint him. “I’m gonna miss you.”
 “You’re gonna miss me hauling your butt around the grounds,” Clark retorted. He had rowed George across the lake, pedaled him around on a double bike, pulled him in a carriage as Clark ran, and had even literally hauled George on his back up the steps in the large lecture hall. But the hard work had paid off — Clark could walk, talk, and control all of his bodily functions.
 “You’re still gonna haul my butt around.” George cut the shake and wiggled his fingers at him. “If you see a fine woman, give her my number. I’m looking for my future wife.”
 “Got it,” Clark said with a chuckle. They both looked up when the door opened.

“There’s my cue to jet.” George turned and reached out to grasp Lois’ arms. “Take care of our boy,” he told her.

“You know I will.”

“Yes, ma’am. You’re half the reason he’s up so soon.” He leaned to kiss her cheek. “Mmh, like I said, CK, one more fine woman.” He laughed and waved his hand as he stepped through the door.

Lois laughed softly before turning to Clark. “Ready?”

“Yeah,” he answered and stood up.

She stared at him for a second before digging in her bag for her camera. “I have to get a picture.”

“Lo-is,” he complained. She had taken thousands already.

“Oh hush,” she told him even as she clicked the shot. “Let’s go.”

He grabbed his bag from the end of the bed. “Let’s go.” He took a deep breath as they headed through the hallways. He spoke to several of the staff along the way. Dr. Klein was waiting at the back entrance — they had agreed to leave that way.

“One day at a time,” Bernie told him.

“I know.” He had bad days... when he was in a lot of pain and when he was more than a little depressed. George and Bernie had pushed him on when Lois wasn’t there to do it. He was terrified to leave this place, to go home with her. He still didn’t remember his life with her- the one before the accident. But he remembered the life he had made since. And she was his world. With her was where he *should* be.

“Thank you, Bernie,” Lois told the doctor.

“Thank you.” He exchanged a silent conversation with Lois, then held the door for them to exit.

Clark climbed in the Jeep, buckled his belt, and settled for the ride across town. He hadn’t been off the grounds of the lab since he had been there and everything was new and exciting to him. It was as if he was seeing everything for the first time.

Lois pointed out places, told him about others... They rode past the Planet — they were going there tomorrow. They crossed by the park and in front of her old apartment building on Carter Avenue.

“Did we like that place?” he wanted to know.

“You liked it because I was there. I liked it when you were there.” She shrugged. “Our place — your place — feels like home.”

“You said it was small.”

“It is. And we should probably think about getting a bit larger place soon, but for now, it’s home.”

He smiled and turned to look out the window. “That’s it,” he pointed out.

“Yes,” she said. He would do that from time to time — have a clear memory of something or recognize this or that.

“Where are we going?” he asked when they passed the building.

“I have a parking place in the back.” She rounded the block and turned down an alley that ran up behind their building. She reached for a remote on the sun visor and pressed it. A garage door in the middle of the wall opened and she wheeled inside.

“This wasn’t here before,” he remarked.

“No. This is something that I worked out with the landlord recently.”

He gave a nod of understanding before climbing out. He grabbed his bag and they walked down the alley to the end of the building. Once they turned the corner, the apartment was there. He could clearly see that door in his mind. His heart thundered in his chest as he followed Lois up the stairs. He waited for her to open the door, then stepped inside. He stopped on the stoop and inhaled deeply. This place felt... familiar. It felt like home.

“Anything?” she asked him.

“Warmth, familiarity, comfort.”

“Good. Good start.” She reached for his bag. “I’ll take that to

the bedroom.”

He handed it off and eased down into the living room, drifting around the space drinking everything in. He looked at the pictures, the little treasures, the books, the music collection... He bounced on the couch, opened the fridge and the cabinets, sat at the table. He stepped into the bedroom and stared at the bed.

He could see them there — him and Lois — kissing, touching. Would they do that again? They had shared a few kisses in the last few weeks, but none as deep as what he could see them doing in his mind. She hadn’t touched him again and he hadn’t touched her — not intimately. He had wanted to.

Clark could remember a lot of things, knew so much, but a large part of him had been reduced to infancy. He was curious. He wanted to touch Lois. Heck, he would just like to see her. Other than the crease of her butt cheek in her shorts, he hadn’t seen a thing. Her gorgeous body teased him from behind her thin shirts. And lately he swore he could actually smell her. He didn’t remember Lois the way she did him, but he had come to know her. As such, he wanted more.

“We can make arrangements if you would rather we not share a bed,” Lois told him as she stepped up beside him.

He turned his head to look at her. “We’ve made out on the bed.”

She grinned at him. “Yeah. A few times.”

“How close did we get?”

“Close... We’ve touched each other through our clothes.”

“Skin to skin?”

“Yeah,” she said with a blush. “On the way to our reception, in the limo... we couldn’t stop ourselves from taking the edge off. And of course, I’ve touched you... to wash you since you’ve been hurt.”

“Really?” He reached down to grasp her fingers. “Maybe you can... feign an accident so I can wash you,” he said with a grin.

“Or I could just come out and ask you to bathe me,” she said with a serious expression. This new Clark was so different. He was much more open and so expressive. He often made comments like that.

“You could,” he agreed, shaking her hand back and forth.

“I suddenly feel... grimy,” she told him.

His eyes moved down her body and he grunted in appreciation. “One fine woman,” he said softly, George’s mantra.

She laughed softly before shoving him playfully.

He laughed at her, loving how this felt. Being with her was exciting, exhilarating even. “So... in the limo... how did we take the edge off?”

Lois blushed again as she looked into his eyes. “Let’s just say my lips were busy and you have great hands.”

His eyes flashed, then moved to stare at her lips before drifting down to look at his hand. For a split second, he could actually feel soft, pliant skin. He looked up at Lois again before leaning to kiss her. He didn’t say anything, didn’t think he could if he tried. Her statement had created so many images he was sure he would explode if he delved too deeply. He had grown quite attracted to Lois and the thought of sharing anything intimate with her got his blood pumping in a hurry.

He drifted into the bathroom to finish inspecting his home. He might not remember much, but Lois was right. This place felt like home.

Home felt... pretty good, especially considering he had Lois here.

Clark lay in bed staring at the ceiling. He and Lois had watched the late news, then went to bed. They had been lying here for a while now, awake. She was still awake, too. He could tell by her breathing.

“Do you want me to get up?” he asked her.

“No,” she said, sighing heavily.

“Then why are you nervous? We’ve slept together at the lab.”
 “I know.” She rolled on her side, propping on a drawn up arm to look at him in the shadows. “You’re... Clark, my husband, but you’re not.”

He rolled his head to look at her. “Do I scare you now?”

“No, of course not.” She reached out to rub his arm. “What do you want to do?”

He rolled over, laying her on her back so that he hovered over her. “I want to kiss you,” he told her huskily.

She reached to cup his cheek and lifted her head to meet him. He sighed and relaxed into the touch. Slowly, reverently he moved his lips over hers. His tongue smoothed over her bottom lip and she opened up for him. He dove in eagerly. Lois was so gorgeous and being close to her had set him on fire.

Before she realized what was happening, Clark’s hand was under her shirt stroking her bare skin. She had come to bed without a bra. They had done this before, been this close. But this...

She drew away from the kiss and panted as he continued to rub her skin. His lips moved to her neck to taste her there and his hand moved down further.

There was a time she had longed for this, ached for this. All of a sudden, it was too much for her now. She pushed him back so she could see his face. “Clark,” she breathed.

“Yeah, baby?” he responded and tried to capture her lips again.

“Clark, stop.”

“Come on, honey. You feel so good,” he crooned and smoothed his hand over her hip.

She could feel his very hard enthusiasm. Why was it he could be so uncertain one minute and like this the next? Was this some of that unpredictable behavior Bernie had said he might experience?

“Clark... no.” She gave his shoulders a little push, causing him to fall back on the mattress. He stared at her with a questioning expression. “We can’t do this.”

“Why not?” he wanted to know. “We’re married,” he reminded her.

“I know.” She shifted and sat up straighter to look at him. “We should just wait.”

“For what?” he wanted to know as he sat up beside her.

“You just came home and you’re doing so well...”

“Precisely the reason we should do this. God, Lois, I think about you all the time.”

“Maybe that should tell you something.”

He stared at her for a long moment before he gave her a sarcastic smirk. “I get it now. You’re waiting for me to magically remember everything. You’re holding on to the hope that you’ll get your Clark back. News flash... I *am* your Clark.” He turned to throw his legs over the side of the bed.

“Don’t be like this,” she said softly.

“Like what?” he wanted to know, turning back to look at her. “Lois, this is me. Right now, this is it. No, I don’t remember everything about you, but I do remember that you were very important to me. The fact that we’re married tells me I’m right. You’re my wife and I want you. I’m your husband and you say you want me. Only you push me away.” He stood up to look down at her. “This is it, Lois. Right now, this is all you’re getting. You’ve heard Bernie. I might not ever regain all of my memories. Does that mean we’ll never consummate our marriage?”

“Shouldn’t we... get to know one another more?”

“Yeah. We’ll spend another two years getting to know each other. Meanwhile, we’ll sleep next to each other. I will look at you and want you. I will wake up from time to time with you whispering you miss me while you touch me, but I’ll have to lay there. I will get up every morning longing to see you and maybe get that chance now and then, but that, too, will be another huge

tease. I’ve listened to my mother and father, I’ve listened to you. I was an incredibly patient man. And if we weren’t married, maybe I would still be more patient. But you said yourself we were chomping at the bit to take our relationship to a more intimate level. I was shot. I almost died. In one lousy second, everything changed. Do we wait around and risk another lousy second taking everything away from us?” He reached down and snatched his pillow from the bed. “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Clark...” she cried out, but he had gone in the other room. She flopped back against her own pillow and let out a long, slow breath. That hadn’t gone well at all. She just couldn’t say what she meant.

But he had. He was right. She was waiting for him to remember. While that *would* change him to an extent, it wouldn’t change the fact that no matter what, Clark was still Clark. Even this man, the one without all of his memories was Clark. He adored her, had shown it in so many ways over the last few weeks. Where it counted the most, Clark hadn’t changed. Only the way she viewed him had.

And she viewed him as... what? Less than who he was? He was capable of loving her, even intimately. He had proven that more than once.

She wanted him... didn’t she? This new man?

He was so gorgeous and so much different than he had been.

Not different exactly. He was... more. He had no reservations, no hang-ups, and seemingly no inhibitions. If Lois was truly honest, that scared her a bit. She couldn’t be that carefree. So much depended on her staying in control. If she let go, what would happen?

But wasn’t making love letting go for a brief time? She had been prepared to do that before. Why not now?

She rolled over and sat up. There was no way she could sleep in this bed alone. She had slept next to Clark every night for the last six days. She wasn’t a bit closer to any answers than she was before, but she was lost without her anchor. She stood up and padded into the living room. Clark was lying on the couch with his arm behind his head, staring up at the ceiling.

“Clark?” she said in a small voice

“What?” he replied without looking at her.

“Honey,” she choked out through a sob.

He laid there for a long moment before he sighed and rolled to his side, scooting backwards enough for her to squeeze on the couch with him. She hurried over and stretched out in front of him, her back to his chest without saying a word. His arm went around her, pulled her close.

“You’re a pain in the butt, you know it?” he asked her.

“Yeah.” She pulled his hand up higher on her chest, holding tight with both hands.

“There’s so much about this memory loss I don’t understand.” He leaned his face down next to hers. “In a lot of ways I feel like a child discovering new things for the first time, even though I remember so much other stuff. Did you know I can completely understand at least three languages?”

“Twelve,” she informed him.

“What?”

“Twelve. You can understand and speak twelve languages.”

“Really?” She nodded. “Wow. Did you know I can speed read and completely understand everything I read?” She nodded. “I can type like ninety-nine words a minute.”

“Oh, you can type much faster than that,” she said with a snort.

“And did you know that whenever you’re around, I’m hyper aware of you?” He rubbed his cheek against hers. “Lois, baby, if you don’t want to make love right now, okay. But I’m going to take you out every chance I get and try to impress the hell out of you.”

She giggled at him, rolling slightly so she could see his face.

“I want you, too, Clark.”

His hand moved up to cup her face. “And in a week or two, you’ll be ready.” He leaned to kiss her softly. “I can’t remember so much, but three things I know for sure... I have remarkable recovery abilities. I know more useless trivia than the producers of Jeopardy. And...” His fingers trailed over her cheek. “I can’t seem to breathe well unless you’re near.” A tear slipped from her eye and made its way down her cheek. “What? I wouldn’t have said that if I’d had my memories?”

“No. You would have said exactly something like that,” she told him before leaning up to kiss him. “I breathe a lot better when you’re near, too.”

He grinned at her. “Why don’t we go back to bed? It’s a bit more comfortable than this couch.” She nodded and he shifted to stand up. “Grab the pillow.” She did and he scooped her into his arms. “I have wanted to do this... I almost asked you if I could do it today when we came home.”

She laughed softly as they made their way back to the bedroom. She would have let him carry her over the threshold. He hadn’t done that yet... since they had married. “I’ll tell you what. The day I ask you to carry me over the threshold, you’ll know I’m ready to become your wife in every sense of the word.”

“Deal,” he said and lowered her to the bed. They settled and he snuggled into her side, burrowing close to her neck. “Just so you know... I won’t stop cuddling.”

“Good.” She pulled him closer, dropped a kiss on his head, and sighed in contentment. They would figure this out, eventually. And if he never regained his memories, they would make new ones.

“You sure I can’t watch you dress?” Clark asked Lois as he laid on the pillows while she gathered up her clothes.

She looked up at him with a grin on her face. “Why is it so important for you to see me naked?” she wanted to know. He had been asking her for the last twenty minutes if she would give him a preview of what he was missing.

“You’ve seen me naked,” he pointed out.

“You were hurt,” she countered.

“Yeah and?” He moved to prop on a plumped up pillow like he fully expected her to dress right there.

She was about to throw out another protest, but stopped and stared at him. She reached for the tie on the robe and jerked. The fluffy material fell open and so did Clark’s mouth. Her eyes never left him as she peeled the material from her body.

Clark moved slowly to sit up, his eyes drinking her in. She was so much more beautiful than he had imagined. She wasn’t large on top, but perfectly shaped. A taut mid-section gave way to slightly wider hips — ones where her bones stuck out a bit more than he was sure they normally did. She had made the comment about losing a lot of weight since he had been hurt.

He eased to the edge of the bed, hands firmly on his lap. “Lois, you’re...” His eyes moved the entire length of her body again. He was sure every single inch was gorgeous. What he wouldn’t give to lay her down on the bed and spend the entire day becoming intimately acquainted with his wife.

She had stood the perusal as long as she could. She nervously shifted toward the dresser where she had lain her clothes, grasping her underwear.

Clark stood and closed the distance between them, grasping her arms to keep her from leaning over to put her undies on.

“Lois, you’re amazing,” he breathed.

“I’m too thin, my breasts sag, and my nipples are huge.”

He lifted a hand to gently urge her to look at him. “I think you’re perfect.”

She glanced down. “And all these bones?”

“We’ll put some weight back on you with all those dinners I plan to feed you,” he said with a smile before he leaned to kiss

her. He drew back, reached for her panties, and knelt to hold them for her to step into. As much as he wanted to look elsewhere, he kept his eyes on hers. She reached to hold his shoulders as he pulled the material up. He couldn’t resist smoothing his hand over her cotton clad cheek when she was covered. He grinned at her, leaned to kiss her stomach right above her waistline, then stood up. “Thank you,” he said and kissed her again.

She felt a wave of relief wash over her. She had wanted his approval, needed him to accept her. Clark had done that without question before he had lost his memories, but this man... She craved his acceptance in a way she hadn’t even back when they had first started dating.

He moved toward his own dresser to gather his clothes, but kept glancing at her while she finished dressing. He seemed to take his time until she was covered. Then he made a little sound that clearly meant he approved of his wife’s appearance before disappearing behind the bathroom door. Lois had been attracted to Clark before, but this... what she felt for him now bordered on scary. That was one of the reasons she had been so skittish about them making love the night before. She was actually scared of how she felt toward Clark now, scared of how badly she wanted him. She was worried what that would mean to their relationship.

She was also worried about them actually making love. Clark had saved himself for so long. He had looked forward to their first time — his first time. Would he feel cheated should he get his memories back and they had already made love?

Of course, he could be right, too. If he never regained his memories, she could be holding out on something wonderful.

So many questions...

She finished getting ready for work and before she could set out a simple breakfast of fruit and toast, Clark was in the kitchen. He had chosen dress slacks and a dress shirt, but no tie.

“I hope it’s okay if I just skip the tie,” he said. “I actually couldn’t remember how to tie it.” He shrugged and picked up a strawberry from the plate on the counter.

“You look great,” she assured him. She had chosen slacks and a dress shirt, making them look remarkably similar.

He grinned at her before moving to pour himself some milk. The new Clark preferred milk over coffee.

Less than an hour later, they were on their way to the Planet. Clark had wanted to visit right away and Lois saw no reason to deny him that. They wouldn’t actually work today, but she might show him a few things he had written to see if it would spark any memories for him.

The trip to the Planet was a question and answer session. Clark would ask Lois about a building or other structure. Or she would point out a place and he would say the first thing that came to his mind. Sometimes those things were memories. Sometimes they were just random thoughts.

The ride up in the elevator to the newsroom floor was almost comical. Clark kept making faces in the mirrored doors. He would do that now and then — act like a child. He reminded Lois a lot of Jimmy now.

The doors opened to the chaos and he stood there in awe. He had never seen anything like this.

Well, actually he had, but he didn’t remember it, so...

“Wow. How do we get anything done in this?” he asked Lois as they made their way toward the ramp.

She grinned at him. “When we’re in the thick of a story, this keeps us hopping.”

Maybe it did. He followed Lois down to her desk, soaking up any and everything around him.

“CK!”

Clark turned to see Jimmy coming his way. He knew the young man — he had visited at the Labs. “Hey, Jimmy,” he said.

“You got it,” he said and reached out to clap him on the shoulder. “Man, it sure is good to see you up on your feet.”

“It’s good to be on my feet,” he returned.

“Clark, can you pick out your desk?” Lois wanted to know.

“Yeah. That one.” He pointed to the right one and she smiled triumphantly.

“Good.”

“Don’t get excited,” he told her. “It’s just the closest one to you.”

That made Lois and Jimmy both laugh aloud. Clark smiled and walked over to sit down in his chair, carefully inspecting the items on his desk. He opened a drawer to look through it. “Wow.”

“What?” Lois asked as she made her way over.

“I’m a neat freak,” he commented as he kept looking. He opened another drawer before lifting his head back to the things on top. Three pictures — a small one of his folks, one of him and Lois, and one of Lois alone. “And I’m obsessed with Lois Lane.”

“You have no idea,” Jimmy said and opened the bottom drawer at Clark’s left side. He took out a book and dropped it on the surface of the desk.

It was a scrapbook. There were articles Lois had written, the first one they had written together, and more pictures — all of her.

“I’m not just obsessed, I’m a stalker,” Clark said with wide eyes as he kept flipping the pages of the book.

“Hey, if my wife looked like her, I’d be obsessed, too,”

Jimmy said with a wink at Lois. “Yell if you need anything.”

Clark watched him walk away before smiling at Lois. “You are beautiful,” he told her.

“So are you,” she whispered in return. She reached out to rub his face before heading back toward her desk. “I’m gonna check some email.”

After tapping his keyboard for a second, Clark glanced her way. “Do you know my passwords?”

“Actually, no.”

He nodded and hit a few keys. When he was denied access, he frowned. Then he grinned and typed again. This time his screen blinked and his program opened up. Yep, he was obsessed.

He was not only a reporter; he was a good one — if the sheer amount of emails was a judge. His inbox was loaded!

And apparently he had an excellent spam blocker because there was hardly any junk. After quickly deleting what he was sure wasn’t important, he moved on to the others. Some were about stories he knew were completed. He had a check system for that, too. His computer automatically tagged emails related to finished stories. That covered about half of his mail.

Some looked important, so he saved them to a file marked ‘ongoing’. Near the end, from the last week or so, was a few mails marked ‘urgent’.

‘Call me. I have information about the woman who tried to hurt your wife.’

That got his full and undivided attention. He clicked the next one and it was mostly the same. The one from just that morning had a number in the body. He glanced up to see that Lois had moved off to the copy room. He picked up his phone and dialed the number in the email. He wouldn’t say anything to Lois just yet, in case it was nothing.

And he didn’t want her to worry.

Three rings later, a woman’s voice came on. “I wondered how long it would take you to call.”

“Who is this?” Clark demanded.

“It doesn’t matter. I know where the woman who hurt your wife is.”

“Where?”

“I can’t give that kind of information over the phone,” she returned. “Meet me.”

“When and where?”

“Twenty minutes, west entrance to the park.”

“How will I know you?”

“I’ll know you.” And the connection was cut.

Clark looked up at Lois after he returned his receiver to the holder. What should he do now? Should he tell her?

Yeah, right, Clark. You barely know your name. She would blow this off. Hell, he would blow this off.

But he couldn’t blow it off. If someone was going to hurt Lois, he was going to stop them. Lois smiled at him as she stepped out of the copy room. He smiled back and waited for her to go in Perry’s office before he stood. He grabbed a piece of paper to act like he was doing something and headed for the stairwell. He walked down to the next floor, then caught the elevator to the bottom floor. He wasn’t exactly sure how he would find the west entrance to the park, but he would figure something out.

He stepped onto the sidewalk and looked around. He took a breath and turned left. He would ask somebody, claim he was a tourist. He headed down the sidewalk, stopping at the corner to cross to the other side. He looked to his right and smiled. He saw a sign that indicated the park was a block over. He changed directions and headed that way. The west entrance was the one he came to — how lucky was that?!

Of course, he would later realize it hadn’t been luck. The woman who had coaxed him to her had known exactly what she was doing.

“Clark?”

He turned and looked at the woman behind him. He studied her for a second before he realized who she was. “Michelle?”

“You remember,” she said with a smile and stepped forward as if she would hug him.

He took a step back. “I should call Lois.”

“You should come with me before Lois gets hurt,” the woman said, an instant change coming over her.

“She’s in a safe place.”

“That can change in an instant. I can have someone there in two minutes.” She flipped out her phone.

“That...” Clark gasped and reached up to hold his head when a high pitched wail rang through his ears. “Stop!”

“I will, as soon as you agree to come with me.”

“Lois... wouldn’t like... that.”

“I can have one of these in place and render her unconscious in seconds. Is that what you want?”

He struggled a bit, then shook his head. “Stop. I’ll go.”

She pressed another button and the pain in Clark’s head eased. “Good. I have a car this way.”

He half walked, half stumbled behind her. He practically fell into an SUV at another entrance and closed his eyes as Michelle drove them out of town. Clark shifted, as if finding a more comfortable position to relieve himself of his earlier pain and pushed his hand into his pocket. Lois had given him a cell phone and he had stuck it in his pocket when they hadn’t been able to find his holder. He smoothed his fingers over the keys to determine which one he needed. He pressed it twice, just like Lois had told him to do. Then he closed his eyes. His head hurt.

If he had been confused before about Michelle Deter, he was crystal clear now. She was bad news. And she had threatened Lois. She was someone he didn’t want to know.

Lois and Perry had been talking about Clark, but suddenly she glanced out of the window.

“Where’s Clark?” she asked and headed into the bullpen. She looked around, headed to the copy room. “Jimmy, have you seen Clark?”

“Saw him head toward the head earlier,” was the answer.

Lois turned in that direction, pushing through the doors of the men’s room despite the looks she got from the males around. She

checked all the stalls and rolled her eyes when Ralph protested her intrusion and tried to hide himself at the urinal. She went back out, checking everywhere.

"Jimmy!" She rushed toward Clark's desk. "Get on here and tell me what he was doing."

"Is everything okay?" the younger man asked.

"No. He's gone." And she knew he was gone. She could feel it.

Jimmy worked his magic on the computer and in no time at all, they were reading the emails that had prompted him from the newsroom. Lois jerked up a phone and dialed the number, but it went nowhere. No doubt a pre-paid phone that had already been trashed. She glanced at her watch, feeling a bit sick because she didn't know exactly how long he had been gone. When her phone began to ring, she bolted toward her desk.

"It's the number for the phone I gave Clark." She went back to Jimmy. "Track him."

"Is this the one we set up?" he wanted to know on the way to his own desk.

"Yeah." Less than three minutes later, they had a bleep on the screen. "Good boy," Lois remarked as she picked up the phone to call Bill Henderson. This time, Lois had been prepared. She could play the same games Mindy Church or Michelle Deter played. And she had much, much more at stake than either one of them.

Clark sat on the couch in the little beach side house Michelle had brought him to. He lifted his head to look at the woman. "I don't want to be here with you."

"I couldn't care less. I just need you to get me out of the country. I had thought I would keep you, just to mess with Mindy. But you're too damn much trouble. That nosy wife of yours would hound us relentlessly. If Mindy wants the crap, she can have it."

"And I definitely want it."

Michelle's head snapped around when another voice sounded out. An expression of horror washed over her face when she saw her sister.

Clark watched as the other woman moved into the room, a tingling at the back of his mind as he looked at her. She was someone... he didn't like. Was this the woman Lois said didn't like them much? Had tried to kill her?

"How are you, dear sister?" Mindy asked.

"How did you find me?" Michelle asked.

"I used this thing between my ears." She smiled down at Clark. "Good to see you up and around, hunky."

Hunky- that sent a flash through him... of horrible embarrassment. He could clearly see himself, with this woman. He had been... He squeezed his eyes tightly closed. There was no way he had been naked with this woman! He wasn't remotely attracted to her. But yet... He dropped his head in shame. Had he betrayed his wife?

"Don't worry, pookie. You and me will be tucked away soon enough and I'll make you smile again." She rubbed his head, coaxing him to look up at her. She leaned over as if she would kiss him, but he turned his head and she caught him on the cheek. "Aw, hunky. So soon you forget."

"Can it, Mindy. His mind is stronger than either of us imagined."

Mindy grinned at him because now he couldn't take his eyes off her. "Maybe more than you imagined," she said, then finally turned toward the other woman. "Now... I want to thank you for bringing him back to me."

"You owe me. If you want him..." She pulled out the device she had used to inflict horrible pain on Clark earlier- a little gift from her dear sister.

"Press it quickly," Mindy warned her, but fired the small gun she held before she finished speaking.

Clark jumped in surprise and watched in wide-eyed horror as Michelle fell in a crumpled heap to the floor. Mindy blew the end of her gun and turned to grin at him.

"Now, you need to call your wife."

"If you expect me to bring her here..."

"That's exactly what you'll do," Mindy warned him.

"I don't think so."

"I..." She was about to issue another threat when she heard the call from outside. "What the hell?!" she yelled and hurried to peak through the dark curtains.

"We have you surrounded," came the call through the bull horn and Bill Henderson. There were at least six police cars in the street.

Mindy could see officers hurrying across the lawns of the houses on either side. She turned and ran toward the back of the house. More police were on the beach area headed toward the house.

"Dammit!" she shouted. She paced back and forth in front of Clark. "Come on." She jerked him up and pushed him in front of her. "Open the door." He did and she made sure he filled the entrance.

"Don't shoot!" was the shout from a voice Clark knew. Lois was here.

"Hold your fire," Henderson told everyone.

"Tell them to send Lois in," Mindy said to Clark.

"No," he replied at once.

"Do it or I shoot you."

"Shoot me," he let her know.

She shoved the gun into his back hard. "Tell them."

"No!" Clark yelled at her.

Mindy grit her teeth and peered over his shoulder. "Send Lane." And she flashed her gun for them all to see.

"No!" Clark shouted.

"Send Lane or I'll put another bullet in his head," Mindy shouted louder.

Clark watched in horror as Lois tried to run toward the house. Bill grabbed her just in time.

Mindy put the barrel to Clark's head and cocked the trigger. "Send Lane now."

Lois twisted out of Bill's grasp and ran toward the house. She stepped up onto the porch. "I'm here."

"Lois," Clark said through clenched teeth.

Mindy drew Clark backwards and Lois entered the house. "Close the door," their captor told her.

She did and glanced at Michelle's motionless body. "Decided the sister had out lived her usefulness?"

"Shut up." She shoved Clark to the side and smiled when he moved straight to Lois.

He placed his body between Lois and Mindy. "Why did you come in here?" he asked her. "That was crazy."

"Why did you come?"

He just looked at her, an apologetic expression on his face.

"I want to test this bond of yours," Mindy told them, poking Clark with the gun to urge him away from Lois. "And I have a feeling you're a little better than even you know. So..." She cocked the gun. "Let's see how much you love your wife."

"Enough to die for her," Clark answered and stepped in front of Lois.

"Yes, but can you stop the bullet from across the room." She moved around and grasped Lois by the hair, dragging her away from Clark. When he protested, she pointed the gun at Lois' temple. "You can't stop it at this range," she warned him.

Clark shared an expression with Lois as he watched her being dragged away. Mindy positioned her just right, then backed away with a grin.

"Tell me, Lois, have you told your husband just how special he is?"

Lois glanced at Clark, then glared at Mindy.

“You haven’t!” She grinned at Clark. “Oh, hunky, we could have had so much fun. Guess watching your wife die will have to do.” And she squeezed the trigger.

The next few seconds passed in a blur. When Mindy’s finger tightened on the trigger, Clark’s body shot toward his wife. He stuck his hand out when he saw he was going to be a second too late, felt a sting in his palm, and pulled Lois to the floor on his way down. He covered her body with his own as more shots rang out. When it grew quiet, he lifted his head. Three black clad SWAT members were standing over Mindy’s body.

Lois lifted her head to look at Clark. “Are you hurt?” she wanted to know at once.

“I don’t think so. Are you?” She shook her head. His eyes moved down to his hand and he opened it, gawking at what he saw.

Lois’ hands wrapped around his, closing it again. “Don’t say a word about this,” she whispered.

Clark could only nod numbly. He rose to his feet as Henderson and the others moved in. They were checked over, asked about what happened, and finally allowed to leave. An officer drove them back to the Planet, and Lois insisted on going up to the newsroom to write up the final chapter to this long, drawn-out story.

Clark sat at his desk, rolling the bullet he held over and over in his hand. He had inspected his skin several times. Back, right after it first happened, there had been a small red mark. Now there was no indication of what he had done.

He had caught a bullet! How was that possible? What the hell was wrong with him?

What was he?!

He would glance up at Lois now and then as she worked. This was who she was — dedicated, fierce, and determined. She tackled her work the same way she took care of him. She was passionate and loyal.

And she was less than honest. Okay, he hadn’t asked her specifically if he was a freak. But how many people have to ask that question?

She seemed to sense him watching her and looked his way. She smiled at him before focusing on her screen again. She had told him they would talk when they got home. That would indicate she *did* have something to tell him. That meant she *had* been hiding something from him.

Sure, it would have probably overloaded his circuits if she had told him every single thing about himself at once. But...

He sighed heavily and looked at the bullet again. Lois had told Henderson that when Mindy fired the gun, Clark had pushed her out of the way to the floor. She had lied to Bill. Why? Why hadn’t she told him that Clark had...? Okay, Bill would have wanted to commit her if she had said her husband *caught* the bullet!

“Ready?” Lois asked a while later.

He looked up and nodded. He just couldn’t seem to find his voice. And the ride home was dead silent. She seemed to understand his need to think.

He entered the apartment and headed straight for the bathroom, closing himself off. Now that they were alone, he wasn’t sure he wanted to talk to her. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know just what kind of freak he was.

Was Lois the only one who knew? Or did his parents know he wasn’t normal, too?

God, he was even more confused now than he had been before.

“Clark?” Lois called from the other side of the door.

“Just leave me alone, Lois.”

“I would if I could, but I need to use the bathroom.”

He groaned and stood up. He clicked the lock and she snatched the door open and pushed past him.

“Sorry, I’m about to blow up. Are you staying?”

He couldn’t help himself. Even as horrible as he felt, he had to chuckle a bit. He glanced back in time to see her lower her pants. She was seriously in urgent need of the facilities. He shook his head and left her alone, chuckling again when he heard her sigh of relief. He dropped on the window seat and stared down at the bullet. Lois came out a few moments later and sat beside him.

“If I caught this one, how did two manage to pierce my skin?” he asked after a long while of staring at the offending object.

Lois stood and walked over to her bag, extracting his notebook and another book. She sat back down and opened the top one. “Do you know who this is?”

He looked down at a brightly clad man. The image reminded him of a cartoon character come to life. “Should I?” And no sooner had he said, than he jerked it closer to his face. “Oh, God, that’s me!” He flipped frantically through the book. Image after image, article after article — he sped read through them before turning to gawk at Lois. “I’m Superman?”

“Yes,” she answered. She opened his notebook and began to read.

‘Since meeting her, since breathing her in for the first time, I know that here is where I will stay.

‘She mentioned something that got me thinking. The idea’s just crazy enough to work. So, here we are — me and Mom — smiling at our invention. The suit will give me the means to use my powers openly, and a disguise so that I can stay and live as Clark Kent. It’s all I’ve ever wanted — to have a real life. Without Lois, I would be lost.

‘Superman — she even named me! God, I love that woman. Is it possible to die if you’re not near another person? I feel like I might. I struggle for breath each night when I leave her side. But that first breath each morning is incredible. I inhale her and can literally feel myself recharge.’

She skipped a few pages before reading again.

‘I learned that I get my powers from the sun. I don’t believe that. I get my powers from Lois. I wrote a while back that I feel myself recharge when I take the first breath of her each morning. Nearly eight months after writing that and I *know* it’s true. I don’t just love that woman, I adore her.

‘Will she ever see me the way she sees him?’

Lois closed the book and sat there.

“Sees who?” Clark wanted to know.

“Superman. When you first became Superman, I was crazy over him and completely ignored you.”

“You didn’t know I was him?”

“No. Not until a little over a year ago.”

“Why did I keep it from you?”

“You wanted me to see you and not just the suit.”

He took that in a moment, completely understanding that statement. Lois rose and went to his closet, coming out again with a box. She opened it so he could see a round sphere of some kind. “Take it.”

He did and it lit up. He stared at it in wonder. “Krypton,” he whispered.

“That’s where you’re from.”

As he sat there, the globe started to glow. The hologram of Clark’s birth father appeared and the messages long ago implanted within the sphere played out. When they were done, the image faded and the orb went black again. Clark sat there, turning the object over and over in his hands, his mind whirling to comprehend all he had learned in the last few hours.

Before he had time to contemplate any of it, there was a knock at the door. Dr. Klein had come, at Lois’ behest, to check Clark over. Clark protested for a moment, but finally agreed to

allow the doctor to look at him. Lois stood at the doorway of the bedroom for the first few minutes of the impromptu exam before she realized her presence seemed to make Clark nervous. She drifted into the kitchen and made some tea.

Funny, she thought as she sat at the table. She had never liked tea until Clark.

She had never liked a lot of things until Clark.

Dr. Klein walked out a few minutes later with a smile on his face. "Clark's body seems to be completely healed."

"Really?" Lois asked as she rose from her chair.

"Keep in mind now, he doesn't remember how to use all of his powers. He doesn't even realize he has them. But he's completely invulnerable." Bernie chuckled a bit. "You should have seen the look on his face when the needle broke on his skin."

"And his mind?"

"I would say his mind will eventually heal. Whatever you're doing is working, so keep it up."

"This has really upset him," Lois pointed out.

"Just hang in there. He'll come around." He smiled at her a final time before heading toward the door. "Call if you need me."

"Thanks, Bernie," Lois returned before walking slowly back toward the bedroom. Clark was still sitting on the window seat flipping through the scrapbook again. She went over and sat down without saying a word.

"Can I really do all of these things?" he wanted to know.

"Yes."

"Is this why we haven't made love?"

Lois' head snapped around toward him and she stared wide-eyed. "Clark, no! We talked about that once... you told me that you could completely control yourself."

"But when a man... loses control, he... loses control," he countered.

She smiled slowly at him. "Do you think you made it this far without a little self-exploration?"

His face flushed beet red and his eyes dropped to the book.

"And what happens then?"

He sat for a long moment before he closed the book and laid it beside the globe on the other end of the seat. "Why did you marry me?"

"What?" She was slightly taken aback by his question.

"I'm... an alien, not from this world. We might not be... compatible."

"Didn't you hear your father on the globe? He said Earth was chosen because 'its inhabitants were biologically compatible'. I choose to believe that means that we are completely compatible."

"And if we're not?"

"Then we'll be a happy family of two," she told him with finality.

He leaned forward, his hands clasped between his knees. It took a long while before he spoke again. "What if I can't live with that?"

"Live with what?" she asked him, apprehension creeping through into her posture.

"Live with not knowing whether I've doomed you to a life without the opportunity to have children."

It was her turn to sit there, lost in thought. "Is it? You didn't seem to have a problem before." She pushed herself to her feet. "And that was when you had all of your memories. You weren't worried about it then. We talked about kids. You never said you felt you might not be able to father children or that the thought upset you."

His head lifted so he could look at her. "Did you? Did you think about it? Wonder about it?"

"Clark, I fell so in love with you." She eased back down on the seat. "The heart can't control a fall like that. Sure, I believe that loving a person for years — the way your folks have done —

becomes a choice after a while because it's just not possible to sustain that 'I'm in love and it feels great' kind of feeling. Looking at the future is a choice I've made. And that future is you. Whether we have kids or not depends on a lot of things... our health, timing, whether or not we can commit to it."

"And say we make love tomorrow and you get pregnant...?"

"Then we become a happy family of three," she told him.

"Why are you begging trouble?"

"When I should be thinking about getting my memories back?" He glanced down at the floor. "If I don't, how can I be what people need me to be?"

"Right now, you don't need to be anything."

"How did you explain Superman's absence?"

"I've written a series of articles to allude that he was working undercover to bring down a few international drug dealers."

When he looked over at her, she shrugged. "You had looked into a few things as Superman. I just jumped off your notes."

"And the public's bought it?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm a very good writer." She grinned widely at him.

He couldn't help but chuckle. He opened his hand to look at the bullet he still held. "I didn't think. I just moved."

"I know."

Clark's eyes went up to meet hers. "Why did you come in there? You knew she was going to try something."

"Read your notebook. Read what you've written about your feelings for me. That's how I feel about you. And somehow, some way, we always seem to find a way — together."

He looked at her for a long moment before he reached out to pick up the notebook that was lying between them. "How did you get this?"

"It was in your nightstand. When I was at my lowest point, while you were hurt, I craved some kind of connection. That book was like a lifeline. It's your thoughts and reading them helped me feel close to you the way I longed to be."

"And now? This new... person I've become...?"

"Has slowly recaptured my heart," she whispered.

His head turned and his eyes bore into hers. He wished so desperately he could remember the woman he had written about in that notebook. He glanced back at the offending object — the one thing that reminded him how glaringly lacking he was in this relationship. Lois said he had recaptured her heart. Did she really mean that? Did she love the man he was now? He couldn't help but think she longed for what she might never have again. He didn't know a lot of things, but he wasn't sure he could live day in and day out wondering if she was thinking about that man.

"I think I need to be alone," he told her after a long silence.

She nodded and rose to her feet, fighting an onslaught of tears. She had laid her heart out to him and he had reacted negatively. "I'll just... go up to the loft and write." She hurried away before he could say anything further.

Clark sighed and rolled the bullet around between his fingers. He didn't know Lois, not like a husband should know his wife. And before today, he had been blissfully happy getting to know her. But finding out he was so much more than he had first thought confused him even more than Michelle Deter had done with her hypnotic suggestions.

It was well after dark before he rose to change his clothes for bed. Lois had been down to the kitchen for a bite to eat and disappeared up the stairs again without a word. She was respecting his wish to be alone. He could hear her tapping on the keyboard of the laptop. He supposed she was writing something needless just to pass the time. Or maybe she was doing what he had done with his notebook — writing to ease his mind. He hated hurting her in any way, but he just couldn't help it. He was so confused.

He sat down on the bed and laid his glasses down. No wonder

he didn't seem to notice a difference with those things on, he thought as he glared at the items. The phone rang and he reached to lift the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Clark, honey, how are you?"

It was his mom. She called every night.

"I'm... okay." He didn't want to lie to her, but he didn't want to talk right now either.

"Lois said you learned today about a huge part of yourself."

He closed his eyes. He should have known Lois had spoken with her. But when? He hadn't heard her talking to anyone.

"Son, you are who you are because of your heritage," his father put in. He was always on the line, too.

"And who is that exactly?" was the sarcastic retort. "I have a memory span of about two months. Yeah, I know all kinds of things, which is insanely confusing as hell, by the way. And until today, I was content to just hang out with the woman that's my wife — who I don't remember. I had made up my mind that I would get to know her, accept her word that she was where she wanted to be. Then I learn this absolutely unbelievable thing!" He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "This is worse than not being able to remember who I am. Why can I remember to read? How is it I know things about cases Lois and I have worked on? Why do I vividly recall important dates in history? How is it possible for me to know so much, yet have such huge chunks missing in my mind? I can recall investigations, only I have no memory of actually doing the work. It's as if my mind has specifically blanked out anything directly related to my life. Why? And I won't even talk about this other side of myself." He sighed heavily. "I feel like I'm going crazy."

"Son, you have to give it time," his mom told him.

He was silent for a long moment before he took a breath.

"Would it be possible for me to come out to stay at the farm for a while?"

"Why?" Martha questioned him.

"Maybe if I'm on my own I won't be so confused... I might be able to focus more clearly."

"I don't think that's the answer," his dad said. "But this will always be your home."

Clark heard a click to indicate Jonathan had gotten off the line. Obviously his father wasn't crazy about his suggestion to go to the farm for a while. When he had been unable to come up with anything else earlier, he had thought that maybe a little time to think would help. It seemed his injury and even his recovery was so closely related to Lois that he couldn't heal. Why else was his mind blocking her out?

"Clark..." The protest died on the other end, then she took a deep breath. "Just don't make any rash decisions, son."

"How can I?"

"We're here... if you need us. But, Clark, when you married Lois, she became our daughter. So we're here for her, too."

"I know. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay. Get some sleep. Maybe things will be clearer in the morning."

"Thanks... Mom," he said softly. He didn't miss the gasp on the other end before he hung up. That was the first time he had called her 'Mom'. He hadn't really felt he should. Now he wasn't sure he shouldn't.

He replaced the receiver and lifted his head to see Lois standing at the bottom of the stairs to the loft staring at him.

"You're leaving me?" she wanted to know, a slight tremble in her tone.

"Lois," he began, but she cut him off.

"Tell me!" she demanded with a high pitched plea.

He sighed heavily and glanced down at the floor. "I don't know what to do."

"And you think leaving is the answer?" She walked closer,

but not close enough to touch him.

"I don't know what I think." He lifted his eyes to look at her. "All I know is that my life is missing and the more I learn, the more confused I become."

"What happened to the man who kept reminding me that he might not remember? That what I have now might be all I ever have?"

"He found out his wife knew more about him than he knew himself," he said softly.

Her brows rose a bit. "Is that what this is about? You feel I've lied to you?"

"You did," he pointed out. "I asked you to tell me things and you left out a really huge thing."

"So did your parents, but you're going to run to them to help you with this instead of leaning on your wife?"

"Come on, Lois, you're not my wife," he spat at her. And immediately regretted saying it. Or at least saying it like that.

Lois' expression changed three times in a split second — from shock, to dawning, to utter pain. "Oh, I see," she said so softly he almost missed it. She started around the bed, grasping her pillow. "Then maybe you *should* leave," she said and headed out the side door of the bedroom.

Clark sighed heavily and flopped backwards on the bed, staring up at the ceiling as if it held answers he had been unable to find elsewhere. He hadn't meant what he said the way it sounded. He had simply meant that...

He sat up and shook his head in disgust. He *had* meant it the way it sounded. Lois had come to him day after day at the Center and cared for him, talked to him, was the main reason he was on his feet and talking again. They had slowly built what he thought was a direction for them to take being a married couple where one of them couldn't remember their lives — either of them. She had allowed him to kiss her; she had kissed him — touched him. Yet, the first time he tried to act as if they were truly a couple, she pulled away. It had felt at the time, and it still felt like she was waiting for something she might never get again.

All of that — the way he felt about her — seemed to get lost in a boggled mess when he learned he was really this strange, strange man. He was... a freak, desperately seeking a life in this world. Had he felt that would somehow justify his existence? He was different, much different than any man on this world. How was he supposed to have a normal life? How was he supposed to... love a woman? Give her children? And if he spent his free time as Superman, what was left for his relationship? His... marriage?

Learning he was Superman had changed everything. If he truly loved Lois before, how could he have condemned her to a long, lonely life? And it would be a lonely life if he was a reporter and savior of the world. Where did his wife fit into that life?

Why had she married him? She had told him it had been her choice, that she loved him. She chose a future with him in it. But had she had any idea what she was doing? Did she truly understand what loving him meant? Could mean? Painfully reminded of the last few months, they were here, in this situation now, in part because of who he was. Yet, Lois insisted she wanted a life with him.

Why had she made such a sacrifice?

Part 6 — Regarding Clark: Battleground Heart

Lois read the same word for the tenth time and still didn't know what it said. She had been at the Planet since shortly after daylight. She'd had a less than restful night tossing and turning on the sofa. She was scared she had lost Clark, even after all she had done to prevent that from happening.

He had been asleep when she finally left the couch behind. She envied him his ability to rest when things were so uncertain.

Remarkably, he had rested well since he had begun his recovery.

No use to read it again. She tapped the keys to save her file, then pushed up to head toward the coffee machine. She cursed aloud when she saw the pot was empty. Deciding to head down to the lobby for a cup from the vender there, she stomped up to the elevator.

Why in hell had she left Clark alone this morning? It was probably the last thing she should have done, though she had been unable to bring herself to stay. Although he had been asleep, the tension was so thick, if she hadn't gotten out when she had, she was sure she would have imploded.

The vender in the lobby gave her the largest size of her favorite cup of Joe and she sighed in contentment as she savored that first taste. She waited for the elevator and the return trip to the newsroom floor in silence. When she stepped in alone, she almost shouted for joy. But at the last second, a woman hurried in beside her. Great, Lois thought, rolling her eyes back to the empty side of the small enclosure.

The woman reached out and pulled the emergency switch to stop the elevator.

"Hey!" Lois yelled and tried to start the ride up again.

"I wish to speak to you about Clark," the woman told her.

That calmed Lois a bit and she glared at the woman. "Who are you?"

"I am called Sara... here. But in reality I am Lady Zara of New Krypton."

Lois' brow furrowed with the utter confusion she felt.

"What?" she asked the other woman.

"I am a high ranking member of the Kryptonian society. And I've come, along with my guard, to find the true leader of our planet."

"Come again," Lois told Sara or Zara or whatever her name was.

"We have come to find Kal-El, son of Jor-El."

Lois' glare turned into something much deadlier. "Oh really? And what do you intend to do once you've found him?"

Sara smiled at Lois. "We have already found him. That is why I am speaking with you."

When the woman didn't say anything more, Lois nearly growled in frustration. "Is everyone on your planet so... frustrating?" She sighed and glanced away a second. "Would you just say it? Tell me what you want and why."

The other woman nodded in understanding. "Kal-El is the rightful leader of our world. We came with the intention of returning him to his rightful place..." She had to stop because Lois looked as if she would jump her. "During our observation to make sure he was worthy of the task we needed him for, we were aggrieved to learn of his injuries. We assume he was exposed to pieces of his home world."

Lois stared at her because she was waiting for an answer.

Instead of answering, Lois glared more.

"Ms. Lane, we know exactly who Kal-El is. We know that he is also Clark Kent."

That made Lois' expression change to one of... not exactly horror, but she wasn't happy with this revelation. And she wasn't about to admit anything to this woman.

"We are pleased to see that he is recovering."

"What do you want?"

"As I've said, we came to find Kal-El..."

"Yeah, yeah. And make sure he's worthy. Worthy of what?"

"Worthy of leading his people."

"Leading his people? As in..." Lois' expression cleared. "You came to take him... where? Krypton is gone."

"Yes, but right before the planet exploded, a group was shuttled from the surface to form a new colony. It took us a few years until we finally located a suitable world to reestablish our society. We have, and we have thrived."

"Then you don't need... Kal-El," Lois clipped out and slapped the switch to set the elevator back in motion.

Sara... Zara let out a breath and waited until they were on the floor of the newsroom before she spoke again. "Ms. Lane, please. We need to finish this conversation."

Lois drew a breath and turned to Zara with fire in her eyes. "Yes, we do. You are not taking Clark," she said fiercely, but low enough no one else could hear. "He has struggled desperately in the past few months. The last thing he needs is the pressure of being in charge of an entire world. He doesn't even know who he is."

"I know."

That made Lois stop and stare.

"As I've said, we had to be sure he was worthy."

Lois looked around to make sure no one was watching. Deciding that maybe this conversation was best had in private, she turned and stomped toward the conference room. When she whirled around once the door was closed, Zara was waiting patiently.

"You've... watched him?" Lois wanted to know.

"We had to be sure we had found the right person."

"Exactly how many Kryptonians did you expect to find here?"

Zara glanced at the floor.

Lois paced toward the window, her arms crossed over her chest. This was unbelievable. Absolutely unbelievable! On top of everything else, *this* had to happen!

"We will be here another week... until our ship is ready for the return trip."

That made Lois stare at her.

"With his injuries, we understand that he needs to continue healing."

After a long moment, Lois visibly relaxed. It lasted a second before she was back to the defensive posture she'd had before. "If you're leaving, why did you even acknowledge you were here?"

"We deliberated long and hard before we decided that this was the right thing to do. The threat that brought us to seek Kal-El is why we decided to speak with you."

"Threat?"

"Our society thrives on a very tightly balanced system of arranged houses..."

"Arranged houses?"

"We align certain noble houses to insure the proper balance of power."

Lois thought that over for a second before she smiled. "And the next pig at the trough wants to assume his proper place," she deduced.

"Exactly. Lord Nor is next in line behind Kal-El. However, Nor is a monster. If he takes his place at the head of our world, we are all doomed."

"And how do you plan to keep him from taking power? Without Kal-El?"

Zara looked a bit pained at that question. "We need Kal-El to pass complete power to me."

"To you? Why to you?"

"He has to pass his power to the other half of the ruling house."

Lois stood there for a long moment, carefully thinking over what Zara had said. When the penny dropped, her brows shot toward her hair. "Your house was aligned with his to form the ruling house."

"Yes."

"That makes you...?" She waited for Zara to finish.

"His birth wife."

Lois sucked in several deep breaths, trying to keep from hyperventilating. She whirled back toward the window, tears welling in her eyes. His birth wife!

Her reaction was crazy. This woman had never been anything to Clark, but...

But he was promised to her first.

"How do I know any of this is true?" Lois asked without looking away from the window.

"We have proof, but it requires Kal-El..."

"I have to speak with him," Lois interrupted her.

"We will give you three days. We know this is a delicate matter."

"You have no idea," Lois told her. She stood for a long moment before she took a deep breath. "You do know we are married?"

"Yes. However, the laws of our world do not recognize your union."

"The laws of my world do not recognize yours."

"I wasn't aware of such..."

Lois spun to face Zara with fire in her eyes. "*My world!* As in Clark *is* my world. And he is at such a critical juncture in his recovery right now. Do you have any idea what this is going to do to him?"

"I'm sorry, Ms. Lane."

"Yeah. Me, too." She reached up to wipe the tears that were making trails down her cheeks. "And my name is Mrs. Kent," she felt she should stress, just so there was no mistake on what ground they stood. If this woman thought she could waltz in here and take her husband away from her, she was in for a fight.

But Lois' stomach coiled at the thought. She wasn't entirely sure he wouldn't go.

"I will leave you now. My guard and I will return here in three days."

"Just tell me where I can find you," Lois told her.

Zara pulled out a card. "This is a number you can reach us on and we will come where you want us to."

Lois could only nod as she took the card. Zara bowed slightly before she turned to leave.

And all this time she thought the woman was a research assistant.

That thought sent a wave of anger through her. Sara had been at the Planet for nearly a month! How long had... *Zara* and her guard been on Earth before then?

What was she going to do? Lois glared down at the card as if doing so would make this go away. The last thing she wanted to do was tell Clark about these people. If he learned there was a whole world of Kryptonians out there, she wasn't convinced he would turn away from them. A few months ago, she was sure their bond was strong enough that he would never leave her... for anything or anyone. But now?

She dropped heavily in a chair and allowed her pent up tears to spill freely.

"Ah, Lois... honey..."

She looked up when Perry spoke.

"Aw, honey, what's wrong?" the man asked, his expression immediately tender.

"Oh, Perry," she gasped. The man was there at once, holding her close. And he continued to do so until she was ready to talk.

Clark had lain around the apartment all day. He had begged off therapy with George. Being as how his body was recovered, he didn't feel he needed to work quite as hard any longer. And the last thing he wanted to do was exercise. His mind was entirely too spent for that.

Lois had been gone when he got up. As confused as he was, he felt horrible they hadn't talked since the night before. Yes, he felt sure going to stay at the farm for a while would help. No, he didn't want to leave Lois, but what choice did he have? He was even beginning to think that permanent separation might be what was best. Lois deserved more than he could give her.

So, he had brooded all day long. He had decided to tell Lois of his decision once she was home. But when she came in, she wouldn't even look in his direction. She headed straight for the bathroom, where she had been for nearly an hour. Part of him wanted to go to her, smooth this over. Yet, if he was planning to leave her for good, there would be more days like this when he wouldn't be there. Maybe it was best to allow her to deal with things on her own.

Glancing at the clock when his stomach growled loudly-Funny, he thought. If his powers had returned, why was he so hungry?

Deciding to call for take-out from the place Lois said would deliver, he reached for the receiver. He was about to press the numbers when he realized Lois was using the cordless.

"I need you guys to come," Lois gasped.

"What's wrong, honey?" Clark heard his mother ask.

It sounded as if Lois was crying. "Just... come," she finally choked out.

"Jonathan!"

"Almost booked," his father returned.

"We'll be there...? When, Jon?"

"Midnight. If we can make it to the airport in an hour," was the reply.

"Please hurry," Lois said.

"Okay, honey. See you then."

"Thanks..."

Clark slowly returned the receiver to the phone when he realized the conversation on the other end was about to end. What was so wrong Lois needed his folks so quickly? He knew she was upset with him, but this was more. His need to protect Lois swelled within him and he stood to head toward the bathroom.

"Lois?" he called from the door.

"Go away, Clark."

"What's wrong?"

It was a long, tense moment before she jerked the door open, fire in her eyes as she glared at him. "My entire world is falling apart. That's what's wrong!" She pushed him aside and stomped into the bedroom. She snatched the closet door open and rifled out some clothes.

Clark stood with his hands in his pockets watching her. She was struggling and he wasn't sure what to do. "I would know what to do if I had my memories, huh?" he asked, mostly of himself. She didn't answer anyway, just peeled her dress off and tossed it on the bed in favor of a pair of slacks and a blouse, not a bit shy changing in front of him now. Boy, how things had changed. Once she was dressed, she picked up a pair of shoes and dropped on the window seat. "Please," he tried again as she walked over to sit beside her. "I can't stand seeing you like this."

"Yeah, well, get used to it." She had slipped her shoes on and was up again.

Get used to it? What did that mean? He stood when he realized she was going back out.

"Where are you going?"

"Out," was her answer as she grabbed her bag en route to the door.

"Why are you so angry with me?"

That made her stop on the landing and turn to look at him.

"You told me last night you might leave me. I have no idea why I'm angry."

And he was left to watch her leave. The tone of her voice had broken his heart. She had sounded so resigned, so sure she knew what he had decided.

Maybe this was best, he thought as he went back over to drop heavily on the couch. If he left, there wasn't going to be an easy way to do it. It would be painful, excruciating even, for Lois. He just wished he could give her what she wanted.

Clark woke up the next morning alone- the same way he had gone to bed. Lois hadn't come back. That really ticked him off. He could understand her being upset, but for her to act so... childish...

He ruffled his hair to help wake himself up before heading to the bookshelf. Lois had left a list of numbers on a notebook there. He found her cell number and dialed it on the cordless he had brought with him from the bedroom. Three rings later, she picked up.

"Where are you?" he asked her.

"I needed to think," she told him.

"Yeah, well, don't you think a call would have been a nice gesture?"

She took a breath. "I'm sorry," she told him. "Do you want me to come home?"

"I want to speak with you about this... this whatever it is that's going on with you."

"Clark..."

"Lois," he shot right back at her.

"Are you leaving me?"

"How can I? You've already left me." And he lifted the phone to cut it off. Only his strength got away from him and the phone fell apart in a heap in his hand. He growled in frustration before heading to the bathroom. He glared at the man he saw in the mirror. A heavy shadow covered his face because he had learned the day before that with his body recovered, shaving with a razor was impossible. They kept breaking.

He used the facilities, washed up, then went out to make a pot of coffee. Normally he drank milk, but he needed something stronger this morning. By the time it was ready and he had taken his first sip, Lois walked in. He set his cup down and looked at her.

"You didn't have to come back on my account," he shot at her.

"What, Clark?" she demanded from him. "What do you want? You're Kryptonian. I can't help that. I didn't tell you and I'm sorry if you feel like I lied to you. But what was I supposed to do? You were trying to heal, trying to find a delicate balance that would set you on the road to healing. And let's not forget the whole Michelle Deter thing." She threw down her bag so they could have this out.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that woman almost turned you into mush. You were with her for three days."

Clark stood there for a long moment before understanding dawned on him. "You're afraid she and I..."

"Well, it *has* crossed my mind!" she yelled at him. Not right away, but after a while. But then he started acting like the Clark she knew he was and she thought maybe she was overreacting. Then... she just didn't know.

"I can remember being with her. She could barely stand to look at me, let alone anything else."

Lois crossed her arms over her chest and turned away from him.

"You don't believe me?" he nearly shouted.

"Clark..." she started.

"Answer me!"

She whirled back to look at him. "You wanted to make love the first night you were home, Clark. What was I supposed to believe?"

"That I found my wife very desirable. But obviously you figured I'd had a taste of physical pleasure and was about to blow up because it had been a while!" He threw his hands up in frustration. "Whatever, Lois," he spat and stomped into the bedroom. He snatched open a drawer to get a pair of jeans out. His brief concern over her anger had completely dissipated. She had ticked him off beyond belief. Yeah, Michelle Deter could

have taken advantage of him, but she hadn't. Although, the way Lois was acting, she believed he might have been a willing participant.

He dressed and headed toward the door. He needed to get away from her. He was angry and felt out of control. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her.

"Where are you going?" Lois asked him. She was sitting on the couch.

"Out," was his answer as he jerked the door open, not giving her a chance to say another word.

Great, Lois thought. This has gone from bad to worse.

Clark spent the day walking. He recognized so many places. A few things came back to him, although he wasn't sure if they were actual memories or not. He was confused now more than ever. He knew Lois was someone important to him — he could feel her. That had surprised him a bit. The first time he realized it was while he was at the Labs. George had asked him about Lois and as he talked, he realized he *felt* her. The sensation had only grown stronger since then. He had been so sure he would come home and they would build something wonderful. So, why was he slowly becoming convinced that leaving Lois was the best thing to do?

Her outburst about Michelle told him that there was a breach of trust between them. If she didn't trust him, how could he live with her? He had asked her about his clone — the one that had spent her wedding night with her — and he had taken her word for truth when she said she hadn't done anything with that other man. Why couldn't she believe him when he said nothing happened with Michelle? Because he wasn't quite himself?

It didn't matter. He was leaving her. He was going to give her a chance to live a normal life with a normal, *Earthling* man. Because he cared for her, this was the right decision.

He made it back home shortly after dinner that night. The apartment was quiet, but a light was on in the kitchen. He listened closely and could hear voices. He headed in that direction, stopping at the doorway of the bedroom when he realized Lois and his mother were on the balcony talking.

"Lois, you're not going to lose him," Martha was saying.

"I've already lost him, Martha," Lois returned. "And soon we'll watch him fly off with his people." She gasped back a sob and Martha moved to embrace her.

"You don't know he'll go with them."

"I do know." She leaned up to look at her mother-in-law. "He'll feel obligated to go."

For the first time, Clark saw his father. He had been to the side, out of sight. He moved closer to Lois and reached up to lay a hand on her shoulder. "Lois, he would have felt that way if he'd had his memories. He would have thought he owed them support for giving him life."

"But if he remembered, he would know how much I mean to him and he might have stayed."

"It doesn't change anything — worrying about something that's out of your control," Jonathan told her.

"It was out of my control the day he was taken from our reception." Lois took a deep breath. "How do I tell him this? He freaked when he learned he was Kryptonian. I can just imagine how much he'll freak when he learns he's not the only one."

Not the only one? What did she mean? He stepped out onto the balcony. "What the hell do you mean I'm not the only one?"

"Clark,"

"Tell me," he demanded in a loud voice.

"You watch your tongue," his mother scolded him. "She's your wife and you will respect her as long as I'm in this house."

"Then maybe you should leave because I have a feeling things are about to get really ugly."

Martha took the three long strides to him and put her finger in

his face. “Don’t you speak to me like that, boy. I am your mother!”

Fire flashed in Clark’s eyes and he was about to bark out another retort when his father reached out to grasp his shoulder.

“Think before you speak, son. Words cut deep. People can forgive a lot easier than they can forget.”

Clark glanced at his father’s hand, then at his mother. There was something in her eyes... It called to him, almost as strongly as the feeling for Lois had that first time. He allowed his anger to dissolve in an instant. He took a deep breath before he glanced around Martha at Lois. “What’s going on, Lois?”

“Let’s all go in and sit down,” she told him.

It was a long tense moment before Martha finally relented and stepped around Clark to head inside. They made a pot of coffee and sat down at the table to talk.

“Yesterday, a woman I thought was a research assistant at the Planet came to me,” Lois began. “She told me she’s actually Lady Zara from New Krypton.” Clark’s brows rose, but he didn’t say anything. “She said she and her guard have been here for a while to observe Kal-El — you,” she said directly to Clark. “They came to make sure you were worthy of your position in their society.”

“My position? How can I have one? I didn’t even know they existed.”

“Yeah, well, that’s where it veers off into the unbelievable.” She glanced at the dark liquid in her cup. “You are their rightful leader, provided you embrace your position beside your... birth wife.”

Clark’s brows shot toward his hair. “Birth wife?”

Lois looked up at him. “Lady Zara is also your wife. She came to take you to your rightful home, but when she learned you had been hurt, she decided to ask you to pass complete power to her so she can go home to lead her people.”

Clark sat for a long while before he finally spoke. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why come now? Obviously they’ve known I was alive to find me.”

“The lord next in line to the throne wants to take his position. And this lord is some kind of monster in the eyes of his world. Zara said if he leads, they will all suffer.”

He nodded and stared down at his coffee. “I want to speak with them myself.”

“Clark...” Lois started.

“I want to speak with them,” he said with a bit of finality.

Lois nodded and stood to look for her bag. She found the card Zara had given her, called the other woman, spoke with her for a moment, then hung up. “She wants to meet us at a place downtown and wants to know if you can bring the globe.”

Clark stood and went to get the sphere. Lois spoke with the Kents, then she took Clark to meet the next woman that was going to change her entire life — again. Why couldn’t the woman who changed her life be her for a change?

Zara was standing beside a man when Lois and Clark stepped inside.

“She does not need to be here,” the man spoke up.

“Ching,” Zara barked. “This is my guard, Lt. Ching.”

“I’m staying,” Lois let them know and moved closer with Clark.

“Very well,” the man relented after a moment.

Zara waved for them to sit at the table in the room. They did and she waited patiently for Clark to speak.

“How long have you known I was alive? Here?”

“Only this last cycle,” Zara told him. “Our Council elder, Trey, told me about Jor’s decision to send you away. We began an immediate search of the galaxies.”

“Why?”

“Excuse me?” she returned.

“Why did he tell you? And how did he know?”

“As advisor to the throne, Trey knows most everything. He had made a promise to your father not to reveal you were alive. However, the threat to our world was too great to ignore. We’ve already lost one society.”

“I won’t even ask about that... now,” Clark told her. “What do you want from me?”

“We want you to pass complete authority to Zara, as you should,” Ching told him.

For some reason, Clark got a bad vibe from the man across from him. “Lois said you have proof that what you say is true.”

“Did you bring the orbital globe from your ship?” Zara asked him.

Clark pulled it from the bag he held and extended it toward Zara. She reached across the table and wrapped her hand around the metal ball. It immediately started to glow.

“Don’t let go,” she told Clark.

They held on and another image of Jor-El appeared.

“My son, if you are receiving this message, somehow your birth wife has found you. Yes, I said birth wife. Our society was built on a carefully structured alignment of houses. It was not my choice to bind my baby boy to a life he might not want. Hence, my decision to send you to a world where you would have a choice.

“Kal-El, I cannot advise you now. I gave you over to a world I felt would care for you when I was unable to do so. The fact that you have grown into a man proves I was correct. What you choose to do now is up to you. Decide wisely, Milord.”

And the image faded. Zara drew her hand back and Clark stared at the globe. They were all silent for a long time before Clark lifted his head. “Tell me about Nor.”

Lois shot to her feet. “Excuse me,” she choked out and hurried from the building.

Clark stood to watch her go. She was upset and it upset him. But he needed answers. He needed everything laid out before he could make a decision. He slowly sat back down and listened as Zara told him about Nor and the lord’s threat to their world.

Much later, Clark opened the door to the apartment as quietly as he could. The lights were out, but he knew Lois was here. He could... smell her.

And if he concentrated, he could see her. Slowly each his powers were beginning to manifest themselves.

Lois had been gone when he came out of the meeting with Zara and Ching. They had told him about what a sadistic man Nor was. It had been an almost easy decision for him to go with them. Although, they were relieved to have the option of thrusting Nor to the position of leader taken away from them, they had both seemed disappointed.

Clark found his tee shirt and sleep shorts before going to the bathroom to change. Lois was asleep, restlessly, but asleep nonetheless. He paused briefly at the bed, intent on going to the couch to sleep, but something drew him down to the mattress. He turned on his side and stared at the woman beside him.

She was so beautiful. He would give anything to remember what they had shared, who she was. What little he did know, he liked. And if he wasn’t so confused, they might have had a chance. But there was no way he could stay here with her. There was just so much between them.

He closed his eyes, already dreading tomorrow, when he would tell Lois goodbye forever.

Clark cursed under his breath as he glared at the man in the mirror. He wanted to shave. The hair on his face was aggravating.

“Lois?” he called. He stepped into the bedroom. She was still lying in bed. She had been there all morning. “How do I shave?”

“Heat vision,” she answered him. “You bounce it off the mirror.”

His eyes shot upward. “Really?”

“Yeah.” She didn’t move. She had the covers drawn up with only her face peeking out.

He sighed and turned back into the other room. He stared at himself for a long moment before he decided to give it a try. Twenty minutes and two burnt towels — from deflected beams — later, he was once again smooth shaven. He dressed and headed out to the bedroom. He sat down on the window seat and stared at Lois. She hadn’t moved. Her eyes were open and she was staring at the kitchen, as if it held all of the answers.

“I’m going with them,” he said softly. No reaction at all. “Zara said they can do a complete memory wipe, replace what’s here with a full slate.”

That got her attention. She eased up to stare at him. “You’re going to replace your memories, the ones you *do* have, with what? Some made up life? A life that isn’t real at all?”

“It’s better than what I have,” Clark told her, looking directly into her eyes.

Lois sat there for a second before tears welled in her eyes. “Your suitcase is in the loft,” she said and laid back down to pull the cover back up over her head.

“You see? This is why I’m going. I say the wrong things. I do the wrong things.”

“You say stupid things,” she said through a choked sob. “Just go. Get what you want and get out.”

“Lois...” he began.

She sat back up, throwing the cover off her completely so she could stand. “Don’t Lois me! I have given you my life. I stood before God and our friends and promised to be your wife as long as I lived. You promised to be *my* husband.”

Clark sighed and lowered his eyes to the floor.

“To do what you say you’re going to do, you have to break those vows you took. Are you prepared to do that? Are you prepared to look me in the face and tell me you want to completely sever our bond so you can sanction your birth marriage? I’ve spoken with Ching. Do you know what will happen?” She took a step toward him. “Your *union* will be sanctioned the second you stand before your Council. He even tells me that when your ship departs, the Council elder will leave New Krypton so that he can reach you in as little time as possible. They want the two of you married and your marriage consummated as quickly as possible. Did you know that?”

He lifted his eyes to hers. “No. I knew the union would be sanctioned as soon as we met with Council, but I didn’t know the elder would intercept us to do so.”

“Do you know why you have to consummate your marriage so quickly?” He just stared at her. “Because they want you to bond with Zara so that the union cannot be broken.” She swiped her face. “I will say I’m sorry for ever doubting that you might have... broken your promise to me. Ching verified that Michelle never... did anything... like that. Or Mindy,” she added softly.

“How does he know?”

“I don’t know!” she shouted at him. “I guess it’s one of those quirky damn Kryptonian intuitions or whatever.”

Clark stared at her for a long moment. “Lois, am I a virgin? Is that why it bothered you so much to think...?” He stopped and stood up to go to her. “I’m sorry I got so angry with you. I had no idea. You should have just told me.”

“Told you what? ‘Oh, by the way, Clark, I’m sick to think you might have shared yourself with another woman because you promised me. Oh, and did I tell you I’m not exactly the girl next door?’” She finished with a flurry of hands and stomped to the kitchen.

“Is that why you wouldn’t make love with me that first night?” he asked, going after her. “You were afraid if my memory

came back I would be upset?” When she snatched open a cabinet door without answering, he sighed. “Lois, the memories I’m creating now are still here. I remember nearly everything since I woke up back at the hospital. Granted, the last few weeks are much clearer, but that is my past now. Those *are* my memories. If we had made love...” He glanced up at the ceiling. “Oh, God,” he breathed when something else occurred to him. “You think that’s why we haven’t made love... that I have to do so for the first time with Zara.”

She had filled a glass with water and lowered it from taking a sip. “Yeah, well, now you will, so it doesn’t matter what I think.”

“You said yourself we tried.”

“Yeah, but I guess we’ll never know if you would have been able to follow through, now will we?” She dropped her glass in the sink and pushed past him to go back in the bedroom.

Clark whirled on his heel toward her. “I can feel you.” She stopped at the bathroom archway, but didn’t turn around. “I can feel you as if you’re inside me. I’ve been able to for a while.”

She slowly faced him, large tears rolling down her cheeks. “How dare you?” she whispered. At his shocked expression, she went on. “You tell me you’re leaving me, then felt you had to impart that bit of information. That isn’t just thoughtless, Clark. It’s downright cruel.”

“It’s the reason I’m leaving.”

“Go to hell!” she spat at him before turning to head to the bathroom.

“Lois!” He ran after her, grasping her arm to keep her from going in the other room. “What kind of life could you expect to have with me? Even if I do regain my memories? I’m an alien. I have to hide behind a costume to even be able to use my powers. I live two lives that I’m sure are hectic as hell. What does that leave for you? For us? Eventually you would come to resent being alone so much. And what happens if I can’t father a child with you? I asked Zara. She doesn’t really know. One day even that would start to take its toll. Bitterness robs a person of their sanity. I can’t do that to you. I can’t allow you to keep vows that you’ll someday regret making.”

“But you can make a life changing decision for me?” She wrenched her arm from his grip. “Last time I checked, I’m a grown woman. I’m very capable of making my own decisions. And like I told you before, loving someone for a lifetime is a choice. Falling in love over and over is a gift. Yes, I had hoped we could do that. It’s a lot of work, just like anything you want. It’s work I was willing to do with a smile on my face. Just like you can feel me, I can feel you. That’s how I found you when Mindy kidnapped you. That’s what has kept me going these last few months. If I had the road ahead of me that you have, there’s no way I could walk away from that connection. I couldn’t even imagine what that piercing hole would feel like.” She swallowed hard as she looked into his eyes. “I guess we’re both about to find out.” She turned into the bathroom, but held the door to look at him once more. “When very normal, very Earthling couples get married, there are no guarantees they’ll have kids. How are we so different from them?” She closed the door, leaving him staring blankly.

Clark leaned back against the wall and took a deep breath. Lois was right. There were no guarantees with any relationship. He knew enough to know that much. Any couple could have problems conceiving. Any couple could be busy as hell. How did marriages like that work?

He heard the door open and his folks called out to them. He pushed off the wall and met them as they stepped down into the living room. “How have you two managed to stay married so long?” he wanted to know right away.

Martha and Jonathan exchanged a look before his father stepped closer to him. “We’ve chosen to keep loving one another, we’ve kept supporting one another, and above all else, we’ve

talked.”

“Why don’t you have any other children besides me?”

Martha smiled at him. “I couldn’t have children.”

Clark’s brows shot toward his hair. “What?”

“I was unable to conceive. And we were unable to adopt. We were at the end of our rope when you fell from the sky. It was as if God had heard our prayers.” His mother reached out to take his hand. “What’s wrong, son?”

“I told Lois I was going with Zara and Ching.”

“Oh,” Martha said, the smile fading from her face. She slowly released his hand and backed away from him. “Oh,” she repeated.

“Where’s Lois?” his dad asked him.

“Locked herself in the bathroom,” he told him softly.

Martha pushed him aside to hurry through the bedroom. The door to the bathroom opened, then closed again. Clark sighed and turned to head into the bedroom to start gathering his things.

“Are you sure this is the right decision?” Jonathan asked him.

“I’m not sure of anything.”

“Yes, you are.” His father reached out to grasp his arm and turned him around. “Tell me. I want to know exactly what you’re sure of.”

“I told you nothing,” Clark said and tried to pull away.

“I won’t let you go until you’ve told me,” the older man said with an authoritative tone.

“You do realize I could get away if I wanted to?” Clark asked him.

“You do realize that I will smack your smart mouth because no matter who you think you are or aren’t, I’m still your father?!”

That made the younger man relent. His shoulders sagged and he dropped his head in shame. He had done this now with both his parents. Why did any of them want him around at all?

“Now, tell me what you *are* sure of.”

Clark stood there for a long moment before he lifted his eyes to his dad. “I’m sure that I want to remember my old life.”

“Then why are you willing to let Zara wipe it away?”

He turned his head to see Lois and his mother standing in the doorway. Before he could say anything, she walked right up to him. Jonathan released his arms and she stepped closer.

“I want a divorce before you leave. I can call some guys who know guys and have the papers drawn up by tomorrow. So, that leaves tonight. Once we get the papers and you sign them, you can go fly away with little miss galaxy queen. But right now, you’re still my husband. You made vows to me. That means I have one night, and I intend to use it.” She pushed the closet door open, reached further inside, and tugged on a lever he hadn’t seen until then. She drew out a suit — one he wore as Superman. “Put this on. I’m going to show you why you became Superman.”

He held the suit, gawking at it. “I can’t be Superman. I don’t know how to fly.”

“You know how, you just don’t remember. I’m going to show you. You have two minutes. Put it on.” She shoved him toward the bathroom.

“Lois,” he began in protest.

“Don’t Lois me! Put the damn suit on.”

Clark stared at her for a long moment before he nodded and turned toward the bathroom. For all she had done for him, he could give her that much. He was going to fly away from her, leave her with a shattered heart. He would give her tonight.

Martha grinned at Lois. “That’s my girl.”

“Yeah, well, he’s my husband. He took vows with me and I intend to remind him of those words.” Lois started rifling through the closet for something to wear. She had one shot to get this right. If what Ching told her was right, by tomorrow he would be unable to leave her.

And he would make everyone happy.

“Why are we on the roof?” Clark asked Lois.

“So you can remember how to fly,” she answered him.

“How will I do that?”

“You’ll come get me.”

“Come get you?” He furrowed his brows, then gasped when Lois jumped off the building. Two seconds later, he was clutching her to his chest while they hovered next to the building. “Jesus, Lois! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“I just got your blood pumping. Now, we need to go up.”

Without much thought, Clark moved them up, higher and higher, until they floated among the clouds. He loosened his grip on Lois and looked at her. “You are a pain in the butt, you know that?”

“Yeah,” she answered with a smile. “You’ve told me that.” She adjusted to wrap just one arm around his neck. “You usually carry me in a cradle.”

He shifted to hold her the way she had described. “Now what?”

“Let’s go.”

With direction from Lois, Clark stopped three robberies, saved six kids from a fire, and whisked a woman to the hospital from a car wreck. She asked him to fly over oceans, countries, and specific locations. He hovered above his childhood home — having made it there on instinct alone. They finally landed on the roof of the Planet somewhere just after noon. Lois chose a spot to sit and smiled up at Clark.

He just stood looking out over the city.

“Close your eyes and listen,” she told him.

He did and immediately threw his hands up to cover his ears.

“Filter it. Concentrate.”

Slowly he separated the sounds- horns, sirens, traffic... closer- typewriters, ruffling papers, voices... and even closer- the wind, clothes moving in the breeze, and...

Clark’s eyes flew opened and he turned to look at Lois. He listened again.

“You told me not too long ago that sound is what grounds you.”

He moved over to sit next to her on the short wall. “It’s... calming.”

“Mmm... I used to envy your ability to fly. But since we’ve grown closer, I envy that ability more.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “I love sleeping with you because I can lay my head on your chest and hear that steady drum.”

He scuffed a spot on the roof with his foot. “Lois, it does feel good being able to help...”

“You won’t be able to on New Krypton. You’ll be a normal man.” She stood up. “Of course, that’s all you’ve ever wanted to be. I wish I could call you up in six months and ask you to tell me how you like it.”

He looked up at her. “I didn’t make the decision lightly.”

“No, maybe not. Come on.”

“Where are we going?” He stood, too.

“You need to change. We’re going downstairs to write up Superman’s return to the sky.”

“Why?”

“Because he was seen today and the public needs something.” She started toward the stairwell door. “And so you’ll have to come up with a reason for him to leave again.”

“What?” He jogged to catch up with her.

She stopped to look at him. “You’re not just leaving me, Clark. You’re leaving an entire world. If you just hop on that spaceship and disappear without explaining Superman’s disappearance, someone might connect you with him. If that happens, you risk someone hurting your folks.”

He could only stare at her for a second. “You don’t play fair.”

“And you do?” With that, she stepped through the door.

Before she could make it down a complete level, he was there —

dressed as Clark. She glanced at him and grinned. “That was fun, huh?”

He grinned back. “Yeah, just a little.”

They made it downstairs, greeting a couple of people as they headed toward their desks. Clark was going to try his hand at writing a piece from the perspective of Clark Kent, reporter, from the fire that morning. No one knew for sure if he was there or not. There had been utter chaos. The daycare center was in the middle of Suicide Slum and not many people gave a second thought to that section of the city. For some reason, he wanted to point that out.

And for a brief second, his mind raced with all kinds of possibilities about changing that part of the city’s image. He imagined a series of pieces about the kinds of people who lived and struggled there. Another piece on the children who seldom made it out. Single parents, watch groups, and on and on.

Then he sobered when he remembered he was leaving in a few days. Suicide Slum would likely remain just that — a slum.

Clark glanced up at Lois, a new respect for her washing over him. She was good.

Within half an hour, his article was written and he looked up when Lois set a bag down in front of him. He arched a brow in question at her.

“Lunch. Philly steak and fries from Dino’s. It’s your favorite.” She turned and went back to sit at her desk, unwrapping her own sandwich.

As he watched her, an image came to him — her sitting on his lap, kissing his neck and telling him what he’d had for lunch.

That happened a lot- things popping into his head like that. And every bit of the images were of him and Lois or Lois. His head was so full of that woman...

Then why was he contemplating leaving her?

He sighed heavily and reached into the bag. With the first bite, another image came to him. Lois was sitting across from him at a table, grinning widely. God, he loved her smile.

His head lifted so he could watch her. If he left her, he would never see that smile again. If Zara wiped his memories, he would lose that image.

If he went to New Krypton, a memory wipe would be the only way he would be able to keep his sanity.

If? Sanity? If he was so worried about going insane by being away from Lois, why in hell was he going?

“You about done?”

He snapped out of his fog and moved his eyes to Lois.

“Ah...” He glanced down at the half of the sandwich he still held.

“With your story?” she explained.

“Oh, yeah.” He took another bite of his lunch. She was still munching on hers as she watched him. “Pastrami, right?”

She glanced at her sandwich and smiled. “Yep.”

They ate for a few more moments before Clark wiped his mouth. “What next?”

“We’re going to play.” She headed toward her desk to gather up her trash from lunch.

Clark cleaned up his mess, then followed her to the elevator. The next building they stepped into was the community center right dead in the middle of Suicide Slum.

“What are we doing here?” Clark asked as he leaned down next to her ear.

“You started coming to hang out with the kids from time to time a while back. You love to play basketball with them.”

“I’m not in the suit,” Clark reminded her.

She looked over at him. “You came as yourself.”

His eyes widened a bit, but he remained quiet as they headed toward the gym. As soon as he stepped in, the small group of kids yelled at him. They swarmed around him, talking faster than he could keep up.

“Clark!” Chants of his name, claps on his arms and

shoulders, and wide smiles. These kids knew him and were glad to see him.

“We heard you were hurt, CK. You okay now?”

“I...” he stammered.

“Ms. CK said you don’t ‘member a lot,” was another comment.

“Not a lot, no.”

“That’s okay, CK, we ‘member you.”

“We just glad you okay,” was the remark of a boy about ten.

“Thanks,” Clark answered with a smile. Suddenly he was bombarded by memories — these kids, playing ball with them, helping them with homework.

“Is Ms. CK your wife yet?”

Clark turned his head toward the girl who asked that. “Yes,” he said with a smile and realized it felt good saying that.

“Want to play a quick game?”

He glanced at Lois and she nodded. He smiled at the boy and held up his hands for the ball. Within minutes, they were ripping it up on the courts. Clark hadn’t even given it a second thought that he knew exactly how to play the game. Lois sat on the bleachers with a group of girls answering questions about Clark. By the time the game ended, Clark was... thoroughly confused. He felt as if he had accomplished more in that single game than an entire week of intense therapy. And he had accomplished a lot during his therapy.

He said goodbye to the kids and he and Lois headed back out. They walked along the sidewalk in silence for a few moments before Lois looked over at him.

“Do you want to go out to dinner or stay in?”

That caught him off guard, but he quickly recovered. “Ah... maybe we should stay in, just in case we want to discuss things better said in private.”

“Good choice. When we get home, I’m going to take a shower first. When you take one, I want you to stay for a while. And no peeking.”

“What are you planning?”

“My secret,” she said with a smile.

Clark walked along with her, deep in thought. He dearly wished he could remember his life, remember her, but he had to admit, the memories he was making now weren’t so bad.

Then why did he want to give it all up?

Clark stepped out of the bathroom after nearly half an hour after he went in. Lois had called to him that he had been in there long enough.

The apartment was practically glowing. She had lit candles everywhere. The table was set with a fantastic smelling meal, soft music was playing in the background, and his wife was pouring them a glass of wine. She was wearing a little black dress and her hair was piled on top of her head. It was the same thing she had worn when she went as his date for the Kerths when he won his first one.

The smile on her face faded and her brows furrowed as she looked at him. “What’s wrong?”

Clark was completely shocked he had remembered something so clearly. “You wore that as my date for the Kerths.”

Her smile was back. “I did. And you wore that suit...”

“On our first date.” His hands smoothed down the suit she had laid out for him to put on. He had fed her chocolate cake on that date.

“Hungry?” she wanted to know.

“A little.” He walked over to her, reaching to take the glass of wine she held for him. He took a sip, watching her over the rim. “Would I have agreed to go with Zara if I could remember everything?”

Lois swallowed. “Maybe, but your reasons would have been different. You might have agreed because you felt obligated to

help them or to give back for the life that world gave you. You would have wanted to help, to save lives. And if you had decided to go for those reasons, I could support you. You would go, but you would come back — if you could. The reasons you've decided to go now are all wrong."

He sighed and glanced down into his glass. "I guess I just want the pain to stop."

"Pain?" she asked in confusion.

"It hurts not being able to remember." He set his glass down and lifted his eyes to hers. "When I look at you and see the comprehension and adoration, it literally hurts not being able to see the same things you do."

She set her glass down beside his. "I didn't know you felt that way."

"I wish I didn't, but..." He shrugged.

"Well, you remembered a couple of things just now. Why don't we have dinner and I'll tell you about us? Maybe you'll remember some more."

He smiled at her. "Okay." He quickly moved around to pull out her seat for her. It was so hard to believe that just a couple of days ago he was determined to impress Lois enough to make love with him. There was a lot to be said for blissfully unaware.

He took his seat and they started their dinner. Lois told him about his first day at the Planet and that first article — the one she had been impressed with but wouldn't admit it for hell.

"The razing of the old theater," Clark said, remembering when he had spoken to the old woman inside.

"That's it," Lois said with a smile before taking another bite of her pasta.

Clark ate for a second. "This is good," he told her.

"Your mother cooked it for us."

He contemplated that for a second. "Yeah. I can taste the oregano. She loves oregano."

Another plus, Lois thought as she watched him.

They ate for a while longer, talking and even laughing a bit. Clark remembered a few more things and asked a ton of questions about Lois. She answered, never rushing a thing. When they had eaten dessert, Clark pushed back from the table and took a deep breath.

"Come on," Lois told him, standing and holding out her hand.

He took it and stood and she turned to him so they could dance. Their distance was very chaste and respectful at first, but the more they moved together, the closer Clark pulled her.

"You smell so good," he told her softly, unable to stop himself. Since about half way through dinner, he had become hyper aware of her again.

Lois pushed her arms up around his neck. "So do you," she said, her eyes boring into his.

"This isn't dancing," he said with a grin as another memory came to him.

"This is," Lois said and pressed her lips to his.

Clark's arms automatically wrapped around her, dragging her as close as he could get her. The kisses were soft and gentle, but deep and very passionate. His tongue drove into her mouth over and over, tasting her, memorizing her. Before he realized what they had done, Lois was pressed against the wall next to the bedroom and he was thoroughly plundering her mouth. He broke the kiss and leaned back to stare at her.

"I just got this... feeling... like I'm doing something wrong," Clark told her.

"It's your connection to Zara," Lois told him honestly. Ching had told her about that, too. That with them close to one another, their connection would manifest itself. It was some biological inclination Kryptonians had to make sure physical bonds were created for the first time between birth mates.

His expression definitely showed his surprise. "What?"

"There's this connection between birth mates... to make sure

the consummation of the union is... successful."

"I'm supposed to make love with Zara my first time?" he questioned her.

"Yeah," Lois replied.

He just stared at Lois. Her dark eyes were so deep, so powerful. His hand went up and his fingers trailed her cheek in a whisper of a touch. "And what if I don't?"

"It's never been done, so no one knows."

Clark leaned to kiss Lois as tenderly as he had ever kissed her. When he leaned back, his eyes had turned black with desire. "I promised you," he whispered, then grasped her face to show her what he couldn't express verbally. His hands smoothed down over her back, lower to her butt to grasp firmly so he could pick her up. She jumped and wrapped her legs around his waist as she held his head to her.

He broke the kiss on the way to the bedroom. "We're not stopping tonight," he told her.

"Nope," she said and leaned to suck his earlobe into her mouth.

"God, that feels good," he breathed as he put a knee down on the mattress. Slowly, using a bit of super strength, he lowered her to the bed. Her mouth was recaptured and his hands began an exploration. His large palm moved up her side, causing Lois to moan loudly. That's it, he thought. Enjoy it. She kept moving against him, further stoking his fire. A huge part of him kept yelling this was wrong, he should stop. But another part, the part that craved Lois so much he could already feel her, wanted this more than he had ever wanted anything.

Shucking all pretense of gentility, he pushed his hand up her dress. When he realized she was wearing thigh high stockings, he grinned against her mouth. When he realized she wasn't wearing panties, he drew back to stare at her, panting heavily.

"Yes," Lois growled and tossed her head back for him to kiss her neck.

He hesitated only a second before he was kissing her skin, inhaling her very essence.

Wow! Had he ever seen anything so beautiful? He had done this before... in the limo. He had done this with her before. And she had responded just like this.

"Isn't this cozy?"

Clark's head jerked up when the voice spoke. There was the ugliest individual he had ever seen standing in the balcony doorway. Clark pulled Lois up and stood beside the bed, pushing her behind him. "Who the hell are you?"

"I am your worst nightmare," the thing told him.

Clark pushed Lois toward the door to the living room, backing up as the creature approached.

"I had imagined all kinds of things when I was sent after you," the thing said. He was tall and skinny, with fanged teeth and yellow skin. His eyes were dark holes in his head. His hands looked more like claws, long nails protruding out.

"Who sent you?" Clark demanded.

They had made it into the other room, Lois and Clark backed up against the table. The creature looked around with a grin.

"Won't the Lady Zara be disappointed to learn you were romancing this woman?" He made a sound. "Dear Kal-El, you should know better. You were trying to unite physically with this Earth creature."

"Lois is my wife!" Clark barked at him, his hand tightening on her hip.

"Wife? You've taken an Earthling wife?" The creature moved closer so that he could look around Clark at Lois.

Clark positioned himself so that she was completely hidden from the thing's view. "Who are you?"

"I am Tez. I am on a mission for Lord Nor."

Clark's brows shot toward his hair. "How did you get here?" "That is of no concern to you. In fact, in just a few moments,

you will have no concerns at all.” The thing pulled out a round ball of some kind. It flashed, then shot a bolt of light at Clark.

Clark yelled and dropped to his knees.

“Clark!” Lois cried and reached out for him.

“This will be much more fun than I thought it would be,” Tez said as he advanced on Lois. “You will watch him die.” He reached out toward Lois, but Clark’s hand shot up to grasp his wrist.

“Don’t touch her!” His voice rose in pitch as his body did. He stood back at full height and glared at the horrible looking man before him.

Tez lifted his ball with his other hand, but before he could shoot another beam at Clark, a flash of heat vision caused the device to explode in a puff of smoke and light. Tez’s eyes flashed, then he advanced on Clark. They struggled back against the table, then Clark whirled and shoved Tez toward the wall. They were in a face off of strength when the door flew open.

“Stand back, Kal-El,” Ching called from the landing.

Clark glanced at the guard before dropping Tez in a heap. Before the creature hit the ground, he vanished.

Lois moved up to grasp Clark’s arm, staring at the spot where the creature had been. She glanced up when Ching stepped over beside them.

“What was that?” Clark wanted to know.

“He was an assassin,” Ching said. “If Nor sent him, that means someone has broken Zara’s confidence.” He waited until the couple was looking at him. “No one knew we had come to find you. Us and Trey were the only ones who knew you existed.”

“Then how did Nor find out?” Lois asked him.

“Obviously he planted a mind bug. It seems Trey’s thoughts might have been compromised.”

“What has happened here?”

They all looked up when Zara spoke. She was moving down into the apartment.

“Nor sent an assassin after Kal-El,” Ching explained to her.

Zara reached for the device Ching was holding and punched a few keys. “This changes everything,” she said when she lifted her head. “Nor has violated the humanity laws by ordering a death. He has committed treason. He could not rule now if he wanted to.”

Lois could have sworn Ching smiled. And she had talked to the man for nearly half an hour the day before and not once had he looked as if he would smile.

Clark glanced at Lois, then at Zara when an incredible rush came over him. It was as if he was being called... called toward Zara.

Zara’s eyes met Clark’s, and he swore he saw the same shock in her orbs. “Kal-El,” she began. “You will not be required to travel with us now, unless you choose to. It is your right to take your place in our society.”

He stared at her for a long moment, unable to understand why he felt so drawn to her. What was that Lois had said? It was a biological reaction, inherent to his Kryptonian side. He glanced at Lois and an entirely different wave washed around him. He could feel her, mentally and physically.

Suddenly he felt like a bolt of lightning had hit him. He took a step back and bent to catch his breath.

“Clark?” Lois reached out for him. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s experiencing the pull to Zara. It’s much more pronounced because his body and mind is fighting the connection. You and he...” Ching waved a hand around the room.

“We *are* married!” Lois nearly yelled at him.

Clark finally straightened and took a step toward Zara. Instantly he felt better. Lois sucked in a shocked gasp, unable to believe he would have done something like that so openly and so boldly.

Clark and Zara looked at one another for a long moment before Zara nodded. “We shall await your arrival.” She turned and strode from the room. Ching bowed and hurried after her.

“Await your arrival?” Lois wanted to know once they had left.

Clark took a deep breath and turned to face Lois. “I’m going with them.” When she just stared at him in stunned disbelief, he continued. “Please understand how I feel.”

“You want me to understand that you’re turned on and need to get across the galaxy so you can get your rocks off?” she snapped sarcastically.

“That’s not what this is about!” he shouted at her.

“No, it’s about something I’ll never understand. You lost your memories, but not your essence. You’re still Clark Kent. You still have a life.”

“I have less than a life!” he returned.

That statement smacked Lois against the forehead with unforgiving force. “Fine,” she said in a resigned tone. “Get a few things and go. I’ll bring the divorce papers tomorrow when I pick them up.” She crossed her arms over her chest, letting Clark know she was done talking.

“Lois, please,” Clark begged.

“I cannot understand something you don’t understand yourself. You feel you have to go. Then go!” She pointed toward the door.

He stared at her for a long time before he nodded his head and turned to go into the bedroom. He opened the closet and stood there. He couldn’t bring himself to pull any clothes out. That was so final.

But wasn’t that what he wanted? He was leaving. That was final!

Without taking a thing, Clark headed for the front door. Lois was standing at the sink in the kitchen, her back to him. He could tell she was crying, but he opened the door and stepped out. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he started walking toward the sidewalk. He wished he completely understood his compulsion to go with Zara and Ching. He just felt everyone would be better off. They could wipe his memory and he wouldn’t hurt any more. It might be the coward’s way out, but he was going to take it. He just couldn’t live like this for an indefinite amount of time. It was too bogging.

And he wasn’t about to think about what almost happened with Lois earlier. What if they had made love? Would he still feel this way?

Why hadn’t he just picked up where they had left off? He could still feel Lois. She had been just as incredible as he had known she would be.

He also felt this... whatever it was he felt for Zara. For a second in the apartment, it had been all he could to keep from throwing her to the floor and...

He recoiled at the thought. He didn’t want Zara like that! He didn’t even know her. Yet, the pull had been so real.

That was why he had to go. All this confusion... His head hurt from the whirling questions, the flashes of memories, and the images of Lois. The hurt and confusion in her eyes was more than he could stand. Someday she would come to realize that he had left to spare her so much pain. He could probably live out a long and happy life, building new memories with Lois... if it wasn’t for that longing in her eyes. That longing, for the man he was, was the real reason he had to leave. He couldn’t look at her day after day knowing she wanted something else.

Lois stared down at the papers in her hand. When she had made her vows, she’d had absolutely no intention of ever looking at papers like these as it pertained to her life. Divorce... so final, so unmistakable, so much like her childhood. When her parents divorced, she had made herself a promise to never get married.

As she grew into a woman, she decided that maybe someday she would meet a man special enough to capture her heart. If that happened, and she decided to marry him, married was the way they would stay.

She sighed heavily and looked up at the sky. It was raining today. It matched her mood.

“Lois?”

She turned to give her mother-in-law a sad smile. Martha and Jonathan had come over a while ago; they had been here when the messenger brought the papers.

Lois walked over and wrapped her arms around Martha. “I’m divorcing Clark because I have to,” she said softly.

“I know, honey,” Martha returned, rubbing the younger woman’s back.

“I’m not divorcing you and Jonathan,” she went on.

“No, you’re not.” The woman leaned back to smile sadly. “You’ll always be our daughter.”

Lois cupped the other woman’s cheek. “I love you.”

“Oh, honey, I love you, too.”

“What about me?” Jonathan asked from the doorway.

“We can’t forget you,” Lois assured him as she went his way to offer him a comforting hug, too. She leaned back and took a deep breath. “Well...” She drew away from Jonathan to head to the living room. “I’ll make him come say good-bye,” Lois told them. She picked up her bag, stuffed her papers inside, then turned to look at the couple. “But I hope you’ll understand that I’m not there. Once I walk away from him again, I have to stay away... if I want to keep my sanity.”

“We understand,” Martha said as she stepped closer to her husband.

Lois gave them a final glance and headed out the door. Clark had left without clothes and hadn’t come back last night. Her first instinct was to make sure he had what he needed, but she had fought that inclination. He had made it clear he was a big boy, so she was relying on that fact. If she was going to let him go, she had to distance herself.

Zara met Lois in the same warehouse where she and Ching had when Clark was introduced to his heritage.

“Where’s Clark?” Lois asked her.

“I don’t know. I thought he was with you,” Zara told her.

“No. He left last night. I assumed he was coming here.”

“We haven’t seen him.”

Lois looked around. “Where is Ching?”

“Preparing our ship. We believe we can launch later today.”

Pain like she had never known washed through Lois. This woman, this... Kryptonian noble was going to take her very life away from her. She couldn’t let that happen without trying one last time to stop it. “I want you to go. Get on that ship and leave.”

“Without Kal-El?” Zara asked.

“Without Clark,” Lois confirmed. “He has suffered so much. He was starting to adjust, starting to truly heal and then you showed up. The pull he has to you is confusing him, ripping him apart.”

Zara sighed and glanced away a second. “His pull to you was a surprise. Jor-El had theorized he would be completely compatible with Earthlings, but even he couldn’t have imagined how deeply Kal-El would feel a mate here.”

“And that’s causing him so much pain. He feels me, but he’s drawn to you. With the fragile state of his mind right now, it’s almost overwhelming for him. His own father felt him better off here. Can’t you respect that decision?”

Zara let out a long breath. “Ching and I have discussed this. It was our choice for Kal-El to relinquish his power in the first place.”

“Then why did you offer to do a memory wipe? And take him anyway?”

“He was so confused, and he talked of his plight. And...” She

walked to the end of a crate and lifted her hand to touch the wood. “Like him, I was drawn. The connection goes both ways.”

“I respect that. I also see the sparkle in your eyes when you look at Ching.” Lois took a step toward her. “You can’t tell me you want him to come. To marry him. Consummate your birth union.”

Zara faced Lois with a sad expression. “If Kal-El and I had been raised together, this decision would have been out of our hands. But no. I have no wish to marry him or consummate a union I was sure had been severed by death.”

“Then go.”

“I think she’s right, Milady.” Both woman turned to see Ching walking toward them. “Kal-El’s mind is much too fragile to lead our world.”

“It is still his choice to make,” Zara argued.

“I disagree,” Lois said. “He’s still healing and has no idea what’s best for him. Trust me when I say Clark is not ready for this.”

Zara stared at her for a long moment before she moved her eyes to Ching. “We will leave as soon as possible.”

Ching seemed to sigh in relief. He bowed his head, almost smiling. “I can be ready in an hour.” He looked up at Lois. “That means you have to find Clark and keep him busy until we’re gone.”

“I can’t say for sure he won’t come here first.”

“Just do what you can.” Ching gave her nod and took a step back.

Zara bowed her head. “It was a pleasure to meet you, although I do wish it could have been under better circumstances.”

“The circumstances would have never been good,” Lois told her. She gave them a sad smile before she turned and left. She had come here to say good-bye to Clark, but if she could keep him away from here long enough for them to leave, that good-bye wouldn’t be necessary.

And she would worry about Clark being angry with her later. If he was still on this world, she would have a chance. Last night proved that. If he got on that ship, she would lose everything.

Clark had walked for a long time the night before, his thoughts nearly driving him crazy. He had ended up at the Planet, reading through old articles he and Lois had written. He had looked through that scrapbook Jimmy had shown him and he had stared at the pictures of her. Had he developed such a strong pull to her simply because Zara wasn’t on this planet? Or was it because of his feelings for her? As long as he wasn’t near Zara and not thinking much about her, the connection wasn’t so bad. But it didn’t make any of it any less confusing or painful.

Perry came in long before dawn and he made a pot of coffee so the two of them could talk. The talk was mostly about past investigations, general talk to keep Clark’s mind off his problems. And the younger man had appreciated the older one’s discretion. Perry White was a wise man. Another he wished he could remember.

It was nearly ten before he stepped inside the apartment on Clinton. His folks were sitting at the table, holding hands. They both looked up at him with very sad expressions on their faces. Two more faces that were familiar and completely unfamiliar at the same time. He walked over and sat down in silence, staring at the surface. It was a long time before he spoke.

“I wish I understood all of this,” he told them. “I grasp at things just out of my reach every waking moment. And it hurts. It hurts to struggle. They’ve offered me a chance to stop the pain.”

“I didn’t raise you to be a coward,” Jonathan told him.

“I’m not that man,” Clark reminded him.

“You *are* that man!” his mother shouted. “You are that man and so much more. Your life is still here. We happened. You lived

it. Wiping it away won't change that. Any life you have will be full of struggles and pain. What happens when your real memories want to get out? They can wipe all they want to, but you'll still be in there." She stood and stomped into the other room.

Clark stood and stared after her, another kind of pain washing over him. He looked back down at Jonathan. "I'm not doing this to hurt either of you."

"We know." Jonathan swallowed, moved his cup around on the table in a tight circle. "Your child is your child, whether he's one or one-hundred. Losing one is painful, no matter the manner in which they're lost." His eyes lifted to Clark's. "And that has nothing to do with memories. She still sees you. She says her heart still speaks to yours." Jonathan rose from the table. "If you were leaving for the right reasons, we would completely support you. We would miss you and we would be in pain because you would leave us, but we would support you. Now we ask that you understand that you are not the only one in pain." He moved around the table. "Excuse me. I believe my wife needs me."

Wow! Had his father taught Lois how to play the manipulation game?

He dropped to his chair and sighed heavily. His dad had said the same thing Lois had- if he was leaving for the right reasons... Were they right? Was he leaving for all the wrong reasons?

Well... yeah. He guessed he was. He wanted to out run the pain and confusion, felt it easier that way. But would it be? Would it really be easier than staying and learning how to be Clark Kent again?

Not how to be... just how to cope with whom he had become.

He had never analyzed his feelings over the accident that made him lose himself. Lois had shown him the pictures, the medical records, the reports... He had been clinically dead for three full minutes. He'd had a heart attack.

Superman had a heart attack. How weird did that sound?

Loss of oxygen to his brain had caused his reversion into childhood.

But the incident itself... He had jumped in front of a bullet that was meant for Lois... the same way he had done when Deter took him the last time. According to Lois, he had known he didn't have his powers, but he had taken those bullets any way. When her life was threatened, he had reacted. It's what he did, had always done. Even now, his instinct to protect Lois was so strong he could almost taste it.

He didn't feel at all inclined that way where Zara was concerned. He couldn't explain the connection to her. It was like an urge to quench his thirst when the only thing to drink was water. He felt he had to be near her, while at the same time, he didn't really want to be. Had his race of people really been hard wired to recognize one another? Were they that insecure about their people doing the right thing? He supposed it had nothing to do with right or wrong. Kryptonians, at least to Clark, seemed to be extremely logical people, even to the point of neglecting their personal emotions. Happiness was sacrificed for the good of the people as a whole.

And if he went to New Krypton, that would be his life. He would never again be able to truly enjoy anything unless he directly advanced his race. Ching had said as much. New Krypton was a world struggling to rebuild itself and the entire population was expected to play a part. Was he really prepared to do that? Yes, he sacrificed a lot as Superman. Even if he didn't remember the life he had lived, he had seen it in the tons of pictures he had been shown; he had heard about it from the stories his folks had told him; he knew it to be true from the passion he saw in Lois' eyes. Being married was evidence that he'd had a good life.

So why did he want to give it up?

Lois stared at the sterile white wall in front of her. She sat alone in a room with only a single chair. When she had left the warehouse after meeting with Zara and Ching, she had called back to the apartment to see if Clark was there. Martha had told her they still hadn't seen him, so she had called the Planet. It was the only other place he had been, so she had felt sure he might be there. Sure enough, Jimmy told him he was in Perry's office. A block from her destination, she had been approached by a man asking if she was the famous Metropolis reporter. Immediately she had been on alert, but it had done her little good. The man said he had read her thoughts.

He read her thoughts right after he rendered her powerless to move. He'd had some kind of device that emitted a wave of light. All at once she had felt dizzy and unable to control her limbs. To any observer on the street she appeared sick. The man had taken her by the shoulders as if he was helping her. That's how he managed to get her down the sidewalk and into an alley. He pulled out another device and they disappeared in a shimmer of light. When she became aware of herself again, she was sitting in the chair where she was now. That was over half an hour ago.

The door swished open and a tall man with long, nasty looking hair walked in. He wore a Kryptonian suit much like Ching's. "Nor, I presume," Lois said flatly.

"Very nice, Ms. Lane. I guess you have earned those accolades that have been garnered upon you." His hands were locked behind his back and he paced back and forth in front of her, silently assessing her. "Why did Kal-El choose such a... lacking specimen as his mate?"

"What would you know about anything?"

"I know you are thin and no doubt weak. On New Krypton, we like our women strong and healthy."

"Have you seen Zara? She's not exactly fat," Lois spat at him.

"She can be anything she wants to be," he said with a grin. "She is royalty." He stopped in front of her and reached out to caress her face. She jerked her head away from his touch. "Don't be that way. If you're a good girl, I might show favor. I can overlook your lack of flesh if you can keep me happy."

"Favor is not what I have in mind to show you," she said fiercely.

Nor laughed and withdrew his hand. "I see Kal-El has had his hands full with you."

"What do you want?"

"Come now. You can't be that naïve." He paced across the room. "I want control. I have been denied my proper place long enough. It is time for my world to know what true power really is."

"You know, I don't understand that," Lois told him, lifting her shoulders a bit higher. "Zara is obviously old enough that she should have taken power a while ago. And you look..." She eyed him critically. "Well, you look old enough to be her father. Why haven't you challenged Council for the throne or power head or whatever it is you people call the head honcho before now?"

Nor's brow arched toward his hair, no doubt because her entire outburst had been achieved in one breath. "I told you I have been denied long enough. Denied being the operative word here."

"I really don't care. If my world knew you people were here, you would have more trouble than your inability to become head lord."

"That is why our ship is cloaked and it will stay that way. The only person that needs to know we're here is Kal-El." He reached into his pocket and extracted Lois' cell phone. "Call him." He held it out to Lois. "We've tapped into the communications systems so this will work."

"Call him yourself." Lois turned away from him.

"Fine." He opened the phone and pressed a couple of

numbers. It was a long moment later when he smiled. “Nice to hear your voice, Milord.”

Clark’s brows furrowed in confusion as he held the phone. He had been sitting at the table, still brooding when the phone rang. “Who is this?”

“This is the man who can make your life miserable,” was the reply. “Come to the empty shopping center just outside the city, near the old railroad station.”

“Why would I do that?” Clark had learned something listening to all those stories Lois had told him.

“Because if you don’t, I will kill your wife.”

That got his complete attention. The hair on the back of his neck stood up.

“I have your dear Earthling mate.”

Earthling mate? Milord? “Nor?” Clark asked of the man’s identity.

“It appears our dear First Lord is quite the reporter himself.”

“If you hurt her...”

“Oh, don’t have a fit. I don’t intend to hurt her.”

“Don’t listen to him, Clark,” came the shout in the background. “He spoke of showing favor if I was lucky. He has no intention...” A loud smack sounded through the line, sending Clark into a seething rage.

“Nor, put your hands on her again and you won’t have to worry about leading your people!”

“Just get to the shopping center.”

The line went dead and Clark turned to slam the receiver he held down, catching himself at the last second to keep from ruining it. “Mom! Dad!” he called and ran into the other room. His folks were coming through the door to the balcony.

“What is it, son?” his dad asked.

“Nor has Lois.” He was already headed toward the closet for a suit. He wasn’t sure why he felt he needed to do this as Superman, but he was going to.

“Don’t go alone, Clark,” his mother told him and reached out to grasp his arm. “Go get Zara and Ching.”

Clark stopped and looked at the woman. “I can’t be near her,” he told his mother.

Martha hurried into the kitchen and came back carrying a piece of paper. “Then call her. Let them go get Lois. Or ask for Ching to help you. If Nor managed to get here without them knowing it, then he knows how to render you incapacitated.”

Clark glanced at the paper, his mind raging against the idea of getting near Zara until he had decided what to do.

And he was most definitely undecided now. As confused as he was, as badly as he ached, he kept coming right back to the same place — Lois.

“Call her,” Clark said while he extracted a suit. “Tell her that Nor is here and wants to meet at the old shopping center outside the city near the rail yard.” He hurried into the bathroom with his suit, not waiting for comment from his mother. Lois was in trouble. It didn’t matter what he wanted, she was the most important thing right now. He would deal with his connection to Zara later.

He came out and headed toward the balcony door. “I can’t wait.”

“We know,” Jonathan told him. Martha was still on the phone.

Clark flashed his father a serious expression before he disappeared in a flash. He dropped to the ground near the building Nor had indicated just seconds later. He wasn’t sure how he had gotten here, but he would worry about it later. “I’m here,” he called into the air. Another second later, two black clad men dropped to the ground in front of him.

“Nice to meet you, Kal-El,” the bald one said.

“Where is Lois?”

“Nor is willing to make a trade,” the man told him. “Your position at the head of Kryptonian power for your precious wife.” “Done. Get him here and have him bring Lois.”

The balding man tilted his head to the side, as if hearing something. After a second, he lifted his hand toward the building. “He’s inside.”

Clark watched the two men closely as they headed toward the nearest door. The other man jerked it open easily and they went inside. Nor was standing near the middle of the large space, holding Lois by the arm.

“Lois!” Clark wanted to go to her, but he wanted to know exactly what he was up against.

“I’m okay,” she assured him.

He moved his eyes to the man. “Let her go.”

“Not until you relinquish power to me,” Nor told him.

“That’s not possible.” Everyone looked to the right to see Zara and Ching approach Nor cautiously. “You violated humanity laws when you sent an assassin to kill the First Lord,” Zara reminded him. “You are a wanted man.”

“Our dear leader can make that go away,” Nor told her.

“To do that, he would have to be sanctioned by Trey,” Ching spoke up. “For that to happen, we would have to wait for him to get here. Is that really what you want?”

For the first time, Nor looked a bit fearful.

“How did you get here anyway?” Ching demanded.

“How did you?” Nor tossed back. “Of course, in my case it was much easier. All I had to do was follow your print.”

Ching glanced at the two men standing off to the side of Clark. “I assume that is your entire guard?”

“Don’t underestimate a determined man,” Nor told him.

Clark had carefully looked Nor over. He was holding some kind of device in his left hand. He wasn’t sure what it was, but knew it couldn’t be good. He’d had to use something to get Lois in the first place.

And before another word could be said, Lois clutched her head and struggled to breathe.

“You see,” Nor began.

“Stop!” Clark shouted at him.

“Take the one thing he wants and inflict so much pain, he’ll gladly give up his life to save it,” Nor finished despite Clark’s protest.

“Absolutely,” Clark said as he raised his hands out to his sides. “Let her go and you can have me instead.”

“All I want is your power.”

“You can have all of it,” Clark said as he took a step toward Lois and Nor.

Nor grinned evilly. “My men are my witnesses,” he said. “Kal-El is willing to relinquish his power to me.”

“Just let her go,” Clark said again.

Nor let go of Lois’ arm and she dropped to her knees, the pain still beating a steady drum inside her head. The evil lord reached down and grasped her by the back of her head to tilt it up. “I would have had so much fun making you submit,” he told her and leaned toward her, his intention to kiss her.

White hot rage shot through Clark and in a flash, Nor and both his men were lying in a heap at Ching’s feet. Before the rogue lord hit the ground, the device Clark had knocked from his hand was caught and crushed. Lois sagged in relief and Clark caught her as she collapsed.

“I’ve got you,” he told her softly. He smoothed her hair back off her face and gazed into her pain laden eyes. He smiled at her, then pulled her to his chest. Why had he ever thought he could leave her? As he held her, he could feel her move completely into his soul. With her is where he would stay.

“Let me see her, Milord,” Ching said as he kneeled beside them. Clark laid Lois back and Ching ran a hand held device over her face and body. “She will be okay. He only zapped her with an

electrical device. It caused excruciating pain, but it's passed now."

"Good." Clark hadn't taken his eyes off Lois. She was looking at him with a questioning expression. "Let's go home," he told her.

"Nor and his men will be detained on our ship. We will dissolve the vessel he came in and when we get back to New Krypton, Nor will be tried for treason."

Clark looked up at Zara. "I'm not going with you."

She smiled at Clark. "I know. I felt the connection sever."

For the first time Clark realized he didn't feel drawn to the other woman. He was relieved not to have that confuse him again. But looking back down at Lois, he knew that connection or not to Zara, this was his home. Whatever life he remembered, whatever life he built, he would do it with Lois- if she would have him.

Gently cradling his load, he stood up. "I'm taking her home."

"We will see you before we leave," Ching told him.

He nodded and headed toward the door. Less than two minutes later, he was laying Lois on the bed in their apartment. She was asleep, so he couldn't resist taking a second to look at her. He smiled and caressed her face.

"Is she all right?" his mother asked from the doorway. They had hurried to check on Lois when Clark landed on the balcony.

"She's fine," Clark told them. "Nor used a device to cause her a lot of pain, so she's sleeping from the wash of relief."

"Where is he?"

Clark stood and walked with his folks to the kitchen. "He's being detained by Zara and Ching. They are going to try him for treason when they get home."

"When they get home?" his father asked him.

"Yeah." Clark glanced at the woman on the bed. "I think someone here needs me more than their world does."

"Oh, thank God," Martha breathed. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Clark's neck.

He chuckled softly and returned the embrace. "Wow. If I had known your hugs felt this good, I would have asked for one a long time ago."

Martha drew back to grin at him. "Then I expect more from now on."

Clark's hand went up to cup her face. "So many you'll get tired of them."

"Not on your life."

Clark couldn't help but hug her again. When he released her, he moved over to hug his dad. "I want to remember, but if I don't..." He leaned back to look at the man. "We'll build something wonderful."

"We will," his dad assured him.

They shared a smile before Clark turned back toward the bedroom. "I'm gonna change and wait for my wife to wake up."

"We'll cook something to eat," Martha told him.

"Thanks." Clark stopped at the foot of the bed to gaze at the woman lying there. He couldn't believe how deeply she seemed to be ingrained within him now. It was as if he had breathed her in. She had told him about her connection to him. Was that normal? Did every couple deeply in love feel that way? Did this mean that he deeply loved her? Even though he didn't completely remember her?

He changed into a pair of shorts and tee shirt, then settled on the bed and pulled Lois into his arms. He laid there looking at her. Did she do this when he was hurt? Was this how she felt? Helpless, like a spectator?

Clark smoothed his hand over her head and face, over her shoulder, down her arm... He lifted her hand and played with her fingers, traced her palm lines with his thumb. It was nearly half an hour before she opened her eyes.

"Hey," he said with a smile.

"Hey," she returned. "Where...?" She looked around and sighed heavily.

"How do you feel?"

"Drained."

"Ching said you were okay." His fingers moved down the side of her face, stopping on her chin.

"I am if my husband is planning to be here tomorrow," she told him.

"And the next day and the day after and every day that you think you can stand a neurotic amnesiac." He grinned at her.

"Really?" she wanted to know.

"Really." He leaned over and kissed her forehead before hugging her to him. "I was so scared he was going to kill you," he whispered.

"And you just reacted?"

"The same way I did when you were shot at." Clark leaned her back to look at her. "I don't know what I will or won't remember, but I want to stay... with you."

Lois pushed her arms around his neck, squeezing as tightly as she could. "That's all I want," she told him.

"I know." His hand went up to cup the back of her head. She drew back to smile at him through tear filled eyes and he couldn't resist kissing her gently. "Are you hungry?" he wanted to know when he drew back to cup her cheek.

"Yeah. And something smells so good."

He laughed softly and helped her sit up. She changed her clothes and they sat down to a late lunch with his parents. Even Clark could feel the difference in the air. He hadn't realized just how tense everyone had been, awaiting the moment he would say good-bye for the last time. And it wasn't until he felt Lois so completely did he realize just how much he meant to them.

He would fight even harder now. He would be whatever they needed him to be. They were already all he needed them to be.

Martha and Jonathan declared they were exhausted and headed back to their hotel room. Clark had volunteered to clean-up while Lois checked her email. She had just stepped back into the kitchen when someone knocked on the door. She made her way over and opened it to find Zara and Ching.

"I believe this belongs to you," Ching said and held up her bag.

Lois reached out to take it. "Thank you. I hadn't even missed it."

"We found it on the small vessel Nor took from New Krypton," Zara explained.

"Clark's not going," Lois wanted to remind them. She had heard Clark tell them at the warehouse, but felt they should hear it again... and again and again.

"We know," the other woman told her with a smile. "We wish to say good-bye and thank you."

Lois stepped aside for them to enter.

Clark came around the corner wiping his hands. "Is your ship ready to go?"

"Yes. We will launch as soon as we return to it," Ching told him. The guard stepped over and held out his hand to Clark.

"Thank you, Clark."

Clark took the offered hand and smiled. "Thank you. I know more now about my heritage."

"And we know that memory or no memory, you are very capable of leading our world." Ching glanced at Zara. "I am glad you won't have to, though."

Clark laughed as his eyes moved to Lois. "Me, too." His arm lifted when she moved closer.

"It is our hope that we never have to bother you again," Zara told them both. She held up what looked like a memory card.

"This is information that might help your world a bit."

"When Lois told us that Superman's absence had to be

explained while you were hurt, we thought this could help,” Ching explained. “Write another article to explain that Superman discovered more of his heritage when he was forced to go help with a problem on his world. If I have read correctly, this world is oblivious of the true state of Krypton.”

“That information doesn’t need to be public knowledge,” Lois told him.

“Explain that as a way for his people to show their appreciation, they sent this information.”

“What is it?” Clark asked as he turned the card over in his hand.

“Scientific and medical data that could help make things a bit easier here on Earth. There is information to show your people how to harness their resources correctly to get the most from them without damage to your world. Perhaps a few diseases might become a thing of the past.” Zara actually shrugged. “What kind of people would we be if we didn’t help our fellow man?”

“Unfortunately, many on this world might not see that information as beneficial,” Lois told them with a frown. “We are a money hungry society and if big business feels threatened, that information won’t be shared so openly.”

“That’s why we gave it to you,” Ching told her. “I am sure that if Lois Lane reveals the secrets of Earth’s technological brethren, the powers that be will be forced to make that knowledge public.”

Slowly Lois smiled at him. “I think I like the way your mind works.”

The stoic guard smiled back. “I thought you would.” He bowed deeply. “Thank you both. We will keep your continued health and prosperity in our thoughts.” He took a few steps back to wait on Zara.

Zara bowed, too. “Nor will be disciplined accordingly, thanks to you both. We are just sorry that he came here to begin with.”

Lois glanced at Clark. “Actually, I’m glad he came. If he hadn’t...” She trailed off and pulled Clark a bit closer. He smiled in return.

Zara nodded. “I can understand that completely.” She turned and headed toward Ching. “Good-bye, Kal-El.”

“Good-bye,” Clark told them. He and Lois stood there until the door closed behind the couple. “Want to go flying?” he asked her when she turned to smile at him.

“Yes,” she answered. “Let’s go see if we can find somewhere to play, too. I would like to laugh a lot and maybe run and...”

“The beach?” Clark asked her.

“I don’t know. Somewhere not here.”

“Hey, I know the perfect place. Pack a bag and grab some jeans and sneakers.” He pulled away from her.

“Where ya’ going?”

“I’ll be back in about fifteen minutes.”

His expression asked her to relent and she did with a nod. He flashed her a grin and disappeared in a flash. Lois headed into the bedroom to get a bag packed. She wasn’t sure what he had in mind, but at this point, she would indulge him almost anything. He was staying here with her. That was enough.

Clark returned, quickly packed his own bag, and flew both out before coming back for Lois. After a slow, enjoyable flight, they landed on the farm in Kansas.

“This is your idea of somewhere to play?”

“Yep,” he answered with a grin. “Come on.” He grabbed her hand and headed for the barn. Jonathan was there, strapping the saddle on one of the four horses on the farm. Clark had flown them home to help with his plans. “Thanks, Dad,” Clark told him.

“Not a problem, son. Grill gets hot at seven. Enjoy!” The older man handed off the reins to both horses he had saddled before heading out of the barn.

“We’re going riding?” Lois asked Clark.

“Uh huh.” Clark helped her mount one of the horses, climbed on his own ride, and they set out. “You’ll have to keep in mind I’m not sure where to go, but Dad mapped me out a route and I memorized it. Hopefully we won’t get lost.”

“And if we do, we can have fun finding our way back,” Lois told him with a grin.

“Absolutely,” Clark said and smiled back. He led them toward the trail Jonathan had mapped out for him.

“Did you fly your parents home when you left the apartment earlier?”

“Among other things,” he said without further explanation. And she decided to let it drop. She wanted fun and he was giving it her. She would be content for now. They rode across the wide expanse of Kent farmland before crossing onto the nature preserve that bordered both the Kent and Irig farms.

“I didn’t know there was a preserve here,” Lois said as they continued on.

“Dad said the towns’ people got together years ago to protect this bit of land so that the community would always have a play area. There are creeks and ponds and even a place to bird watch. Over there...” He pointed in the right direction. “Is an old Indian reservation. It has a burial ground. There...” He moved to point the opposite way. “Is a campground. It has a lake with all kinds of things to do. I thought we would get up tomorrow and go for a boat ride. We can take lunch and hike a while. Dad said we would probably see a bit of wildlife.”

“That sounds good.” They rode for a short distance before Lois gasped. “Oh, God! We forgot to call Perry.”

“Covered,” Clark returned with a smile. “And I left the laptops on purpose. I turned off our cell phones and told Perry not to call the farm unless it was a dire emergency. Besides, he thinks for the next few hours we’ll be on a plane.”

“What about Superman?” she asked him.

“He’s only going out if there’s a huge natural disaster somewhere. The world survived without me for these last few months, it can get along for a few more days while I spend time with my wife.”

She looked at him for a moment. “I like the sound of that.”

“Good.” He reached out and pulled her horse to a stop so he could lean over and kiss her. “How about that?” he asked when he sat up. “Do you like the feel of that?”

“Oh, yeah,” she breathed and leaned in for another one. She straightened and grinned at him. “Race you to the fence.” And before he could flinch, she was off.

Clark shook his head and set his horse in motion. He had told his dad to saddle the fastest horse for her, sure that she would want to race at some point. Hearing her laugh was much, much better than seeing her tears and feeling her anguish. He was so glad he hadn’t left her.

By the time they had brushed out their horses after their ride, Jonathan had fired up the grill. Martha had the table outside set and covered dishes awaited the two couples. It was a perfect night to eat outside. The weather was warm and the stars were twinkling in the sky. The patio was lit up and torches were dancing to keep the bugs away. Clark had no idea what made him think to bring Lois here, but he was glad he had. Their ride had worked wonders. Lois had smiled and laughed and they had talked — about any and everything but his injury, memory loss, or his temporary decision to leave. They didn’t discuss work either. And Clark remembered a few things along the way.

Clark helped his dad cook the steaks and corn before they sat to eat. The conversation and laughter continued. Martha told a few embarrassing stories, but Clark took them in stride. Lois even offered up a childhood story or two. Clean-up took all of three seconds thanks to some super help. Jonathan turned on the radio and they all danced. Lois had a ball trying to teach Clark a few line dances — he didn’t remember how to do that. He did

remember dancing with her at the Corn Festival though. After Martha and Jonathan begged off for the night, the younger couple shared a slow dance.

As they swayed together, Clark wrapped his arms around Lois and pulled her closer. "I remember doing this before, too."

"When?" she asked him.

"We weren't this close." He drew back to see her face, his arms looped behind her. "And we were interrupted." His brows furrowed. "I don't remember her name."

"Blond bombshell with big..."

"Wow. Is someone jealous?"

"I was... for a second," she admitted with a smile.

"You have nothing to be jealous over. I've seen your package." His hands smoothed over her back. "And it's incredible."

"Typical male reaction," she told him with a smirk.

"I'm not your typical male," he reminded her.

"Nope." She pushed her arms up around his neck, clasping her hands together.

He gazed at her for a second before he smiled again. "So, who was the woman?"

"Mayson Drake."

"Mayson... She's dead," Clark said as his smile faded.

"She is," Lois said sadly.

"Aw, man." He pulled Lois a little closer.

She leaned in, asking him to hug her. "I'm glad I let her dance with you," she said softly into his ear.

Clark's hand moved up to cup the back of her head, the other squeezing her side. "You're an amazing woman," he returned. They danced for a few moments before Clark drew back. "Hold on a second." He flashed away from her, disappeared inside the barn. He had done that one other time tonight, too. He was back a few seconds later, putting out the torches, cutting the lights, and turning off the radio. He stopped beside Lois again and reached down to take her hand. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see." He grinned over at her as he led her toward the barn. They stopped beside the stairs to the loft and he faced her. "Hang on." He grasped her sides and slowly floated them up. He stood her on her feet and looked around the space, lighting candles as he went. The soft glow allowed Lois to see that the loft had been transformed into a romantic bungalow. All of the hay was gone, save the pile used to make a bed along the side wall. It was covered with some of Martha's handmade quilts. Clark moved over to a table where another radio sat. He switched it on to play soft music. He smiled at Lois as he moved to drape the curtain of sheer fabric along the open space at the ladder. "To keep the bugs out," he told her. "Would you like to take a bath?"

"Here?"

He moved over to the side opposite of the bed and drew another curtain back. There was an old, claw foot tub filled with water. "Just let me heat it," he told her and moved his eyes back and forth over the water. He shoved his hands in the now warm bath to whirl the heat throughout.

Lois noticed there was another table beside the tub and it held everything she needed for a bath. "Are you going to join me?" she asked him.

"If you want me to," he returned.

"Absolutely."

Clark smiled at her as he took her hand and drew her toward the tub. His eyes never left hers as he reached up to start unbuttoning her shirt. When three were open, he leaned forward to kiss her collar bone.

"You do know this only has to be a bath?" he wanted to know as he leaned up to look at her again.

"Why don't we just do what feels good and feels right at the moment?" Lois asked him.

He paused in his task to unbutton her shirt. "And if what feels right is... crossing the final threshold? Is that something you can do now? I still don't remember everything. Am I the man you want?"

Her hands went up to lay on his chest. "Clark, it took nearly losing you for me to understand that *whoever* you are right now is enough. You were right. Things can change in an instant. It's the moments that really count. We can build so many wonderful memories with special moments."

He lifted his hand to cup her cheek. "So many," he whispered. "Just so you know," he said as his hands moved back down to her shirt. "I have no problems at all crossing the final threshold."

She laughed softly as she moved her hands over his shirt. He had worn a tee shirt and as much as she liked him in those, she wished he had worn a button up shirt. There's something so erotic about revealing skin a button at the time.

Clark groaned and she glanced down. He had completely unbuttoned her shirt. She had worn it out of her jeans, mainly to entice him. And it had worked, too. He had mentioned how good she looked several times today. The shirt was also sleeveless, causing him to ogle her more than once. Although his glances had made her feel special and loved, not like she was a piece of meat he wanted to devour.

"God, honey," he breathed as he moved her shirt back on one side. He kissed her bare shoulder before lowering the material completely off her body. His hands skimmed her arms as he took in the sight of her standing before him in her bra. "Mmm, umm," he said and bent to remove her shoes and socks. He tickled her feet a bit while he did, causing her laugh. He stood again, grinning at her, and reached out to grab her by her waistband to drag her closer to him. "Tomorrow, I want you to tuck your shirt in."

"Why?"

"So I can see that cute little butt in jeans," he said and reached around to grasp a cheek.

"That goes both ways," she told him.

"I'm wearing swimming trunks and no shirt... while we boat."

"Oh, God," she breathed, pushing her arms around his neck before she kissed him. She broke the kiss when she felt his hand slip under her jeans to smooth across her cotton clad behind.

"Is this okay?" he wanted to know, his other hand going under her jeans as well.

"More than okay," she assured him.

He smiled and pushed down, lowering her denim to her thighs. He had unbuttoned them earlier, along with her shirt. He gave her another quick kiss before pulling back to take them completely off. He drank in the sight of her in nothing but her underwear for a second before he bent to untie his shoes.

"Let me," she said and kneeled.

Clark's smile faded as he looked at her. His wife was nearly naked, kneeling before him. He slowly stood back up to drink in the view. She finished divesting him of his shoes and socks and he learned he was a bit ticklish. Lois was laughing when she stood up to push her hands under his shirt. He helped her get it off and removed his glasses, too. He walked over to drop his glasses on the table with the radio before going back to check the water. He gave it another quick blast before reaching for the chilling bottle of champagne on the bottom shelf of the table beside the tub. He poured a couple of glasses, set them on the top shelf, then held out his hand to Lois.

"You thought of everything," she told him.

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a grin. His grin faded when she turned around.

"Will you unhook me?" she asked him. "If I had known you were going to so much trouble, I would have worn one with a

front clasp.”

“Front, back, it’s all good,” Clark said as he popped open the back of her bra. He moved the straps off her shoulders, leaning to kiss her right one. He looked over her shoulder while he pulled the material completely away and tossed it to the floor. He wrapped his arms around her and drew back against him so that he could kiss her neck. She sighed and laid her head back against his chest.

“Can we just skip the bath and head straight for the finish line?” she panted as he hit a particularly sensitive spot.

“Not yet,” he said and slowly lifted his head.

She groaned in protest. “Why not?” she whined.

He grasped her hips as he nibbled behind her ear. “Because it’s our first time and I want to build the anticipation so high that when it bursts, it feels good all over.”

She twisted to look at him. “I can live with that,” she said.

“Good,” he said with a smile and reached for his waistband. His eyes met hers when she reached out to help him. Together, they pushed his jeans over his hips. He stepped out of them and stood before her in a pair of boxer briefs.

“Wow,” she said, moving her hands up and down his hips.

“You didn’t like the briefs?” He had worn regular briefs while he was recovering because they were easier to get off and on with his limited mobility.

“The briefs are nice now and then, but look at these.” She stepped back so she could see him. “These are sexy.” He had picked up a package a few weeks before their wedding and had even modeled a pair for her. She had decided right away she had wanted him to start wearing these all the time. Although he had worn briefs on their wedding day. Black briefs... Very snug, black briefs.

He chuckled softly as he stuck his fingers under the waistband. She did the same and they lowered their respective underwear together. Each took an unabashed gaze at the other before stepping over into the tub. They sat opposite one another, close together. Lois sat between Clark’s legs, drawing her knees up close to her body.

“This is nice.”

“I’m glad you liked it,” he said and moved his hand up her back and shoulder.

“When did you manage to do all of this?”

“You do know I’m Superman?” he asked, waggling his brows at her.

She laughed softly, reaching to run a finger along his jaw.

“And it helps I have great folks. They dug out the candles, the quilts, and the radio,” he told her.

“You have the best parents. Why don’t we do something for them when we go back to the city?”

“Like what?”

“Send them on a trip or have some work done to the house. Your mom mentioned she would like to paint the kitchen. We could have a contractor come out and give her a dream kitchen. Maybe buy your dad a nice new tractor.”

Clark’s brows rose toward his hair. “Do we have that kind of money?”

“We have that kind and more.” Her hands were moving up and down his sides now. “Clark, when all of this first began, I found out that there was an account in my name with two hundred million dollars in it.”

“What?” he asked with raised brows.

“Do you remember anything about Lex Luthor?”

He sat for a long moment. “A little. I read the articles about him. You were engaged to him my first year at the Planet.”

She nodded. “And when I was, he put money in an account in my name in case he ever needed it. Well, the whole ‘switch Clark Kent’ thing came about when he asked Mindy to help get him out of prison. He paid for her to create a clone of the President so that

he could be pardoned. But Mindy cloned you instead. Lex had promised her half that money. His intention was to get out of prison, kidnap me, get that money, and disappear. Mindy double-crossed him instead. She killed him, kidnapped you, and tried to get me to exchange the money for your release. Only she had no intention of exchanging you.”

“And you have the money?”

“I kept it, as a bargaining chip. In the end, I didn’t need it.” She dropped her eyes to the water. “If I had known you would be hurt, I would have given her the damn money.”

Clark lifted her chin with his fingers. “We can’t change any of that. What’s done is done.”

She stared at him for a long moment. “Okay.”

“Okay.” He kissed her. “Now, how did you end up with the money?”

“Well, I had most of it wired to an account she couldn’t find. After everything was over, the money was still there. You were hurt and what I thought was one of the best facilities in the country was insanely expensive. Your folks and I talked it over. I spoke with Perry, and in the end, I used the money. I paid for your care, paid for your folks to fly out whenever they wanted to, paid for everything else we needed.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I did it and I’d do again. I kept the money. I figured it was owed us for all the crap we’ve been through.”

Clark reached for the loofa and the shower gel. He squirted a glob onto the sponge and held up her arm to start washing. “Was it legal for you to keep it?”

“Yeah. I talked to Bill, Constance Hunter, and Perry had the legal department look into it. There was no way to trace how or where Lex got it. They looked, but there was no trail leading to that account. The money was in my name, in a legal account. So...” She gave him her other arm.

“Could we donate some of it?”

“I’ve already started,” she admitted. “I wrote Star Labs a huge check as a thank you for your care. Of course, I paid for that, too. I wrote another check to the Superman Foundation.”

“Good.” Clark moved the loofa over her neck. “Scoot back.” She did, reclining against the back of the tub so he could lift her leg to soap it up. “Is keeping it something you can live with?”

“If you can live with it, too,” she replied.

He lifted her other leg, intent on his task. When he had lowered her leg back to the water, he laid the loofa on the table and stared at the water for a long moment. “I think I can live with it. Luthor, Mindy, and Deter put you through hell. The money will make your life a bit easier and anything that makes your life easier is okay with me.”

She slowly smiled at him. “So, we’ll talk to your folks about what they would like?”

“We’ll talk to them,” he said and he moved his hands up her legs. He pulled until she was close again, her legs around him this time. Her smile faded as she stared into his eyes.

They gazed at one another a moment before he smiled at her then reached for a glass of champagne. He took a sip. “Want some?”

“A little,” she replied and allowed him to give it to her. Her eyes never left his as she drank. He took another drink, then sat back to look her. When he did, she licked her lips. “I like it better that way.”

He chuckled and emptied the glass before returning it to the table. He held her face as he kissed her this time, moving his tongue over hers in a delicious slide. She moved her body onto his lap, increasing the already intense heat between them. He kissed her hungrily a few seconds before lifting her away. Both sat panting as they gazed at one another.

“My body feels like it’s on fire,” Lois told him.

“Good,” he said as he stood her up. He grabbed the loofa again and moved it around to her backside. His eyes held hers as

he soaped her bottom and the backs of her thighs. When he moved to the front, her legs nearly buckled. He sat her back down, put the loofa on the table, then moved his hands over her to remove the soap.

“Do I get to wash you?”

“Not tonight,” he said and began to wash quickly. When he was done, he climbed out to stand beside the tub. He leaned in to lift Lois out in front of him. He dried them both — her so slowly she thought she would scream from the eroticism of it. He took her hand and moved her back toward the empty space in the middle of the loft. They started to dance, his hands moving over her back. He spun her away from him to continue to touch her that way. She was the one to face him again so they could kiss.

“I can’t stand much more,” Lois told him when the kiss broke.

He smiled at her as he walked backward toward the bed. He sat down, holding her hips as she stood before him. “I, ah, I bought a box of condoms.” He blushed as he glanced at her stomach. “We’ve never discussed protection, but I didn’t want to make assumptions. So…” He stopped when she put her finger on his lips.

“We discussed birth control a while ago.”

“Yeah, well, I figured we had, but I couldn’t remember.” He looked down as he squeezed her hips. “Please tell me you take the pill.”

“Mr. Kent, are you telling me you want to forgo the condoms?”

“I’m telling you that the first time I make love to my wife, I want to feel her completely.” And he pulled her close enough to kiss her stomach, right below her navel. He groaned and lifted her off her feet, shifting to lie her down. He moved them toward the top of the bed, hovering over her and staring down at her with eyes so filled with desire, she was sure he was going to ignite them both.

“Tell me yes,” he breathed.

“Yes,” she replied softly and leaned up to meet him in a kiss.

Their world dissolved into a flash of color and unimaginable sensation as two truly became one.

Clark’s movements slowed and he leaned up to look at her. As he did, a roar of memories washed over him. Flash after flash played behind his eyes — his childhood, high school, college. He could see the days and nights he had spent mastering his powers, the places he had been, the people he had met. That first save, that first day at the Planet — the first time he had laid eyes on his future.

He moved his hand up to cup Lois’ cheek lovingly, smiling at her. She smiled back, a blissful twinkle in her eyes. He kissed her, tasting her lips — savoring that flavor he could now remember. His mind kept flashing through the memories — each and every one. He deepened the kiss when he began replaying his wedding in his head.

She broke the kiss and wrapped her arms around his neck. Warmth like he had never felt before washed through him as his memories settled in his mind and heart.

A little while later, he lay looking down at her as he moved his fingertips over the side of her face. “You are so beautiful,” he told her.

“So are you,” she declared.

He smoothed her hair off the side of her face so that he could kiss her below her ear. “I love you,” he whispered in her ear.

“Oh, honey,” she gasped. She hugged him close, savoring every second.

Clark drew back and dropped onto his back, staring up at the ceiling with a sappy smile on his face. “Was it worth the wait?”

“Oh, yeah,” she breathed, laying her head back to sigh heavily.

Clark rolled to side and ran a finger down her chin, between

her breasts, then to her navel. Both of them were sweaty, which really surprised him. “I don’t think you’ve ever looked so good.”

“You do know you’ve created a monster now?”

“One I think I can handle,” he replied as he grasped a hip to tug her closer.

“I’ll want to make love often now.”

“Any time, Mrs. Kent.”

“Mrs. Kent… I like that.”

“I like this.” His hand patted her hip.

“Just like a man.”

He laughed softly. “Sorry, honey. I waited a long time for this.”

“I know. You should know I’ve never… finished during sex before.”

His smile faded and he stared at her. “What?”

“It’s not like I’ve had countless encounters or anything.” She looked down at the quilt as she spoke. “I waited until I was in college, so I had a lot of expectations. We had this good build up going, then at some point it changed from sensual encounter to all-out assault. I fell behind and never caught up.” Her eyes lifted to his.

“Did you sleep with him again?”

“No. I caught him in bed with Linda the next week.”

“Ouch.” Clark winced to show her he sympathized.

“She would do things I wouldn’t, so…” She shrugged and reached out to rub her hand up his side. “Then there was Claude.” She snorted out. “He made sure I was done before he started.”

“Let me guess. He was a two minute man,” Clark said, pulling her just a bit closer.

“More like ten seconds,” she said. Clark’s brow arched and she laughed. “Okay, maybe a few more than that, but nowhere close to two minutes. But he told me he loved me and I figured it would get better.”

“And now you have me and my remarkable recovery ability,” he said with a waggle of his brows.

She laughed and pushed him to his back so that she could lean down and kiss him. When she drew back, she smiled at him. “And those wonderful vibrating abilities.”

“Don’t forget I can warm it up a little, too. Then I could cool it off.” His hand smoothed down over her butt. “I’m strong enough to hold you in most any position you’d like to try.”

“Then there’s the whole floating thing.”

“Ummm,” he said with a grin. “We could make love on the ceiling or in the clouds or in space or most anywhere else you wanted to.”

She shifted on top of him, causing him to grunt. “I’m going to enjoy our honeymoon.” She stopped to stare at him. “Would you like to take our long awaited honeymoon now?”

“We are.” His hands smoothed up her sides. “I told Perry we would be back in two weeks.”

She slowly smiled at him. “Are we going to spend the entire time here?”

“As in Kansas?” She nodded. “No, ma’am. I have a few other places I want us to see.”

“What would you have done if I hadn’t wanted to take the two weeks?”

“I would have taken you home. I can love you just as well there as I can anywhere, but I hope you let me show you a good time.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will.” Lois leaned to kiss him again, sighing contentedly when she had.

“I meant what I said earlier about nothing had to happen tonight,” Clark began. “But now that it has, I would like to see if we can make love in a different place every day of our honeymoon.”

“Really?” she asked with a grin.

“Mmm… I want to make love in my bedroom in the house

tomorrow night.”

“That’s so…”

“Kinky?” he asked with twinkle in his eyes.

She chuckled, but it soon faded and they stared at one another for a long moment before Clark grasped her face and drew her down to kiss her. It was a good while later before she drew away and he floated them back to the tub. He quickly reheated it before they settled back down. They bathed again before crawling in bed under one of the quilts. Clark blew all of the candles out and they lay there in the dark. Lois was draped across his chest and he was moving his fingers over her arm.

“Was it all you thought it would be?” Lois asked Clark.

“Much, much more,” he told her.

“Before or after you remembered everything?”

His hand stilled and he drew back to look down at her. “How did you know?”

“I felt the change.” She reached up to cup his face. “I saw it in your eyes. Pure adoration replaced the wonder.”

“I have to be honest and tell you that I wasn’t going to say anything until tomorrow.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess part of me wanted to know if you would regret making love with me before I remembered.”

“Do you regret doing it?”

“Absolutely not.” His hand moved up so he could rub his knuckles over her cheek. “And so you know… both before and after I remembered was incredible. The sheer wonder of being with you… I don’t think I’ll ever get over how humble I was at that second — knowing the absolute trust you placed with me. I’m sorry if it hurt your feelings because I didn’t say something right away.”

“Clark, I can’t imagine all you’ve been through, all you’ve thought and felt. We’ve been together for most of it, but some of it you’ll have to deal with on your own, in your own way. This was part of that. I have you here.” Tears spilled over onto her cheeks. “I have you back, though I’m pretty sure I got more, too. I can’t see you ever being quite the same again.”

“Is that something you can live with?”

“Oh, honey, it’s something I can’t live without.”

Clark smiled and leaned to kiss her softly. When he drew back, he cupped her cheek. “Thank you for fighting so hard for me to stay.”

“Zara and Ching wanted to take away my heart. There was no way they would do that without a battle.”

He laughed softly and hugged her to his chest. “When I was with Mindy the first time…”

“We don’t have to talk about any of that again,” she told him.

“But I want to,” he said.

“Okay.” She lifted her head to look at him.

“She told me she knew who I was. She took me because she wanted me to… be with her so she would get pregnant. She wanted a super baby.”

“To manipulate,” Lois said as anger flashed through her.

“She made me undress, watched me shower, but nothing happened. She tried to kiss me and she… touched me. And I wanted you to know that right away. I fought her. She became angry when I wouldn’t respond for her.”

Tears had welled in Lois’ eyes again. “I kissed the other Clark.”

“You told me that. And it’s okay.”

“It’s not,” she sobbed.

Clark struggled to sit a bit so that he could more or less cradle her. “Lois, honey, it *is* okay.”

“I knew… once I kissed him, I knew he wasn’t you.”

He smiled as he smoothed his fingertips over her cheek. “I’m glad he was with you. If he was part of me, then he protected

you. And given the fact that he was shot protecting you proves that.”

Lois struggled to sit up so she could look at him. “He *was* part of you,” she said softly.

Clark looked at her for a moment before he grasped her hand. “It’s okay that you did.”

Her eyes lifted to his. “I did, not like I love you, but I loved him. He was part of you and I couldn’t help it. And when he told me he was going to die…” She wiped her face and glanced down. “If he hadn’t been shot, I was going to ask Bernie to try to save him.”

“Lois?” He waited until she was looking at him. “I love him and I didn’t even know him. It’s okay how you felt. It’s okay to grieve his death.”

“Do you think we could have some kind of service for him?”

“I would be disappointed if we didn’t.” He lifted her hand to kiss it. “He died to give you back to me. How could I not honor his memory?” He coaxed her to lie back down and sighed when he pulled her close.

“What if… I would have… you know… with him?”

“What if I had with Mindy?”

She squeezed him hard. “I’m so glad we won’t ever know.”

“Me, too, baby.” He held her head while he kissed her right below her left eye. “I think I would have died if she had taken that from you.”

Lois lifted her head to look at him. “What?”

“If something had happened, Mindy would have taken what was to be a special gift for you. I had promised my virtue to you. If she had taken that from you…” He leaned to press his lips to her forehead. He held for a long moment before he drew away.

Lois stared at him for a second before she smiled. “I think I just fell in love with you all over again.”

“I’ve done that several times the last few days. Back in the Center… the morning I woke up in pain… as you held me, I fell hard. Then in the shower and again while we had breakfast. At Star Labs the first day you came in to stretch my leg muscles… you just did it. The day I was standing up. The next morning. The day you came to get me. That first night at home on the couch.”

“On the couch?”

“Yeah. When you came in the living room and looked up at me with that pretty pouty face… I don’t think I’ve ever fallen quite as hard.”

She grinned widely. “When else?”

“The morning you let me watch you dress. The day you were lying in bed because you thought I was leaving. The night we danced and kissed. When you came rushing in the house when Mindy had me. The way you were fearless when Tez attacked us. Then with Nor… Lois, the second I felt you completely again, I can honestly say I’ve never felt so free. It was like I knew everything again without actually knowing it.” He grinned at her. “As I held you while you slept, at lunch, then on our ride. At dinner tonight, while we were dancing, and the second you saw this loft… wow.” He lifted her hand and kissed her fingers.

“When you wrapped your arms around me after the first time… and of course, as my memories rushed back, I was constantly falling again.”

“Do you remember everything?”

“Every second, including all of those times Jimmy interrupted us.”

She laughed aloud. “Thank God he wasn’t here.”

“Thank God I turned off our cell phones.”

She laughed again before kissing him softly. Once she was tucked against his chest again, she closed her eyes. “Clark?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“I love you.”

“I love you.” He sighed and closed his eyes, too. Everyone that had come against them lately had no idea when they picked a

fight with Lois Lane that the battleground they had stepped on to do so was her heart. And with Lois, to ask for her heart was a declaration of war.

Clark wasn't sure how, but he was glad he had become her heart long ago.

The blissful couple greeted the day making love. When they dressed, they headed to breakfast with his parents, who were thrilled to have their son back. Clark took Lois back to the preserve to boat, swim, and picnic. They took a hike, made love in the woods, then headed back to the farm. They played a game of basketball and horseshoes with his parents before treating Martha and Jonathan to supper in town. Both couples took a stroll, hand in hand, through town before heading home. That night Clark made love to his wife in his old bed.

The following morning they left on their long awaited honeymoon. They visited the beach, the mountains, and anywhere else they wanted to go. They made love every day of the two week trip in a different place. Lois had laughed when they had landed in Vegas. Clark had said their lives just wouldn't be complete unless they made love in sin city.

He took her overseas, to Alaska, and even Mexico. He wouldn't tell her where they were headed from one day to the next, just surprised her with each stop. They played — a lot. They laughed even more. They were seldom more than a breath apart, doing everything together. If either had any reservations about their relationship before, it was dispelled on their trip. They had seen one another do absolutely everything.

That awareness had built a bond that was much stronger than it had ever been. They were in absolute sync with one another. Yeah, they still argued passionately for what they believed, but there was something unique about their relationship now. They knew what the other needed before each knew themselves. It led them to share explosive intimacy, which both seemed to appreciate.

They spent the final day of their trip in the city, visiting all the places Lois loved. Clark was surprised she enjoyed the museum. They went to the zoo. She told him she hadn't visited since she was little. The aquarium, one of the places she adored. She had gone often during the loneliest times of her life. She liked the sharks — no big surprise to her husband. Other places were related to her chosen profession, of course. She liked the Planet, but they opted not to visit there. Before Clark, Lois hadn't enjoyed very much in the way of entertainment. But she took him to Louie's place and showed him she could play pool like a shark. She took him to the community center to show him why she had earned a few trophies in tennis. They picked up dinner from her favorite Chinese place and headed to the observatory. She had always been fascinated with the stars. Had she known that someday her life would be so closely related?

Clark landed them on the balcony of their apartment just after ten that night. He had explained that he wanted to make love in their own bed tonight. She didn't argue a bit.

Clark straightened from turning down the covers on the bed when Lois padded up behind him. Her hand slid up his chest as she nuzzled his neck.

"You look so good," she told him. He was wearing a pair of his boxer briefs and nothing else.

His hands covered hers on his chest. "You feel good," he returned before he turned to face her. His eyes flashed in appreciation. She was wearing one of his shirts. "I like this," he said as he fingered the collar.

"I thought you would," she told him as she pushed her arms around his neck.

"So... there's something we need to do before we can make love tonight."

"Really?" She arched a brow as she studied him. "Suddenly you're modest?"

"No. Not modest. In love." He kissed her before drawing away to reach down to open the drawer on the bedside table. He took out a box and faced Lois again. "I had thought of taking you back to the church to put this back on, but decided I would rather be home." He opened the box to reveal the two wedding bands inside.

"I should have sent you to get these that first night... before we made love the first time," Lois said as she reached to take his out.

"No. That night was perfect." Clark took her ring out and looked at it. "When I came to after Mindy took me and I realized I wasn't wearing my ring, I was so sick. It breaks my heart that I have to take it off when I'm Superman." He looked into her eyes. "But it calms me every time I look at it. And seeing this one on your hand..." He reached to lift her hand. "I've thought of this moment for the last two weeks. I had wondered if we should repeat the vows we made on our wedding day. With everything we've been through, I thought maybe we should make new vows... to add to the ones we've already taken." He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

'Lois,' he thought, willing her to hear him.

She gasped and closed her own eyes. 'Clark! I can hear you,' she returned in her head.

He smiled, then opened his eyes. 'And now?'

'Yes!' She opened her eyes when he touched her face.

'All of my life I've wanted to feel a connection to this world. And even when I was with Zara and Ching, I kept waiting for that connection. But a connection was already there. A link so strong having to start my life over couldn't break it. I feel that connection every single time I look at you.' His eyes moved down as he held her ring at her finger. 'I give you my life and ask that you allow me to cherish you.' He pushed her ring into place before leaning to kiss it.

Lois smiled through her tears and lifted his hand. 'All my life I've been looking for that perfect man. But perfection is overrated. None of us are. When I realized that and began to see you with my heart instead of my eyes, I knew I had found my other half. I give you my life... to cherish and adore — the same way I do you.' She had barely pushed his ring in place before he grasped her face and kissed her.

They surfaced sometime after midnight, lying against the ceiling.

"Wow," Lois said with a sappy grin on her face. "After all the times we've done that, you still manage to take my breath away."

Clark moaned and leaned to kiss her temple. He was snuggled up to her side, his arm under her head. "Lady, Kryptonite has nothing on you."

She giggled and rolled to nibble on his chin. "So... you want more?"

His grin split his face as he cupped her cheek. "Oh, yeah," he breathed. With a quick flip, they were back on the mattress. Clark lifted his head to look at her. "We've been through so much to get to this place."

"Any regrets?" Lois asked him.

"Just one." Her brows furrowed and he chuckled. "I regret not asking for three weeks off instead of two." She laughed softly, but it died in a gasp as he leaned to kiss her. The kisses continued as they hovered off the bed.

From their union through the trials of kidnapping and duplicity, and the repetition of doing it again, they had learned their life together was unforgettable. They had learned that with great sacrifice any opponent could be beaten when the battleground was the heart. Lois had fought hard to show Clark he was someone she needed and in the process, she taught him she was someone he couldn't live without. Finally everything

was the way it should be... regarding Clark.

THE END