

Seed of Doubt

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: Doubts abound after a series of unfortunate events involving Lex Luthor, red Kryptonite, and Miranda's pheromone spray. Can Lois and Clark survive the storm to come?

Story Size: 156,363 words (867Kb as text)

Disclaimer: I own nothing. I make nothing. All characters, plot points, and recognizable dialogue belong to DC Comics, Warner Brothers, December 3rd Productions and anyone else with a stake in the Superman Franchise. I'm just having fun with their toys.

Author's Note: I am completely altering the time line for this story. Also, this will deal with non-consensual sex between a man and a woman, but that will NOT be described in graphic detail. This story will also deal with other difficult and controversial topics, though I have attempted to handle them in as delicate a way as I possibly can.

Special thanks go to: ChrisP for planting the idea for this story in my head. I hope I did it justice for you!

Special thanks also go out to: AntiK, my ever fearless, ever helpful beta. Your comments throughout the story have helped shape it into something stronger than it once was, as always. We make a "super" team, the two of us! Thanks for taking on this monster of a story.

Miranda Covington smiled and hummed a lively tune to herself as she mixed various chemicals in her laboratory. Unstopping a vial of clear liquid, she poured the contents into the vat she was currently working on. Her humming became louder, almost words. An evil, pleased smile crossed her lips as she worked. From a shelf to her right, Warlock, a completely black cat, looked on. Miranda hated that the cat was there, watching her every move. The last batch of pheromone-laced perfume she'd cooked up had killed her other cat, Daru, with the noxious fumes it had given off when she'd miscalculated the ratio of her ingredients. But there was no dissuading Warlock away from his perch. Instead, he lay there, purring away, as though he were supervising the operation.

"I want to get physical, physical," she sang, breaking away from her near-humming. Her voice was muffled by the mask she was wearing to protect herself from the effects of the perfume.

She grabbed the last ingredient and added it to the mix. The lavender oil was supposed to help mask the smell of the pheromone mixture, which reminded her of sweaty gym socks. To her dismay, it did almost nothing to hide the odor. She shrugged to herself. Making it smell more pleasant was a perk only for her, not for her targets. Still, she dared not add more to the mixture. She couldn't risk diluting it. If it was to work, she would need it to be as potent as possible.

"Twenty percent," she said, marking the beaker in her hand with a black marker. "This should do the trick. But who?" she wondered aloud.

"Meoow," Warlock responded, stretching. He arched his back and jumped down from his shelf to wander toward the water bowl on the other side of the room.

"Hmm," Miranda mused, as if the cat's meow had been an actual name. "Of course!"

"Meow?" the sleek black cat asked, standing by the empty food dish.

Miranda crossed the room and knelt by the bin where she kept the cat food. She dug out a scoop, then another, and filled the bowl. "There you go, sweetie."

Warlock purred and rubbed against her upraised knee. Miranda pet the cat's head, luxuriating in the silky feel of the jet black fur. After a moment, she straightened back up. Biting her lower lip in thought, she left her lab for the night. The perfume needed some time to rest. Besides, it was late. Her plans would need to wait.

"Morning," Clark said cheerfully as he passed by Lois' desk, biting into a plain cake donut and taking a sip of his coffee.

"Morning," Lois said, barely looking up from her computer screen. She spoke distractedly.

"What are you working on?" Clark asked, diverting himself from his path to his own desk. Instead, he circled behind Lois' and sat on the edge.

"That murder-suicide we covered last night," she said. "I've almost got it written up."

"Didn't you get my email? I had a hard time falling asleep last night so I came in and filed it for us."

Lois' jaw dropped open an inch. "No! The network's been down all morning. What time did you come in?"

Clark shrugged. "Sorry. I guess I should have left a post-it note too. I guess it was about...eleven-ish?"

"You should have called me. I would have met you here."

Again, he shrugged. "I figured it was pointless to drag the two of us out in the rain when I could write it up myself. It wound up being a fairly quick article anyway. I was back in my apartment by twelve forty-five. And that included a stop at the twenty-four hour convenience store a couple of blocks from my house for a late night churro."

"Well...thanks," Lois said, brushing a stray lock of hair back behind her ear. "I appreciate it."

"No problem," Clark said, meaning every word. "You know I'll never have a problem with doing something like that."

"Yeah, I know."

"So...I was wondering..." Clark began.

"Yeah?"

"Well..." he said, clearing his throat.

Inwardly, he groaned. He'd spent half the night trying to figure out how to ask Lois out, which was the *real* reason why he hadn't slept well. They'd been friends for the better part of a year. He feared to rock the boat, now that Lois trusted him as both a partner and a best friend. After all, he didn't want to lose her. On the other hand, it was killing him inside, having to hold back his true emotions around her.

Then again, he sighed to himself, *the only person she seems to be interested in is Superman.*

That thought made him sad. While it was great that the alien superhero had found a friend and champion in Lois, the flashy suit and the extraordinary powers had blinded her to the real man that they belonged to. The man who loved her. The man who worked alongside her every day. The man she utterly ignored as far as romantic thoughts seemed to be concerned.

"Luciano's for lunch?" he asked instead.

Lois smiled. "I'd like that."

He sighed. "That...that wasn't..."

"Clark? What's going on? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," he said. "I just...need to ask you something."

"How much?"

"Huh?" he asked, confused.

“Clark, you’re jumpy and beating around the bush. Clearly you aren’t comfortable asking. So...how much do you need?” She shrugged while reaching for her purse.

“No, Lois. I’m not asking for money.”

“Then what? Do you need to borrow the Jeep? If you gas it up, it’s yours.”

“Would you like to go out with me?” he asked, finally finding his courage, the words tumbling out of his mouth in a rush.

“What? You mean like...a date?” she asked after a long moment of processing his words, a look of utter shock on her face.

He nodded and dropped his voice a little lower, unwilling to let the entire bullpen overhear him. “Yes. Like a date.”

“Oh, Clark...I don’t know...I mean...we’re best friends.”

“And partners,” he added.

“Exactly! What if we did and it blew up in our face? I can’t lose you as a friend,” she said, her eyes still wide as she fumbled for words.

“You’ll never lose me, Lois. I care about you too much to let anything get in the way of our friendship. There isn’t a force on this Earth that can change that.”

She rewarded him with a tender smile. “Well, when you put it like that...”

Clark brightened. “So...you will?”

Lois nodded her affirmation. “Sure. Let’s give it a shot.”

It was a struggle for Clark to keep his feet firmly planted on the floor and not float in his happiness. Lois saw his smile grow and matched his grin.

“What?” she asked as he continued to grin at her.

“Nothing. It’s just...I’m glad that you’re willing to give this a shot. I thought...” he let his voice trail off as he shrugged.

“That what?” Lois prodded. “That I’d waste my time pursuing Superman until I die?” She gestured, as if dismissing the thought. “Don’t look at me like that. I know what you must think of my...attraction to him.”

“I just didn’t realize you’d given up on him, that’s all.”

Lois sighed. “I’m not sure he even knows I exist. At least, not outside of our friendship. But maybe...maybe it’s a good thing,” she said, her voice steeling with conviction as she spoke. “I mean, really, I’m not sure I would want to share my boyfriend with the entire world. Besides, it was a stupid idea that a man like that, who can have anyone in the world, would pick...well...someone like me.”

“It’s not such a stupid idea, Lois,” Clark said in a soft voice. Then, realizing he was treading on dangerous ground, he faked a cough and changed his tone. “I mean, you’ve got a lot to offer a guy.”

“You’re just saying that because I agreed to go out with you,” she said with a smirk.

Clark shook his head and smiled. “No way! Why do you think I asked you out? Why I’ve *wanted* to ask you out since the moment we first met? It’s because you are the most fascinating, complex, brilliant woman I’ve ever come across. Not to mention the fact that you’re beautiful.”

He clamped his mouth shut as he processed what he’d said. He hadn’t meant to say so much. But Lois didn’t look upset at him. In fact, though perhaps a bit surprised, she seemed to be touched by his confession.

“Well,” she said after a moment, “maybe it all worked out for the best. I mean, you’re a great guy, right?” Had he imagined it, or had Lois sounded almost vulnerable and scared for an instant there?

“I like to think so,” he replied with a wry grin and a quick, shallow nod.

“Any woman would be lucky to date you.”

“Thanks,” he said. “That means a lot. So...how does tonight sound?” It felt like an awkward way to put the conversation back

on its initial track, but he couldn’t take back what he’d said.

“I wish I could,” Lois said, throwing a glance at her calendar, as if to double check the date. “But I have a dinner date tonight.”

“A dinner date? With who?”

“Lex Luthor. Actually, it’s more of a dinner than a date. A working dinner. He’s *finally* agreed to let me interview him. For the first time, he’ll actually be answering a reporter’s questions about himself.”

“Oh,” Clark said, his tone going icier than he’d wanted and his mouth twisting down into a frown.

“What *is* it with you and Lex? Ever since the night you met him at the White Orchard ball when you first started here, you’ve had this hatred for him,” she demanded.

“I wouldn’t call it a hatred,” Clark mumbled in defense.

Lois crossed her arms and gave him a hard look.

“I just don’t trust the guy,” Clark confessed after a moment.

“There’s something about him. I can’t place my finger on it. I just...I don’t think he’s the good guy philanthropist everyone thinks he is.”

“Clark, please, it’s more than that. The way you talk about him, it’s like you consider him to be the root of all evil.”

“He may well be,” Clark said, taking another sip of his coffee. “I just can’t prove it yet.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “In any case, I’ll be the first reporter to snag an in-depth interview with him. Kerth Award, here I come!”

Clark chuckled. “One thing at a time, Lois. One thing at a time.”

“Let’s see...today is Thursday. How about Saturday for...you know. Our date.” She lowered her voice, perhaps afraid that their coworkers would overhear them.

“Saturday’s great,” Clark said. He’d purposefully kept his calendar clear in case Lois had agreed to go out with him. “I know a guy who can get me two tickets to ‘Rent’ at the Metropolis Theatre House, if you’re interested.”

“I’d like that.” Lois’ phone began to ring. She looked apologetically at Clark.

“Go ahead,” he said. “I need to work on getting my article on the arson trial written up before Perry skins me alive.”

He wandered over to his desk, started his computer, and began to type. The article flowed from his fingertips. It was a simple enough story to write, just the verdict of an arson trial that he’d been assigned to cover — not surprisingly, the jury had found the defendant guilty. Within fifteen minutes, it was finished and he fired it off to Perry, thankful that the network had come back online since he’d first started talking to Lois.

At lunchtime, Lois and Clark hailed a cab and took it to Luciano’s, one of their favorite Italian restaurants. Clark paid for their meal, feeling almost like they were preparing for their first date. He said nothing about it to Lois, however. He’d already admitted to far more than he’d wanted to that day. He was just happy that Lois had actually said yes to him — that she was going to give him, Clark, a real chance.

Of course, that didn’t make him feel any better about Lois’ impending dinner with Luthor. The guy reeked of evil. Clark vowed that some day, he would find a way to make Luthor pay for whatever misdeeds the man had committed.

“Sir?”

Lex Luthor held up one finger to silence his manservant, Nigel, as he finished signing his name to the check he was writing out. When he was finished, he set it aside in a pile of similarly prepared checks.

“These are ready to go out,” he said, gesturing to the pile.

“Payments to your business associates?” the man asked knowingly.

“Just the legitimate ones,” Lex grinned.

The elder British man had been with him from the beginning,

when Lex had taken over his first corporation. He was the only man alive who was privy to Lex's more underhanded and illegal business dealings. In many ways, he was the one person on the planet that Lex trusted at all.

"Very good, sir. I will get these out by the end of the day."

"Excellent."

"There is a Miss Miranda Covington here to see you, sir."

"Miranda? Here?" Lex frowned. He hadn't summoned the woman. He hadn't even spoken to her in well more than a year.

Nigel nodded. "She says that she has urgent news that she must discuss with you."

"My calendar?" Lex asked.

"Free until lunch, when you have a meeting with Mr. Kobiyachi."

"Ah, yes." Lex threw a glance at the antique clock on the wall. "Make Miranda wait ten minutes and then show her in."

"Very good, sir."

"And, Nigel?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I'll take the stretch limo to the meeting this afternoon."

"An excellent choice, sir," the manservant said with a bow before exiting the room.

Ten minutes later, the man reappeared as he escorted Miranda into the room. Without a word, he slipped back out, unnoticed by either party. Miranda slithered her way over to Lex's desk, where he still sat, less than thrilled to be meeting with the woman before him.

"Miranda," he said flatly. "How nice to see you."

"Lex, you haven't been returning my calls," she purred in a dangerous tone.

"Yes, well, I've been rather busy. In fact, I'm extremely busy today, so if you don't mind, I'd like to cut to the chase. What is it that I can do for you?"

"More like, what can I do for *you*," she said. She reached into her purse and pulled out a small atomizer spray bottle.

"Perfume?" Lex asked dryly. "You come to me with *perfume*?"

"Oh, it's more than *just* perfume," she promised him. "One spritz of this and..." With a dramatic flair, she sprayed Lex right in the face.

"Ugh!" the man cried out, his eyes watering. "What *is* that foul stench?" He furiously waved at the air before him, trying to dissipate the offending odor.

"Pheromones," Miranda said as a simple explanation. "You see, once a person inhales my perfume, the pheromones go to work breaking down their restraint, allowing them to act on their baser, animalistic impulses. Once they spy someone they are attracted to..." she shrugged. "They are powerless to resist the urge to mate."

Lex arched a skeptical eyebrow. "Really?"

Miranda nodded.

"And why might I be even remotely interested in this... concoction of yours?"

Miranda shrugged. "Strip people of their sensibilities and you can control them better," she offered, speaking as if it was the only answer that made any sense.

"I think not. Take away people's abilities of rationalization and overall clear-headedness, and you strip away the very things that make dominating them so satisfying. Take away the challenge and make the victory devoid of any meaning."

"But, Lex? Surely you have to admit that the idea does have *some* merit?" Miranda asked, blatantly fishing for a compliment.

"Go pedal your witch's brew at one of those sappy love retreats. I'm not interested in it," Lex said firmly.

"And what about *me*?"

"What about you?"

"What about what we once meant to each other?"

Lex had to stifle a laugh. The woman was crazy!

"There was *never* an *us*, Miranda. You meant nothing. You were an itch and you've been scratched."

The woman's face fell, but, to her credit, she quickly recomposed herself. She cleared her throat and looked Lex in his eyes. "But..."

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I have an important meeting to get to," Lex said, standing for the first time.

"Don't you dare dismiss *me*," Miranda said, a threatening tone creeping into her voice.

"On the contrary," Lex countered. "Don't *you* dare threaten *me*. Because, believe me, it will *not* end well for you. Is that understood?"

"We'll see about that," Miranda said.

"Get out of my office. *Now*."

"You'll regret this," Miranda vowed. "You and everyone else in this pathetic city."

"I highly doubt that," Lex said, boredom in his voice. Truth be told, he'd ceased to pay much attention to the woman.

"I'll prove to you just how useful I can be," Miranda muttered under her breath as she walked out of Lex's office. "Just you wait and see."

"Sir?" Nigel asked, poking his head into Lex Luthor's private study.

Lex looked up from the book he was reading. As deeply engrossed in the subject matter as he was, the older man's voice had almost startled him. "Yes?"

"There is a Miss Lane to see you."

"Yes, of course. Let her in. Is dinner prepared?"

Nigel nodded. "Pierre is ready when you are, sir."

"Very good. Tell him to bring the first course up in fifteen minutes."

"As you wish," Nigel said, inclining his head in respect.

"Oh! Nigel," Lex called as the other man turned and began to leave. Nigel stopped immediately and turned on his heel.

"Sir?"

Lex stood and held aloft two ties. He'd changed from the suit he'd been wearing earlier to something that he felt was more appropriate for a dinner date and interview. Although, if he were being honest, he wasn't really thinking of the meeting as an interview. It was definitely more of a date in his mind.

"The black or the gray?" he asked, lifting each tie slightly in turn. "Black for formality? Or gray to soften the look?"

Nigel eyed each of the cloth strips in question. "The gray, I think," he finally said.

Lex held the tie up under his chin as he looked in the full length mirror before him. "I think you're right," he finally said. Swiftly, he deftly began to tie it around his neck, then straightened the knot.

"Shall I let Miss Lane in now?"

Lex checked his appearance one final time and finger-brushed down a single stray hair. Perfection was everything in his world.

"Yes, thank you."

Nigel nodded and wordlessly left the room. Moments later, Lois appeared in the doorway.

"Ah! Good to see you again, Miss Lane!" he said warmly.

"And you, Lex," she replied, but with less enthusiasm.

"Something wrong?" Lex asked.

Lois flushed. "Oh, no. It's just been a long day, that's all."

"Well, you can forget about all of that now. Let tonight be a night of luxury and pampering. Some wine, perhaps?" He swept his hand toward the door. "This way, please."

He led her through his home, to the plush, intimate dining space he'd had set up in his living room. The hearth was ablaze with a large fire, which threw merrily dancing light to the

otherwise dimly lit space. A small table, set for two, had been set before the fireplace, helping to ward off the chill of the late February night. Pristine white linens cloaked the table and sat neatly tented next to their plates, while expensive white and silver china waited alongside the silverware. Two full wine glasses stood at the ready, the dark red, nearly black liquid seeming deeper in the firelight. Chilled green salads, topped with grated parmesan cheese and Caesar dressing had already been placed before each chair, as well as a martini glass filled with cocktail sauce and ringed with the biggest prawns Lex wagered Lois had ever seen.

"Please, have a seat," he offered, pulling her chair out for her.

"Thank you," she said politely. "Wow, this is just... more than I anticipated," she added, motioning to the spread before them.

"This? It's nothing," Lex said dismissively.

"For you, perhaps," she said with a smile. "The rest of us only splurge like this on special occasions."

"This *is* a special occasion," Lex said, returning the smile, pleased that he'd cracked her typically stony demeanor. "It's not every day that I get to be interviewed by a world famous reporter."

Lois shyly tucked an imaginary strand of hair behind her ear. "It's not every day you allow anyone to interview you *at all*," she pointed out.

Again, Lex smiled. He liked the way she played the game. She would be a challenge for him. "True," he conceded. "But, can you blame me? Just look at what the media typically does to people like me. That's why I've chosen to speak to you. I know you'll do me justice."

"Well, that's up to you. I'm just a reporter. I state the facts as I gather them."

"No, not *just* a reporter," Lex argued softly. "A Da Vinci amongst wordsmiths. And beautiful at that."

"I...uh..." Lois stammered, at a loss.

What was happening? Lex's brain screamed to himself. He knew he was charming and charismatic, but he usually reserved his flattery for when he felt it would be the most useful to him. He rarely wasted it on the media, unless he was in the midst of another corporate takeover. But this lowly reporter? All she was doing was a human interest piece on him.

"Lex, if we can just...move on, with the interview?"

Lex speared one of his shrimp with his fork and dipped it into the cocktail sauce. "Please."

"Well, let's start at the beginning, shall we? You took over your first company at the age of twenty-one."

"Actually," he corrected her, "my birthday hadn't yet passed. I turned twenty-one six days after the deal closed. A trivial thing, to be sure, but I like the sound of 'CEO at twenty' much better."

Lois nodded and scribbled a note on the small, pocket-sized notebook she'd taken out of her purse. "There were reports of coercion."

"I'm aware of the rumors," Lex said dismissively, with a wave of his hand. "Nothing was ever proven."

"Oh, I know," Lois said. "I've done the research. I'd like to hear about the takeover in your own words though."

"There's not much to tell, to be honest," he lied with a smile.

Lois said nothing, her way of inviting him to divulge more of the story.

"My God," Lex found himself saying instead.

"What?"

"Your eyes!"

"What's wrong with them?" Lois asked, confused and suddenly nervous-sounding.

"The way they catch the firelight. Like two polished gems, flashing in the sun. Gorgeous."

Lois shifted uneasily in her seat. "Lex..."

"And your hands. So delicate. So feminine. So soft. I've

never seen hands so exquisite before."

Mentally, he frowned. Things were definitely getting stranger. He felt like he was slipping away, losing himself to the sole desire to have Lois for his own. He felt instantly obsessed with her, consumed by thoughts of her, unable to focus on anything that wasn't her. All thoughts not connected to Lois grew fuzzy and unimportant to him.

Whatever else she was asking him faded into the background. He stumbled through answers, feeling like he was completely losing his normally very firm grip on his control over the situation. He tried switching from the heady wine on the table to the icy cold water, but to no avail. By the time the dinner course was served and eaten, it was all he could do not to launch himself over the table to kiss her.

"That was a lovely dinner, Lex," Lois complimented, gingerly dabbing at her mouth.

Lex made an indifferent shrug. After all, it had only been Kobe beef and Maine lobster tails. It hadn't exactly been the most expensive or rare meal that Pierre could have served them. Still, he deemed the meal a success, in that it had been cooked to perfection, and hadn't been too exotic for Lois' more pedestrian tastes.

"Yes, well, the company certainly helped," he responded. "Dessert should be served shortly."

"Oh, I never eat dessert," she said politely.

"Even chocolate mousse?" he asked. "Pierre makes the finest mousse I've ever tasted."

As much as she'd done her research on him, he'd had his own staff find out what made her tick, including any favorite foods or allergies. It simply would not bode well for him if the first reporter to ever interview him for a profile of sorts had her throat close up from an unknown and unanticipated reaction to shellfish.

"It's tempting," she said, a half smile on her face, "but no, thanks. That wonderful dinner is about all I can handle." She set the napkin down on the table. "I think I have just about all the information I need from you," she added, scanning her notes. "Is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything at all? Something that maybe I didn't touch upon? Some message or information about yourself that you'd like the world to know?"

Lex stood, thinking. He crossed the room to the couches, beckoning Lois to follow him, which she did. She sat across from him and looked at him expectantly.

"Do you feel like I've left anything out?" he asked.

Lois smiled coyly. "I asked you first."

"Touché." He thought for another long moment, but his thoughts were muddled to everything except Lois, and the overwhelming desire to take her into his bed. "I can't think of anything," he finally said with a shrug. "It seems you've covered it all."

Lois nodded and shut her notebook. "Great, well, I'd better be going so I can get started on this article. The Chief wants it for the Sunday edition. He said he'd have someone contact you about setting up a photo shoot for the spread."

"It's early still," Lex said, getting more comfortable in his seat. "Perhaps we can discuss other matters, not related to the interview?"

"I really should be going..." she protested.

The door to the room opened a crack and one of the wait staff slipped inside with two plates. Another woman followed the first, setting down two cups of coffee. Lex didn't even throw a glance at the two. He could smell the coffee — strong and hot — and had personally overseen Pierre's mousse presentations that afternoon — choosing the pyramid shape with edible gold leaf on each side in the shape of a highly stylized "L" — their shared initial. He did not speak until the staff had silently left the room again.

"My dear Lois, you must learn to relax once in a while," he

pressed. “Come. Let’s have some coffee, shall we?”

“I really can’t, Lex. I’m sorry.”

She stood to leave, putting the notebook in her purse. Lex stood as well, though he hadn’t meant to. He felt almost as if his body was working independently from his brain. It was terrifying, but at the same moment, oddly freeing. He grabbed Lois’ wrist.

“Lex? What are you...?”

He silenced her question with a crushing kiss. He couldn’t help it. It felt almost like he would die if he didn’t do it. His hands went into motion. He felt Lois resisting, but that only fanned the flames of his ardor. He pinned her arms to her sides, but lost his balance in the process. Together, they toppled into the couch where Lois had just been sitting a minute before.

“Lex, no,” she protested as he broke his kiss to take a breath. “Stop it. Let me go.”

He heard the fear in her voice, the firmness of her demand for him to stop. But her wishes no longer mattered. He wanted her. *Needed* her. As much as he hated to admit being subservient to anything, he found that he was a slave to his baser desires. He would make love to Lois, whether she wanted him to or not. Then she would see that they were meant to be together.

“Lex, I’m warning you,” she threatened as she tried to squirm away.

But he was on top of her already. She could not move her legs. Her torso was mostly pinned to the leather couch. Though he’d let go of her arms and she was now hitting his chest in an effort to free herself, it felt like no more than the light buffering of butterfly wings in his heightened state of arousal. He reached for his belt and undid it with one hand.

Lois never stilled her attempts to break free of him, not while he hiked up her dress, not while he took her for his pleasure. Somehow, while Lex enjoyed the blissful feelings that only reaching his peak could bring, Lois finally managed to squirm far enough to get her fingertips around the base of a lamp on the side table. Once she had it firmly in hand, she crashed the heavy silver metal into Lex’s head.

Pain was the last thing he was aware of before he went limp and the world went black.

Clark turned on the television, belated realizing that the Knicks/Heat game had already started. He hadn’t even changed out of his Superman suit yet. He’d only just gotten home from a grease fire that had gotten way out of control and had burned down an entire restaurant in Maryland. He flipped through the channels, looking for the game, chugging down the last of his soda, quenching the thirst battling the blaze had caused.

“There we go!” he announced to his empty apartment as he finally found the game. “Oh, come on, guys!” he groaned.

The Knicks were down by six and the Heat had possession of the ball. Clark sighed and took the last swallow of his drink. He brought the bottle into the kitchen, tossed it into the recycling can, then continued on to his bathroom. A quick, three minute scrubbing in the hottest water his shower could offer got him feeling clean and smelling fresh again, as opposed to the stench that had clung to him like a second skin from the fire. He stepped back out of the shower, wrapped a towel around his hips, and spent the next few minutes washing his uniform, scrubbing it until he was satisfied that the stains were out and that the smell was imperceptible to a normal, human nose. He dried it with his heat vision, then stuffed it into the hamper to give it a proper wash the next time he did laundry.

Moving into his bedroom, he grabbed a fresh pair of socks, underwear, and sweatpants, dressing swiftly in his desire to get back to the game. He was just about to look for a shirt when frantic knocking pounded at his door. He grabbed the first thing before him and jogged to his front door, stopping only to put on

his glasses. He dropped the shirt on the arm of the couch, checking the score as he did so. The Knicks had managed to even the score, much to his delight. He mounted the steps to the landing two at a time, unbolted the locks, and threw open the door.

“Lois?” he said, immediately knowing that something was wrong.

Tears were in her eyes and had destroyed the careful work she always put into her makeup. Dark mascara rings shadowed her eyes and continued down, leaving muddy trails on her cheeks. Her eyes were bloodshot — further evidence that she had been crying hard. She had her arms wrapped protectively around her chest, as though by hugging herself, she could keep herself from falling apart.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, before she could even speak.

“Can I come in?”

“You never have to ask that,” Clark said, hoping to lighten the mood and get her to smile.

He failed. Lois merely cast her eyes down to the floor.

“Thanks.”

She stepped into the apartment, and Clark shut the frigid night air out. Lois distractedly gave him her coat, now that she was in the inviting warmth of his home. Clark hung it up on a peg, then ushered her down the steps and into the heart of his living room.

“Lois, what’s going on?” he asked as he shrugged into his shirt. “Why are you so upset?”

“The dinner...” Lois said vaguely, as though in a trance, as a fresh tear escaped her eye and trickled down her cheek.

Clark instinctively reached out to brush the tear away, and panic shot through him as she reflexively shied away as contact was made.

“Lois?” he asked, not bothering to hide his concern. “What happened? What about the dinner?”

“He...he...”

“Lex?”

Lois nodded.

“What about Lex?”

“I’ve...he’s never been...oh, Clark!” she managed to get out, before a sob bubbled up in her chest. She pitched herself forward, into Clark’s arms.

“It’s okay,” he assured her as he enveloped her shaking body. “You can tell me anything, you know that.”

“I didn’t want it. I told him no,” she cried into the soft, navy blue sweatshirt he was wearing.

“Told him no?” Clark repeated, every hair on his body standing at fearful attention.

Please, be wrong, he pleaded with himself. *Please don’t be what you think it is.*

“Everything started off so...so...normal,” Lois said, gathering herself a bit. “He answered my interview questions, we had a really nice dinner. And then...he wouldn’t let me leave. It was like he was possessed or something. It was terrifying. But that wasn’t the worst part. The worst part was when he...he...” She stopped and buried her head further into his chest, allowing the material to soak up the water that was gushing from her eyes.

“Did he...force...you to do something that you didn’t want to do?” Clark guessed.

Lois nodded her head against his body as dread washed over him, leaving him feeling icy cold. “Yes,” she said, her voice muffled by the thick sweatshirt he wore. “Clark, I’m so sorry.”

“This isn’t your fault,” Clark said with gentle conviction.

“I should have...I don’t know. Seen the signs. Something,” she moaned, her face still deeply buried into his shirt. “I mean, he was a little off at points but I never suspected...”

“Lois...”

“I’ve always been so careful,” she continued, as though Clark

hadn't spoken. She finally pulled her face out of his chest, but she didn't meet his eyes. "Sure, I've gotten into trouble a time or twelve with criminals. But no one's ever ra...forced themselves on me. Shoved me into barrels and sent me into the river, yes. Pointed guns at my head, sure. But not this. Never this."

"It isn't your fault," Clark asserted once more. "It's Luthor's. He's the one who did this."

I wish I could fly over there right now and wring his neck.

"Fly over there?" Lois asked. "Wring his neck? Clark, no offense, but you aren't Superman."

"I know," he said, embarrassed. He was so angry with Luthor that he hadn't realized he'd spoken his thoughts aloud. "It's just a figure of speech. The flying part, at least. I really *do* wish I could go over there and...do something...to make Luthor pay for what he's done." His hands reflexively balled into fists and he had to remind himself to relax them again. He fell silent a moment as he processed what Lois had told him. Then, "We need to call the police and report this."

He thought for sure that Lois would fight him, but she nodded. "Okay." Her eyes, however, spoke volumes of fear to him.

"I'm not going anywhere," he promised her, in response to her unvoiced question. "Okay? I'll be here for as long as you need me to be."

"Okay. Thanks."

Clark nodded, turned the television off, and picked up the phone. He spoke quickly to the police officer who had answered, his hands shaking badly from his pent up rage toward Luthor. The officer politely assured him that he would send a couple of female officers to his apartment to take her statement and escort her to the hospital for the necessary tests and evidence collection.

"Great. Thank you," Clark said as he finished up the call. As he placed the hand set down on the phone base, he told Lois, "They should be here soon."

"I'm scared," she admitted, inching closer to him.

"I know," he said with a nod, almost afraid to touch her. He knew from several investigations that he covered, that assault victims usually feared the touch of others, especially just after the event had occurred. "But I'm here now. And I won't let anything else happen to you. I swear it."

"You always have been," she mused. "My very own, personal hero." She turned partially toward him and hugged him, snuggling into his side, her body shaking slightly, even now.

"I'm here," he said again. "I'm here."

It didn't take long for the police to arrive. The open floor plan of his apartment left little to no privacy for Lois, so Clark threw on his coat and stood outside. The night had turned overcast and a gentle snow was falling. It was freezing out, and Clark was thankful he didn't feel the cold the way normal people did. He was sure to be shivering in the frosty air, despite the heavy, sheep's wool-lined coat if he did. He watched his hot breath mist in the snowy night and leaned his back against the wall, just to the side of the door so as not to be in the way.

It seemed to take forever before he was allowed back inside. By then, his hair was a sodden mess from melting snowflakes and the heat of his apartment seemed higher than he remembered it being, though he knew it was just a trick played by the cold. Lois was finishing up giving her statement, so Clark hung back by the door, leaning against the wall after hanging up his now wet coat and toeing his shoes off. When Lois was finally finished, they ushered her to a squad car, Clark tailing along, unwilling to leave her side for a moment. Together, they went to the hospital, Lois remaining silent the entire time, and every one of Clark's nerves tight with anger and fear for Lois.

Once there, Lois was whisked away and Clark was left to climb the walls of the waiting area. Sitting still was not an option. He took to pacing wherever he could — the waiting area, the

lobby, the hallways, even the snow-covered sidewalk before the lobby doors. Hours passed — each feeling more like days. His mind never strayed from Lois, and though he wanted her to have her privacy, it killed him inside to be parted from her when she needed him most. At long last, she was released to him and they caught a cab back to his place.

It was getting late by the time they arrived and the snow was falling even more thickly. It seemed to have gotten colder out, though Clark wondered if the change could be attributed to the ice that now ran through his veins at the thought of Luthor putting his hands on Lois. He knew Lois was glad to return to the warmth of that familiar apartment, by the way her shoulders slumped in relief once they closed the door, shutting out the rest of the world.

"Are you okay?" he immediately asked Lois, as she sat on his couch, seemingly trance-like.

"Huh? Oh. I'll be fine. Eventually."

"Look, Lois..."

"Can I stay for a while?" she asked, cutting him off.

"I was just going to say, you can stay as long as you like.

And, if you decide you want to go back to your apartment, I'll go with you, if that will make you feel better."

She tried to smile, but her lower lip trembled, a sure sign that she was on the verge of renewed tears. "I'm afraid to go back to my apartment at all. Lex...if any of your theories about him are true...I'm scared, Clark."

She threw her arms around him as her tears finally spilled. Clark cautiously put his arms around her. When she didn't spook, he tightened his embrace, silently letting her know that he would be her rock that night and always.

"You can stay here," he told her again. "For as long as you like. Tonight, tomorrow, all month if you want. I'm always glad to have you. You know that, right?"

She nodded against him. "Mmm," was all she answered.

"I still have some of your stuff here from those all-nighters we pulled last week. Everything's washed and ready for you. I just haven't had the chance to give them back to you yet."

"Can I use your shower?" she asked, pulling back, meeting his eyes for the first time. "I feel filthy, thanks to him."

"Anything you want or need is yours," Clark assured her. "Just wait here for a second."

He got up and gathered fresh towels for her — the fluffiest ones he owned — then laid her overnight bag on his bed, where she would be sure to see it. Once he was done, he returned to the living room.

"My home is yours," he announced.

"Thanks," she said as she stood.

She walked toward him and lightly put her hand on his cheek. Clark was elated by that simple gesture. Too often, victims withdrew from physical contact with others. But Lois had touched his cheek. She'd hugged him. And, what was more, she'd allowed him to hug her in return, and had seemed to genuinely take some comfort from it. That was more than enough to tell him that Lois Lane would heal from her trauma. And he would be by her side, helping her, every step of the way, if she allowed him to be.

While Lois disappeared into the bathroom, Clark kept himself busy. He cleaned the dishes in the sink, straightened up the living room, put the few scattered books back on the shelves where they belonged, and started the coffee maker. He checked his fridge and closets, looking for snacks that he knew Lois liked, and found a reserve of Double Crunch Fudge Bars that he'd nearly forgotten about, hidden in the back of one cabinet. Once he was reasonably sure that Lois was finished showering, he fixed her coffee exactly the way she liked it, and brought the drinks and snacks to the living room.

She emerged not long after, clad in red flannel pajama pants

and an old gray Daily Planet sweatshirt, her hair done up in a loose and messy ponytail. As she sat on the couch, Clark handed her the mug of coffee he'd prepared for her.

"Thanks," she said distractedly. Her red eyes gave away that she'd been crying again.

"I figured you might like something comforting. I have some Double Fudge Crunch Bars too, if you'd like."

Lois shook her head. "You don't, by any chance, have some chocolate ice cream, do you?"

It was Clark's turn to shake his head. "I'm afraid not. I can run to the twenty-four hour store, if you'd like some though."

"No, that's okay. I don't really want to be alone right now."

Clark slid a little closer to her and put his free arm around her. "I won't go anywhere," he promised. "I'll be right here, on this couch, all night."

"Oh, no, I don't want to put you out. *I'm* sleeping on the couch," she argued.

"No way," Clark said with a grin and a shake of his head, trying with all his might to make Lois feel as though this was just a normal night. "I was raised better than that. The lady always gets the bed." He was glad to see his light tone elicit a smile from her. Then, more seriously, "Besides, the couch is closer to the door. I'd rather be between you and the door, just in case of anything. I don't trust Luthor at all."

"Where's Superman when you need him?" Lois mused.

"I'm sure he's got his eyes peeled," Clark said, attempting to reassure her.

"Why? He doesn't even know what's happened," Lois said, giving him a strange look.

Oops. Watch it, Clark.

"I just meant, it seems like he's always around when you or I need him, that's all," he said with as casual a shrug as he could muster. "It kind of feels like he inherently just sort of watches out for us. Know what I mean?"

"Actually, yeah, I do," Lois said as she took another sip of her coffee. "From the day he first flew onto the scene, it's like... well, like you said. Like he watches over the two of us. I'm not sure why that is, but I *am* glad for it. Especially given some of the situations we've been in."

"Yeah," Clark agreed with a nod.

It's because I'm in love with you, Lois.

"Clark?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you, for...everything tonight. I hate imposing on you."

"It's never an imposition, having you here," he said truthfully. "I like having you here. Granted, I wish tonight's circumstances were better, but..." He let his voice trail off. "I'm just glad to help in any way that I can."

"I know," she replied with a soft smile. She briefly and affectionately cupped his cheek.

"Luthor won't get away with this. I promise you. I'll make sure that he pays."

"*We* will," Lois corrected him, steely determination in her voice. It made Clark's heart skip a beat in gladness to hear her sounding like her old self again. "Lane and Kent, right?"

"Lane and Kent," Clark affirmed with a grim nod.

Clark barely slept that night. For a long while, after Lois had finally retired to his bed, he sat staring at his front door, sometimes looking just at the curtain covered glass and sometimes x-raying beyond to ensure that no one was coming. Every sound set him on edge — he nearly jumped out of his skin in the middle of the night when Lois slipped out of the bed to use his bathroom. When he did sleep, it was a light, uneasy sleep that was far from restful. Even the winter wind against the panes of glass in his windows made him constantly get up off the couch

and check to make sure that all was well.

He tried watching some television, with the volume so low he could only hear it with the use of his super hearing. But nothing that was on could hold his interest, and after twenty minutes of flipping from one infomercial to another, he gave up and turned the television back off. He read for a while, keeping the lights off, using only the dim glow of the city lights beyond his windows to see by. It wasn't much of a strain for him. He'd always had superior night-vision.

"Clark?" Lois called out as she slipped into the living room.

Clark's eyes immediately snapped open. Sleep still clung to him. He pushed his glasses up just enough to rub the sleep out of his eyes, then replaced the frames before clicking on the lamp next to the couch. He squinted against the light as it assaulted his eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked, stifling a yawn. According to the clock, he'd been asleep for a whole forty minutes.

"Did I wake you?" she asked, apologetically.

"It's fine," he said warmly. "Are you okay?"

"I can't sleep."

"I'm having trouble too," he admitted. "But, like I said, you can rest easy tonight. I'm here for you. Nothing's going to happen unless I allow it to. And I refuse to allow anything at all to happen."

"It's not that. I just...I keep seeing it happen, over and over, every time I close my eyes," she confided, swallowing back a sob.

"Oh, Lois," Clark said, his heart hurting for her. "Come here." He patted the cushion next to him as he pushed himself up to sit.

Lois came over, Clark's comforter draped over her shoulders and wrapped around her body like a badly oversized cloak. She opened it once she got to the couch, engulfing Clark in its warmth as well. She cuddled next to his body and laid her head on his shoulder. Clark put his arm around her waist in a protective manner.

"I'm so stupid," she said softly.

"Lois, we've been over this. You did nothing wrong. There's nothing you could have done differently either."

"I can't believe I was stupid enough to think that Lex really just wanted...really just *selected* me solely for an interview. I'm stupid because I let myself be blinded by the public facade Lex puts on. I should have known better. Most people in Lex's position — wealthy, well-known, powerful — all put on some farcical persona when dealing with the press and public, and are usually quite different in private."

"Lois, you couldn't have known..."

"I could have listened to you, Clark!" she interrupted. "I could have *really* listened to what you had to say about Lex."

"Lois, everything that I suspect about him...it's all just speculation. I have no hard proof of anything. I've never blamed you for not taking what amounts to just my gut instinct about him seriously," Clark said soothingly.

"You're a good man, Clark. A lesser man wouldn't be able to resist a good 'I told you so' right about now," Lois said with a tiny, barely-there smile touching the corners of her mouth.

"I hope you'll never find a reason to consider me a lesser man," Clark said with solemn truth.

Even though I've been lying to you, practically since the day we met.

"I don't think that will happen," Lois said with a tired yawn.

"You want to try to go back to sleep?" Clark asked.

Lois shook her head. "Not yet. You?"

"Sleep is overrated," he joked. "I'd much rather spend time with you — my best friend and the woman I..." He caught himself. "Am about to start dating."

"After all of this, you still want to date me?" Lois asked,

sounding surprised.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Clark asked, surprised by her tone.

“I just figured... I dunno. I’m damaged goods now.” She gave him a half-hearted shrug.

“You are *far* from damaged,” Clark argued. “In fact, you’re probably the most perfect person I know.”

“Clark,” she breathed, clearly taken aback by his admission.

“Look, Lois, I’ve wanted to date you for a long time. You are such an incredible woman. What happened tonight can never impact how I look at you or how I feel about you. All that’s changed tonight is how much hotter my hatred for Luthor is burning.”

“So... you won’t run away? Like my college friend’s boyfriend did when some frat guys drugged her and... you know?”

“Never,” Clark swore, aghast at the notion.

Just as I hope that you won’t run from me, when I tell you my secret, someday.

“Thank you,” Lois said, unable to hide her yawn.

She snuggled down a little farther into his shoulder. After a few minutes, her breathing evened out. Her heartbeat slowed a little as her fears and worries melted away while she drifted off to dreamland. Clark slouched down, getting more comfortable, and allowing Lois to sleep on him. He would stay up all night if he had to, if it meant that she could sleep. He knew she needed it.

He rested his cheek against the top of her head, enjoying the sensation of having her close. He closed his eyes, feeling calmed himself by the steady beating of her heart and her deep, even breathing. Even the occasional soft snore as she moved her head against his neck brought a smile to Clark’s lips. And, after a time, Clark grew so relaxed by Lois’ presence that he drifted off to sleep himself.

He awoke with a cry for help in his ears. His body immediately tensed and his head automatically cocked to one side as he listened. A car accident. He wanted to help but he’d promised not to leave Lois. Thankfully, the situation sounded like it was well in hand the longer he listened in, nor did it sound like there were any life threatening injuries. He severed the connection and let his body relax.

Somehow, during the night, they had wound up lying sideways on the couch. His back lay against the cushions and his head on the armrest. Lois lay partially alongside him, partially atop him, wedged between his body and the back of his couch. There was no way that he could possibly get up without her knowing. He craned his neck to peek at the clock. In an hour, Perry would expect him to be in the bullpen. He wondered if he should take the day off or not and what Lois might want to do.

A yawn took him then, as he gently stretched his arms and shoulders, being careful enough not to disturb Lois as she continued to lay on him. Lois stirred, despite his care. She looked up at him sleepily.

“Hey,” Clark said with a soft smile.

“Hey.”

“Did you sleep?”

“A little,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “You?”

“A little,” he echoed.

“What time is it?”

“Just a couple of minutes after seven,” he replied. “I can call in and get us out of work, if you want.”

Lois shook her head. “Thanks, but no.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. It’s better if I keep busy.”

“Okay,” Clark said with a nod. “Give me five minutes to get dressed and I’ll be ready to go. We can swing by your place so you can get ready. If you want, you can grab some extra things, whatever you need, if you want to continue staying here.”

“Oh, Clark, I don’t know. I mean... I appreciate the offer and

everything. But, I can’t just hide out here forever.” She sounded unconvinced however.

I wish you would stay forever.

“I know. But maybe just a few more days, just until we make sure that Luthor doesn’t try to retaliate against you for reporting him to the police. Maybe it won’t make *you* feel any better to stay,” he said, knowing she would take his words as a challenge, “but it would make *me* feel better, having you here...”

“So that you can protect me?” she asked, cutting him off, a knowing look on her face.

“Well... yeah. Look, Lois, if something happened and I wasn’t there to stop it, I’d never forgive myself. Please, stay here, with me, until we’re sure that he doesn’t try anything?”

Lois sighed in feigned exasperation. “Fine.”

Clark grinned. “Great!”

Lois laughed slightly and waved him away. “Go. Get ready. I’ll start the coffeemaker.”

“Don’t bother,” Clark said over his shoulder, as he disappeared into his bedroom. “We can stop at Pete’s Donut Shop on the way.”

“I’d like that,” Lois said.

Clark quickly grabbed his favorite light gray suit, a white shirt, and a floral print tie before ducking into the bathroom. He shaved first, using his heat vision to sear away the stubble that had cropped up on his cheeks overnight, applying a lightly scented aftershave once he was finished. Then he slipped out of his sweats and into his work attire. He was still adjusting the knot of his tie when he rejoined Lois.

“Did you drive here last night?” he asked. “Or did you grab a cab?”

“I drove. I’m parked around the block,” she replied, fishing her keys out of her purse.

On the way to the car, every one of Clark’s nerves was on edge as he scanned the area for potential threats. He knew he was, in all likelihood, overreacting. After all, what made him so sure that Luthor would be stupid enough to try anything against Lois, especially given the charges against him, not to mention Lois’ prominence in the media world? Still, that did nothing to appease Clark or help soothe the worry he carried inside him.

Luthor’s too crafty and too wealthy to try anything that can be traced to him. But if I’m right and he has connections to Intergang... He mentally shrugged. Worse, if he’s the head of Intergang, like I think he is, he can do just about anything he likes and have basically no fear that it will be traced back to him. I don’t trust him.

It didn’t take long before they were at Lois’ building.

Together, they went inside and rode the elevator to Lois’ floor. Clark waited patiently in the living room while Lois dressed and packed a bag full of essentials. He’d always liked Lois’ place. Somehow, her personality shined through in her choice of decor and furniture, though it lacked the fire and passion that she let so few people see. To give himself something to do, and in an attempt to be helpful, Clark wandered over to her fish tank and fed its occupants. He rummaged around and found a food block as well, the packaging promising that it contained enough food to support a fish tank for a week. He dropped that into the water as well, knowing Lois had far too much on her mind at the moment to worry about whether or not her fish would starve.

He was just closing the tank’s lid when Lois reemerged from her bedroom, sporting a no-nonsense red business suit and matching heels. Clark wondered if the outfit was new. He was certain he’d never seen her wear it before, and he had to stop himself from letting out a low whistle.

“Wow,” he said instead, unable to help himself. “You look great.”

“Maybe black would have been more appropriate,” she said. “After all, I’m going to see to the death of Lex’s freedom.”

Clark chuckled. "I don't doubt that, Lois."

She gave him a smile. "I appreciate that."

"And I'll help you in any way that I can," he vowed. "I'm your humble servant, at your disposal," he teased with a shallow, mock bow.

"You've already been a big help. I'm not sure I would have slept at all last night, if I had been here, by myself."

"That was nothing," Clark replied honestly. "You're always welcome at my place, no matter the time or the circumstances."

Again, she smiled. "Come on, partner. We have a billionaire to take down."

"Lois Lane's desk," Clark answered, slipping into her desk chair. "This is Clark Kent speaking."

He could see that Lois was still in Perry's office. The Chief was animated as he spoke to her — no doubt an Elvis yarn, if Clark was any judge. She'd been in there for over half an hour already, having decided on the way in to the office that she needed to tell Perry of what had transpired the night before, and why she and Clark were going to be shifting their focus toward uncovering whatever dirt the billionaire had in order to ensure that he stayed in jail for a long time.

"Hey, Henderson," Clark said as the caller identified himself. "What's up?"

"Clark, hi. Lois called me earlier, said to call with any updates to the Lex Luthor case."

"Yeah, I know."

"She said I could talk to you about the specifics. Frankly, I'm surprised. Most women who've gone through her ordeal don't want to talk to anyone, let alone another man about it."

"Lois is a very special woman," Clark agreed.

"No kidding," the inspector said, and Clark could imagine the scarcest curving of the man's lips in a tight smile.

"So, what have you got for us?" Clark prodded.

Henderson drew a breath and exhaled in a near sigh through his nose. "Well, we have him in custody."

"That's great!" Clark said, relieved that, at the very least, Luthor wasn't still roaming freely. "Has he talked yet?"

"He tried to deny what happened, until we told him that we were going to run a DNA test. He cooperated after that."

"And?" Clark asked. "What'd he have to say?"

"He said he's not to blame. That something came over him, like he didn't have control over his actions."

"Sounds like a pretty poor excuse," Clark observed.

"I think so too."

"So, how long before the DNA results are back?"

"Not sure yet. I'm still waiting on word from the lab, but I'll keep you guys posted."

"Thanks, Bill," Clark said. "We both appreciate it. Oh, and Bill?"

"Don't worry, Kent. Very few people here know what's going on. Just me and the officers who went to your place last night."

Clark smiled into the phone. "Thanks for the discretion, Bill. I know Lois will appreciate it. I think she's going to want to stay under the radar for as long as she can, without the whole world knowing her business."

"Yeah, I figured. Anyway, I just wanted to keep you guys in the loop."

"Thanks. Bye, Bill."

Clark hung up the phone before standing up and continuing on his way to the fax machine, where he'd been headed when Lois' phone had rung. The fax he'd been hoping to find hadn't come in just yet, so he diverted his path to the coffee break area. He fixed two mugs — one for himself and one for Lois — and then delivered them to their respective desks. Not a moment too soon, he saw, as Lois left Perry's office and made a beeline for her desk.

She saw the coffee waiting for her and raised the mug in a salute before sipping it. Clark could plainly see that she was pleased with the way he'd prepared it, as she always was, by the way her eyes slid closed and some of the tension melted from her body. After a few sips, she again raised her mug in his direction. Clark knew that was his cue to approach her desk.

"How'd it go?" he asked in a confidential tone.

"Better than I thought. He's given us the green light to pursue this as much as we need."

"Good," Clark said with a firm nod. He hadn't really doubted that Perry would give them as much leeway as he could in pursuing the matter. "Henderson called while you were in there, getting what looked like an Elvis story."

"Yeah," she said, confirming Clark's suspicions. "So, what'd Bill have to say?"

"Luthor's in custody," Clark said, unable to hide his pleased smile. "They're questioning him and running a DNA check to match against...last night's evidence. He said he'd keep in touch with us about the results."

"I don't need the results to know what they'll be," Lois huffed angrily.

"You know it and I know it," Clark said, sincerely, gesturing first to Lois, then to himself. "But evidence is still evidence. And we're going to need every shred we can get to put him away for, hopefully, the rest of his life."

Lois nodded. "What else?"

"Luthor apparently pleaded that he wasn't himself last night. That it was like something else was controlling him."

"Yeah, and I can tell you exactly what it was that was controlling him," Lois said disdainfully.

He probably shouldn't have laughed, but a chuckle did escape him. "Sorry," he immediately apologized. "Anyway, Bill's keeping the details as hush-hush as he can for now, for your sake."

"He's a good man," Lois said, nodding.

"I've always thought so," Clark agreed. "So," he said, changing the subject from the police inspector. "Where do we start?" He grabbed Mike's chair from the desk next to Lois, since the man was out of state on assignment, and sat facing Lois.

She sighed. "I'm not sure." She sipped from her coffee mug, looking deep in thought.

Clark followed suit. "You think Bobby might know something?"

Lois brightened. "Could be. I'll give him a call." She checked her watch. "In about an hour. I'll never get a hold of him this early."

"Sounds good. In the meantime, I think we should look into Lex's business associates and see if we can dig up any dirt on any underhanded dealings or links to Intergang."

"Okay."

"Hello! Hello, everyone!"

A female voice cut over the general and constant noise of the bullpen. Clark looked up, noticing, for the first time, that several of the janitors were hanging decorations at various points of the newsroom. Some very attractive female models were now strutting about the place in various degrees of risqué dress, while most of the male members of the Daily Planet sat ogling them. He took this all in at a brief glance, then looked back to Lois.

"What's going on?" he asked, more to himself than to Lois.

"Oh." She checked the date on her calendar. "Don't you remember Perry telling us? The Planet got picked to be the backdrop of some lame perfume ad or another."

Clark shook his head. "No, I guess I don't remember him saying that."

"He mentioned it at the last staff meeting. Must have been when you disappeared into the bathroom for twenty minutes."

Clark's cheeks reddened. "Right. Yeah, that fish sandwich

just didn't sit well with me that day." In actuality, he'd dashed out to stop a hold up at Mazik's jewelry shop.

"Ugh, I hate stuff like this. No one ever gets any work done. What about you? Going to join the throngs of the drooling Neanderthals?"

Clark locked his gaze with hers. "Why would I do that?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "All of the half naked women that are so thin you can count their ribs?"

Clark chuckled as he smiled softly. "Lois, there's only one woman I want to look at. And she's sitting in front of me, wearing a red suit. If I'm going to look at those women at all, it's going to be if I offer them a cheeseburger to eat."

"Yeah, right."

"I wouldn't lie to you, Lois."

Not about this, anyway. Just about the fact that I'm an alien superhero in my spare time, he mused to himself.

"Hey! CK! Check out the eye caaaaaan-dyyyy!" Jimmy said as he approached Lois' desk, a folder full of photos in his hand.

"Not now, Jimmy," Clark tried to warn him.

"See the blonde over there by Jenny's desk?" Jimmy said, ignoring Clark's warning, or perhaps not hearing it at all.

"Yeah," Clark said cautiously. "What about her?"

"Think I have a shot?"

Clark looked over again at the tall, lanky blonde in question. She was dressed to the barest minimum in a leopard print bikini and chatting idly with Cat Grant. He shrugged.

"Only one way to find out," he told Jimmy. "Go talk to her."

"I guess. Oh, and I saw the strawberry blonde over by the coffeemaker making eyes in your direction," Jimmy added. "Want me to...you know...tell her anything?"

"No," Clark said with a firm shake of his head. "I'm already spoken for." He sent his gaze to Lois.

"You two?" Jimmy asked. "All right, CK! My man!"

Lois shot him a withering look.

"Okay, back to minding my own business," Jimmy mumbled, tripping over his words in an effort to make a hasty exit. "Oh, and here are the photos you asked for on that drive-by the other day." He held out the folder.

"Thanks," Clark said, taking it from him.

With that, Jimmy took his leave, moving quickly away from the death glare Lois was still giving him. When he was far enough away, her features softened.

"What is it with men?" she asked. Deepening her voice slightly, she mimicked Jimmy. "Way to go, man! Ugh! Are women just trophies to you? Another notch on your belts?"

"Not to me," Clark said. "Lois, I asked you out because of who you are. My best friend and the most intelligent and passionate woman I've ever met. I don't have a belt with notches on it. I mean, sure, I've dated, but it's never been about... conquest," he said, stammering for a word. "I've only ever dated women who have intrigued me."

"And how many has that been?" she asked, teasing in the slightest.

"Three," he admitted. "Lana was my high school girlfriend, but she wound up being controlling and manipulative. I was more relieved to break up with her than anything. I dated Melissa for a semester in college. She hated that my schedule was so hectic, between classes, night classes, and football. Honestly, looking back, we had so little in common, I'm not sure how we even lasted an entire semester. And now, there's you."

"And you think we'll last?" Lois asked sincerely.

Clark smiled warmly, giving her the smile he reserved only for her. "I know it."

Lois smiled back. "Getting a little ahead of ourselves, aren't we?" she teased.

He chuckled. "Maybe. But I honestly do believe that we'll make it."

I've been in love with you since the moment I laid eyes on you.

"We'll see. We still haven't even had our first date yet," she reminded him. "In fact, we still have a whole day."

A whole day too long.

"I know," he said. Then, to distract himself, he took a sip of his coffee.

"Have you tried my new fragrance?" a woman asked as she swept through the newsroom. "Here! Let me give you a sample!"

She sprayed each person she passed with a squirt from the pink crystal atomizer she carried with her. Most people coughed, taken off guard at the unexpected spray of perfume. She got Lois and Clark as she passed Lois' desk. Clark gagged on the stench of the perfume as it coated the air with a sickening, musky scent. Lois coughed. Both, like everyone else in the bullpen who'd been sprayed, fanned the air before them, trying to dissipate the offensive odor.

"Good God," Lois complained, waving one of Jimmy's photos before her face. "What died?"

"I wish I knew," Clark said unsteadily.

There was something more to his sudden feeling of unease than just the assault to his nostrils. Something he couldn't quite place. Purely by reflex, he shot a look at the woman who'd been responsible for the disgusting stench hanging in the air. She wasn't tall by any means and seemed fairly unremarkable. Her blonde hair was wavy and she walked with a confident stride. As she turned to force a sample of her concoction onto Danny, Clark got a look at her outfit. That, too, seemed completely unremarkable. Tight black pants paired with black boots and stiletto heels. An even tighter white shirt, ruffles cascading down the front, beneath a black vest. She also had a fiery red gem on a golden choker around her neck, which seemed almost to glow as it caught the light as she moved.

Clark sighed. Nothing about her set off any alarms for him.

"I need to get out of here," Lois huffed, trying to breathe solely through her mouth.

"Me too," Clark admitted.

Without a super nose, the smell would have been bad enough. With his enhanced sense of smell, it was intolerable and made his head throb. He helped Lois into her coat before going to his desk and grabbing his own.

"Where to?" he asked as they made a beeline for the elevators.

"I don't know. Anywhere but here," she replied. "The whole place reeks."

Clark stood slightly behind Lois as they waited for the elevator. He still felt strangely, but he didn't know where it stemmed from. Maybe it was just the stench from the perfume that had set knots into his stomach. Perhaps it was because Lois was acting so normal in the wake of Luthor's assault. Maybe he was just nervous about their impending date, now that it was so almost tangibly close.

No, that's not it, he told himself. I've been waiting for this for a long time now. Except...Luthor had to go and ruin this for me, didn't he? Lois seems comfortable enough with me, but...if things progress in the future, to the next level...will what he did haunt her? Will she even allow me to kiss her at the end of our date?

He sighed to himself, hoping against hope that he still had a real, unmarred chance with Lois.

"How's that article on the dock strike coming?" Perry asked as he passed by Clark's desk, later that afternoon. The odor of the perfume that had been sprayed still lingered, though Clark knew it had a more powerful presence to his nose than to an ordinary human's.

"Almost done, Chief. I hate how these last two paragraphs sound, but I just can't seem to get a handle on them," he

admitted, gesturing futilely.

Perry patted him on the shoulder in a friendly and supportive manner. “Well, just keep at it. You’ll find what you’re looking for.”

He moved on, calling for Matheson, the travel writer, as he did so. Clark abandoned his useless staring at the computer screen. His gaze, like always, wandered to Lois as she sat at her desk, working on her own story. She must have known he was looking at her. She locked eyes with him, then smiled coyly. She stood up from her chair and sauntered over to him, before taking a seat on his desk. One leg came up and rested on the desk as well — one long, lanky, shapely leg that went on forever before disappearing up beyond the confines of her red skirt.

“Lois? What are you doing?”

“How’s the article going?” she purred.

“Slowly. You know, the two sides aren’t all that far apart,” he said, unable to pull his gaze from her leg and teasing near-view of what lay beyond that she was giving him.

“Really?” she asked in a tone that was almost bored with the topic at hand.

Clark gulped and nodded.

“What do you say we call it a day?” she asked.

“Lois,” he said with great difficulty. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Come on, Clark,” she said, gesturing to the bullpen at large. “Look at it around here. No one is going to get any work done today.”

Lois was right. Clark had been so focused on trying to keep his mind off the woman of his dreams that he’d barely noticed the chaos of the newsroom. It was always a bustling hub of energy, and he’d learned to tune it out, for the most part, in order to be able to get his work accomplished. It had been one of the first survival skills he’d learned at the Planet.

But now...

Now the bullpen seemed more a brothel than a place of business. Coworkers were tucked away in almost every conceivable corner, kissing, touching, whispering together. Clark caught Cat Grant dragging a poor, unsuspecting copy machine repair man off to the copy room, licking her lips in seductive anticipation. He shuddered to think of what that poor man was about to endure.

“Clark?” Lois asked, a pleading tone in her voice.

“Huh? Oh,” he stammered. “I’m not sure that’s a good...”

“Rehalia! Wait!” Perry roared over the constant noise of the bullpen, cutting Clark’s words off, much to Clark’s relief.

The cleaning lady whirled on him as the Chief caught up to her. He lightly touched her shoulder. Clark stood to get a better view of what was happening. He watched in horror as Rehalia punched Perry in the face. With his super hearing, he heard the sickening crunch as Perry’s nose broke. He tried not to wince as the editor’s hands flew up to his face, to protect it against another attack and to cradle his injured nose.

“Keep away from me!” Rehalia yelled, before storming out of the bullpen, leaving Perry to stare, moon-eyed, after her.

“Wait! My love!” he called after her, though futilely.

“What was that all about?” Clark wondered aloud.

“Who cares?” Lois asked, standing at his side, whispering her response into his ear, sending shockwaves of pleasure down Clark’s spine. She tugged at his necktie, trying to loosen it.

“I do,” Clark said, pulling her hands from his tie, though it took all his willpower to do so. He made his way to where Perry still stood, gazing in the direction Rehalia had last been. “Perry? What happened?”

“Rehalia. My love. My morning dove. My heart’s desire. She’s gone. Rejected me.” Immense sadness rolled from his words.

“Rehalia?” Clark asked, incredulous. “What about Alice?”

“Alice?” Perry repeated, as though the word was foreign.

“Your wife,” Clark reminded him.

“Old news,” Perry said dismissively.

“Yesterday you were saying that she has spies everywhere, remember? You were worried about eating that side order of fries with your sandwich.”

“Bah,” the editor said, waving away Clark’s concerns. “She’ll understand. This...this is love, son.”

Clark shook his head. “This isn’t going to end well,” he tried to warn him.

Perry either didn’t hear him or chose not to respond. Lois nibbled at Clark’s earlobe, trying to get his attention. He tried to gently push her away, but it was only a half-hearted attempt. The greater part of him wanted to lavish in the affection she was showing him.

What’s going on around here? he wondered to himself, his eyes once again sweeping over the newsroom. *Why is everyone suddenly so...loving? Or maybe lusting is the right word. Or maybe just... uninhibited,* he thought, watching as Leanne from the city desk and Rusty from the mailroom made eye contact across the room, ran to each other, and started tearing at the other’s clothing. Clark averted his eyes.

Lois was still nibbling at his ear. For a moment, he fought against the urges that told him that this was wrong, that something was amiss, but he soon surrendered. It just felt *so* good and *so* right. After all, he’d been in love with Lois for a long time. And she was the one making all the advances. Surely he could allow himself to enjoy the pleasurable sensations she was causing.

I love you, Lois, he thought, just as she brought her lips crashing against his.

How long they kissed for, he wasn’t sure. Time seemed to stand still as Lois caressed his lips with her own. She was all he was aware of. Where they were, who might be watching — none of it mattered as long as she kissed him, though he had the presence of mind enough to ensure that he remained rooted to the floor and didn’t float in his ecstasy. When she did break the kiss, in order to draw a breath, Clark found himself almost lightheaded from how quickly his heart was beating and from the natural high of his emotions.

“Lois,” he breathed, unable to say more than that.

“That...was wonderful,” she said.

Clark couldn’t have agreed more. He simply nodded, finding words inadequate.

This isn’t right, a small voice said, in the back of his mind. *None of this is right. Everyone is acting strangely. Even Lois. Even you. This isn’t like you, Clark. What’s going on?*

But he had no answer for that. In fact, it was difficult to think of anything that wasn’t Lois, or how deeply in love with her he was, despite the fact that they hadn’t even officially begun to start dating yet. Yet thoughts of her suffused his every thought, more so than usual.

“So,” Lois said coyly, “what do you think we should do with the rest of the day?”

“I, uh,” he said, his throat going dry and constricting a bit. *Help! Someone! Anyone!*

The cry for help sobered him slightly. He listened for another moment. It sounded like a ship was afire, out in Metropolis Harbor. And, he thought with a frown, it sounded like a lot of people were aboard.

Probably one of the deep sea fishing boats, he thought. *It’s too cold still for the luxury day cruises.*

“Clark?”

“Huh? Oh. Uh, sorry, Lois.”

“Are we going to get out of here, or what?”

He shook his head. “Not just yet. I almost forgot, I have uh...” He searched for a moment, wondering what excuse he

could use where Lois wouldn't be able to tag along. "A doctor's appointment that I'm going to be late for if I don't leave right now."

"You never mentioned..."

"I know," he said, hastily cutting her off. "I only just remembered. I'll be back as soon as I can. In the meantime, see if you can dig up anything on Luthor, okay? I need to go."

He didn't wait for a response. He turned and made a swift exit from the bullpen. As soon as it was safe to do so, he spun into his alter ego's uniform and flew toward the harbor. A sonic boom rang out in his wake, and Clark had to wonder if Lois was hearing it along with everyone who was out on the streets. Already, his heart ached to be parted from her.

Focus! he chastised himself. *Lives are at stake here!*

He found the boat easily enough. Few enough were out on the water, and only one was throwing huge, oily black clouds of smoke up into the air. He changed his angle and landed gently on the deck, where panicked fishermen and women had abandoned their rods in favor of trying to loosen and lower the lifeboats. The captain rushed to Clark's side as he took a moment to assess the situation in its entirety.

"The engine, Superman," the captain, a grizzled old pot bellied man with a scraggly white beard, said, pointing. "We were looking for a new spot to cast when it caught fire."

Clark nodded. "I'm on it."

He made his way to the engine and easily put the fire out with the help of his super breath. Then he was back on the main deck, checking for injuries. No one seemed to be hurt, much to Clark's relief. Everyone was thankful for his intervention. None of the lifeboats had been successfully lowered. That concerned him. What if he hadn't been around? Everyone aboard might have been forced into the icy waters of Metropolis Harbor, and he shuddered to think how deadly a turn that could have been.

"Thank you, Superman," the captain was saying, relief evident in his eyes. He looked on the verge of tears.

"I'm just glad I could help," Clark replied, shaking the hand that the captain extended. "The lifeboats are a concern though. It looks like something's stuck or rusted up. It shouldn't be this impossible to get them lowered."

"I agree. But I just had my ship looked over last week. I do it every six months, because it makes me feel better knowing that my vessel is as safe as can be."

"And now the engine caught fire and the lifeboats refuse to lower," Clark mused.

"On the same day," the captain said, nodding.

"Sir, do you have any enemies, that you know about?" Clark asked, the hairs on the back of his neck rising. This reeked of sabotage to him.

"Maybe. A couple of guys in business suits tried to get me to sell my business a month or so back," the captain said thoughtfully. "I told them to take a hike. They've been buying up every business they can on the wharves. This business of mine — it may not be much, but it keeps me happy and busy now that I'm retired and my wife's gone."

"Do you remember anything else about those men?"

The captain thought for a moment, removing his wool cap to scratch the crown of his head as he did so. "Can't say that I do, off the top of my head. I have a business card from them, somewhere."

"Well, don't worry. I know a few people who can look into things for you," Clark said, already on the case, as he saw it. "Now, let's get this ship back to port. I don't trust the engine, even if it would start, so I'll tow you back in. Get me the longest length of the heaviest rope you have."

The captain scrambled away, quicker than his girth allowed the mind to imagine that he would. Minutes later, he emerged with a heavy coil of rope. Clark took one end and secured it to

the prow of the boat. The other end he crossed over his chest in a makeshift harness, and knotted it securely. Then he flew out before the ship until the rope was taut. Once he was certain it would hold, he began to fly back toward the docks, going only as quickly as he dared.

He made good time, all things considered, and the men and women aboard seemed to be fine with the pace he set. At least Clark didn't hear anyone getting sick over the railings. In fact, he heard cheering coming from the men and women aboard as the vessel sliced through the water. It didn't take long for them to reach the docks, where Clark carefully positioned the ship before the captain could set the anchor. Then Clark helped get the gangplank into position, allowing those on board to disembark. Everyone stopped to shake his hand as they exited, and Clark was more than happy to speak with each of them for a moment and pose for pictures.

When everything was finally in order, he took off again, flying back to the Planet. Back to Lois. Now that his mind was no longer focused on a crisis, he was free to think of her again. Think and *want*.

Want is putting it mildly, he thought as he hovered above the Planet. *It's like some primal need. I've always dreamed of being with her. But today...I don't know. It's different.*

He stayed hidden in a cloud for a few moments while he composed himself, then looked for a place to land. When he found an acceptable spot, he sped into his landing, spun into his work attire, and casually strolled back into the building. He purchased a candy bar as he passed the newsstand in the lobby. He ate it as he waited for the elevator and as it brought him to his floor.

He should have guessed that Lois would be waiting for him when he returned. He'd hoped that she would be more like her normal self when he got back, but she was much the same as when he'd left. She was sitting in his computer chair and idly drawing on a pad of paper. As he drew closer, he could see a variety of hearts drawn there — some small, others large, some with arrows through them or ribbons surrounding them, still others with CK + LL written inside them. And, in a select few, Mrs. Lois Kent.

Well, that's one thing I like the sound of.

"Clarkie! Where have you been?"

Clarkie?!

He tried not to cringe. His old high school girlfriend, Lana, had called him Clarkie. Although, he had to admit, whenever she'd said it, it had been like an ice pick in his brain. With Lois, though he hated the nickname, at least the way she said it made it seem somehow sexy — enticing, even.

"Hi, Lois."

"I missed you."

Clark gave a half-hearted and brief chuckle as he tried to reclaim his chair. Lois allowed him to do so and jumped into his lap instead. She began to kiss his neck. Clark melted. She was hitting all of the right spots. With an effort, he stopped her ministrations, some long minutes later. She huffed in annoyance to be denied her goal.

"I ran into Superman while I was out," he said, trying to swing the conversation around to more pressing matters, and to take his mind off the effect Lois' kisses had had on his body. "He gave me some information about a potential sabotage down at the docks."

"Mmmhmm," she replied in a bored tone.

"A fishing boat suddenly caught fire, and the lifeboats wouldn't deploy."

"Fascinating," she said dryly.

"The captain is supposed to call us in the morning with some further information. He said he was recently approached to sell his business, but refused. Then this happened a week after he had

his boat inspected.”

“Riveting,” Lois said, stifling a yawn.

Clark shook his head. Whatever was going on with Lois, it was hitting her hard. He’d never seen her be so disinterested in a story before, unless it was a puff piece. And this was not a puff piece. His head might have been a bit clouded, but he knew that much at least.

“You’re not in the least bit interested?” he asked.

“Only in you,” she answered in a seductive manner.

“Lo-is...”

“Cla-ark!”

He sighed and looked at the clock. It was close enough to quitting time. Neither he nor Lois were going to accomplish anything. And, judging from the state of the newsroom, neither was anyone else. It wouldn’t matter if he and Lois slipped out a little early. He eased Lois off his lap and stood.

“How about an early dinner?” he suggested.

“Anything, so long as I’m with you,” she replied with a grin.

“Chinese?” he asked.

“From that place you always go to?”

“Actually, I think they’re closed for renovations,” he said.

It was partially the truth. The place *was* undergoing some renovations. But it was located within China, and even if it had been open for business, Clark was unwilling to leave Lois at his place, alone, lest Luthor try to make a move against her.

The more he thought about it though, the more he wondered if he was just being overprotective of Lois. Surely Luthor wouldn’t be stupid enough to order a move against Lois when the police knew that she was the one who was pressing charges against him in the first place. Still, he preferred to be overcautious and over-vigilant, rather than allowing anything to potentially befall the love of his life.

“Pity,” Lois observed.

“Sorry,” Clark said with a shrug, as he helped her into her coat. “We’ll have to settle for one of the delivery places. Your choice.”

“Jade Tiger,” Lois immediately decided. “They have the best tempura of anyone.”

“Your wish is my command,” Clark said, as they headed to the elevator bank.

Hopefully she’ll be feeling more like her usual self by the time we get back to my place, he thought. *Otherwise, this is going to be a long night.*

Whatever was causing Lois’ lack of self control didn’t lighten up once they got back to Clark’s apartment. In fact, her ardor only seemed to be fanned by the privacy that the location afforded them. Immediately upon entering the apartment, she flung herself into his arms, tackled him to the couch, and began to kiss him with an almost hungry passion. Clark, too, was feeling more uninhibited than before. He eagerly returned her kisses, matching her every movement with his own lips, his tongue darting into her mouth to explore and taste every inch of her.

From some dim portion of his mind, the voice of reason tried to reach him. But it was almost drowned by his desire. He easily pushed that small little voice away, ignoring it for the moment, and just enjoyed the attention Lois was giving him. It was his dream come true, to have her willingly lavishing her affections on him.

Willingly? that annoying little voice persisted. *Something doesn’t feel right.*

Again, he slammed the door on that voice and focused solely on Lois. For a long time, he merely kissed her back, loving every moment that they were together. But when they finally broke for a breath, Lois’ grumbling stomach broke the mood. Both laughed shyly and Clark picked up the phone to place their food order.

The Jade Tiger wasn’t very far and the delivery boy seemed to know that they tipped well. Long before the estimated forty-five minute wait, their food arrived, piping hot and with an extra package of crispy noodles for their shared egg drop soup.

They wound up sharing more than just the soup. Lois carefully fed Clark some of her shrimp tempura and Clark fed Lois dainty pieces of his chicken and broccoli. He knew that they talked during their meal, but his thoughts were overwhelmingly of Lois. He tried to keep his attention on what she was saying, but his thoughts kept circling back to her — the way her hair moved as she spoke, the beautiful sound of her laugh, the way her eyes sparkled with love for him, the delicate way she moved her entire body.

When dinner was at last finished, he poured them both a fresh glass of wine as they sat, relaxing, on his couch. Lois crawled into his embrace, and Clark found the close contact with her intoxicating, as always.

“A toast,” Lois said, raising her glass and clicking it against his. “To love.”

“To love,” Clark repeated.

He drained his glass within minutes, debated another glass, then thought better of it. The voice of reason was still strong enough to remind him when he was getting close to doing or saying something that might blow his carefully constructed cover. Even the way he felt — drunk on love, as he deemed it — he knew he could not let on that he was Superman.

Get out of the suit, the voice warned him. *Before you blow your cover.*

“I, uh, should probably get out of these clothes,” he stammered. Then, at Lois’ hungry look, “I mean, uh, get into something more comfortable. Did you want to get washed up first?”

Lois shook her head. “No, thanks. I’ll change while you get yourself out of those clothes.” Her voice was almost a purr.

Clark nodded and ducked into his bedroom, just long enough to root around for an old red sweatshirt and a pair of soft gray drawstring pants. Then he headed into his shower. The cold water did nothing to relieve or even reduce his raging desire for Lois. He was fairly certain that she wanted him just as badly too.

Is it such a bad thing, if she wants me the same way I want her? he wondered.

What if she doesn’t? came the whispered reply from his inner voice.

She does, he firmly told himself. *She’s been all over me all day.*

All day since that strange lady came to the Planet.

He sighed audibly, the rush of water concealing the sound. Maybe that was the truth. Maybe that lady had somehow caused the chaos and disorder he’d seen in the bullpen that day. After all, it *was* awfully strange that Lois had started coming on to him after the entire newsroom had been fumigated by that awful smelling concoction the woman had been forcing everyone to sample. The short hairs on the back of his neck stood at attention.

What did she do to us?

Swiftly, he finished showering and toweled off. In seconds, he was dressed, though he lingered for an extra minute or two so as not to rouse Lois’ suspicions. Then he strode out of the bathroom, eager to share his epiphany with her. But his train of thought violently derailed as soon as he stepped back into his bedroom.

Lois had certainly changed out of her work attire. In fact, she was reclined in the middle of his bed, atop the comforter, wearing nothing but the tie he’d worn to work that day.

“Lois? What are you...?”

“Ssh,” she silenced him, a finger to her lips. Then, she crooked her finger and made a “come here” gesture. “Join me, won’t you?”

“Lois, I’m not...really sure...”

“Ssh,” she chastised him again. “I want this. I want *you*.”

She rose and took the tie off, deftly hooking the material over Clark’s neck once she reached him. She used like a towline to guide him to the bed. By then, the last of Clark’s mental clarity had vanished. He willingly allowed her to pull him down onto the bed. Off came his shirt. He hadn’t even been aware that she had been pulling it over his head. Once it was gone, her hands began to roam his chest.

“You’re amazing,” Lois whispered against his ear as she nibbled on his lobe. “Did I ever tell you that?”

Clark made a non-committal noise in his throat. Truth be told, he was barely able to remember his own name through the pleasure and sheer joy coming from having Lois so boldly caressing his skin. Caution and self-restraint fled him. By the time Lois leaned in to whisper “Make love to me, Clark” in his ear, the word “no” was no longer a part of his vocabulary.

Sleep took a back seat to their passion. Three times they reached their pleasure together. Three wonderful, amazing times, each better than the last in Clark’s mind. He’d dreamed about being with Lois, many, many times since he’d met her. But to actually, physically be making love with her surpassed any of his fantasies.

It was almost painful to give in when sleep came to claim them both. Grudgingly, Clark closed his eyes, his heart alight with the greatest, most intense happiness he’d ever known.

“I love you, Lois,” he murmured as his arms closed around her to hold her close as they slept.

Clark awoke in a tangle of sheets and limbs. Somehow, while they’d slept, Lois had come to be the one embracing him, rather than the other way around. At first, however, Clark couldn’t understand just why Lois was in bed with him. He felt groggy and his head was absolutely pounding. That got his notice. He’d never felt so badly before — not without the presence of Kryptonite. He groaned and squinted his eyes against the light spilling in through his windows.

Lois moaned in her sleep as she stirred in turn. Her eyes fluttered open and she seemed to take a second before she registered where she was and who she was with. A look of surprise crossed her features.

“Clark! What are you doing?”

She tried to push him out of the bed, and failing at that, resorted to swatting at him. Clark shimmied over an inch or so, until he was in danger of rolling out of the bed.

“Lois! Hey, wait!” he said, his hands up in a gesture of pacification.

She stilled for a moment, taking in the rest of the situation. Her eyes landed on Clark’s bare chest.

“What happened last night?” she asked.

“I think we...you know,” Clark said, making a vague gesture.

Lois looked down, peering beneath the blankets at herself.

“Oh, God. Did we really?”

“From what I remember, yeah,” Clark said, pausing for a moment to think. “Do you remember anything from last night?”

Lois thought before responding. “I remember Chinese food. And wine. Then you went to get into comfortable clothes.”

“Right,” Clark said, remembering as well.

“I came in here to get changed myself and...Oh, God!” Her hand flew up to cover her mouth as she gasped.

“I’m so sorry, Lois,” Clark immediately began to apologize. “After everything that’s happened to you lately...this is not what...I never meant...I hate that I’ve put you into this pos... situation,” Clark said, stumbling over his choices in words.

“No,” Lois said, shaking her head. “From the way I remember things, you weren’t the only one...actually, I think *I*’m the responsible one.”

“Still, I should have had some restraint,” Clark said.

“Especially given my...disgust at what Lex did.”

If Lois caught his near-slip, she didn’t mention it. “No. I think...I think I really wanted that, last night. Wanted *you*. It was such...” She stopped, struggling to describe the feelings that had coursed through her veins.

“An overwhelming feeling,” Clark supplied and she nodded her agreement. “Like I couldn’t help myself.”

“Exactly,” Lois said.

“Like I was drunk...on love,” Clark continued.

“Yeah,” Lois agreed again. Then, glancing down again, “I guess I should put something on.”

“Yeah,” Clark agreed. “I...uh...I won’t look,” he promised, shutting his eyes behind his glasses, which he’d managed to fall asleep in.

He heard, as well as felt, Lois slip from the bed and then pad around the room, gathering things to wear for the day. He kept his eyes studiously closed until he was certain that Lois was in the bathroom. It felt better to his head, that way, shutting out the light. It was tempting to go back to sleep.

Is this what a hangover feels like?

Eventually though, he forced himself to get out of bed and get dressed for work. He wished he could take an aspirin to soothe his aching head, but he knew it would be a futile effort. Instead, he settled for coffee in the largest mug that he owned, and fixed one for Lois as well. At the last moment, he decided to cook up some eggs and toast, again fixing them in Lois’ preferred manner.

Well, if this isn’t cliché, I don’t know what is. Fixing breakfast after a night of passion. And what passion it was! All my life, I’ve wondered what it would be like to make love to the woman of my dreams. Now I finally know. And it was amazing. But...everything was wrong. We were under some kind of...influence. Nor does she know the full truth about me.

“Breakfast?” Clark asked, as he set Lois’ plate down on the table as she entered the kitchen.

She nodded. “Thanks.”

“Lois...” he began carefully, sitting down with his own meal, “about last night.”

“What about it?” She seemed like she was not much in the mood to discuss it.

“I think we were drugged, somehow. We weren’t the only ones acting strangely yesterday. Everyone in the bullpen was acting weird. Even Perry.”

“I guess that’s true,” she conceded. “Did he really go after Rahalia?”

Clark nodded, then winced as his head throbbed anew.

“Are you okay?” Lois asked, concerned.

“I’m fine. Just a headache, that’s all. How are you feeling?”

“A little fuzzy in my head, to be honest. But overall fine. You need me to get you an aspirin or something?”

Clark smiled. “No, thanks. It doesn’t do much for me. I just have to wait it out.”

“So...I guess the next question is, what caused everyone to go crazy yesterday?”

Clark had to hold back a chuckle. Leave it to Lois to dive right back into the heart of the matter. “I’ve been thinking about that,” he said. “And the only explanation I can think of is that we were all exposed to something in the newsroom yesterday. Probably something airborne. Too many of us were affected for it to have been something in our food or in the coffee pot.”

“Makes sense,” she replied with a nod.

“The perfume,” Clark said with sudden clarity. “More specifically, the one that blonde woman was forcing on everyone. It’s the only thing that we were more or less *all* exposed to.”

“Sounds like a good suspect to me,” Lois said. “But...if I had to guess, I’d say that she probably wasn’t part of that photo shoot.”

She didn't strike me as fitting in with the rest of them."

"I had that impression too."

"So, how do we find her?"

Clark thought a moment. "You don't come up with a chemical compound like that by accident. She probably works in the perfume business. Let's grab some magazines as we head for the Planet."

"Bridal and beauty magazines," Lois said, picking up his train of thought. "And anything with hard hitting news articles like 'The Top Ten Positions To Please Your Man.'"

Clark nodded, biting into his toast. "Exactly."

"Clark...about last night..."

"Forget it, Lois. As far as anyone is concerned, nothing happened. I won't say a word."

She opened her mouth to say something, then seemed to think better of it. She shook her head. "Thanks." She put her fork down and went into the living room to retrieve her purse.

Clark swiftly cleaned up their dishes, rinsed them briefly, then left them in the sink to wash later. He was just drying off his hands when Lois spoke.

"Hey, you have a message on your answering machine."

She was right. The light was blinking on his phone. He pressed the speakerphone button and listened as he went to get their coats.

"Hi, honey!" came the cheerful voice of Martha Kent. "Your father and I just wanted to call and wish you a happy birthday. We wish we could be there with you, in Metropolis, to celebrate."

"We hope you're out somewhere having fun," the voice of Jonathan added. "We love you, son. Call us when you can."

"Message received yesterday at six fourteen pm," the robotic voice of the machine informed him.

"Oh, God! I totally forgot it was your birthday yesterday," Lois said, embarrassed.

Clark shook his head. "It's not your fault. That perfume did something to us to make us focus almost exclusively on whoever it had us falling head over heels for. I didn't even remember it was my birthday."

"Well, uh, happy belated birthday?" Lois said, her voice half a question.

Clark chuckled. The caffeine in his system seemed to be making his head feel better. "Thanks, Lois. Come on, we have just enough time to hit the newsstand on the corner before we head to the Planet."

She nodded and stepped ahead of him, letting him trail her so that he could lock the door behind them. He left her to get the Jeep warmed up while he ducked into the store and bought copies of every magazine that he thought might help provide a clue who the woman with the perfume was. The cashier blinked sleepily at him as his purchase was rung up. Clark handed over his credit card, signed the receipt, then grabbed the bag of magazines. Lois was fiddling with the radio as he hopped into the passenger seat.

"All set," he said, hefting the bag slightly. "Hopefully, somewhere in here, we'll find our lead."

"Great. I'm looking forward to catching this woman before she can cause any more chaos."

She put the car into gear and began to navigate through the always-present Metropolis traffic. Clark leaned back in his seat, his eyes ever watchful on the road ahead.

"I agree," he said. "I just wonder what her motive is. I mean, I assume she knows full well what that concoction is capable of. Why else force it on everyone?"

"Maybe she's just desperate for a date," Lois joked dryly.

Clark laughed. "Maybe. I have a feeling it's bigger than that though. And I doubt it's anything altruistic, like some sort of overwhelming concern for Metropolis' population of single people."

"I have a feeling you're right."

"I just hope it was contained," Clark said. "That it was just the Planet affected. Can you imagine anything more widespread than that?"

"I'd hate to think of that," Lois agreed, nodding without looking at him. "Looking back, it was kind of scary to not be in complete control of myself. It was so different than being drunk, for example. Because, at least when I've had one too many, I know what's causing me to act differently. Know what I mean?"

"Ah...I guess," Clark said.

"You guess? Haven't you ever been drunk before?"

Clark blushed. "Would you believe me if I said no?"

Lois glanced over to study him for a moment before pulling her attention back to the road. "Part of me is, part of me isn't. Knowing you, it makes sense. You're so...I don't know. So... Clark. Such a boy scout. On the other hand, I know you played ball in college, and I've only ever met athletes who partied *way* too hard whenever they weren't on the field."

"Not me. I've never taken that much pleasure in drinking to excess," Clark said. "Always seemed like a waste. A romantic glass of wine or two with a date? Sure. A cold beer while watching a game on television? Why not? But after that..." he shrugged as his voice trailed off.

She laughed and shook her head slightly. "You know what? I believe you."

Clark smiled but didn't respond. Mentioning the word "date" had reminded him that he was supposed to be having his first date with Lois that night. But after all that had happened in the last couple of days, he wasn't sure if it was appropriate or not to even *mention* it to Lois, let alone go through with it. Especially after what they'd done the night before. And, even if it *might* have been appropriate to discuss it with her, that didn't mean that she would take kindly to the question.

Regretfully, Clark maintained silence on the topic. Instead, he picked up one of the magazines and started to flip through it.

"What are you doing?" Lois asked, not looking at him. She rapped her palm into her horn. "Green light means *go!*"

"Researching," Clark said as he thumbed through the ad-laden sex and gossip rag before him.

"You don't want to wait until we get into work?" Lois asked.

Clark shrugged. "Why wait? Even if I get through one of these now, it's one less we have to go through at the Planet. Although, if this one is any indication of what the others are going to be like, I'm going to need a lot more coffee. I mean, really. Who comes up with these articles? 'I Was A Teenage Mother And Prom Queen.' 'Quiz Time! What Should Your Safe-Word Be?'" He clucked his tongue as he read the titles he was flipping by. "Oh, and let's not forget, 'What Your Bed Sheets Say About You.'" He sighed and shook his head. "I can't believe people actually get paid to write this drivel!"

"Sounds like they haven't changed much since I was seventeen," Lois said.

"You actually read stuff like this?" Clark tried to picture a teenage Lois pouring over one of these rags in her bedroom, late at night to avoid Ellen's detection, but he failed.

"Once in a while. My friend Marcie used to slip them to me during lunchtime after she was done with them."

That made more sense to Clark. He couldn't see the ever practical Lois Lane spending money on these kind of magazines.

"I used to read them and day dream about the kind of man I'd marry. And then I'd be grateful that I was pursuing a *real* journalistic career, unlike the authors of those fluff articles."

Clark laughed. "I can believe that." He shut the magazine he'd been going through. "Nothing in this one."

They arrived at the Planet shortly after. Lois parked in the underground lot and together they rode the elevator up to the bullpen. Clark immediately made a beeline for the coffeemaker to fix two cups of the strong brew. He brought them to Lois' desk

and handed her the one he'd made for her.

"Thanks," she said, barely looking up from a bridal magazine. Clark could see that she'd checked three quarters of it already.

"Any luck?" he asked.

"Nothing yet."

"Maybe we should move this to one of the conference rooms," he suggested.

She nodded. "Good idea."

He helped her gather up their research and relocate to one of the two conference rooms in the newsroom. There they spread out the vast variety of magazines and started systematically going through them. Clark knew it was a long shot, but he also called Jimmy in to help.

"What's going on?" the younger man asked as he threw open the door to the conference room.

"Jimmy, is there any way to find out who that blonde woman was? The one who was here yesterday with that perfume sample?" Clark asked.

"I can try. But I overheard some of the models wondering who she was. I kind of got the feeling she was some rival who came to crash the party."

"She might have done more than that," Clark said. "Find out whatever you can, as quickly as you can."

"Consider me on it."

With that, Jimmy left, shutting the door behind him. Clark went back to thumbing through yet another mindless magazine. How did women read these things? He felt like eighty percent of the pages were ads. And when he did find articles and actually did take the time to skim them with his super speed, it seemed like they were all about sex, makeup, or how to lose weight, because clearly no woman on the planet was happy with their body shape. It bothered him, the kinds of messages he saw, because it seemed to almost universally give advice on how to land a man, instead of praising and encouraging women to stand on their own two feet. He wondered if such publications even existed.

He finished his magazine a moment before Lois finished hers. They both looked up and quietly shook their heads before tossing their respective magazines to the side. Each picked up another one and repeated the process. Time passed and the "rejected" pile grew ever larger. They would soon run out of publications to check. Their coffee cups had long since been emptied, refilled, and emptied again. Clark was just about ready to give up hope when something caught his eye.

There was no mistaking the woman posing with the antique glass atomizer.

"Got her!" he announced, relief and a sense of near joy in his voice. He spun the magazine so that Lois could look at it right side up. "Miranda Covington. Owner of Scentsational Perfumes, right in Metropolis."

"Nice work," Lois said approvingly.

"CK! I'm still working on finding out who that woman was," Jimmy said, bursting into the room without knocking. "But I do have this." He handed over a black and white photograph of the woman in question. "That's her, right?"

Clark nodded. "It is. Good work, Jimmy. But I think we have a lead on who she is." He pointed to the ad, which Lois had since torn out of the magazine. "Miranda Covington."

"Do us a favor," Lois added.

"Find out what I can about her. Aliases, addresses, rap sheet, business dealings — I know the drill," Jimmy filled in with a grin.

Lois smiled in return. "Thanks."

"You got it. Just...do me a favor?" he asked, uncertainly.

Lois hesitated. "What?"

"Remember how I went to talk to that model?"

"Yeah?" Clark said, cautiously.

"I guess I came on a little strong. I'm not sure what got into me. Anyway, she thinks I'm a creep. If you could, I don't know, send a message along telling her that I'm not a bad guy. You know. Damage control."

"Don't worry, Jimmy," Lois said, patting his shoulder gently. "We think the perfume this Miranda woman was spraying had some kind of influence on all of us."

"Really?" he asked, brightening.

"Yeah. Why?" Lois asked.

Jimmy looked over his shoulder, as if to reassure himself that no one was listening in. "It's the Chief."

"What happened?" Clark asked, his heart skipping a beat in dread.

"He got hit with a sexual harassment suit."

Clark's heart dropped. "The Rehalia thing?"

"What else?" Jimmy replied with a resigned shrug.

"Come on," Lois said with decisiveness. "We need to get this perfume thing out in the open."

"The sooner, the better," Clark agreed. He swept his hand over the desk, gathering the magazines into one pile, which he dumped unceremoniously into the recycling bin by the door, hoping that, in their next life, they would become something useful.

"Good luck, guys," Jimmy added, as they all exited the room.

Neither Lois nor Clark answered. They simply grabbed their coats and pulled them on as they made their way to the elevator. Clark reached the call button half a step faster than Lois and pushed it. The elevator must have been on the move. The doors opened almost immediately. They boarded and pushed the button for the parking garage.

"Poor Perry," Lois observed as they made their descent, her hands stuffed deeply into her pockets.

"Yeah," Clark agreed. "But, we'll get this straightened out. Hopefully before anyone else has something like this happen."

Lois seemed to sense his discomfort. "You know I'm not going to hit you with some lawsuit, right?"

"I know," he said with a small smile.

He couldn't decide what else to say. He wanted more than anything to clear the air with Lois. But he was afraid. Afraid to upset her. Afraid to learn that she hated him for what had transpired. Afraid that she might never want to be with him again, after what had happened. So, he did the only thing he could do. He maintained his silence.

I do love you, Lois. I just hope that one day, you're able to accept that, and maybe, just maybe, love me in return.

He sighed softly. Lois heard the sound and looked at him.

"Something wrong?"

He shook his head. "Just...thinking about all the trouble this woman has caused." At least it wasn't really a lie. "Perry, Jimmy, who knows who else. I just want to see this woman behind bars."

"Soon enough," Lois said as the doors opened to the underground parking.

"You want me to drive?" Clark offered.

"I've got it," she replied, jingling the keys in her hand as if to make a point.

Lois had managed to secure a spot close to the elevator, so it didn't take long for them to be on their way. Miranda's store was right on the outskirts of midtown, and easy enough to find. Parking, however, proved to be a nightmare. Grumbling, Lois wound up parking five blocks from the place.

"We should have hailed a cab," she muttered as they set a brisk pace down the sidewalk. "It's freezing today."

"Sorry. I didn't think it would be this bad over here," Clark apologized. Then, "Look! There it is!" He pointed across the street.

A quaint little shop sat in the middle of the block, surrounded

and dwarfed by the bigger and more popular retailers around it. In fact, the trendy coffee place to the left of the store stretched to the corner, while a steady stream of people entered and exited it. To the right, several other stores stood in a line, each one easily two or three times the size of Miranda's shop. But, there was no mistaking the place. A wooden sign above the door proudly displayed Scentsational Perfumes in gold lettering against a weathered black backdrop. The blinds were up and a neon sign in the window proclaimed that the place was, indeed, open for business.

Lois and Clark dashed across the street before the light could turn green, while an irate driver or two honked at them. Clark mentally shook his head. Even after all this time in Metropolis, he still was amazed at the impatience of some people. They reached the wooden door to the shop and paused for a moment while Lois caught her breath and Clark pretended to. Then Lois opened the door and a bell up top tinkled to signal their entrance into the store.

Miranda appeared from a back room, a smile plastered to her face. She was dressed in a similar manner to the way Clark remembered her looking the day before.

"Hello," she said in a pleasant manner. "May I help you with anything?"

"Oh, we're just sort of browsing," Lois said, picking up a green bottle and sniffing it. She coughed slightly at the scent.

"Anything in particular?" Miranda asked. "Something to spark that certain someone's interest? Perhaps something to rekindle a waning romance?"

"Oh, nothing like that," Lois said as Clark continued to survey the shop, looking for the atomizer he'd seen the day before.

"You were at the Daily Planet yesterday, weren't you?" Clark asked casually as he inspected a tiny purple vial of perfume. The price tag stated that it was thirty-two dollars. He pulled the stopper out, sniffed the contents, and replaced the top.

"Yes," Miranda said, "I was sampling my newest creation. I'm calling it Revenge. And, of course, checking out my competition. Which, between the three of us, I found to be lacking, at best."

"Revenge? That's...ah...a rather interesting name," Clark said, through a fog of wooziness that had begun to creep up over him.

Miranda shrugged, oblivious to his discomfort. "Every scent has to have a name. Why, the one in your hand I've named Angel Wings. The green one you sniffed earlier," she said, looking to Lois and pointing to the table, "is Disappointment." She pointed to a few near the register. "Starlight, Loneliness, Frustration, Summer Wind, Vengeance, First Kiss. Every one of them unique. Every one of them a masterpiece."

"The one yesterday, Revenge?" Lois asked.

"Yes? What about it?"

"It had an interesting scent to it," Clark said, fighting hard against the odd feeling that was washing over him. "Like it might have been animal based."

Miranda appeared to be surprised. "Very good, Mr. Kent, is it? I'm impressed. You have a remarkable olfactory sense. Yes, Revenge is a particularly rare creation indeed."

"Would you mind telling us how it's made?" he pressed.

Miranda laughed and gave him what felt like a fake smile. "Sorry, but I can't just go around giving away all my secrets. I'd be out of business in weeks if I did."

"Oh, come on," Lois complained, giving Clark an opportunity to scan the room at super speed and his enhanced telescopic vision. "Let's not beat around the bush. Whatever you sprayed in the newsroom made the whole place erupt into some kind of weird love fest. I don't think Woodstock had that much free love going on."

Clark finally found the atomizer he was searching for, and pocketed the smallest, least conspicuous one he could, all at super speed. In a flash, he was back in his same spot, just a foot or two behind Lois. He continued to peruse the various bottles on the shelf, sniffing at a pleasant, floral scented one in yellow glass that was shaped like a sunflower. Sun-shower, the tag proclaimed.

Still, he wasn't feeling right. Something was amiss. Again, he wondered what was causing it. It felt similar to Kryptonite, but somehow different at the same time. His eyes alit on Miranda's choker once more. Was he imagining it, or did it seem to be glowing?

Miranda had replied to Lois' accusation, but Clark hadn't heard what she'd said.

"It isn't funny," Lois said, her anger showing. "People were hurt! And humiliated! It's a wonder no one got killed!"

"Killed?" Miranda repeated. "I don't see how. Besides, who said that I had anything to do with what you're talking about? I'm just a simple perfume maker."

"Yeah, right," Lois said, nearly spitting the words. "Perfume that makes people go crazy."

Miranda, to her credit, never lost her composure. "Miss Lane, I'm not sure where you're going with this ridiculous line of thinking, but I don't appreciate being pegged for a villain. Did you know that animals have no sense of villains and heroes? No, they are ruled by their sense of smell. It tells them what to avoid, what to try to woo to propagate the species. We humans think we're so much better for evolving past that point, but I'm not sure I agree."

Clark subtly slipped his glasses down, just enough to telescope in on the red gem at Miranda's neck, going down to the stone's molecular makeup.

Kryptonite! he thought with surprise. *But red? Is it possible that more than one variety exists?* As his head started to pound, he knew with certainty that it truly was a type of Kryptonite. *That explains why the perfume was able to affect me though.*

That made him feel a little better. At least he'd had a legitimate reason for allowing himself to climb into bed with Lois, breaking every rule he'd ever set for himself. Chief among those rules was the solemn vow to himself to never sleep with anyone who didn't know the full truth about who he was.

Still, now that there's no perfume in the air, I wonder how this is going to affect me, if at all.

"I doubt that you're as innocent as you're trying to make yourself out to be," Lois retorted. "And I intend to expose those lies. Don't leave town. The police are going to want to speak with you."

"Miss Lane," Miranda said coldly, "forgive me, but I hardly think that the unfounded suspicions of two reporters qualifies as a criminal investigation. Luckily for us all, you need *evidence* of wrongdoing. And you have none. Now, if you don't mind, I have work to do. I'm going to kindly ask you to leave my shop before I call the police and charge you with harassment and defamation of character."

Clark quickly focused on Miranda's carotid artery. He could hear her heart racing, much more than anger could account for. She was lying and scared.

"Fine," Lois snapped. "Come on, Clark. We have work to do."

She grabbed him by the sleeve and ushered him out of the door. Clark felt instantly relieved to be away from the strange breed of red Kryptonite, and the potential to be once again exposed to Revenge. Still, some of the odd perfume's scent must have been in the air, even if only the barest trace of it. His head became crowded with thoughts of Lois.

"She's lying," Lois declared as she stomped her way to the crosswalk.

"I know," Clark said. "Her pulse rate was over one-fifty."

“Huh? How’d you know that?” Lois asked, giving him a funny look.

“I...uh...it’s just an expression. Like ‘going a mile a minute’ or ‘shaking like a leaf.’ What? You’ve never heard of it before?”

Lois shook her head. “Must be one of those famous Kansas expressions.” She sighed as the light turned green just as they reached the sidewalk. She tapped her foot impatiently as she waited to be able to cross. “So, we know she did it. But we need to prove it. I’m just not sure how, yet.”

“Ah,” Clark replied, like a magician pulling a rabbit out of his hat. He stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out the miniature atomizer.

“How did you...? Never mind. I don’t care how. I just love that you got that,” she said, kissing his cheek in her glee.

For Clark, it was a struggle not to float away as the love of his life praised him and put her lips to his flesh.

Here we go again, the tiny voice in the back of his mind said with a resigned sigh.

Miranda waited a moment before moving out from behind the counter and to the windows of her shop. Keeping to one side to hopefully stay undetected, she watched as Lois gave Clark a kiss on the cheek. Both reporters were hunched into their coats against the cold, hands shoved deep into their pockets. Overall, Miranda was pleased.

“Those two idiots will never pin this on me,” she told Warlock as the cat entered from the back room, jumped up on the counter, and laid down. “They have no evidence. True, they figured out the trail quicker than I would have liked, but they can’t prove a thing. Lex will be sorry he didn’t listen to me.”

“Meow,” the cat asserted.

“Yes. I suppose you’re right. I probably *should* call him and arrange for another little test. Someplace different this time. I can’t go back to the Daily Planet. Not with those two trying to crack the case.”

Lois and Clark disappeared around the corner of the other block, their pace as fast as the Metropolis foot traffic would allow them to go.

“But, where?” she pondered.

Warlock blinked slowly and yawned before shutting his eyes.

“Where, indeed?”

“So...where to?” Lois asked. “S.T.A.R. Labs?”

Clark shook his head. “I’m not sure they have the manpower to get this processed right away. There’s a woman I know at a government run lab downtown. She can probably do a rush job for us, getting this analyzed. Besides, she owes me a favor.”

“Okay, just tell me where to go.”

“I can just hop a cab and run it down. No need to make you drive out of your way,” he said.

Please, more than anything, I want to be by your side forever.

“I might as well go. This is *our* case. We *both* have been affected by this witch’s brew.”

Clark nodded. “Okay.”

“Clark?”

“Yeah?”

“At some point, we’re going to need to talk about something other than work.”

Is that an invitation to ask about our date? Or does she want to rehash what happened last night?

“Okay,” he said in a non-committal tone, unsure what else to say. If he said much more at that moment, he was afraid he’d wind up confessing his deep, abiding love for her.

The perfume is getting to me, he realized. Faster, this time, even though my exposure today has been considerably less than yesterday. Could be because I spent more time today closer to that piece of that strange red Kryptonite she’s keeping so close. I

wonder where she picked that up, and if she knows just what she’s got there.

He saw Lois’ frame tense for a fraction of a second. Was she angry with him? Frustrated? He was certainly feeling frustrated. The woman of his dreams was right next to him and he was terrified to speak to her, lest he say things he wasn’t yet ready to let out into the open.

“Come on,” Clark said. “Let’s get down there. There’s a great little pizzeria close enough to the lab. We can grab some lunch on the way back to the Planet, my treat.”

“Sounds good.”

They reached the Jeep and climbed in. Clark patiently gave Lois directions, all the while stealing loving glances at her from the corner of his eye. He tried to pretend, however, that he was focused on the other drivers Lois came close to hitting on more than one occasion. Lois’ aggressive driving did have one upside to it — they arrived at the lab just about half an hour later.

Three hours and a shared small pizza later, they were ready to make their way back to work. Lois still sipped her cream soda through a straw from the Styrofoam cup, while Clark still nursed his Mountain Dew.

“Pheromones, huh?” Lois asked. “Never heard of ‘em.”

“Sure you have, Lois,” Clark said, feeling a bit more cheerful now that they had a logical explanation for everyone’s bizarre behavior. “Pheromones. ‘A chemical substance secreted by animals which produces specific responses to other individuals of the same species.’ You would have learned about them in basic biology.”

Lois gave him a funny look. “Did you memorize the dictionary?”

“I read a lot. Speed read, if you must know,” he added, gauging that she wasn’t done asking questions from the look on her face.

“At any rate,” Lois said, “I’m glad it wears off as quickly as it does.”

“I agree. Can you imagine more than twenty-four to forty-eight hours of not being in control of your emotions? Of being completely and hopelessly uninhibited?”

“Those hours yesterday were more than enough for me,” Lois grumbled.

Clark’s heart sank. While he hadn’t liked feeling so out of control, being with Lois had been one of the most amazing moments of his life. Now, however, she sounded bitter about everything that had transpired.

“I don’t get it,” she continued. “Your friend, Dr. Friedman, said that this stuff only works if you are already physically attracted to a person. Only then can it override a person’s normal restraint.”

“Right,” Clark said, though cautiously. Was Lois about to deny that she was attracted to him, despite having agreed to date him? “If there’s any animal magnetism there to begin with, the perfume inhibits the part of their brain which would normally act as an intellectual defense mechanism, leaving that person completely helpless to control themselves.”

“You can’t tell me that all of our co-workers are just a perfume sniff away from tearing each other’s clothes off. I mean, just about everyone in the newsroom went nuts for each other. And Perry! Attracted to Rehalia? I just...I’m having a hard time seeing that. At all.”

Clark nearly collapsed from relief. “I guess you really never know,” he said, shrugging, and struggling to maintain his composure.

“I guess that’s true.”

“Anyway, at least we have a defense for Perry to fight his harassment suit with,” Clark observed.

Lois nodded as they got back into the car. A moment later, she pulled away from the curb.

"I just don't get it. Why would Miranda want to wreak havoc on the Planet?" she asked after a few minutes of silence.

Clark shrugged. "Maybe she was having a really hard time trying to find a date?" he offered, though he knew the joke had already been made before.

Lois cracked a small smile, but that was it. Clark mentally sighed. He just wasn't sure what to do next, or how to interact with Lois. And with the lingering effects of the perfume from just being in Miranda's shop, he was terrified of saying or doing the wrong thing. At least, this time, the exposure had been so slight that, although he knew he was being affected, he felt mostly in control of himself, a reassuring thing after the previous night.

They rode in relative silence after that. Clark occasionally broke the quiet to give her directions, taking several shortcuts that he knew of. The uncomfortable silence lasted until they rejoined the rest of their co-workers in the newsroom. They took their findings straight to Perry, who they found sulking in his office, a white bandage gingerly placed on his broken nose.

"Oh, geez, Chief. Does it hurt?" Lois asked, peering at the bandage.

"Only when I laugh," the Chief grumbled. "And there is very little danger of that happening."

"Well, we have some good news for you," Clark said. "We have your defense right here." He handed over the sheet of paper that Dr. Friedman had furnished them with.

"What's this?"

"Everything you need to defeat that harassment suit," Clark said. "We can prove you weren't in control of your actions."

Perry lifted a suspicious eyebrow. "How?"

"Pheromones," Lois said simply.

"Huh?"

"Basically, you...us...we were all sprayed with pheromones and it made us lose all our inhibitions," Clark quickly explained.

Perry looked over the paper. "This should help the suit," he finally conceded. "But what about Alice? She found out and kicked me out of the house."

"Go to her," Clark urged. "Shower her with gifts. Show her how much you love her. Wine and dine her."

Perry sighed resignedly. "This is going to cost me a trip or seven to the opera, isn't it?"

Lois shrugged helplessly. "Maybe?"

"Aw, hell. Jimmy! I need you to run down to the opera house for me!" Perry yelled out the door. "You two," he said, pointing with two fingers. "I want you on this until whoever is responsible for this has been caught. Got it?"

"We'll make it our top priority," Clark said.

One of them, anyway. We still need to take down Luthor.

"Got it," Lois said at nearly the same instant. As they left Perry's office, she looked at Clark. "Let's start with a bio on her."

"You read my mind," he replied, leading her to his desk.

He stole Jimmy's chair from the adjacent desk for Lois, before sitting in his own. He cracked his knuckles as he waited for his computer to boot up. As soon as he was connected to the system, he began his search for whatever information he could pull up. After ten minutes, he grinned.

"Got it. Our bio on Miranda."

"First in her class at M.I.T.," Lois said, reading the screen.

"Research funded by Luthor Industries," Clark said, his eyebrows raised.

"He funds half the scientists in the city," Lois pointed out. "I'm not sure there's enough to link the two."

"I think there *is*," Clark argued. "Think about it. She has a perfume named Revenge. A perfume the entire newsroom got sprayed with — leaving us all feeling like we were no longer in control of our actions. The *same* excuse Luthor gave the police after his arrest."

"You think she sprayed Lex first?"

"I'd bet on it, yeah." His voice barely broke above a whisper as he said the words, hating that it seemed like Luthor had a defense for his heinous crime.

Lois seemed to freeze as the implications of that statement hit her, especially since she and Clark knew first hand how overwhelmingly strong the perfume's effects were. After a moment of what looked to be some internal struggle to retain her composure, she seemed to return to the Mad Dog reporter that Clark knew and loved.

"Then what? She got bored and hit the newsroom?"

"I don't know," Clark said, shaking his head. "Maybe the perfume failed to produce the intended result. Maybe hitting the Planet was a test to see if it actually worked at all. Or maybe it was an attempt to prove that it did, either to Luthor or her fellow scientists. I'm not entirely sure it matters. All that matters is stopping her before she decides to do something like this again."

"Obviously she hasn't read the news," Lois said. "She hit the bullpen after Lex was already in police custody."

Clark shook his head. "Maybe not. Who knows?"

"At least it's worn off," Lois said, glancing around at their co-workers. "This place was a real mess yesterday."

"That, we can agree on," Clark said, nodding.

"Agree on what?" Cat asked, strutting by, still in the previous day's clothes, holding her sparkly silver heels in one hand.

Clark bit back a laugh as Lois said, "Well, maybe not."

"What?" Cat demanded to know.

"Oh, nothing," Lois said, grinning. "Just thinking. You must have gotten a huge whiff of that perfume yesterday."

"Perfume?" Cat asked.

That was all it took for Lois. She began to laugh and Clark couldn't help but join her.

"What are you talking about?"

"You didn't get sprayed with that god-awful smelling perfume?" Lois asked, now serious.

Cat thought. "I don't..."

"You know what, never mind," Clark said, shaking his head.

"No, what?" Cat said, angrily tapping her foot. It was no secret that the self-styled "Gossip Queen" hated to be left in the dark about anything. "Tell me."

"Okay," Clark said, in an effort to make Cat go about her business and leave them to theirs. "Most of the newsroom got sprayed by a pheromone-laced perfume. It made everyone lose their minds and go head over heels in love. We thought, since you, uh...were so friendly with the copy repair guy, that maybe you were affected too."

"Head over heels in love?" Cat repeated. "Felt left out, did you, Lois?"

Lois bristled at the dig, but said nothing. Clark supposed it was better than alerting the presses that he and Lois had intimately spent the night together. They would never hear the end of it, especially from Cat. The woman was forever trading insults with Lois and making unwanted advances toward Clark, though she never pressed him hard enough that he felt comfortable making a formal complaint against her. He'd long ago come to accept that that was just the way Cat was.

"Cat?" Clark asked politely.

"Yes?"

"Would you mind giving us some space? We have a lot of ground to cover trying to gather our proof so we can get this woman in jail, where she belongs."

Cat eyed him, perhaps trying to assess if there was more to his request, but she did nod. "I have to get home and changed anyway. I'm supposed to be interviewing Lenny Stokes tonight at his new club." She did a little dance move, indicating that she was ready to party. "I hear that I fit his type."

"Loud and trashy?" Lois retorted with a snort of disapproval.

"Ooh, the burn," Cat said, rolling her eyes, but at least she

started to walk away.

“Don’t let her get to you,” Clark said, giving Lois a smile. “She knows she’ll never be as classy or respectable as you.”

At least that chased away the scowl on her face. “You think so?”

“I know so. Now, let’s see what else we can dig up, okay?”

By six o’clock, however, no fresh information or leads had turned up. Clark yawned and stretched, causing Lois to do the same as she looked over at him from her own desk. She looked tired and frustrated, he could see. As for himself, he was feeling frustrated as well, and a bit stiff from being bent over his work for so long. It was time to throw in the towel for the night. Perhaps some time away from the case would help put it into fresh perspective — and hopefully a new angle — when they returned to it in the morning.

He stood and stretched again, hearing the muscles in his back and shoulders pop. It felt good. He looked to Lois, and realized, for the first time, that the perfume must have worn off again. He was no more besotted with her than normal. That was the first good news for him in hours. He went to her desk and shrugged helplessly as she looked expectantly up at him.

“Nothing,” he said simply. “You?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

“I think we should call it quits for the night,” Clark suggested. “We can come back to it tomorrow with fresh eyes and clearer heads.”

“I hate to admit it, but you’re probably right,” Lois said. “Dinner?”

“Sure. What do you want?”

“You tell me.”

“I don’t know,” he said as he helped her into her coat. “Did you want...” he swallowed around his discomfort. “Did you still want to stay at my place? Just to be on the safe side? Or would you prefer to go back to your place?”

“My place,” Lois said decisively, as relief and sadness dueled in Clark’s heart. “I need to pick up something. Then yours. I’m still not sure I’m ready to be alone at my place.”

Clark nodded. “I promise, no surprises this time,” he joked weakly. “I’ll stay on the couch, all night.” When Lois didn’t respond, he added, “So, what are we getting at your place?”

“Huh?” she asked, distractedly. “Oh. You’ll see.”

That was all she would tell him, no matter what else he asked, or what he guessed. She even made him wait in the car when they arrived at her building. She was gone all of fifteen minutes, then came rushing back down the steps in the front of her building, a bag in her hands. She jumped behind the wheel once more.

“Everything okay?” Clark asked, as she pulled away from the curb.

“Everything’s fine. At least, it appears to be. I think I was half afraid to come back and, I don’t know, find the place ransacked or something.” She sighed. “I hate this, Clark.”

“I know,” he said sympathetically. “And I promise, I’ll do whatever it takes to make you feel safe again. You have my word.”

“I know,” she said, giving him a smile, before turning back to the road.

A little while later, they arrived safely at Clark’s apartment. He unlocked the door and went straight to the kitchen, checking his closets and fridge. He nodded to himself as he took stock of what he had, and what he could possibly make with it.

“How do fajitas sound?” he asked, pulling his head back out of the fridge for the third time.

“Lovely,” Lois replied, but again, he heard the distraction in her voice.

“Go, get changed,” Clark told her, as he gathered what he needed for their dinner. “I’ll handle this.”

“Thanks.”

She disappeared, only to reappear half an hour later, showered and clad in pink flannel pajama pants with a matching top. Reluctantly, she took over for Clark while he changed, promising to keep a distant, but watchful, eye on the sizzling chicken that was cooking in a pan on the stovetop. When Clark reemerged into the kitchen, she was fearfully poking at the chicken with a spatula.

“Thanks,” he said, now in his pajamas to match Lois, though his pants were red and his thermal style shirt gray. “Looks like you kept things well under control.” He took up a pair of tongs and checked the doneness of the chicken before systematically flipping each of the strips that he’d cut.

“I’ll set the table,” Lois said, sounding relieved to be not be responsible for the food anymore.

Ten minutes later, Clark removed the chicken from the heat and brought everything to the table. After some internal debate, he decided on offering soda to Lois, rather than wine. He still wasn’t sure how familiar he should be acting around her. Would she see wine as an attempt to get her even slightly drunk and back into his bed?

Hungrily, they both dug into their food, eating with gusto. Clark kept Lois talking, mostly about other cases they were working on. He refused her offer to help with the dishes when they were finished, tasking her, instead, with finding something to watch on television. But when he finally joined her in the living room after putting everything away, he found her sitting cross-legged on the couch with the television screen lifeless before her.

“Nothing good on?” he asked, settling down on the opposite end of the couch.

“I didn’t check.”

“Oh,” he said, feigning understanding, though her answer confused him.

“I thought you might want your birthday present first,” she said, nodding to the cheerful blue, green, and orange wrapped item sitting on the coffee table. “I meant to give this to you yesterday, but then things got a little...out of hand and I totally forgot about it.”

“Thank you, Lois,” Clark said, reaching for the thick rectangular item. It was heavy in his hands as he picked it up.

Carefully, he tore the paper on one end. Once he got a hole made, he slid his finger in and pulled it along the rest of the paper, leaving a long tear in his wake. Finally, he pulled the paper away, only to smile as the item was revealed.

“My favorite book,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Open it,” Lois instructed him, waving toward the top cover.

Clark did as he was told. He sucked in a breath when he saw the inscription inside, along with the author’s signature.

“How did you get this?” he asked in awe. “Richard Karhold *never* signs his books.”

“Well, not *never* but rarely,” Lois corrected him. “Let’s just say I know a guy who knows a guy who knows Richard Karhold. I cashed in a few favors when you mentioned this book to me a couple of months ago.” She shrugged, as if it were no big deal.

Clark shook his head and put the book down. “Thank you, Lois. I don’t know what to say. I love it.”

I love you more.

He went to hug her but stopped midway, unsure. For a moment, he hesitated, then finally allowed himself to give her a brief hug, too brief for his liking and far too brief to even be called friendly. It made him mourn for the easy friendship they’d been sharing for so long.

“I’m glad you like it,” Lois said, though it somehow sounded awkward, as if she was also unsure of how to act and speak.

“Like it?” He shook his head again. “Lois, this is one of the most thoughtful gifts I’ve ever received.”

She gave him a timid smile as a blanket of silence fell around them. A minute or two passed, each looking uncomfortable in that fragile silence, each appearing to want to broach the quiet but failing to find the right words. Another minute passed before Lois finally cleared her throat gently.

“Clark... I think we need to talk.”

“Talk?” he asked, aware that he was parroting her.

She nodded. “I’m not sure how to start this,” she confided.

“Start what? You know you can talk to me about anything.”

“That’s just it!” she said, seeming almost grateful for the opening he’d provided for her.

“That’s what?”

“I *used* to be able to talk to you about anything. But ever since the other night, when I showed up here after my interview — and *especially* since we slept together last night — it’s like... like I don’t know you.”

“What do you mean?” he asked. “Of course you know me.”

“Not the way I used to,” she said, shaking her head. “Clark, you’re my best friend. I’ve told you more about myself than anyone else. Hell, you even bring me my favorite snacks when I’m upset even before I *admit* to being upset. But in the last two days — minus whatever we might have said while under the pheromone perfume’s influence — it’s like you’re a different person. Like... like you’re walking on eggshells around me.”

“I didn’t realize...”

“I think you *did* realize you were acting differently,” she said, cutting in. “You’ve been acting so... aloof, I guess. Well, maybe that’s not the right word. But... different. Like you have no idea what to say to me or if you’re allowed to still be my friend. All day, since we first left for the Planet, you’ve been strictly business. All through lunch, all through dinner. All business. It’s like my best friend disappeared and was replaced by some stranger.”

“I wasn’t sure...” Clark said, struggling for words.

But Lois didn’t seem to hear him. “I mean, we were supposed to go out on our first date tonight, Clark! Instead, we’re sitting here in our pajamas after a home-cooked meal during which all we talked about was work! I mean, don’t get me wrong. Dinner was wonderful. I can’t remember the last time I had fajitas that good. But... and I don’t want to look like some greedy, high-maintenance woman here... but I’d really hoped for something a bit more romantic. Was last night so bad for you that you wanted to back out of our date?”

Clark’s jaw opened in shock. “No! Of course not!”

“Then why are you treating me so differently?” she asked in a quiet voice, having lost the momentum and passion she’d had just a moment before.

Clark turned in his seat to look at her directly. Lightly, he touched her shoulders with both of his hands as he looked her in the eyes.

“Lois, last night...” he shook his head, embarrassed, but mentally trying to will Lois to see the truth in his words. “Last night... from what I remember of it... it was the best night of my life. I never knew that things could be that amazing. If I’ve treated you any differently than normal, it’s because I’m not really sure what to do here. I’m lost, Lois. I’m afraid. Afraid of making you uncomfortable. Afraid of doing or saying something that might... push you away.”

Lois sighed, but at least it sounded a little relieved. She laughed a little and the vice around Clark’s heart loosened a little. “Haven’t you ever done this before?” she asked, mischief in her eyes.

Clark looked down as a blush crept over his features. “Not exactly.”

“Not... exactly?”

“I’ve uh... I’ve never actually... uh...” he stammered.

“Clark? Are you telling me...?”

Clark sighed. “I could never be with anyone I didn’t love, Lois.”

Lois looked to be on the verge of panic. “So, what you’re saying is... that you’re a vi... v... very patient man? Someone who saved himself for... what? Marriage? His engagement? At the very least a long time girlfriend? And that I... stole that from you?”

“No! Yes. I mean... you’ve got it half right, Lois. I did... save myself for when I found the one woman I could love and share everything with.”

“Oh, God,” Lois moaned in embarrassment.

“But you didn’t steal anything,” he quickly amended. “Lois, last night... it wasn’t about you taking charge or me pressing for us to sleep together. We *both* wanted what happened.”

“Because of a stupid perfume!”

That was a blow to Clark’s heart. “Not for me, it wasn’t,” he said in a quiet voice. “Lois, you had to have known, before tonight, that I’ve liked you for a long time. I started to fall for you the moment you stormed in on my interview with Perry. By the time you warned me not to fall for you, that you didn’t have the time for it, it was already a lost cause.”

He stood up and paced to the dining room table where they had shared their dinner. “Last night... it wasn’t a mistake. At least, it wasn’t for me. What I... gave up... last night? It was to exactly the person I’d been waiting for my whole life.”

“So, why did you try to push me away?” Lois asked.

Clark ran his fingers through his hair. “Because I was sure that you viewed last night as a mistake. I know you haven’t had a great track record with sharing a bed with men you work with. I was afraid you’d mark me off as another disaster, even though I wasn’t going to go out and steal an award winning investigation from you.”

“Clark?”

“Yeah?” he asked, now feeling thoroughly punched in the gut.

“Come here,” Lois instructed him, and he did what he was told, retaking his seat on the couch. Then, “I never said last night was a mistake.”

“You... what?” he asked, wondering if he’d possibly heard right.

“Look, I’ll admit it. I hate the idea, in general, of starting a relationship off by exploring the physical aspects of it. But, I don’t know. Last night... it wasn’t some stranger that I was... doing that with. It was... I don’t know. Different. I thought I knew Paul and Claude when we finally... you know. But you. *I know you*, Clark. I know you wouldn’t hurt me.”

Clark nodded, in an effort to conceal how hard he was swallowing.

But I already have, he thought bitterly. *And I have to continue to do it for some time to come. I need to know. Will you - can you — choose the ordinary man, without knowing of his super side?*

“I guess I owe you a real date,” he said instead, being as cheerful as he could. “Do you accept I.O.U.s?”

Lois smiled. “Only from special people. But don’t make me wait too long, Kent. I’m patient, but I have my limits.” She wagged a warning finger at him in mock remonstrance.

Clark laughed and felt the last of his apprehension falling from his shoulders and chest. “I’d say tomorrow, but I doubt we’ll get a table at Chez Reynaldo’s with such short notice.”

“Chez Reynaldo’s? Clark, that place is ridiculously overpriced!”

“Maybe, but they have some of the best food in the city.”

“Clark, you realize that you don’t have to prove yourself by emptying your wallet on one meal, don’t you? I don’t mind something more low-key.”

“Well...” he said, thinking. “If you’re not on board with Chez Reynaldo’s, there’s always Lucia’s on Edison and Hickory.”

“Much better. I could go for their shrimp parm. Besides, we’ll *definitely* be able to get a table there. *And* it’s a more intimate setting — so much easier to have a conversation in.”

“It’s settled then,” Clark said with a grin. “Tomorrow night, we’ll have a real first date.”

“Lois! Clark! What in Elvis’ name are you doing here?” Perry growled at them the next morning. “You’re supposed to be off.”

“We know, Chief,” Lois said, sipping her second cup of coffee.

“So? Why are you here?”

“We think Miranda might strike again,” Clark said, looking up from the research papers they’d printed off.

“You have evidence of this?”

“Not yet,” Clark said. “Just a gut feeling. But we’re looking.” Perry eyed them dubiously. “Okay then.”

Once the Chief had moved on, Lois and Clark exchanged a look.

“You think Alice is still giving him a hard time about Rehalia?” Clark asked.

“Probably,” Lois said with a soft sigh as she watched the Chief bark at Wally. “I wish there was more we could do for him.”

“We can,” Clark said decisively. “We can put Miranda behind bars.”

“I’m not sure that will appease Alice,” she replied doubtfully. “Still, it won’t hurt things, that’s for sure.”

The phone at Clark’s desk began to ring. He quickly jumped out of the chair he’d pulled up to Lois’ desk and ran across the aisle to his desk. He picked up the phone as he stood in place.

“Clark Kent.”

“Clark? It’s Dr. Friedman.”

“Oh, hi,” he said, sinking down into his seat and grabbing a pen and pad to take notes.

“You told me to call you if I discovered anything else about that perfume sample.”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “Did you find something?”

“Yes. Something disturbing, actually.”

Clark’s heart beat faster in dread. “What?”

“Well, in order to understand it better, we attempted to replicate the perfume,” she said. “And, while the ingredients aren’t easy to get a hold of for the average chemist, we had everything on hand here in the lab.”

“And?” Clark prodded.

“It seems that the solution you gave me was around twenty percent. Of course, we wanted to see what would have happened with a higher concentration of the pheromones included in the solution. Anything higher than twenty percent runs a higher risk of permanently overriding a person’s normal restraint. In fact, a one hundred percent solution is guaranteed to cause permanent damage to a person’s brain.”

“So, they’d be a slave to their every desire?” Clark asked, his dread giving way to fear. “For life?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Dr. Friedman said. “I’m sorry. I wish I had better news.”

Clark shook his head, even though the woman obviously couldn’t see it. “Thanks. You’ve been a huge help.”

“Glad to hear it. Goodbye.”

“Bye,” he said as a click sounded in his ear.

“What was that about?” Lois asked as he returned.

“That was Dr. Friedman. She discovered that the concentration of pheromones in the perfume we gave her was just enough to override a person’s restraint, but higher concentrations, particularly if the full one hundred percent is used, is permanent.”

“You mean, people would run around for the rest of their lives...doing what we all did here the other day?” she asked in a horrified tone.

“I’m afraid so,” Clark said with a shallow nod.

“We need to stop her.”

“I think we should head back to the shop with the police this time,” Clark said after a moment. “We have evidence enough that she’s the perfume’s creator, *and* that this concoction could have dire consequences. At the very least, they can perhaps confiscate whatever she has left of it.”

“I’ll make the phone call,” Lois said with a grin.

Clark knew the smile well. It all but said “we’re about to score a huge victory.” It made him smile to see it. He wanted this case to be over and done with so he could devote more time to proving that Luthor was the head of Intergang, and so that he could focus on his upcoming first date with Lois that night.

Two hours later, Lois and Clark led a small contingent of police officers to Scentsational Perfumes. Detective Thomas Pines was in charge of the officers, and Clark was pleased to see how quickly and efficiently he handled the men and women who were taking their orders from him. But the shop was empty and dark when they arrived. Once the place was secured, Lois and Clark were allowed to enter. Clark showed Detective Pines where he’d seen the few sampler sized vials of Revenge, though none were left.

A search of the back room turned up nothing more than empty containers, though they were marked with the names of the ingredients for Revenge, at least according to the list Dr. Friedman had given Clark. The police got to work, busily snapping photos and bagging the evidence. It should have made Clark feel a little better. But all it did was to make him feel more frustrated and worried. He had the sickening feeling that Miranda was up to something.

He only wished he knew what.

“May I help you?” Nigel asked the blonde woman who had turned up on the doorstep of Lex Tower.

“I’m here to see Lex,” Miranda said, brushing off the manservant. “Tell him Miranda is here, and that I can prove that my perfume works.”

“I’m sorry, that won’t be possible,” Nigel said in his slow drawl.

“Oh, please. He can’t possibly be too busy for me to sneak in for ten minutes.”

“Tell me, have you picked up a newspaper in the last day? Or turned on a television? A radio, even?”

Miranda furrowed her brow. This was not the reception she’d been anticipating.

“No,” she admitted. “Why?”

“Mr. Luthor has been taken into police custody,” Nigel said, his voice betraying no emotion at all.

“He...what?” Miranda asked, jaw hanging slack as a phantom punch took the wind out of her lungs.

“Yes,” Nigel said with a shallow nod of his head. “Something about him sexually assaulting a woman. Oddly, it was just hours after you left here the other day that this supposedly happened.” His tone told her that he suspected that she had a hand in things.

“Pity,” Miranda said, choking back her anger. “Well then, I guess I have no further business here. I’ll let myself out.”

She turned on her heel and stalked off, her anger boiling inside and threatening to spill over into her demeanor. Her Lex! In jail! She would make the entire city pay for their crime against Lex. And she knew just where she was going to start.

“Clark!” Cat purred as she sidled up to his desk, not long after he and Lois returned — empty handed — to the bullpen. “The Metropolis Winter Fest is today. I was wondering if you might want to accompany me.”

“Cat,” Clark sighed, “we’ve been over this. I’m not interested.”

“So you say. You know, I don’t get it. You moon over Lois like she’s some rare gem. But, in reality, the Winter Fest has less ice than she does.”

“I’ll take my chances,” he said firmly.

“Suit yourself. You’ll be sorry. Anyone who’s anyone will be there, and I would have been just the woman to introduce you to them.”

“That’s it!” Clark said as a sudden jolt of realization hit. “The perfect target for Miranda!”

Cat wasn’t lying when she said that just about everyone would be at the Winter Fest. Most of the city normally turned up for the event, which had everything from food, to hot drinks, ice carving demonstrations, snowman building competitions — using snow machines if Mother Nature didn’t provide any of her own — roped off areas for kids and adults alike to throw around snowballs, free ice skating in the park’s rink, and booths filled with winter themed knickknacks to purchase. Usually, the Winter Fest was held in January, but a series of bad snows alternating with heavy rains had forced the city to reschedule until the beginning of March.

It would be the perfect place for Miranda to ambush the vast, unsuspecting population of Metropolis with her pheromone spray.

“I need to go,” he said as a way to excuse himself from his conversation with Cat. “Excuse me.”

“Where are you running off to?” Lois asked as she returned from the ladies’ room.

Clark halted for a moment as he tugged on his coat. “I think I know where Miranda’s going to strike next.”

“Where?”

“Metropolis Park, at the Winter Fest.”

“And what? You were going to run off and leave me here? I don’t think so.”

“Lois,” he pleaded, feeling every second slip by. “I can’t risk having you there. If she hits the place with the hundred percent formula...”

“And you think I’m going to sit here while you go risk yourself? Not a chance, Farm Boy.” She shrugged into her coat as she talked.

“Lo-is!”

“No way, Clark. I’m not missing out on this. I want to see her get what’s coming to her just as much as you. More so,” she added pointedly.

“Fine,” Clark relented, knowing he’d never win, and afraid that if he pressed too hard for her to stay at the Planet, she’d think he was no better than Paul or Claude who had slept with her and then stolen her story. “We’ll call Detective Pines from the cab.”

A light snow had sprung up in the short time they’d been back at the Planet, making it slightly harder for them to finally get a cab to stop. Clark gave the man their destination as Lois pulled out her cell phone to call the police. After that, Clark sat anxiously tapping his foot as the cabbie navigated the streets of midtown. To give himself something to do, he estimated the fare in his head and took out some bills from his wallet, hoping to shave off a few seconds when they reached their destination.

He was only a couple of dollars off when they finally pulled up outside the nearest entrance to the park. Instead of wasting precious seconds, he gave the man the full amount he’d extracted from his wallet, making the tip far more generous than the cabbie truly deserved. He pointed as Lois got out of the cab.

“Let’s split up,” he suggested, desperate to separate from her so that he could don his Superman disguise. “I’ll go this way. You start that way. We can meet up somewhere near the middle.” He frowned, wondering how she could avoid any possible exposure to the spray. “Here. Wear your scarf up over your mouth and nose. I don’t know if it will help if Miranda gets that stuff into the air, but it’s all we can do for now. I’ll do the same.” He pulled his own scarf up. It was just cold enough that no one would side-eye

them for it.

Then he was off, forcing himself to walk, not run, in the direction he’d chosen. When he was far enough from Lois, he found a secluded spot outside of the festivities. He ducked behind a screen of tall hedges and spun into the suit before anyone could possibly see him. Then he took to the air, flying slow, searching the crowd with his telescopic vision. He just wasn’t sure what would happen if he *did* find Miranda. If she was wearing that chunk of red Kryptonite, he couldn’t be sure that exposure to the hundred percent formula, if she had it, wouldn’t permanently alter his mind the same as it would a normal person’s.

He was just starting to wonder if he’d made a mistake, and that Miranda *wasn’t* going to launch an attack at the festival, when he spotted her. She was over by the one of the snow machines, several jugs of liquid by her feet, each marked in thick black marker that it was the one hundred percent solution. She was busily at work pouring out the contents of one of the jugs into the machine. So that was one of the ways she was going to launch her spray into the air and cover people. This particular machine would soon be throwing snow into the air in the middle of the festival, where almost everyone would walk through the artificial winter wonderland, now that the light snow from earlier had stopped.

He angled into a descent, slowing as he approached the ground. He landed directly before Miranda, who looked up, startled by his appearance, though she quickly regained her composure. He crossed his arms before him, though he felt the strange presence of the red Kryptonite necklace.

“Funny,” he said in the commanding tone of Superman, “you don’t look like someone who’s licensed to operate this machine.”

“Oh, I’m just improving on it,” Miranda said in a smug tone.

“I’ll bet,” he replied in a tone that let her know she wasn’t fooling anyone. “That’s a nice necklace. Mind if I take a closer look?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He reached out and removed the choker at super speed. The piece of Kryptonite surprised him when it didn’t burn his hand the way the green always did. He hefted it for a second in his palm before sending it sailing into the stratosphere. Immediately, he felt better, the strange feelings the rock had caused vanishing completely.

“You overgrown baboon,” Miranda hissed. “Do you know how many people I had to con to get that?”

Clark simply cocked on eyebrow at her, a silent “you’re kidding me, right?” that she didn’t directly respond to.

“At least I still have this! And there’s nothing you can do to stop me!” she said, grinning.

She hit the power button on the machine. It sputtered for a long moment as it adjusted itself internally, giving Clark a couple of seconds of opportunity. With a blast of super breath, he froze the other jugs of liquid into solid, useless masses while Miranda screamed at him in frustration. Then he severed the power cord to the snow machine, right before it could start spitting out the pheromone spray that would leave the city permanently crippled by love.

“You idiot!” she shrieked, stomping her foot like a child, her fists balled at her sides.

“You know, if you’re having so much trouble with love, you can always check the personals,” Clark sarcastically joked as he waved over a few police officers. They weren’t Detective Pines’ men, but they were more than able to put Miranda into handcuffs and read her rights to her. Moments later, Detective Pines and a handful of his officers appeared on the scene, each leading a trained canine unit member on sturdy chain leashes.

“Gentlemen,” Clark greeted them, inclining his head in respect to the badges they carried.

“Superman!” Detective Pines said, sounding happily surprised to find the superhero had beaten him to the arrest.

“Thanks for the help. How’d you know?”

“I like to keep my ears open for trouble,” Clark said. “I overheard Lois Lane and Clark Kent talking as they were on their way here, so I thought I’d check things out for myself. I got here just in time.” He pointed to the snow machine. “This is filled with the one hundred percent perfume solution.” He moved his hand and gestured to the frozen jugs, plus the one empty one that Miranda had gotten into the machine.

“I’ll have one of my guys take care of this.”

“Be careful,” Lois broke in, coming up behind Clark. “That stuff causes permanent damage, from what I understand.”

The older man nodded. “Don’t worry. It’ll be handled as gingerly as a live explosive. Matthews! Get this stuff to the lab and take every precaution. Do not break the seals on the lids. Breathing in this stuff makes you go permanently crazy in love.”

“Yes, sir,” the young man said, nodding gravely. “Peterson! Give me a hand getting these to the cruiser, would you?”

“Sure thing,” came the reply.

“And this?” Clark asked, pointing to the machine. “I’m not sure if I can safely get it all out.”

“Maybe you can take it someplace harmless?” the police detective said, pointing upwards at the overcast sky.

Clark nodded. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Be careful, Superman,” Lois said, concerned.

“Don’t worry, Lois. I will.”

Carefully, he lifted the machine and flew off into the sky. Once he was clear of the Earth’s atmosphere, he sent the hunk of metal hurtling away from his planet. He watched it for a long minute as it raced away into the vastness of space.

He’d always taken solace in that space he was in now — trapped between the world where he was raised and the universe he’d come from. It was a lonely place, that much was sure. But it had provided a wonderful refuge when he’d needed to get away from the chaos that too often ruled the planet and his life, especially once he’d taken up the persona of Superman. And sometimes, it was just nice to find a place that was as lonely and isolated as he felt.

Hopefully not any longer; he thought to himself as he briefly gazed down at the blue, green, and white swirls of water, earth, and clouds. *Hopefully tonight will go well with Lois. And if it does — if we can make a relationship work — I may never have to be lonely again. Please, God, let tonight go well. I love her.*

Once the snow machine was well out of the range of even his telescopic vision, he turned his back on the stars and began his descent back to the world that he knew. He came to a landing in the same place he’d taken off from. Lois was there, watching and waiting, as he’d anticipated. She smiled when she saw him.

“Superman? Are you all right?” she wanted to know.

“I’m fine. And that perfume is beyond the reach of anyone now.”

“Good,” Detective Pines said, nodding. “Thanks, Superman.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, giving the man a smile and a friendly touch on the shoulder. “Is there anything else I can do?”

Pines shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’ll speak to the owner of the machine and let them know what happened here.”

Clark nodded. “Okay, thank you.” He made ready to fly off.

“Superman?” Lois asked and he immediately turned to her.

“Yes?”

“Can we talk for a minute? In private?”

“Sure,” he said.

He gestured away from the small crowd that had gathered to watch the arrest and the superhero in action. They walked along a row of evergreen bushes, still laden with snow that hadn’t yet melted from a few days prior. To ensure their complete privacy, they kept walking until they could no longer hear the muttering from the crowd as they discussed the things they’d seen before stopping. Clark automatically put his arms over his chest, though

he relaxed his body language by leaning against the bark of a tall, naked oak tree.

“Is something bothering you, Lois?” he asked, taking his cues from her own body language.

“You and Clark...you’re close, right?”

He cautiously nodded. “Yes.”

“I wanted to tell you...before anything happens...Clark and I are dating.”

“I know,” he said, still wary.

“He told you?”

“He didn’t have to. He cares a great deal for you, Lois. It didn’t take me long at all to know that he’d be asking you out.”

“Is that why you and I never...?”

He nodded. It was simpler than trying to explain the more complicated details. At some point, he would be telling her the whole truth anyway. Lois nodded in turn.

“You’re okay with that?” she asked.

“More than you can imagine,” he replied truthfully. “Clark’s a good guy, and it makes me happy to see him so happy.”

“He *is* a good guy, isn’t he?” Lois agreed.

Again, Clark nodded. A stiff wind sprang up and his cape snapped in the sudden breeze.

“Speaking of,” Lois said, craning her neck to look back the way they’d come from, “I wonder where he is.” She frowned.

Oops.

“I’m sure he doesn’t even know Miranda’s been caught yet,” he threw out as a limp cover, but it seemed to work.

“Maybe.”

“I should probably get going anyway. Why don’t you go find Clark? I’m sure you two will want to get your story written up as quickly as you can.”

“Yeah,” she distractedly mused. “Thanks for talking with me. I had to know.”

“I understand. Goodbye, Lois.”

“Bye.”

Clark rose into the sky and streaked away, just enough to cause a sonic boom to mark his departure. Then, at a slower speed, he circled back to the park. As before, he found a secluded place to change, this time donning his civilian clothes. He had to pass through a section of vendor booths in order to reach the place where he’d left Lois. As he made his way through the crowds, one particular booth caught his eye.

Necklaces of every shape and size hung from display racks or lay nestled within display cases lined with black velvet. The extra lighting in the booth made each of them sparkle and shine. But it was one particular necklace that had drawn his attention. He stopped to take a closer look.

“Can I help you?” the shop owner, an elderly Asian woman, asked.

“I couldn’t help but notice this snowflake pendant,” Clark said. “How much?”

“Ah! That one is the only one I have. Those are genuine Swarovski crystals. A hundred.”

Clark bit his lower lip in thought, the knowledge that Lois was looking for him pressing heavily on his mind and making each second fly by with supersonic speed.

“Can you go any lower?” he asked. “I don’t think I even have that much on me.”

The lady looked him over, silently appraising him. Clark threw a nervous glance backwards, hoping, for once, *not* to see Lois approaching. She wasn’t. At least, not yet.

“For a certain young lady?” the shop owner asked knowingly.

“Yes,” Clark said with a nod. “Our first date is tonight.”

The woman smiled. “For young love? I’ll take off twenty-five dollars. That’s my best offer though.”

Clark looked again at the necklace as the woman placed it in his hand. It was the most elegant, stunning snowflake he’d ever

seen, the entire thing white and ice blue crystal, with the barest hint of silver holding everything together. It hung from a slender silver chain that he estimated would settle the snowflake just an inch or two above Lois' breasts.

"Take a moment to think about it," the owner urged him as she turned to ring up another man's purchase.

As soon as she took her eyes off him, Clark slid his glasses down and checked the internal structure of the pendant. He was pleased to find it to be of top quality. He pushed his glasses back up, just in time. The owner turned back to him.

"I'll take it," he said.

The woman smiled, took the necklace, and got it boxed up for him. He refused a bag as he counted out money from his wallet, making a mental note to stop at an ATM on the way back to work. Once he was done, he slipped the slender box into the inner pocket of his suit jacket, then pulled his winter coat tighter around himself.

"Thanks," he said, smiling widely.

Lois is going to love this, he thought, already allowing himself to feel pride in the smile he knew he'd elicit from her that night.

He left the booth and continued on his way to meet up with Lois. He found her not far from where Miranda's evil plot had been foiled. She impatiently waved him over. He jogged a little to get to her that much faster, his breath misting in the freezing air with every exhalation.

"Clark! Where have you been?" she asked when he finally reached her side.

He feigned confusion. "Looking for Miranda."

"Superman caught her already. He found her messing with the snow machines. The police arrested her."

"That's great," he said. "Was anyone...affected?"

Lois shook her head. "Thankfully, no. Superman got to her before the machine could start pumping out that witch's brew."

Clark breathed a sigh of relief. "Great."

"I got us the story," she said, waving her notebook for emphasis.

"Then let's go get it written. After all, we have a date to get to tonight," he said with a conspiratorial smile. "And this time, I *refuse* to miss it."

"Here we are," Clark said as they pulled up to Lucia's.

He parked the car behind a small red Chevy. Luckily, this block didn't have meters, so he didn't have to worry about finding quarters. He gave Lois a smile. She looked absolutely stunning in her wine colored dress, which boasted long sleeves but a tastefully plunging neckline. When she had emerged from her bedroom, back in her own apartment, Clark hadn't been able to stop staring or complimenting her.

She'd complimented him as well. He hadn't felt like the charcoal suit was anything special, but Lois had confided in him that she'd always liked him in charcoal. He'd made a silent vow to buy more in that color. Still, Lois' compliments had quelled some of the lingering fears and doubts he'd had, giving him his confidence back.

"Clark, before we go in, I just want to say something," Lois said as he cut the engine off.

"Okay," he said cautiously.

"Thank you."

That surprised him. "For what?"

"For giving this a chance, even after...everything. For not getting mad when I suggested Lucia's instead of Chez Reynaldo's. A lot of guys are too insecure to allow the woman to make any kind of demands on the first date. Especially when they'd been planning things. But you took it all in stride."

"Lois, your comfort matters more to me than any half-formed fantasy I might have had about our first date. Believe me, if

you're happy, then I am too."

"It's always been that way, hasn't it?" she asked as they exited the Jeep. "I say I want Chinese takeout, you almost always go right along with it. Once, you went along with my need to have hamburgers for three days in a row without objecting at all."

Clark shrugged. "I like burgers," he said with an air of innocence.

Lois saw right through his playfulness and laughed. "Yeah, who doesn't?"

Clark reached the door to Lucia's and opened it, allowing Lois to step inside and out of the cold first. Once she was inside, he followed her and went directly to the hostess stand, where a young redhead was standing.

"Hi. I have a reservation, for Clark Kent."

"Kent...Kent...Kent..." she said, skimming her list. "Ah, yes. Party of two, correct?"

"That's right."

"Marcus?" she asked, throwing a glance one of the wait staff, a short, thin black man. "Can you bring these folks to table eleven, please?" She handed him two menus and a wine list.

"Right this way," he replied with a genuine smile. After a brief walk through the restaurant, he announced, "Here we are, folks. Enjoy."

He set the menus down at a secluded table nestled in corner of the restaurant. A candle blazed merrily in the center of the table while the night beyond the window they were up against deepened. A light snow had once again begun to fall in a lazy, haphazard way. Clark pulled out Lois' chair and pushed her in against the table once she was seated, then sat himself.

"So...here we are," Lois said, looking around the place as if seeing it in a new light.

"Yeah," Clark agreed. "Here we are."

Funny, how being in the restaurant suddenly made the date feel real in a way that it hadn't before. It was as though stepping through the front door had magically transformed their evening from two friends having dinner to the date they had planned on. Clark swallowed nervously.

"I'm glad we're finally getting to do this," he said after a moment of studying the menu.

"Me too."

"I hate to admit it, but I guess I'm a little nervous," he confided, knowing that she'd probably already guessed as much.

"You too?" she asked, then laughed. "I thought it was just me."

Clark chuckled. "I guess we're both a little out of our comfort zone," he said with a smile.

"Yeah." She touched a free strand of her hair, which she'd curled and placed into an elegant up-do with a few tastefully and specifically placed tendrils hanging down. "It's funny. We've been to this place what? Dozens of times, I'm sure. Tonight it just feels so different."

"I had the same thought," Clark admitted. "Maybe we're more in synch than we realize."

She gave him a private smile. "Maybe."

Their waiter appeared then, a pitcher of ice water in his hand. He swiftly filled their glasses and set down the basket of freshly baked bread in the center of the table. A moment later, his notepad appeared.

"May...I...take your...order?" he asked in halting English.

"Lois? Do you know what you want?" Clark asked.

"I do," she said, shutting her menu. "I'll have the shrimp parm with the angel hair pasta, please."

But the poor man looked lost. Clark looked at the badge with the man's name, which was pinned slightly askew on his black vest. It stated that the waiter's name was Angelo.

"Is it easier if I speak Italian?" Clark asked, hoping to be helpful.

Angelo looked relieved. "Please?"

Clark nodded. "Two orders of the shrimp parmesan with the angel hair pasta. And a bottle of the rose zinfandel, please," he said in flawless Italian.

"Very good, sir," Angelo replied. "Anything else I can get for you?"

Clark looked down at the menu for another moment before replying. He knew Lois loved the restaurant's flourless chocolate torte. "Yes. We'll have a flourless chocolate torte to share for dessert," he said. The dessert was much more than any one person could eat on their own, even with a Kryptonian appetite.

"Very good," Angelo repeated. "I'll get this in for you right away."

"Thank you," Clark said, handing over both menus and the wine list.

"Wow," Lois said, impressed, once Angelo had moved on from their table. "I didn't know you spoke Italian, especially not so well."

"I've picked up a number of languages on my travels," Clark said, shrugging.

"A number?" Lois asked, arching an eyebrow. "How many?"

"I...uh..." He looked down at the table, slightly embarrassed.

"Clark?" Lois asked in mock impatience.

Without looking up, he answered. "Three hundred. And forty-seven."

He could all but hear Lois' jaw drop. "That's...uh..." she sputtered. She picked up a slice of thick bread and buttered it in an effort to give herself a task.

"It's no big deal," he said, brushing it off. "Most of them I only know the basics. How to ask for directions, how to order dinner, where the nearest hotel is. That kind of stuff."

"Still, that's pretty impressive. Most guys I've dated can barely speak English, let alone any other languages."

Again, he shrugged. "I guess it just comes easily to me. It's not something I've ever had to work too hard at. A lot of it I've just picked up by listening to others speak. I never really thought about it."

"I took French and Latin in high school," Lois said. "It was trying enough to keep the two of those straight in my mind. I can't imagine throwing any other languages into the mix."

"Latin?" Clark asked, grinning.

Lois laughed. "One of the 'perks' of being an honors kid." She rolled her eyes.

With that laugh, the tension between the two seemed to dissipate. They spoke easily with one another, swapping stories of their childhoods and talking of their families. Lois expressed how she wished her parents could have been like Clark's, and told him about the horrors of her own family.

"Lucy was the one saving grace for me," Lois said after a while. "She always understood me. She never judged my decisions. Until we got older. Did you know, when we first met, that she was pushing me to go out and date? She couldn't understand that I wasn't interested in pursuing any of the guys I'd met. I mean, what did I have to choose from? A hypochondriac, a guy with a foot fetish, a lawyer who was a compulsive liar? No, thanks."

"I'm sure she just had your best interests at heart," Clark said, taking a sip of his wine.

Lois swallowed a bite of her shrimp. "I guess. But she wasn't exactly understanding when I kept blowing off her 'helpful' lectures."

"Well, with any luck, she won't be bothering you about that anymore," Clark said with a soft smile.

"I don't imagine that she will," Lois said, returning the smile. "So, what about you? Your parents ever push you to date? Although, having met them, I doubt it."

"Not really," Clark said. "Oh, they expressed interest in

seeing me happily in a relationship with someone, but they understood that I was really looking for the right woman. Someone I could share everything with. They supported that."

"Your parents are so wonderful," Lois replied, putting down her fork and taking a bite of her bread.

"I got really lucky," Clark said. "Of all the people who could have adopted me as their son, my mom and dad were the ones to do so."

"Well, to be fair, it seems like they got a pretty great son out of the deal."

"I like to think so," Clark said with a wink.

Lois put her napkin down and pushed her plate away. "That was delicious."

"It was. Great pick. This was a much better choice to come to."

Lois smiled. "I'll be back in a minute," she said, standing.

Clark nodded and watched as she breezed through the now-emptying restaurant toward the ladies' room. Angelo came over with the torte and Clark had him bring two cups of coffee as well, which he prepared in their preferred ways. When everything was ready, he slipped the box with the snowflake pendant out of the inner pocket of his jacket and placed it next to Lois' dessert fork. Satisfied, there was nothing else to do but wait for her to return, which she did a minute later.

"Hi," she said, as she stepped to the table. "Sorry, there was a bit of a line."

"No problem," Clark assured her. "I took the liberty of ordering dessert. I hope that's okay."

Lois saw what his choice had been as she sat and grinned. "With choices like that, you'll never get rid of me."

"Good. Because I don't intend to *ever* be rid of you," he replied with a smile.

In the next second, she noticed the box next to her fork. "Clark? What is this?"

"What's what?" he said, playing dumb.

"This," she said, holding up the box.

"That? Oh. I guess you'll have to open it up to find out." He was toying with her now and she knew it. He gave her a wolfish grin for good measure.

Lois opened the box, doing as he had asked, then sucked in a shocked gasp. "Clark, it's gorgeous!"

"You really like it?"

"I *love* it. But...why?"

He shrugged. "I saw it today at the Winter Fest in a vendor's stall and I just couldn't help myself. It was so unique and it stood out so much that it reminded me of you. It's just a pretty great coincidence that it happens to be snowing tonight."

"Clark, this is too much."

"No, it's not," he said, dismissing her concerns. "Lois, even if we hadn't been going out on a date tonight, I still would have bought it."

"Thank you," she breathed, looking down again at the crystal that was cradled in the palm of her hand. "Would you mind putting it on me?"

"Absolutely." He stood and went around behind her, taking the necklace as she offered it to him. He clasped it gingerly around her neck, then returned to his seat so that he could see how it looked on her. "Just as perfect as I imagined it would look," he declared.

Lois pulled a compact from her purse and admired the gem as well. "It's stunning."

"I'm glad you like it. And, in case you're wondering, I still had my eyes peeled for Miranda the entire time," he said with a wink.

That made her laugh. "Good," she said, attempting to be stern, but unable to hide the smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. "I can't have my partner going soft on me, especially

when so much is at stake.”

Clark nodded and picked up his fork. “Shall we?” he asked, motioning to the still untouched torte.

“Please,” she said, seemingly grateful to have an excuse to dig into their dessert.

“So,” she said after a couple of bites, “what made you want to go into journalism? You told me about your travels, looking for work, and how important it was for you to make a name for yourself in the field.”

“I’ve always wanted to help people,” Clark said, shrugging.

“You could have been a police officer or a fireman to do that,” Lois said teasingly.

“True,” Clark responded, taking a sip of his coffee. “But it didn’t have the same appeal to me. I’ve always loved writing. And looking beneath the surface to get to the root of the problem always made so much more sense to me than simply reacting to a situation. *Who* set the building on fire and *how* can I help prevent that person from doing it again, as opposed to just getting the people out of there alive. Know what I mean?”

She nodded. “I do. There’s nothing quite like the feeling of seeing our efforts help bring a guilty person to justice, is there? Except for maybe winning an award or two for the investigation,” she added with a playful grin.

“It’s a nice perk,” Clark agreed, thinking of his own Kerth award back in his apartment. “But what about you? Why’d you pick journalism?”

“At first, it was all about proving my family wrong. My mom was hoping I’d get into medicine or law. And my dad... well, he never really talked about what he hoped I might pursue. He might have once said how being a teacher was a good job for a woman to have. I think I picked journalism just to get as far away from their dreams as possible.”

“So, you built a name for yourself,” Clark said.

Lois nodded. “I did. I was determined to be the best.”

“Once you did, why didn’t you quit?” Clark asked.

“Because I’d found out that I really love being a reporter.”

Clark smiled softly. “I’m glad you decided to stick it out. I mean, how else would I have met you?” Then, seeing her eyeing the last bite of cake, “Be my guest.” He slid the plate an inch closer to her.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t,” she protested.

“Please,” Clark said, putting his hand to his stomach in an “I’m full” manner. “I can’t, really.”

“Well,” she said, dragging the word out, as if torn in her decision, “if you insist.”

But Clark speared the torte with his fork, then carefully fed it to her. He’d been itching to do that from the first moment they’d begun to eat the chocolate treat, but he’d needed some time to work up the nerve. Lois’ eyes slid shut as her lips closed around the fork’s prongs. Clark’s heart started to hammer. It was incredible how sensual Lois looked in that moment. Carefully, and regretting that there was no more to feed her, he guided the fork back while Lois chewed and swallowed.

“Another cup of coffee?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I couldn’t even if I wanted it.”

“Did you want to try for a late movie or something?” Clark asked.

Lois checked her watch. “I don’t think we’d make it. The multiplex usually starts the final showings right about now. Can we just head back to your place?”

“Sure,” he said with a nod.

“I’m still not sure I want to be alone in my place,” she added as an explanation. “Do you mind?”

“Of course you can stay. I told you, my place is yours for as long as you want.”

Angelo came over at that moment. “Anything else, sir?” he asked in Italian.

Clark responded in kind. “No, thank you. Just the bill when you get the chance.”

“Of course.” The man produced the bill in a thin folder from the pocket of his apron. He flipped it open to ensure that it was the correct one before handing it to Clark.

“Thank you,” Clark said, taking it.

As Angelo breezed away to refill another table’s drinks, Clark opened the folder, skimmed the bill, then reached for his wallet. It was easier just to leave cash, so he did so, calculating a generous tip in his mind. He put the bills into the folder and placed it at the corner of the table.

“Ready?” he asked Lois.

She nodded and pulled on her coat before Clark could help her into it. “Let’s go.”

He took her arm and guided her back out into the cold night air. The snow was coming down thicker than before, and a plow rumbled past, scraping the roadway clean. Lois looked up at the sky once they reached the Jeep, a look of joy on her face.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” she asked Clark.

But he was looking at her. “Gorgeous,” he agreed.

“I’ve always liked the snow. Oh, it can be annoying, especially big storms. But it’s so pretty, on quiet nights like this.” Then, crossing her arms against the chill wind, “I just wish it didn’t have to be so cold out.”

Clark chuckled. “Your carriage awaits.”

Lois grinned back. “Home, Jeeves.”

Again Clark laughed. “Your wish is my command.”

It didn’t take long for them to return to Clark’s apartment. He found a spot as close as he could, but it was still more than a block away. It seemed like everyone had already returned home to hunker down and wait for the snow to end. Again, Clark offered Lois his arm and held her close when she accepted it.

“Well, this is a first,” he joked as they mounted the steps to the door of his apartment.

“What is?”

“Bringing a date home with me at the end of the night.” He looked over and smirked at her.

She responded by playfully slapping his chest. “And I’ve never gone back to the guy’s place at the end of a date either.”

They reached the door and Clark unlocked it before allowing Lois inside first. Once inside, he took her coat.

“So... what now?” he asked, at a loss.

“Now... I think I’ll get changed, if you don’t mind. Maybe we can find a movie on the TV to watch.”

“Sounds great,” Clark said. “You know,” he added as Lois disappeared into his bedroom and he flopped onto the couch. “It was nice of Perry to tell us to take tomorrow off.”

“I think he suspects that there’s something going on between us,” Lois said, her voice muffled as she dug through her luggage.

“I think you might be right,” Clark agreed as he picked up the remote control and turned the television on.

“Still, he did kind of owe us one, since we were supposed to be off today.”

“Just don’t tell him that,” Clark laughed. In his best Perry voice he said, “The world doesn’t stop just so we can sit on our laurels.”

He could hear Lois laughing. A moment later, she reemerged from his room, now in soft black fleece pants and a thin, but matching, top. She sat cross-legged on the couch next to him.

“Find anything good?”

“Blazing Saddles?” Clark asked. “Or there’s ‘Indiana Jones’, or ‘Die Hard’.”

Lois shrugged. “All of them sound fine. Which would you prefer?”

“I guess ‘Blazing Saddles’. It’s been a while since I last watched it.”

“I like that one,” Lois said.

“You want some coffee? Or some tea? I might have some hot chocolate as well.”

“Oh, nothing for me,” Lois said. “After that meal, I may not want anything for another week.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Clark said. “I was really hoping we could go out again tomorrow night.”

She smiled at him in a sweet way that he’d only rarely seen before, but had seen often enough over dinner that same night. “I’d really like that.”

Clark couldn’t help matching her smile. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“You sounded like you expected me to turn you down.”

“I couldn’t be sure,” Clark said, heading into his bedroom now. “It looked like you were having a great time, but...well...you never really know, I guess.”

“You really didn’t have great experiences dating in the past, did you?” Lois asked gently.

Clark sighed. “That’s an understatement. But none of that matters anymore. Because I’m dating the only person in the world that could possibly be right for me.”

He ducked into the bathroom and changed swiftly into navy pajama pants and a white top. Then he rejoined Lois on the couch. He hadn’t missed much of the movie, he saw. But he was more interested in the woman next to him. He settled down and after a few minutes, Lois snuggled into his side. His arms moved seemingly of their own volition, and came up to encircle her, holding her close. He heard her sigh in contentment and mirrored her with one of his own as he leaned his cheek in rest on the top of her head.

“Clark?” she asked sleepily as the movie came to an end and the credits scrolled across the screen.

“Hmm?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For the best date of my life,” she answered, stirring in his arms to look him in the eyes. “I mean that. I really had a great time. I usually hate first dates. They’re always so awkward and uncomfortable. But tonight was different. I don’t know if it’s because we came into it as best friends, but, whatever the reason, it just felt so natural, so right.”

“I felt the same way,” Clark confided. “Only, I *have* dated a friend before. Lana, from high school. And, well, it never felt as comfortable as this. Being with you...it *fits*, you know what I mean? It’s like...like it was always meant to be this way. You and me together, not as friends or partners, but as a dating couple. So, maybe I should be thanking *you* instead.”

“You know,” Lois said thoughtfully, “the date’s not really over yet.”

“Oh?” Clark asked, playing along though he didn’t know what Lois was getting at.

She nodded. “You still haven’t kissed me goodnight.”

A goofy grin spread across Clark’s features, and he was completely powerless to stop it. “A huge mistake on my part,” he said. “Allow me to remedy that oversight.”

Lois leaned in a little closer. “I’m waiting,” she breathed, enticing him in for the kiss.

Clark closed his eyes as he also leaned in, allowing his lips to seek hers. As contact was made, fireworks shot off in Clark’s mind.

It wasn’t like he’d never kissed Lois before. It was simply that none had ever been this real before. Most had been ruses to fool and distract others. A few had been bittersweet ones, times when Clark had thought he’d needed to move away from Metropolis or had had other such dark and heavy thoughts on his mind. Sometimes, he’d even kissed her while wearing the guise of Superman, but those had always been as chaste and restrained as he could manage. Even the ones he remembered trading with

Lois while under the pheromone spray’s effects hadn’t been real. He hadn’t been in control then, not really. It was as if someone else had been directing those kisses.

Now, however, each of his senses were alert. He could hear the rapid beating of her heart. He could smell her rose scented perfume. He could feel the way her arms encircled him, the way she pulled his head in closer to hers, the way her hands riffled through his hair. Now, he didn’t have to hold back his passion, his love. He could finally give himself over to her, fully, completely. He could show her just how much he loved her with his kisses.

Judging from the way she responded, Clark had the impression that she was feeling similar things. Never before had she kissed him with such passion, not even when they’d both been victims of Miranda’s spray. Those kisses had been more hungry than loving, more designed to turn him on than to show him how she felt.

When they finally broke from their kiss, Clark rested his forehead against Lois’.

“Wow,” she said.

“Yeah,” he agreed breathlessly.

“Who knew that mild-mannered Clark Kent was such a great kisser?” she said, cupping his cheek in her hand.

“Only for you,” he said in a soft voice. “But, maybe we should run that experiment again, just to be sure,” he teased.

Lois answered by locking her lips with his. All thought left Clark. He was aware only of Lois and the way that her lips caressed his. His heart was flying and he leaned forward, over Lois, so that she was laying back with her head on the arm of the couch. It was a struggle not to float above her and to remain completely grounded. It just felt unnatural not to float when he was feeling so great.

“I’d call that another successful experiment,” Lois said, some time later.

Clark nodded, at a loss for words. Slowly, he got up, so that Lois could sit up. When she was upright, he snaked an arm around her waist.

“Tonight was perfect,” he said.

“It really was,” Lois agreed, leaning against him. She yawned a little. “Sorry,” she apologized.

“It’s been a long day,” Clark said. “Why don’t we turn in for the night? Tomorrow we can do whatever you’d like, even if it’s just sleeping in and lounging around.”

“Okay,” Lois said.

They both rose from the couch and hugged warmly. Clark placed a kiss on Lois’ brow, cupping her cheek in his palm as he did so.

“Goodnight, Lois.”

“Goodnight, Clark.”

He watched her move into his bedroom before he made up the couch with the extra blankets and pillows he’d been keeping out ever since she’d started staying with him. Then he laid down and pulled the blankets over himself, the biggest, goofiest grin of his life on his face. He’d been on a date — a real date! — with Lois. And, better still, it had gone better than he could have ever imagined.

I love you, Lois, he thought with a happy, mental sigh.

Then he closed his eyes and waited for sleep to claim him. For once, he looked forward to the promise of what the morning would bring. He had the entire day to spend with Lois, doing whatever they wished. Lois. His girlfriend. The woman he was dating. The woman who, given enough time, he would ask to marry him. The woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, and raise a family with.

He heard Lois tossing and turning in his bed, most likely trying to find that perfect, comfortable position that even he, alien though he was, also sought out every night. After a moment, her movements lessened and he heard her breathing even out. Then,

and only then, would his mind slow down and allow sleep to wash over him.

For the first time in a long time, all of Clark's dreams were pleasant ones.

"Morning, Chief," Lois said as Perry passed by her desk.

Clark looked up from his computer screen, where he'd been intently conducting some research. "Morning, Perry."

"Can I speak to you two for a minute?" Perry asked, looking troubled.

A nervous flutter started in Clark's stomach. This could not possibly be good, he knew. But he nodded anyway.

"Sure," he said, speaking for the both of them.

Perry led them back to his office and gently shut the door behind them. Lois and Clark both opted for the red plaid couch in the room, as Perry sat on the edge of his desk, facing them. Perhaps he felt that it was less intimidating to not have his desk as a barrier between them. He didn't speak right away. Instead, he contemplated the carpet, as though looking for a way to say whatever it was that was on his mind. He cleared his throat, then finally spoke.

"I'm not sure how to go about saying this," he said slowly, "so I'm not going to beat around the bush. I'm just going to say it."

"Say what, Chief?" Clark asked.

"That I know about the two of you. That you two are... well... somewhat of an item now."

"How did you...?" Lois began to ask.

Perry gave half a laugh and a partial smile. "Nothing goes on in my newsroom that I don't know about."

"Yeah, but we never even..." Lois tried, searching for words.

"You didn't have to say or do anything," Perry said, again stepping in and cutting her off before she could finish, his hand raised slightly as he interrupted. "I could tell just from the way you two have been acting toward each other the last few days."

"It's not a problem if we date, is it, Chief?" Clark asked. It hadn't crossed his mind before now that it might actually be against the Planet's code of conduct to date a coworker.

"You tell me," Perry said, spreading his hands in an almost helpless looking gesture. "Can I assume that you two will continue to be completely professional?"

"Absolutely!" Clark said.

"Perry!" Lois said at the same moment, indignant.

"Look, Lois, you know I hate to ask," Perry said, hands up, almost as if warding off a blow. "But you also know that I have to keep the best interests of the paper in mind."

"This isn't going to be another Norcross and Judd," she said, steamrolling over Perry's explanation. "From what you've told me of them, they really weren't suited to the task of handling a professional life along with a personal one."

"Norcross and Judd?" Clark asked.

"Billy Norcross and Serena Judd. Two of the best damn reporters I'd ever had. Almost as good as the two of you," Perry explained. "They were partners, like the two of you, and started dating. When that went down the drain, they were never able to work together again. Just like that, the Planet's best reporting team at the time was destroyed." He snapped his fingers in emphasis.

"What Perry is leaving out is that Serena had a good reason for dumping Billy and breaking up their partnership," Lois added. "The way I hear it, he was playing her for a fool the whole time. He never told her about his secret families, from his two broken marriages. Personally, I don't blame her one bit for high-tailing it out of that relationship."

"It was one broken marriage and a former mistress," Perry corrected her. "But the real point is, I can't afford to sacrifice my best reporting team. Now, I can assign you two to different

partners if you feel like the pressures of dating and your work might be too much."

"Perry, we'll be fine," Lois assured him. "We're complete professionals. And besides, Clark and I have a different relationship than Norcross and Judd did. We've always been honest with one another. Right, Clark?" She looked to him for an answer.

Clark swallowed hard. "Uh...right."

"See?" she said, not noticing the slight hesitation that had been in his voice, bringing her gaze back to their boss. "We'll be fine."

"Okay," Perry said after a quiet moment of studying the two of them. "But the moment I see that this isn't working out in the Planet's favor, I'll have to separate you and either assign you different partners or send you solo. Got it?"

"Got it," Lois and Clark said together.

"Good. Now, go on. Get out of here. Find me a story."

"Can't say I expected that," Clark said once they were back in the bullpen.

Lois sighed. "I can't say that I didn't. Remember how I told you about Claude? The guy who slept with me and stole my story? Perry wound up firing him for that and told me that he never wanted to be in that position again. That's when I first heard the Norcross and Judd story. I think it was also the first time I'd heard him tell a story that didn't involve Elvis somehow."

"Well, like you said, we're not Norcross and Judd. And I am certainly not Claude. We'll be fine."

Until you find out that I have a secret life too, he thought unhappily.

"CK! Lois!" Jimmy called, racing toward them and calling out over the din of the bullpen.

"What's up, Jimmy?" Clark asked as they drew closer to him.

"Thought you might want to know, a couple of floaters washed up by the docks."

"Any IDs yet?" Lois asked.

Jimmy shook his head. "It just came over the police scanner."

"Thanks," Clark said, putting a hand on Jimmy's shoulder briefly. "We're on it."

"I'm coming too," Jimmy said as he grabbed his camera bag off his desk.

"Let's go then," Clark said, grabbing his coat and tugging it on as he moved.

Lois drove them to the dock in a manner that left even Clark white-knuckled. She pulled into the closest spot she could find and they all piled out of the Jeep, eager to get the story. Many of the other news outlets in the city had already arrived and more were pulling up even as they stepped foot in the cordoned off area. Lois and Clark split up, to cover more ground. Clark headed to the police officers and Lois to look for witnesses to the bodies washing up. Jimmy broke off to snap as many photos as he could.

"Geez, you caught this one, Keith?" Clark asked the officer in charge.

The lanky, young, blond cop turned to him and nodded. "Yeah."

"What can you tell me?" Clark asked, as he peered over at the bodies.

They were bloated and what was left of their skin was pasty white. In a few places, the nibbles of fish and other sea creatures had feasted down to the bone, exposing it to Clark's view. The clothes looked expensive — suits that had once been tailored to each of the men's bodies.

"Well," Detective Stone said, "we got a call about forty-five minutes ago." He double checked his watch. "More like an hour," he corrected himself. "The guy says he jogs the same path, rain or shine, year round. Anyway, he saw the bodies and thought they were just hurt. When he got closer, he realized they were dead

and called us from the payphone across the street at the seafood restaurant.” He pointed with two fingers pressed together at Dockside Delicacies.

“Mmm-hmm,” Clark said, jotting down notes, rapid-fire, into a small notepad that he kept in the breast pocket of his suit jacket.

“We haven’t had a chance to ID them yet,” Keith continued. “But, whoever they were, someone wanted them dead.”

“What makes you say that?” Clark asked, prodded for further details.

“Both were shot in the side of the head, execution style. It’s hard to see now because of the level of decay, but our forensics guy is sure.”

“Donny?” Clark asked.

“Yeah.”

Clark nodded. He was familiar with the man and knew he was always right about the manner of death. “What else can you give me?”

“Not much. They had no identification on them. No wallets. Nothing. Donny’s still working on a window for the time of death.”

“No wallets,” Clark repeated. “That’s definitely suspicious. Guys dressed in suits this expensive never leave home without a wallet full of cash and their trusty credit cards.”

“Exactly,” Keith said. “We’re working on a few theories. We won’t know more until we know who these guys used to be though.”

“Well, when you do know...”

Keith laughed. “Don’t worry. I’ve got your number.”

Clark chuckled. “Thanks.”

When he finally met back up with Lois and Jimmy, only the photographer was in good spirits. He’d been able to get a number of shots that he felt would be helpful in their investigation, and other good ones that Perry could use in the evening edition. Lois and Clark, however, were frustrated. There was simply not enough information yet to start the beginnings of their investigation. The best they had was that two unidentified men had washed up on shore.

For once, it would be nice if things could be a little easy, Clark thought as Lois fiddled with the radio while waiting at a red light.

She found the classic music station and Jimmy began to sing along to “Piano Man” until he realized that no one else was joining in with him. He broke off after four lines and went silent again, his face red with embarrassment. Clark heard him changing out the roll of film in his camera so that he would be ready to immediately process it when they got back to the office. He heard the *clink* of plastic on plastic as Jimmy dropped the roll in the camera bag along with the other spent film, then heard the man load a fresh roll into the camera and snap the compartment shut.

When they arrived back at the Planet, Clark immediately began a search through the recent missing persons list, hoping to strike it lucky and find a match to the two floaters. He was halfway through the list when Jimmy came over, several pieces of paper in his hand. He held them out so Clark could take them.

“CK? This came for you over the fax.”

“What is it?” Clark asked as he reached for the papers.

“Something from a Captain Gregory Marsh.”

“Oh! I’ve been waiting on those,” Clark said.

“Who’s Captain Marsh?” Lois asked, bringing him a cup of coffee. “Here. I thought we could both use a cup.”

“Thanks,” he said gratefully. He took a sip before continuing. To his delight, it was absolutely perfect. “Superman told me about Captain Marsh. He’s the one...I told you about the fishing boat, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“Superman promised him that we would help him find out

who had sabotaged his ship. Looks like he found the information about the men who offered to buy his business. Thanks, Jimmy. Hey...how much longer before the photos from the docks are ready?”

“Shouldn’t be more than an hour or two. I made them my top priority.”

“Great,” Clark said.

As Jimmy moved on, Clark studied the papers before him. “Nicholas Parsons and Brian Greenhorn,” he read aloud, scanning the page quickly. “Representatives of...the Magnus Corporation.”

“Magnus? Is that one of the shell companies that used to be linked to Lex Corp?” Lois asked.

Clark nodded. “It hasn’t been affiliated with them in three years, but, yeah.” He flipped to the next page and his mouth opened a little in shock.

“Is that...?” Lois asked, peering over his shoulder.

“He’s got a little more flesh here, but yeah,” Clark said, nodding.

There on the page, in a crude but unmistakable pencil drawing, was the image of one of the men that had been found washed up on shore. Clark flipped to the next page, only to find a similar drawing of the second man that had been found dead.

“Well, that makes our job a little easier,” Clark said with a sinking feeling in his gut.

“Why do I get the feeling the names Nicholas Parsons and Brian Greenhorn are about as real as the company they worked for?” Lois asked.

“Let’s find out, shall we?” Clark asked.

“Let’s hear it for Lois and Clark!” Perry exclaimed as the two reporters entered the bullpen, hand in hand.

A round of applause broke out from their co-workers. Lois and Clark both blushed and ducked their heads in acknowledgement. After a week of chasing the only lead they had on the two bodies that had been found, washed up on shore by the docks, they had finally found a connection to Intergang. With that connection, they had proven that Lex Corp had dealings with the notorious crime syndicate. The police had worked with Lois and Clark, finally finding the man responsible for killing the two floaters.

That had been two days ago, when they had finally seen Trevor Moore arrested. Word was now that he was willing to testify against Intergang and swear before the court that Luthor was the head of the organization. It had been Henderson that had made the call to both of their apartments, wanting to be the first to congratulate them and thank them for their help.

“Nice work, you two,” Perry said as they finally came within an arm’s reach of their boss. He lightly put a hand on each of their shoulders. “Now, I want you two on this when the trial starts. Got it? Unless, of course, you don’t feel up to it, Lois.”

“I’m okay, Chief. Really, I am,” she assured him.

She had broken down and told Perry everything about what had happened with Lex the day after the billionaire had assaulted her. Recently, she’d gotten the phone call that the District Attorney’s office was fast tracking the trial. Mr. Clemmons had always disliked Luthor, so it hadn’t surprised Clark in the least that he’d want to nail the case shut and have Luthor formally sentenced as soon as possible. In just a week and a half, Lois would testify in court.

Clark’s heart bled for Lois. He knew it had to be tearing her up inside, knowing that the public would soon be privy to the assault she’d endured. He wanted nothing more than to protect her from every harm the world could throw at her. Of course, he knew it was impossible, but that didn’t squash the desire to do so at all.

“You sure?” Perry prodded.

“Absolutely. I’m a complete professional, Perry.”

“Okay then,” the editor nodded. “If you change your mind, however...”

“Don’t worry. I won’t.”

“You’ve got one heck of a woman there, Clark,” Perry said, shaking his head but smiling with approval.

“Don’t I know it,” Clark said, returning the smile.

Perry patted Clark’s shoulder in response, then moved on, barking for Jimmy. Clark turned to Lois.

“Feels good,” he said. “Putting the final nail in Luthor’s coffin, I mean.”

“It does.” She sighed.

“What?”

“I just wish I’d listened to you all along, is all.” She sighed again, then took a deep breath that she let out slowly. “Anyway, I’m just so thankful that I’ve had you by my side this whole time. I’m not sure I could have made it through the last week and a half without you.”

“I’ll always be there for you, Lois. I promise you that. I’ll be right there, by your side, the whole time the trial lasts.”

“I know. I was thinking though. I think I might try...going back to my place for the night. It’s not that I haven’t appreciated or loved being at your place this whole time. But I feel like...like it’s something I *need* to do. I can’t hide out forever. At some point, I have to resume living at my apartment. After all, I *do* pay enough in rent.” She smiled at him as she cracked her joke.

“Are you sure? You know I’m not kicking you out or anything.”

She nodded. “I know. But I’m tired of being scared. If Lex was going to go after me, he would have done so already, don’t you think?”

Clark said nothing. He wasn’t sure he agreed with Lois’ reasoning.

“I’ll be fine, Clark. You don’t need to babysit me forever.” She touched a hand to his chest.

“I know...” he began to protest.

The truth was, he feared for Lois’ safety. But he also knew that he would miss her terribly. Despite the difficulties involved in keeping Superman’s true identity under wraps, he would miss having her sharing his apartment with him. He loved cooking her breakfast in the morning. He loved settling down on the couch at night to sleep, knowing that Lois was snuggled down into the sheets and pillows of his bed. He loved cuddling up on the couch with her after work, watching television or going through research together, without worrying about how late it was getting.

Lois smiled at him. “Are you going to miss me?” she guessed.

Clark blushed and dipped his head in a nod. “Yeah, what gave it away?”

“Oh,” she said, smiling wider and playing with his tie, “just the look on your face. Like someone ran over your puppy with a tractor trailer.”

“Is it such a crime for a man to enjoy having his girlfriend living with him?” he asked sweetly.

That made her laugh lightly. “No. It makes him cute.”

“That’s me,” Clark said playfully. “Mr. Adorable.”

“I said ‘cute,’ not ‘adorable,’” she corrected him.

“I know. I was fixing your mistake,” he joked back.

“You are *always* editing my copy,” she mock complained.

“I know.” He shot her a huge grin.

The rest of the day dragged by. It was a slow news day in general. Lois and Clark spent most of the morning doing research for some of the stories they were working on, as well as organizing all their research on Lex Luthor, in preparation for his trial as a part of Intergang. That way, once the trial completed, they would be that much closer to writing up their expose on him. Clark did most of the work on that, knowing that it was still

sometimes difficult for Lois to focus on Luthor for too long a stretch of time.

They took a long lunch just after noon, extending their stay at the quaint corner deli as they talked about their next date. They finally agreed on bowling and mini golf at the new indoor recreation center in the heart of midtown. The place also boasted several restaurants, shops, and even an indoor ice skating rink for year round fun.

Lois’ pager began to beep as they were picking up and getting ready to head back in to the office. She glanced at it after digging through her purse to find it. She looked up apologetically as she tossed it back in to the depths of her purse.

“That’s Jimmy. I’ll be right back.”

She headed out of the deli to where the closest pay phone was. Clark watched her through the floor to ceiling windows, just for a moment, before he resumed his task of clearing the tiny round table they had been sharing. He took the orange plastic tray they had both used to the trash and allowed the contents to slide into the opening of the garbage container, then placed the tray on the shelf above it. Figuring he had a minute, he ducked into the men’s room to use the facilities and wash up. By the time he was done, Lois was hanging up the phone.

“What does he have for us?” Clark asked as he exited the deli.

“Shooting.” Her breath misted in the frigid air as she exhaled. “Where?”

“Prescott and Harvard,” she replied.

Clark’s eyebrows crawled upward to his hairline. “Rich area,” he observed.

“That’s what I said,” she said with a nod. She got to the curb and whistled sharply as she waved. A passing cab stopped short and she opened the door. “After you,” she told Clark.

Clark good-naturedly rolled his eyes, but he got into the cab anyway.

“Where to?” the cabbie asked, peering at them through the rearview mirror.

“Three-thirty-one Prescott, at the corner of Harvard,” Lois said as she pulled the door closed.

“You got it.” He had to half yell over the Reggae music blasting from his radio.

Clark held on as the cabbie put the gas pedal to the floor and began to swerve through the usual midday traffic of the city. Once, he came inches from flattening a bike messenger, and Clark couldn’t be certain that a pigeon with ill timing had actually escaped the vehicle’s path as it swooped down to peck at something in the roadway. He kept one arm safely curled around Lois’ waist in an attempt to keep her from flying all around the back seat. Both breathed a sigh of relief when they finally arrived at their destination. Clark paid the fare, giving a modest tip. He usually gave more, but he didn’t usually feel like his life was in danger despite his invulnerability.

“Here we are,” he said, stating the obvious. He saw Henderson and waved to get his attention.

“Hey, Kent,” the inspector said by way of a greeting.

“Hey,” Clark replied.

“Must be a slow day if they called you two in for this one,” Henderson said.

“What makes you say that?” Lois asked.

Henderson shrugged. “It’s a pretty standard murder-suicide. Nothing out of the ordinary.” His walkie-talkie crackled to life. He pulled it from his belt. “Go on up. Third floor. Number five.” Then, into the walkie-talkie, “Say again, Steve?”

Lois and Clark entered the building, grateful to be out of the cold, but dreading what they would find. They’d both covered their share of shootings before, but there was something particularly gruesome about murder-suicide scenes. For Clark, he couldn’t imagine ever wanting to take his own life. How could

someone decide to do that? And worse, how could they make the decision to take others with them as they exited this life?

The right apartment wasn't difficult to find at all. Several police officers were in the hallway outside the door, shooing away passersby, most trying to peek in to satisfy their own morbid curiosity. But one of the policewomen knew Lois and Clark well from several other recent stories, and she waved them through the barricade. They nodded their head in thanks to her as they passed by.

They entered into the apartment, where a reporter for LNN was already on the scene. At first glance, the apartment was cheery and bright — a pale pink living room with cream colored chairs and couches alongside chestnut colored bookshelves, tables, and coffee table. A child's toys lay scattered about the floor, except for one neat area where a blanket had been laid out for a tea party, several baby dolls and stuffed animals all sitting in wait. Everything looked perfectly normal, except for the police activity and the bodies.

The police were already packing up their gear. Two of them were zipping a body bag up around a woman's unmoving form. A third removed the handgun from where it had fallen by her right hand. Sticky blood clung to it from the pool where it had leaked out of the woman's head. Nearby, a blonde headed little girl — probably five by the look of her — lay chest down on the floor, her blank eyes wide and staring. Her face seemed to be a permanent mask of shock. A black bear doll was still clutched in the crook of her arm.

And against the wall, furthest from the bodies, a man was on his knees, his head in his hands. He was unashamedly weeping. "My girl. My baby girl," he sobbed, over and over. "Caroline. Oh, God. Why?"

Clark saw Lois visibly shudder at the man's grief. He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Then he moved on to speak with one of the officers, to get the facts on what had happened. He saw Lois move to speak with the woman who was standing by the distraught father. He guessed she was a family member or a neighbor.

Henderson had been right. It was a straightforward murder-suicide. The wife had been caught having an affair with the husband's best friend. The husband had claimed to have confronted her with the knowledge and had told her that he'd wanted a divorce. He'd gone to work that day the same as any other day, until the neighbor had called saying she'd heard gunshots that had sounded like they'd come from across the hall. She'd tried knocking but there had been no response. The husband had come home to find his daughter and wife both dead from gunshot wounds to the head.

Lois and Clark both left the apartment with heavy hearts. It would be a simple story to write up, but the image of that little girl laying there would stay with them both for a long time to come. For Clark, he knew he would always remember the way she looked, right down to her pink sweatshirt paired with a sparkly purple tutu and jeans. He also knew that, given time, he would be able to shove aside that image, as he had always been forced to do, both as a reporter and a superhero.

Clark handled writing the article, while Lois handled the one for the car accident they witnessed on the way back to the office. At last, the day finally ended, leaving them free to go home. Both were still in quiet moods, so they opted for a quick burger at their favorite diner before Clark saw Lois to her apartment. After checking it out thoroughly, he deemed it free from threats. He stayed for a short while, then kissed Lois goodnight and took his leave.

Back at his apartment, however, he felt profoundly lonely. He missed having Lois there. He missed the way she made the place light up with her laughter and her smile. He missed snuggling on the couch with her. He missed kissing her goodnight moments

before they closed their eyes and went to sleep. To give himself something to do, he made a slow patrol over the city. But it seemed that the inactivity of the day had seeped into the darkness of the night. Metropolis was quiet, almost sleepy in a way. He circled around Lois' building several times, carefully scanning the area, but all he saw was the occasional neighbor that he recognized either returning home for the evening or popping out to smoke or walk their dog.

He made a second patrol, being too unwilling to face the lonely silence of his apartment. But nothing had changed since he'd finished the last patrol, and he found himself flying back to Lois' building. After a few moments of indecision, he allowed himself to descend from the clouds to the level of her window. Her lights were still on, or he would never have ventured to disturb her. Her heavy curtains were pulled back, allowing him to see in, though the view was obscured by a second set of curtains — these sheer white. He could see that she was watching television, so he gently rapped his knuckles against the glass.

She was up in an instant, though he judged by the way she moved that he'd startled her. She came to the window, peeked out, then undid the locks and opened the window when she saw who it was.

"Superman!" she said, surprised.

"Hi, Lois. I hope you don't mind my stopping by."

"Not at all. Come in, please."

Clark entered through the open window. "I was in the neighborhood, and thought I'd make sure things were quiet around here. Are you okay?"

"Did Clark send you to check on me?"

"No," he said, crossing his arms before his chest in his usual stance. "But, I do know that you've been staying with him, up until now. I thought..." He shrugged as his voice tailed off.

"That I might sleep better, knowing you've checked things out?" Lois suggested, leaning against her couch.

"Well, I wouldn't quite put it that way," he replied with a reserved smile.

Lois smiled in return. "Well, I will. Sleep better, that is. Thanks."

"So, everything's been okay here?"

"Perfectly boring," she confirmed.

"Good."

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked, heading to her coffeemaker.

"No, but thanks," Clark replied. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't allow himself to stay too long, lest the mask of Superman give way to expose the man beneath the Spandex. "I really should be going."

"Never a dull moment for you, huh?" Lois asked, nodding understandingly. "I'm fine here, really. But I appreciate your stopping by. It means a lot, knowing you're looking out for me."

Help! He's having a heart attack!

Clark's head snapped toward the window as the cry for help reached him.

"Go," Lois said with a smile, patting his shoulder in a friendly manner.

Clark nodded. "Goodnight, Lois."

"Goodnight, Superman."

He quickly ducked back out into the night and flew off toward the call for help. It was coming from only a few blocks away, and he was there in seconds. An older gentleman had collapsed to the ground while unloading groceries from his car. Clark gently picked him up and flew him to the hospital, while the man's wife promised to follow in the car.

All in all, the rescue took less than fifteen minutes. Afterward, Clark headed home, feeling useless in the still and quiet night. He showered at a leisurely, human pace, then flopped onto his couch, already bored. He flicked through the television

channels, only to find nothing of interest. He turned it back off and grabbed the book he was in the middle of reading — the one Lois had given him for his birthday. He wandered off to the bedroom, striped out of his clothes down to his boxers, and crawled into his bed for the first time in almost two weeks.

At once he was in Heaven as well as even more lonely than before. The entire bed smelled of Lois — that wonderfully arousing mix of lavender soap and cucumber perfume, coconut shampoo and conditioner, coffee and mint toothpaste, as well as the normal, unique scent that was all her own beneath all the superficial scents she surrounded herself with. Clark breathed in deeply, savoring it, though his heart ached as he missed Lois even more.

He managed to read a few pages, but his mind kept wandering back to Lois. He was still partially in disbelief that she was his girlfriend. Despite the unconventional start to their relationship, things had been going very well. Clark had never been happier. After a while, he put the book aside and reached for the phone on his bedside table.

“Hello?” came Lois’ voice over the earpiece.

“Hey, Lois. It’s me.”

“Hi, Clark.” He could hear the smile in her voice. “What’s up?”

“Nothing. Just wanted to hear your voice.”

“You must be a mind reader. I was just thinking of calling you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I guess I’ve gotten used to *not* being all alone at night,” she said.

“Me too.”

“I’d forgotten how lonely it can get.”

Is that an invitation to come over? he wondered.

“Me too,” he repeated. “Is everything all right over there?”

“Quiet as a mouse,” she replied.

“Glad to hear it.”

“Clark?”

“Hmm?”

“I miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

Just say the word and I’ll be on my way.

“I know this is going to sound stupid, but I’m so glad that... well... that we’re together. As a couple, I mean.”

His smile crept across his face, going from ear to ear. “It’s not stupid, Lois. I’m glad that we’re together too. You have no idea how happy I’ve been, ever since you said ‘yes’ to our first date.”

“Well, it’s not *that* hard to imagine,” she teased him. “You’ve been walking around with the biggest grin on the planet since our first date.”

Clark chuckled. “I guess that’s probably true.”

“Hey, Clark?” she asked after a brief silence fell.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“Thanks for calling,” she said after a slight hesitation. “I think I’m going to turn in for the night.”

“Me too,” Clark said, his heart falling a little when she didn’t ask him to come back over to her place. “Goodnight, Lois. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Clark.”

I love you, he mentally added, as the phone clicked and the line went dead.

With thoughts of Lois in his mind, he finally drifted off to sleep.

Several weeks went by. Lois and Clark grew closer every day. Clark also became happier as time passed, as they continued to go on dates, sometimes staying at the other’s apartment until late in the night, with Clark always escorting Lois home. Most of the time, they went out, trying new restaurants, revisiting old

favorites, seeing movies, touring museums, even going out to dance at one of the downtown clubs one night. Some nights, they stayed in, watching old movies, playing board games, cooking together — though it was mostly Clark doing the cooking and Lois mostly standing back in terror — even just sitting around and talking about everything and anything.

Even work was going well. Slow news days were rare, almost non-existent, for those weeks. He and Lois constantly had some event to cover, or some case to investigate further. It kept them both busy, but they both loved to dive in and undercover the truth. At the very least, it helped make the work days fly by, which was always welcome, though a few times their research lasted long into the night, cutting into their date time. Still, it felt good to be helping people in whatever capacity they could.

The Luthor trial had gone smoothly enough, at least as far as the charge of rape had been concerned. He hadn’t yet taken the stand for his involvement in running Intergang. Clark had been impressed with Lois and how she’d handled herself during the trial. She’d been strong the entire time, and had fearlessly testified against him when she was called to the stand. She had, however, needed to fight back tears as she spoke about what had happened to her, nor could she meet the billionaire’s eyes while she testified. Her gaze had been studiously trained on whichever attorney had been questioning her, though Clark had noticed that she’d snuck a look or two in his direction, which she admitted later had been to take strength from him.

What Clark hadn’t counted on was how respectfully most of the city’s news outlets treated the trial. A few of the seedier ones blasted Lois for bringing charges against the perceived philanthropist, but most were respectful of her claims. One or two had heralded her as a champion amongst the citizens of Metropolis for standing up for herself against such a powerful and wealthy man. She had brushed off the more scathing articles, knowing that once Luthor was tried for his involvement in Intergang, the world’s view of the third richest man on the planet would change. Clark had been proud of her for that.

Neither one, however, had taken well to Luthor’s sentence for his assault of Lois. The judge — one of Clark’s least favorite, if he were to be honest — had given Luthor a lighter than usual sentence for his crime. He’d said that, while he was sympathetic to what Lois had endured, Luthor could not be held one hundred percent responsible for his actions because of the pheromone spray. Both had been outraged, and only took comfort from the knowledge that, soon enough, Luthor would be on trial as the head of the city’s most powerful crime organization, and that he would not escape the justice of a harsh prison sentence. Still, it had taken a couple of weeks for them both to stop feeling quite so livid over the ruling.

All in all, though, everything was perfect in Clark’s world.

“Hey,” Clark said as he returned to Lois’ desk from checking the fax machine. He’d already checked it five times, hoping for the police report they needed for their most recent investigation. “You want to go out tonight?”

“I’d love to. But Lucy’s coming in, remember?”

“Oh, right,” Clark said. He’d nearly forgotten that Lois’ sister was coming in for a visit. “What time?”

“Around six-thirty is what she’s shooting for,” Lois replied, sipping from her coffee cup.

“Well, how about a quick bite of pizza on the way to your place then?” he offered. “I’ll file the bank robbery story and tomorrow we can work on the Weston arrest since the police report hasn’t come in yet.”

“Really? Henderson’s usually great about that.”

“He must be swamped. Weston’s the superintendent of the schools. He’s probably got a lot on his plate today. If it’s not in by the morning, I’ll call him again. It’s getting late.”

Lois nodded. “I’ll send Perry what we already have on it and

let him know we'll follow up."

"Great." He started back to his own desk.

"Hey, Clark?"

Clark stopped in his tracks and looked back. "Yeah?"

"Dinner's on me tonight."

"Lois, no. You don't have to..."

"I want to," she said, overriding his protest. "We're equals in this relationship, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

"So far, you haven't let me pay for anything. Not even a soda from the vending machine. It's not fair to you."

"Lois, I really don't mind. I *like* doing stuff for you."

"I know, and it's sweet. But I *want* to be able to do stuff for you too."

Clark had no rebuttal for that. He could argue that it was traditional for the man to pay for dates, but he knew she'd just argue sexism in society at large. A pizza dinner wasn't worth getting her aggravated, so he just nodded.

"Okay," he relented. "If you insist."

"I do," she replied.

"But we'll never get out of here if we don't get our stories in to Perry," he reminded her.

She laughed. "That much is true. Go, write up yours. I'm halfway done with our notes on the Weston arrest, so it shouldn't take me long to bang out the article."

"Sounds good," Clark said, then finished crossing the aisle to his desk.

He sat, cracked his knuckles, then laid his fingertips to the keys. For a moment, he sat stone-still in thought, then he began to type as the article took shape in his mind. He easily typed up the article, then wrote up a separate sidebar piece focusing on the three men and one woman that the bank robbers had held hostage. All four had come through the ordeal shaken but unscathed, luckily. He threw in a few choice Superman quotes for good measure, then sent both pieces off to Perry.

From the look of things, Lois wasn't quite ready to leave, so he began to organize and type up notes on another story. He was just getting into the meat of it when Lois tapped him on the shoulder. He'd been so engrossed in what he'd been doing that he hadn't noticed her approaching his desk.

"Hey. Ready to go?" she asked.

Clark blinked rapidly as he pulled himself out of his work. "Huh? Oh. Yeah. Just a second." He finished typing the sentence he'd been in the middle of writing. "There." He saved the document, then powered down his computer. "All set. Off to Tommy's."

They walked out together, arm in arm, as they did most nights. Clark saw Cat roll her eyes. He knew she was *still* fuming over Clark choosing Lois to date. He also saw Jimmy give him a sly thumbs up. He shot Jimmy back a smile that he wasn't sure if his friend caught or not.

The weather had turned milder, now that April was half over. Still, they both zipped their coats up against the cooling night air once they reached the lobby. It had started to drizzle, so Clark hailed them a cab and gave the cabbie the address. With the rain, it made more sense for them to go directly to Lois' place and have the pizza delivered. Clark snaked his arm around Lois and pulled her close as they made their slow way through the rush hour traffic.

Clark called in their pizza order when they reached Lois' apartment. Lois changed while Clark was on the phone, coming back in soft yoga pants and a thin, long sleeved shirt. She curled up on the couch, waiting for Clark. He hung up and joined her.

"It should be about a half hour," he informed her.

"Good," she said, stifling a yawn.

"Tired?"

"Yeah."

"You've been tired a lot lately. Are you feeling okay?" Clark asked, concerned.

"I'm fine," she said, waving away his concern. "We've been working pretty hard lately. I guess I need a day off worse than I thought I did. Don't worry. I'll sleep in tomorrow and be good as new. You can't tell me you haven't been tired as well."

Clark nodded. The truth was, he *was* tired, but not to the same degree as Lois. He simply didn't need as much sleep as a regular person, and the sun helped to energize him anyway. Still, he wouldn't mind the extra sleep he'd be able to get in the morning, assuming there was no need for Superman.

"Are you sure you don't want to come over tomorrow?" she asked.

"No. You should spend time together — just you and Lucy. It's been, what? Five months?"

"Thereabout," Lois said with a shrug. "It's her own fault, running off to Montana with some guy she barely knew." She sighed. "I wish she would just settle down and find a great guy. Like I did."

Clark smiled. "Well, you said she's going back to school, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's a good start," he said in an encouraging tone.

"I just hope she stays put long enough to finish it this time," Lois said. "I love my sister, Clark, but it frustrates me to see her making mistake after mistake."

"I know," he said in a lowered tone. "But there's not much you can do. She needs a support system. And, if you and I are the only ones to supply that, so be it. We'll be there for her."

Lois smiled. "I like the sound of that — 'we.' And you're right, of course." She yawned again and snuggled deep into his side.

Not three minutes later, she was sound asleep. Clark let her be. It still amazed him, how wholly she trusted him, how completely comfortable she was with him. He wondered how badly he would shatter that trust, once he came clean about his secret. He wasn't ready to share — not yet — but he knew he would have to sometime soon. He loved her, and he loathed keeping secrets from her.

He finally had to wake her when the pizza arrived. She yawned and blinked rapidly as she woke, then stretched as Clark went to answer the door.

"Sorry," she apologized.

"It's okay," Clark assured her. "I'm glad you were able to get in a short nap. You and I both need what sleep we can get right now." His eyes followed her as Lois went to the kitchen to retrieve plates, drinks, and napkins as he spoke. "Feel any better?"

"A little," she admitted.

"Good." He opened the door to find Wally, their regular delivery boy. "Hey, Wally."

"Hey, Mr. Kent," the pimply college-age boy said. "How's it going?"

"Great, you?"

"Could be better," he admitted as Clark handed him the money. "Biology one-oh-one is kicking my butt."

"Sorry to hear it," Clark said.

Wally shrugged. "At least it's my last science class. Anyway, I have a ton of other deliveries to make. See you around."

"Night, Wally," Clark said. He watched him go, then closed the door. "Hungry?" he asked Lois.

"Starving," she confirmed.

She wasn't lying. She matched Clark, slice for slice, as they talked. The small pizza was soon a distant memory embodied in the garlicky, oily smell in the air. Lois lit a flowery scented candle while Clark brought the empty box down to the garbage chute.

“Lucy’s going to be a little late,” Lois said as Clark returned. “Want to stay for a bit?”

“Sure.” He sat on the couch and pulled her close. “What do you want to do while we wait?”

“Actually,” she said slowly, “I wanted to ask you something.”

Something about her tone of voice made Clark very nervous. Perhaps it was how unsure of herself that she sounded. Perhaps it was the drop in her volume, to a level just above a whisper. Perhaps it was the way she pulled out of his embrace to look at him, but then couldn’t — or wouldn’t — meet his gaze.

He swallowed hard before answering. “You can ask me anything.”

“Well...I was thinking...about...you know...that night we were under the pheromone spray.”

Clark nodded. “Okay.”

“You said something, just before we fell asleep.”

“I did?”

Did I really say that out loud? he wondered. *Or was it only in my mind?*

Lois nodded. “You said that you lo...”

“Loved you,” he finished for her.

Again, she nodded, still looking at the couch cushions rather than him. “Was it true? Or was it the pheromones talking? I mean, we’ve been together almost two months and I know that you might think it’s fast and all. But I’ve been thinking about it for a while now. Only I didn’t have the guts to ask because maybe you weren’t comfortable, but I feel like I need to know if there’s a future here.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Clark said, putting his hands up in a “hit the brakes” kind of gesture. He wasn’t sure if she’d even taken a breath during her babbling. “Slow down.”

Her face fell. “Oh. I knew I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Clark said. “I meant, ‘slow down’ so we can talk about this.”

She peeked up at him, hopeful. “Okay,” she said in a much calmer voice.

Clark took a deep breath before continuing. “I remember what I said.” He inwardly cringed. Of course she already knew that. He’d filled in her statement before.

“And?” she prodded.

“And...it wasn’t the pheromones, Lois.”

“It...it wasn’t?” she asked, finally meeting his eyes with her own and giving him a slight, hopeful smile.

“I mean it. Lois, you have to understand...I’ve been in love with you since the moment I met you. Remember when you told me not to fall for you? That you didn’t have time for it?”

“I remember,” she said with a nod, “though I wish I hadn’t been so stupid back then.”

“You weren’t stupid, Lois. You were protecting yourself. Anyway, you might as well have been telling the Titanic not to hit that iceberg...after it was already sunk. I’d already fallen that hard for you.”

“Really?” She sounded only mildly surprised.

“Really. I love you, Lois. Every day since that first day. Every day for the rest of my life.” He smiled at her. “You have no idea how much light, warmth, and happiness you’ve brought into my life, ever since the day we met. Even more so now, now that we’re a couple.”

Lois reached out toward him and captured his body in a hug. “I love you too, Clark.”

Clark’s heart began to race. Had he heard her correctly? She, the woman of his dreams, returned the eternal love that blazed in his heart?

“You do?”

“Of course I do. Why do you think I wanted to know how you felt, lunkhead?”

Clark chuckled. “Lunkhead?”

Lois nodded. “Lunkhead,” she confirmed for him. “Someone who’s just been told that his girlfriend loves him, but hasn’t yet taken the opportunity to kiss her.”

Clark’s eyes slid shut as his smile broadened and he moved in closer to rectify that problem. “My mistake,” he murmured, half a second before their lips touched.

“I love you,” Lois said between their kisses, her voice a feathery whisper.

“I love *you*,” he replied, his voice betraying his hunger for her lips.

When they were forced to break for air, they merely held on to one another, as if they were adrift in a storm and the other was their only safety. But they both had grins on their faces. Clark kissed Lois’ brow.

“I have been waiting *so* long to be able to tell you that,” he said. “It’s been so hard to keep it inside all this time.”

“Why didn’t you? I mean, we’ve been dating for nearly two months.”

“I know,” he said, dipping his head in a single nod. “But, I guess I was afraid. I didn’t know how you’d react. I didn’t know if you felt the way I do. I didn’t know if it was too soon...if I might have scared you off. I didn’t want to seem like I was pressuring you either...that I was asking for...I don’t know...some kind of commitment or demand for you to return the feelings. Maybe it was stupid of me. Maybe I should have been more upfront with my feelings. This is all new to me, Lois. I’ve never loved someone before.”

“You...you haven’t? Not even a little?” she asked, surprised.

“Not even a little,” he assured her. He knew he’d told her before, when he’d admitted his previously virgin state, that he’d never been in love, but her voice had been so small and meek sounding that he knew she needed to hear it again. “There’s never been another and there never will be.”

“It’s funny,” Lois said after a moment, as a smile crept across her features. “I’ve dated. I’ve thought I was in love before. I’ve even slept with people to try to make the relationship work. But being with you...it’s made me realize...those other guys...I didn’t love them. Not really. Not the way I love you.”

A knock sounded at the door. Lois shot a dagger look at it. Clark knew she hated the interruption, so he looked to her to see if he should answer it.

“Lois? It’s Lucy,” came the muted voice from the other side of the thick wood. “Are you home? You should be. I called you earlier.”

Clark stood and went to answer the door, Lois trailing him.

“Hi, Lucy,” Lois said as the door swung open to reveal Lucy standing in the hallway, a couple of suitcases on the floor beside her.

“Hi, sis!” Lucy said energetically. “And you are...?”

“Clark,” Clark replied, holding a hand out, which she took and shook.

“Oh! Hi!” she said, though in a guarded manner. “So, you’re the guy my sister’s always talking about.” She stepped into the room. Clark grabbed her bags for her, pretending to struggle a bit.

“You talk about me?” he asked, enjoying the way Lois squirmed.

“Well, at first she *complained* about you,” Lucy said, flopping down, cross-legged, on the couch. “Then, all of a sudden, she was raving about her best friend. Now...well, even that’s changed,” she said cryptically.

“He already knows that I love him,” Lois said, sitting down next to her sister.

“About time,” Lucy snorted with mock distaste. “She’s been nuts over you for approximately forever.”

“She has?” Clark asked, thoroughly surprised.

Lucy nodded. “Oh, God. You should have heard the way she’d talk about you. ‘Clark and I went to investigate this guy

and you should have *seen* the way he handled things. He's *such* a great person to deal with skittish sources.' Or 'Clark brought in the *best* croissants. He's just the *best* that way.'" She looked over and grinned wolfishly at her sister. "Right, sis?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "I guess, maybe, it was a little obvious."

"To Lucy, at least," Clark said in mock complaint. "I had to wait until tonight for all the gushing."

"Watch it, Farm Boy," Lois said with a grin, her finger raised as though in warning. "I can still take it all back."

Clark chuckled. "Unless you have a time machine stashed someplace..." He shrugged. "Anyway, I should probably go. You two should spend some time together. I know Lois has been looking forward to your arrival, Lucy."

Lucy nodded. "I'm sure we'll be crossing paths again."

"I look forward to it," Clark said truthfully. He really *did* want to get to know the woman who would one day — he hoped — be his sister-in-law.

"You don't *have* to go, you know," Lois said.

"It's okay. Really. I want you two to be able to spend some time together. I'll call you tomorrow night, okay?"

"Okay," she said, rising from the couch as he got up from his own seat. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too."

"I love you."

"And I love you," he replied. He leaned in and kissed her deeply, though he was painfully aware of Lucy's attempt to look away and give them a moment of privacy. Too soon, he pulled away from her. "Goodnight, Lois."

"Night, Clark."

"Goodnight, Lucy. It was nice meeting you, brief as it was."

"You too. We'll all do dinner some night," she replied.

"Sounds like a plan."

Clark grabbed his jacket, tucking it into the crook of his left arm and left Lois' apartment. Once he was outside of the building, he found an empty alleyway and changed into the flashy blue and red of his Superman costume. A quick patrol of the city would give him something to do and peace of mind that all was well in the place he proudly called his home.

As if on cue, he heard a call for help. He took off like a shot, pausing once he was above Lois' building for a brief couple of heartbeats to locate the direction the cry had come from. A second later, it was repeated and he was on his way across town to where an older woman was being mugged at knife point. Clark easily disarmed the man and turned him over to the local police department. The woman had suffered a few deep lacerations to her arm, so Clark brought her to the closest emergency room to have the wounds cleaned and stitched closed. Then he tended to a car fire, in which, luckily, no one had been hurt. He extinguished the blaze with one prolonged blast of super breath, moved the vehicle to the side of the road where it would be out of the way, then brought that family to the hospital as well, in case they had inhaled smoke.

After that, he returned back to his apartment and called his parents. It had been a few days since he'd last gotten an opportunity to do so, and it was good to catch up with them. He lingered on the phone, prolonging the inevitable return of silence to his apartment. But finally he ran out of things to talk about. He climbed into bed with a book and soon fell asleep, only to spend the night dreaming about Lois.

"Hi there," Lois said as Clark made his way to his desk, a few days later.

"Hi," he said, pausing to give her a quick peck on the lips.

"You're late," Lois observed.

Clark checked his watch. "Only by five minutes." All things considered, he thought being late by only five minutes was pretty good. That apartment fire had been brutal. He'd been at the scene

nearly three hours, between rescuing people, quenching the blaze, recovering those who hadn't made it, and giving statements to the press. "It was worth it though. I snagged an exclusive with Superman about that fire."

Lois nodded. "That was nice of him."

Clark shrugged. "It's good to have friends," he said, making it no big deal.

It's even better when you have firsthand knowledge of the story, he thought with a mental grin.

"I told Perry you'd be in late, that you'd called and said you'd grabbed the story. How was it?"

He'd called her on the way in, once Superman had officially left the scene.

"Bad," Clark said. "Superman said that he'd counted twenty dead."

"Oh, God," Lois breathed, horrified.

Clark nodded. "The vast majority of the residents escaped, but at least half of them had severe and/or critical injuries. It's so bad they had to divert some of the least severe cases from Metropolis General's burn unit to others."

"What caused it? Do we know yet?"

"The fire chief I spoke with said it appeared to be arson."

"Who would do a thing like that?" Lois wondered.

Clark shrugged. "I don't know. But he also said it appeared to have been started in or near the landlord's apartment."

"Either someone had an axe to grind with him, or he's the landlord from hell," Lois supplied.

"I don't know," Clark said with a sad shake of his head.

"Anyway, did I miss anything here?"

"Same old same old," she said, though he caught some reservation in her voice.

"Everything okay?" he asked. "I mean, with you?"

"I'm fine," she said, but he didn't quite believe her. Something was off with the tone of her voice.

"Are you sure?"

Lois nodded. "Just...have a lot on my mind, that's all."

"Lucy driving you nuts?" he guessed.

"A little, but it's not so bad...yet," she said. "She's only been in town for five days. She's looking for a place of her own, but so far every place in her price range is a dump."

"Do you want me to keep my ears open?" Clark offered.

Lois shrugged. "If you want. I told Henry to keep me posted if anything comes across the classifieds desk."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Good idea."

He retreated to his desk as Lois' phone rang. While he waited for his computer to turn on, he watched her worry a pencil eraser with her teeth as she listened to whatever it was that Bobby Bigmouth had called to tell her. Clark knew something was wrong, and it was driving him crazy not knowing what it was that was bothering Lois. Had he done something to offend her? He hadn't even seen her the day before. She'd spent the whole day with Lucy once again. He hadn't even had a chance to talk to her on the phone, as the two sisters had planned on a late movie.

For a while, he distractedly worked on the fire story. He knew the finished product wasn't very good. Perry was going to be angry with him if he didn't whip the article into something usable, and soon. He sighed and began the painstaking process of editing, but he couldn't focus. Stretching, he stood and made his way over to the break area for a cup of coffee and a donut. He made two cups of coffee — one for himself and one for Lois. He didn't see any donuts that she liked, so he ate his while he made his way back to where their desks were.

"Coffee break?" he asked as he rounded her desk and placed the mug before her.

"Oh, uh...thanks," she said, taking what looked to be an obligatory sip.

"Lois, what's going on? I know something's bothering you. I

want to help, if I can,” he said gently, sitting on the edge of her desk.

Lois sighed heavily, a sound that made Clark’s heart sink. “Can’t it wait, Clark?”

“That’s up to you. But, the way I see it, why carry... whatever it is... around, alone, all day, if there’s a chance that I can help now?”

She chewed her lower lip in indecision. Finally, after what felt like a small lifetime, she shook her head. “Not here.” She glanced around the bullpen. “Maybe you’re right though. Maybe I should just... you know... get it out in the open. Can we talk in the conference room?”

“Sure,” Clark said, though the way Lois had spoken now had him feeling apprehensive. “After you,” he added, sweeping his hand before him in a show of false confidence.

She nodded and grabbed her purse. That was odd, Clark knew. She never took that with her unless they were heading out to a story. A knot formed deep in his stomach. Things were getting stranger and more ominous by the second. She didn’t even take her coffee with her. She almost never left that behind, unless it was a particularly bad cup. And Clark knew he’d made it exactly to her liking. She always drank the coffee he made her, and often hinted that a second cup would be more than welcome.

Together, they walked to the conference room, Lois leading the way and Clark trailing. Worry weighed him down, though he kept his face meticulously neutral. He waved off Jimmy’s advance as the man came to either tell them something or ask them about something. Luckily, the younger man took the subtle hint, veered off his chosen path, and went on to do something else entirely different.

“Lois,” Clark said, as they entered the conference room. He shut the door gently behind them. “What’s going on? Is something wrong? Did I do something wrong?”

She didn’t answer right away. She merely gazed out of the large glass windows and into the bullpen at large.

“Because if I did,” Clark continued, unsure of if he should keep his distance from her or to approach, “I’m sorry.”

She sighed again, a sound that came up from the depths of her very soul. “No, Clark. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“So... then, what? Is everything okay with your family?”

“It’s not that,” Lois said, finally peeling her eyes away from the bustling newsroom. “It’s just... we need to talk.”

Clark sat in a chair. “I’m listening.”

Lois seemed to contemplate the high back of the chair opposite from him but remained standing. “I was watching TV the other night.”

When she paused, Clark shrugged in an attempt to lighten the heavy atmosphere. “Everyone does *that*,” he joked.

Lois shook her head. “This commercial came on. You know the ones. The late night ones. It was for a... ah... product. For... intimate... uh... diseases.”

“Oh.” It was the best Clark could come up with.

“And it got me thinking,” Lois went on with her confession. “We didn’t... that is... we weren’t *safe*. I mean, I know you said you’ve never... but with what Lex had done the night before... I got scared. So yesterday morning, I saw my doctor. Just to be sure, you understand. I couldn’t stand the idea that maybe Lex had passed something on... and that maybe I unwittingly passed something to you.”

“Lois, I don’t think...” he started to say, but she cut him off before he could speak another word.

“Well, she ran a bunch of tests and blood work and the like. Somehow, I’m clean. Maybe Lex is usually more... protected? I mean, I’m sure he’s... you know. He’s a billionaire. He can have anyone he wants.”

“That’s great news,” Clark said. “So... why are you so upset?”

“Because the doctor did find one thing.”

“What’s that?” Clark asked, his stomach dropping to the floor in fear.

Please, God, let Lois be okay. I can’t live my life without her.

“I’m... I’m... pregnant.”

I’m pregnant.

The words were lightning strikes to Clark’s brain.

Pregnant.

A baby.

His?

Or Luthor’s?

“I...uh...that is...” he stammered, looking for the right words. “Is she sure?”

“I’m afraid so,” Lois said, looking to be on the verge of tears. “She had me take a standard home pregnancy test and it was positive. Then she did an ultrasound, to see how far along it is and if it’s healthy looking.” She dug in her purse for a moment.

“And it was true,” Clark supplied, as she handed him the ultrasound photo. He stared at it, half in shock, half in awe.

Lois broke down in tears. “I didn’t want to believe it. But there is was, right there in the middle of the screen. A black blob of amniotic fluid with this tiny white smudge in the center. She showed me this... flicker. It was a *heartbeat*, Clark. I didn’t want it to be true. But it was there. Oh, God. It was right there, beating away. I’m... it’s... nearly eight weeks along. Which, of course it is. We haven’t... you know... done that, since the pheromone spray affected us. But I don’t know... we can’t be sure yet if it’s yours.” She ended her babbling to break down in heaving sobs.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Clark said, standing. He went around the table to hug her. “It’s okay.” He stroked the back of her head, running his hand over her silky hair, trying to comfort her.

“It’s a nightmare,” Lois whispered into his shoulder.

“Lois, we’ll figure this out,” he promised her.

“I can’t believe this is happening. Everything was going so well,” Lois lamented. “I’m so sorry, Clark. I never meant for this to happen. You must be so mad.”

“Mad?” he asked numbly, as he tried to absorb everything she’d said.

Help! Someone! He’s got a gun!

The cry for help took him off guard and he mentally groaned.

Not now! he thought in vain.

He picked up a police scanner next.

All units to Metropolis General. I repeat, all units to Metropolis General. Armed and dangerous gunman in the cancer ward. Shots have been fired. At least five dead or wounded. EMS on the way. Gunman is a white male, two hundred pounds, about six feet tall. Wearing a green camouflage shirt and dark blue jeans. Carrying a handgun. Proceed with caution.

Clark had lost track of what Lois was saying. He gently pulled out of her embrace.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“What do I think?” he repeated, at a loss. He licked his lips nervously. He needed to get away to help, and soon. “I...uh...I think...uh...I think I need some air,” he finally stammered out. “Excuse me.”

With that, he ducked out of the conference room. He knew it was a lousy excuse. And he knew his sudden departure would upset Lois. But he honestly hadn’t been able to think of a good way to extract himself from that conversation, though he *did* regret that he’d neglected to assure Lois that they would speak in further depth later that day. There was a *lot* for them to discuss, he knew.

“Clark?” she called after him, sounding more heartbroken and distraught than he’d ever heard her. “Clark? Wait! Come back!”

I’m so sorry, Lois, he thought as he rushed off, looking for a place to change into Superman.

He hated to leave. He wanted to talk to Lois. He needed her to know that he didn't fault her for the situation they were now facing. She *had* to know that, whatever she chose to do, she would not be facing it alone. But people's lives hung in the balance. He couldn't just shirk his responsibilities as Superman to discuss Lois' newly discovered pregnancy.

Pregnant.

A baby.

Potentially *his* child.

The idea of a child of his own blood was exciting to Clark. In fact, he felt oddly calm about the prospect of becoming a father to his own son or daughter. It wasn't scary, the way he'd heard it described by some of his friends from high school and college who'd already crossed the threshold into parenthood — by choice or by accident. On the contrary, Clark looked forward to rocking a squalling child to sleep at night, comforting hurts, getting splashed at bath time, even changing diapers.

A family.

He'd always dreamed of a family of his own. A wife and children who made him feel complete. People to come home to at night. A network of love and support.

It wasn't that he hadn't felt that way as a child. Even after finding out that he wasn't Jonathan and Martha's natural child, he'd always felt loved, supported, and accepted. But questions had always remained. Who had been the parents who'd given him life? Why had they given him up? Didn't they love him? Even when the globe had given up its secrets to him, questions had remained, despite the answers it had provided. And a profound sense of loss and loneliness had grown. He was, by all accounts, the only living Kryptonian in the universe. He truly *was* set apart from the world. But he knew he didn't need the love and acceptance of the world. Sure, it was nice that Superman had that, but the world didn't know him, not really.

In Lois, he'd found what he was looking for. Assuming, that was, that she could accept and forgive the lies he'd told her, and that his double life didn't drive an irreparable wedge between them once he came clean and told her the truth.

He sighed heavily as he flew to Metropolis General.

In and out, he promised himself. *Stop the gunman and get back to Lois.*

He slowed as he reached the hospital and came into a soft landing outside of the emergency room doors. Already, the street had been cordoned off by the police. Several police cars and vans had been haphazardly parked to block traffic, alongside the wooden roadblocks. Several officers walked the length of the blockade, urging reporters and gawkers alike to move back to a safer distance. Some listened but most didn't, Clark saw.

He landed next to a group of police men and women who were clustered around a van. The woman who appeared to be in charge was handing out riot gear, which the others were carefully and dutifully strapping on, though Clark could see that their actions looked hurried.

"Superman!" the leader said. Her badge identified her as Garrison, just before she strapped a bulletproof vest on.

"What's the situation in there?" he asked, allowing the woman to brief him. He disliked rushing headlong into delicate scenarios like this without foreknowledge.

"Some nutcase is shooting up the cancer ward. We know of at least five people that have been shot."

"Where's the cancer ward?" Clark asked. He wasn't familiar with anything more than the emergency room.

"It's the entire sixth floor," Garrison said.

Clark nodded. "I'll go in first and try to talk him down. If nothing else, I'll disarm him. Then you can make the arrest."

Garrison smiled. "Glad to have you with us, Superman. Okay, folks, let's move!"

The officers arranged themselves into a predetermined

formation, allowing Clark to take the lead. He heard them when they finally moved forward, after waiting for him to get far enough ahead that they were sure to be giving him the space he needed to work in. He was grateful for that. He wanted to protect those men and women as much as possible. Garrison radioed in their plan, though Clark wasn't sure if it was to all the other officers on the scene or back to command. He didn't care. It made no difference to him.

The hospital was on lockdown, but the doors were opened to allow the police officers and himself entrance. Clark mounted the steps in the closest stairwell, taking them as fast as he dared, while the police hustled behind him. He took it a little faster as he neared the top, asking Garrison and her squad to stay back, but close enough to be on hand for the arrest.

He reached the sixth floor and confidently opened the door to the cancer ward. He'd expected an eerie silence, but the truth was, it seemed to be almost business as usual. Groans of pain came from various rooms. Someone in one of the closer rooms was coughing harshly. Machines beeped. Phones rang. With the exception of the lack of people in the halls and waiting areas, it seemed oddly normal. Clark moved forward, his every sense on alert for the gunman.

He found the man as he rounded a corner where the nurses' station was. A doctor was on his knees, tears streaming down his face. Blubbing, he was begging for his life. Clark slowed his stride and approached cautiously.

"You don't want to do this," he told the gunman.

"Says who?"

"Trust me," Clark said. "Whatever it is that you want, this isn't the way to go about it."

"This is *exactly* what needs to happen," the gunman said defiantly.

Before Clark could react, the man squeezed the trigger and the doctor's head exploded into flesh and blood. Clark blinked once in shock. He'd expected, if anything, for the man to shoot at him, not the doctor, if he shot again at all. He'd truly hoped to talk the man into a calmer state. Clark stepped forward, just enough to see a female nurse cowering behind the high desk of the nurses' station. She immediately freaked out as the doctor's brains spattered over the walls, floor, and her own scrubs.

"Jeff," she screamed. "Oh, God! Jeff! No!"

The gunman trained his weapon on her. "Shut up! Or you're next. I don't want to kill you, but I will if I have to."

The woman stopped screaming, but she didn't stop crying and she continued to shake and whimper.

"Put the gun down," Clark commanded him.

His mind felt like it was wrapped in a fog from Lois' earlier revelation. Mentally, he gave himself a shake, trying to slough off those thoughts to bring himself fully into the present. He'd already made one mistake. He couldn't afford to make another.

"I'm not done here yet," the man spat back.

"Yes, you are," Clark said firmly. In the blink of an eye, he sped over to the nurse, standing before her to protect her, shielding her with his body. "Give me the gun," he demanded, palm outstretched to receive it as he reached forward, ready to make a grab for it.

"Never!" He squeezed the trigger, perhaps hoping to make some point.

The nurse screamed, but no harm came to her. Quick as lightning, Clark had caught the bullet. He held it up for the gunman's inspection, then deliberately squashed it into a harmless pancake between his thumb and index fingers.

"You *don't* want to play this game," Clark warned him.

"Because I assure you, you *will* lose. Now give me the gun."

Clark roughly snatched the gun away from the shooter. Every second the man had an opportunity to be in possession of the weapon, people would be in danger. Already, one man had been

murdered before his very eyes, a scene which sickened Clark. He knew it would haunt him for a long time to come. And the longer Clark lingered in the hospital, the more distressed he knew Lois would become. As soon as the man was weaponless, he seemed to change. His once straight and tall stance slumped. The fire in his eyes dimmed, though it did not extinguish. Clark crossed his arms before him, holding the gun out of reach as he crumbled the middle of it, rendering the weapon useless.

“Why?” Clark asked the gunman. He restrained the man by holding his wrists behind his back.

“They took everything from me. *Everything*. My wife. She came in here... they told me the surgery had minimal risks. And they *killed her*. She left here in a casket. Now it’s their turn to die.”

Clark was appalled. “You killed these people because your wife died?” he asked.

“She didn’t die! She was killed! She went into that operating room to have a routine mastectomy. They said ‘complications’ had occurred. She died on that cold steel slab!”

Clark saw Garrison and her squad peeking around the bend. The gunman’s back was to them, so he was blissfully unaware of their presence. He inclined his head, making it seem as natural a movement as possible.

“So... what? You came in here to kill everyone involved with her surgery?” Clark asked, trying to keep the man engaged with him so he wouldn’t notice the police as they crept closer. He didn’t want the man to see the police coming and perhaps revert back to his earlier wild rage. He gestured to the dead body beside him to keep the man’s eyes focused forward.

“You don’t understand. How could *you ever* understand?” the man yelled, half in fury and half in despair. “You fly around, above anyone else. You don’t know what love is! You don’t know what it’s like to have your world ripped away.”

“You’d be surprised what others can empathize with,” Clark said, arching an eyebrow.

“I have nothing left to live for,” the gunman wailed as the police closed in. Tears rolled down his face as Garrison swiftly restrained him with a pair of handcuffs. He didn’t even fight her. “Everything is gone. My Becca. My poor, sweet Becca. She didn’t deserve this! She never hurt anyone.” He looked around, seeing, as if for the first time, the body of the doctor he’d shot. “God, what have I done? I’m sorry, Becca. I’m so, so sorry.”

Garrison read the man his rights as Clark turned to the nurse behind him. He knelt and offered his hand to her, but she seemed paralyzed by fear. Clark could see her shaking with silent screams and sobs.

“Hey,” he said softly. “You’re okay. Everything’s okay. You’re safe now.”

But her eyes remained glued to the dead body and the still growing pool of sticky red blood that was creeping across the once white tile floor.

“Jeff! Oh, God! Not Jeff! Not my Jeff!”

Clark maneuvered himself so that he blocked her view of the doctor, guilt washing over him. He’d allowed himself to become distracted — in this case, a fatal mistake. “Come on,” he said softly. “Let’s get you checked out, to be sure that you aren’t hurt.”

She allowed him to pick her up without protest. He cradled her against his chest like a small child. He quickly bore her away from the body of what he guessed had been either her boyfriend or husband.

Now that the threat was gone, word had spread like wildfire. He was nearing the stairwell when a group of doctors in emergency room scrubs met up with him. He eased the nurse onto the stretcher they had with them and allowed them to do their job.

“Superman,” Garrison called to him as two of the men in her

squad led the gunman away. “I wanted to say thank you for giving us a hand.”

“You’re welcome. I think, underneath it all, he might *actually* be truly sorry for what he’s done,” he observed, gazing after where the police officers were loading the gunman into the elevator. “Do we know how many...?”

He didn’t need to finish. “We’re not one hundred percent sure. But it looks like five dead and three wounded. One critically so.”

Clark nodded. “I wish I could have gotten here sooner,” he said quietly.

“Thanks to you, no one else was harmed,” Garrison said. “Thank you. My department owes you a debt of gratitude.”

“Just glad I could help,” he replied. “Is there anything else I can do?”

He secretly hoped there wasn’t. With the image of the doctor’s head exploding into a mist of blood and brains still so fresh in his mind, he felt like a walking disaster. Worse, he knew he’d failed not only the doctor, but the nurse who seemed to love him, as well. He needed to get away before the mask of Superman fell away and revealed the all-too-human emotions bubbling just beneath the surface. Besides, he’d already been gone from the Planet for too long. He wanted desperately to get back to Lois. She needed Clark more than the hospital needed Superman now. He was relieved when Garrison shook her head.

“We can take it from here. I’m sure you’re a busy man.”

Clark nodded. “I’ll swing by and leave my statement later, if that’s okay.”

Garrison nodded. “Great. I’ll be there until eight. If not, you can always leave it with someone else. I’m with the forty-fifth.”

He nodded again. “West Park, right?”

“That’s the one.”

“Great. I promise, it’ll get there.”

“Thanks, Superman.”

He inclined his head in acknowledgement, then headed into the stairwell. He flew up the steps, to the roof, and took off into the sky. Back to the Planet he raced. Back to Lois. He hoped she wasn’t fuming with his disappearance. But, he also wasn’t naive. He knew she’d be livid with him. He diverted his course to pick up some of the specialty chocolates that she loved from a Swiss chocolateer in the rich upper city section of Metropolis. He bought a few pounds comprised of all of her favorites. It served to seriously lighten his wallet, but it was worth it.

Maybe I can consider it as catering to her cravings for the first time, he mused. *That is, if she’ll even speak to me after this.*

At least the distance between the shop and the Planet could easily explain his long absence.

With no small amount of fear, he entered the building and rode the elevator up to the bullpen. At least Lois was still there, he could see. He listened to the beating of her heart in order to calm and center himself. He needed it, after the horrors in the hospital and knowing how angry she was likely going to be with him. For the first time, Clark noticed a second, tiny, much more rapid heartbeat within her as well.

“Lois?” he asked as he neared her desk.

She ignored him.

“Lois, please, talk to me,” he pleaded.

She shot him a withering look.

“I know you’re mad at me,” he continued. “I just... it was a lot to take in. I needed some time. My head’s clearer now and I *want* to talk about this. Please? Give me a chance?” He showed her the box of chocolates he’d purchased. “I thought...”

“That you could buy me with chocolate?” she interrupted him, her words acid.

“I thought I could start to make amends with it, yeah,” he admitted. “But, more importantly, I thought we could share them while talking things out. There’s a lot to discuss. Maybe we can

talk over dinner tonight? I'll cook, if you want. Or I can pick up something."

Lois continued to scowl at him for a moment.

"Look, Lois, I need to you know just one thing, before we get back to work."

She reached for the chocolates and he handed them over.

"What?"

"I need you to know what you're not in this alone. I'll support you, whatever you choose to do. I'll be there at your side."

The hardness in her features melted somewhat and she swallowed hard while nodding. "Thank you. But, Clark?"

"Yes?"

"I'm *not* sharing the chocolates."

Clark laughed. "I'll stand by your decision there too," he promised her.

That got a smile out of her. "Okay. Your place, if that's okay. Lucy's still with me and I'd rather not have her around as we talk."

"She doesn't know?"

"Oh, she does. I'd just rather be alone for this."

"I understand," Clark said. "Chicken parm okay?"

"Sounds good." Then, quickly changing topics, "There was a shooting at Met Gen."

"I know," Clark said. "I heard about it when I went to get some air and collect my thoughts. That's why it took me so long to get back."

"You went there *and* you managed to swing uptown for chocolates?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I didn't hit any traffic," he said with a shrug. "Anyway, I got us the Superman exclusive."

Lois nodded. "Good. I've been trying to get an ID on the gunman, but nothing so far. LNN says the police chief is going to issue a statement at four at the courthouse."

"Looks like we've got until four to get everything else written up then," Clark said with a smile. "Superman told me everything that happened."

"Let's get to work then," Lois said.

"Just make yourself comfortable," Clark said as they stepped into his apartment.

The day had seemed to drag on forever. Only the hospital shooting had given them anything worth working on. And even that hadn't been much more than typing up a recount of what had transpired. The press conference hadn't offered much in the way of new information either. So the hours had crept by, slowly, torturing them both. They both longed to have the freedom to talk about Lois' pregnancy, and what they were going to do. Still, they had both stayed silent on the issue, even once they'd finished working for the day, all the way to Lois' place so that she could change into something more comfortable, and all the way to Clark's place.

Lois sat on the couch while Clark went to change his own clothes. When he was dressed in jeans and his favorite blue plaid shirt, he moved into the kitchen and began to prepare their meal. He wondered, however, even as he fried the chicken cutlets, if either of them would do much more than pick at their food. Lois joined him in the kitchen, setting the table while Clark cut slices of mozzarella, added them to the chicken and sauce, then stuck the whole thing in the oven.

They talked about everything else as the food cooked, studiously avoiding the topic of Lois' pregnancy. Clark kept checking on the food, until, at least, it was done. He took it out of the oven and set it on a trivet in the center of the table. Lois eyed the food appreciatively.

"Thanks for doing this," she finally said.

"It's no problem," Clark said. He took a spatula and used it to

put a cutlet on Lois' plate. "I like being able to cook for you, Lois. And now that...well...I should probably be feeding you better food than takeout all the time."

"Clark...about that...I...I don't know what to do."

"You know you don't have to decide that right this second," he reminded her.

She nodded as she cut her meat. "I know. But, I think we need to talk about our options."

"I agree. But, ultimately, the choice is yours, you know. I won't force you to keep the baby nor will I force you to terminate the pregnancy. Like I told you at work, I'm on board with whatever it is that you decide to do. If you don't want to carry the pregnancy, I'll be right there, holding your hand when you go for the procedure. And if you choose to keep the baby, I'll be right there helping you to raise that little boy or girl."

"I just don't know what I want to do yet," Lois said before taking a bite of her food. "I never pictured myself as a mother. At least, not like this. I always thought I'd have the marriage and the house first, a Pulitzer or two under my belt. I don't even know for sure whose baby this is. I wish I could say with one hundred percent certainty that it's yours. I really do. But the timing..."

"Hey, you aren't to blame for this," he said as her lower lip began to tremble. "A large part of the blame falls on Miranda. The rest...that falls on Luthor and on me." He hated to lump himself in the same category as the billionaire, but he felt that, in this case, it was warranted. He and Luthor had both succumbed to their baser desires. The only difference was that Clark hadn't taken anything Lois hadn't freely given.

"No, Clark. You aren't to blame for this," Lois said. "If it hadn't been for Lex..."

"In any case," Clark said after taking a bite of his dinner, "I'm sure there must be ways to figure it out. At the very least, I know we can do a DNA test after the baby is born...assuming that you decide that you want to keep it. I think they might be able to test while the baby is in utero still as well, but I don't know much about it. Again, assuming that you decide you want to go through with the pregnancy."

"About that..." Lois said hesitantly. "What are your feelings? I mean, your feelings on that in general?"

Clark sighed as he tried to find a way to word it properly. In the meantime, he speared another piece of chicken and chewed thoughtfully. He swallowed and washed it down with a sip of ice water.

"You know that I'm adopted," he said at length. "So, I've always been a fan of that, if a woman doesn't feel ready to be a mother yet. A baby gets to live and a couple who might otherwise be left to a childless fate gets to have the family they've always dreamed about. That's the same reason why I've never been a fan of termination. That, and the fact that my parents always talked openly to me about their heartache in not being able to conceive. I guess, because of that, I've always been more on the side of pro-life. On the other hand, my parents taught me that a woman has every right to control her own body — what she puts into it, who she accepts into her bed and who she rejects, even the right to terminate a pregnancy." He'd been staring down at his food while he'd spoken, but now he met Lois' eyes. "So, my stance is, I will support whichever option you choose."

Lois frowned. "I don't know what to choose. I don't want to carry Lex's child. Not after the way it was conceived, if it's his. But I don't think I can kill your baby. On the other hand, I'm not sure I'm ready to be a mother right now. Then again, I don't know if I'm strong enough to carry a baby for nine months only to hand it over to someone else. I'm so confused." She pinched the bridge of her nose as though warding off a headache.

"You don't need to know tonight," Clark reminded her again. He reached over to her and took her hand. "If fact, I'd be worried about how much thought you'd put into your choice if you *did*

make a decision tonight. There's no easy answer. There's no right answer. Only what you think will be the right choice for you. For us."

She gave him a tremulous smile. "Us. I like the sound of that. Because, honestly, I don't think I can do any of this alone, no matter what I wind up doing."

"You'll never be alone," he swore. "I can promise you that. This child...if you keep it...even if it is his, Luthor's, it will *never* be his child. I learned a long time ago that it doesn't matter who a person's biological parents are, or what their reasons are for not being in that person's life, it's the people who love and raise a child that are that kid's parents."

"Did you ever resent not knowing your parents?" Lois asked. "Did you ever hate them for giving you up?" She sounded scared. "If I choose to give this baby up for adoption...is it going to hate me for the rest of its life?"

"My situation was a little different," Clark said vaguely. "I was left with no note, no records, no story from an adoption agency. I never knew my parents' reasons for leaving me. It was hard and there *were* times, especially during those already awkward teenage years, when I wondered — why? Why had they given me up? Didn't they love me? I don't think I ever hated them though. Because I knew, if they *hadn't* given me up, I never would have known my true parents — Jonathan and Martha Kent."

"And now?" Lois asked, prodding him further.

"Now?" He shrugged. "It doesn't honestly cross my mind all that often. Sometimes, sure, I'll lie in bed at night or go for a walk or something, and I'll wonder what my biological parents were like. But then I'll remember that I already have the best parents I could have wished for."

Lois sighed. "You know I appreciate you saying that you'll back me up either way here. But I wish you'd...I don't know. State a solid preference or something."

"Lois, you know I can't tell you what to do," he said with a soft sigh.

"You can't just tell me that you would be one hundred percent fine with all of our options!" she argued. "I know it's not something we planned, to be faced with making a decision that is going to change our lives forever, no matter which option we choose to pursue."

"No, we didn't," he agreed.

"I'm asking you, please," Lois pleaded, "to give me a straight answer for once."

Clark fell silent as he contemplated an answer. Slowly, uncertainly, he started to speak.

"I've always wanted to be a father," he began. "For as long as I can remember, I've always dreamed about having a family of my own. A wife. Children born of my own flesh. A true, biological family. People who share my bloodline. Maybe adopt too, and give a home and love to a child who is waiting for a family of their own." He paused, contemplating the food on his plate for a moment. "Termination wouldn't be my top option," he finally admitted. "But, at the same time, I would never ask you to carry a child that you don't want to carry, just because I asked you too. It's not fair to you and it wouldn't be fair to the baby."

He took a sip of his drink before continuing. "What makes this so difficult, especially for me to take a hard stand on any single option, is the Luthor factor. What he did to you is sickening. I will not ask you to keep a baby that might be his. I can't."

"You really don't like the idea of termination, do you?" Lois asked in a small, soft voice.

Clark sighed again. "I don't love the idea," he confessed. "I understand why some women would choose it, I really do," he quickly added. "Especially those in situations like yours — where the baby might be the product of a violent attack. I swear to you

though. Whatever you choose, even if it is to terminate, I will be there to support you."

Because I love you too much to do anything else, he thought to himself.

A silence fell as they both ate. Only the clinking of their utensils broke the silence. At last, Lois spoke up.

"Clark?"

"Yeah?"

"When you left the bullpen today..."

He cut her off gently. "I'm sorry, Lois. I didn't handle that well at all. I should have...I don't know." He gestured helplessly. He hadn't had a choice. He'd needed to get out of the newsroom.

"I had wanted to ask you...when I showed you that ultrasound picture...did you...feel anything?"

"You mean...about the pregnancy?" he asked cautiously.

"I meant...toward the baby," she said gently.

"I...I don't know," he admitted, somewhat ashamed. "The truth is, I didn't even have the time to think about it. I was too blindsided by the news. That, and knowing that there's a chance it's mine, and there's a chance that it isn't. I didn't really get a chance to feel anything toward the baby itself. Why? Do you...feel anything for it?"

Lois cast her eyes down at the uneaten portion of chicken on her plate. "Nothing." She sounded on the verge of tears. "How can I possibly be a good mother if I feel nothing toward my own baby? I don't love it. I don't hate it. I haven't embraced it. I haven't even found it within me to resent or reject it." Silver tears slid down her cheeks.

"Hey," Clark said, reaching over to wipe her tears away, "it's okay. You're still processing things. It's natural. It's not like this was planned. It's okay to take some time to absorb everything that's happening and then figure out how you feel about the baby itself, and not about the circumstances of the pregnancy. It does *not* mean that you won't be a good mother. All it means is that, right now, you're in shock and maybe even a little scared. Certainly overwhelmed."

"You really believe that?" She sounded as vulnerable as a child at that moment.

"I really do," he responded truthfully. "Lois, you are the strongest and most compassionate, even fiery woman that I know. The very fact that you are worried over this proves to me how much you really do care. I know you want to do what's best. For yourself, for us, for this baby."

"I feel...such guilt," she said after a moment. "I keep thinking...how can I put Clark in this position? If, for some reason, I choose to keep this baby, how can I ruin Clark's life if it isn't his? And that scares me."

"You aren't putting me in any position, Lois. I'm *choosing* to be in it. I *want* to be there, no matter what," Clark insisted. "You aren't ruining my life, Lois. If you decide to keep the baby, you'll be *enhancing* my life."

"But, if it's Lex's...?"

"It won't matter," Clark swore. "Because he will *never* know about the baby. He will *never* have any interaction with the baby. He or she won't even know who Luthor is, let alone any possible genetic link to him."

"But what if...if it *is* his...what if I can't love it the way it deserves? Not through any fault of its own, but because of what it would remind me of?"

Clark shook his head. "I wish I had an answer for that, Lois. I really do. All I can say is that I know you. I know how warm and loving you are. I've seen how much you care for people, even those you don't know. Regardless of who fathered this child, half of it is you. I believe that this will trump anything else. Besides," he added with a smile before he took a sip of water, "you don't *have* to find out who the biological father is if you don't want to."

"I guess that's true," she said unhappily, obviously still not

convinced.

“Well, like I said, nothing had to be determined tonight,” Clark reminded her. “For the time being, let’s leave it at this: I love you and I swear that I’ll be at your side, no matter what. There is *nothing* that will change the truth of those two things. Okay?”

“Okay,” Lois said with a nod as she poked distractedly at her food with her fork.

“Can I ask one thing though?” Clark said after a moment, during which, he’d managed to eat two more bites of food.

“Sure.”

“What’d Lucy say?”

That got Lois laughing. “She’s torn between being ecstatic at the prospect of becoming an aunt and wanting to march down to the jail to castrate Lex.”

“Can she do both?” Clark teased.

Again, she let out a laugh. It was so good to hear that beautiful sound. It meant the world to Clark that he could help lighten Lois’ mood, even if only by the slightest of degrees.

“I wish,” Lois agreed.

“Morning, Lois,” Clark said as she opened the door to her apartment.

“Morning,” she replied, sounding less than thrilled.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, already guessing from her demeanor that she wasn’t feeling well at all.

“Aside from the fact that I’ve been throwing up for the last half hour?” she quipped. “Just lovely.”

“I brought you something for that,” Clark said, holding up the bag he’d brought.

“A new stomach?” she asked weakly.

Clark chuckled. “No. Ginger ale, saltines, and a box of peppermint sticks. All the books I’ve read say that this can really help with the morning sickness.”

“All the books, huh?” Lois said, giving him a side glance as she took the bag from him.

Clark shrugged. “I figured it couldn’t hurt. Ever since you told me...well, I’ve been educating myself, in case you decide that you want to keep the baby.”

It had been two weeks since Lois had first told him the news. Two weeks in which they had continued to talk, at length, about the situation. Two weeks in which Lois had remained torn on the issue — to keep the pregnancy, to end it, or to give the baby up after birth. Two weeks in which she’d seemingly come no closer to making a decision. But Clark was a patient man. He would wait for Lois to be completely ready to make her choice.

Lois peeked in the bag, then hastily put it on the floor and went running to the bathroom. A minute later, Clark could hear Lois retching. He moved toward the bathroom, to find Lois nearly hugging the toilet as she vomited. He knelt behind her and gently pulled her hair back for her and held it out of the way. For several long minutes, she alternated between throwing up and dry heaving, before she finally, albeit shakily, rose. Clark held on to her as she flushed the toilet and rinsed out her mouth, then helped her back to the living room, where he opened a can of the ginger ale.

“Drink this,” he told her, holding the can out to her as he knelt before her.

Lois took it and sipped cautiously before leaning into the couch cushions. “Thanks, Clark.” She sipped again. “Are you sure about this though?”

He shrugged. “Like I said, the books all seemed to agree on it. And you need to do everything possible to stay hydrated.”

She nodded. “It does feel good to not immediately throw up whatever I’ve eaten or drank.” She took a longer swallow from the can. “You know, I used to hate this stuff. But right now, it tastes pretty good to me.”

“Are you feeling any better?” Clark asked worriedly.

“I think so. Maybe,” she replied hesitantly, as if speaking the words would make her morning sickness return with a vengeance.

“Think you can handle some crackers?” Clark asked, popping open the top of the box of saltines.

“I can try,” Lois said in a non-committal tone.

Clark nodded and tore open a sleeve of the crackers. He gave a couple to Lois to get started with. She nibbled experimentally. Finding herself not immediately getting sick, she began to eat with more confidence. Clark handed her a few more saltines. She ate them quickly enough, washing them all down with intermittent sips of ginger ale.

“I needed that,” she finally said, after refusing more of the crackers. “I think I can handle something a little more substantial now.”

“Are you sure about that?” he asked skeptically.

“No, but I’m hungry enough to try. And sick of being sick.”

“How about toast?” Clark asked. He checked his watch. “We still have enough time before we need to be at work.”

“I think I could handle some toast,” she responded.

“Butter and jelly?”

“A thin layer, yeah.”

“Grape or blackberry?” he asked as he headed into her kitchen.

“Blackberry,” Lois said. “The thought of grape is enough to make me queasy.”

Clark chuckled. “Blackberry it is then.”

He swiftly got together everything he needed and began to make Lois her toast. It didn’t take long. Within minutes he was handing her a plate with four slices of toast on it. She smiled gratefully at him.

“Thanks,” she said between mouthfuls.

“No problem. Consider me your own, personal chef and/or food retriever. Any time, any food, you name it, I’ll get it.”

“What if I want chocolate ice cream at four in the morning?” She was teasing him, he knew.

“I’ll have it in my freezer, waiting for you,” he said.

“What if you don’t have any left?” she said, still teasing him. “What if I finished off the container earlier in the night?”

“Well then, it might take me some time, but I’ll find a store open at that hour,” he said, meaning every word.

Lois might not know that he could fly to anywhere in the world in seconds, but he hoped she’d at least realize how sincere he was being.

“Somehow, I believe you,” she said.

“It’s the truth,” he assured her.

“I know.”

She finished off her toast, leaving only a few small corners on the plate. Clark dutifully whisked it away into the kitchen. He tossed the scraps into the garbage, then washed the plate. In moments, he rejoined Lois in the living room.

“Ready to go?” he asked her.

“Yeah. Let me just grab my jacket and purse.”

“Take your time,” Clark encouraged her. “Did you want me to drive us in?”

“That would be great. I didn’t sleep too well. I’d rather not drive if I don’t have to.”

Clark nodded. “Okay. Is everything all right though?”

“Fine. I just never imagined that the constant need to visit the bathroom started this early. I thought that was something that women got to look forward to toward the *end* of pregnancy.”

“Have you given things any more thought?” he asked as Lois pulled her jacket on and slung her purse over her right shoulder.

She grabbed her keys from the table by the door and locked the multiple locks behind her as they stepped into the hallway.

“A lot,” she said absently as she secured the final lock. “And

I can honestly say that I'm no closer to making a decision. It's just such a huge thing, you know? Whatever I choose, my life's going to be altered in ways I can't even imagine. Not just mine either. Both of ours."

"I know," Clark replied solemnly.

"Have you told your parents yet?" Lois asked as they reached the stairs and started down.

"Not yet," he said with a shake of his head. "I didn't want to say anything until you were ready. I also didn't want to get them excited about a potential grandchild if you opt not to keep the baby."

"Oh," she said thoughtfully.

"Have you told yours yet?"

"No," she said, shaking her head in turn. "I'm not sure I'm ready to have that conversation. I don't even want them knowing about this unless we decide that we're keeping it." She paused for a moment. "But, I think...you should tell your parents, Clark. Maybe they have some words of wisdom for us, even though I know they never quite went through what we are. Still, they're so...accepting and loving. I think they should know."

"Okay," Clark said, touched that Lois trusted and accepted his parents so much that she was willing to include them in everything. "I'll talk to them tonight, if I can."

In person, not over the phone, he thought to himself. If I get the chance to fly out.

"But Perry!" Lois whined.

"But nothing!" Perry insisted. "I need you on this story."

"This isn't *real* news!" she stressed. "This is...a puff piece!"

"It's the story you are going to cover, whether you like it or not," the Chief said, his tone brooking exactly zero arguments.

"But..." she started again.

"No buts. I need you to cover this. Winestock and Paulson are out with the flu."

"So? Find someone else," Lois demanded.

"Lois, it's not that bad of an assignment," Clark finally said, breaking his silence on the matter. That earned him such a hard glare from Lois that it might have killed a normal man.

"Easy for you to say," Lois shot back. "You love puff pieces."

"I just don't think it's worth fighting over," he defended.

"Perry," Lois said, moving her gaze back to their boss. "You can't possibly understand how much I don't want to do this."

"Look, normally, I'd agree this assignment is beneath your skill. But I've got no choice here. Everyone's covering something and I'm short staffed as it is. Just take the assignment. Unless, of course, you think you can't be a professional. Under the circumstances, that is," Perry said somewhat slyly.

"Circumstances?" Lois asked, a squeak of panic shattering the feigned innocence of the question.

"You know," Perry said, giving her a knowing nod. "Since I'm asking you to cover the opening of that new fertility clinic in midtown and you're...well...already expecting."

Lois' jaw dropped and Clark fought hard not to follow suit.

"How did you...?" she asked, perhaps unable to finish.

Perry glanced out of the windows in his office, out at the bullpen, just for a moment, before he looked again at Lois. "It's been over thirty years, but I still remember exactly how Alice acted when she was carrying both of our boys. The constant yawning. The frequent bathroom breaks. The paleness and illness around certain foods."

"But I haven't..." she started to protest.

Perry chuckled. "You might not have said anything, but I've noticed the changes in your behavior. You left the staff meeting three times yesterday."

"Hey! During one of those, I had to take that phone call from the DA's office," she said, crossing her arms.

"I know," Perry nodded. "But I also noticed that you slipped

back toward the ladies' room afterward. Look, I don't mean to sound like a stalker or anything," he said, giving her a fatherly smile, "but, well, you know me. I like to keep an eye on everything that happens within these walls. Any editor worth his salt does the same. Besides, I want you to know, if you need anything, well, all you need to do is ask."

"I know," Lois admitted. "Look, Perry, I was going to tell you...eventually. If...well...Clark and I have a lot of decisions to make."

"Yours?" he asked, looking at Clark.

"As far as I'm concerned," he replied with a nod.

Perry nodded thoughtfully. "Okay then. My lips are sealed, until you two tell me otherwise."

"Thanks, Perry," Lois said gratefully. She sounded like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"Any time. Now, the ribbon cutting ceremony is at two. I suggest you two grab Jimmy and get going."

"You want us both to go?" Clark asked, surprised. He'd assumed that Perry had a different story for him to cover.

Perry nodded. "I think it's for the best. You can cover the reactions of any of the men there. They may be more open to speaking with a man, given how sensitive of a topic infertility issues can be. Lois can cover the women. Again, they may be more open to speaking with a woman about things."

"Makes sense," Clark said, looking at Lois and shrugging.

"Oh, and uh, keep a sharp eye out. Word is that some of the more, ah, religious organizations have threatened to protest. Something about fertility clinics being the lair of the devil, from what I've gathered." He rolled his eyes.

"We'll be careful," Clark assured his boss.

"Good. Now, git."

"Yes, sir," Clark said even as Lois rolled her eyes in disgust.

"Oh boy," Clark heard Perry say after the door had shut, thanks to his super hearing. "This might be worse than Norcross and Judd ever was. God, I hope I'm wrong about that."

"What?" Lois asked, looking up at him, concerned.

"Huh?" Clark asked, snapping back to his immediate surroundings.

"You sighed just now. It sounded a little...heavy."

"Oh? It's nothing. Just, ah, thinking about the assignment, that's all."

"So, you sighed sadly?" she asked, not buying it.

"Well...yeah," he stammered. "I mean, what must it be like?"

Pinning your hopes for a family on expensive medical treatments? What would my life have been like, had my parents had these treatments and facilities available? Would I have had brothers and sisters?"

He hoped his explanation would satisfy Lois. It wasn't completely untrue. He really did feel for anyone who was facing problems in building their family. And he'd often wondered as a teenager, especially as his powers had developed, what it would have been like to have a sibling.

That answer seemed to satisfy her. She made a throaty noise of approval.

"Anyway," Clark said, "let's just get this over and done with. Afterward, let's stop by Mazik's and see if we can't get an interview with the owner about last night's robbery."

And, one day, if I'm lucky, a ring for you.

That would have to wait, however. They hadn't been dating all that long. He didn't want to push too hard, too fast. And with the baby — if she decided to keep it — he didn't want it to look like he was only asking because there would soon be a child.

Well, in another thirty weeks, give or take, he thought to himself.

In any case, he *needed* Lois to know that the baby wasn't the reason why he wanted to marry her. She had to understand that he was asking because he couldn't live his life without her. Still,

waiting for that opportunity to arise was slowly killing him. He'd lost his heart to her long before they'd begun to date. And, although he hadn't worked at the Planet for years, it certainly felt like he'd known and loved Lois all of his life.

"Good idea. But not before we stop for lunch," Lois said, still clearly unhappy with what she considered to be an assignment that was beneath her abilities as a reporter. "Uncle Mike's place isn't too far from there."

Outside of the Planet, they hailed a cab, with Jimmy promising to meet them at the clinic later. Clark gave the driver the address and they soon found themselves at one of the largest gatherings of people they'd seen at an event like this. Clark thought that he probably hadn't seen a gathering like this one since Superman had been officially welcomed to the city of Metropolis. In some ways, it was humbling to see how many people had come out in support of the clinic — people who needed the facility's help and friends and family members of those couples. In other ways, it hurt Clark's heart to see just how many needed the clinic to give them any kind of hope for a family of their own.

He and Lois soon split up, working through the crowd at a gentle pace, interviewing whoever felt comfortable enough to allow them to interview them. Many were too uncomfortable to give their names, citing everything from feelings of shame that stemmed from not being able to have children on their own to judgmental family members that they never wanted to know about their struggles and treatments. Still, a surprising number of men and women both spoke to him, providing him with a wealth of insight and quotes he could use in the article he and Lois would be writing. They spoke openly about their hopes and fears, their gratitude at having a clinic opening so close to home, the time and money they'd already poured into treatments and how much more they were guessing they would be spending, all in the hope of having a child to love.

Their indomitable wills uplifted Clark's spirit. The obvious pain they were all in crushed his soul.

One of the women who agreed to speak with him spoke passionately about her five year long attempt to get pregnant. Tears slipped from her eyes as she spoke of the three miscarriages she'd suffered. She couldn't meet his eyes as she talked about taking a second mortgage out on her home to afford the fifty thousand dollars she and her husband had already spent at a more expensive, out of state, clinic. If this clinic couldn't help her, she would have to resign herself to being childless, she said. Monetary resources were running out and she mentioned that adoption was not an option for them, but she would not elaborate on that.

By the time Clark found Lois again in that crowd, he had more than enough for an article and several sidebar pieces. It would be difficult to whittle away at his notes to find the best quotes. Lois also had several pages of hastily scrawled notes in her notebook. Clark skimmed them as they waited for the ribbon cutting ceremony. They didn't have long to wait. The mayor soon stepped out from beyond the clinic's doors.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my good citizens of our fair city of Metropolis," she began dramatically. "I want to thank you all for coming out today in support of the grand opening of the Metropolis Hope Fertility Clinic. I know, for some of you, this place is a beacon of hope and light in an otherwise dark and turbulent time. I also know that, for some of you, this place signals a new beginning for yourselves or your loved ones. That is why I am thrilled to introduce Dr. Lawrence Eagleman. Some of you may recognize the name. Dr. Eagleman is one of the foremost authorities on assisted reproductive technology and the head of this clinic. Let's give him a warm welcome. Doctor?"

The mayor stepped away and a tall, thin, kindly old black man approached the microphone as the audience clapped for

them both. Despite his advanced age, he stood straight and unbowed by the weight of so many years. He took off his silver wire frame glasses, cleaned a spot off the one of the lenses, then replaced them back on his face. He looked out over the crowd for a moment before speaking.

"Thank you, Madame Mayor," he said. "And thank you, everyone, for the welcome. I'd start with a joke, but, well, there's a time and a place, right?"

Nervous laughter rippled through the crowd.

Dr. Eagleman cleared his throat. "Anyway, I'll keep this short and sweet. I am so pleased to welcome all of you here today to this state of the art facility. I'm thrilled to say that we have the top of the line in everything here, from our ultrasound machines to our labs where we work with the embryos, to the very people who staff this building. We are all here to serve you. We understand how important starting or expanding your family is. Our promise to all of you is that we will do our best to help, and we look forward to meeting with you all."

He paused, and Clark wondered if that short speech had been all the doctor wanted to say.

"Now then, each of you who came for more information about our clinic was given a folder. Does everyone who needs one have one?" He waited for a moment while a few raised their hands to alert the workers that they still needed a folder. "Good," he said after a few minutes. "Now then, I would ask that you all open it and go to the very last sheet of paper in there. It's a price list." Again, he waited while everyone did as they were bid. "The other doctors here as well as myself decided to raffle off a few in vitro sessions. If you have a gold seal on the top of that price list, I congratulate you and ask that you please see Dr. Wallace Lancer so that we can get your information."

Delighted shrieks and thankful prayers rent the air. Clark craned his neck to look out over the crowd. Not far away, he could see the woman he'd interviewed earlier, the one who'd spent fifty thousand dollars already in the hope of having a child of her own. Tears streamed from her eyes and she clasped her hands. She looked heavenward with a smile and a prayer of thanks on her lips, it seemed.

"And now," Dr. Eagleman said, taking the oversized pair of scissors the mayor held out to him, "it is my pleasure to announce that the Metropolis Hope Fertility Clinic is officially open!"

He deftly cut the ribbon and shook hands with the mayor while photographers snapped photos. But it wasn't the flashing bulbs that caught Clark's attention. From behind the crowd, in the street, an angry chanting had begun. He turned his head to look.

Perry hadn't been wrong about petitioners and protesters. A sizeable crowd had gathered, all with signs with anti-fertility treatment sayings on them. GOD HATES TEST TUBE BABIES! one declared in angry red against a white background. JUST SAY NO TO ARTIFICIAL BABIES! another stated, complete with a circled test tube with a slash running through it. Another brazenly pronounced A.R.T. = NO SOULS. And yet another declared THE WORLD DOESN'T NEED YOUR GENES! OPT TO ADOPT!

Before Clark could even mention to Lois how tasteless he thought the protesters were being, a fight broke out. How, he wasn't sure. There was no way of telling who threw the first punch. In the next second, all hell broke loose. The entire crowd went into a panic — at least those who hadn't been goaded into a fight. People started to move, trying to either get away or join the fray. Yells rang out as people were pushed, shoved, kicked, and punched. Clark found Lois wrenched away from his side.

"Clark?" she called out, sounding a little scared.

"Go! Get out of here, Lois!" he yelled back. "I'll find you at your uncle's!"

He lost sight of her completely then as the crowd swelled around him and swallowed her up. He carefully forced a path out of the fray and found a deserted alley. After a thorough check to

ensure no one was looking, he spun into Superman's famous blue, red, and yellow suit. He spent the next half hour breaking up the fight, aiding the police forces that showed up within minutes of the first punch being thrown, thanks to the officers who'd already been on site to help maintain the peace. All the while, it baffled him how the protesters could be so heartless toward an already suffering group of people. In a rare moment where Superman showed his anger, he burned the protest signs in a heap right there on the street, only to extinguish the blaze once it had consumed the hateful messages.

Then it was time to find Lois.

He really, sincerely hoped she'd listened to him and gone to her uncle's restaurant. His heart in his mouth, he flew with all speed to the place, stretching out his hearing before him. After a tense few moments, he found her, her heart beating steadily and calmly. He zoomed in with his telescopic vision and found her sipping ice water with a lemon wedge just inside the cafe, at the table right by the window. He angled himself into a landing and found a spot to change.

"Clark!" she cried, sounding ecstatic to see him in one piece. She stood and threw her arms around him, kissing his cheek. "Thank God you're okay. I was getting worried. What happened?"

"I got swept up in the fray," he said, shrugging, as he pulled out a chair and sat. "You're lucky you were able to get out when you did. It was a nightmare by the time I got out of there. But, I was able to see Superman break things up, so at least we can add it to the story."

"Yeah," Lois nodded, sounding distracted.

"Are you okay?" he asked gently, sliding his chair over to sit next to her as opposed to across from her. He put a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm fine," she said, shaking her head a little, as if to snap out of whatever thoughts were on her mind.

"Lo-is."

"Really, I'm okay. I just never expected a puff piece to, well, have such an emotional aspect. I mean, I know they can, but I'm usually so distanced from it."

"Because of...you know?" he asked in a near whisper, mindful of the fact that Lois didn't want anyone in her family to know about the pregnancy.

"Maybe. Maybe it's just because the man I love's parents could have been those people there today. And to see them met with such...such...*hate*..." She shook her head.

"People fear and hate what they don't understand," Clark said softly. "They think their way of life, their way of thinking, is the only way. Unfortunately, that sometimes leads to things like this."

"I felt," she said, hesitantly and shaking her head, "like an intruder there today. Like I wasn't welcome there, even though most of the people I spoke with were perfectly nice and cordial, and even though I know that none of them could possibly know anything about me. They all want the one thing I'm not sure I can accept in my life right now." She sounded extremely guilty.

Clark nodded thoughtfully. "I can understand that." He wasn't sure what else he could say to ease Lois' guilt. "I guess we all feel like that, once in a while. We all have what someone else wants — we might feel guilty over hating our job when a friend is unemployed, or complain about how overcooked our steak was even as we pass by a homeless person in the streets. I don't think any of us are immune to it. Not even Superman, I'd wager. But Lois, our situation...it's nothing to feel guilty about. What those people are going through..." he shook his head lightly as he took her hand in his, "it's unfortunate, yes. But it's also something that, hopefully, most of them will be able to finally beat, with the help of those doctors."

Lois sighed heavily. "I know. But it still doesn't make me feel any less bad for contemplating, uh, ending things."

Clark nodded. "I know," he said in a whispered voice.

"Did Superman weigh in on it?" she asked, in an attempt to change the topic. "The fight, that is."

Clark shook his head. "He didn't say a word to any of the press who stuck around. But he did burn the protesters' signs. So I guess it's safe to assume he didn't like their messages."

"Good," Lois said grimly.

"Mom? Dad?" Clark called softly as he knocked on the front door of his parent's farmhouse.

It was late at night, later than Clark usually came to visit. He hoped they weren't yet in bed. He hated to wake them or bother them in any way. But he had to talk to them. He had to let them know about the changes that were taking place in his life. He wanted their guidance. He needed their approval. He craved their opinions.

And yet, he was afraid.

He was afraid that they wouldn't understand. Afraid that they might be disappointed in him. Afraid they might think that he was doing the wrong thing.

Irrational fears, he knew.

His parents had never been anything but supportive and understanding of the choices he'd made in his life thus far. They had rallied around him in support when his powers had first begun to manifest and he'd made the decision, on his own, to never tell another soul. They'd been heartbroken but understanding when he'd felt the need to move on from the farmlands of his youth to travel the world in search of a place where he felt he was meant to be. They'd approved of his choice to become Superman — had even made his costumes for him — despite their own fears for his safety once he went public, showing the world that an alien walked amongst them.

Still, those decisions had been one thing. This was another. He'd always strived to be the perfect son. He'd always tried to do things according to the moral code his parents had instilled in him, and that he'd developed on his own as he'd grown. Part of that code, for him, was to never sleep with a woman who didn't know about his super side, and, if possible, not lay with anyone at all until his wedding night.

Now he was about to tell his parents that he might have gotten a girl pregnant. Not just any girl, but his best friend and work partner. Not just outside of marriage either, but before they'd even begun to date.

True, he was a grown man who could make his own decisions and who could deal with the consequences of those actions. It was also true that his lapse in judgment hadn't completely been his fault. At least some of that fell on Miranda's shoulders, between the red Kryptonite choker she'd worn and the pheromone based perfume she'd concocted. But, ultimately, he had been the one to give in to that problematic combination.

He felt embarrassed, small, and oddly young — almost as though he were sixteen and confessing to having gotten a classmate pregnant.

"Clark?"

Martha appeared at the door, already in her pajamas with a soft, baby pink bathrobe tied around her. Just behind her, Clark could see his father, also apparently in his pajamas, a red and black plaid robe on. Martha hurriedly unlocked the storm door to let Clark in.

"Hi," Clark said, ducking his head a bit in embarrassment. "Sorry it's so late. I didn't wake you guys, did I?"

"No," Jonathan said with a quick shake of his head. "We were up. Actually, we were watching the news. They were showing footage of that fire you put out in Brazil. Nice work."

"Thanks," Clark said distractedly.

Martha picked right up on his mood. She hugged him tightly, asking, "Is everything all right?"

“Kind of,” Clark said. “I need to talk to you guys about something.”

“Something...big?” Jonathan asked as he hugged his son in turn.

“You...could say that,” Clark said, choosing his words carefully.

“Come on into the kitchen,” Martha said. “I’ll make some tea.”

“I’d like that,” Clark said, mostly because tea was usually accompanied by his mother’s home-made cookies. That, and it would buy him a little time.

In the kitchen, Clark got out the mugs and spoons while his mother put the kettle on the burner. He chose a bag of oolong tea for himself, and measured out two spoonfuls of sugar into his mug. Then he sat at the table where he studied the grain of the wood as though it had become the most fascinating thing in the world. A mere two minutes later, the tea kettle whistled and Martha poured the hot water into the mugs. She brought them to the table along with a plate of what appeared to be freshly baked chocolate chip cookies.

“Thanks, Mom,” Clark said as he toyed with the tea bag string, making the bag in the water rise and fall in an effort to make the flavor steep faster.

“So, what’s this all about? And how can we help?” Martha asked.

“You know how Lois and I have been going out for the last two and a half months,” he began, unsure of where else to start.

Martha nodded, “Of course, dear. You know your father and I are thrilled for you.”

“I want to marry her,” Clark found himself saying in a soft, almost whispered voice.

“Clark, that’s wonderful news!” Jonathan said, excitedly slapping Clark on the back.

“It’s a bit sudden, don’t you think?” Martha asked, folding her hands around a cup of steaming Earl Grey.

“Yes and no. I’ve known since I first met her that she was the woman for me,” Clark said. “But I also know and appreciate how early it is into our relationship. That’s why I haven’t even discussed the possibility of marriage with her yet. Soon though, I think. At least, I hope.”

“Do you need help? With the ring?” Jonathan asked, confused, it seemed, by why Clark was so quiet about such good news.

“Oh, no,” Clark said quickly, dispelling the thought. “I’ve been saving for a while. I’ve got more than enough for the kind of ring I’ve been thinking about, plus some extra for a wedding if she says yes.”

“So, then, why do you seem so...nervous?” Jonathan asked, searching for the right words.

“Well,” Clark said, dragging the word out somewhat, “there is one, ah, complication.”

“You need to tell her about Superman,” Martha said knowingly.

“I, uh...well, *two* complications,” Clark conceded. “I’m still not ready to tell Lois the truth about Superman. Not yet. I have to know that she would be answering *Clark’s* proposal, not Superman’s. I need to know that she’s choosing the man, not the powers.”

“You said that she loves you,” Martha reminded him.

“She does. And I’m thankful for that. But, I have to be sure.”

“You mentioned another complication?” Jonathan said, his voice making the statement into a slight question.

Clark dropped his eyes to the table again as he nodded.

“Yeah,” he said, pausing to sip at his tea. “It actually ties in to why I can’t tell her about myself yet.”

“Well?” his mother prodded.

“It’s ah...Lois is...we’re...” he stammered, feeling heat creep

up his neck and into his face as he blushed. “Lois is pregnant.”

For a moment, all his parents did was stare at him and blink. He wondered briefly if they’d slipped into shock.

“Pregnant?” Jonathan said, as though the word was foreign.

“Yeah,” Clark said, giving a single, shallow nod. “And I might be the father.”

“Might be?” Jonathan asked, raising an eyebrow as he drank from his mug. “You don’t know for sure?”

“Well, it’s like this,” Clark said, mentally preparing himself for the explanation. “You know what happened between Lois and Luthor. How he attacked her.”

Martha nodded as she bit into a cookie. “Of course.”

“Well, that happened the night before Lois and I...” He gestured vaguely, hoping to get his point across. “Remember how I told you about that woman with the pheromone perfume? The one who made the newsroom go crazy in lust?”

“Mmm-hmm,” they both said together, nearly in synch.

“I didn’t tell you all of it. I was too embarrassed, and, honestly, it was something very private. But, the truth is, Lois and I both got hit with the spray,” Clark said. He took a cookie from the plate and studied the random pattern of chocolate chips. “It affected us both. Lois a little more deeply than me, but I still found myself losing my grip on my self control. By the time we left work for the day, neither of us had any restraint left and things...happened.”

“Wait,” Jonathan said, holding up a hand like a traffic cop motioning for a car to stop. “How did it affect you? You’re different from other people.”

Clark bit into the cookie. As always, it was, he thought, like tasting a piece of Heaven. “She had this choker that she wore. It had this red gem...at least, I thought it was a gem. It wasn’t until later that I got a chance to really look at it. It was a piece of Kryptonite...some weird red kind that I’ve never seen before. All I know is that I didn’t get sick, the way I do when I’m exposed to the green kind. I did feel strangely though. I can’t really describe it. I guess it made me vulnerable to the chemicals in the perfume, just like a normal person would be.”

“So...” Martha began, at a loss for words it seemed.

“So...” he repeated after her, trying to fill the awkward silence, “I can’t be sure that I’m the father.” It was so difficult to admit those words out loud, as if saying them would make it true that Luthor was the biological father. “At least, I don’t know if I’m the *biological* father,” he amended after a moment. “But I *will* be the father, *if* Lois chooses to keep the baby.”

“She’s not sure yet?” Martha asked softly.

Clark hung his head as he shook it. “No. Not yet.”

“Because of the circumstances?” his mother asked, still in a soft, concerned voice.

“Partly,” Clark admitted. “At least, a huge part of it is the not knowing. I know she also isn’t sure she wants to be a mother.”

He could see the concealed hurt in his mother’s eyes. He’d seen it before. When people spoke of not wanting to be a mother, it was difficult for Martha to empathize, despite her best efforts. She was a woman who’d always dreamed of having a large family, only to find out that she would never be able to conceive and carry a child of her own. It seemed so cruel to all of the Kents, Clark included, that there could be those who would give anything for a child who couldn’t have one while others could have all the children they wanted and not want a single one of them.

“We haven’t been dating that long,” Clark quickly tried to add, to lessen the sting, but unsure if he was digging the wound a little deeper. “And she’s just so career-driven right now. I think she *does* want kids, eventually. But finding out that she’s expecting right now...it’s got her terrified and unsure of herself.”

Martha nodded. “I can understand that, in part. The night we found you, I felt scared too. Scared you’d be taken away from us.

Scared that, even though we'd spent many years and shed innumerable tears trying to have a baby, well... that I wasn't completely ready. What did I know of taking care of an infant? But it all passed the moment you grabbed my finger and looked me in the eyes. It was like you were telling me that everything would be okay, that we'd figure things out together."

"So, you think Lois will come around to the idea?" he asked, studying the steam that was lazily curling upward from his mug.

"That's not what I'm saying at all," Martha replied.

"Mom," he said, exasperated.

"All I'm saying is... it's normal to be a little afraid.

Everything changes when you have a baby. Not just the woman's body. Priorities change. Sleeping patterns change. Even the way you speak. Nothing is the same. But... when you see that child... none of that matters. A bond forms."

"I hope so," Clark said in a low, almost sad, voice. "Because I know she's kind of, well, freaking out about this."

"Does she know you're telling us?" Jonathan wanted to know.

Clark nodded twice. "I didn't want to say anything to you yet. Not until I knew for sure if you guys were going to be grandparents. But she wanted me to tell you. She wanted your advice and words of wisdom."

"And her parents?" his father prodded.

"She's too nervous to say anything yet. Lois' family... they aren't like you guys. They've always been a little harder on her. Her mom is into appearances — even though she's divorced, she wants to be seen as the perfect family. Lois is afraid of what she might say about a pregnancy out of wedlock and a potential termination." He still couldn't make himself use the word "abortion" in front of his parents. Mentally, he felt as though "termination" somehow softened the idea of ending the pregnancy, though he could not have given a reason why. "And her dad..." he shrugged. "She doesn't have much of a relationship with him. She hasn't for a long time. His affairs were what broke up the marriage, and he always regretted that Lois and her sister weren't boys."

He saw Jonathan bristle at that, but that was all the older man allowed himself to do. Complaining about Sam's behavior and thoughts would serve no purpose.

"So... that's where we are now," Clark said after a lapse into silence. "Lois is pregnant. We don't know who the father is right now. She's not sure if she wants to keep it anyway. If she does, I've sworn to be the only father the baby knows. She trusts you guys to be the calm and accepting ones. She's afraid of her family's reaction — except for her sister, who already knows. I want to marry Lois, but don't want it to look like a shotgun proposal to her. And, she has no idea that I'm Superman because I have no idea how to break *that* news to her, nor do I want that fact to influence her decision at all."

"You're going to need to," Martha said thoughtfully. "Not just if you want to marry her."

"What do you mean?" Clark asked.

"Well, if this *is* your biological child, he or she may develop powers of their own."

It was as if a bolt of lightning shot through Clark's body, searing all other thought out of him. Of course! How could he have overlooked that fact?

"Clark?" Jonathan asked, concerned, as he peered at his son's ashen face.

"I... I never thought of that," Clark confessed slowly, as if waking from a daze.

This is going to be harder than I thought, when I finally tell Lois the truth, he thought to himself.

"I think we're getting ahead of ourselves a little bit,"

Jonathan said. "Clark, you know you're different from the rest of the people on this planet. I don't want to sound harsh... but, we

don't even know for sure that you *can* father children with an ordinary person."

She's far from ordinary, he wanted to say. But his father was right. No one knew for sure if alien and human DNA could create another little life.

"I think I can find out," he finally said as his mind whirled.

"Yeah?" his father prodded.

"Dr. Klein," Clark offered as an explanation. "He knows everything *else* there is to know about Superman. I could visit him while in the suit and see if he can run some tests for me, under the guise of curiosity only. I'm sure he'd enjoy having yet more information on the Man of Steel. He seems fascinated by Superman's physiology. He's even run tests just to see how different Superman's blood is to a regular person's. Granted, that information might one day save my life, but I still think it wouldn't bother him to study one more aspect of the alien superhero. Although," he said, blushing a little, "it *is* pretty embarrassing."

"Son," Jonathan said slowly, as if choosing his words with great care. He put one sturdy hand on Clark's shoulder. "Are you sure that's a road you want to take? What if the results aren't what you hope for?"

Clark hung his head for a moment, thinking. After a minute, he lifted his head again in a sudden decision and determination. "I *need* to know. So does Lois. If I can't give her children, she needs to know that before we can take our relationship anywhere near the idea of marriage."

Jonathan nodded approvingly. "Okay then. As long as you're sure."

"I am." He took another cookie, dunked it in his tea, and ate it. "So, how disappointed are you guys?"

"Disappointed?" Martha asked, as though the word held some unknown meaning.

Clark shrugged. "I know you've always wanted to see me settle down and have a family of my own. But, let's face it, this is *not* the way you've imagined it, I'm sure."

Martha smiled gently and laughed. "Clark, you could never disappoint us. Oh, the situation isn't ideal because of what happened with Lex Luthor, but I'm proud of you."

"Proud? For falling victim to a perfume spray and potentially getting a woman pregnant outside of marriage?"

"No," Martha said with an amused twinkle in her eye. "For being the kind of man who's standing by his girlfriend during one of the scariest times of her life. For being ready to step up and care for this child, regardless of his or her parentage."

Clark bowed his head, speechless for the moment. He'd known his parents would be supportive, but he'd still harbored a shred of fear that he'd disappoint them. Instead, they were proud of him.

"I really hope you get to be grandparents," he said softly. "I'm so afraid that Lois might not keep the baby. I don't know if I can handle that — knowing that a child I might have fathered never got a chance to live... or might be living with total strangers if she chooses adoption."

"Have you told her this?" Martha asked.

"No," he replied, shaking his head sadly. "I can't. I don't want to pressure her in any way. I don't want her to feel like she has to choose to keep the baby. That's why she can't know that I'm Superman, not yet. Imagine the pressure of having to decide whether or not to keep a child that might be his!"

"Good point," Jonathan conceded. "But imagine how she'll feel afterward, if she doesn't keep the pregnancy."

"It's a lose-lose," Clark agreed unhappily.

"What can we do, son?" his father asked, again putting a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"There's nothing you *can* do, Dad. I have to figure this out on my own."

“Do you want us there, after you come clean to Lois?” Martha offered.

“I think I’d prefer to handle it on my own,” Clark replied after a several seconds of silence.

Maybe I should leave them my last wishes for my funeral, he thought unhappily. Because I have a feeling Lois is going to kill me.

“Morning,” Clark said, bringing his usual offering of coffee and a donut to Lois’ desk.

“Morning,” Lois said. “I tried calling you last night.”

“I was with my folks,” he said absently.

“With your folks?” she repeated.

Too late, Clark caught his mistake. “Uh, yeah,” he said, trying to brush it off. “I, uh... I happened to see Superman last night. He flew me out to my folk’s house so I could talk to them in person. About, well, you know,” he said cagily, ever mindful that certain members of the Daily Planet staff might overhear them.

Lois nodded, appearing to buy his half-truth. “How’d they take the news?”

“Surprisingly well,” he admitted in a whispered voice. He sat on the edge of her desk and took a bite of the plain cake donut he’d swiped for himself from the break area.

“They weren’t... I don’t know. Disappointed? Put off by the whole non-traditional aspect of this?”

Clark shook his head. “No. They seemed perfectly accepting of it. Even a little excited over the small chance that they might become... you know.” He couldn’t say grandparents, not here.

“But they *do* know that’s not likely,” Lois asked.

Clark nodded shallowly. “Of course.”

“But other than that...?”

“They didn’t have much, in terms of advice,” he said.

“They’ve never been in our situation. But Mom did say that even for her, the idea of becoming... you know... was scary for her at first, even though she’d spent her whole life wanting it.”

“She did?” Was Clark imagining it, or did Lois sound a little relieved to hear that?

“She said it was brief, just a moment or two as she first saw me, but then it was gone. She knew things would have a way of working out. Lucky for me, she was right.”

“That’s all?” She sounded hopeful that Martha had somehow bestowed the secrets of the universe on Clark.

“Pretty much,” he said, hating the crushed look on her face. “She said that you can call her any time you want to though.”

Lois nodded distractedly. “That’s nice of her.”

“She wants to help. They both do,” Clark said in a soft, kind voice.

“No opinions on what she would do, if she was in my shoes?” It was almost as if Lois hoped someone would tell her what the best course of action would be.

“Sorry,” Clark said apologetically. “But remember, her life experiences are a little different than yours.”

“True,” Lois admitted with a sigh.

“Look, I have a few errands that I need to run after work today. It shouldn’t take me long. We can have dinner and talk about this in more detail then. Okay?”

“I wish I could,” Lois said. “But I promised Lucy I’d meet her new boyfriend tonight.”

“New boyfriend? I thought she wasn’t seeing anyone?”

“Oh, she wasn’t. Until three days ago. He’s in a biker gang.” The sarcasm dripping from her lips was as thick as honey. “He just got out of jail for narcotics possession. Great, huh?”

Clark made a face as if to say “yikes” but didn’t make a sound.

Lois rolled her eyes. “It’s going to take more than one drink to get through the night. And I can’t even do that.”

“You want me to come with you?” Clark asked.

“Could you?” she asked in an almost childlike voice.

Clark grinned. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world. What time do you need me there?”

“Seven. Casey’s Pub.”

“I’ll be there,” he promised.

Clark flew through the darkening sky at a speed that fell somewhere between leisurely and urgently. He was well aware of how long he had before he needed to meet up with Lois, Lucy, and Lucy’s new boyfriend. On the other hand, he was exceedingly nervous about his upcoming meeting with Dr. Klein. He wasn’t sure what would be required of him, and what wouldn’t be. It was making his stomach churn. Admitting to Dr. Klein, even as discreet as the man was, that he wanted to one day father children was scary, because it made Superman so vulnerably human.

It has to be done, he reminded himself with a mental sigh. Whatever the results are, I owe it to Lois and myself to find out the truth. I need to know if there’s even a chance that this child is mine. I need to know if I can have others in the future, regardless of Lois’ decision to keep this baby or not.

Before long, S.T.A.R. Labs came into view. Clark hovered for a long few minutes, gathering up his courage, before he finally descended in a slow, graceful angle. He approached the front door and a guard buzzed him in without Clark needing to ask. He nodded his thanks before finding his way to Dr. Klein’s office. Again, he hesitated before knocking, but only for a few seconds.

“Just a second!” he heard Dr. Klein call from within. A second later, Clark heard something explode.

“Dr. Klein?” he asked, opening the door a crack. “Is everything all right?”

“Oh, Superman,” the doctor said with a cursory glance up. “Come in.”

“I heard something explode,” Clark offered, as a way to skirt his real reason for visiting, even if only for a minute.

“That?” Dr. Klein said, grabbing a well-used towel and wiping up his work bench. “I overheated a beaker. I’m working on this new... well... never mind. I’m sure it’s less important than why you’re here.”

Clark grabbed a broom from where it leaned against the wall and swept up the pieces of glass on the floor. “I wouldn’t call it important, exactly,” he said as he worked.

“So, this is a social call?”

“Not exactly,” Clark said, feeling heat rise in his cheeks as he used a dustpan to pick up the glass and put it in the closest trash bin. “Can we talk? Privately?” He glanced around, even though no one else was in the room with them.

“Of course,” Dr. Klein said, sitting down on the stool next to him. “Thanks for doing that, by the way.” He gestured to the glass Clark had picked up. “What’s on your mind?”

Clark put the broom back where he’d gotten it from and leaned a hip against the work bench. “It’s kind of a personal thing.”

“Whatever it is, you know I’ll keep your confidence.”

“I know,” he said with a nod. “The thing is... you’ve run numerous batteries of tests on me.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You know how my body works better than anyone else on this planet.”

“It’s been a privilege,” the doctor said, seeming to be slightly confused.

“Well, there’s one thing that we’ve never really discussed,” Clark hedged. “Something that I’ve been wondering about recently.”

Dr. Klein furrowed his brow. “I’m nowhere near ready to

experiment with the idea of a Kryptonite vaccine,” he said, lowering his voice.

“Not that,” Clark quickly corrected him. “Something else completely.”

“Oh.” Was Clark imagining it, or did Dr. Klein sound very relieved that Superman wasn’t looking for the vaccine? “It’s not that I haven’t thought about it,” the man began to ramble, “but I’ve been under so much stress here with the entire place being in upheaval since the department chair quit and…”

“Dr. Klein,” Clark interrupted as politely as he could. “Really, I’m not here about that. I understand that it may take years before we’re anywhere near ready to test that. And that it’s only a theory, not a guarantee that we’ll even come up with one.”

Dr. Klein took a breath and nodded. “So, then, what *can* I do for you today?”

“I need some more, uh, *personal* tests conducted. Ones that are strictly between you and me.”

“That shouldn’t be too difficult. Half the department is out sick with the flu, even though flu season is over. The other half is too overworked to wonder what I’m up to. What do you need?”

“Well,” Clark said, rubbing the back of his neck in a very uncharacteristic move for Superman. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately.”

“About?” Dr. Klein prompted when Clark didn’t elaborate further.

“Well,” he repeated, drawing the word out. “I’m not saying that it’s something that is of immediate concern, but I want to know...if I were to date and get serious with a woman...could I...father a child? With an Earth woman, I mean.”

“I...oh,” the man replied, his entire face changing to reflect his shock at being asked such a question. “Are you...?”

“Just curious,” Clark replied, not wanting to flat out lie to the man. “But, lately, it’s been on my mind more and more.”

Dr. Klein scratched the back of his neck. “It should be simple enough to find out,” he reasoned, sounding like he was talking more to himself than to Clark at the moment. “I can run a few simple tests, and should have the results for you in...say...a week? In the meantime, I, uh, would recommend that you, uh, protect yourself, if you are, um, going to be, uh, intimate with anyone. Earthly diseases can’t affect you but until we know more, we have to assume that you can potentially get someone pregnant.”

“Sounds good,” Clark said haltingly as he realized just how uncomfortable Dr. Klein was, discussing birth control with him. “What do you need from me?”

“Well, not to put too fine a point on it, I need a sample of your DNA.”

“Okay,” Clark said. “Let’s do it then.”

Dr. Klein rummaged around in a supply closet for a moment, only to emerge with a sterile cup in his hand. He gave it to Clark, who peered at it for a moment, uncomprehendingly. He’d thought a simple blood test could tell him what he needed to know.

“I’ll need you to, ah, deposit a sample of your, ah, genetic material in the cup,” Dr. Klein said, his face going almost fuchsia. “There’s a room down the hall, third door on the left, that you can use.”

“Ah...okay,” Clark said, fighting hard not to blush.

This is more embarrassing than I thought it would be.

“There are some, uh, materials in there, if you need the, um, inspiration,” Dr. Klein added, not making any eye contact at all. In fact, he appeared to be studying the tiles on the floor.

“Magazines and movies, to be exact.”

“Thanks,” Clark said in as neutral a tone as he could muster.

And here I thought admitting to my folks that I might have fathered a child out of wedlock would be the worst of it, he thought with a resigned sigh as he went to produce the sample Dr. Klein required of him.

“Clark?” Lois asked, as she emerged from the bathroom of his apartment.

“Hey. Are you feeling any better?” he asked, though the lingering paleness in her face told him that she wasn’t yet recovered.

She’d been throwing up for the better part of half an hour. She’d been feeling so miserable that she’d even kicked him out of the bathroom when he’d tried to help by rubbing her back. It was now nearly midnight.

“Whoever called this ‘morning sickness’ was a moron,” she complained as she collapsed onto the couch beside Clark.

He immediately took her into his arms and stroked her hair with one hand. He placed a kiss on the side of her head. “I’m sorry. Do you need me to get you anything?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head slightly. “Just hold me, okay?”

“I can do that,” he said cheekily.

Lois glanced at the television and winced. “Your team’s taking a beating, huh?”

Clark shrugged. “I expected as much. Their best guy is benched for the rest of the season with a torn rotator cuff. Was there something you’d like to watch? Because, I have to be honest, this game is brutal to watch.”

Lois shrugged in turn before snuggling deeper into Clark’s side. “What about the movie stations?”

Clark dutifully switched the channel, and eventually they settled on ‘Lethal Weapon’. It was great, Clark mused to himself, having a girlfriend who usually preferred action movies over sentimental, girly ones. He leaned his head against hers, resting his cheek against the top of her head.

“Clark?”

“Hmm?”

“I was wondering. I have another doctor’s appointment next week. Would you...do you want to come with me?”

“Yeah,” he said, lighting up in excitement. “I’d love to come.”

“It’s an ultrasound, so, I thought...you know.”

“Lois, it could be nothing more than a consult about your morning sickness and I would be there, right beside you,” he said, his words sounding like an oath.

He could see the smile in the corner of her mouth.

“Of course, you know, I’m still torn. I don’t know what to do,” she said after a moment. “Or, I guess, what it is that I *want* to do.”

“I know,” he said, trying to push the disappointment from his words. Not knowing if he was going to actually be a father or not was killing him inside, as every day he grew more and more accustomed to the idea of fatherhood. “I guess we can talk to your doctor about that when we’re there. Our options, what kind of time frame we’re looking at, whether or not we can conduct a DNA test while the baby is still in utero...if you want to, that is.”

“I’ve thought of that. I’m not sure I *want* to know. I mean, shouldn’t I know if I want this baby, without knowing who fathered it? What if...I don’t know...the test is wrong, and I terminate it or allow it to be born and it isn’t really biologically who they say it is?”

“I think the chances of that are pretty slim, Lois,” Clark said.

Inwardly, however, he felt a weight lifted from his shoulders. He’d thought long and hard about the possibility of a paternity test, but the idea had terrified him. What if his very DNA was so different that it screamed ‘alien’ to whoever was running the test?

“Anyway, it’s Monday at one.”

“I’ll be there, I promise.”

“Thanks.” She paused, then after a minute add, “You know, I’m impressed.”

“By what?” Clark asked.

“Everything. I know you’re a man of your word, don’t get me wrong. But, still...how you’ve really stepped up these past few weeks...it’s been so...I don’t know. Reassuring? This might not even be your child, but you’ve been right by my side, as if it was unquestionably yours. Helping when I’ve been sick, covering for me at work, and now going to the doctor appointments with me. I guess...I guess part of me had been a little afraid that the chance of it being Lex’s baby would send you running for the hills.”

“No way,” Clark said with a smile. “I’ve already told you, this baby is, at the very least, half you. *That’s* what matters to me. I already consider myself the father, regardless of what a blood test can tell us.”

“Still, I’m glad. It makes me feel,” she paused, looking for the right word. “Lucky, I guess. And loved. And...secure. I know that sounds weird but, it makes me feel like, whatever path I chose, we’ll be okay. You and me. Our relationship.”

“That’s because it *will* be okay,” Clark vowed. “*We’ll* be okay.”

Lois hummed a note of acknowledgement and snuggled in closer. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Lois yawned, though she tried to stifle the sound. Clark felt her whole body shift along with the yawn. He lightly stroked her hair.

“You want to get some sleep?” he asked.

Lois nodded. “Can I stay here?”

“Of course you can.”

“Will you cuddle with me for while?” she asked in an almost childlike voice.

“You mean, right here? Because we’re sort of already doing that,” he joked.

“In the bed,” she clarified.

“Lois...are you sure?”

“Clark, I’m already pregnant. How much more trouble can we create for ourselves by snuggling innocently together in your bed?”

Clark shrugged. He couldn’t deny her logic, or the fact that he’d dreamt about sleeping with her in his arms since the moment they’d met.

“Okay,” he agreed. “Go get yourself ready for bed. I’ll close up everything here.”

As Lois moved off toward the bathroom, Clark shut the television off. He locked the door to his apartment, then moved through the living room, cleaning as he went. Empty teacups went into the sink to be washed in the morning. Open Chinese food containers went into the garbage, having sat out for too long and being too close to empty to attempt to save the remaining food. The blanket Lois had been using prior to getting sick got folded and draped over the back of the couch.

When Lois was finished in the bathroom, Clark went in. He brushed his teeth and rinsed with a minty mouthwash in anticipation of how intimately close he’d be to Lois. He changed into sleep pants and a plain white t-shirt. Normally, he’d shed everything down to his boxers and climb into bed, but he and Lois weren’t quite at that place in their still-new relationship.

I’d wear a full suit of armor if that would make her comfortable, he thought as he removed a piece of lingering shrimp and broccoli from his teeth with a bit of dental floss.

Lois was waiting for him in the bed by the time he emerged from the bathroom. She was lying on her side, facing the empty space she’d left him. Clark smiled tenderly at her. She looked so tired, but she returned his smile with one of her own — the loving, private kind she reserved for him alone.

“Are you okay with that side of the bed?” she asked.

“I’m great with it.”

“Because, if you prefer this side...”

He shook his head, cutting her off gently. “Really. It’s perfect.

I’d sleep out on the terrace if that was what would make you happy.”

“I’ll have to keep that in mind, just in case,” she teased him. “Never know when you might be in the doghouse.”

Clark chuckled as he slipped beneath the sheets. “Oh yeah? Well, who’s to say that I’ll ever *be* in the doghouse?”

Lois laughed and dragged her index finger over his chest. “Gut instinct,” she said, continuing to play with him.

“Mmm,” he replied, leaning in for a kiss.

“Of course,” Lois said breathlessly, once they parted, “with kisses like that, I’m not sure I’ll ever be mad at you for long.”

“I hope so,” he breathed against her lips, moving in to kiss her again.

When at last they were done kissing, Clark shut off the bedside light. Leaving his glasses on in case Lois woke before him, he cradled her against his chest, reveling in the feeling of having her in his arms. Before long, her breathing changed and became more even as she slipped into sleep. Feather-light snores followed, until she shifted in her dreams and found a more comfortable position.

For a little while, he just watched Lois sleep using only the city lights that filtered through his bedroom windows to see by. She looked so peaceful, so angelic, that it was hard for him to want to close his eyes, even though he was more than ready to slip off to dreamland himself. It was only when he felt his eyes closing of their own accord that he finally snuggled his head down into his pillow and shut his eyes. Within moments, he was whisked off to a deep, dreamless sleep.

Help!

The cry for help forced his eyes to bolt open. He felt a little dazed and disoriented at first. It was strangely new, waking up to find Lois in his arms, her dark, shoulder length hair tickling his nose. A swift glance at the bedside clock informed him that he’s been asleep for roughly forty-five minutes. He listened to the night, to see if the call for aid was repeated. When it was, he gently eased Lois out of his embrace, careful not to wake or otherwise disturb her.

Quiet as any mouse, Clark slipped out of bed. He made sure Lois was sound asleep before changing into his Superman uniform. He crept out to the terrace and took off like an arrow suddenly loosed from a bow. He found, to his relief, that the call for help was simple. A single car full of drunk teens had flipped while careening around a sharp, nearly hairpin turn on the highway just outside of the city limits. Clark easily righted the car, then ferried the young men and women to the closest hospital. A short, ten minute stop at the police department was next, where he told a sleepy Detective Zymak about the accident. Then he was headed home.

Clark cautiously pushed the door open from the terrace. Lois’ back was to him, but he could tell by the way she was still lightly snoring that she was asleep. He held his breath as he stepped first one red booted foot into the bedroom, then the other. He spun out of the suit and back into his bedclothes and eased himself back into bed. It took him a few prolonged moments to get comfortable, but he remained far from sleep. Sometimes, after a rescue, even simple, run-of-the-mill ones like the one he’d just made, his adrenaline would be pumping, making it difficult to find sleep once again. He shifted some more, attempting to find a position that encouraged the return of his dreams.

“Clark?” Lois mumbled in a sleep-caked voice.

“Ssh, it’s okay,” he replied. “Go back to sleep.”

He went stock still as he spoke, terrified that she might have woken as he changed clothes via the mini-twister he became when he did his spin move.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Why are you moving so much?”

“I’m having trouble sleeping,” he said, knowing it wasn’t a

total lie. “I woke up a little while ago and now I can’t fall back to sleep. I was trying to get comfortable just now. Sorry I woke you.”

Lois yawned mightily. “Come here.”

She flipped over so that she was facing him and threw her left arm over Clark’s body. He had to admit, it *did* help soothe his racing thoughts, steering them away from the rescue and reminding him of how very lucky he was to have Lois in his life. She rubbed his arm for a couple of minutes, generating heat and calming his mind. He reached out and put his arm over her as well.

“Feeling better?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “You’re incredible.”

“I try,” she teased him with a tired smile.

“Thank you,” Clark whispered, resting his forehead against hers.

“Any time.” She fidgeted a minute, then disentangled herself from him. “Be right back.”

Clark watched as she got out of bed and made off in the direction of the bathroom. It brought up an interesting point. How long would it be before a rescue pulled him out of bed in the middle of the night and Lois woke up to find him gone? He hoped it would be a long time in coming, but he wasn’t deluded enough to really believe that. Sooner or later, it would happen. Of course, he also didn’t want to assume that Lois would often be spending the night with him. He sighed and sent up a silent prayer that it wouldn’t happen until after he told her the whole truth about himself.

“Back,” Lois announced as she reentered the room, rubbing at her eyes and yawning.

“Come back to bed,” Clark told her. “It’s late. We both need some sleep.”

Lois nodded. “That’s for sure.”

She slipped easily back into his waiting arms. Once she settled into a comfortable spot, she kissed Clark lightly on the lips. Clark kissed back, deepening the chaste touch a little further. Lois responded, sighing against his lips.

“How did I get so lucky?” she murmured against his chest afterward as they cuddled.

“I wonder the same thing every time I look at you,” Clark admitted in a soft whisper. “You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Lois reached up to touch his face. For a moment, his heart stopped beating. It almost looked like she might attempt to take his glasses off in preparation for bed. But her hand came to a merciful rest on his upturned cheek.

“So are you, Clark. I used to think I’d be pathetically alone all my life. That I’d turn into the crazy old cat lady. Only with fish. Like, tanks everywhere in my apartment. And now, well, I can’t promise that I won’t stop keeping fish, but I feel so... complete...having you in my life.”

“I’m glad,” Clark said, his voice still the same gossamer whisper in the night, “because I feel the same way about you. For various reasons, I’ve always been a loner. Despite friends and family, I’ve never really connected with anyone on a soul-deep level. That’s not to say that I’m not close with anyone. Jimmy might as well be my brother, for the love I have for him. But you? You make me happy in a way I’d never known was possible. So, I thank you for that.”

Lois hummed an acknowledgement before closing her eyes. “Love you,” she said through a yawn.

“Love you too,” Clark said, placing a kiss on her brow.

He closed his own eyes and found, hours later, that Lois had been right. Being in her arms had almost instantly allowed sleep to claim him.

“Lois?”

“Right here,” she replied, standing from her seat.

“Come with me please.”

The nurse led Lois beyond the waiting room door and into the maze of offices and examination rooms. Clark followed in her wake, his finger wedged in his book to mark his place until he could find a slip of paper to act as a bookmark. They eventually wound up in a small, cheerfully painted lilac room. The nurse got straight to work, taking Lois’ weight and blood pressure, marking it down in the chart she carried with her. Then she ushered Lois off to the bathroom so that a urine sample could be collected to test for potential issues with the pregnancy.

While Lois was gone, Clark took a minute to look around the examination room. A new looking, portable ultrasound machine stood in one corner. The monitor was on and blank. Posters covered the wall. The largest depicted an illustrated woman standing sideways and drawn so that her insides could be seen, a head-down baby positioned perfectly for her to give birth. Organs were labeled. Even the fetus and all of his accompanying items were labeled — placenta, umbilical cord, amniotic fluid. A second poster, slightly smaller than the first, showed the same woman during the different months of the pregnancy, as the child within developed and grew larger.

Other glossy posters listed the benefits breastfeeding, things to avoid eating and doing while pregnant, the signs of postpartum depression. Clark read them all at super speed, committing the information to his nearly flawless memory. He was just skimming the information sheet about car seats when Lois returned. She gave him a nervous half smile, which he returned.

“The doctor will be in shortly,” the nurse said as she closed the door behind her.

Ten minutes later, there was a light sound of knuckles rapping against the wooden door. A moment later, it opened to reveal a tall, skinny woman in a white lab coat. She introduced herself to Clark as Dr. Lauren Prescott, then asked Lois how she was feeling.

“Some morning...well, all day sickness,” Lois said. “It comes and goes, never at the same time, but usually lasting an hour or less.”

“Good,” the doctor said, nodding. “Any discomfort, pain, or bleeding?”

“No,” Lois said, shaking her head.

“Anything at all out of the ordinary?”

“Nope.”

“Okay then. We’ll just have a peek at your baby today and see how he or she is doing. We’ll do a quick measurement and check the heartbeat.”

“We’ll actually see it?” Clark asked, surprised.

Dr. Prescott nodded. “You sure will.”

“Will we be able to see if it’s a boy or girl?” he asked.

“Not yet. We’re still a few weeks too early for that. Lois? Just lay back here and lift your shirt up. We warm the gel, so it should be nice and comfortable for you.”

Lois did as she was bid, rolling her shirt up to just below her breasts. The doctor squirted a generous dollop of gel on her bare and barely protruding belly, then pressed the ultrasound wand to her skin. She expertly found the baby, who seemed to be doing gymnastics within the dark confines of its home. Clark heard Lois’ breath hitch as she looked upon the tiny being that was growing inside of her.

Clark was in awe. It was one thing to look at illustrations showing the stages of growth and development. It was another to see the marked difference in size and even the form of the baby in person. The first ultrasound images Lois had shown to him were merely white blobs floating in a sea of black, surrounded further still by a grainy gray sea that represented the rest of Lois’ uterus. Now, however, arms and legs were moving, clear as day. He

could easily see the baby's head as the child twisted and turned, almost somersaulting in that perfect darkness.

"Wow," he breathed in a reverent tone.

My baby.

"Yeah," Lois repeated, sounding a little dazed. He couldn't tell if it was a good thing or a bad thing though.

A perfectly formed human being. There are arms and legs.

Feet. Fingers.

He said nothing of this to Lois. He knew she still didn't know if she wanted to keep the baby and he refused to pressure her in any way. As he was having those thoughts, however, the doctor moved the ultrasound wand slightly, to get a better view of the beautiful flickering that was the baby's heart. She pressed a button, focused in on the flickering, then, pressing a different button, switched to sound. In the next second, the rhythmic but fast sound of the heart beat filled the room.

Clark tried his best to appear stunned. The truth was, he'd snuck in a listen with his super hearing on more than one occasion. It had been, in part, his way to reassure himself that the baby was still living and growing. It had also been, for the greater part, his way of trying to get to know that child before he or she could be born, if they would be born at all.

"Very strong," the doctor commented. "Now, let's get a few measurements."

She worked deftly, but the baby was so hyper and squirmy that she had a hard time capturing some of the measurements she needed. Still, she remained patient and laughed it off.

"Quite the little acrobat," she observed at one point. "Hold still, little one. There we go. And... got it. Looks good."

Throughout it all, Lois said barely a word. Clark was torn between checking her reactions and wanting to watch every second of the baby's antics in the screen before him. He ultimately pulled his eyes from the screen to look at Lois. She was laying on the table almost completely motionless, her expression completely neutral and utterly unreadable. He gave her hand a little squeeze as he sat there next to her, but even then, she barely acknowledged his presence.

"Okay, we're all set here. You can towel off and sit up," Dr. Prescott said, handing Lois a thin hospital-grade towel. Lois methodically rubbed the goop off her stomach. "Do we have any questions today?"

Lois and Clark exchanged a look as Lois abandoned the table for one of the regular chairs in the room. Clark nodded slightly, letting Lois take the lead.

"Yes, actually," she finally said. "We have a few questions."

"Go right head, as many questions as you can think of," the doctor encouraged her with a sincere smile.

"Well," Lois began in halting tones, "you might remember from last time that this wasn't exactly a planned pregnancy."

"I remember the situation," Dr. Prescott said, nodding as she skimmed her notes with a speed that rivaled Superman. "Two possible fathers, correct?"

"Right," Lois confirmed. "The thing is...not to put too fine a point on it, but I'm not entirely sure I want to keep this pregnancy. So, what's the procedure for that?"

"Well," said the doctor, reaching for a booklet from a wall-mounted shelf and handing it to Lois. "We'll schedule you for an appointment at the hospital. You'll undergo anesthesia, and the fetus will be removed from your body, along with the placenta. We dispose of the remains. New Troy state law does mandate that it be done before twenty weeks, however. So, while I won't pressure you, you will have to decide fairly soon, though you do have some time to think about it."

"And if I choose to keep the baby? How can I know for certain who the father is? Do I have to wait until it's born?"

Dr. Prescott shook her head. "No. We can run certain tests while the fetus is still in utero to test the DNA. Since you know

for sure that it's one of two men, we can just test Clark here. If he's not a match, then you know it's the other man."

"And how, exactly, is that done?" Clark asked.

"The best way right now is through an amniocentesis. We use an ultrasound machine to guide a large needle," she approximated the length with her hands, "in through the abdominal wall, into the uterus, and into the sac surrounding the baby. We draw out some of the fluid, in which there are shed skin cells, and run the tests on that. For you, we can run it through blood, a cheek swab, even a lock of your hair."

"And is there a time limit on that as well?" Lois asked before Clark could voice the same question.

"It would need to be scheduled and performed between weeks fifteen and twenty. So, about the same as a termination. We can go later, but I personally don't like to do them much later than that."

"What about the risks?" Clark asked, not caring about whatever reasons the doctor had for steering away from testing in the later part of pregnancy. "To Lois and to the baby, I mean."

"There's a risk of bleeding, leaking of amniotic fluid, and cramping," the doctor explained. "There is also a slight risk of miscarriage. About one percent. But, we can also run tests to look for genetic diseases while we run the paternity test. We'll look for things like Down's Syndrome and cystic fibrosis, as well as any others that the baby may be at risk for, given your family histories. Actually, we can fill out the family history for you now, Clark. We already have Lois'."

"I don't have any knowledge of what my family history is like," he said vaguely. "I never knew my biological parents. I was adopted as an infant by my parents after I was left on their doorstep."

"Oh," the doctor said, blushing a little in embarrassment. "I didn't mean..."

"It's fine," Clark said, waving off her concerns. "It's never really been that big of a deal for me."

"Any other questions?" the woman asked, clearly trying to change the subject after her gaffe.

Lois shrugged, looking slightly overwhelmed. "I can't think of anything."

"Okay," the doctor said, nodding and scribbling a note in the chart. She handed Lois a slip of paper to give to the receptionist. "This is for your next appointment. Give it to Trisha. She'll get you all set. If you decide on testing or termination, give us a call and we'll get that set for you. In the meantime, feel free to give us a call if you have any other concerns or questions. Someone will always get back to you in a timely manner, I promise."

"So, there's nothing to worry about? With the baby?" Clark asked.

"Everything looks perfect, don't worry."

But, I do worry, he thought to himself. *For the baby and for Lois.*

Clark landed with a whoosh. He saw that he was just in time. The man he sought was about to leave. But at the familiar sound and rush of air that accompanied Superman's takeoffs and landings, he stopped and turned around, his keys still dangling from his fingertips.

"Superman!"

"Dr. Klein," Clark greeted him warmly. "I was wondering if we might be able to talk?" It started as a statement, but tapered off into a question, subtly informing the man of the sensitive nature of the coming discussion.

"Of course." Dr. Klein stuck his keys in his pocket and gestured. "This way."

"I'm sorry to keep you so late," Clark apologized. "I know you're probably looking forward to getting home."

Dr. Klein shrugged. "Actually, I'm in no rush. Here. Let's

sit.”

Clark obliged, sitting on the cold metal bench at the furthest end of the S.T.A.R. Labs building. He pulled his cape slightly around him, trying to make himself comfortable. Dr. Klein sat down next to him, but didn't look at Clark at all.

“I'm assuming you came to ask about your test results.”

Clark swallowed hard, nodding. “Yes. If they're ready, of course. I know you said it could take some time, but it's been over a week. So, I figured...” He shrugged.

“Oh, they're ready,” Dr. Klein said, his voice almost void of emotion. “I finished up my testing a day or two ago. I wasn't sure how best to contact you, but figured you'd probably stop by.”

“And?” Clark prodded gently, already knowing that they wouldn't be good. “What did the results say?”

“Well,” the man said, taking a big breath and letting it out slowly, “as I expected, they were wildly different from a regular person's. The basics were the same. Shape, numbers, the ability to swim. Everything looked great at first glance. If you were a regular guy, I would have stopped there and proclaimed you to be healthy and fertile.”

“But?” Clark asked, trying not to let on how low his heart had sunk.

“Because of your unique background, I delved a little deeper. Actually, a lot deeper. I took things down to the very DNA they carried. What I saw there...”

He went silent as a few of the late shift scientists walked by, coming from a small side parking lot. He and Clark nodded amiably at the foursome as they passed the bench, and received nods and smiles in return.

“It wasn't good news, was it?” Clark asked in a quiet voice as the group moved out of earshot.

“I'm afraid not,” the man replied, sounding miserable and possibly close to tears, but he didn't elaborate.

“Dr. Klein?” Clark asked, putting a light hand on the man's shoulder in order to try and get the doctor to look at him. It worked. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

“I know. It's just...well...you're...well...*you*. And I don't want to, you know.” He gestured vaguely. “You don't deserve what I have to tell you.”

“It's okay. I can handle it,” Clark said, putting on the most convincing smile he could muster while his heart quietly broke. “Just tell me. Please.”

“Well, as I said, I started to look at the structure of your DNA. It was fascinating. I've never seen anything quite like it before. Part of me has wondered if studying it further might not unlock the secrets of how your powers work and why Kryptonite affects you. But, as far as compatibility for reproductive purposes...” He gulped, taking a deep breath and studying the sidewalk before plunging on. “I'm sorry, Superman. Your DNA is just too different than that of an Earthling. I'm afraid that it's not possible for you to father a child with an Earth woman.”

Clark had been expecting bad news, and had even been aware of this exact possibility. But to hear it confirmed shattered his already wounded heart. The broken shards seemed to stab at the rest of his body as his world crumbled.

“Are...” he asked, pausing to swallow back his hurt and attempt to maintain Superman's well-defined neutrality. He tried to subtly clear his throat. “Are you sure?”

“Almost certainly.”

“Almost?” Clark asked, wanting to see some glimmer for hope in that one word. “What do you mean by almost? Is there some chance...?”

Dr. Klein sighed and rubbed at his temples for a few seconds. “You have to understand, this is all untested speculation. But, there were some similarities to a regular person's DNA. I ran some numbers last night, actually. Just to see if there was any way I could give you good news.”

“And?”

“And, the best I could come up with was a trillion to one shot of conception occurring, even if you went high tech and used in vitro to aid you.”

“A trillion to one,” Clark echoed, his voice flat.

Dr. Klein nodded sadly. “I wish I had better news. I'm so sorry.”

Clark shook his head, dazed. “No, don't be. It's not your fault. If anything, I'm glad that you were able to come up with any results at all. And I'm glad you gave it to me straight.”

“I know it's not the news you'd hoped to hear.”

“I don't think any man would,” Clark said, doing his best not to show how much the results had killed him inside. “Let me ask...this trillion to one shot. How...how would that even...? He paused, uncertain how to phrase the question he wanted to ask.

“How would it happen?” the doctor supplied. He sighed again. “Truthfully, I'm not even sure. Maybe just the perfect storm of conditions between your genetic material and that of the woman you'd want to have a child with. Or maybe that trillion to one is just a false hope. I honestly don't know. I wish I did.”

“What about exposure to Kryptonite?” Clark asked in a low voice, though no one was nearby.

“What about it?”

“Could it...affect things?”

“Probably not,” Dr. Klein said, looking down at his own lap. “It affects your body, sure, but it doesn't alter your DNA. I tried exposing some of the sample you left to a small shard of the rock. I wanted to cover any and all theories I could come up with, or that I thought you might ask about. All it did was hasten the rate at which the sample died off.”

“I see.” Again, Clark felt his body deflate further with the worsening news.

“I'm so, so sorry,” the doctor repeated. “I feel just awful, having to give you this news.”

“I...uh...I guess I expected this, in a way,” Clark confided. “After all, I'm not human. It stands to reason that I wouldn't be compatible with humans. Just like my blood is similar, but different enough that I could never donate it or receive a transfusion. It's just...one of those things.” This time, he failed to stop the remorse from showing in his voice as he finished speaking.

“If there was anything I could do to change things or find...I don't know...some way to alter things so you had better odds, you know that I would. The world needs more people like you,” Dr. Klein said miserably.

Clark nodded, his mind in a fog. “Thanks, Doc. I appreciate it.” He stood and Dr. Klein followed suit. “Again, I appreciate your help and discretion with such a sensitive, personal issue.” He extended a hand.

Dr. Klein took his hand and shook it. “Any time. I'm always happy to help, when I can. I just wish I actually *could* help you in this case.”

“You have,” Clark said. “Anyway, I should probably go. You'll be wanting to get home, at the very least. Goodnight, Doc.”

“Goodnight, Superman,” the doctor said.

Clark silently rose into the dark sky, trading the company of Dr. Klein for the loneliness of the upper atmosphere of the Earth, far above where any plane would dare to go. He wanted no distractions. He didn't want to have to think about avoiding skyscrapers or birds or planes. He just wanted to be alone. He barely even wanted to think.

But his thoughts wouldn't be quelled, no matter what he did.

A trillion to one, his mind screamed at him. *A trillion to one. Why did you even bother to entertain the idea that this baby could be yours? You knew the odds would likely be slim to none. You're an alien, you fool! What gave you the hope that you could*

ever father a child with Lois?

Because, some other, inner voice countered, I love her: Because I believe that our love can overcome any obstacle. Because I so desperately wanted this baby to be mine and not Luthor's, for the sake of that child and for Lois.

Idiot! the first voice sneered at him. Fool! Wanting something doesn't mean it will come true. You're hopeless, Clark.

Maybe so, the second voice shot back as Clark rocketed into that peaceful place between the stars and the Earth, but a trillion to one means that there is a remote chance that it could be mine. No matter what though, I will be that child's father.

"A trillion to one," Clark said aloud, though in the cold vacuum of space, he couldn't hear his own voice.

It was as empty and lifeless around him as the hope he was trying to cling to.

"Ready, honey?" Clark asked.

"As I'll ever be."

"Got your notebook?"

"Right here," she said, patting her purse affectionately. "Let's go."

"Are you *sure* you're okay with this? Seeing *him*, I mean?"

Lois nodded determinedly. "Absolutely. In fact, I can't wait to see Lex get nailed for his involvement in Intergang."

It was Day One of the trial. Luthor stood charged of crimes too numerous to recount without a written list, even for Clark's nearly flawless memory. On a personal level, Clark felt the same as Lois. He could scarcely wait for justice to be doled out, though he knew the trial was likely to last for weeks, if not longer. It would be deeply satisfying to see the man pay for his evil doings. How many people had lost their businesses and livelihoods at the hands of his thugs? How many more had lost their lives? How many more would have suffered if he hadn't been caught?

"Does this suit look okay?" Lois asked after a moment. "It's a little tight across the stomach. It doesn't scream 'pregnant,' does it?"

"It looks fine," Clark assured her. "No one will know the difference."

"I don't want Lex to know," she admitted.

"I know. But, in all honesty, I'm sure he'll barely even be aware that you and I are there. This trial is probably going to be an absolute circus with the media coverage."

"Let's stay near the back anyway," Lois said. "Just in case."

"That shouldn't be too hard. I think everyone else is going to want to be front and center for this one. Anyway, how'd you sleep last night?"

"Not too badly, all things considered," she said, shrugging. She grabbed her keys and ushered Clark out of her apartment. "It took me a while to fall asleep. I even considered calling you, just to talk."

"You could have," Clark said as they walked down the hallway together. It was true. It had been a quiet night and he hadn't needed to attend any emergencies. "I was up until about one."

"How come?" Lois reached the stairs and pulled the door open.

"I was thinking about the Espen case," he said. "I took another look over the research, hoping to find something we could use, but..." He shrugged, letting his voice trail off.

"I put in a call to Bobby Bigmouth before you came over. Hopefully he'll know something."

"Good thinking," Clark said.

Lois insisted on driving to the courthouse. As they made their way through the early morning Metropolis traffic, they both allowed themselves to lapse into other topics. Lois told Clark how Lucy's newest boyfriend had been arrested on seven counts of domestic violence, and how he was still married to the poor

woman he'd beaten. Lucy had taken it all in stride, according to Lois, apparently stating that she'd been getting "bored" with him anyway. Clark nodded and pretended to know nothing. Superman had been the one to stop the man from his last attempt to beat his wife. He hadn't realized until later that the man was the one Lucy had been dating.

"She's enrolled in three summer courses at Metro U," Lois said, pride in her voice. "Maybe this time she'll actually finish her degree. I hope so."

"Me too," Clark agreed. "I know I haven't had too many meetings with your sister, but she seems like a great person. I want to see her do well and succeed as much as you do, Lois."

"Thanks, Clark. I know it means a lot to her that she's got people cheering her on."

"And your parents?"

Lois managed to roll her eyes as she swerved around a taxi. "Mom doesn't think she'll do it and Dad still hasn't returned her phone call. That was four days ago."

"Yikes," Clark said, truly saddened by the Lane family dynamics. "I'm sorry, Lois."

Lois snorted. "Don't be sorry for me."

"But, I am. No one should have parents that are that so utterly disconnected from their kids."

A soft sigh escaped her. "Yeah. Not all of us get lucky, like you. Your parents are just so amazing."

"Well, I'm happy to share them."

Hopefully as your in-laws, some day.

"Thanks."

"I talked to them a little bit last night. They said they were glad that your morning sickness seems to be abating. Mom, in particular, had been worried about you."

"See? That's exactly what I mean! Your parents are so accepting and loving and considerate. Whereas mine..." She shrugged.

"So," Clark said, reaching over and briefly taking her hand, "I take it you haven't spoken to them yet."

"Yes and no."

Clark raised one eyebrow. "Okay...?"

"I talked to her two nights ago, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her about the baby."

"Why not?" he asked gently. "I mean, you were so ready, last time we talked about it. At least, you seemed ready. Or at the very least determined."

"I know. I lost my nerve."

"Honey, you can't hide it forever," Clark reminded her, brushing his hand over her arm as she continued to drive.

"I know," she repeated. "But you should have heard her on the phone that night, Clark. Before I could tell her, she just *had* to tell me how she ran into Michelle Knox, one of my old elementary school classmates. Turns out that she's pregnant and not married. That set my mother off on a whole rant about 'girls these days' and 'doesn't anyone get married before having children anymore' and 'of course, in my case, the marriage was a waste.'" She made quotation marks in the air as she spoke, holding the wheel with her palms, while trying to mimic Ellen's voice. "It was horrible. I felt like dirt afterwards. I mean, I'm an unwed soon-to-be mother, if I choose to keep the baby. I'm exactly what she was complaining about. And what's worse? I don't even know for sure who the father of my child is!" Her once calm and controlled demeanor dissolved into near hysterics as she brought the car to an abrupt halt outside the courthouse, in the first available spot they'd seen.

"Hey," Clark said, turning slightly to her. He reached over and lovingly stroked her cheek with his finger, brushing away a stray tear. "Hey. It's okay. You don't have to tell her until you're ready. And if you prefer, we can do it together. As far as Ellen needs to know, I am this child's father, regardless of who it was

who actually...contributed his DNA. Because that's the truth. You and I are in this together. Luthor will *never* be this baby's father."

"Thanks, Clark. I appreciate it."

"It's the truth, Lois."

"I know." She sighed. "I'm not ready to tell her. I mean, she only needs to know if I keep it, right? She doesn't need to know, if I terminate, right?"

"That's...that's up to you, Lois," Clark said, trying hard to find the right words. Three weeks had passed since they'd been in the doctor's office and seen their child doing an entire gymnastics routine on the ultrasound machine monitor. "If you think you'd feel more comfortable keeping it a secret, I'll protect that secret with my life. And if you choose to tell her, regardless of what you do about the pregnancy, I'll be there to stand by your side and defend you if need be."

"I'm lucky to have you," Lois said, a tremulous smile on her lips.

"No. *I'm* the lucky one, Lois. I have you. One day, I hope you'll understand just how deeply I mean that."

The day dragged on far longer than Clark had thought it would. Lex never took the stand. Every effort was made to start building the case against him. Clark had silently nodded to himself as the prosecutors had set the stage, describing a monster in human form who had directly been responsible for the rise in the city's crime statistics, illegal dealings, and the deaths of untold numbers of people. Throughout it all, he'd kept his arm securely snaked around Lois' waist, hoping to impart some level of comfort and strength to her.

He knew, despite her assurances to him, that seeing Luthor couldn't be easy for her. As things stood, it wasn't easy for *Clark himself* to sit there and look at the man. Rage boiled inside him. Hatred burned his heart. It was rare for Clark to truly and unreservedly hate a person. But Luthor easily topped that short list.

He wondered idly how long this trial would last. As far as he was concerned, it could not be over quickly enough for his liking. He wanted to put the whole thing, and Luthor himself, behind him. He just wanted to move on with his life. His life with Lois, and possibly the child she carried.

By the end of the day, both he and Lois were mentally exhausted. For Lois, that exhaustion extended to her physical self as well. She opted for a quiet and quick burger at one of their favorite diners, then retired to her apartment for what she described as a "long soak in the tub and an early bedtime." Clark couldn't fault her for being so tired. After all, she was still growing an entire person. He brought her home, saw her safely into her apartment, then went for a long patrol around the city after kissing her goodnight.

He thought about going home for a while, back to Kansas to be with his parents for part of the night, but he didn't want to face them. He hadn't yet told them about Dr. Klein's findings — that there was no possible way he could be the father of Lois' baby. He wasn't embarrassed by the findings, but he *was* deeply, immeasurably saddened over them. He wanted, more than anything, to have a family of his own — children born of his own blood, who he could see parts of himself in, along with the best parts of Lois.

Now that hope was gone — ripped away to leave his heart battered and bleeding. Doubts had begun to creep in, where they had never existed before. Was he good enough for Lois? Would she reject him, if he couldn't give her children, once he told her the truth? And he knew that he would, eventually, have to tell her the truth. She deserved to know everything before he could ask her to spend her life with him as husband and wife.

In order to keep his mind otherwise occupied, he widened his

patrol to the rest of New Troy. He found a few minor car accidents to attend to, a gas station robbery, and would-be jumper on a small bridge over a deep ravine on a lonely stretch of country road. He easily dealt with all of them, spending the most time with the jumper — a distraught young woman who'd lost her entire family to a house fire a few months before. He sat with her for a long while, listening when she seemed in a mood to talk, and offering condolences and advice when she appeared to be looking for him to say something. At long last, he convinced her to have herself checked out at the nearest hospital so that she could get the help she truly needed. He personally brought her there, promising to drop her car off in the parking lot of the hospital afterwards, seeing that she was in no shape to drive herself anywhere.

Once he was done, he headed back to his apartment. While he was grateful for the hours that had passed by unnoticed as he'd lent his aid to those in need, he was getting tired. He was looking forward to a hot shower and his bed. When he finally reached his bed, he crawled under the covers and was asleep in minutes.

"You're a lifesaver," Lois said with a smile as she dug a plastic spoon into the cookie dough ice cream Clark had brought her.

"Maybe," Clark grinned at her. "But cookie dough? Since when does the great Lois Lane ever pass up on whatever chocolate overload she can get?"

"I know," she replied with a carefree shrug. "Weird, huh?"

"So weird that I'm questioning whether or not you're the real Lois," Clark joked. He pulled a cream soda out of the same brown paper bag the ice cream had been in. "To wash it down," he explained.

"Ice cream?" Cat observed as she sauntered by. Clark averted his gaze and retreated to his own desk. The woman's top barely existed — just a few strategically placed bands and straps of fabric to maintain any modicum of modesty. "At eleven in the morning?"

"So?" Lois shot back. "What's your point?"

Cat shrugged. "Do what you like. But, between us, you should probably be watching what you eat. I mean, you *have* put a little weight on."

Lois pulled the spoon from her mouth. "Is that so?" she asked coldly.

"Well, it's not *totally* noticeable," Cat shrugged, "but yeah, I see it. All on your waist too."

"Uh huh," Lois said in a flat, deadly voice as she forcefully slammed the spoon onto the top of her desk. "But, there's something you're forgetting, Cat."

"Oh?"

Clark tried to hide it as he cringed. Lois and Cat had a long, rich history of traded insults and open hostility. Still, he could hardly believe that Cat had had the gall to comment on Lois' weight. He ducked his head as though he was concentrating hard on the research materials on his desk. He did wonder if he should come to Lois' aid, but thought better of it. He knew she liked to fight her own battles with Cat.

Lois nodded. "I can always lose weight. You, however, will always have an ugly personality."

"Ouch," Cat said, feigning hurt. "The burn. It stings. But seriously, you can't expect a man like Clark to not consider chasing someone who *does* care about her figure."

"Still bitter that he chose me over you, huh?" Lois shot back, eyebrow arched. "Didn't you know that Clark doesn't date *old* women?"

"Experience doesn't make me old," Cat said, crossing her arms.

"No, but your birth year *does*."

By this point, Clark had heard enough. He decided to

intervene. He picked up a file and brought it to Lois' desk, doing his best to make it look like a normal, casual movement. He sat on the edge of Lois' desk.

"Hey," he said. "Sorry to interrupt. Lois? Can we go over our research on the rash of car break-ins?"

Cat snorted in displeasure, but she took the hint and left, heading toward the coffeemaker. Lois looked at Clark, her face plainly displaying her relief that he'd chosen to swoop in to save her from that conversation. It was also obvious that she knew he didn't actually want to discuss the file in his hand.

"Thanks," she said in a low, confidential voice.

"I'm so sorry," he replied, gazing for a moment, in the direction Cat had wandered.

"Is it really that obvious?" Lois wondered in a quiet, distracted voice.

"No," Clark said in a matching tone, shaking his head slightly. "You still look perfect to me."

"She...she isn't *right*, is she? About us? About you?"

"That stuff about me chasing other women?" Clark shook his head as a near-snort emerged. "Not a chance." He gave her his best smile.

"But...I *am* starting to change, aren't I?"

"Your eating habits, maybe," Clark conceded, "but you don't look any different to me."

It was true. He didn't see much difference in how Lois looked, and he wondered how Cat had picked up on it. Unless, of course, she'd been bluffing. He couldn't discount that as a possibility.

"So, did you want to go out tomorrow?" he asked. "I was thinking we could hit up the New Troy Spring Renaissance Faire."

"That's right," Lois mused. "They're trying out a spring one for the first time, in addition to the fall."

Clark nodded. "Interested?"

"Actually, I have a few things I need to do tomorrow. Maybe next..." She checked her desk calendar, to see when they were both off next. "Saturday?"

"Sounds good. Can you at least do dinner with me?" He gave her a false pout. "I'll miss you too much otherwise."

Lois smiled tenderly and caressed his cheek. "I'll try to."

Clark brightened. "In that case, let me make some reservations. I can always cancel if need be."

Lois touched his hand and shook her head. "No. I think I'll probably just want a quiet dinner at home."

Clark nodded. "Whatever you want is fine by me."

"Clark?" Lois asked, the tone of her voice instantly concerning him. "Clark, open up! I know you're home! Please, be home."

Clark shut the book he was reading and dashed to the door, making sure to grab his glasses in the process. He cleared the steps to the landing in a single bound and unlocked the door before opening it. Lois was behind the door, her fist raised to knock again. She looked surprised to see Clark already at the door.

"Lois? What's wrong?" he asked.

The redness in her eyes gave away the fact that she'd been crying. She dropped her hand and used it to wrap herself into a hug. It was cool out that night to be sure, but far from cold. Still, the way she held herself told Clark that she wasn't protecting herself from the howling wind.

"Come in," he added, putting his arm around her and ushering her inside, before shutting the night air out.

He took her jacket from her as she moved into his apartment and took her accustomed seat on the couch. She pulled her knees up to her chest as best she could and wrapped her arms around them. Clark could see her rocking her body ever so gently back

and forth.

"Lois, what's going on? You're scaring me," he admitted.

"I couldn't do it," she said numbly, staring straight ahead, as if nothing else existed.

"Do it? Do what?"

"I'm sorry, Clark."

"For what?"

"I never wanted this... Oh, God, what have I done?"

"Lois, honey, slow down. I can't follow a word you're saying." He knelt down before her, cupping her chin in his palm, and forcing her to make eye contact with him. "Lois?"

Lois closed her eyes and took a shuddering breath. Clark used his thumb to wipe away her tears, which had begun to flow once more. He kissed her forehead gently.

"You can tell me anything," he reminded her. "Tell me what's going on. I want to help you, if I can. Please?"

Lois nodded and took another deep, steadying breath.

"Remember when you asked me to go to the Renaissance Faire, yesterday?"

"Of course," Clark said, gently easing himself into a partial stand to sit on the coffee table before Lois, instead of being on the floor. "You said you had some things to do."

"I did. Kind of. That is, well, I *tried* to do it."

"Honey, you keep saying that. *What* did you try to do?" he pressed in a soft, concerned tone.

"I made an appointment. I was going to...put an end to things. This pregnancy...it's been nothing but a source of...of fear and lost sleep for me. And not just how often I get up to use the bathroom. I've been thinking about it non-stop. How I'm not sure I can be a good mother. How I'm not sure I can stand the thought of raising this baby if it turns out to be Luthor's." She fidgeted on the couch and hugged her own body tighter. "How I don't think I can be strong enough to carry this baby to term and then hand it over to some stranger."

Clark silently relocated to the couch, next to her, before speaking. He drew her into his sheltering embrace and gently brought her head to his chest.

"You said you were 'going to' do this," he whispered into her hair. "What happened?"

"I couldn't go through with it," she replied with a snuffle. "I was there, in the waiting room. I knew all about what was coming — the doctor had briefed me on the procedure and I've been reading up on what, exactly, happens during it. It's disturbing in a way, but I was okay with doing what I needed to do."

"So, what happened?" Clark asked when she paused, knowing that she was giving him a chance to absorb everything she was saying. He kissed the top of her head to show her that he was there to support her, not judge her.

"As I was sitting there, I started to think. I knew what was going to happen. I knew all about how the baby would be... removed. And I started to think. I couldn't help but remember those women, and even the men, who'd been at the opening of the fertility clinic. How they were willing to sell everything they owned and take out a second mortgage on their homes for the chance to have a baby — the very thing I was throwing away. That was when I started to cry. How could I be so selfish? How could I end the life within me, when so many others would kill for the chance to be pregnant?"

"Lois, your...*our* situation isn't the same. It has no bearing on those other couples," he reminded her in a gentle voice.

"I know." She nodded slightly against his chest, but did not break contact with him. "But I couldn't stop thinking about it. And then, I got this flashback to the last ultrasound. How it was clearly a little person bouncing around in there. I tried, that day, to...well...harden myself. I didn't want to love that baby, because I knew the chance of me deciding to keep it was slim to none. But..." Her voice trailed off and Clark felt her tears soaking

through his old Property of Smallville Athletics t-shirt.

“But you couldn’t help it,” he supplied. It was not a question.

“I tried. But seeing that baby moving around...suddenly, I wasn’t sure if it matters, who the biological father is. That baby is half of *me*. And *you* are the father, no matter what genetics say. I love this baby, Clark. And I love you. I hope...I hope you aren’t upset. Are you?”

“Upset?” Clark asked, sounding like a man coming out of a daze. “Why in the world would I be upset?”

Lois lifted her head to peer up at him. “This baby...it kind of throws a wrench into everything.”

Clark smiled down at her. “Maybe. I mean, sure, we didn’t plan on raising a family right now. But, the truth is, Lois, part of me... a big part of me, has been hoping that you’d choose to keep this child. Now, I know I said I would back you up one hundred percent, no matter what you chose to do,” he said quickly, seeing the way her brow scrunched up before she could point out his promise. “And I would have. But, well, the idea of raising a child with you...it’s what I’ve always dreamed of.”

“So, you’re really, truthfully happy about this?” she asked in a small, still worried, voice.

“I am,” he confirmed with a nod and a smile.

Lois twisted in his arms and kissed him hard and deeply.

Clark melted into the kiss, any thoughts he had scattering as her lips caressed his. He wrapped her in his arms, his fingers running through her dark, silky hair. After a moment, he felt her fingertips running up and down his back, tracing random patterns over the thin cotton shirt he was wearing. In that moment, Clark’s world was perfect.

“We have a lot to figure out still,” Lois reminded him after their kiss ended.

“I know. But we also have a lot of time to figure out all of the details.”

“Not *that* much time,” she argued. “But there are some things that need to be discussed before others. Like when we’re going to tell people.”

Clark grinned. “My parents are going to be so happy.”

Lois laughed. “Mine might have a stroke when I tell them.”

“We’ll do that together,” Clark promised with a chuckle. He kissed the top of Lois’ head. “I can’t believe it. We’re going to be parents.”

Help!

Clark groaned and rolled to one side, burrowing his head into the pillow. He didn’t want to get up. He wanted to stay in bed, Lois laying sprawled alongside of him.

She had stayed late as the two of them had begun serious discussions about the baby. Lois wasn’t yet ready to announce to the bullpen, especially since she hadn’t told her own parents yet. There was a lot to consider, the announcement being the least of it. Living arrangements, naming the baby, even if they wanted to run a pre-birth DNA test. Clark has his reasons for not wanting it done — namely, the slight risk of miscarriage, and the possibility that, if the baby miraculously *was* his, the DNA might out him as being something other than a human Earthling. He spoke only of his concern of miscarriage though. He wasn’t yet ready to tell Lois his secret. Lois too was afraid of that small, but real, risk and had agreed with Clark.

Help me, please!

Again, Clark groaned, this time opening his eyes. He glanced at the clock. Four am. He forced himself to slide out of bed, careful not to wake Lois. Silently, he walked to the living room, grabbed a Superman uniform from his hidden closet, and changed at top speed into the hero. He left via the front door, to afraid to risk being seen if he flew off from the terrace. He’d have to sneak through his bedroom to do that. At least it was the dead of night. He had almost no chance of being seen exiting his front door.

Only one neighbor worked early, but even he still wouldn’t be up at this hour. Another neighbor was a self-confessed insomniac, but, as Clark listened carefully, her apartment was blissfully silent.

At top speed, Clark flew off, stopping only when he punched through the cloud coverage. He paused for a moment, listening intently, but the world below still slumbered on. His departure from his apartment had gone unnoticed. With a sigh of relief, he sank back down below the clouds, trying to pin point the direction of the cry for help. In the span of two heartbeats, he had it, and rocketed off through the night, heading toward the interstate.

What he found when he arrived broke his heart. Four badly smashed cars were pointing in random directions all over the five lanes of road. And one large tractor trailer had jackknifed, causing what little traffic had been on the road at that small hour to come to a complete halt. Police and ambulances were beginning to arrive on the scene, but Clark could tell, even as he started into a landing, that there was no way everyone had made it out of the accident alive. The small red Chevy was too badly destroyed, and there were no signs of life as he scanned with his powerful senses.

He landed lightly next to the Chevy and immediately pulled the door off the vehicle. Blood greeted him as he pushed the airbag away and extracted the unmoving body from within. He felt for a pulse, listened for a heartbeat, and checked for breath, only to find none. Clark handed the woman over to the first paramedic to reach his side. He went to the next car while the EMTs began to attempt to revive the woman, though Clark wasn’t hopeful they could save her. Her entire body condition was extremely bad.

In all, two other people had died, both in an aging Oldsmobile, and the rest sported varying degrees of injuries. Most were minor, one was critically serious. Clark hoped the man would make it, but he wasn’t overly confident about it. Only one person involved had escaped unscathed — a sleeping three month old boy, snuggled in his car seat while his parents got an early start on their cross-country drive to visit family.

The driver of the tractor trailer couldn’t stop shaking and weeping. “I tried to stop,” he kept repeating, as if that was the only thought circulating around in his mind. Clark wondered if perhaps it was. He clasped the man on his shoulder and assured him that he believed him when the man said that he’d tried everything to avoid colliding with the Chevy.

After about an hour and a half, Clark and the officers had gotten help for everyone involved, cleared the roadway, and pieced together what had happened. The driver of the Chevy had been flying down the middle lane going in the wrong direction, presumably after getting onto the Interstate from one of the exit ramps. The Chevy had hit the Oldsmobile first, then ricocheted off into the other vehicles before hitting the tractor trailer last. The driver had tried to switch lanes when he realized that the car was coming straight at him. He’d panicked and lost control, and the car had slammed into him anyway. He’d walked away with minor cuts to his face from hitting the windshield.

One of the officers on the scene had known the woman driving the Chevy — they’d been casual, but not close, friends in high school. She admitted to knowing that the woman had been suffering from a lot of depression and financial stress — her company had downsized and laid off more than half of their staff without warning. The driver, Lauren, had been one of those who’d lost their job. She’d been trying for eight months to land something else, but had remained unsuccessful. With mounting debts and creditors constantly calling her, she’d had to move back in with her parents at the age of thirty. But, in the last month, she’d finally gotten another job, even if it was low paying and physically demanding. The last time the officer had spoken with

her, Lauren had seemed happy enough. Suicide had been the last thing the cop had ever anticipated.

When Clark finally began his slow flight home, sadness weighed heavily in his mind. He hadn't known the driver of the Chevy, nor would he ever. She'd been pronounced dead at the scene after the paramedics failed to revive her. But he couldn't imagine things being so bad that a person saw death as the only way out. And his heart broke for the family she'd left behind.

He finally arrived at his apartment. Carefully, painstakingly, he checked the area before deeming it safe to land. He slipped in through the front door without a sound, then slipped back into his sleep clothes before hiding away his suit in the secret closet behind his wine rack. He was about to tiptoe his way back into the bedroom when he heard the toilet flush. Lois emerged out into the hallway, her face the very picture of rage.

"Lois? Honey? What's wrong?" Clark asked, wary of the look he saw in her eyes.

"Where the hell have you been?" she said in a deadly cold voice.

"I went out for a bit," he said, shrugging.

"At four in the morning?" she asked, crossing her arms before her chest. "For *two hours*?"

"I, uh..." Clark stammered.

"No, Clark. I can't take another one of your stupid lies about how you suddenly needed to find a twenty-four hour drug store for allergy medication that I never see you take. Or how you suddenly remembered that you needed money from the ATM. Or...or..." She floundered, too upset to continue, from the look of things. She took a moment to draw in a deep breath, appearing fight back tears. "I know. I know. It's your place. I'm not the one who lives here. I shouldn't be dictating what you can and cannot do. But, for God's sake, Clark, this has been such a *pattern* with you. Every time you have me sleep over, I get up at least once in the night to find your side of the bed empty."

"Lois, I..." he tried to say.

But Lois didn't hear him, or did and chose to still steamroll right over him. "I want to raise this baby with you, but if you can't be honest with me, I don't think we can make this work. Do you *know* what kinds of thoughts have been in my head for the last two hours?"

"No," Clark admitted with a sigh. "I really...I thought I had enough time."

"Time for *what*? To visit some secret, non-pregnant girlfriend?"

The accusation punched Clark right in the gut. "What?" he stammered out, in disbelief that Lois could think such a thing about him.

"What *else* am I supposed to think, Clark? You left in the middle of the night! What else could be *so* important?"

Clark sighed and hung his head. He hated that it had to be this way. He hadn't wanted to tell Lois his secret. Not yet, at any rate. She'd only just decided that she was going to keep the baby. He didn't want to add on something so huge as the truth that Superman was nothing more than Clark Kent in a ridiculous Spandex costume. But he saw no other choice. Not when Lois was so upset with him.

"Fine," Lois said as he sat, silently finding his courage to break the news to her. "You don't want to answer me? Fine," she repeated. "I'm leaving." She stomped her way to the door, still in her pajamas.

"I have another job," Clark said in a small voice, unable to lift his eyes to look at her.

"What?" she snapped.

Clark sighed again and repeated his words. "I have another job. That's why I left, Lois."

"What do you mean?" she asked, but at least she hung her jacket back on the peg next to the door and came back into the

living room.

Clark sat in his armchair and gestured for Lois to sit on the couch. She did so, commanding the entire thing by sitting directly in the center of it. Clark nodded absently to himself, racking his brain to find the best way to explain things to Lois. In all the time he'd spent thinking about this moment, he'd never once felt like he'd found the best words to make her understand.

"Clark?" she prompted him, not losing any of the anger in her voice.

"Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I have to go to this other job," he tried explaining.

"In the middle of the night?" Lois repeated. Her arms tightened over her chest, her fingertips drummed on her biceps, and her eyes narrowed into disbelieving slits. "What kind of job demands that?"

"It's uh...kind of...related to law enforcement," Clark said. "Tonight...tonight I was at a car accident. A woman got on the highway going the wrong way. She died and two others in another car did, but luckily no one else. There were several others with injuries though."

Lois glared at him. "And you felt this wasn't something you could tell me before? That you have this other job on the side?"

"Of course not, Lois. I really did want to tell you. But, I could never find the words," he said, his voice soft, not trying to defend himself. "I know I was wrong but..."

"Were you embarrassed? I mean, my God, Clark, people take second jobs all the time! Were you worried about affording things once the baby comes? Is that why you couldn't tell me?"

Clark shook his head. "It's not that at all, Lois. Actually, this job? It doesn't pay anything at all. It's something I do because I *want* to do it. I didn't...couldn't...tell you before now for a number of reasons. But embarrassed? That was the least of it, I assure you."

He was about to launch into those reasons but Lois put a hand up to stop him. His mouth immediately closed.

"First, I want to know *exactly* what it is that you've been doing. Then you can give me your reasons." Her voice still bore a razor sharp edge to it, but it wasn't quite as icy as it had been moments before.

"Okay," he agreed. "But please, Lois, try to understand how hard this is for me. This...other side of me. I've never told anyone else about it. I've never wanted anyone else to know. It's a dangerous secret, not just for me, but for anyone else who knows about it. It's something that my parents and I have protected for almost thirty years. And, although I've wanted to tell you for a long time, I could never find the words. Maybe that makes me a coward in your eyes. I don't know."

"That depends on what this secret is," she replied to his label of 'coward.'

"The thing is, Lois, I *do* sort of work in law enforcement. Just not in a typical way. I'm not a cop. I'm not even a meter maid," he clarified, staving off the questions that were written on her face. "I don't carry a badge or write tickets. Here, let me show you something. It might help to explain it."

He stood and went to his wine rack. Lois hesitated only for half a heartbeat, then she was on her feet, hanging back behind him, clearly awaiting some huge revelation.

I can deliver on that, at the very least, he mused darkly to himself.

He pushed the wine rack to expose his hidden stash of Superman uniforms. All hung neatly from hangers, all of the blue unitards together on one end, all the capes and briefs behind them. The floor housed several well worn and now comfortable pairs of Superman's familiar red boots. Clark swallowed hard, waiting for the inevitable explosion from Lois.

"Superman's laundry?" Lois asked, the hard edge to her tone completely restored. "Clark, what does Superman's uniforms

have to do with anything?”

Clark shook his head. “Not Superman’s costumes,” he said in a careful, low voice. “*My* costumes.”

Lois’ burrow furrowed. “So...you’re...what? A Superman impersonator? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“No, Lois,” he said, his voice taking on a little more strength than it had previously. “What I’m trying to tell you is...I’m not a Superman impersonator. I’m *Superman*.”

“Clark, I’m not in the mood for this,” she said, pinching the bridge of her nose, as if to ward off a headache. “If you’re not going to take this seriously...”

“Lois, I *am* taking this seriously. Watch.”

Silently, he rose into the air and hovered there, suspended above the floor. He couldn’t quite find the courage to look Lois in the eyes. He did, however, see the flash of mixed emotions that ran over her features in the span of a heartbeat. He did see when she settled back down on being angry again. He landed gently and stood before her, his heart in his throat and his stomach in knots.

It was, simply put, the scariest thing he’d ever done, letting Lois know his secret.

“I’m sorry,” he immediately apologized.

“You’d better be,” Lois said, her mouth settling into a hard, cold frown. “How could you lie to me, Clark...Superman... whoever you are?! When were you going to tell me? When this baby started floating out of its bassinet? How can I ever trust you again?”

Clark took a deep, shaking breath. He was well over the point of no return now.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “Please, Lois, believe me. I want to explain everything. I want to answer all of your questions. At least, I’ll do my best. There’s so much of my...origins, that I don’t know. Please. Will you let me try?”

“I’m listening,” was all she would answer in a brusque manner with a look that could have frozen Metropolis Harbor.

“I never lied to you, Lois. Not really. Yes, I led you on to believe that Clark and Superman are two separate people. I *had* to. I was too afraid to tell you the truth. At first, you would have seen me as just a stepping stone to your Pulitzer. At least, I thought so, at the time. Then, as we became friends, I knew you’d never do that to me, but I wanted so much to date you. To love you, and maybe even be loved by you. I couldn’t do that if you knew that I also masquerade as an alien superhero. And that’s all Superman is. He’s not me, Lois. Superman is *not* Clark Kent. Clark Kent is Superman.”

“What’s the difference?” She was still pretty mad at him, he could tell. But the fact that she was asking even simple questions had to be a good sign, he thought.

“Everything,” he replied. “Superman cannot exist without Clark. But Clark can — and did — exist without Superman all my life, up until I started working at the Planet with you. He’s not real, Lois. Please, understand that. Superman isn’t real. He’s just a cover I use so that I can help people. I can’t have Clark flying in to a burning building to save people. They’d know that there was something different about me. They might use my loved ones against me to try to control me. But Superman — he’s a different case. He’s not a regular guy. He has no loved ones, no family, to use as a bargaining chip against him. It’s easy to let the world see his powers because he’s nothing more than a cardboard cutout of a person.”

“That’s...” Lois began, her voice still perfectly portraying her anger with him.

“It’s the truth,” Clark said. “I can’t stress that enough. Superman never existed until after I met you. I’d been wanting to use my abilities to help people, but without fear of exposing myself for something other than an average, unremarkable man. It wasn’t until you mentioned having a change of clothes on hand

that I got the idea for a costume, so that it would be whoever my new identity was that was making the rescue, not the real me. Not Clark.”

“Really?” Lois asked, sounding half curious, but giving him an unconvinced look at the same time.

“Really,” he said sincerely, nodding. “It was like this light bulb went off in my head when you said that. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of it before. Of course, once I saw what my mom had come up with, I was less than convinced it would work. But, to my surprise, it did. No one pegged the man in blue as mild mannered reporter, Clark Kent.”

“Wait. Your mother made the costume? You weren’t kidding about that?”

“She really did,” he confirmed for her.

“It must have been a real kick for you, putting one over on your overbearing and rude partner, am I right?”

Clark winced at the harshness of her words. “No, Lois. But, I won’t lie. It was a relief for me that you didn’t recognize me. I thought for sure you would have made the connection. When you didn’t, it was like I could breathe easier. If the smartest woman I know didn’t figure it out, the rest of the world didn’t stand a chance. It meant I was safe, that I could continue to be Superman.”

Lois seemed to soften a minute amount. She nodded. “Go on.”

“I’ve wanted to tell you about my dual life for so long,” he continued. “I just never had the words. Or the courage. As we’ve gotten closer, it’s been more and more important that I tell you the truth. But, at the same time, it’s only gotten harder for me to take that step. I had to know, Lois. I had to know that you loved Clark, not Superman, not my powers.”

“But you already know how I feel. And you *still* waited *this long* to tell me,” she argued, her crossed arms tightening across her chest while disbelief played over her features.

“I know,” Clark said, dipping his head in agreement with her words. “The problem was, by the time I knew that you loved me, you were pregnant. Not only that, but struggling to decide if you wanted to keep the baby or not. I couldn’t throw Superman into that mix, Lois. It would have been too unfair to you.”

“How do you figure that? That withholding information this important could possibly be the right choice to make?” She rolled her eyes and threw her hands into the air, exasperated.

“Because, Lois,” Clark said, trying to make her understand. “I thought it would put too much pressure on you. Imagine if I’d told you then, while you were struggling to make your decision. Wouldn’t it have placed more pressure on you, trying to decide whether to keep or to terminate the potential offspring of Superman?” He shook his head. “Maybe I was wrong in my thinking. If I was, I’m sorry.”

Begrudgingly, Lois slowly nodded. “No, you weren’t completely wrong. I guess it *would* have complicated my thought process.”

“I wanted you to know, for yourself and yourself only, if this pregnancy was something you wanted. Not because it might be Superman’s kid. Not because he or she might one day take up the cape and continue what I’ve started.” Clark got up and started to pace, feeling the need to move, as if it could somehow make him more comfortable or get his point across any better than his words alone. “I was going to tell you about myself once you made up your mind.”

“But...you didn’t,” Lois pointed out.

“I know,” he said as he reached the bookshelf on the other side of the room. He rested his right arm on one of the shelves. “I just...I thought that you’d been through enough today. I didn’t want to add on the stress of, well, this entire conversation. Not when you’d just made one of the biggest decisions of your life. It didn’t seem fair to you.”

“So, then, when, exactly, did you plan on telling me?” Most of her anger was there still, but at least a small amount of warmth had infused back into her voice.

“Soon,” Clark said, looking her in the eye. “I was thinking of giving you a couple of days, just to make sure that you were completely comfortable with keeping the baby. Then I was going to tell you everything. Just...don’t ask me how.” He smiled shyly at her. “Tonight, tomorrow, a week from now. It was still pretty terrifying for me.”

“Why?” she asked, clearly still not fully understanding his fear.

“Why is it terrifying? Because, for the first time in my life, I’m truly exposed. My parents and I have guarded this secret since they found my ship crashed-landed in a field. They were always so afraid that, if word got out about me, someone might try to take me away, lock me in a lab, and dissect me like a frog.” He could hear Jonathan’s voice in his head as he said the words. “And, as for telling you, I was afraid of losing you, Lois. Afraid that you might decide that this is more than you want to handle and that you might walk right on out of my life. I can’t...I need you in my life, Lois. More than food, more than sunlight, more than air.”

Lois shook her head. “So...if you’re Superman...then that means, this baby...might be half Kryptonian?”

Clark shook his head in turn, his shoulders slumping. “That’s the other thing I needed to talk to you about,” he said sadly.

“Clark, what is it?” she asked, losing her hard edge and sounding concerned over his change in demeanor.

Help! There’s a bomb!

Clark’s head snapped up of its own accord as his hearing picked up the call. He groaned. He couldn’t leave Lois now, but he couldn’t ignore something that serious and potentially deadly. Lois saw the change in his face and stance.

“What is it?” she asked.

“A bomb,” he replied distantly, still listening. “Sounds like Centennial Park. Lois...”

“Go,” she said, gesturing for him to fly off.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can. I promise. Please, don’t leave,” he begged. “I still have a lot to tell you.”

“I’ll be here,” she vowed. “And you still have a lot of questions to answer.”

He nodded firmly, ready to answer whatever she could possibly ask him. He grabbed one of his uniforms and spun into it. When he stopped, Lois was staring wide-eyed. He gave her a genuine smile.

“You don’t know how long I’ve been waiting to do that in front of you,” he said as he grinned. “I’ll be right back. I love you.”

To his dismay, she said nothing, though he wasn’t completely surprised that she didn’t declare her love back to him. He took off from the terrace this time, feeling safer that no one could track his flight from there, now that the world was waking up and people were preparing to commute to their jobs. He hoped he’d have enough time to explain everything he wanted to tell Lois before they would also need to head to the Planet for the day.

He found himself racing through his rescue. It wasn’t enough to cause him to make mistakes, but it was enough that he wondered if the media would comment on Superman’s less-than-normally-friendly self. He honestly didn’t care. All that mattered was getting the situation under control so that he could return to Lois with all speed.

When he did finally fly back home, he was relieved to find Lois still there. She’d found his stash of frozen but microwavable breakfast burritos. He was glad that she’d gotten herself something to eat. She needed fuel for the coming day and in her continuing journey of pregnancy. Clark wanted the baby to be born as healthy as possible. He noticed too that she’d changed out

of her pajamas and sat now on the couch in a crisp, powder blue blouse and black pants. He guessed it must have been one of the outfits she’d been keeping at his place for those nights when she was too tired to return home to her own apartment.

“Hi,” he said as he entered his home.

Lois looked up from the magazine she’d been perusing. “Hi, yourself. Everything go okay?”

“One second,” Clark said. He quickly spun out of his uniform and into his work attire — a charcoal suit he’d often worn, but one which he also knew Lois liked. He hoped it would appease her. “It, unfortunately, was a real bomb threat,” he said half a heartbeat later. He sat down at the edge of the couch, gambling that he could get even that close. When she said nothing, he felt comfortable enough to continue speaking. “Someone planted a pipe bomb at the Centennial Park subway station. I got there in time, but it was a close call. It went off before I could get more than fifty feet in the air. No one was hurt, thankfully.”

Lois nodded. “That’s good.”

“I’m sorry that I had to rush off like that. If the situation hadn’t been what it was...”

She put up a hand to quiet him and he obliged. “You did what you had to do. I have no right to demand that you give up your Superman duties just because I’m furious with you.”

“It still...I hate that I had to leave you,” he offered.

“Before you left,” Lois said, changing the subject, “you said you needed to talk to me about something.”

Clark nodded at the reminder, though his heart sank into his toes. “Yeah. Lois...I don’t...I don’t know how to say this. I’m still struggling with it myself. I wasn’t sure if I could even have children. I’m not human. So...I had Dr. Klein run some tests for me. He says...” He paused for a second, working at breaking down the lump that had unexpectedly formed in his throat. “I can’t have children. My biology isn’t compatible for reproduction with a human woman.” He couldn’t help the wobble in his voice as the pain of that knowledge cut him anew.

“Is he sure?” At least she sounded compassionate, Clark mused.

He managed to nod. “He called it a trillion to one chance. If any chance at all, which he doubts.”

“So this baby...”

“Is almost certainly Luthor’s,” he finished for her.

Lois whacked his arm, hard. “When were you going to tell me?”

“I only just found out,” he said, not bothering to put any strength in his voice. He felt defeated in every way by his admission. “I was still trying to process it myself. I wanted so badly for the baby to be mine. I didn’t want you to be in a position where you were carrying your attacker’s child. And, selfishly, I’ve always dreamed about having my own, biological children.”

“And the fact that this baby isn’t, doesn’t change your mind at all, about stepping up to raise it?” Lois asked, warily.

“Not at all,” Clark assured her. “As hard as it is to have it confirmed that I’ll never father a child, part of me has always known it was a possibility. I want to be there for this baby. I want to be its father, that is, if you’re still willing to let me be a part of your life.” He looked up, dragging his eyes from where his hands lay in his lap to peer hopefully at her. “Please?”

Lois matched his gaze, holding him there with nothing more than her piercing eyes. “I never said I don’t want you in my life. However,” she said, stilling him immediately when he went to respond, “that doesn’t mean that I’m not furious with you for everything you’ve withheld from me.”

Clark nodded. “I understand. Ask me anything. I swear to you, Lois, I have no secrets left. I want you to know everything.”

“You can start at the beginning,” Lois prompted him.

It wasn’t a question, but Clark understood what she was

asking. She wanted him to tell her about his life, literally from the beginning.

“Well,” he began. “I guess...I guess I really *should* start at the beginning. Please, Lois, understand that I don’t have the answers to a lot of the questions you might have about my origins. I still have scores of them that I’ll never have answers to. The globe only told me so much, and what it could tell me only prompted more answerless questions.”

“The globe? The one that Jack stole from your apartment?” Lois asked.

“One and the same,” he confirmed. “When I took it from Bureau Thirty-Nine, I knew it belonged to me. As soon as I touched it in that warehouse, the map-face changed from Earth to some otherworldly place. I heard a voice in my mind, whispered from some deep place I never knew existed. *Krypton*. And I knew, right then and there, that the globe was somehow connected to me. That’s why I took it and why I hid it from you. For months, it sat in a box on my shelf, until one night it started to glow with some inner light. What it showed me...” He shook his head, still in awe and sadness of what it had shown him.

“What?” Lois prompted, now only curiosity in her voice.

“A man appeared to me, calling himself Jor-El, telling me that I was Kal-El, his son. Five times, his messages came to me, even when I was apart from the globe. Anyway, he told me a brief history of why I’d been sent to Earth. Krypton was on the brink of destruction. He and Lara, my mother, selected Earth to be my new home, because I would look just like the people here. I don’t know why or how they selected Kansas as my destination. But they did, bundling me into a tiny spaceship and sending me out into the darkness of the universe just before Krypton exploded.”

“That couldn’t have been easy for them,” Lois said.

“At some point, I don’t know how long it was, I finally crash-landed on Earth. My parents were driving by Schuster’s Field and saw what they thought was a meteor. Curious, they decided to check things out, only to find me instead. They couldn’t have children of their own, but they managed to find a way to legally adopt me, even though initial attempts to adopt had failed in the past.”

“You always told me that you were left on their doorstep,” Lois pointed out.

“That’s the official story that everyone knows,” Clark clarified. “They were so afraid that someone would find out that I was more than what I appeared to be, and that some scientists might rip me away from them only to dissect me in a lab. Fear led them to cover up any evidence that might prove me to be something other than human.”

“I wish you’d stop saying that.”

“Saying what?” he asked, taken aback by the unexpected comment from Lois.

“That you aren’t human,” she replied calmly.

Clark was thunderstruck by that simple statement. It was the last thing he’d ever expected to hear from her, especially now as they sat dealing with the aftermath of his secret being exposed.

“It’s the truth though,” he said, finding his voice.

Lois shook her head. “Clark, I’ve dealt with every kind of person on this planet, everyone from true philanthropists, to ego maniacs, to the lowest scum to ever breathe air. You are one of the most human people I’ve ever met.”

“But, biologically, I’m not,” he protested, unsure why he was making the case against himself. Perhaps he’d considered himself as an outcast for too many years, thanks to the powers that set him apart from everyone else. “I wasn’t born on Earth. I’m an alien.”

“In your genetics only,” Lois allowed. “Listen to me, Clark. Do you laugh when things amuse you? Do you cry when you’re upset? Do you care about other people? Do you love? Do you hate?”

“Yes...” he ventured, tentatively.

“Then you’re a human,” she finished, a sense of finality to her voice.

He felt humbled by her defense of his humanity, but could only nod his acknowledgement. After a few seconds, he squeaked out a “Thank you.”

“I’m still mad at you,” she warned him. “And I might be for a while.”

“I understand. I guess I’d be more afraid if you just accepted it without feeling anything at all,” he admitted. “I promise, I won’t pressure you. I can wait for you to...digest all of this.”

Lois nodded. “I know.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Because that’s just who you are.” Clark gave her a hopeful smile, but she barely returned it. “Now, you were saying?”

“Right,” he said. “Anyway, they raised me as they would have any normal kid. For all they knew, I *was* a normal kid, right up until I was about ten. Then I started to develop a series of weird abilities. Before I was eleven, for example, I could outrun the local train without breaking a sweat or even breathing hard. I was growing stronger all the time. I set the occasional fire with my eyes. My parents, God bless them, helped me find ways to control all of my powers. They never judged me or condemned my abilities. While I silently or very verbally freaked out as each new power made itself known, they only remained steadfast and resolute in their efforts to help me. And, in time, I mastered each ability.”

He sighed. “As I got each power under control, I eventually came to look at them as a gift. I had to decide how I would use them, if ever. Helping people seemed like the only morally sound way to deal with such incredible powers, but I was always afraid of being caught. So, for many years, I used them only when I was sure not to be caught, and worked on excuses for the few times when it seemed that I might become exposed for something other than a normal man. I traveled the world, looking for an explanation of why I had such powers and how I could best use them to help. And,” he admitted, “I kept moving each time it seemed like I might have been in danger of being caught.”

He looked away, the pain of those lonely days spent seeing world still a sharp knife in his heart. “Finally, I found myself in Metropolis. I found a way to secure work with the Planet. I met you. In fact, you’re the reason why I fought so hard for Perry to accept me as his newest hire. The rest, I’ve already explained. You mentioned a change of clothes and soon thereafter, Superman was born.”

“I guess I’m glad to have helped,” Lois said, though she didn’t sound all that enthused at the moment. “I need some time,” she added, “to wrap my head around all of this. Starting now. I’ll meet you at work.”

Not sharing the ride to work with her broke his heart, but he had to admit that it wasn’t wholly unexpected. He nodded in return.

“Okay,” he said. Then, haltingly, “Is there anything at all, anywhere in the world, that I can get for you?”

“No,” she said, with a swift shake of her head. Whether she truly didn’t want anything or if she just didn’t want to deal with his super-side at the moment, he didn’t know, and thought it best not to even try to figure out.

“Okay,” he repeated. “See you later.”

As he watched her gather her things and step out of his apartment, he couldn’t help but wonder just how badly damaged their relationship was. Unfortunately, only time would tell. He just hoped it wasn’t completely beyond repair.

“You’re here early,” Lois said to Clark as she passed by, on her way to her own desk. “Didn’t hit any traffic, I assume?”

Clark winced at the harshness of her words. “No, no traffic,” he allowed. “Coffee?”

“No.”

“Maybe later then,” he muttered, more to himself than her.

“Maybe.”

“I sent you everything I have on the pipe bomb this morning,” Clark said, hoping that it would be the peace offering that was so desperately needed. “Including some choice quotes from Superman. I would have given you the car accident Superman was at in the middle of the night, but, I’m afraid that if I turn up with nothing this morning, Perry will skin me alive.”

“We wouldn’t want that to happen. It might expose that you’ve been lying to him all this time too,” she said in an annoyed whisper.

“Lois...please. I’m trying here.”

She sighed. “I know. So am I. But, you have to understand how hurt I am right now. How much you made me feel like an idiot.”

“You aren’t an idiot, Lois,” he tried to assure her.

“Well, I sure feel like one, for not seeing what was staring me in the face for all this time,” she snapped back before turning her back to him and walking to her desk.

Clark watched her go, but only for a moment. He had nothing left to say. He wanted to remind her how much he loved her, but knew that, until she worked things out for herself, it would be a futile and, more than likely, unwelcome effort. He sighed and forced himself to work on his article, though, as usual, he was still very aware of what Lois was doing.

For a time, she sat at her desk, sipping a bottle of water, reading something on her computer screen. Clark only hoped it was the detailed notes he’d written up about the pipe bomb. He really did want her to have the article. He knew it was the least he could do.

After a while, Lois clicked something on her screen, stood, stretched, and headed toward Perry’s office. Clark didn’t turn to watch as she walked through the bullpen. In fact, he made no moves at all, pretending, instead, to be engrossed in his work. In truth, he was already nearly done with the apparent suicide from the middle of the night. Soon, he would read it over, make his corrections, and send it to Perry.

“Lois!” Clark heard Perry say in a startled tone as Lois knocked on the open door to his office. “What in Elvis’ name are you doing here so early?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Lois replied, not waiting for an invitation to join him in his office. Clark heard her shut the door behind her, feeling guilty for listening in with his sensitive hearing, but driven to eavesdrop by some baser need. “Can we talk?”

“My door is always open, you know that,” Perry replied in that soft southern drawl of his. “What’s on your mind?”

“I need a new partner,” she bluntly stated.

“Oh for the love of Elvis!” Clark heard Perry exclaim. He could just imagine their editor throwing his hands up in frustration. “I *knew* this would happen. It’s worse than Norcross and Judd! What the hell happened? I thought you two were happier than pigs in slop?”

“Clark’s been lying to me,” Lois stated matter-of-factly.

“So?” Perry asked.

“What do you mean, ‘so?’” Lois asked. “He *lied* to me, Chief!”

“And you’ve never lied to him, ever?” Perry countered.

“Well,” Lois said haltingly, “of course I have. But this...? Did you ever have someone lie to you about something so important that it made you wonder if you ever really knew them at all?” Her voice wavered and Clark knew she was on the verge of tears. Tears that he wanted nothing more than to kiss away. Tears that he’d caused.

“Sure,” Perry replied, and Clark imagined the shrug that went

along with the calm and collected sound of his voice. “When Alice and I got married, well, we were standing there before each other on our wedding night. Suddenly, I notice she’s listing off to one side. Turns out, she’s got one leg that’s an inch shorter than the other.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. She has special shoes made for her with this little wedge inside to balance her out.”

“So...what’d you do?” Lois asked.

Again, Clark’s mind filled in a shrug that he couldn’t see. “Nothing. It didn’t matter to me. I loved her anyway. And, I figured, if she hadn’t said anything about it before, it wasn’t something that she herself was completely comfortable with.”

“That’s so beautiful,” Lois said, her voice still quavering.

“What about you?” Perry asked gently. “Do you love Clark? No, no. Don’t answer me. Think about it for yourself. This lying — is it something you can live with, or a complete deal breaker?”

“I do love him,” Lois said after a minute, though Perry had told her not to voice her answers aloud. Clark imagined — or rather hoped — that she was staring out the window of Perry’s office in Clark’s general direction. “But this lie...it’s a *lot* to take in.”

“You think you can still work with him? On a professional level?”

Clark could hear Lois’ contemplative sigh. “I don’t know. I’ll try, I guess.”

“Good. Now, go find your partner and something to put in the blank space I have in my paper.”

Lois must have smiled or nodded, because she left Perry’s office without another word. She breezed right back to her desk, saying nothing to Clark. A few minutes later, he could hear the keys on her keyboard clicking as she began to write. He hoped it was the pipe bomb story, but he didn’t dare ask.

At noon, they broke for lunch. Lucy had just started working for one of the local diners, in between the classes she was taking. She seemed happy to see them when they walked through the front door, and immediately rushed to get them drinks.

“So, how much did you hear before?” Lois asked once her sister was out of earshot.

“Hear?” Clark asked, trying to find her train of thought.

“When I spoke to Perry.”

“Oh. That. I, uh...” He felt his neck and cheek flush with heat and redness.

Lois nodded. “I thought so.”

“I didn’t mean to. I just...I’m so scared, Lois. Not that you’d...out me...to Perry,” he said, lowering his voice and glancing around as he carefully chose his words. “But that I’m going to lose you completely.”

“I told you, I need time to digest it all,” she said, her voice soft instead of harsh, the way it had been for most of the day so far.

“I know. But, the truth is, part of me has always wondered if I was good enough for you. Especially because of the lies you exposed this morning. It’s always been my biggest fear that those same lies could tear apart the only love I’ve ever known. And I *do* love you, Lois.”

“I know you do.”

“One bacon swiss burger, extra fries, no coleslaw, double pickles for you,” Lucy said as she appeared with a tray of their food. She put the dish in question before Lois, along with a bottle of ketchup. “One steak sandwich, extra au jus for dipping, waffle fries, double coleslaw and a pickle for you,” she said, setting down Clark’s plate. “Anything else?”

“Not at the moment,” Lois replied pleasantly, picking up a steak fry and nibbling on it before deciding that the fries needed salt. “So, the new job’s going well, I take it?”

“Well enough,” Lucy said. “There’s one cook who is a little

creepy, but the other girls assure me that he's harmless."

"You sure?" Lois asked.

Lucy nodded. "Yeah. I think he's more socially awkward than anything else. I'll let you know if there's ever a problem. So, how are the two of you doing? And the baby?"

"Ssh! Not so loud," Lois complained, motioning for Lucy to turn the volume down several notches. "No one knows."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "Sorry," she said in an exaggerated whisper. "So? Are you going to tell me? Or should I ask again?"

"Everything's fine," Lois lied. "And I've decided to go ahead and keep it," she added in a low, confidential tone.

"Oh. My. God," Lucy said, almost squealing. "That is so great!"

"Mom and Dad don't know anything yet. You *cannot* say a word to them, got it?"

"My lips are sealed."

"Hey, there she is!" came a new voice.

"Johnny!" Lucy cried, happy to see the newcomer. "Lois, Clark, this is Johnny Corben. We've been seeing each other."

"Since when?" Lois asked. Then, "Sorry. Nice to meet you."

"Same," he replied, barely glancing over at Lois and Clark.

"A couple of weeks," Lucy said.

A couple of weeks? Clark thought. *Didn't she just recently break up with some other guy?*

Judging from Lois' look, she was having a similar thought.

"I'll tell you all about it some other time," Lucy said, her tone conveying the confirmation they were looking for. She had, indeed, been seeing at least two men at the same time.

"Babe, can we talk?" Johnny asked.

"Sure. Just give me a few minutes, okay? I have to check on a few more tables first." Lucy led the man away to a more secluded area, where they could talk in private when she was finished refilling a few drinks.

"A couple of weeks?" Lois said in a voice so low, it was almost as if she merely mouthed the question, instead of speaking it.

Clark shook his head. "Guess your sister's been keeping some secrets."

Lois frowned, instantly making Clark regret his words. "Seems to be a pattern with people that I love lately."

"Lois..."

She put her hand up in a "stop" gesture. "Clark, I'm *really* done discussing your...extracurricular activities for the time being."

Clark sighed, slumped his shoulders, and swallowed the words that had been on his tongue. He tried to think of something else to say, but came up empty. He said nothing, dunked his sandwich in the small bowl of au jus, and took a bite. At least, with his mouth full, Lois wouldn't expect a response.

At the end of the meal, Lois excused herself to the bathroom. Clark paid the bill, leaving cash on the table. Lucy hadn't yet returned, and he and Lois still had work to do. He didn't want to have to wait for his credit card to be run. He left a healthy tip as well, sensitive to the fact that Lucy was his girlfriend's sister. Or, rather, he *hoped* he could still consider Lois to be his girlfriend. After all, she *had* said that she still cared about him.

When Lois failed to return in a timely manner, he went looking for her. He found her spying around a corner, beyond which Lucy and Johnny were speaking together. He lightly touched Lois' shoulder. She jumped a little at the unexpected contact, but she managed to keep her gasp of fright low enough to remain undetected by her sister.

"Excuse me, but this is the no eavesdropping section," he teased her.

"A funny thing for the man who listened in on my conversation with Perry to say," she shot back, but she did allow him to lead her away. "I'm trying to make sure my sister doesn't

get hurt," she added, in an attempt to defend her actions.

"Lois," he said haltingly, choosing his words, "I'm not sure that's the best idea."

"I'm her older sister," she argued as they left the diner.

"I know that. And I appreciate where you're coming from. But, do you think *Lucy* will? From what you've told me, you've always been a little...vocal...about her choices in men."

"Clark, trust me. Lucy needs my help. She can't seem to pick a decent guy. You want to know what I overheard just now?"

Clark buckled his seat belt. "No, but something tells me you're going to tell me anyway."

"She *gave* him all her money! Her tips *and* paycheck! He's *using* her, Clark. And she's too blind to see it."

That gave him pause. He knew that Lucy was already struggling to pay her rent and her tuition fees. She certainly couldn't afford to give up her tips and paycheck to anyone, let alone a guy she'd only just started dating.

"I don't want her to be forced to drop out of her classes," Lois said in a sad voice.

"I know. I know you want to protect her," Clark sympathized, giving her shoulder a squeeze. He stopped for a stop sign, checked both ways, then proceeded forward. "I admire you for it. But this might be one of those things that she needs to figure out on her own. I have this feeling that she won't appreciate it if you meddle at all."

Lois said nothing, which Clark took as a bad sign. He kept driving, trying to think of some way to transition into a different topic of conversation. Finally, a thought popped into his brain, as he made a sharp right turn at an intersection.

"I was wondering something," he started.

"What's that?"

"Well...I thought that maybe...maybe you'd like to come out to Kansas with me tonight? I know you're mad at me right now, and I respect that. But, to be honest, my parents love you. I'm sure they'd be thrilled to find out that you know, well, everything now. As scared as they've always been for me, about others finding out, I think part of them has always wished that I could find someone I could trust enough to be my whole, real, weirdly gifted, alien self around." He turned his head just long enough to give her a quick smile, which she partially returned.

"No."

"I...uh...okay. I understand."

"Not tonight. I need some more time, Clark. I love your parents, and yes, maybe it would be good for me to talk to them. But I can't do this right now."

Clark nodded, keeping his eyes trained on the road ahead. He hit the brake as the driver in front of him stopped short. "Okay," he said.

"Are you going to tell them?" she asked.

"Well, I think they'll know something's up if one night Superman flies you to their house," he joked.

Lois laughed, a sound so precious and rare that day. "I meant about the baby."

"I...thought I'd follow your lead on that one. I wasn't sure if, after everything, you wouldn't change your mind. Especially given how it's...not mine."

"We don't know that for sure," she argued, though he couldn't tell if she wanted to believe there was a chance of him being the father or if she was just arguing for argument's sake.

"We do," he said in a soft, defeated voice. Then, "So, you *are* still keeping it, I take it?"

"I am. And, even as mad as I am right now, I still want you to be in the baby's life...if you still want to be."

"I do. I promised you, Lois. You and this baby will never be doing this on your own. Part of me fell in love with it when you showed me that first ultrasound image. And I still love you. Always will. I could never walk away from that, ever."

"I know. I still love you too. That's what makes this so hard," Lois said in a low, soft voice. Her head drooped a little toward her chest.

Clark nodded and swallowed down the urge to reply. He wasn't even sure what he could say to try to mend the rift between them. At least she still cared about him. If she couldn't muster the will to tell him that she still loved him, then he would be concerned. But she *had* told him that, and it was enough to give him hope that one day the hurt would be healed and they'd be the closest they'd ever been. He just wished he knew the day or the hour when that would happen, while part of him, despite his hope, feared that Superman and his deception would always stand as a wedge between them.

"So..." he hedged after a few minutes of silence. "I think we should check with the police and see if they know anything about that pipe bomb from this morning."

"We?" Lois asked.

"It's your article of course," he quickly amended. "But, well, it might not be the worst thing in the world if I tagged along. I'd like to stop by the scene of the bombing too, just in case I can pick up on anything that the police didn't."

"It's been hours," Lois pointed out.

"I know," he said, beeping the horn as the car before them remained idle well after the traffic light they were at turned green. "But it would give me peace of mind to check things over anyway."

"Okay," Lois said. "And, Clark?"

"Hmm?"

"We can share the byline, if there's a story."

"Really, Lois, I don't mean to pry into your story."

"I want to," she said. "I've done some thinking, especially right after I left your place this morning. You could have scooped me on just about any story we've done together. *Especially* the Superman pieces. But you've always shared the credit, even outright *given* me some of them. I know it hasn't been just to maintain your cover."

"It's because I've wanted to share with you," he said before she could. "I've always loved getting to share a part of who I am...my super side...with you, even if I couldn't do it directly."

"Let's go to the subway station first," Lois suggested. "I want to get this solved as quickly as possible. Whoever did this could strike again, and you might not make it there on time. I don't want to see anyone get hurt."

"Okay," Clark said, changing his course to comply with her wishes.

It didn't take long before they found themselves at the subway station. It was still closed as the police continued to work the area over, looking for the slightest clue to help them identify at least a suspect or two. Lois broke away from Clark, going over to speak with Detective Anderson, whom they had often worked with in the past. Clark spoke for a time with Inspector Henderson, but the man had nothing new to add to their investigation. Casually, he looked around the area, like any interested and curious reporter. As he did so, he discreetly employed his enhanced senses, scanning for clues, but came up empty. There was simply too much concrete and steel for there to be any distinctive signs of who may have passed that way.

And thousands of commuters coming and going day in and day out, every single day, he reminded himself.

Henderson promised to keep them abreast of any break in the case, and they vowed to do the same, if they heard anything. Lois put the word out to all of their snitches as Clark drove them back to the Planet, but by the day's end, they had heard nothing. Lois opted to go straight back to her apartment, alone, nor would she allow Clark to buy her dinner. It broke Clark's heart, but he couldn't blame her. She was still absorbing his betrayal of her trust.

For his part, Clark followed her home from a distance, after Lois refused to let him escort her. It made him feel better to make sure that she got safely to her door. He spent the better part of two hours patrolling, then headed off to Kansas. Now more than ever, he needed the support of his parents.

"Clark!" Martha cried when he knocked on their door. Then, seeing his face, concern flooded her own, replacing her joy at seeing him. "Honey, what's the matter?"

"I need to talk to you," he said, stepping over the threshold as Martha held the door open to him.

"Come in. We're just having dinner. Have you eaten yet?"

"Not yet," he said as his mother ushered him to the table.

"Venison stew," Jonathan said by way of a greeting as Clark entered the room. "Mark stopped by last week with some meat. His freezer broke and the new one doesn't hold as much. How are you, son?" He wrapped his boy in a bear hug.

"I've been a lot better," Clark admitted as he sat.

"What happened?" Jonathan asked as Martha set a large bowl of stew in front of Clark.

"Did Lois make a decision about the baby?" Martha asked worriedly. Clark knew that she hoped beyond hope for a grandchild.

"Yes," Clark answered. "She's keeping it. And I'll be involved in the baby's life, even if there's no chance of it being mine." They nodded, though they smiled at the prospect of becoming grandparents.

"That's wonderful news!" Jonathan exclaimed.

"Yeah," Clark said, his enthusiasm gone. "That's not really why I'm here though."

"What is it?" Martha pressed. "Is there something wrong with the baby?"

"No," Clark said, shaking his head. "It's Lois. She...found out. About me. About Superman."

"Oh," Martha said, sinking into her chair. "My guess is she didn't take it well."

"That's an understatement," Clark said, dragging his spoon through the stew before taking a mouthful. He swallowed before continuing. "She's absolutely livid."

"She's not speaking to you?" Jonathan guessed.

"She is, but it's almost completely limited to professional matters. She says she still loves me, but she needs time to process everything. I can't blame her. I've been lying to her face for a long time. We're having a baby together. She should be able to trust me with everything, and I should be able to trust her with everything, even that stupid secret of mine. I'm not sure she'll ever really forgive me. No, that's not right. I'm *afraid* she'll never truly forgive me. I'm terrified that I might have completely wrecked things."

"Did she *say* that everything is ruined?" Jonathan inquired.

"No," Clark admitted, pushing his food around in his bowl.

"But I just have this sinking feeling down in the pit of my stomach. Lois means everything to me. *Everything*. I've spent the better part of the day second guessing everything about our relationship. The way I handled my secret, the way I couldn't just trust her from the start, whether or not she'll ever understand that she really *does* know the real me — that Superman doesn't factor in to who I really am, not really. He's just an extension of myself." He sighed heavily and ate another heaping spoonful of the thick and hot stew.

"At the same time," he continued, "I know in my heart that things couldn't have been any different. I needed to know that she chose Clark, not his alter ego." Again, he sighed and took a sip of water. "I've spent the other part of the day wondering if it was ever a good idea for me to create Superman to begin with."

"I thought you loved the freedom to be able to help people," Martha said knowingly.

"I do, Mom. You know that. It's just that, for all the good

Superman does, he might have destroyed the one perfect thing in my life.”

“She said she still loved you,” Martha pointed out. “Can’t you trust her when she says that?”

“I *do* trust her. But that hasn’t stopped that nagging little flame of doubt from flickering there inside as well. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m not sure there *is* anything to do,” Jonathan said after a thoughtful moment of silence had passed.

“That’s not exactly what I was hoping to hear,” Clark said, casting his eyes down at his supper.

“I know it’s not,” his father said, reaching over and lightly squeezing Clark’s shoulder. “But I think, in this instance, it’s true. You have to let Lois figure things out on her own, as hard as it is.”

“I’m not sure I can do that,” he admitted. “I’m so used to fixing problems. Sitting still and being helpless...” he shook his head. “I don’t know if that’s possible for me.”

“I have faith that you *can*,” Jonathan said.

“I hope so,” Clark said. “I can’t mess things up any further than I already have.” He took another bite of his food.

“I could talk to her, if you’d like,” Martha offered.

Clark shook his head. “I actually offered as much to Lois. I wanted to bring her with me tonight. She’s not ready for that either. I had hoped that, if she got to talk to you, it might help her to process everything. But, I’m not going to force it on her. Thanks anyway. Maybe sometime in the future though, if Lois ever forgives me.”

“She will,” Martha assured him. “She loves you. I know it looks bad now, but it will change. Just you wait and see.”

Clark nodded, but, in his heart, he wasn’t completely convinced.

“Croissant?”

“Huh?”

“Croissant?” Clark repeated, holding a brown bag toward Lois.

“Let me guess,” she said in a lowered voice. “France?” She gestured with her hand in what looked to be a flying motion.

“Uh...oui?” he replied, feeling himself slightly blush. “They’re from my favorite little cafe.”

Lois nodded and took the proffered bag. “Thanks. I guess maybe there might be a perk or two to this whole thing.”

“Does that mean you forgive me?” he teased.

“Not quite. You know you can’t buy my good graces.”

“I know, and I wouldn’t have picked these up, under normal circumstances. But I was in the area this morning.”

“The plane that was going down. Yeah, I heard about it on the radio. And if I wasn’t so hungry, I wouldn’t even want this. It’s like...cheating. No one else can do what you can. Getting this,” again, she made that same motion with her hand, “the way you did — that’s *exactly* what we’re fighting about here, Clark. Everything that you hid from me. I want to be a *normal* couple.”

Clark nodded in understanding. “I’m not sure that’s possible, Lois. Because I’m *not* normal. Normal for me is rushing off on a moment’s notice to help save someone or picking up an authentic Italian pizza. I’m sorry, Lois. I wish I could just...stop. But I can’t. It’s...*he’s*...as much a part of me as the blood in my veins.” He sighed and fell silent for a moment before speaking again, this time changing the subject. “Oh, uh...my parents say hi. They’re so excited about your decision,” he said, pitching his voice as low as he could, so that only she could hear. “And yes, they’re even happy that you know...everything...about me. They’re willing to talk with you, if you want. In person or on the phone, it doesn’t matter. I told them you weren’t ready yet, but they said the offer stands.”

“Good to know,” Lois said neutrally.

“Did you sleep okay last night? I wanted to call you but figured it was best if I didn’t.”

“Not as well as I would have liked.”

“You and me both.”

“The difference is, you deserve a sleepless night or two,” she said.

Ouch.

He couldn’t argue that she was wrong though. “Maybe,” he said.

“Lois! Clark!” Jimmy called out to them. “This just came in. Surveillance photos from the subway that was bombed yesterday.”

“Great. Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark said, taking the manila envelope from his friend. It was thin, so Clark assumed only the most relevant photos were enclosed within.

“Oh, and the Chief wants everyone in the conference room for a quick staff meeting.”

“We’ll be right there,” Clark said.

Jimmy nodded and headed off to spread the word. Clark moved to his desk and placed the envelope down. He dearly wanted to open the envelope up and inspect the photos within, but he knew better than to get wrapped up in their investigation. Finding the bomber would have to wait, as much as it pained him to know that the perpetrator was still out there somewhere, able to strike again if he or she so chose. With one last, lingering look, he put his back to the desk and moved off toward the conference room.

As per usual, he sat in the seat next to Lois, more out of habit than because he believed that she wanted him close by. Lois picked at her croissant as they waited for the rest of their coworkers to trickle in. She leaned in to Clark as she took the first bite of the treat he’d brought for her.

“It’s really good,” she informed him.

“Glad you like it.”

“All right everybody, sit down and quiet up,” Perry said as he entered the room. Immediately, the noise level in the room dropped to almost nothing. “Let’s not make this a long, drawn out meeting. The world doesn’t stop just because we’re in here and not out there in the streets. Wyman, how’s the gang murder story coming?”

“Almost done, Chief. I have two, maybe three more paragraphs to write.”

“Good. Munoz? The apartment fire?”

“Waiting to hear back from the fire department on whether or not it was arson. I plan on calling them back by the end of the day.”

“Make it sooner,” Perry said. “Stone? How’s the follow-up on that toy store robbery?”

“Stalled. The owner refuses to give us an interview and the police don’t have any fresh leads. I’m going to try for an interview again before lunch.”

“Good. Lois? Clark? Anything on the subway bombing?”

“Nothing new. We just got some surveillance photos that we haven’t had a chance to look at yet,” Clark answered. “With any luck, we’ll grab a lead from them.”

“As soon as this meeting is over...” Perry started to say.

“We’ll be on it,” Clark finished for him.

“Cat, how’s the gossip column looking?”

“Unfortunately not as plump as Lois is these days,” she jibbed, giving Lois a victorious smile.

The entire office was used to the traded teasing and occasional verbal warfare between the two women. But this time, there was only scattered snickering as Lois’ entire visage darkened like a storm cloud.

“That’s *it!*” she said, slamming the palms of her hands on the polished conference room table. “I have *had it* with the jabs about my figure from you, Cat. You want to know *why* I look the way I

do right now? It's because Clark and I are having a baby. Yes, that's right," she said as Cat gaped, "he chose *me* to have a baby with. *Not you*. So chew on that for a while. You will *never* have Clark. *Never*."

The rest of their coworkers sat stock still and silent as they absorbed what Lois had said. She eyed them all with a dangerous stare, daring them to speak.

"Anyone *else* have something to say?" she asked in a flat, cold tone.

Jimmy bravely ventured to break the silence. "Congrats?" he asked, somewhat fearfully.

That finally put a small smile on her face. "Thanks, Jimmy."

With that, the congratulations began. Clark felt many a hand clasp him on the shoulder as their friends and coworkers all offered their well wishes and happiness for them. For a moment, Clark felt almost like a celebrity.

Too bad this baby isn't of my blood.

The thought was there and gone in a second, but it left him feeling somewhat deflated and definitely saddened. He kept the smile affixed to his face, however, and thanked everyone for their kind words. Lois looked surprised by the outpouring of happiness from the rest of the reporting staff and photographers. She graciously accepted each congratulatory word from the rest of the staff. Clark was glad. She looked genuinely happy and that made his heart ache with love for her.

"All right, everyone, settle down. Settle down," Perry called out, trying to regain order so the meeting could finish and everyone could get back to work. "You all will have a few more months to discuss this. Can we get back on track here?"

Lois shot Perry a grateful look. Clark knew that, as thankful as she was for the well wishes of their coworkers, she really didn't like being in the limelight, unless it was to celebrate yet another reporting award. Perry nodded once in acknowledgement.

"Kirth? Where are we on the school board hearing?"

"We should have a ruling tomorrow morning."

"Woods? The liquor store holdup?"

"Positive ID on the suspect, I sent the story over to you just before the meeting."

Clark lost track of the rest of the meeting. His mind was solely fixated on Lois. He'd never once imagined her telling the entire newsroom of her pregnancy, not the way she had. He knew also, now that the cat of out of the bag, so to speak, she would need to tell her parents. He wasn't looking forward to that. It was always awkward enough meeting a girl's parents for the first time. But to do so and take responsibility for her unborn baby in the same breath...he only hoped he'd leave the meeting in one piece. He loved Lois and nothing in the world could tear him from her side, but that didn't mean he wasn't nervous about the scrutiny he was guaranteed to receive, if Lois wasn't exaggerating about her parents' attitudes.

It was a relief when the meeting was adjourned and he could get back to work on the bombing case. At least he had something else to occupy his mind with. He went straight back to his desk and used a letter opener to neatly slice open the sealed manila envelope. He studied the pictures for a long time, scanning them in every possible way, looking for something by which he could identify the hooded figure he saw in the images.

"Anything yet?" Lois asked, appearing over his shoulder and causing him to jump slightly. He hadn't noticed she was there as he rescanned the photos for a second time.

Clark snapped out of his enhanced vision and back to normal to look at Lois. "Nothing yet." He zoomed back in on the photo. "Wait...I think...I think there's some sort of logo on his backpack."

"What does it look like?" Lois asked, getting excited.

"A starburst with initials."

"Well? Spit it out! What are they?"

"It's hard to tell. It's mostly blocked." He quickly checked the other photos, but they were worse than the first one. "I think I see the word 'tech.' Jimmy might know it. Jimmy!" he called out.

The younger photographer seemed to materialize from nowhere. "What's up, CK? Oh, and by the way, congrats again. It's so cool that you two are having a baby! Let me tell you, you guys are *so* lucky to have each other. I'd kill for a decent girl right now."

"Thanks, Jimmy," Clark said. "I need you to blow up these images. Specifically the backpack." He pointed with his finger to exactly where he meant. "I think something might be on it. It might be nothing, it might be everything."

"Will do. I've got some stuff developing in the darkroom right now, but I can get to this in about an hour."

"Great," Clark said, knowing it would be pointless to ask if Jimmy could please hurry along the current batch of photos. "You're the best."

"Just call the kid Jimmy and we'll be even," his friend teased as he took a few steps backwards, the photographs in question in his hand.

"Speaking of," Clark said, looking to Lois. "We're going to need to tell your folks. Not that they have any contact with anyone in the bullpen, but..." He shrugged and left the unspoken implications hang in the air.

"Ugh," Lois said with a healthy dose of disgust. "You're right, of course."

"They're going to find out eventually."

"Can we just send them

an announcement when the kid graduates from high school?" Lois pleaded.

"Lo-is," Clark said, though an amused smile curled the corners of his mouth.

"Okay, okay. I'll see what I can do. Later. We have work to do."

Clark nodded. "Coffee?"

Lois thought about it for a moment. "I really shouldn't, but, yeah, I think I need it after that meeting."

"I'll be right back," he promised.

"I'll come with you," Lois said. "I feel like I want to stretch my legs a little."

He shrugged. "Sure."

As they made their way to the break area, they passed by Ralph, who was just coming from there, munching on a donut. He grinned when he saw them. Lois ducked away for a moment, heading into the ladies' room.

"So, Kent. You and the Lane woman," Ralph said, coming up alongside Clark. "You *dog!* Or should I say, Mad Dog *tamer!*"

Clark gritted his teeth. "That's not even remotely funny, Ralph."

"I mean, man! It's no secret that she's a looker. But that attitude? Did she even let you get a word in edgewise?" he continued, as if Clark hadn't spoken. "If you know what I mean, that is."

"Cut it *out*, Ralph," Clark said in a warning tone.

"Granted, for some reason, she gets along with you, and you with her. Most of us would rather not be on the receiving end of her tirades, let alone whatever her pregnancy hormones are going to be like. I feel bad for you," Ralph said. "She's probably going to turn into a total psycho."

Clark had heard enough. He pushed Ralph back against the wall, pinning him there with his forearm. A look of shock, and maybe even a little fear, crossed Ralph's features. The donut dropped from his hand and hit the floor, the jelly filling spattering on the freshly mopped tiles.

"Hey, man, what's the big idea?"

"*Shut up*, Ralph," Clark demanded in an almost growling

tone. “I don’t *ever* want to hear you speaking about Lois like that ever again. Understood?”

Ralph gulped. “Get your hands off me! Do you *know* who my uncle is?”

“I’m very aware of who your uncle is,” Clark replied. “I’m fairly certain your connection to the owners is the only reason why you still have a job here.”

“So you know you just crossed a bad line,” Ralph threatened.

“Actually, Ralph, *you* crossed the line. Lois means *everything* to me,” Clark said. “I will *not* tolerate you or anyone else speaking badly about her.”

He abruptly let go and Ralph dusted himself off in an overly dramatic fashion. “Maybe I was wrong. Maybe *you’re* the insane one. I’ve heard of sympathy pregnancies but this is ridiculous.”

“Ralph, I’m not going to warn you again,” Clark said through gritted teeth, trying hard to control the sudden wave of anger that had engulfed him.

For some reason, that seemed to cut Ralph to the bone. He took the opportunity to scurry away like the rat Clark thought he was. He’d always known that the man was inept at his job, as well as crude, but this had been a new low, even for him.

However, it was his own reaction to Ralph that was upsetting Clark the most. He’d allowed his anger to control him. That was never a good thing. What if he’d lost his careful grip on his powers?

“Clark? Clark, you’re shaking,” Lois said as she lightly touched his upper arm. She sounded scared and Clark had to wonder how much she’d seen.

Clark looked down. His hands were shaking and he could feel the rest of his body quaking as well. “I...I...”

“Come over here,” Lois said quietly, leading him to an empty conference room.

Once they were inside, she wrapped her arms around him in a hug, though he continued to tremble. For a moment, he just let her hold him, before he returned the hug, once he was sure that he was in control enough not to hurt her. Hurting Lois, even accidentally, was simply not an option.

“Are you okay?” she finally asked, murmuring into his ear.

“I’m not sure,” Clark replied, pulling away. “I can’t believe I just did that. I threatened him. I could have *hurt* him, Lois. For just a split second, I lost control of my anger, and, as a result, of my control over my abilities.”

“But you *didn’t* hurt him,” Lois reminded him.

“It doesn’t matter,” he argued, shaking his head. “The point is, I *could* have. For a moment there, I was terrified of myself. I can’t allow myself to get this emotional. And I usually don’t. But when he started in on you...between that and everything over the last few days...I couldn’t help it. It was like...I don’t know. Like I wasn’t myself at all.”

“I appreciate that you stood up for me,” Lois said, giving him a smile before dropping her eyes down to the floor. “No one’s ever really done that for me before. Not like this.”

“Lois, I’m always happy to be there for you. But I shouldn’t have done what I did. Perry’s going to kill me.”

“He’ll have to go through me first,” Lois vowed.

“Lois, don’t put yourself on the line here. Not for me. Not after what I’ve done.”

“Clark, forget the secret for now. This has nothing to do with it,” she said, rubbing his forearm in a soothing manner. “And even so, I still love you. I’ve still got your back when things get tough.”

“And I’ve got yours,” he replied with a small smile.

“Kent?” Perry asked, opening the door to the conference room a crack. “Can I see you in my office for a moment?”

“Sure, Chief,” Clark said, a knot of dread reforming and tightening in his stomach.

“I’m coming too,” Lois said, and for once, Perry didn’t

challenge her.

She grabbed Clark’s hand as they trailed their boss. It was a short walk to his office. Lois closed the door as they entered, blocking out the noise of the bullpen and prying ears alike.

“Kent...” Perry began, uncertain.

“Look, Perry...I can explain.”

“No need. I know exactly what went on.”

“You...do?” Clark asked, surprised.

“I wouldn’t be the editor of a world famous newspaper if I didn’t know what was going on in my own newsroom,” Perry said.

Lois and Clark exchanged a look, then shrugged. It made sense, after all, that Perry would keep his thumb on everything that went on in the bullpen, if he could. Still, Lois ventured a guess.

“Jimmy?”

“Maybe,” he said elusively. “Now, I don’t disagree that Ralph got what was coming to him. But you have to remember, his uncle’s one of the big mucky-mucks upstairs.”

“I know,” Clark said, sinking down onto the plaid couch. “Look, Perry, I know I messed up. I let him get under my skin and I lost my composure. I shouldn’t have.”

Perry nodded. “You, above all people, I think, understand that. I’ve never seen you that riled up before.”

Me, above all people? Clark wondered to himself. Once again, he had to contemplate how much Perry knew or suspected about his connection to Superman.

“The things he said about Lois...” he said instead, in a weak defense of his unforgivable actions.

Perry put up his hand to silence him. “I know. I’ll be speaking with him too. Believe you me, if I could, I’d kick his butt from here to Graceland. But I can’t. That being said, there’s no way I can sweep this little incident under the carpet. You understand.”

Clark nodded miserably. “Of course.”

“Good, that makes this a little easier. I’m going to have to suspend you for a week, sans pay.”

“Perry!” Lois exclaimed, outraged. “You can’t do that!”

“I can and I am. Look, if I do nothing, the bigwigs upstairs are going to be on me like white on rice.”

“And what about Ralph?” Lois demanded to know. “What? Clark gets punished for sticking up for me, but Ralph gets away scot-free?”

“Lois,” Clark protested, trying to get her to calm down. He felt like he deserved the punishment that Perry had doled out, and felt, in part, relieved that it was only a small suspension and nothing more substantial.

“I’ll be speaking to him. *And* his uncle. I always said that guy was a walking sexual harassment suit waiting to happen,” Perry said grimly. “His behavior is completely unacceptable.”

“Tell him that I’m sorry,” Clark said.

Perry nodded. “I hate to say this, you know that. But, I need your press pass, son.”

Clark nodded in turn. “I understand.” He took this wallet out, slipped the pass out, and handed it to his boss. “I’m sorry, Perry. It was stupid of me to lose my temper.”

“Son, don’t even mention it. I can’t say that, back in the day, I wouldn’t have done the same if someone had insulted Alice like that. Now, go home. Try to relax. Maybe start thinking up some names for that baby of yours.” He gave Clark a fatherly smile and a pat on the shoulder.

It didn’t make Clark feel any better. He sighed heavily. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Go on,” Perry encouraged him.

“Come on,” Lois said, rubbing Clark’s back. “I’ll take you home. It’s really not all that far out of the way from that fire from the other day that we covered. I was thinking of following up

with the owner of that consignment store that was affected.”

Clark mutely nodded and followed Lois when she exited Perry’s office. His heart dragged along with his feet. How had he been so irresponsible? How had he lost that iron grip he always had on his emotions and powers? And why Ralph? The man wasn’t worth Clark’s anger. In fact, Clark tried to avoid the man when it was possible, for the sole reason of how much his complete ineptitude and inherent crudeness bothered Clark.

“Hey, CK,” Jimmy said as he spied the two making their way toward the elevator.

“Don’t say it, Jimmy,” Clark said, shaking his head.

“I wanted to say that he had it coming,” the younger man said.

Clark knew that Jimmy and Ralph had a rocky history. Ralph thought of himself as a Jack-of-all-trades and master of all. He’d once been paired with Jimmy on an assignment. While there, he’d tried to teach Jimmy how to be a photographer, despite the young man’s prowess with a camera. He’d even grabbed the camera from him and shot an entire roll of useless, blurry photos. Of course, when Perry had raged about it, Ralph had tried to place the blame on Jimmy, stating that the photographer must have purposefully messed with the settings to make him look bad. Perry hadn’t believed a word of it, but that had done nothing to cool Jimmy’s hatred for Ralph.

“It’s about time someone put him in his place,” Jimmy added.

“Yeah, well, it should never have been me,” Clark said. “I’ve been suspended for a week.”

“What?! That’s ridiculous!”

“It’s more than fair,” Clark said, putting a hand up to stop Jimmy before he could begin to rant.

“Sorry, man.”

“Don’t be. I did it to myself.”

Jimmy shook his head anyway. “Oh, Lois,” he said, as if suddenly remembering something. “There was an ATM robbery this morning.”

“So? That’s not exactly breaking news.” She shrugged.

“Yeah, but the word is that the front of the machine had a hole punched right through it.”

“A hole?”

“A *fist-sized* hole,” Jimmy said, a twinkle in his eye.

“How do they know that?” Clark asked.

“There was a witness. She saw the man punch a hole in the machine with his bare hands.”

Lois and Clark shared a look. This could be something huge, they both knew.

“I’m coming with you,” Clark said decisively.

“But...”

“Not as a reporter,” he assured her. “But as a concerned boyfriend.”

And superhero, he thought to himself flatly. With Lois’ strong reaction to his secret alter ego, the thought of Superman left an almost bad taste in his mouth.

Lois nodded. “Let’s go then.”

“I’m coming too,” Jimmy said, grabbing his camera.

“Actually, I was just about to leave you a message and go when I saw you. I’ll take my bike and meet you there.”

That didn’t surprise Clark. Jimmy rarely rode with them when on assignment. He preferred to take his own car or motorcycle, so that he could be free to get back to the Planet whenever he needed to. That way, he could get the photographs developed as swiftly as possible, oftentimes finishing the process before Lois and Clark could get back to the bullpen. It was a time consuming process to speak with the police, witnesses, victims, and others at crime scenes, or to secure an interview with whoever was holding the press conference they were covering. On more than one occasion, having Jimmy develop the photos ahead of Lois and Clark’s reemergence into the bullpen had given

them their very next lead almost instantaneously.

“See you there,” Lois said, her voice carrying a note of approval. Then, to Clark, a brief and singular nod.

“Right,” Jimmy said, slinging his camera bag over his shoulder. “I’ll give Perry the head’s up.”

“Are you going to, you know? Buzz around?” Lois asked when they were safely in the elevator.

Clark shook his head. “Only if I have to. Jimmy’s expecting to see *me* there, not Superman,” he said, lowering his voice though they were completely alone.

“Clark?” she said after a brief lapse of silence.

“Hmm?”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“This,” she replied, gesturing broadly. “This is my fault. I should have kept my mouth shut about the baby.”

Clark laughed, causing creases of confusion to crinkle Lois’ brow. “It would have come out sooner or later. And Ralph still would have been an idiot.”

“Yeah, but, in light of everything between you and me lately...”

“Lois, trust me, I don’t think there would ever be a perfect time to announce that to the rest of the Planet. Are both of our emotions running high right now? Sure. But, in the end, I’m responsible for my own actions. *All* of them.”

“Lane! Kent! You caught this one?” Detective Keller asked as the two approached the bright yellow police tape cordoning off the scene of the ATM robbery.

“A man punches a hole through the ATM with his bare hands? That’s right up our alley,” Lois said with a grin. “Is it true?”

“Best we can figure, yeah. Witness saw the guy do it. Says he walked right up to her, plain as day, hit on her, then broke into the machine.”

“How can a man do that?” Lois asked, more to herself than to anyone else.

“Might not have been a man,” Keller said. “The witness took a literal bite out of crime. Tore a chunk of flesh from his hand.”

Lois winced. “Lovely.”

“Only, well, it wasn’t flesh. The guy didn’t bleed. She said she saw metal flashing beneath where she’d bitten him.”

“Some kind of robot?” Clark asked.

Keller shook his head. “Unlikely. The work’s too good. Here. Take a look.” He handed them a couple of pictures. “The ATM takes photos of everyone who uses the machine.”

“Johnny Corben,” Lois said with disgust in her voice. “I knew the guy was bad news.”

“You know this joker?”

Lois sighed. “Yeah. He ‘borrowed’ money from my sister a day or so ago. I was planning on doing a background check on the guy to show her that he’s not the good guy he’s making himself out to be.”

“You think she knows where he is?”

“I have no idea,” Lois said, biting her lower lip. “She hasn’t been seeing him long. I can ask.”

Keller nodded. “Thanks for the ID.”

Lois nodded. “Of course. So, what else can you give me?”

As Lois and the Detective talked, Clark took to wandering the scene, discreetly checking for clues when he could, fully aware that he wasn’t even technically part of the investigation. He saw Jimmy arrive, the young man flashing his press pass almost before he completely dismounted off his bike. Immediately, his camera was out of the bag, the shutter snapping away as fast as Jimmy could hit the button. He only slowed to change the roll of film. Then, and only then, did Clark see him begin to take his time in getting more creative with the angle of his shots.

Lastly, as the two officers near the ATM moved away, Clark got his chance to examine the machine itself. As inconspicuously as possible, he lowered his glasses and telescoped in on the ATM. The damage was incredible. The strike had been singular, precise, and made with superhuman strength. It made Clark very uneasy. Who knew what other damage Johnny might cause? Who knew who he might hurt?

Sighing, he pushed his frames back up his face and shook his head slightly. Nothing had seemed off about Johnny when he'd briefly met him. Oh, sure, he'd gotten a bad feeling when Lois had told him of the money Lucy had so freely handed over. But, other than that, Johnny had seemed like a normal guy.

Right. Because no normal guys ever harbor any secrets, he mused to himself.

"Anything?" Lois asked, coming up alongside him.

He shook his head. "I wish. Lois..."

She nodded, encouraging him. "What?"

"I looked at the ATM," he said, leading her to a relatively empty spot on the street. "It goes without saying that a lot of power went into punching through all that metal and everything. But the damage I saw — I don't think the police understand yet just how strong this guy is. You know I'll do what I can to keep you safe, but with my suspension, it's going to be harder. Superman cannot be seen tailing you to keep you out of trouble."

For a moment, it looked like she was going to argue. Then her hand fluttered to her stomach and she mutely nodded in agreement. Clark loosed a mental sigh of relief that she wasn't going to fight him on this.

"I'll be careful," she promised him after a minute.

"Good," he said, letting his relief accompany his words. "I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you."

"I think you worry too much sometimes, but it's kind of nice too," Lois admitted.

But Clark was no longer listening. Something had caught his attention. He listened in as Lois looked on, her brow furrowed in concern.

"What?" she asked in a confidential tone.

"Fighting a few blocks over," he said. "Sounds bad."

"CK! Lois!" Jimmy called in a friendly manner. "Did you see the damage? Crazy!"

"Very," Lois agreed as Clark nodded, trying to conceal his desire to rush off to the fight. To his relief, Lois noticed the pensiveness in his poise and directed Jimmy away. "Did you get a shot of the piece of fake flesh?" She started walking away, shooting Clark a parting glance that promised him she'd be at the scene of the fighting in another moment.

He responded with a grateful look before making his way beyond the police tape. He found a quiet, secluded place to spin into the suit. Seconds later, he was at the scene. A man was mercilessly beating another man, the victim pleading for his life with bloody spit flying out from between his broken teeth.

"Let him go," Clark commanded in the resounding, bold tone of Superman.

"Who's going to make me?" the assailant asked.

"Me," Clark responded, his tone hard and unyielding as stone.

"I'd like to see you try," the assailant replied, without even looking at Clark.

"Please," the victim pleaded. "Help."

Clark took a few measured steps forward until he reached the pair. He firmly, but carefully, placed his hand on the assailant's right shoulder, effectively stopping him from bringing his fist back to the other's face. At the same moment, however, a stabbing lance of pain pierced his entire body. There was no mistaking it.

Kryptonite.

One of the two men had kryptonite on them. Worse, Clark

knew, without a doubt, it was of the deadly green variety, not the still new and as of yet not understood red kind that Miranda had once worn.

The assailant shrugged Clark off, throwing him back a few steps, then turned, grinning. Johnny Corben. Even through the fog of pain that had engulfed him, Clark recognized the man instantly. Johnny still held his victim tightly by the shirt. He barely sent a flicker of a glance at him before reaching over and snapping the man's neck like a brittle twig.

"No!" Clark cried, too late.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't *Subpar* Man," Johnny taunted.

As he stepped forward, the kryptonite's effects on Clark became stronger. It was a fight for him to remain on his feet, instead of crashing to the pavement. He fought through the assault of pain and did his best to maintain the immovable stance of the superhero.

"It's over, Corben."

"Oh, so you know who I am. Good. I'd hate to have to introduce myself before I kill you."

"Just come along quietly. Trust me, it'll go easier on you."

Johnny snorted. "Right." He took a measured step forward. "You want me? Come and get me, Super Loser!"

Clark stood his ground, not moving an inch either forward or backward. He felt, rather than heard or saw, Lois' presence at his back. He didn't acknowledge her. His eyes never left Johnny's.

"What are you waiting for? Come and get me!" Johnny challenged again.

After another minute of a silent battle of wills, Johnny grew tired of waiting. He ran at Clark. The Kryptonite nearly crippled Clark as Johnny came closer. His legs turned to jelly. Johnny fisted his right hand as he came forward. Clark wasn't fast enough to turn the blow aside. It took him full in the stomach. The sheer force of the punch sent Clark flying backwards several feet. When he finally connected with the ground, he gasped and coughed, trying to get air back into his lungs.

"Aww, did I hurt you?" Johnny taunted, kicking Clark in the gut.

Clark made a muffled sound of protest as, once again, the air whooshed out of him. He coughed again and attempted to stand. Johnny's fist connected with Clark's jaw, knocking him back down before he could fully gain his feet. Laughter filled the alleyway as Johnny danced around, punching the air, like a television boxer mugging for the cameras. It gave Clark a moment's rest where he could finally stand, doing his best to ignore the pain in his jaw. It wasn't broken, for which he was grateful, but it certainly felt like it was.

"Come on, *Stupidman!* Fight me, you wuss!"

"Give it up, Corben," Clark commanded through gritted teeth. "This won't end well for you if you keep it up."

"Won't end well for *me*? Please! You can't even withstand these gentle punches I've been throwing!"

To prove his point, he came at Clark again. This time, however, Clark was ready. He turned aside as Johnny rushed at him. Corben couldn't stop in time and hit the street light pole behind Clark. The pole cracked, groaned, then fell. Clark was only too glad that Lois had since moved her position, and had been far from the danger the falling pole had possessed. Johnny shook off the impact the easy way a dog shook rainwater off its coat. He set his jaw and attacked again.

He must have anticipated Clark's movement. He changed his trajectory as Clark moved to evade him. He grabbed Clark's left arm and jerked it. Clark couldn't help the cry of pain as the bones snapped. Clark lashed out with his good right arm, his fist connecting with Corben's shoulder, knocking him back. Behind him, Clark heard Lois' cries of distress at watching the beating he was enduring. Johnny responded by redoubling his efforts. His punch carried at least double the force of the first few. Clark's

chest received the brunt of the force this time. He sailed backwards and into a metal trash can, crumpling the side with his solid frame. Breathing became painful thanks to cracked or broken ribs.

Another grunt of pain and annoyance escaped his lips as he fought his way to his feet. The Kryptonite sickness was almost overwhelming. All he could do was grit his teeth and fight through it as best he could, though his head was throbbing and his vision swam. His stomach was twisted up in knots and he could taste the metallic tang of blood in his mouth from the split lips he'd received from the punch to his jaw earlier.

Johnny rushed him again. Clark managed to push him backwards with his unbroken arm. He mustered up enough strength to send the other man to the opposite side of the street, buying Clark some much needed recovery time and distance from the Kryptonite. Though the weakness and pain didn't vanish, the assault on his body did slightly subside. It was a welcome relief for Clark.

It lasted for only a few blissful heartbeats.

Johnny launched himself to his feet with inhuman agility. He grabbed the nearest object to him — a motorcycle — and lobbed it at Clark. Luck must have been smiling on Clark — it missed him by a narrow six inches. He had only a second to breathe a sigh of relief. He couldn't imagine how much damage his body would have sustained in his weakened state, or if he would have survived at all, had Johnny hit his target.

A howl of frustration erupted from Johnny. He ran at Lois and grabbed her around the throat. He glared at Clark, silently daring him to come closer.

"Leave her be, Corben," Clark commanded. "She has nothing to do with things."

"She your little girlfriend?" Johnny asked. "Will you cry when I snap her scrawny neck?"

"*Let her go!*" Clark insisted, fighting to keep his voice as neutral and devoid of emotions as possible. "It's me you want. I'm standing right here."

"Super-ack!" Lois tried to squeak out, just before Corben's grip tightened around her throat.

Fear ripped through every part of Clark's being like a bolt of lightning. He gathered what little strength he had left and rushed headlong at Johnny, funneling his energy into his super speed. His shoulder connected with Johnny's chest, taking him by surprise. His grip faltered and fell away from Lois as he tried to ward off Clark's attack. The momentum carried them into the brick wall of an abandoned and crumbling building. Somehow, the bricks withstood the force of the impact, stopping the two men as soon as they made contact with the building.

The move had cost Clark dearly. He wasn't fast enough in his attempt to subdue Corben. Johnny pinned him down and began to punch him — in the face, in the chest, it didn't seem to matter or make a difference to him. Clark felt a couple more of his ribs snap, to match his broken and useless arm. The world started to dim around him as he succumbed further and further to the Kryptonite. He swung wildly with his right arm, and only by the grace of luck hit Corben in the eye. Clark heard a crunch of metal before the eye flashed red and went dark.

Johnny howled in anger, his hands automatically going to his face. He began to retreat, slowly at first, but faster as he passed Lois. Clark could hear sirens in the distance and he only hoped that the police had been alerted to Johnny's presence in the area. Had Lois screamed for help? He couldn't recall. All he knew was the agony of his broken and battered body.

"Jimmy, no," he heard Lois saying. "No photos. Not like this."

He would have laughed if his body hadn't felt aflame.

"Superman?" Lois asked, her tears hidden well within her eyes and voice, though Clark could see and hear them easily.

"What can I do for you? Can you stand?"

Clark tried to move and his body screamed in protest. Still, he forced himself into a sitting position. His right eye was beginning to swell and blacken, and he could feel his precious lifeblood rolling down his forehead from a gash in the center.

"I'll be okay," he told her in a flat, professional tone, for Jimmy's benefit.

"Jimmy," Lois said, understanding that Clark wouldn't speak while the photographer was there. She glanced over her shoulder. "The police are here. Go tell them that Corben was here."

"You got it," Jimmy replied, visibly shaken by the fight he'd just witnessed.

"Clark," Lois said in a low voice as Jimmy reached the mouth of the alleyway. "Are you okay?"

"No," he admitted. "But I will be, as soon as I get a chance to rest and take in some sunlight."

Lois tried to help him stand. Clark winced as she touched his broken arm.

"Broken," he explained.

"Oh, God," she replied, paling. "How?"

"Kryptonite," he said, lowering his voice to a bare whisper. "I don't know if he was carrying it or made of it, but it was unmistakable. Are *you* okay?"

"I'm fine," she assured him, "thanks to you."

"I wasn't about to let him hurt you." He finally pushed his begrudging body up, using the wall of the building to support himself as his limbs remembered their strength.

"Can I take you home?" she whispered.

He shook his head. "It's better if you don't."

"But, Clark..."

"I know, Lois. But I can't risk being seen in your car right now. I should be fine in a moment, at least enough to fly back to my place. Trust me. I've done it before."

"But, the broken bones..."

"Will heal," he finished for her. "I can already feel my ribs knitting back together." He gingerly maneuvered his broken arm with his whole one. His x-ray vision had returned, and he used it to carefully align the bones. Luckily, it had been a clean break. He didn't need to worry about having several pieces of bone fragments to get into place.

The sun burst forth from the tattered clouds above, as if it knew how much Clark needed its healing rays. Immediately, he felt the break beginning to mend itself, along with the other cuts and bruises on his body. Still, he knew he'd be sore for the rest of the day, if not longer. Lois looked on as Clark stood silently, eyes closed, as his body began to repair itself.

"What?" she asked, concern flooding her voice.

He managed a smile, though he did not open his eyes. "I told you my body would heal," he said.

"Does it...hurt?" Again, there was only concern in her voice, mixed, perhaps, with some of her natural curiosity.

"A little, but in a different way. It's not so much pain as...I don't know. General discomfort? It's hard to describe."

"Superman? Lois?" Jimmy called as he started back down the alley toward them, a few officers flanking him. "The cops want to talk to you guys."

Clark nodded. He'd anticipated as much. With confidence and precision, he gave the uniformed men his statement, recounting every word and every punch that was thrown. The officers took everything down in their notepads, and Clark identified Corben from the photo they showed to him. By the time he was finished and Lois began to tell her own version of what she'd witnessed, Clark was feeling much stronger, nearly like his old self, though his body ached and groaned whenever he moved. He excused himself and flew back to his apartment, where he promptly changed into his civilian clothing and laid out on his terrace to take full advantage of the remaining hours of

sunlight.

He must have dozed off. The next thing he knew, it was late afternoon and the shadows had begun to creep across his terrace, slowly but surely swallowing up Clark's bright haven with deep pockets of darkness. He rubbed his eyes, getting the sleep out of them, and winced even at that small motion. Though the sunlight had fully recharged him and healed the physical wounds he'd borne, his muscles still ached from the beating he'd received at Johnny's hands. Still, he forced his body to move, rubbing the places that protested as best he could.

He set aside the lounge chair he'd fallen asleep in and made his way back into his apartment. Though the cold didn't bother him, the day was growing chillier and the warmth of his home felt good. He decided on a hot shower, hoping the heat and rhythmic pounding of the jets of water on his muscles would loosen up some of the knots that had formed. He was right — it did help, by the slightest of degrees. Still, he wasn't one to complain. He would take whatever relief he could get.

Boredom set in shortly after he finished his shower. He tried to watch television, but found himself too distracted to pay much attention to the images on screen. Instead, he called his parents and related all of the woes and missteps the day had so far brought him. He had to assure them more than once that he was physically fine and not in danger of losing his job before they were satisfied — though Clark suspected that they wouldn't be completely contented until they saw him in person and he was reinstated at the Planet. He was just saying goodbye to his parents when there was a knock at the door.

A quick x-ray through the curtains on the door told him that it was Lois. He moved with as much speed as he dared to let her in.

"Hi," she said, almost shyly.

"Hi," he responded, stunned to see her there. He wasn't sure she'd ever willingly come to visit him at his place, at least, not while she was still so angry at him over his secret identity and the lies he'd told to protect it. "Come on in."

"I wanted to check on you," Lois said as he closed the door behind her, leaving the night behind. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said. "A little sore, but otherwise no worse for the ordeal. And you? When I saw those hands around your neck..."

"I'm fine," she said, repeating him and cutting off his train of thought. "Really. He never really got the chance to hurt me. Just enough to give us all a scare."

Clark nodded. "What's in the bag?"

"Oh," Lois said, as if remembering some long forgotten thing. "You're always bringing me food. Especially now, with the pregnancy. I figured it was my turn. I remembered you saying that you like fried chicken, so I went to Studebaker's and picked some up for us. I know it's not as good as that place you sometimes fly off to, but, well, it was the best I could do in Metropolis."

"Studebaker's is great. Thank you, Lois," he said sincerely.

He leaned in to kiss her, then remembered himself at the last second. He diverted his lips from their path to meet with hers and kissed her lightly on the cheek instead. It killed him to not be able to kiss her the way that he wanted. To distract himself, he got to work unpacking the bag of goodies Lois had brought over. Fried chicken, buttermilk biscuits, mashed potatoes, glazed carrots, creamed corn, and green beans all came out, one container at a time. By the time Clark was done unpacking it all, he was practically salivating.

"I wanted to get you the macaroni and cheese that you like so much," Lois said, blushing a little. "But they were all out. They said it would be another forty-five minutes before the next batch would be ready. I would have waited, but I was so worried about you that I wasn't willing to stick around. And then they didn't have the cherry soda that you like and I wasn't really sure who

else sells it. And..."

"Lois," Clark said, cutting her babbling off gently. "It's fine, really. This is more than enough."

Lois went to his cabinets and got out some plates, then the utensils. She brought them over to the coffee table. "Can we eat on the couch?"

"Absolutely. I think it'll feel better on my body," Clark said with a nod. "Here. I can make up a plate for you, if you'd like."

"No, no," Lois said, bringing the plates back over. "If anything, I should be making up yours."

Clark smiled over at her, one which she easily returned. "I have to say, Lois. This is a wonderful surprise. I'm glad to have you here."

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you," Lois admitted. "About our fight...or, I guess, the fight I picked with you. Please?"

Clark nodded. "I want nothing more than to clear the air with you. If you have any other questions, you know I'll give you straight answers."

"I know. But this is more about my issues with you keeping secrets from me."

"Of course. Come on, let's sit down first," he said, guiding her to the couch. "Just one second. I'll get us some drinks first." Before she could respond, he was quickly but gingerly headed to the fridge. For a moment, he rummaged around inside, then emerged with two bottles in his hands. "Here you go. The last cream soda. I'll pick up more next time I'm out. One good thing about all this free time Perry's given me." He tried to laugh it off, but Lois wasn't amused.

Still, when she spoke, it surprised Clark that she didn't comment at all on his suspension. "I have a lot of apologizing to do," she said in a soft voice as she picked at the skin of her chicken.

"No, you don't," he replied.

"I *do*. I should have listened more to what you were trying to tell me, about why you kept your other identity a secret. I saw today, when Johnny grabbed me to goad you back into the fight with him, that you were right. Criminals will use whatever and whoever they think are close to Superman. If word ever got out to the wrong person..." She let her voice trail off as she shuddered.

Clark swallowed the carrot in his mouth. "No, I should have trusted you, Lois. I should have known better."

"You *did* know better. You knew me well enough to know that, in those early days, when I was mad at Perry for saddling me with an unwanted and green — so I thought — partner, if I had found out the truth...I would have almost certainly have exposed your secret. Back then, the Pulitzer was everything to me. I was hardened and bitter and I would have done anything to get what I wanted. I wouldn't have cared much for who I might have hurt or destroyed along the way."

"What changed your mind?" he asked in a soft voice, meeting her gaze.

"You," she said simply.

"Me."

She nodded and ate a forkful of mashed potatoes before continuing. "You. You made me fall in love with you in both suits, the blue and the business ones. It didn't take me long to realize that I would have done anything to protect Superman. I'm ashamed to admit that it took me a little longer to realize that I would die to protect Clark, my best friend."

"Lois..."

She put a hand up to silence him. "I'm sorry, Clark. I overreacted when I found out about Superman. I won't say that I wasn't hurt, because I was. And I won't say that I wasn't mad, because I was. But, over the last two days, I've come to realize that I was mostly mad at myself for not seeing it sooner. The way you've both always spoken to me, the way you've looked at me and touched me, like I'm the center of the universe or some

precious treasure. I can't believe I never picked up on it before."

"You *are* the center of my universe, Lois. You *are* a rare, beautiful, priceless treasure to me. And I am *so* glad that I don't have to keep secrets from you anymore. Maybe part of me never wanted to keep secrets in the first place. Maybe that's why I allowed Superman to get so close to you, even at the expense it brought against me, Clark, as you fell for the superhero."

"Maybe," she agreed.

"So...are you still mad at me?" he asked, teasing her.

She laughed a little. "No. Seeing you today, taking that beating...I thought I was going to lose you, Clark. I won't lie. It terrified me. The thought of never seeing you again, never hearing your voice, never kissing you again...it made me realize how stupid this whole fight has been. It made me see how much I really do love you, and how little the past matters. What's important is now. What's important is our future together, if you'll still have me in it."

Clark coughed on his soda. "If I'll have you in it? Of course I will, Lois. You are my everything. I was just afraid that you wouldn't want me in *your* life after everything."

"That's not possible," she said with a smile. "Where would I be without my best friend, and the man that I love?"

Clark shrugged, as if to say "I don't know." Lois laughed.

"Anyway," she continued after a few moments where they both ate silently and searched for something else to say, "I'm relieved that you're okay."

"So am I. When I first felt the effects of the Kryptonite, I knew things were going to be bad, but I had no idea *just* how bad it would be. The next time I face him, I have to be smarter about the way I fight him."

"The *next* time? *Clark*, are you *out of your mind*?" The terror in her voice was real and apparent.

"I don't have a choice, Lois. He can't be allowed to remain at large. He's far too dangerous. You saw how easily he snapped that other man's neck."

"I know. I just...I can't lose you, Clark."

"You won't. I'll figure something else out."

Lois nodded, though her face showed her lingering doubts and apprehension. "Oh, that reminds me. I've got an ID on the dead guy. Name's Angel Gutierrez. I'm working on figuring out why Corben wanted him dead."

Clark sighed. "I wish I could help. And I *will* do whatever I can, look at anything you might happen to bring over for a round of late night research."

"Is that a hint?" she teased.

"Maybe," he replied in a playful tone.

"Only if I can crash here afterward."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm just glad that you and I are okay. I spent the better part of the last two days cursing the moment I came up with the idea for Superman, thinking he'd destroyed the best thing in my life."

Lois reached over and grabbed his hand. "You'll never lose me, Clark. Eventually, I would have gotten over myself. Today just...speeded up the process."

"Then every drop of my spilled blood was worth it," Clark said sincerely. "I know it sounds crazy, but I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you too," Lois admitted. She scooted a little closer to him.

"I'm glad this is behind us," he confessed. "Maybe now we can focus on important things, like baby names."

Lois laughed. "I have a couple of name books back at my place. Maybe once we get Corben off the streets."

"And the bomber," Clark reminded her.

"And the bomber," she agreed, echoing him. "Did I mention that Jimmy got a match on the emblem you saw in the photo? The starburst?"

"He did?"

"Yeah," she said with a nod, biting into a piece of chicken. "It's from a little known, very elite honors group at the Metropolis Technical Institute. We're waiting to hear back from the school, trying to get a list of the members."

"That's great!" Clark said. "Once we have a name, we've got him." A thought occurred to him then. "How did Perry take it, when Jimmy had no photos to show of the fight?"

"I haven't seen anger like that from him since...since..." She paused, grasping for an example. "Since I started at the Planet. He's never been that mad before, not that I've seen."

Clark winced. "Oh, man," he said miserably.

"I owned up to it. I told Perry that I was the one who prevented Jimmy from taking pictures. I couldn't allow the world to see its hero so vulnerable. The world needs hope, not despair. And, I admit, I wanted to spare you the uh..."

"Humiliation?" Clark supplied. "It's okay, you can say it."

She nodded even while a blush crept into her cheeks. "Yeah. The humiliation of being seen in such a defeated state. It broke my heart seeing you like that."

"I appreciate it, Lois. But you shouldn't have put your own job in jeopardy for me. What did Perry do? Obviously he didn't show you the door."

"Hardly. He knows that you and I are the best reporters he's got. Short of burning the Planet down, there's nothing we can do that would make him outright fire us."

"So...what then? Don't tell me you got off scot-free."

Lois sighed. "No. He's got me covering all the fluff events for the next month."

"Ouch," Clark said, wincing again, knowing how much Lois loathed doing puff pieces.

"It's no big deal," Lois said, shrugging. "The important thing is that world didn't get to see you on your knees, so to speak."

"Maybe it wouldn't have been the worst thing," Clark said. "There are those who look at Superman like he's some sort of god in a cape, like he can't possibly understand what it is to be human. Maybe this would have provided an opportunity to dispel some of those beliefs."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Clark, as much as I appreciate where you're coming from. Prior to knowing who Superman really is, I guess part of me saw him in that same light that you just described. But I think the world at large needs to see Superman as someone who is, even just a little bit, set apart from them. It's part of where he gets some of his authority from. I think. Yes, I know the majority of that comes from the respect he's earned for dealing with us regular folks with such understanding and compassion. But if people found out that he's flawed and can be brought low by a lunatic with a rock..." She paused, shaking her head. "He'd find himself an even bigger target, by people who might never have tried to go against him before."

"Maybe," Clark said, not completely convinced.

"Anyway, what's done is done. There's no going back. Once we catch this psycho, and the subway bomber, Perry will forget this whole thing ever happened."

Clark nodded, chewing a piece of chicken skin carefully. It was true. As mad as Perry was now, he would barely remember the incident once Lois brought in the next big, front page story.

"You're right about that," he allowed.

"Of course I am," she said, reaching over and patting his cheek. Then, "There's two more small pieces of chicken inside. Why don't you finish them?"

"What about you?"

"I'm full. Even the baby's full. I know Superman has mentioned to me before that he doesn't really need to eat, but I kind of feel like the food will help you get back to complete health. Irrational? Maybe. Will you eat them?"

“Okay, but only if you have the last biscuit,” he bargained. Lois grinned at him. “Deal. But only because the biscuits are out of this world.”

Clark chuckled as he went to retrieve the food in question. It felt so good, so normal, being around Lois now. His heart, once broken in two, felt whole and unblemished once again. He swiftly returned to the couch, but before he would give Lois her biscuit, he leaned over and captured her lips in a kiss. She returned it passionately. In that moment, Clark’s doubts, however small, vanished like shadows in the sunlight, even ones he hadn’t realized he’d been harboring.

“I love you,” he whispered into her lips as they briefly parted. “And I love you,” she returned, before leaning back into his kiss.

Always and forever, he thought, before the power of their kiss obliterated all thought.

Clark checked his watch. Seven-fifteen, on the dot. He rapped his knuckles against the door of Lois’ apartment and waited, restraining himself from using his super hearing to catch some sound of her. Seconds later, she opened the door, hoping on one foot while she tried to wiggle her other foot into her high heeled shoe.

“Hi, Clark,” she said as the offending shoe finally made its way onto her foot.

“Hi, honey,” he said, confident, now that they had worked things out the night before, that he was once more allowed his terms of endearment. “These are for you.”

“Clark, they’re beautiful,” Lois said, as he handed her the dozen red roses he’d picked up from a street vendor on the way over to her place. “Thank you.”

“Not as beautiful as you, but I couldn’t resist getting them for you.”

“Racking up the points this morning, aren’t we, Fly Boy?” she replied with a grin.

“How am I doing so far?” he asked innocently, making her laugh.

“Very well,” she replied as she went to the kitchen to find a vase. Clark heard her rummaging around in a cabinet, then filling the vase she’d found with water. She brought the flowers to the living room and placed them in the center of the coffee table. “I love them,” she said. “And you.”

“Good. Because I love *you*,” he said. “Have you eaten yet?”

“Not yet. I was about to make some frozen waffles.”

“Forget the frozen stuff. We have enough time to grab breakfast before the trial. How about the deli on Schurz?”

“At this hour? We’ll be on line forever. Let’s just grab some bagels or something from Little Manhattan. It’s not that far out of the way.”

“You know, I could just zip over there and save us the trip,” Clark offered.

“And miss an opportunity to spend time with you in the car? No way. Plus, I’m not dating Superman, remember?”

“True, but you have a guy who can pretty much bring you whatever you want, whenever you want it. I can actually go up to Manhattan to any bagel place you can name. I *want* to do things for you, Lois.”

“Clark, I know you might think that doing stuff like that shows me how much you care. And it’s not that I don’t appreciate the effort. But, the thing is, I *know* that you love me, without all of the grand gestures. Having a simple breakfast with you in a small cafe and spending time with you as we drive- those are the things that really matter. You know that, don’t you?” She caressed his cheek with one hand.

“Of course, I do,” he replied, covering her hand with his own. “I understand that completely, because, believe it or not, it’s those simple moments that I treasure above all the others as well. I

just... I *love* being able to provide you with things that no one else can. It makes me happy to see you happy.”

“I *am* happy. You’re with me. Now, let’s get going, before the traffic gets bad.”

He nodded. “Good idea.”

Lois locked her apartment up behind her as they left. “I wonder how long the Luthor trial will last,” she mused as they walked down the steps to the ground floor.

“I don’t know. There are a lot of people waiting to testify on both sides, and a lot of evidence to be presented.”

Lois sighed noisily, nodding at some of her neighbors as they exited the building. “Yeah. Well, at least I’ll have you there with me, even if you aren’t there on official Daily Planet business.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he told her, giving her a wink. “A chance to spend the whole day with you? What could be better?”

“Mini golf, bowling, the zoo, just about anything else with you, instead of spending the day sitting on a hard wooden bench in a stuffy courtroom,” Lois complained. “I know I should be thrilled that Lex is on trial, but, it’s hard to muster up enthusiasm when I don’t even want to see him for a minute, let alone hours.”

“You don’t have to look at him,” Clark reminded her. “I’ll be right there, whenever you want to look at someone else. And we can always sneak out for a few minutes here and there to get some air and a short break.”

“Lucky me,” she said with a genuine smile. “Come on. I’ve starving.”

It took longer than Clark had anticipated, getting to Little Manhattan. They seemed to hit every red light on the way. When they finally arrived, Lois left Clark on the long line to order while she made a beeline for the restrooms. He knew her order well enough, even though she was back in plenty of time. All of that did add up to a very rushed breakfast, however. They ate as swiftly as they could before heading back to the Jeep to drive over to the courthouse. They’d needed to park a few blocks away from the cafe, so they linked arms, sipped their drinks, and walked, talking and laughing as they did so.

As they waited for a light to change, a plain gray van pulled up to the curb alongside of them. The sliding door opened wide and Johnny Corben jumped out. Clark’s back was to the van, but he was immediately aware of the danger as he felt the effects of the Kryptonite on his body. His entire body began to ache and grow weak as the life leached out of him. Johnny put one unnaturally strong arm around Clark’s throat and dragged him backwards. Lois made a grab for Clark as well, but Corben swatted her away like a fly.

“Tell your buddy Superman that if he wants to see his pathetic little friend alive ever again, to meet me in Centennial Park at five tonight. I’ll be waiting,” he shot over his shoulder as he shoved Clark into the van.

Clark made a muffled sound of protest as he hit the bare floor of the vehicle. It was dark inside, with the only window in the back portion of the van being on the rear doors, and those were covered over with black plastic garbage bags and what seemed to be an entire roll of duct tape. He heard Lois screaming for him as the door to the van slid shut with a rusty squeak and a solid thud as it closed him off from the world. But he was in too much agony to even make a reply. His heart, however, hurt the most, being torn from her side.

He was blindfolded by a set of hands he couldn’t see, lest he get a peek out the front windshield. His hands and feet were bound as well. Normally, such fetters wouldn’t bother him at all. He’d simply break them whenever he got a free moment, away from any prying eyes. But now, sick with Kryptonite poisoning, he could neither break the strong zip ties that immobilized him, nor could he ignore the way they bit into his skin, pulled cruelly tight. Every bump in the road wrenched his body and stabs of

pain lanced through him.

I'm sorry, Lois, he thought to himself, over and over again, though the rational part of his brain recognized that his kidnapping wasn't his fault.

"Jimmy!" Lois screamed the second the doors to the elevator slid open.

"Whoa, Lois, chill. What's up?" he asked from not more than fifty feet away, carrying a box of donuts in one hand.

"Chill? *Chill?*" she repeated, as though it was some offensive, foreign word. "That guy, Corben, from yesterday."

"That one who beat up Superman?"

"He took Clark." She had to fight around the rising bubble of panic in her throat.

Jimmy paled. "Took?"

"Grabbed him right off the street while we were walking to my car."

"We'd better tell Perry," he said, trying to appear calm, though his hands now shook slightly.

Lois nodded. "I've already given the police the license plate number of the van he was taken in. But I'm going to need your help too, Jimmy."

Jimmy nodded once, stiffly, as they wound their way through the bullpen. "Whatever you need, consider it done."

"Jimmy! There you are! How long does it take to get donuts?" Perry asked as they entered his office without knocking. Then, noticing Lois, "Lois? What in Elvis' name are you doing here? I thought you were covering the Luthor trial?"

"I was. Clark and I were on our way when he was kidnapped by that psychopath who fought with Superman yesterday."

I will not admit that he defeated Clark. I will not utter a word about the beating he suffered.

"What now?" Perry asked, his entire expression falling, as if he hoped he'd heard wrong.

"It's true. I've already alerted the police, but..."

"Whatever you need, I'll back you up," Perry finished for her, without the need for her to ask. "What can I do?"

"I gave the police the license plate, but with the budget cuts in the department," she paused, shaking her head, "I think we really need to conduct our own investigation."

Perry nodded and made a gruff sound of agreement. "I don't normally do this, but I'll ask around with my sources."

"Sore..."

Perry cut her off with a look. "Don't mention that name here. But I'll see what he knows, if anything."

"I'll run the plate," Jimmy said without the need for prompting. "What is it?"

Lois grabbed a sheet of paper off Perry's desk, then commandeered the red pencil he'd been using to make edits. She hurriedly scrawled the combination of numbers and letters down. She shoved it at Jimmy even as Perry grabbed his pencil back.

"On it," Jimmy said, excusing himself from the room.

"You okay?" Perry asked her when the photographer was gone.

No.

"I don't know," she said instead.

The man I love, the father of my child, is missing, in pain, and in serious danger.

"This psycho say what he wanted with Clark?"

Lois sighed. "Superman."

"Superman?"

"He's using Clark as bait. I think he wants to finish what he started yesterday. I think he wants to kill Superman," Lois said, using all of her strength to hold her emotions in, though she was aware of how much of her fear had leaked out into her words anyway. "He wants to fight him at five tonight in Centennial Park."

"I'm sure Superman will be there and make this Corben joker wish he'd never gotten out of bed this morning," Perry assured her.

"I don't think so, Chief." She cleared her throat as she caught her near-slip. "I mean, Corben...he's not an ordinary guy. He's at least Superman's equal."

"I'm sure Superman will figure something out," Perry said.

He seemed self-assured, but Lois had learned over the years that still waters could and often did run very deep. Perry might be as frightened as she was. She forced herself to swallow around the lump in her throat and nod.

"I hope so. In the meantime, I'm going to do whatever I can to help figure out where Clark is."

She didn't wait for a response. She turned and stalked out of the office, to her desk. She sat, picked up a pencil, and drummed the eraser end on the top of her desk, trying to slow the rapid beating of her heart and quell the nausea that Clark's kidnapping had caused. She lost the battle moments later and rushed off to the bathroom, retching up everything she'd eaten, presumably in the last week and a half, she judged in her blackened mood.

She rinsed her mouth in the sink, then splashed some cool water on her flushed face. Her mascara was running slightly from the tears that had leaked out of her eyes from the force of her vomiting. She hated that, the wateriness of her eyes when she got sick. It always had felt somewhat insulting to her, liked an added insult to injury. She carefully fixed the offending areas where her makeup was smeared, then put on a brave face to show her coworkers, though inwardly, she was frantic and terrified.

He's got Clark, she thought unhappily as she opened the door to exit the ladies' room. *He's got Clark and he's got Kryptonite. He wants Superman. Only...he's already got him. Either way, he's going to kill Clark if I don't find some way to find where Clark's been taken.*

"Lois," Jimmy said, waving a piece of paper as he approached her desk.

"What'd you find?"

"The license plate came up as a match on a vehicle that was reported stolen late last night. Belonged to a Mister Everett Von Stampe. He works at FutureTech magazine."

Lois stared at him for a moment. "FutureTech?"

"Yeah," Jimmy said with a nod and a shy grin. "It's the go-to source for anyone with any interest in anything technological. I've had a subscription since I was twelve."

"What would Johnny want with a van that belongs to a guy who works at a magazine?" Lois asked aloud, more to herself than to Jimmy.

Jimmy shrugged. "I don't know. Could just be dumb luck that he stole that particular van."

"I'm not sure I believe in dumb luck," Lois said, her head shaking. "Jimmy, find out what you can. See if Corben had any contact with this Von...Von..." she snapped her fingers, the name beyond the reach of her memory for the moment.

"Von Stampe?"

She nodded. "See if you can find out if Corben ever met with him, spoke with him, tried to get an article published, though I doubt that last one. He seemed to have the IQ of a tennis ball."

"I'm on it," Jimmy said dutifully before turning on his heel and striding away.

"Thanks," she called after him. He waved, but never turned to her. "FutureTech...FutureTech..." she mused to herself under her breath as she typed the name into her computer, running a search on the publication. "Von Stampe...there we go. Hmm...looks like he's an editor. Why would Corben steal an editor's van?"

The more she tried to make sense of it, the more her thoughts strayed to Clark. He'd been in such pain when Corben had grabbed him. And she was painfully aware of the kind of damage Corben could render on Clark if he wanted to. Superman simply

didn't exist in the presence of Kryptonite.

"No, that's not true," she whispered to herself.

Clark was Superman, without or without the powers, in or out of the blue suit. Superman wasn't the powers. He wasn't the uniform. He wasn't the superhero. He was a man. A man with a huge and caring heart. A man whose bravery and passion stemmed from his soul, not his alien DNA. A man who routinely fought for what was good and right no matter how small an issue or how much it hurt him, be it mentally or physically. Even when Corben had Clark bruised, bleeding, and suffering from broken bones, Clark had still fought on, hoping to bring Corben to justice, not for his own sake, but for the sake of society at large — people who would never know of the excruciating pain he'd endured for their sake.

"Oh, Clark," she sighed. "I'll find you. I promise. And then, I'm never letting you out of my sight again."

"Talking to yourself again, Lois?" Cat purred as she sidled up to Lois' desk.

"Cat, I'm not in the mood," she snapped.

"Testy, aren't we? Need some pickles and ice cream, *Mom*?"

"Cat, I swear to God..." Lois huffed, hoping the woman would just go away.

That wiped the smirk off Cat's face at least. "What's going on? Have a fight with your baby-daddy?"

"Far from it. Clark's been kidnapped," she blurted out.

Cat's face fell. "What?"

"I really don't want to get into details. I have to find him and I only have a very short time to do it in. And, since I highly doubt your gossip sources can help me, I really must insist that you let me get to work."

"Always with the working, sis," a new voice said.

"Lucy!" Lois' voice reflected the relief and surprise she felt.

"What are you doing here?"

Lucy side-eyed Cat before responding. "We need to talk. Alone."

Cat threw her hands up in a gesture of pacification and slunk away. Lois watched until she was satisfied that the woman was out of hearing. Then she turned to her sister.

"I'm so glad you're here. We *do* need to talk."

"If it's about Johnny, that's why I'm here," Lucy replied, setting her purse down and hopping up on the edge of the desk, in a manner that Lois found to be extremely reminiscent of Clark.

"Do you know where he's taken Clark?" Lois plowed ahead.

"Wait... you don't know, do you?" she asked as the confusion spread across Lucy's face.

"Clark? What?"

"Johnny grabbed Clark this morning and drove off with him in a stolen van. He's using him as bait to goad Superman into a fight with him." There was no use, she reasoned, in getting into the specifics of how it would really be a second fight. "Has he said anything about where he might be staying?"

"No," Lucy said, shaking her head. "But, I did see him a little while ago. He came into the diner. He wanted to show me... God, it was horrible."

"What? What was horrible?" Lois prodded.

"He opened up his shirt. His whole body... it was metal. Smooth, shiny, cold metal."

"Metal?"

Well, that makes some sense, considering how none of Clark's attacks seemed to bother him during the fight yesterday. And why he was so strong.

Lucy nodded again. "He called himself a, uh..." She paused, looking for the right word, turning her finger in the air as though spinning the wheels in her mind. "A cyborg, I think he said?" It was more of a question than a statement. "He even had this symbol on his chest, like a brand. He called it a mobius strip. He said it means eternity."

"Or infinity," Lois supplied.

"He said he would live forever."

"Wait a second. Infinity, infinity..." Lois mumbled to herself, jotting down a note on a pad of paper. "Why does that sound so familiar?" She anxiously bit the pen's cap as she thought. She clicked back through the archives on the FutureTech website. "Aha!"

"What?" Lucy asked, stretching her neck to see what Lois was talking about.

"This article here. 'Infinite Life, Closer Than We Think' by Rollie Vale."

"So?"

"So, it could be a connection."

"Sounds like a stretch," Lucy said, frowning.

"Maybe, but it's the only lead I've got right now." Lois clicked a few more items, then ran a search on Rollie Vale.

"Looks like that was his one and only article. And from the looks of things, plenty of other technological institutes blasted his ideas as ludicrous. Let's see... they included a lot about bionics. And cyborgs," she said, her heart thumping wildly in her chest as her stomach roiled.

"So, how do we find this creep?"

"Give me a minute. I'll see what I can find."

For several long minutes, Lois searched for any indication of where Rollie Valle might be. Nothing turned up when she searched on her computer. And a particularly rude receptionist named Tristan refused to release any of FutureTech's information without a court order when Lois called the publication. Lois gave him an earful before slamming the phone down on him. Jimmy was also on the case, once Lois filled him in while waiting on hold, but when Lois shot him a hopeful look, he gave her a thumbs down.

"Lucy, can you contact Johnny at all?"

"I have his cell number, yeah."

"Good. Call him. Tell him that you need to talk to him, but that you want to do it in person. Then, we can either follow him back to wherever it is he's staying, or, if he's as stupid as I think he is, maybe he'll have you go to where he's holding Clark."

"I don't know about this, sis..." Lucy hesitated, sounding terrified at the prospect of facing Johnny. "I want to help, but... well, Johnny and I didn't leave things off very well this morning. He stormed out."

"Even better," Lois assured her. "You can tell him that you've had a chance to think things over and want to mend things with him."

"But... he's not human... not anymore."

"I know," Lois said, giving Lucy a quick hug. "But if we stand any chance of saving Clark's life, we have no choice but to try this."

"Why can't you just get Superman to do it?" Lucy whined.

"If I could, I would," Lois said, her patience wearing thin in her fear for Clark. "But it's just not that simple. It's up to us. You and I have to be the heroes here." Lucy squirmed uncomfortably. "I know it's scary. But we have to do something, anything to save Clark."

"I know you love him," Lucy said after a moment. "And the fact that my big sister has fallen in love with *anyone* speaks volumes to me. So... I'll do it."

"Thank you, Lucy," Lois said sincerely.

"Let's do this," Lucy said with sudden resolve in her voice.

"Great. Call him from the car. I don't want the noise of the newsroom in the background. Jimmy!"

Jimmy picked his head up from whatever he was bent over at his desk. Lois waved him over. He obliged, making his way over in seconds. He came to a rest right in front of Lois' desk.

"Nothing yet," he apologized.

"Doesn't matter," she said, almost before he could finish

speaking. “I think we’ve got a lead. Grab your camera and let’s move.”

“What if he doesn’t show?”

The man nervously paced before Clark, who was bound tightly to a sturdy wooden chair with thick rope and zip ties that were pulled cruelly taut against his wrists and ankles. He wasn’t gagged, thankfully, but one had threatened him if he spoke out of turn.

“He will.” The other man was seated, relaxed, and smugly confident.

“Yeah, sure, but what if?”

“Then we make good on our threats.” The tone told his counterpart that it was a no-brainer.

“We don’t really mean that...”

“Of course I do, you small-minded moron. Do you think Caesar grew his empire by issuing empty threats?”

“It’s getting late. There’s been no word...”

“So? As long as our metallic friend is where he needs to be, when he needs to be there, we shouldn’t have a problem.” He went on tightening a screw in the metallic arm that he bore.

“So, if Superman shows, you’ll let this guy go?”

“No, you moron. He knows who we are. He might even have an inkling of where we are. Of course I’m not going to let him go.”

“You’re going to kill him.” It was a statement of fact, not a question.

“No,” the other said, dragging the word out as if explaining to a child. “We’re going to get our metallic meathead to do it *for* us.”

The first man nodded thoughtfully. “I like the sound of that.”

“This is why you need me, Emmet.”

“Just one thing, Rollie.”

The one named Rollie rolled his eyes and placed his screwdriver down with an audible and annoyed sigh. “What now?”

“Are you *sure* Corben will, you know? Off this guy for us?”

“He’ll do whatever we tell him to do. Or else we’ll stop repairing him.” Again, Rollie had that same, patronizing tone to his voice. It was clear to Clark that Rollie really looked down his nose at the other man. “He has no choice. We’ve got him by the short hairs.”

“I guess...” Emmet stammered, sounding unconvicted. “He’s not exactly the sharpest knife in the drawer, so to speak. And his temper...”

“*You’re* the one who suggested that we give it a human brain. And *you’re* the one who procured the donor for us, remember?”

The two men continued to argue. Clark stopped paying attention. He focused his energy on trying to break his bonds, or at least loosen them up a little to allow his hands and feet to get better circulation. It was no use. Though Corben wasn’t in the room with them at the moment, Rollie had a small piece of exposed Kryptonite out on the table. As Clark watched, the man stuck it in his robotic arm and shut the tiny compartment door. Rollie flexed the arm, wiggled the fingers, and easily picked up a screw with it. He nodded, satisfied.

A slight wave of relief hit Clark as the Kryptonite vanished from sight, but it wasn’t enough to stop his head from spinning and his stomach from lurching with nausea. He shut his eyes for a moment and tried to breathe in through his nose and out through his mouth, as he’d seen Lois doing over the weeks her morning sickness had been at its worst. It didn’t work.

The three men seemed oblivious to Clark’s silent suffering. Of that, Clark was glad. He didn’t need or want them to make the connection between his discomfort and the Kryptonite. Still, he had the fleeting thought that they wanted so badly to kill Superman, that they had gone to extreme lengths to try to coax

him into a fight. The reality was that they might just kill him right there in that musty, dusty room and never be the wiser.

Lois, he thought to himself as few stabs of pain lanced through his body. I love you. I’ll do my best to get back to you. I promise. I’m just not sure how. Stay safe and please, don’t do anything rash.

“Hey, eggheads!” Johnny’s voice echoed slightly in the old building they were holed up in.

“Yes?” Rollie asked with feigned politeness.

“I’m getting bored waiting around. Can’t I just push you off the roof or something to draw the Man of Jello in?”

“No, you mor...ah, we can’t risk being seen. Not until the time is right,” Rollie said, correcting himself. But Johnny looked too agitated and distracted to have noticed. “Come here. Let me check on your power source.”

That got Johnny’s attention and he eagerly peeled off his shirt to reveal the smooth, shiny, cold metal beneath, polished and formed to resemble the muscular torso of an athlete. Rollie opened the compartment in the center of the chest, the small door emblazoned with what Clark recognized to be a mobius strip. A second later, the Kryptonite was exposed, sending a fresh assault of radioactive death toward Clark. It was all Clark could do to stay conscious as Rollie inspected both the rock itself and the connections and wires that sent the power through Corben’s robotic body.

It felt like an eternity before the door was finally shut again, blocking the worst of the Kryptonite poisoning. Clark allowed himself to draw a deeper breath, but he was still hurting from the little bit of radioactivity that leaked through the microscopic gaps around the compartment door. His lungs burned with the effort and Clark had to content himself to keeping his breaths shallow. He wished Corben would lose interest in Emmet and Rollie and move off into another area of the building. Corben pulled his shirt back over his head as a car horn began to blare outside.

A scowl passed over Emmet’s features. “What’s going on?”

“You,” Rollie said, pointing at Johnny. “Go find out who’s out there.”

“On it,” Corben said grimly as he flexed his fingers in and out of a fist.

As he lumbered off, Clark felt the pains in his body lessen. He tried to listen, but his super abilities were not yet back, no doubt due to Rollie’s Kryptonite powered arm. Both of the men rechecked Clark’s bonds, then followed after Corben.

Just a few minutes, Clark pleaded to the universe. Just give me a few minutes to get my strength back enough to break free.

“Pssst!”

Clark opened his eyes and looked around, but the sound seemed to be coming from behind him.

“Clark!” the whisper came again, this time more urgently.

“Lois?” he shot back in a disbelieving whisper.

He heard a rustling behind him, like someone climbing through the low window.

“Me too, CK.”

“Jimmy?”

“Just sit tight. We’ll get you out of here,” Jimmy promised.

Clark felt Jimmy tugging on his bonds, trying to loosen them. At the same time, he felt his strength starting to leech back into his body. His other powers seemed to be coming back to him as well — his sensitive hearing caught the sound of Lois’ pocket knife being flicked open in an effort to free him. Using the barest fraction of his returning strength, he flexed his muscles enough to help her, causing the ropes to split apart along the frayed cuts she was making. He allowed her to cut through the zip ties that held him anchored to the chair, to keep up appearances in front of Jimmy.

“Are you okay?” Lois asked him as soon as the last of his bonds snapped and fell to the floor. She engulfed him in a tight

hug.

"I'm much better now, thanks to you," he told her. "How'd you find me?"

"Long story. I'll tell you over dinner," Lois cut in before Jimmy could speak. "We don't have much time. Lucy is outside distracting Corben for us."

"Go," Clark said, giving Lois a knowing look and a nod. "I have some business to take care of here, but I'll be right with you."

"CK, I'm not sure that's a good idea..." Jimmy protested.

"Trust me, Jimmy, I need to take care of this," he said, putting a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Go on. Get out of here before they come back."

Lois put her hand on Jimmy's back and guided him back to the window. When Clark was sure that they were safely away from the building, he spun into the avatar of Superman. Then he was out of the building faster than the eye could see. From his vantage point above the building, he saw Lucy and Johnny speaking. Corben seemed agitated, perhaps even close to becoming a threat to Lucy.

"Corben!" Clark called out in a strong, clear, commanding tone. "I hear you're looking for me."

"You better believe it. I'm going to finish what I started yesterday," he called back. "Come on down and fight like a man!"

Clark floated a little closer, but stopped well short of where Corben stood, and before he could feel the crippling effects of the Kryptonite that powered his body. Corben scowled deeply, enraged that he wouldn't be able to reach Superman.

"I think I'll keep my distance this time," Clark said, crossing his arms and giving Corben a hard look.

"I'm gonna tear you to pieces!" Corben swore.

He looked around frantically, searching for anything he could use against Clark. He finally settled on pulling a 'No Parking' sign out of the sidewalk. A ball of concrete remained lodged on one end. Corben twirled it twice like a baton, then aimed it like a spear and rocketed it towards Clark. Clark casually reached out with one hand, grabbed the projectile, and dropped it as though it was a speck of dirt brushed off his uniform. He raised an eyebrow at Corben, silently sending him a "nice try" message.

From the corner of his eye, Clark saw Emmet and Rollie attempting to make a getaway. Before he could move a muscle, Lois and Jimmy were on them. Clark saw Lois sucker-punch Rollie in the stomach. The man doubled over and Lois knocked him out cold with a strategically placed whack of her purse to the back of his head.

God, I love that woman, Clark thought with a mental smile.

"Is that the best you've got?" Clark taunted, keeping Corben's attention on him and him alone, instead of what Lois was doing.

"Come on, Super Wuss! Fight me!"

Corben ran at Clark and jumped. Clark was surprised by the man's agility and the height he was able to attain. Clark maneuvered out of the way, staying out of the Kryptonite's sphere of influence. He had to think. Normally, he would just find something to bind the criminal with and either wait for the police to show up or deliver him directly to the closest police station. He couldn't do that with Johnny. He was too strong and would likely break any bonds Clark could find, and securing Johnny would bring Clark into contact with the Kryptonite anyway. He could hear Lois on the phone with 911, but he couldn't risk Corben being free when the police arrived. Officers would be hurt or killed, Clark didn't doubt.

Johnny continued to shout insults at Clark, but they fell on deaf ears as Clark sought for something, anything to securely and peacefully subdue the cyborg. He spied some cable in a construction zone just down the block. It was worth a shot, he

reasoned, so, in the span of a heartbeat, he raced to the cable, grabbed it, and, though the position was slightly awkward, used a fair amount to wrap up Johnny. Corben roared in rage, flexed his artificial muscles, and snapped the cable as though it was so much silk. Clark frowned. He hadn't expected the cable to fully incapacitate Corben, but he'd thought it would buy him more than half a second to think.

Sirens began to wail in the near distance. Whatever Clark was going to do, he had to do it quickly. Johnny went to the van he and the other men had used when they'd kidnapped Clark earlier that morning. He began to try to lift it. Clark just reacted. He landed and called out to Corben.

"You want me? Come and get me," he taunted.

Corben left the vehicle and rushed toward Clark. That was his mistake. Clark sent a blast of his heat vision at Corben's feet. The metal that comprised his entire body began to melt as Clark kept the heat flowing. He stopped only when Corben was a melted puddle of metal from the knees down. Then he sent a blast of his super breath at the molten metal that had pooled on the sidewalk, instantly cooling it and hardening it in place, ensuring that Corben wasn't going anywhere.

Satisfied, Clark gave Corben a wide berth and went to meet the first of the officers to arrive on the scene. To his delight, he found that it was Bill Henderson. That was good news, with the sensitive nature of the Kryptonite. He knew he could trust Henderson with the knowledge that the deadly green stone was in the area. He also knew that he could walk away from the scene of the fight without having to worry about the Kryptonite's disposal. Henderson would make sure that it got to Dr. Klein at S.T.A.R. Labs.

It didn't take him long to give Henderson a run down on what had occurred and of the threat of the Kryptonite. On that point, Henderson mutely nodded, a silent vow that he, and he alone, would be the one to handle the situation. Clark clasped the man's shoulder in unspoken thanks. He flew off then, giving the appearance that Superman had other things to attend to. Of course, once he knew that no one would be watching the skies, he sped back down into the building. He changed at super speed back into his normal Clark attire, gathered up the evidence he'd meant to save for use in ensuring that Rollie and Emmet Vale never saw the outside of a prison again, and exited the building.

Lois flung herself into his arms as soon as she saw him. "I was worried about you," she whispered in his ear as she subtly nodded toward the partially melted form of Johnny.

"I'm all right," he promised her. "Are you okay?"

"Now that I know you're safe, I'm fine."

"You should probably go to your sister," Clark murmured to her just before she could plant a kiss on his lips. With his super hearing, he could easily hear the younger woman's sobs as Henderson removed the Kryptonite battery in Johnny's chest, causing the entire machine to power down once and for all.

"Mmm," Lois replied. Then, pulling away, "Yeah, you're probably right."

"I'll talk to Henderson, then grab a cab home. Judging from what I can hear, you might be with Lucy for a while. See you tonight?"

"I'll bring the pizzas," Lois promised. "Rest up. You've been through hell today. And I'm just grateful that you're still here, alive, with me."

"Thanks to you," Clark acknowledged. "If you hadn't found me... I'm afraid things would have gone very differently today."

"I'd never let that happen," Lois said, and although her voice held confidence in it, he could also detect a hint of relief that she'd managed to save him.

Clark kissed her again. "I know. Now, go on. I'll see you later."

"Okay. I love you," she said, stroking his cheek with her

hand.

“I love you too.”

The week of Clark’s suspension passed by at a frozen snail’s pace. He did what he could to stay busy, but even most of the criminals in the city seemed to be taking it easy. Lois kept him constantly abreast of what was going on at the Planet, which both soothed him as he attempted to help her research during the nights and pained him because he couldn’t be there beside her as she tracked down stories and leads.

Two days after Clark’s rescue from the psychotic cyborg and his builders, Lois called him at home from the Planet with the list of names the Metropolis Technical Institute had furnished, in hopes of identifying the bomber. They needn’t have bothered. The following morning, the bomber struck again, only this time, the device they placed managed to go off while Clark was assisting at a major car accident. Three people were killed and a dozen others injured. But the bomber, a twenty year old man by the name of Dustin Hacker, had foolishly waited around to see if his target, his thirty-one year old — and, Clark had to admit to himself, attractive — female professor had been hit by the explosion.

Clark easily recognized the suspect from the photographs the school had given them. He swiftly apprehended him and passed him off to the police officers at the scene, then turned his attention to those who were injured. There was nothing he could do for the dead, so they became his last priority. He did what he could to assist, flying those he could to the hospital, though there were four with injuries so severe that Clark was afraid to move them himself. He didn’t want to do more harm than good, so he waited with those last four victims until the paramedics could arrive. Three of the four left by ambulance. The fourth was allowed to be flown by Clark, once the EMTs decided that the man’s injuries were not as bad as Clark had feared they were.

It gave him a distinct feeling of satisfaction when he later learned that all of the injured people were expected to make a full recovery, and that the original target, Charlene Bosworth, had suffered from nothing more than a sprained ankle, a broken arm, some cuts and a light burn that would soon heal. She’d been lucky. She’d been farther away from the blast radius of the bomb and had gotten the majority of her injuries when the blast had thrown her off her feet.

Lois spent each night with him, sometimes only for a few hours before heading off to her own apartment, sometimes the entire night, going over leads and research with him or just watching movies with him until she either fell asleep in his arms on the couch or stumbled off, bleary-eyed, to his bed. Those hours with Lois were the best parts of Clark’s days, as always. Twice, to kill some time during the day, he took to walking the streets of Metropolis and found himself wandering into jewelry shops. After inspecting the engagement rings at five different stores, he had a good idea of the one he wanted to one day buy for Lois. Truth be told, it was agony for him to walk out of that store empty-handed, but he knew it wasn’t the right time yet. He and Lois had only just gotten their relationship back on track, after the revelation of Superman’s true identity had almost completely derailed it.

He would have to be content to wait.

Finally, mercifully, the day came when he could rejoin Lois at the Planet. It felt so good to step into the lobby of the building that morning, seeing, hearing, smelling all the familiar elements of his dream job. It was funny, he reflected to himself as he made himself a cup of strong bullpen coffee. He’d come to Metropolis, drawn to the city by the Planet. But it wasn’t the Planet that kept him rooted to the city. It was the woman he’d met while at the Planet who’d given him a reason to stay and make Metropolis his home. Though he loved the paper dearly, he could just as easily

work for any other publication. What he couldn’t do without was his partner, his best friend, the woman he loved.

Walking through the newsroom, he found himself to be somewhat of a hero, especially to his female coworkers. It seemed that many, if not most, of them had been the recipient of Ralph’s crudeness, but hadn’t had the nerve to say anything because of his connections to the people who actually owned and ran the paper. Still, it had made him extremely nervous when Ralph’s uncle called him upstairs to talk to him. His heart in his throat and his stomach firmly coiled into a knot, he’d ridden the elevator up to the top floor.

He’d nearly fallen out of his chair when Mr. Warrens apologized to Clark on behalf of Ralph. Ralph, Mr. Warrens explained, had been a source of trouble and worry for a while, but the things Ralph had said to and about Lois had finally given him the opportunity he’d been seeking to get rid of Ralph. To maintain peace within the family, he hadn’t fired the man, but had permanently reassigned him to the Planet’s satellite office in Cleveland. When Ralph had protested and threatened a lawsuit against Clark, Mr. Warrens had sworn to back Lois and Clark up in a countersuit for harassment. Ralph had immediately become sullen and withdrawn, and had offered no further resistance to the mandatory move.

Clark had left the meeting unsure of how to feel. On the one hand, he was elated that he still had a job at the Planet. On the other, he hadn’t meant for any of this to happen, least of all to force a coworker, however disliked the man was, to be forced to relocate. He’d spent the remainder of the day in a mental funk, and his initial eagerness to return to work was replaced by an eagerness to go home and collect his thoughts.

Still, there was nothing Clark could do. He couldn’t even offer his apologies to Ralph. He never saw the man back in the bullpen after that. He had to accept the situation for what it was. Life moved on. The days passed swiftly by, now that Clark was once more fully engaged in his job, righting the wrongs of the world with Lois by his side.

“Morning, Clark,” Lois said one morning, about a week and a half after Clark had officially been reinstated to his duties at the Planet.

“Hi, Lois,” he said, looking up from his computer screen.

“You’re here early.”

“I didn’t sleep well,” he said, shrugging.

“Was it...?” She motioned with her hand, making her now-familiar gesture for Superman.

Clark nodded slightly. “A little. But even when things were quiet, I still couldn’t get to sleep. It was just one of those nights, I guess. Anyway, I thought I’d come in and get the finishing touches on the Luthor trial story.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s just about finished. I’ll email it to you when I’m done, if you want.”

“No, I’ll just hang out here, if that’s okay.”

“Sure,” Clark said as he stood to fetch Lois a chair. Now that she was a couple of weeks into her second trimester, the small bump of her stomach was becoming more obvious, though she could still hide it beneath certain types of shirts.

“It looks good so far,” Lois announced a few minutes later as she read over what Clark had written. “I can’t believe the verdict will be in soon. I feel like...like there should have been months more of this to endure.”

“I thought so too. But the DA’s office is really pushing to get this one closed. Personally, I don’t mind. I think they’ve done a commendable job of exposing all of the atrocities Luthor’s committed or ordered.”

“I think so too. On the other hand, the verdict and sentencing can’t come soon enough for my liking. I just want everything related to Lex to finally be completely in the past.”

“Sounds good to me,” Clark said with a smile. “So, what do you think? I was toying with the ending. It feels...I don’t know. Incomplete?”

“It does,” Lois agreed. The phone on her desk rang. She rolled her eyes. “I should get that.”

“Take your time. I’m going to play around with this some more, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Lois pushed herself up off the chair and stretched her back before heading to her desk. She picked up the phone on its fourth ring, just before it could transfer to her voicemail. Clark heard her say “Hi, Mom,” before tuning out her conversation and focusing on the elusive conclusion to their article.

Half an hour later, as Clark found himself lost in a different article, Lois returned to his desk. Clark looked up, startled, his focus on his work so intent that he’d managed to tune out the entire bullpen. He gave her a smile, which she returned with a tentative one of her own.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, instantly concerned by the way the normal sparkle in her eyes was subdued.

“I sort of...well...got us roped into a dinner with my parents on Friday night,” she said, shifting uncomfortably as she toyed with a pen on Clark’s desk.

“Your...parents? As in, *both* of them? At the same time?” Clark asked, incredulous. “I thought they vowed never to be in the same place at the same time again, barring one or the other’s funeral.”

“They did. But they’re both in the city tomorrow and I thought, since I still haven’t told either of them about their impending grandchild, that it might be better just to tell them both at the same time. I just told them that I wanted them to meet you. Am I crazy?”

Clark chuckled lightly and stood to kiss her forehead. “No, you’re not crazy. Brave, is more like it. Given the history between you and your parents, I give you credit for wanting to tell them together. What about Lucy? Is she coming?”

Lois sighed. “I wish. She’s got class tomorrow night from six to nine, then an early shift at the diner in the morning.”

Clark nodded. “I see. Well, I’ll be right there with you. Everything will be fine, I promise.”

“Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad,” Lois said as she and Clark approached the table where the elder Lanes were sitting in an uncomfortable, awkward silence.

“Hi, Princess,” Sam said, standing and kissing her cheek.

“I still don’t understand why you insisted that *he* be here,” Ellen complained, nodding in Sam’s direction.

Lois ignored the comment, choosing, instead, to make the introductions. “Clark, these are my parents, Ellen and Sam. Mom, Dad, this is Clark.”

Clark shook hands with the Lanes. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“Lois’ partner, right?” Ellen asked as Clark pulled out Lois’ seat for her.

“More than that,” Lois answered as she sat. “I told you, Mom, Clark and I are dating now. We have been, for a couple of months now.”

“Right, right,” Ellen said dismissively.

Clark took the seat next to Lois. At the round table, it meant that Ellen and Sam were sitting next to one another. That made Clark nervous. From what he understood about the Lanes’ relationship, it was safer to leave dynamite next to a bonfire. He only hoped they would set their differences aside once Lois told them about their grandchild-to-be.

“So, can I ask you?” Ellen continued. “What in the world is this dinner all about tonight? Not that I don’t love seeing my daughter, but, having him here too?” She again nodded in Sam’s

direction.

“I know, Mom. If it had been possible, I would have seen you and Daddy separately. But this is the only weekend when I could get together with both of you. So, please, I’m begging you both, just...get along for the next couple of hours, okay?”

“I can be civil,” Ellen said pointedly.

“Don’t look at me,” Sam grumbled. “I can handle a little dinner.”

Lois shot Clark an almost pleading look. He could almost hear her thoughts in that look. *It’s already starting*, her eyes seemed to say. *Can we just go home?* He gave her a soft, loving smile and took her hand as it lay in her lap. He was just wondering how and when Lois was going to broach the subject of her pregnancy when the waitress came to take their order — medium rare steaks for Clark and Sam, veal parmesan for Ellen, and shrimp scampi over linguini for Lois. With Lois opting just for ice water with lemon to drink instead of wine or a caffeinated beverage, Clark did the same, hoping to keep any suspicions at bay until Lois was ready to tell them her news.

For a while, they made small talk about their jobs, the weather, the articles Lois and Clark had recently been working on. Sam was interested in the Corben case, having dabbled in the realm of bionics and robotic limbs for patients who’d lost an arm, a leg, or the use of their muscles due to sports injuries, accidents, or disease. The appetizers arrived and were eaten, and still Lois made no move to mention the baby.

“So, Lois, did I tell you about Shannon Marsden? She’s moving back into town. Split from her husband,” Ellen said as the waitress reappeared with their meals and whisked away the plates from the appetizers.

“That’s...uh...very sad,” Lois stammered, clearly uncomfortable. “But, um, wasn’t she cheating on him the entire time?”

“That’s what’s being said,” Ellen said by way of confirmation. “Now everyone’s wondering if her three kids are all really Hank’s or not. I’d get a lawyer if I were him. I wouldn’t be responsible for another man’s child.”

“I don’t know,” Clark ventured, hoping he wasn’t being too brazen. The waitress reached around him to refill his water glass. “Even if they aren’t his, I’m sure he loves them. How old are they?”

“Ten, six, and five,” Ellen and Lois said with one voice.

Clark nodded. “He’s been their father for a long time, even if they aren’t his own.”

“I still wouldn’t be paying to raise someone else’s kid,” Ellen said, shrugging. “Let the real father or fathers step in and do it. If she even knows who they might be.”

Clark could see that Lois was having a hard time keeping it together. Her hands flexed into tight balls, relaxed, then flexed again in her lap. He could hear her pulse begin to increase. He lightly touched her hand with his own to silently tell her that everything was okay. Ellen could have whatever opinions she wanted. It didn’t mean that he was in agreement with her.

“I mean, really!” Ellen continued. “I always did say the youngest looked more like the mailman than he does Hank. What kind of woman does that? Or man, for that matter? Putting a family at risk like that?” She looked pointedly at Sam.

“Actually, Mom, Dad, there’s something Clark and I want to tell you,” Lois said as Sam fumbled for an answer. She waited until they both looked up at her. “We are, uh...we’re having a baby.”

Ellen’s fork loudly clattered to the plate as it slipped from her fingers, her mouth hanging open. Sam coughed as he choked on a piece of steak, and he thumped himself hard in the chest. Once the offending piece of meat had been swallowed, he sipped his soda slowly as small coughs continued to rock him.

A painful silence stretched on at their table for a good ten

seconds — the longest ten seconds of Clark’s entire life, while all around them, the air was filled with the buzzing of conversation from all the other tables.

“You...*what?*” Ellen finally asked, as though needing confirmation that what’d she’d heard was true.

“You heard me,” Lois said softly. “I’m pregnant.”

“Are you sure?” Sam asked, sounding as if he wished Lois was wrong.

Lois opened her purse and handed both of her parents each a photo from her most recent ultrasound. Ellen and Sam took them in mute shock.

“Pretty sure,” Lois replied as they looked at the images.

“Oh, Lois, you didn’t...” Ellen said sounding disappointed and shaking her head. Then, looking again at the tiny human in the photograph, “Wait. How far along are you?”

“About seventeen weeks,” Lois said, not making eye contact and sounding embarrassed. “Give or take.”

Ellen’s eyes widened in surprise for a split second before narrowing in anger in a perfect mirror to what Clark had often witnessed in Lois. “And you’re just telling me this *now?*” she asked in an accusatory tone.

“Clark and I...no, that’s not right,” Lois corrected herself. “I had a lot of decisions to make. I wasn’t sure if I was even going to keep this baby. I was having trouble even believing that this had happened for a while. Part of me wished that, if I ignored thinking about it, it would just,” she waved her hand vaguely, “disappear. And I knew that, well, I knew it would be a disappointment to you and Daddy.”

“A disappointment?” Sam asked, sounding like a man woken from a deep sleep and still half dazed.

Lois nodded. “I’m not married. I know that’s always been something that you and Mom found important. Marriage first, then the babies.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Ellen said, putting both hands up to the level of her chin and waving them from side to side. “Seventeen weeks?” She appeared to count backwards on her fingers for a few seconds, then frowned. “And you said Clark is the father? But seventeen weeks puts things right around the time...”

“Of Lex,” Lois finished for her. “Yeah, it does.”

“But that would mean...Lois! I raised you better than that!” Ellen eyed Clark harshly, as if she suspected him of being some deviant who’d taken advantage of a freshly assaulted and fragile woman.

“It’s not her fault,” Clark said, gently snaking his arm around Lois.

“Obviously not fully,” Ellen returned sourly.

“It’s not Clark’s fault either,” Lois said in a tone of appeasement. “Remember how Clark and I wrote those articles on that Miranda woman, with the pheromone spray?”

Sam nodded. “Sure.” That came as no surprise to Clark. The man was a scientist — of course he would be interested in such stories.

“Well...” Lois shrugged. “She sprayed the newsroom before we were even aware of what she was up to. She got Clark and I right in the face with that foul witch’s brew. Things...happened. It just...so happened to occur right after the incident with Lex.”

“So...how do you *know* Clark is the father?” Ellen asked pointedly.

“Because *I’ll* be the one raising this child with Lois. Even if Lex is the biological father, he’ll *never* be a part of this child’s life,” Clark said in a steady but authoritative voice, brooking no room for an argument.

“Between you and your sister, you’re going to kill me,” Ellen complained with a sigh as she brought her hand up to her forehead.

Lois’ face went red. “Mom, it took me a long time to get to a place where I am happy to be expecting this baby. You don’t have

to like it, but that’s how things stand. And if you can’t be positive about it, you don’t have to be involved in his or her life. I won’t tolerate the negativity and I certainly won’t tolerate any snide comments about Clark. Don’t look at me like that. You don’t have to voice what you’re thinking. I can see it plain enough in your eyes. You think Clark’s promise to stand by me and raise this child is a lie, that, like so many other sleazy men out there, he’s going to run. You’re wrong. I love him and I trust him.”

Ellen looked as if her daughter had just slapped her across the face. The embarrassment that crept into her features was unmistakable. She cleared her throat softly and drank her iced tea, perhaps to buy herself some time to extract the foot from her mouth. Finally, she shook her head.

“My baby’s having a baby,” she said in awe. “But...are you *sure* this is what you want?”

“*We’re* sure,” Lois stressed. “I know this is hard for you, Mom. But Clark and I...we want this.”

Ellen nodded mutely.

“Are you getting enough medical treatment?” Sam said awkwardly, seemingly at a loss as to what else he could say.

Lois smiled tenderly. “Yes, Daddy. I have a wonderful doctor.”

Sam nodded contentedly. “Do you know if it’s a boy or girl yet?”

“Not yet,” Clark answered. “But we’re having an in-depth ultrasound in a few more weeks. We should be able to find out then, if the baby’s cooperating.”

“I don’t think I want to know,” Lois said, her statement shocking Clark. He’d thought for sure that Lois Lane, world renowned solver of puzzles, would be squirming as the sex of their baby remained a mystery.

“Really?” he asked.

“It might be nice,” Lois said, “to find out when the baby’s born. Don’t you think?”

“If that’s what you want, I think it’s a great idea,” he told her with a warm and genuine smile.

She returned the smile, but the unspoken “And no peeking” thought was evident in her eyes. He gave her the slightest of nods — his solemn promise that he wouldn’t be sneaking a look. The look in her eyes changed and Clark knew that she’d understood what he was telling her.

“So, does this mean that you two are uh going to uh...” Sam stammered, gesturing vaguely.

“Not at the moment,” Lois said.

“Which doesn’t mean it might not happen,” Clark interjected. “Sam, Ellen, I love your daughter. She’s my heart and soul. And I know what you must be thinking about me — the guy who might have gotten their little girl pregnant. Wherever our relationship goes from here...nothing will change the love that I have for her and this baby. Believe me, nothing would make me happier than if one day Lois allowed me to be her husband. But the truth is, whatever happens, this baby will have more love than he or she will know what to do with. This whole thing...this family Lois and I have created — are creating — whether or not we ever say vows to one another, it’s still sacred to me. It’s not something I’ll ever just walk away from.”

Ellen opened her mouth to speak, looking less than convinced, but Lois cut her off.

“Mom, you should listen to Clark. Trust me. You don’t know him like I do. When he gives his word, he means it.”

Ellen reluctantly nodded. “If you say so.”

“I do,” Lois said firmly, ending the discussion.

“Well then,” Ellen said, seeming to swallow whatever retort she’d had, “I guess...I guess I should say congratulations. To both of you,” she amended immediately. “Do you have any names chosen?”

Lois chuckled, in what sounded like Clark to be relief. “No,

not yet. We haven't even really started the process. Things have been so crazy between the two Lex Luthor trials, that Metallo character kidnapping Clark to draw Superman into a fight, and about two and half dozen other things, that we haven't had the time. Not to mention that up until a couple of weeks ago, I wasn't even sure if I saw myself as a mother, so entertaining the idea of brainstorming names was laughably ridiculous in my mind."

"And you're sure now. About your desire to be a mother and about all the changes this baby will bring to your life."

"Yes, Mom."

"Well, if you need any help..." Ellen said, leaving the offer hanging in the air.

"You'll be the first to know," Lois said to appease her.

"Lois," Sam said gently, "you know you can count on me too, if you need anything."

"Oh, please," muttered Ellen beneath her breath.

"I know, Dad," Lois said, but Clark wasn't sure she fully believed what she was saying. Something was off in her voice, though he couldn't quite place it.

"Well, I uh... the food's getting cold," Ellen said, seemingly at a loss as to what else to say.

"I'm proud of you," Clark leaned in to whisper to Lois.

She answered him with a small, relieved smile and a pat on his leg. Gratitude for his presence gleamed in her eyes. Clark gave her a matching smile, then turned his attention to his steak. He was thankful for the way Lois had defended him, but the sting of Ellen's disbelief that he'd hold true to his promises to stand by Lois and the baby was still fresh. It colored his mood, making him quieter than usual and it altered the flavor of his meat, making the once thick and juicy steak taste closer to thin cardboard. He forced the food down anyway and would have forgone dessert if Lois hadn't insisted that he split a molten chocolate lava cake with her.

The conversation became, if possible, even more strained between the four of them. Clark contributed when he could, in as friendly and open a tone as he could, but he felt like both of Lois' parents had him under some kind of invisible microscope, watching and judging him as the night wore on, now that they suspected him of impregnating their daughter, especially on the heels of Lex's assault.

It was a relief for Clark when he finally paid the bill. He helped Lois see Sam and Ellen safely into cabs to take them to their respective hotels. Then he and Lois headed back to his place for a while, for a chance to relax and recuperate from the ordeal.

"Well," Lois said, as she stepped through the doorway of Clark's apartment, "that was certainly...uh..."

"Interesting?" he supplied helplessly.

"Not exactly the word I was looking for," Lois said, turning to him with a grin. "But, at least that's over."

"You have to admit, it went better than we'd anticipated," Clark said, shedding his light jacket and hanging it on a peg by the door once the night was shut out behind them.

"That's true," Lois said, handing him her own jacket. "No food was thrown, there wasn't any screaming, and no one got barred from ever stepping foot in that restaurant ever again."

Clark grinned broadly. "So, overall, a successful night."

That made her laugh. "Yeah, I guess so." She moved to the living room and flopped down on his couch. "I give you a lot of credit though. Most men would not have been as calm or confident in sharing the news that they might have gotten their girlfriend pregnant — especially not to the girl's parents."

Clark sighed and sat beside her. "Lois, we've been through this..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. One in a trillion. That doesn't mean there isn't a slight chance," she said, waving off his concerns. "Even so, what you did tonight with me... that couldn't have been easy. And I'm sorry for the way my parents sort of, well,

scrutinized you for the rest of the night."

"Well, it wasn't comfortable," he admitted, "but, honestly, I'm not sure that it was all that difficult, telling them. I think it was harder for me to tell my own folks. We might have fudged the truth a little tonight, saying that there was a possibility of me being the biological father. But when I told my folks, I really thought I had a good chance of being the one to get you pregnant."

"The perfect son, admitting to a mistake," she said, though her tone was gentle and free of reproach or teasing.

Clark smiled a half smile. "Kind of. More like...they knew, to a certain extent, the limits I'd placed on myself. And I knew the morals they'd instilled in me — among them, a hope, if not a belief, that I'd be having children inside the parameters of a marriage. Admitting that I'd broken all those guidelines, even if I wasn't quite myself that night..." He shrugged and allowed his voice to trail off.

"Anyway, at least that's over," Lois repeated. "Everyone knows now. And everyone is still speaking to the two of us. I guess that can be considered a success. Though, I think, for my parents at least, the real happiness will set in once the baby is here."

"Could be."

"Mmm." Lois leaned into his body, resting her head against his shoulder.

"Did you want to stay here tonight?" Clark asked after several minutes of silence had lapsed.

"Huh? Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking... I'm getting close to halfway through this pregnancy and I haven't even read any books on it yet."

"Never fear," Clark said, gently sitting Lois upright and launching himself off the couch. He went to his bookshelf and pulled a pristine copy of 'What To Expect When You're Expecting' off the bottom shelf. "I picked this up a few weeks after you told me that you were pregnant, just in case you decided that you wanted to keep the baby." He rejoined her on the couch and extended the book toward her.

She took it gratefully. "Thanks. Let me guess, you've already read it?"

"That and about four other books," he admitted sheepishly.

Lois shook her head, amused. "Must be nice, being able to get through a book like this in about thirty seconds." She hefted the book's weight in one hand.

"More like fifteen," Clark corrected her with a mischievous smile.

Lois smacked his chest with the thick book, only making him laugh. "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up," she said in mock annoyance. Then, in slight wonderment, "I can't believe you actually read this."

"Why not?" Clark asked, turning sideways on the couch and putting a hand between his head and the back of the couch. "I want to know everything. What the baby is doing each week. What you may or may not be experiencing at any given time. Did you know that at seventeen weeks, our child is about five inches long? The book compares it to the size of a turnip." He spread his fingers about five inches apart as Lois made a face. "What?"

"I hate turnips," she said.

Clark laughed. "Okay, so we won't compare Baby Lane to a turnip."

"Baby Lane?" she asked, sounding surprised.

"What?" he asked again, confused.

"It's just...well, I guess I didn't even think of this child like that. With my last name, that is. Don't you want it to have Kent?"

Clark shrugged. "I guess I haven't thought that much about it either. I just assumed that you'd want the baby to carry your name, since we're not..."

"Not married," Lois finished for him.

Clark sighed. “Yeah.”

Lois was silent for a moment, then she too, sighed. “Everything is so much harder than we thought, huh?”

“Not really harder,” he hedged. “Just more interesting,” he said, hoping to put a positive spin on it. “The truth is, I’m happy to see either one of our last names on this baby. So long as he or she is happy and healthy, that’s all that matters.”

“So, you wouldn’t care if I named it Ishkabibble?” Lois teased and Clark had to wonder where that name had come from.

“You are *so* weird,” he mused.

“I’m the weird one, huh? *You’re* the one who flies.”

Clark chuckled. “Okay, you win that point. So, did you want me to bring you home tonight? Or would you like to stay? Not that I’m forcing you to choose now. It’s just, well, you look tired.”

“I guess I am a little tired. But I’ve still got enough energy to stay for a while.”

“Good. Oh, no.”

“Someone in trouble?”

Clark nodded and inclined his head, listening as the call for help was picked up by his sensitive hearing. “Yeah. There’s a massive fire down at the docks. I might be while. Just leave me a note if you decide to go back to your place, okay?”

“Okay,” she promised.

Clark spun into the familiar blue, red, and yellow, kissed Lois, and took off.

The fire was worse than he’d feared. Five cheek-by-jowl warehouses were ablaze, the fire so intense that the fire crews were having difficulty in reaching the people trapped inside — mostly immigrant workers who’d been assigned the overnight shifts in producing the various products the warehouses made or in packaging the inventory in readiness for the morning pickups by trucks or ships. He did his best to reach everyone, flying in and out of the collapsing buildings, rescuing people two at a time when it was possible, often needing to hoist one or two unconscious bodies over a shoulder in order to get them out into the fresh air and to the attention of the EMTs standing by, ready to help.

It took Clark far longer than he would have liked, the overnight crews numbering much more than he would have thought. In the end, most sustained some degree of burns and suffered from smoke inhalation. A lucky few who had been able to get out first were unscathed. A dozen people had lost their lives, a blow to Clark’s heart, though he knew he’d done everything in his power to help, including dousing patches of fire each time he went into a building to pull out what survivors he could, so the fire crews could finally reach some of those trapped within.

Clark emerged from the scorched shell of the final building some three or three-and-a-half hours later. He couldn’t quite tell. All he knew was that he was tired and more than ready to shower the stench of the fire off and climb into bed. He wondered if Lois was still there, or if she’d gone home. He hoped she was there. Better than any sunlight, she recharged his soul. With the deaths of a dozen people on his mind, he needed the boost that Lois gave him.

After speaking with the emergency responders and ensuring that they no longer needed his assistance, Clark took off through the night. He stopped only once to prevent a collision between an SUV and a motorcycle. Then he was home.

As he stepped through the terrace door into his bedroom, he could see Lois fast asleep in his bed, the book he’d given her open and laying across the bump of her belly. He smiled, feeling Lois’ warmth and love envelope him even though she was not actually awake to talk to him and put his mind at ease. He spent several long minutes just watching her sleep, transfixed by her beauty and the knowledge that, somehow, incredibly, she loved

him. Not Superman and all he could do, but Clark, the man with simple farmland roots. He shook his head in the dark, wondering, again, how he’d gotten so lucky.

Then, aware of how the smell of the fire still clung to him like a morbid second skin, he quietly extracted some clothing from his drawers and headed off to shower. Inside, he turned the water on as hot as it would go, then proceeded to scrub his body down with a moisturizing soap that he’d picked out for the slight coconut scent it had. Once he was sure that the smell was gone from both his skin and his hair, he dried and dressed. He slipped into the bed beside Lois, flipped onto his side so he could watch the even way her chest rose and fell with breath, then, feeling more content than he had in what felt like ages, he dropped off to sleep.

“Clark!”

Clark’s eyes shot open and his heart raced.

Lois.

Lois’ voice had cried out to him, sheering through his deep, dreamless sleep like a hot knife. He bolted upright in bed, his every muscle on alert for danger.

“Lois?” he called out, as his sleep-bleary vision slowly focused, though he had to squint against the obtrusive light coming from the lamp on what he’d become accustomed to thinking of as Lois’ nightstand. “Lois? Is everything okay?”

His vision finally focused enough to see her huddled with her knees to her chest. She was trembling and his panic skyrocketed.

“Honey? What’s wrong?” he asked again.

“I...I...”

“Is it the baby?” he asked with dread.

“No. Yes. Sort of,” she replied.

“Honey, talk to me. Tell me what’s wrong,” he said, sliding a little closer to her and pulling her to him.

“I had this dream. This nightmare, really. I went into labor but I couldn’t get to the hospital. I tried so hard to stop the baby from coming. But it wouldn’t wait and I knew that it was going to kill me and the baby both unless I got help, but I was alone. Everything was happening so fast and I called to you but you weren’t there. I was terrified.” She sniffled a little.

“Oh, Lois, is that all? You’re worried about the delivery?”

Clark asked, relief flooding through his body.

Lois nodded. “That book is frightening,” she said, pointing to where the offending book had clattered to the floor.

“Honey, nothing bad is going to happen. I won’t let it,” he promised her. “You still have a long way to go before we meet our child. And I will always, *always* come to you if you call for me.”

“I know you will. But in my dream...” Her voice trailed off.

Clark nodded. “Forget the dream. Dreams aren’t real. What *is* real is that I love you and I will always be there for you, no matter what the circumstances. And, if this baby *does* happen to make a swift appearance when the time comes, if I can’t get you to a doctor fast enough, I’ll just deliver the baby on my own.” He gave her a grin to match the playful tone in his voice, even if he was deadly serious about the subject matter.

“I guess you probably have some experience with that, huh?” she mused, seemingly much calmer.

“Superman’s delivered thirty-two babies, including three sets of twins, one set of triplets, and one baby born during that hurricane last summer,” Clark said, allowing some pride to seep into his words. Truth be told, the births he’d assisted at had been some of the most beautiful but scary moments he’d lived through while clad in the Spandex. Still, each new life he’d seen emerge into the world had reaffirmed for him why it was that he pulled on the suit every day. “I think I could handle delivering *our* baby, if the need arose.”

“You’ve really delivered that many?” Lois asked in awe.

“Mmm-hmm,” Clark confirmed, nodding. “And about a

dozen of those deliveries included at least one joke about naming the baby Superman, even if it was a girl.”

Lois laughed, which was exactly Clark’s intent, even if he was telling the truth about the matter. “Can you imagine? Superman Smith, come up to the blackboard and solve this equation please!”

Clark laughed along with her. “I already pity that poor child.” “Which, of course, brings up the topic of names. Are there any that you like?”

“I honestly haven’t thought much about it. I just know that, should the baby be a boy, I don’t want a Clark Junior.”

“Why not?” Lois asked.

He shrugged. “I’ve never been a big fan of juniors in general. Plus, even if this kid had a decent chance of being mine, I don’t want him to feel like he’s living in Dad’s shadow. Because, eventually, he’ll find out about what his father does in his spare time. That’s going to be tough enough. I can’t imagine what having the same name as Dad might do to that kid’s ego when he winds up not inheriting any powers. And even if he was mine and did have the powers, I think there might be this pressure to measure up to Superman.”

“I guess that’s true,” Lois said, snuggling closer into his side.

“What about you?” Clark asked, since it was clear that Lois wasn’t yet ready to settle back down to sleep. “Any names that you love?”

“A few,” she admitted, “but now that I’m thinking about them on my own baby, I’m finding that I don’t love most of them the way I thought I did. It’s not that I never saw myself as a mother, it’s just...I thought I would be a little older, with a Pulitzer under my belt, a husband, maybe a dog too. And even then, kids never felt like a ‘must’ for me, you know?”

“I guess,” Clark said. “For me, I’ve always wanted a wife and children, a home of my own. I love my parents, but I always yearned for some flesh and blood connection to this world, in addition to the bonds of love from my adoptive family.”

“I’m sorry, Clark,” Lois said in a hushed tone. “I wish I could do something, anything, to ensure that you have a biological child of your own one day, if it turns out that this baby...”

“Isn’t mine?” he finished for her. “You can say it.”

“Dr. Klein really thinks the odds are that low, huh?” she asked instead, her eyes falling to stare at the bed sheets.

“Yeah.” He tried not to let his inner despair show, but knew he was failing.

“Maybe we should get a second opinion,” Lois said slowly, after a thoughtful silence.

“Lois, who are we going to ask? Dr. Klein is the foremost, no, the *only* authority on how my body works and how different it is from normal people,” Clark said, amused now at Lois’ innate doggedness. “And right now, that’s exactly the way I want it to stay. I have to be very careful with who I trust, even if Superman’s true identity remains under wraps, like it is with Dr. Klein. There’s just too much sensitive information that would need to be revealed, including the extent of the devastation that Kryptonite can cause.”

Lois sighed. “I guess that’s true. I just...I don’t want to believe that the odds are so low, that you and I will ever be able to have a child together that is half you and half me. I *won’t* believe it,” she said, her voice ending up sounding like a sacred vow. Then, to change the subject, “How was the fire?”

He shook his head, allowing her to change the subject, since he was unwilling to rehash the subject of his infertility when paired with a human woman. “Bad. Five warehouses went up. The firefighters still aren’t sure if it was an accident or arson. We got almost everyone out. Overall, though, I’m pleased with the result. I just wish those twelve or so people...I wish I’d gotten to them faster.”

“Oh, Clark,” Lois said, her voice a sigh as she rubbed his arm

affectionately. “I’m sure you did your best to get everyone out. What you do, every day...no one has the right to expect anything more out of you. And most people don’t. They know that you do your best.”

“It’s not what other people think of me,” Clark clarified for her.

“It’s the standards you impose on yourself,” Lois said, understanding.

“Well...yeah.”

“Oh, Clark. You are the most amazing, most extraordinary man I’ve ever known, even without your powers. And even with them, you can’t be everywhere at once.”

“I know,” he said, sighing a little. “I just...it’s hard, Lois, to have to pick and choose who to help, knowing that someone might die, or worse, *will* die.”

“Because of you, Clark, all the rest of those people are alive tonight. Fathers will go home to their children. Wives will go home to their husbands. That has to count for something, right?”

He smiled warmly at her attempt to lighten his mood. “Of course it does.” He kissed her head. “Can I confess something?”

“Sure.”

“I’m really glad you stayed tonight. Just seeing you here when I got back, even though you were asleep...you have no idea how much that means to me, or how much that lifted my spirits. I love you, Lois.”

“I love you, Clark. And I’m glad that I can help, even if I’m not really aware of it,” she said with a wry grin.

Clark laughed. “It’s funny that you put it that way, because, for me, it’s always been that way. You have no idea how much your friendship, your smile, your gentle touch has always recharged me, especially in those moments when you’ve had no idea how badly I needed something to keep me going, to help me keep fighting, to get up and pull on the Superman suit in the mornings. So, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Lois said, appearing to be at a loss. Clark didn’t blame her. He thought he might be speechless as well, in the face of such a confession.

“Anyway,” he said, unwilling to dwell on the subject any longer, “I’m beat.” He yawned, though he attempted to conceal it behind his hand.

That got Lois yawning. “Yeah, me too. Let’s get some rest. Tomorrow’s going to be a busy day.”

“Oh?” Clark asked, as he snuggled down into his pillows and blankets. “What’d you have in mind?” They were off and had nothing planned for the day.

“Well, I was thinking. It’s about time we flew out to your parents’ house. After everything that’s happened lately — finding out about Superman, your kidnapping, and our investigations — we’re long overdue for a quiet evening away from the city. I’m sure Jonathan and Martha will want to see their grandchild...in a manner of speaking, that is,” she said, rubbing the tiny rounded bump of her stomach.

“They would love that,” Clark said in between another yawn. “I’ll call them first thing in the morning. We’ll spend the day out there. I have so much to show you. Where I learned to fly. The first tractor I ever lifted. My Fortress of Solitude, where I keep the globe that showed me my origins.”

“Your...Fortress of Solitude?” Lois asked, looking askance at him.

Clark nodded. “My old tree house. I used to retreat there when I was feeling particularly lonely or freakish. Before I could fly, it felt like the one place I could go to shut out the world, which, of course, was ridiculous since it’s all of two hundred feet away from the house. But, back then, as a kid, that two hundred feet felt like a million miles.”

“I’m sorry that you felt so alone, Clark,” Lois said in a low, sympathetic voice.

He shrugged. “Now that I have you in my life, it seems sort of unreal that I ever felt as alone or as isolated as I once did. My past is the past. You are my future. You and our baby.”

“Our baby,” Lois agreed, putting a protective hand over her stomach.

“Clark, this is incredible,” Lois said gleefully as they soared above the farmsteads that dotted the land outside of the main town of Smallville.

Clark had already shown her many of the places where he’d spent his youth. The old quarry where he’d spent his summers, swimming in the cool, deep water. The schools where he’d received his education. The football field where he’d played and secured the scholarship that had paid for his college education. The river where he and his father had spent many a weekend fishing. The empty parking lot where Jonathan had first taught him how to drive his beat up old pickup truck.

He thought that, perhaps, she now had a more comprehensive view of what his life had been like growing up, at least, before his powers had truly set him apart from other people. Still, that hadn’t been his purpose in showing her such snapshots of his life. He merely wanted her to know everything about him, now that his most terrifying secret was safe with her. It felt good, knowing that he could show her everything, knowing that she could ask him any questions and knowing that he wouldn’t have to dance around the truth or tell partial lies.

“So, you’re having a good time?” he teased, as he slowed down, now that they were nearing the Kent farmhouse.

“A wonderful time,” she said. “I’ve always enjoyed our flights together, but now, knowing it’s *you* that I’m flying with... and getting to see so much of the world you grew up in, it just makes it all the more special.”

“I’m glad you agreed to come. The truth of the matter is, I’ve never had so much fun while flying around. Getting to show you around Smallville, even if mostly in a bird’s eye view, has been incredible. Look!” He pointed as best he could while still carefully cradling her body to him. “There’s my house.” He angled his flight path into a gentle descent.

He landed on the roof of the barn, then let Lois down easily so she could stand, though he kept a strong, sturdy hand around her, lest she fall. “See the field back there?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s where I first learned how to control my flying ability.”

“Was that difficult?” she asked, gazing into the distance, shielding her eyes against the golden shafts of light from the setting sun.

“At first,” Clark said with a shrug. “It was simultaneously thrilling and terrifying to laugh in gravity’s face. I loved, and still do love, the absolute freedom it gives me. But, at the same time, I didn’t know how to control it yet, and I was afraid a gust of wind might blow me away or that I’d float too high and never be able to get back to the ground.”

“How’d you break the fear?”

“My dad. He bought a ton of rope, looped one end around my waist and secured the other to his truck. He said that the rope would save me, if I lost control.”

“Couldn’t you lift his truck by then?” Lois asked. “At least, I *think* you said flying was last.”

Clark nodded. “Good memory. And yes, I could lift much more than the truck by then. But I believed my father when he said it would keep me safely anchored to the ground. I never doubted the truth of those words. So, I let myself rise off the ground, as slowly as I could manage, and began to experiment with moving around. Pretty soon, and by that, I mean about a week or so later, I finally felt ready to try it without the rope. I’ve never looked back since.”

“That’s such a great story. I see why you turned out the way you did. Your parents are really great people. Of course, I could tell that before now, even though I’ve only met them a few times, but that story... I guess I never could have appreciated before now just how amazing they really are. They must be so proud of the man they’ve raised.” She hugged his body and rested her head against his chest.

Clark’s arms instantly encircled Lois in return. “They’re great people, my parents. I give thanks, everyday, that they are the ones who found me.”

“Are you ready to go say hi to them?”

“Always. Are you?”

“We’re *both* ready,” Lois said with a smile.

Clark smiled in turn. “Good. Because they’ve been asking me every day when they are going to be able to see you.”

He took Lois in his arms and gently lifted them from the roof. Slowly, gently, he floated them down to stand on the ground alongside the barn. Once they were safely back on the ground, Clark released his protective hold of Lois and spun out of his Superman uniform. As soon as he was back in his jeans and long sleeved t-shirt, he gave Lois a wry smile.

“You know, I really love that I can do that in front of you now,” he told her.

Lois shook her head in wonderment. “And I keep finding myself constantly fascinated by it.”

“It took me weeks to figure out the easiest way to change,” he admitted as he took her hand and led her toward the house. At the door, he knocked. “Mom? Dad?”

“Clark!” Martha said, coming to the door, wiping her hands on a dish towel. “Hi, Lois.”

“Hi, Martha,” Lois managed to get out as Martha hugged first Clark, then Lois. “Hi, Jonathan,” she added as Jonathan emerged, coming down the stairs and into the living room.

“Lois, so glad you could come out with Clark. How was your flight?” he asked with a wink, his eyes twinkling in merriment.

Lois laughed. “Best I’ve ever had. Plenty of leg room and I didn’t have to worry about any luggage getting lost.”

Jonathan laughed, a deep, hearty belly laugh and patted her on the back. “Atta girl,” he said in a tone of approval. “Glad to see you can make light of our unique situation.”

“Make light? Dad, Lois has done more than that,” Clark said, sitting on the couch. “You would not believe how well Lois has accepted the undefined depths of my strangeness.” He grinned widely.

“That’s good,” Martha approved. “I have to admit, Lois, I’m looking forward to getting to talk to you about Clark. In almost thirty years, there’s never been another woman I could talk freely to about my boy.”

Lois smiled warmly. “I’d like that. Clark’s told me a lot, but I think it’s important to talk to you too. Actually, that’s why we’re a little late. Clark was giving me the grand tour of the area. I now know where you used to buy his shoes for school.”

Clark blushed. “Okay, so maybe I got a little over excited to show you around,” he admitted.

Lois laughed. “It’s fine, Clark. I was only teasing. I loved seeing it all.” Then, taking a moment to savor the wonderful smells in the air, “Wow, something smells amazing.”

“Roast beef, sweet peas in melted butter, steamed carrots, corn bread, garlic mashed potatoes and...” Clark took another large whiff of the various scents wafting through the house. He smiled. “Apple pie for dessert.”

“With ice cream,” Martha pointed out playfully, as if she’d scored a point against her son’s super sense of smell. Which she had, Clark supposed. They sometimes played this game, ever since Clark had discovered that his nose’s abilities were closer to a bloodhound’s than a human’s.

He chuckled. “With ice cream,” he conceded.

“Sounds delicious,” Lois said as her stomach rumbled in agreement.

“Hungry?” Jonathan asked.

“Constantly,” Lois grinned.

“The meat should be done in another five minutes or so,”

Martha assured her. “Can I get you anything in the meantime?”

“No, thanks. I’m fine, really.”

“Are you sure? It’s no trouble.”

“I’m sure,” Lois said, nodding. “So, Clark says that you two are excited about the baby.”

“Couldn’t be happier,” Jonathan said, smiling from his armchair. “We’re just thrilled for you both.”

“I’m glad to hear it. My parents, well, I think, eventually, they’ll warm up to the idea,” Lois said with a sigh.

“Oh, honey, I’m sure that, underneath it all, they’re happy for you. They probably just need some time to process it all,” Martha said, taking Lois’ hands.

“I guess,” Lois said in a non-committal way. “It just would have been nice to see some enthusiasm from them. Still, like I told Clark, nobody went at anyone else’s throat, so I consider last night a success of sorts.” She shook her head. “Anyway, I don’t want to talk much about my parents. I think it might be more fun to talk about Clark here.”

Clark chuckled. “Oh boy. Now I’m in trouble,” he joked.

Martha laughed. “Come on into the dining room. We’ll talk over dinner.”

“Anything you want to know, they’ll tell you too,” Clark said, feeling a little self-conscious and hoping his parents wouldn’t tell *too* many embarrassing stories about him. He helped Lois up off the couch. “You can come sit by me.” It sounded childish to his ears, but it felt better than saying nothing.

“Come on, son. Let’s let these two ladies talk,” Jonathan said, giving Clark a fleeting look after the dinner had been eaten, the dishes cleared away, and everyone had moved back to the living room.

Clark knew the look well. His father wanted to talk to him in private. Letting Lois and Martha talk was just an excuse to sneak away to speak one on one. They’d been happily chatting for most of the night. Still, he obediently nodded.

“Sure thing, Dad. Why don’t we go move that filing cabinet in the shed, like you’ve been wanting to?” He jerked his thumb vaguely in the direction of the shed.

“Great idea,” Jonathan smiled gratefully at him, then led the way from the living room.

Clark kissed Lois’ brow and caressed her growing belly before standing and following his father. Out into the night he went, strolling at a leisurely pace across the yard alongside his father. He inhaled deeply, savoring the scents of the home he’d grown up in. The rich, damp, earthy scent of the soil in the fields, some busily growing crops, others lying overturned and fallow as the soil was given a rest before it would once more nurture growing plants. The fresh paint his father had used on the shed, the once weather-beaten gray replaced now with a vibrant shade of red. The bales of hay stacked outside the shed, clean and dry.

He listened to the sounds too. In Metropolis, there was always some noise — cars horns honking, dogs barking, police cars with sirens wailing, people chatting on the streets. Out in the fields of Clark’s youth, silence was elusive as well, but it was a different kind of noise that he heard. Crickets chirping away, singing their mating songs. Frogs croaking near the small pond. A soft splash as one of the small fish in the pond jumped, possibly to try and catch a bug as it flew too close to the water’s surface. The way the grass cushioned and muffled his and his father’s footsteps.

It was comforting, being home.

And yet, Metropolis was also home, and the sounds, smells,

and sights were just as comforting.

Jonathan stopped just outside of the shed. He leaned his back against the side of the building. Clark mirrored him. Jonathan looked up, studying the stars. Clark followed suit. Even before he’d learned that he’d been born on a different planet and traveled among the stars to find his family, the night sky had always fascinated him. Now, he easily picked out some of his favorite constellations, old friends he sometimes missed as the lights of Metropolis blotted out the stars, unless, of course, he flew up and beyond the reach of the lights to visit with those same stars.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Jonathan asked absently.

“I’ve always thought so.”

“There are times, Clark, even now, when I look up there and wonder. Why us? How? Of all the people in the world that could have found you, how did it happen that Martha and I were the ones to do so? What did we do to be so lucky?”

Clark shook his head. “I’ve asked myself the same questions. How did I get so lucky to find my way into this family? Did my Kryptonian parents plan it that way? Was it random chance? Did a divine hand guide my ship?” He shook his head again and sighed.

“You were, and are, our miracle,” Jonathan continued.

“And you and Mom are mine,” Clark said. “And now, incredibly, so is Lois.”

“I remember when you first went to Metropolis,” Jonathan said, smiling. “I remember how excited you were for the opportunity to follow your dreams. But more than that, you said you wanted a normal life.”

“To find a woman to love and have a family of my own,” Clark finished for him.

“Mmm-hmm.” Jonathan nodded. “I hoped you would manage to make that dream a reality. But I was worried for you too. I knew you could never make a life with someone unless she knew your secret. It was a terrifying thought. But when you found Lois, and once your mother and I met her, we knew. She was the one for you. She alone could be trusted with the enormity of the secret we three have shared for almost thirty years.”

“I know,” Clark agreed. “Not a day had gone by since I met Lois that I haven’t been grateful that our paths wound up crossing. She completes me in a way that I never thought was possible. Having this baby with her, regardless of his or her actual parentage... it’s my every dream come true.”

“Well, there’s one piece missing,” Jonathan said.

“A marriage.”

“Only if you think the time is right,” his father cautioned.

Clark nodded. “I think it is. Now that Lois knows everything, and I mean *everything*, and I know that she still accepts and loves me, yeah, I think I’ll ask her soon. Just... not quite yet. It’s so early into our relationship as a couple — as a completely *honest* couple, that I don’t want to get ahead of myself. I want Lois to really have a chance to decide for herself if she wants to marry me, and not feel like it’s just the next logical step for a couple who are expecting a baby.”

Jonathan reached into the breast pocket of his shirt. “Then you’ll want this.” He handed a slip of folded paper to Clark.

Clark looked at it curiously for a second before accepting it. He unfolded it to find that it was a check, made out in his mother’s neat handwriting. The amount it was written for staggered him.

“Dad, what is this?” he managed after a minute, peering up at his father, who bore a self-satisfied smile.

“That’s a little something to get you two started,” Jonathan said.

“This is *not* a little something,” Clark argued, shaking his head. “I can’t accept this.”

“You can and you will,” Jonathan said, closing Clark’s hand

over the check. “It’s yours. Use it as you see fit.”

“Dad, I can’t take this. You and mom need it more than I do. I make a good salary at the Planet. And I’ve been saving up for a ring for a while now. I have more than enough stashed away for what I’ve been thinking about getting for her.”

“Then use it for the wedding, or for the baby,” Jonathan said gently. “This is your money. Your mother and I started saving from the day we found you. We bought a lot of bonds, when we could. Some years, we were able to put away more for you than others, that’s true, depending on how the crops turned out. But, no matter what, we always found a way to set some money aside for you. We always intended it to be used for your education. Then you had that football scholarship that covered the entirety of your college tuition. So we kept saving, thinking that you could use the money for graduate school or a house or whatever it was that you wanted to use it for.”

“But you and mom...”

“Are fine. Trust me, Clark, your mother and I have more than enough saved up for ourselves. We’ve never looked at this money as anything but yours. Even those times when the crops failed and money got tight, we never touched this money, never considered using it for anything else other than for you.”

“Are you sure about this?” Clark couldn’t help but ask.

“Absolutely.”

“I don’t quite know what to say here,” Clark admitted, “except thank you. And even that feels miserably inadequate.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Jonathan reassured him. “Your mother and I are thrilled that we were able to do this for you. We want you to have the most comfortable life you can have. Even if we can only offer small gestures like this.”

“Dad, this is *not* a small gesture. This is a sizable down payment on a home. In fact, that’s exactly what it might become,” Clark said, his mind beginning to race as he thought about what he’d just said. “With the baby coming, even if Lois doesn’t want to get married — and I really hope that’s not the case — it might not be a bad idea for us to buy a place, or find a bigger apartment that we can share, so we don’t have to split our time with the baby.”

“Good idea,” Jonathan said, and Clark could see the familiar twinkle in his father’s eyes.

Clark said nothing. He only nodded and embraced his father, hoping that his dad could feel his appreciation and love through that simple gesture. Jonathan returned the hug, slapping Clark’s back lightly in a loving manner. After a moment, they both pulled away at some unspoken signal. Clark pocketed the check after carefully placing it in his wallet. Then he cleared his throat before speaking.

“So, where do you want that filing cabinet?” he finally managed to ask, making his father laugh deeply.

“Ah, Nigel. So good of you to visit me,” Lex Luthor said from behind the thick sheet of bullet-proof glass that separated him from any visitors who might come to see him or any of his fellow inmates.

Nigel inclined his head in acknowledgement. “Sir, I bring news.”

“Oh?” Lex asked, not allowing himself to show anything but a calm, composed exterior. “Good or bad?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“It’s about the Lane woman,” Nigel said through the phone that connected the two sides of the glass.

“Lois?” That got Lex’s attention.

“One of my *associates* swears that she’s about five months pregnant.”

“Pregnant?” He couldn’t help the surprise from suffusing his voice.

Nigel nodded. “She, ah, happens to work in Lane’s doctor’s office. She puts the date of conception right around the time you two, ah...” His voice trailed off.

“I see,” Lex said, giving away nothing about what he felt on the matter. “Is your associate sure of this?”

“Quite.”

“I see,” Lex repeated. He held the phone between his ear and his shoulder, steepling his fingers before him in a thoughtful matter.

“There *is* something else,” Nigel said, though hesitantly.

“And that would be...?” Lex pressed.

“Well, she swears that Lane is claiming that Clark Kent is the father.”

“Kent?” he asked, the name burning his tongue like acid. God, how he *hated* that man.

Nigel nodded in affirmation. “That’s what I’m told, yes.”

“Is Lois certain of this?” He hated to ask, but he had to know. “From what my associate has been able to gather, no. There’s been no DNA test.”

“Interesting,” Lex mused. “Nigel, be a friend, would you? Call...”

“Your lawyer,” Nigel finished for him. “I’ve already taken the liberty. He’ll be here in the morning.”

Lex cracked a tiny smile. “Whatever would I do without you, my old friend?”

Nigel allowed himself a matching smile. “Yes, what indeed?”

Lex allowed himself a slight chuckle. But his heart wasn’t in it. Lois’ pregnancy, assuming Nigel’s informant had the truth of it, was something he hadn’t really planned on. One stupid mistake one night, and now he was living in a nightmare — exposed as a rapist, crime boss, and now possibly with yet another illegitimate child on the way.

Sheldon Bender, his ever loyal, if not completely trustworthy, lawyer would see to all of the details to sweep this whole thing under the rug. Still, it *was* almost a nice thought to think that the woman Lex loved was carrying his child. If the informant was right. If it really was his child she carried.

If.

So much doubt from one little word.

“Miss Lane?”

Lois looked up from her desk at the messenger boy who’d called her name. Clark, too, looked up instinctively from his work at his own desk. He was ever alert and aware of any potential threats to the woman he loved more than his own life. He knew, just by the man’s voice, that he wasn’t one of the regular messengers on the Daily Planet’s payroll. And he wasn’t one of the regulars he’d gotten to know from S.T.A.R. Labs or any of their other, regular sources.

“Yes?” Lois asked.

“This is for you. Sign here please.”

Lois distractedly took the pen and signed where the short, balding man pointed. He handed her an envelope, turned on his heel, and strode away. Clark stood, stretched subtly, then crossed the aisle to Lois.

“Is that the research we’ve been waiting on?” he asked as he sat on the edge of her desk.

Lois’ brow furrowed. “Doesn’t look like anything we’re waiting on. Actually, it’s kind of thin, this envelope.” She took up her letter opener and deftly sliced the envelope open. She extracted the contents, unfolded the paper, and read.

“What?!” she said, a little too loudly. Around them, their coworkers looked over at them.

“What is it?” Clark asked, ignoring the stares, too concerned for Lois to care.

“It’s from Sheldon Bender.”

“Luthor’s lawyer?” Clark asked.

Lois nodded. “Lex must have found out about the baby somehow. He’s filed to obtain a court ordered paternity test.”

“What?” Clark asked, aghast. Having Luthor seek a paternity test was a scenario he’d never once imagined.

“I’m being ordered to show up to court on September twenty-second.” She crumbled the edges of the paper as her fists clenched.

Clark slipped from his perch to stand behind Lois. He lightly placed his hands on her shoulders.

“You mean *we* are being ordered to show up to court,” he said. “We’re in this together. Whatever happens to one of us, happens to both of us.”

“Thanks,” she said wearily. “Oh, Clark. How did he find out?”

Clark sighed and shrugged, though he continued to lightly massage Lois’ shoulders.

“The man has eyes and ears everywhere. And it’s getting harder to hide the fact that this baby is on his or her way.”

“Why?” Lois asked, seeming to ask the universe more than Clark himself. “Why would he want a paternity test?”

“Because he’s Luthor,” Clark said. “Because he needs to feel like he’s the one in control, even when he isn’t.”

“But why would he want even acknowledge this child?”

“To protect himself, most likely,” Clark said. “He wants to prove he isn’t the father before you can sue for child support. At least, that’s what makes the most sense to me. What he’ll do when he finds out the truth of this baby’s parentage though...” Again, he shrugged.

“Supposed parentage,” Lois automatically corrected him.

“Supposed parentage,” he echoed hollowly.

She always corrected him whenever he spoke of the absolute certainty that the baby wasn’t his. She was persistent, and Clark had long since given up trying to argue the science that said that there was zero chance that he was the biological father. He usually just went along with whatever Lois said, just wanting her to be happy, though it still cut him to his very heart to know that he could never actually father a child with Lois.

“So, what do we do?” Lois asked.

Clark shook his head. “I’m not sure. Hire a lawyer, I suppose.”

“A lawyer,” Lois said distractedly, appearing to be reading over the court summons again.

“I’ll talk to Constance Hunter,” Clark promised.

“The lady who represented Superman that one time?”

“The very same. She’s had a bunch of successes ever since that whole Superman thing,” Clark said confidently. “I’m sure she can help us.”

“Is this really her domain though? I’m not being sued here.”

“Even if it isn’t her area,” Clark said after a moment of thought, “I’m sure she knows of someone who *can* help. Look, it’s worth a shot, isn’t it? I’ll give her a call. Okay?”

“Okay,” Lois relented. Clark could see that this newest obstacle in their journey toward parenthood still had her reeling.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay,” he tried to reassure her, but all she did was nod absently.

“Lois Lane?”

“That’s me,” Lois said, standing, as the nurse called her name.

“Follow me please,” the nurse said pleasantly.

Clark stood from his seat, closing the magazine he’d been flipping through but not reading. He set it down on the low table before him. Trailing Lois, his heart was in his throat. Today they would see how their child was growing, making sure that he or she was healthy. He hoped and prayed for good news.

The nurse brought them down to an examination room and took Lois’ weight and blood pressure. She nodded to herself as

she jotted down the numbers, her brunette ponytail wagging with the movement. Then she brought them to a different room, one that was sparsely decorated but for a long table with high backed black leather chairs, a few plants near the windows, and a couple of generic landscape photos.

“Dr. Humbert will be with you shortly,” the nurse cheerfully informed them. “He’ll ask you some basic questions about your family genetics so he can keep an eye out for anything that might indicate a problem, though an amnio is more accurate. Any questions for me?”

“Sure. Where’s the ladies’ room?” Lois asked.

The nurse smiled. “Down the hall, first door on the left.” She pointed with two fingers pressed together.

“Thanks,” Lois said, just before slipping out the door.

The nurse left without another word, a silent figure in lavender colored scrubs. Clark tried to sit still, but his anxiety was getting the better of him. He began to drum his fingers on the table. He wanted to pace or fly up into the deepening twilight or make a rescue just to burn off some of his nervous energy. How did normal men go through this process, he wondered.

“Back,” Lois announced a few tortuous minutes later.

That was a relief to Clark. He pulled out Lois’ chair then sat once she was comfortable. He reached over and took her hand, his fingers immediately entwining with hers. That gave him a small measure of comfort, and he hoped it was doing the same for Lois. Perhaps it did — she gave his hand a gentle squeeze, which he returned.

“Are you okay?” he whispered to her.

“I will be, once we know if this baby is healthy,” she replied in an honest tone.

“Hello, hello,” a dark, short, portly and balding man said. He maneuvered himself to the other side of the table with a speed that belied his rounded figure. “I’m Dr. Humbert.”

Lois shook the hand that he offered, followed by Clark. “I’m Lois and this is Clark.”

“Nice to meet you both. Did Aubrey explain what we’re going to do here?”

“Yes,” Lois said, nodding. “She said you would take some family history.”

“Right,” Dr. Humbert said. “Once I have the information I need, we’ll head back to the exam room for the ultrasound. Did you want to know the sex of the baby today, assuming that he or she cooperates?”

Lois shared a look with Clark. He shrugged subtly, letting her know that he was really okay with whatever she chose. After a few heartbeats, she faced the doctor again.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “We’d prefer to wait until the birth.”

Dr. Humbert nodded absently. “Fair enough. We get plenty of moms and dads who wish to be surprised at the delivery. I’ll warn you though, I have a tendency to say ‘he’ when I do the ultrasounds. It doesn’t mean you’re having a boy. It’s just a habit of mine, since I dislike calling the baby an ‘it.’”

“Okay...” Lois said, clearly at a loss.

“Now then, shall we start with your family history, or his?” the doctor asked in a kindly voice, adjusting his rimless glasses.

“Well,” Clark said uneasily. “We really don’t have a history for my side. I was adopted and have no knowledge of my birth parents’ histories.”

It was true. Jor-El hadn’t left any kind of family history in his messages to Clark — messages that the globe had held until he grew into a man and had reclaimed it from Bureau Thirty-Nine.

“I see. Not a problem,” Dr. Humbert said cheerfully, scribbling a note. “It’s actually more common than you might think.”

Clark felt horrible, leaving out the fact that he wasn’t the true father of this child. But what good would it do to mention that the

child was Luthor's? They didn't have a history for him either, nor did Clark want to even attempt to find out. He would just as soon like to forget that Luthor was connected to the baby at all. He just wished that he *could* forget.

For a solid half hour, the doctor asked Lois about her family's medical history — if diabetes was present, if anyone had heart defects, if any specific ethnic or religious backgrounds were in her family — anything that could be linked to specific diseases. Clark could see that she was answering as best she could, but that she was terrified as she did so. Then they were led back to the same room where the nurse had taken Lois' blood pressure and weight.

Clark helped her up on the table. Lois laid down and lifted her shirt to reveal her expanding waistline as the tech introduced herself as Paulette. She already had the ultrasound machine up and running, so she wasted no time in squirting a generous amount of blue gel on Lois' abdomen. As soon as she pressed the ultrasound wand to Lois' stomach, the screen on the wall came alive with white, gray, and black shapes. Paulette swiped the wand around for a moment, looking for the baby's head.

"Here we go," she said happily as a skull appeared on the screen. "Look at that, your baby is looking right at you. See the dark holes there? Those are the eyes." She clicked around on the computer with the mouse, taking various measurements. "Looking good," she announced.

"Ah, look there," Dr. Humbert said, watching the screen.

"Is that... a hand?" Clark asked as something came into view.

"Yes," the doctor said. "He's waving at you."

As they watched, the baby stuck a thumb into its mouth and began to suck, while simultaneously rolling away from the full frontal view. It stopped once it was laying in profile, contentedly sucking its thumb.

"My God," Lois whispered, her voice sounding somehow reverent to Clark's ears. "Do you see that, Clark?"

"I do," he said, working the words around the emotional lump that had somehow formed in his throat. Funny, he hadn't even felt it form until he tried to speak. "It's beautiful." Beautiful? He'd never before considered the act of thumb sucking to be beautiful before that moment.

Paulette and the doctor continued to take careful measurements of the baby, pointing out everything to Lois and Clark. Arms, hands, fingers, spine, legs, feet — everything that appeared on the screen was identified. Even some of the internal organs — the flickering rhythm of the heart beating, the dark spots that were the kidneys and bladder, even the stomach — were carefully measured and eagerly pointed out by Paulette.

Clark could barely speak as he watched in rapt fascination. Even the normally chatty Lois was subdued and spoke only to ask the occasional question to see if things were still looking well, or if she was unsure about what she was seeing on the screen. At one point, they both had to let out a much needed chuckle as the baby started to hiccup. When Paulette reached the baby's bottom, she had them both look away, so that they could remain unaware of whether the baby was a boy or girl.

Special attention was spent on the baby's heart and umbilical cord, checking for any visible defects or problems. None were found, much to Clark's great relief. He could see from the way the tension bled out of Lois' body that she felt much the same. Finally, Paulette took the wand from Lois' exposed belly and handed her a towel to wipe the gel from her skin. She then went to work printing off pictures for them.

"You can relax now," Dr. Humbert said with a kindly smile. "Everything looks perfect. Your little guy is doing great. He's measuring right on target. Heart is strong, brain looks good. I see absolutely nothing to worry about."

"Thank you," Lois said breathlessly.

"He *is* laying sideways at the moment, but you still have

plenty of time before the delivery for him to flip to the head down position."

"Is there anything we can do to change that?" Clark asked.

Dr. Humbert shook his nearly bald head. "Not at this time. That baby's going to continue to swim around and do somersaults for many more weeks. If he's still transverse closer to your delivery date, your regular OB should be able to give you some tips and run over your list of options."

"Here are your pictures," Paulette said, smiling, as she handed them a stack of thin ultrasound snapshots.

Lois took them distractedly. "So, there's really nothing I can do?"

"Nothing more than to relax and enjoy the rest of the pregnancy. I know it's concerning to many women, not seeing the baby in a head down position. But really, it's fine and many of those babies will move into the correct position for delivery on their own. He's just enjoying himself and all that room to move around until he gets bigger and the space becomes more constrictive."

"Thank you, doctor," Clark said, helping Lois off the table. "We appreciate everything."

"My pleasure," Dr. Humbert said, shaking Clark's hand. "Congratulations, both of you."

With that, both the doctor and the ultrasound technician left the room. Lois took a moment to continue to readjust her shirt, grimacing as she realized some of the gel had managed to evade her diligent efforts to clean herself off. Clark saw the wet marks it left on her shirt.

"Ugh," Lois said, looking down where the gel had connected with her clothing. "I can't wait to shower this stuff off."

"Why don't we head back to your place? You can take a shower and I'll get us a celebratory dinner," Clark offered. "Anything you want, just name it and I'll get it."

Lois smiled at him before pulling him into a hug. He could feel how much tension had drained out of her, now that the ultrasound was over.

"Our baby is healthy," she whispered in awe, as though the news was just dawning on her. "I was so afraid, Clark."

"I was too," he admitted. "Even with as slim a chance as we have that it really is my son or daughter, I was terrified. Your DNA and mine... if it *is* mine... I was afraid it might cause some kind of deformities or be fatal or at the very least give the kid some antennas or something."

He made the last part lighthearted, wanting to offset the gravity of his fears. Human and Kryptonian genetics had never mixed before, and he'd been terrified that, on the off chance that the baby was his own flesh and blood, that the alien DNA it carried would be either deadly or crippling to the child. Now, however, it seemed liked no matter who was the father — and Clark knew in his heart, despite what hope he might have once had, that it was Luthor's — the child was completely normal and healthy. That knowledge alone made it feel like the weight of the world had been lifted from his struggling shoulders.

Lois seemed to appreciate his minor attempt at humor. She playfully slapped his chest and laughed. "Well, we don't know if this baby has purple skin or anything like that," she teased back.

Clark chuckled and grinned. "Good point. Come on. Let's go home."

"With pleasure. I'm beat and I feel like Slimer caressed my belly."

Clark put his arm around her as they left the examination room. Together, they found their way out of the hospital where the ultrasound had been performed and out into the parking lot. Clark offered to drive. Lois gladly gave him her keys, then proceeded to fall asleep in the passenger seat as he navigated through the city streets to Lois' apartment. He found a spot to park, then gently leaned over and kissed Lois' brow to awaken

her.

“Huh?” she asked sleepily as her eyes started to flutter open.

“We’re here,” he replied in a low, soothing voice.

Lois opened her eyes fully. “Oh. Thanks, Clark.”

“Any time. Let’s get you inside, then I’ll make a food run.”

“Okay.” She unbuckled and clamored out of the Jeep. “What are you in the mood for?” she asked as they mounted the steps from the sidewalk into her building.

“I don’t know,” Clark said helplessly. “What are *you* in the mood for?”

Lois shrugged. “Not Chinese again. I feel like I’ve consumed more duck sauce than the rest of the country combined in the last month or so.”

“French?”

Lois made a face. “No.”

“Japanese?”

“And watch you eat all the sushi while I can’t have any?” she teased. “Pardon me if I decline.”

Clark chuckled. “Italian?”

Lois’ eyes lit up. “Now *that* sounds good.”

“Pizza or other?” he asked with a wide grin as the elevator in the building’s lobby opened for them. He stepped aside as the Mendez family exited.

“Other. I could go for some chicken francese, a side of pasta, and don’t forget the bread and dipping oil,” she said as they boarded the elevator.

“Got it,” Clark said with a mock salute.

They rode the rest of the way up to her apartment in relative silence. When they reached Lois’ floor, they disembarked from the elevator and linked arms as they walked to her door. Once inside the apartment, Clark turned to her.

“I’ll head out for the food now, if you want.”

“Please. I’m starving.” She paused. “Promise me that you’ll go someplace local?”

“Do I *have* to?” Clark asked in faked wounded tones.

Lois smiled and patted his cheek affectionately. “Yes.”

Clark sighed dramatically. “Okay, fine. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He went to his customary window after spinning into the suit. It was funny, he thought to himself. He’d always used that one particular window to enter and exit Lois’ apartment whenever he was in his Superman garb, even though there were other perfectly good windows he could use. It didn’t really mean anything, but the passing thought still struck him. He turned back to Lois for a moment, one foot on the window sill.

“Love you,” he told her.

“Love you too. Now, go,” she encouraged him.

He nodded, then raced off into the sky, too fast for anyone to notice, though he curtailed his speed so as not to cause the tell-tale sonic boom that oftentimes signaled that Superman was in the area. He thought about heading across town to one of their usual places, but changed his mind seconds later. He altered his course and headed north, to New York.

Twenty minutes later, he was back in Metropolis. He headed for his apartment first, wanting a shower and a change of his civilian clothes. He’d heard that it was a cardinal sin to make a pregnant woman wait for her food, but he was sure that Lois wouldn’t mind the extra two minute delay. He zoomed into his place via the terrace door, spun completely out of his clothing, shoved everything in the hamper, showered at super speed, then dressed. He checked his bedside clock as he was once more leaving and smiled to himself in satisfaction. Two minutes exactly, and that was only because he’d taken the time to shave before his shower.

A minute later, he was knocking on the window of Lois’ apartment. She’d left it open for him to enter, but he disliked just walking — or flying, as the case might be — into other people’s

homes without at least knocking. She was just entering the living room from the direction of her bathroom, clad in soft looking pajamas, her hair still damp. She waved him in with a smile.

“Smells good,” she said as he stepped into the room.

He spun into his civilian clothes. “Trust me, it tastes even better.”

“You didn’t go to our usual place, did you?” she asked, her tone indicating that she already knew the answer. “Clark! I told you to stay local. Where did you go?”

“I did stay local. I went to The Bronx,” he admitted. “There’s a place over there that that blows ours out of the water.”

“That’s *hardly* local,” she accused.

Clark shrugged, smiling wolfishly. “It is for me.”

Lois rolled her eyes, but laughed.

“Besides,” Clark continued. “I don’t see what’s wrong with going a bit out of the way for dinner tonight. We’re celebrating, after all.”

“That’s precisely *why* I didn’t want you flying to Italy or China or wherever. Clark and I are celebrating. *Not* Superman. What? Why are you smiling like that?”

Clark shook his head as he brought the bag of takeout to the kitchen. “Nothing. It’s just... all my life, this is what I’ve dreamed about. Being able to be myself with the woman I love. Having my abilities accepted but ignored in the greater scheme of who I am. I love that you’re able to do that, Lois. Seeing me for who I really am.”

Lois came up behind him and grabbed his midsection in a hug. “You make it easy to, Clark. I’ll admit, when I first found out about you, part of me wondered if I really would be able to separate you from Superman. I’ve always looked at you in two different lights. But, somehow, something just made sense and clicked for me. You made it seem so natural, that you were Clark masquerading as Superman and not Superman pretending to be Clark. And not because you explained how you became Superman to me. It’s just... who you are. It’s just so evident in how you live your life. It was impossible not to ‘get it’ pretty quickly. What took more getting used to was that, out of the millions of women you could possibly have, you chose me.”

Clark twisted in her arms, momentarily abandoning the food containers he’d been taking out of the bag. He kissed her lips — a brief, chaste kiss that lasted only a second or two. “Lois, I have met hundreds of thousands of people, all over the world, between my days traveling the world and as Superman. Believe me when I say you are the *only* woman who has ever captivated me. Your mind, your drive — everything about you makes me love you. Not to mention how beautiful you are.”

Her grin matched his own. “Smooth talker.” Her stomach rumbled loudly.

“Baby’s hungry, huh?”

Lois blushed. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Go on, sit. I’ll get this all set,” Clark said. As Lois released him, he went back to work opening the food containers and setting everything on the table.

“Everything looks and smells so good,” Lois said as he placed her meal in front of her. “What’d you get?”

“The same as you,” he said, bringing his plate over and seating himself. “Enjoy.”

“Oh, God, this is good,” Lois said after the first bite. “You are officially forgiven for not staying local.”

“Good,” Clark said. “I was hoping that would be the case.” He basked in the praise for a moment, enjoying the fact that he’d made Lois so happy.

Lois ate another bite and closed her eyes blissfully as she chewed. “Definitely forgiven,” she murmured.

“I’ll keep it in mind next time you’re in the mood for Italian,” Clark said. “You should try their pizza some time.”

“I definitely will be.”

A small silence lapsed. Clark fiddled with the food on his plate, enjoying the food but wanting to break the fragile quiet of the room. He was half finished with his meal when he finally found a starting point.

“So, uh, were you going to call your family tonight to tell them the good news?” he asked.

Lois sighed noisily. “I probably should. I’ve been thinking about it since I climbed into the shower. I’m just dreading it. Mom’s still mad that I don’t want to know if the baby is a boy or girl yet, and that I’m not using the doctor she’s been insisting on. Dad keeps harping on getting a paternity test done. And Lucy... well, I guess I *am* looking forward to telling her the good news. But at the same time, I feel kind of bad. I know she’s been feeling kind of down, ever since the whole thing with Johnny Corben. I just want her to find a sweet guy, like you.” She eyed him a gave him a wry smile. “Too bad you don’t have a brother,” she mused.

Clark chuckled. “I wish. It would have been nice to have someone else like me growing up.”

“Do you regret not having siblings?” Lois asked.

It was Clark’s turn to sigh as he formulated his answer. “Yes and no. I would have loved to have had a sister or brother to share things with. And I would have loved for my parents to have had another child to love. It always seemed sort of unfair to me, that they had all this love to give but only one child to lavish that love on, and that one only by random chance. And if that other child had been like me... well, it would have been nice, to not have to endure all the changes, all the power manifestations on my own. It would have been nice to know that someone else knew *exactly* what I was going through.”

He paused to take a sip of his water. “On the other hand, I had a fantastic childhood. I had many friends and wonderful parents. I guess I never really felt like I was really missing out on anything by not having a sibling. Even now, as an adult, I have friends who are so close, so dear to me, that they almost feel like the brothers and sisters I never had. Like Jimmy. He’s like a brother to me.”

Lois hummed her understanding. “I’ve seen that, between the two of you. I’d bet that Jimmy thinks of you in the same light.”

Clark smiled. “He’s a great guy. Maybe you should fix him up with Lucy.”

Lois rolled her eyes. “I tried that once. I guess it was six or eight months before you started at the Planet. It was a disaster.”

“I never knew that,” Clark said.

Lois shook her head. “Neither one of them ever mentions it. And I don’t even fully know what happened between them. All I know is that it didn’t go well.”

“Shame. I would think they’d make a cute couple,” Clark mused aloud.

“I did too. But maybe it’s for the better. Neither one have the best track records in the dating world.”

Clark had to concede that point. “True.”

As if to spare him from the awkward topic he’d inadvertently brought up, the phone rang. Lois rose to answer it. He heard her greet her mother. Knowing she’d likely be on the phone for a while, he busied himself with cleaning up the kitchen, even going so far as to reorganize her Tupperware, since a small avalanche occurred when he opened the cabinet to find something to pack the leftovers in.

About forty-five minutes passed until Lois finally begged her way off the phone. She pressed Clark to call his parents to share the news that the baby was healthy. He did, but only to make her happy. By then, it was getting late. Lois fielded one brief call from her sister, then curled up under a blanket with Clark on the couch. She leaned against him, resting, and he was more than happy to take her in his arms and hold her close.

“Clark?” she asked some time later, as an old movie played on the television. Her voice was heavy with sleepiness.

“Hmm?” he asked, half asleep himself.

“Will you stay tonight?”

“Only if you want me to,” he murmured into her hair, hoping she would say yes.

He always loved when he was invited to stay the night at Lois’ apartment or when she accepted his invitation to stay at his place. They always shared the same bed now, though they had agreed not to take things any further than cuddling, kisses, and actual sleep. He knew that Lois was still working through some strong feelings caused by Luthor’s attack. In fact, she was speaking with a therapist once a week. According to Lois, Dr. Friskin was simply amazing. He was just happy that Lois was beginning to feel like she was putting some distance between herself and that singularly traumatic night. He still kicked himself for making an earlier than normal patrol that night, and for being at home at the time of Luthor’s assault. He still felt like he should have been able to do something to prevent Lois from going through such a frightening and scarring experience.

“I really do,” Lois said. “It’s so nice when I get to fall asleep in your arms.”

“I love it too,” he replied.

Lois yawned and stretched. “I’m going to get ready for bed.”

“I’ll get everything in here shut down,” he promised, flicking the television off with the remote control.

As Lois moved off to the bathroom, he double checked the locks on the windows and door, then turned out the lights. After a few minutes, Lois emerged from the bathroom and slipped beneath the bed’s soft sheets, allowing Clark to get himself ready for sleep. He’d long ago left a set of necessary toiletries at her place along with some spare changes of clothing, and she at his, so he brushed his teeth, used the toilet, then followed Lois’ lead in climbing into bed. Once settled next to her, he placed his hand over the rounded and now unmistakable bump of her belly.

“Baby’s moving a lot right now,” Lois informed him.

Clark nodded mutely, unable to feel that movement yet, though he knew it would be coming soon enough.

“Our baby,” he said after a moment. “Sometimes, I still can’t believe it.”

“Me too.” She placed her hand over his. “I guess I still wonder if we’re doing the right thing, if I’ll be a good mom. I *know* you’ll be a good dad. And then this little one will kick me and it’s like he or she is telling me that it’ll be okay.” She paused for a moment. “Does that make me sound as crazy as I think it does?”

Clark smiled at her and kissed the tip of her nose. “Not at all. And you’ll be a fantastic mom.”

“Thanks. So, what’s your guess on the baby? Boy or girl?”

Clark shook his head. “No idea. I’ll be happy no matter what. What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I feel like... I know so many men who want a son, but so many others whose daughters have them wrapped around their little fingers. And, while I’d love a son, the bigger part of me wants a daughter so I can have that mother-daughter relationship. Especially since the relationship with my mother is... well, what it is.”

“I guess I can understand that,” Clark said, pulling his hand from Lois’ belly to brush a stray lock of hair back behind her ear.

“Promise me something?” Lois asked.

“Anything. Uh, what, exactly, am I promising?”

“You’ll let me know if you ever see me turning into my mother, regardless of if we have a son or daughter?”

“Absolutely,” Clark said with a laugh.

Lois wagged a playful finger at him. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“So, uh, I was wondering if you’d given any more thought to names,” Clark said after a few minutes of silence. His hand went back to her stomach.

“A little. It turns out there are more names that I hate than

that I like. What about you?”

“I have a few that I like. I started to highlight ones that I like in a baby name book I found at a library sale.”

“Tell me some of them?”

Clark started to rattle off some of the top names and was a little surprised when Lois enthusiastically jumped into the conversation, offering up some names that she liked, or letting him know if she liked or disliked the ones he was suggesting. In a way, it was the most peaceful night they had spent together in the recent weeks, even if it was of the more important discussions in his mind. In the end, they agreed on a few potential names for both a boy and a girl, but also agreed to keep subject open for further discussions.

Soon, Lois dropped off to sleep in his arms, half turned into his body. Clark cuddled her closer and eased himself further down into the blankets. He was tired, but sleep would not come right away. He lay, instead, just listening to the sound of Lois’ even breathing as she slept, and the steady, comforting sound of her heartbeat. He listened, for a time, to the baby’s heart as well, faster than any resting adult, though Clark had come to learn that that was perfectly normal for any child. He guessed the baby was also sleeping, from the barely changing rhythm of his or her heart.

How did I ever get this lucky? he wondered for what felt the billionth time in the five short months he’d been dating Lois. *A woman who loves me, the real me, not the super me. A child on the way. Somehow, I almost feel like I’m not worthy of all these wonderful developments in my life. All I need now is to live with Lois full time, as her husband, if she’ll have me. Being apart from her...and eventually being apart from this baby...it hurts. I’m lonelier in my apartment after she goes home for the night than I’ve ever been in my entire life, even when my differences made me the most isolated person on the planet.*

He sighed and placed a careful kiss into Lois’ hair, taking every caution not to wake her. *Maybe my dad was right. Maybe I should use the check he gave me to put a down payment on a new place for us. Assuming Lois wants to move in together. I mean, we’re practically living together as it is. On any given week, about half the nights she’s sleeping over at my place or I’m sleeping at hers. And with the baby coming, it makes more sense for us to have one place, right? Or am I crazy in considering this?*

His mind turned to thoughts of the ring he’d long since picked out for her. *Tomorrow, I’ll buy that ring,* he decided. *I’ll hold onto it until I’m sure a proposal would be welcome. But, in the meantime, at least I’ll have it. Even if it takes us years to get to the point where I know Lois would be okay with my asking her to marry me, at least I’ll know that I’ll have the perfect ring for her.*

God, she’s so beautiful, he thought as he continued to gaze at her peacefully sleeping form. *Never in my wildest dreams growing up did I ever dare to imagine that I’d wind up with someone like her. Her smile. Her features. Her mind. She’s the most gorgeous woman in the world.*

He kissed her once again before shutting his eyes. Finally, thankfully, sleep took him to a deep, dreamless place where only healing rest took place, though even then, he still felt happy.

“Good afternoon, sir,” a cheery, almost too skinny blonde woman bubbled as Clark walked into Mazik’s Jewelry Shoppe. “Can I help you with anything? Or do you need some time?”

“Actually, I’m here for an engagement ring,” Clark said, feeling very confident.

“Oh, congratulations!” the perky woman gushed. “Over here is our engagement ring section.” She swept her hand over the pristinely polished glass counter.

Clark looked over, confused. “I thought it was on this side,”

he said, gesturing.

The woman, Tara, he could see written on her nametag, giggled. “Oh, we changed things up about, oh, a week or two ago. Did you have a ring in mind, or did you want to browse the selection?”

“I have one in mind,” he answered as he approached the display case. “I just hope it’s still here,” he added as an afterthought.

“I hope so,” Tara said in an agreeable manner.

Clark held his breath as he scanned the sizable collection of rings. He had to force himself to slow down and not to sweep the case with his eyes as quickly as his heart was pounding. His stomach clenched in knots and his heart managed to wedge itself into his throat, making it hard to swallow. He forced himself to take a breath and start again at the leftmost edge of the engagement ring collection. He carefully and deliberately brought his eyes to each ring, steadily working his way from the left of the case to the right. About three-quarters of the way in, he finally spotted the ring, and a breath of air whooshed out of his lungs in a grateful sigh.

“That one,” he said, pointing.

Tara unlocked the back of the case and reached in. “This one here?” she asked about a yellow princess cut diamond.

“No, the one beneath it and to the right,” he directed her. “That’s the one.”

“Here you are,” she said as she pulled the ring from the padded display.

Clark accepted it as she handed it over for his inspection. The white diamond center stone shone like a perfectly gleaming star. He slipped his glasses down a tad, allowing himself to telescope in on the one and a half carat diamond. He swiftly, but methodically, checked for any flaws within the stone, and found it to be as close to perfect as he was likely to find and be able to afford. Three small sapphires trailed down the sides of the silver band on either side of the round cut diamond, and he checked them as well, only to deem them perfectly acceptable gems as well. He guessed the overall weight of all the stones together was about two carats.

Satisfied with the integrity of the stones, Clark pushed his glasses back up and pretended to continue to inspect the surface of the ring. He checked the price tag that was looped about the bottom of the band. It hadn’t changed since the last time he’d been in the store. Tara saw him checking the tag.

“Oh, I should mention, we’re running a sale right now.”

“Really?” Clark asked, though he’d briefly glanced at a sale sign when he’d walked in.

Tara nodded. “Engagement rings are twenty-five percent off right now. Actually, that’s a Logan Collection piece, right?”

Clark checked the price tag again. “Looks like it,” he said, seeing the shorthand description written there.

“You picked a good one. We’re offering an additional five percent off those.”

“Any particular reason why?” Clark asked, now slightly suspicious.

Tara shrugged. “They aren’t big sellers. Mr. Mazik wants to move some of the inventory so he can get other designers showcased here.”

“How come they don’t sell well?” Clark asked, curious.

“The Logan Collection is pretty small and relatively unknown. A lot of the people coming in here want bigger, more well known brand names. They pay more for it, that’s true, but it doesn’t deter most of them.”

Clark could understand that to a certain extent. He’d interviewed people of every economic class and standing. One thing that remained a near constant was the proud and unashamed name dropping done by most of the super-wealthy. And yet, he could still never understand paying more for something that was

basically the same thing as a less expensive version.

He did the math quickly in his head as he handed the woman back the ring. “I’ll take it.”

Tara smiled broadly. “Excellent choice, sir! Is there anything else I can help you with before I ring this up for you?”

“No, just that. Looks like just the right size too,” Clark said. He followed as she went to the register.

“So, do you have a whole plan on how you’ll be asking your lucky lady to marry you?” she asked, making small talk as she punched the numbers into the computer, and taking the discount off.

“Not yet,” Clark said with a shake of his head. He didn’t want to get into the fact that he wasn’t even sure if this ring would be sitting in his sock drawer for months or years. “I just wanted to make sure that I got the perfect ring before someone else could snatch it up.”

“Well, it’s a great choice,” Tara said as Clark handed her his credit card. “I know that I would love a ring like it.”

“Thanks,” he said, watching as she swiped his card, then tore the receipt off the paper roll so that he could sign it.

He signed his name, thankful that the ring was now safely in his possession. It put his mind at ease, knowing that he hadn’t missed his window of opportunity to get Lois the perfect engagement ring. He only hoped that she would love it as much as he did, when the time came to give it to her.

“Would you like a bag?” Tara asked, as he handed her back the receipt he’d signed and the pen he’d used.

“No, thanks,” Clark said, smiling.

“Good luck to you,” Tara said. She handed him the ring box, which he pocketed, along with the receipt. “And thank you for shopping at Mazik’s. Have a great day.”

“You too,” Clark said as he headed for the door.

Weeks passed, flying by with Superman’s speed. Lois’ midsection continued to grow as the child within put on weight and inches. The ring Clark had purchased remained hidden in his apartment, stashed away in a safe in the bottom of his closet. And the court date had inexorably drawn nearer, leaving them both on edge and in a constant state of dread as they met with Constance Hunter, their lawyer, to go over what would happen and their fight against the paternity test that Lex Luthor was demanding. Clark often reflected that this should have been the happiest time of their lives — picking out names, thinking about baby furniture, wondering who the baby would be as his or her personality would become apparent — but it was overshadowed by Luthor’s reach and the uncertainty of how the DNA test might change things.

“Are you ready for tomorrow?” Clark asked Lois, the night before they were due in court.

Lois sighed nosily. “No. Are you?”

He sighed in turn. “No.”

“Can I admit that I’m scared?” Lois asked.

Clark pulled her a little tighter, enjoying the solid feel of her head on his chest as they lay together in his bed. “You’re allowed,” he said, trying to make light of things. “The truth is, I’m worried too. Let’s face it, we know that it’s almost certain that Luthor is the biological father. And we know he can’t possibly be interested in having a say in this child’s life. So, I question the motive. Does he hope this kid isn’t his, and he wants to be cleared? Does he hope it’s his so he can deny me the legal right to adopt the baby as my own? Is he just doing this to torment us for exposing him for the criminal that he is?”

“And what happens if this child *is* really yours and the blood work shows it as something more than human?” Lois added in a soft voice.

Clark nodded out of habit. The thought had crossed his mind more than once, wishful thinking as it was.

“I’m sorry this is happening,” she said after a moment.

“Hey, this is *not* your fault, Lois. It’s just...one of those little parenting details to work out before the baby comes,” he joked. Then, turning more serious, “If getting through this means we can finally put Luthor behind us, I’ll gladly endure whatever happens tomorrow. I just want to focus on you and the baby.”

“Speaking of which,” Lois said, taking his hand and pressing it to her stomach, “our little one must be throwing a party in there.”

“Whoa!” Clark exclaimed as a particularly hard kick thumped into his palm. His hand jerked back a centimeter in a surprised reflex. “I felt that!” he cried out excitedly. “I actually felt that!”

Lois smiled at him, her face almost glowing in pride and happiness. “Really?”

“Yeah. That was incredible.” His grin spread from ear to ear. “And again!” he said as another kick glanced his outspread fingertips.

“That’s the first time for you,” Lois said. Before that night, despite how hard Clark wanted to, he hadn’t been able to feel the baby’s movements. “He’s strong, like his daddy.”

“Like her mommy,” Clark countered playfully.

“Mmm,” Lois mused. She sighed contentedly. “This is nice,” she murmured after a while.

“I agree. In fact, I could stay like this forever,” Clark said. He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep, relaxed breath, as if he could inhale the peaceful essence of the moment.

“Me too.”

“I love you, Lois.”

Lois turned a little and kissed him on the lips with the lightest touch, like butterfly wings against his sensitive flesh. “And I love you.”

“You know that this love...it’s the kind that lasts forever,” Clark said, the words spilling out of his mouth before he knew it.

Lois nodded. “I know. These past several months...I’ve come to learn so much about you. I know you’d never say anything you didn’t completely mean. Not intentionally. I think it took me a while to really get used to that. I’ve been so used to people lying to me all my life — people I’ve interviewed, boyfriends who’ve only wanted my stories and a good time out of me, even my parents to some degree. But, ever since I’ve known you, you’ve always been honest with me, even when you were hiding the truth about Superman.”

“It killed me inside to keep that from you.”

“I know that too. It’s funny. I love you even more because of it.”

“You do?”

“I do. Forever.”

A sudden decision came to Clark’s mind. “Close your eyes,” he instructed her gently. “Please.”

“Why?” she asked, her curiosity piqued.

“Just...trust me and do it,” he replied with a mischievous grin.

“Okay,” she relented, closing her eyes. “You know I hate surprises though, right?”

“No peeking,” Clark said, ignoring her last statement.

He could imagine her rolling her eyes beneath her lids. But he was already on the move, streaking out of the bedroom. In seconds, he’d done what he needed to do and was back at her side. He gently lifted her in his arms, asking her once more to keep her eyes shut until he gave her the word to open them. He took her as far as the terrace, the late September night still holding more than a note of warmth within it. He brought her over to the wall and sat her down.

“Open your eyes,” he told her in a soft voice that held all of his love for her.

Candles sparkled in the night, scattered around the terrace —

some on the wall, others on the ground, and still others on the small table he kept there. As for Clark, he was down on one knee before her, the ring box open in his palm. He smiled at her as she gaped, looking around and processing what she was seeing.

“Lois, you make me the happiest I’ve ever been in my life. Happier than I ever dared to believe I could be. You’re my heart and soul, my reason for being. If there’s one thing that I’ve learned in the past seven months or so of being with you as your boyfriend, it’s that I cannot live without you.”

“Clark, I...”

“I’m already the luckiest guy in the world to have you, Lois. Please, say you’ll marry me.”

“I...I...” Lois stammered. She cleared her throat. “I will. I love you, Clark. I can’t imagine going through life without you as my husband.”

Clark pushed himself up enough to kiss Lois. She threw her arms about his neck, hugging him with an iron grip that only made his heart swell with even greater happiness. After a minute, the two parted. Clark sat next to her on the wall and with hands shaking from his excitement, he took the ring out of the box and slipped it easily over her delicate finger. Lois looked down at the ring with what seemed to be a mix of love and admiration.

“It’s beautiful,” she said. She brought her hand to her chest and covered it with her free hand, as though she was trying to hug the stones on her finger. “I love it. But when...?”

“I’ve had it a while. I was just waiting for the right moment, when I knew for sure that you would appreciate the proposal. Lois, the truth is, I would have asked you to marry me the day I met you, if it had been appropriate. Something about us together always just clicked for me. I just...when you found out that you were pregnant, I didn’t want it to seem like I was asking you just because a baby is coming. I wanted you to know that my feelings for you have nothing to do with our baby. So, I waited, until I was sure that you would understand.”

“I do understand,” she replied in a voice that seemed to be bursting with love for him. “And I appreciate that you did so.” She looked down again at the ring. “It really is gorgeous.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it? I love it. I love the sapphires too. It reminds me of just how ‘super’ my fiancé really is.”

Clark chuckled. He hadn’t thought of that when he’d fallen in love with the ring. “Does it fit well? I can get it resized if need be.”

“It’s a perfect fit,” Lois said, patting his knee affectionately. “How’d you know my size?”

“I didn’t,” he admitted. “I just sort of eye-balled it and thought it looked like it might fit you.”

“Well, you did a great job.”

Clark smiled, then glanced around helplessly at his terrace. He gestured. “I wish I would have done more for this,” he admitted. “I didn’t really think it through. It just sort of... happened...in the moment. I always thought I would take you to some romantic spot — a walk on the beach in Greece at sunset or at a cafe overlooking the Eiffel Tower or at the base of Mount Fuji or...I don’t know. Something more than this.” He gestured again.

Lois kissed his cheek while cupping the other with her hand. She gently forced him to look at her. “Clark, *this* was perfect. Do you know why?”

“Why?” he asked, knowing she would tell him anyway.

“Because it was just so...you. So...comfortable and low-key and heartfelt. It was all the things I love about you.” She kissed his cheek again for good measure. “I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.”

“Even if you’d had an opportunity to *not* be in your pajamas?” he couldn’t help but to tease.

“And miss out on that extra bit of comfort? Especially with

this huge belly?” Lois scoffed. “I think not.”

Clark took a moment to tenderly caress her stomach. “Your belly isn’t huge,” he said. “It’s beautiful because it is housing our child.”

“Mmm,” Lois said in what sounded like agreement.

“It’s still early,” Clark said after silence reigned for several long minutes. “Did you want to call anyone and tell them the good news?”

Lois shook her head, her dark tresses bouncing with the movement. “No way. I’d like for it to just be you and me sharing the news together for a while. Err...well, you can let your folks in on the secret. They aren’t insane like my family.”

“Your family isn’t insane, Lois. A little...intense, maybe.”

“Are you serious, Clark? I’ll tell you exactly what’s going to happen. Mom will want to know if we’re going to get married before the baby comes, because how else is she going to save face before her friends? Or she’ll rant and rave about how a wedding is a waste of time and money because look at how my father cheated on her and left her as a single mother raising two kids. Or she’ll take over the wedding planning and...”

“Lois,” Clark said, cutting off her tangent before it could gather any more speed. “It’s okay. You can tell your family whenever you want. And you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to for the wedding. If *you* want us to get married before the baby comes, I’m more than okay with that. And if you prefer to wait, I’m okay with that too. I want *you* to be comfortable. Not your mom, not your dad, not even Lucy, as much as I like her.”

“So...you wouldn’t mind, waiting?”

“No,” he said, the truth making his voice soft. “I’ll wait until you’re ready, no matter how long that takes.”

“It’s not that I’m not ready to marry you,” Lois said, fidgeting with the ring on her finger. “It’s just...we only have a few months until the baby is born. It’s overwhelming enough, the prospect of parenthood looming so close. I want us to be able to really focus on our wedding, that’s all.”

“I agree,” Clark said. “Lois, I’ve waited my entire life to meet you, to be able to share everything with you. I can wait a little longer before saying my vows. I’m not going anywhere, even if you decide that you don’t want to get married until our child is in high school. I *hope* that’s not the case,” he teased, “but if it was, I would be right beside you, counting down the days.”

“It *definitely* won’t be that long,” Lois said with a grin. “But I *do* want to wait until after the baby comes and those first few months are over. From what people have been telling me, we may never sleep again.”

Clark sat holding Lois’ hand in the small, nearly unpopulated court room. She nervously squeezed his hand from time to time, seeking reassurance. He squeezed back, hoping to impart some comfort, though his own stomach was roiling in his own nervousness. He could taste the tang of bile in the back of his throat.

“Don’t worry,” Constance Hunter, their lawyer, told them.

“It’s kind of hard not to,” Lois retorted, using her free hand to protectively embrace her stomach.

Clark reached over with his own free hand, putting it atop Lois’. “No matter what happens,” he whispered to her, “just remember that Luthor is in jail and can never lay his hands on our child. Okay?”

Lois nodded, but Clark could see that she wasn’t convinced. “Sure,” she said, half-heartedly.

Clark wasn’t sure what else to say to her. The truth was, he was just as scared as she was. He drummed his fingers on the table before him, aimlessly tapping out a tune. A few minutes later, Lex Luthor was escorted into the courtroom, his orange inmate clothing having been swapped out for one of the specially tailored Italian suits that seemed to be eternally associated with

him, even though he'd fallen from the height of his power and influence. Two burly policemen walked to either side of him, and a third trailed behind. Luthor sat at a second dark cherry table and began to whisper to his lawyer, Sheldon Bender, but not before tossing a meaningful glance at Lois and Clark, one which Clark thought held a hint of malice and more than a pinch of gloating.

Lois must have seen the look as well. She ever so slightly shuddered, as though Luthor's very presence in the room was making her skin crawl. The movement was slight though, and Clark thought that it was likely that only he had seen it, and only because of his enhanced visual abilities. He squeezed her hand again to let her know that he was there for her.

Not more than two minutes later, the judge entered from a door off to the side of the witness stand. He seated himself with a strained huff of air, caused from the stress of moving his more than ponderous body the thirty or so feet he'd walked. He introduced himself as Judge Bennett. Clark knew him and was far from pleased. He'd covered a number of cases that Matthew Bennett had presided over and thought of the man as very likely sexist and always more inclined to be on the side of the rich. Things definitely didn't bode well for them. He could see by the faces of Constance and Lois that they thought so too.

"We're here today at the request of Mr. Luthor, is that correct?" Judge Bennett asked, barely looking up from the papers before him.

"That's correct," Sheldon Bender said, nodding. "My client is requesting a DNA test for the child that Miss Lane is carrying. If the child is indeed his, my client is willing to put two million dollars in a trust fund for the child to mature on the child's eighteenth birthday. If the child is *not* the biological offspring of my client, he wishes to have it on record so that none may seek child support from him."

"What makes you think I *want* that two million?" Lois asked, standing with her fists clenched. Clark gently took her wrist to make her sit again.

"I'll not have it said that I ever failed to provide for a child of mine," Luthor replied coolly.

"So, that's what this is all about?" Clark asked, grinding his teeth. "Saving your already destroyed reputation?"

Luthor's smug face was all the answer Clark needed.

"Do you agree to this?" the judge asked in Lois and Constance's general direction.

"No," Constance said with conviction. "My clients neither want nor need Mr. Luthor's money. They are willing to sign an agreement stating that they will never seek any sort of support — monetary or otherwise."

"How do we even know you have the money you're promising anyway?" Lois asked defiantly.

Bender stood and handed Constance a paper before handing one to the judge. Clark craned his neck to peer over at the paper to see what it said. It appeared that all sensitive information had been blacked out before the paper had been photocopied, but the basic gist of it was intact nonetheless. It was a bank account in Luthor's name — obviously a legitimate account from his legitimate business dealings — worth in excess of a hundred million dollars.

"Satisfied?" Luthor asked, not bothering to hide the delight in his eyes at shutting down their argument. "You see, Lois, the empire that I built with my own two hands still endures, despite what you and Mr. Kent did to try and destroy me." He put his hands up before him and wiggled his fingers at the mention of his own hands.

The judge grunted. Clark couldn't tell if it was in agreement or in acknowledgement, or even if it was just a random noise that meant nothing at all. He forced himself not to float in his anxiety as he waited to see what the judge would say.

"Everything looks legitimate," he said after a lengthy silence,

rubbing his multiple chins as he looked the paper over again.

"I'm inclined to grant Mr. Luthor's request. A man should know if he's fathered a child, and should be given an opportunity to provide for that child. I'm ordering DNA test to be performed. When the results are in, we'll meet back here to sign any paperwork to either prove that the money was exchanged or that Miss Lane has terminated her right to pursue monetary compensation for the child. I expect the tests to be performed by the time the child is born."

"*No!*" Lois blurted out, her voice hardened but still showing the evidence of her fear. "I am *not* putting my child at risk by having an amniocentesis done."

"Miss Lane, I assure you that the risks are minimal," the judge said, taking his glasses off to wipe away a smudge.

"I don't care," Lois said, slapping the top of the table as she pushed herself to her feet. "This is *my* child and I *refuse* to put him or her at risk. You want to force a paternity test on me, fine. But it'll be done *after* the baby is born."

Clark didn't bother to hide the impressed smile on his face. Leave it to Lois to argue with a judge. He just hoped that Judge Bennett was as impressed with her protective mother's instincts.

For a long moment, the judge appeared to appraise her, no emotion showing at all on his face. Then, finally, he shrugged. "Fine," he said in a flat, neutral tone. "You have until the baby turns one month old to have the test performed."

"One last thing," Constance said. "If it is proven that Mr. Luthor is, in fact, the father, my client wishes to have his paternal rights terminated, in the best interest of a child. Mr. Kent here is more than willing to legally adopt the child as his own, whereas Mr. Luthor is serving a jail sentence for the rest of his life without the possibility of parole, for crimes too heinous to rehash."

Luthor bent and whispered something into Bender's ear, that Clark didn't quite catch. He was too busy trying to read the judge's expression to remember to tune in with his super hearing.

"My client declines that offer," Bender said after a minute.

Of course he would decline, Clark thought. *He hates me. He'll do anything to prevent me from having whatever he thinks will make me happy.*

"Termination of legal rights it is," the judge said, much to Clark's shock.

"You can't order that!" Luthor objected with a roar. "Don't you know who I am?"

Judge Bennett gave him a cold, hard look. "I do, Mr. Luthor. I also know that you are buying this woman off, if this child is yours. Mr. Kent? Should the blood test prove that Mr. Luthor is indeed the father, we can fill out the paperwork for the legal adoption after the test results are read, if you so choose."

"I do," Clark said with confidence. He glanced at Lois.

"Neither of us want any of Luthor's blood money. All we want is him out of our lives, for good."

"So be it. We'll discuss the details once the DNA results are in. I will have my secretary get in contact with you about when you should return, after the results come in. Dismissed." The judge pushed his generously proportioned body from his seat and waddled his way back across the room to his private chambers.

Lois and Clark watched as Luthor was escorted away by the police officers who'd brought him in. Once he was out of the room, Lois' shoulders slumped. She buried her face in her hands. Clark could smell the salty tang of her tears. Gently, he enveloped her in his arms and hugged her.

He wanted to tell her that everything would be okay, but he knew that such empty platitudes would only make her feel worse.

"I'm sorry, honey," he murmured into her hair before planting a kiss there. "I really am."

"I'm sorry too," Lois said, her words hitching in her throat.

"All I wanted was an uneventful pregnancy. Just you, me, and our baby. And now...now..."

“Shh,” Clark said, attempting to soothe her. “It’s okay. It’s not ideal, I’ll admit to that. But Luthor *cannot* lay a hand on our baby. His rights are going to be terminated when the blood results come back. If he’s the father,” he added, more for Constance’s benefit than anything else. She didn’t know that Clark already knew that he could never father a child of his own.

“I know,” Lois sighed, sagging against him. “It just...enrages me that we even have to do this. I don’t want anything to do with Luthor or his blood-money or anything. Why can’t he just leave us alone?”

“Because he’s Luthor,” Clark replied. “Because we’re the ones whose work got him put behind bars where he belongs.”

Lois nodded. “Makes sense,” she conceded.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here. Did you want me to call Perry and tell him that we’re not up for coming in today?”

Lois seemed to think about it for a minute. “No,” she said at last. “I need to keep busy.”

“Okay then. To the Planet it is.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to do more,” Constance said as she placed her papers back in her briefcase. “But the truth is, I know this judge. I’ve never seen him *not* mandate a paternity test.”

“We understand,” Lois said, composing herself. “And we appreciate the fact that you tried.”

“Thank you,” Clark said, extending a hand to the lawyer, which she shook.

“Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in,” Cat Grant said as Lois and Clark made their way through the bullpen. She sauntered over to Lois’ desk to meet them, leaning against the side and filing her nails with a hot pink emery board, the back of which was bejeweled with darker and lighter pink crystals.

Lois observed for a moment while Cat sharpened her claws. “Chasing mice again?” she retorted.

“Men, Lois. Men. Or have you forgotten the thrill of the hunt? Oh, wait, that’s right. You never knew it with how sad your life was.” She pointed at Lois with the nail file as she spoke. “Poor Clark, feeling obligated being with you, now that you’re pregnant.”

“I’m not *obligated* to do anything,” Clark wearily defended. He felt like it was nearly a lost cause, arguing with Cat. “I love her.”

“That’s because you don’t know what else is out there. All the other flavors of the world,” Cat said, winking at him. “Why stick with chocolate ice cream when there are so many other, richer, desserts out there?”

“Because I happen to think that chocolate ice cream is the *perfect* dessert,” Clark said.

“Wait a second,” Cat said, catching sight of Lois’ ring. She grabbed Lois’ hand for a better look. “What is this?”

“Some of us don’t want to span the world looking for other flavors when we’re in love with the one we already have,” Lois said, grinning wolfishly.

“So you two...”

“Are engaged,” Clark finished for Cat.

“It took getting knocked up for a guy to want to marry you?” Cat needed Lois.

“Jealous much?” Lois asked, arching an eyebrow, overriding the defense Clark was trying to make.

“Jealous?” Cat asked, as if the word held no known meaning.

“Well, it’s just that you’re older than me. I’ve never seen you with a steady boyfriend. Clark here rejected your advances how many times in favor of being with me? Yeah, jealous.” Lois crossed her arms, a smug look on her face, knowing she’d scored a point in the bizarre game between them that Clark still didn’t fully understand, and probably never would, if he was any judge.

Cat’s mouth flapped open for a moment. Clearly she hadn’t been expecting Lois’ retort. Clark thought he saw a small, remote,

but very real flash of hurt in Cat’s eyes. It was there and gone within seconds, but it did make him feel badly. Lois must have seen the same thing.

“Cat, I...” she began.

Cat put her hand up before her face to silence Lois. “No. Congratulations. You’ve won.”

“Cat, I didn’t *win* anything,” Lois protested. “Clark and I just...fit, that’s all. I’m sure, someday, you’ll find someone.”

“Oh, I know I will. In fact, I’m going out with Arthur Chow tonight.”

“Going...out?” Clark asked. “Like a date?”

Cat nodded in a satisfied manner.

“How’d you manage that?” Lois asked, crossing her arms incredulously.

“Oh, Arthur and I belong to the same fund raising committee for the downtown modern art museum.”

“You?” Lois asked, her voice clearly showing Cat her disbelief in such a thing. “But that place is so...so...cultured,” she ended weakly.

“I *do* have interests outside of the gossip circuit,” Cat snorted.

“We know that, Cat,” Clark said, trying to smooth things between the two women. “It’s just...well, Arthur Chow is known to be pretty straight-laced and conservative. And you’re...uh...free-spirited.”

Cat snorted and filed a pinky nail. “Oh, I can play the part Arthur wants to see.”

“CK? Lois?” Jimmy said, interrupting. “The Chief’s asking for you. Said he wanted to talk to you about some meeting today?” he informed them, clearly confused.

“Right,” Lois covered smoothly. “Our interview. Come on, Clark.”

She took Clark by the hand and led him away toward Perry’s office before he could utter a word.

Clark tossed and turned in his bed, caught in the gray fog between sleep and waking. His limbs were heavy and it felt almost like he was paralyzed in that in-between state of being. He thought he might have grunted as he forced himself to finally break free of the nightmare bonds that held him to his dreams. When he finally woke, his eyes snapped open and his heart was racing. For several minutes, he lay there in his bed, unmoving, as he fought to regain his normal heart rate. When he finally felt as close to normal as he could, he sat up, tossed the blankets aside, and stood. He didn’t bother grabbing a shirt as he strode out of the room and onto his terrace. Once out in the cooling night air, he finally felt as if the horrors of his dreams were beginning to dissipate.

It had been a week ago, when the judge had demanded that a paternity test be conducted on Lois’ unborn child. An entire week where the dread of those results had sat like a stone in Clark’s stomach. Seven whole days since his guts had been twisted into tight knots. One hundred and sixty-eight hours where old doubts that Clark had thought he’d squashed months ago had resurfaced like oozing sores in his mind.

Clark sighed as he looked out over the limited view his terrace afforded him, remnants of his nightmare still wrapped around him like invisible chains. He leaned against the sturdy brick of his apartment and tried to focus on the nightmare which had torn his sleep asunder. He’d been back at the hostage situation he’d attended to much earlier in the night. But this time, in his dream, he’d made every wrong decision and all those innocent people had died. The thought made him shudder in the night and he instinctively wrapped his arms around his bare chest. It was rare that he had such dreams now. Back when he’d first conjured up the idea of Superman and had made a few, cautious “test” rescues, as he’d thought of them at the time, the

nightmares had been much more frequent. As he'd learned to shed the Superman persona along with the suit, he'd found that his sleep was usually deep and restful, and that the nightmares which had once plagued him had become almost a thing of the past.

Now, though, it appeared that the stress of the pending paternity test and the answers it would definitively yield had invaded his mind deeply enough to disturb his precious sleep. Glancing back through the window into his bedroom, he saw that it was still not yet midnight. He went back inside, pulled on his suit and some spare civilian clothing, then went back out. Spinning into the Superman uniform that had defined his alien origins for so long now, he flew into the blackened and overcast sky. He made a quick patrol over the city, but found it to be blissfully quiet, as far as nights in Metropolis got.

After a quick stop at his favorite twenty-four hour coffee shop for a plain cake donut, he took to the sky once again, this time angling for Smallville. He landed on his parents' porch with no more than the lightest whisper of sound. They were still awake, he could see, from the flicking light of the television illuminating the living room. He knocked on the door.

"Mom? Dad? It's me," he called out into the otherwise still and quiet night.

"Clark?" his father asked with a wrinkle of concern in his brow as he answered the door. "Is everything okay, son?"

"Everything's fine," Clark assured his father as he embraced him in a quick hug. He followed Jonathan into the living room and hugged his mother. "I know it's late and you guys probably want to go to bed soon," he added, "but, I was hoping I could talk to you guys for a bit."

"Honey, what's wrong?" Martha asked.

"I just...I needed to ask you both something. I'm just not sure how to go about asking," he said, grasping for words now that he was actually home with his parents.

"Honey, you know you can talk to us about anything,"

Martha assured him, sipping from her cup of tea and setting aside the book she'd apparently be reading before he'd arrived. She hit the power button on the remote to turn the television off.

"Please...don't take this the wrong way," Clark pleaded. "But when you guys were looking into adoption...before you found me...did you ever...have doubts?"

"Doubts?" Martha asked. "What kind of doubts?"

"Well...things like...if you could love a child that wasn't your own," Clark said, resting his forearm against the mantle of the fireplace as he came to stand before it.

"Clark? Are you having doubts about Lois' child?" Jonathan asked.

Clark sighed, his body slumping in frustration. "Sometimes," he admitted. "I mean, I've always wanted to be a father. But, sometimes I wonder...am I going to be able to love this child, if he or she turns out to be Luthor's? And, let's face it, that's almost certainly the case. I trust Dr. Klein when he says that my chances of fathering a child with an Earth woman are slim to none. Am I going to be able to set aside my hatred of Luthor for the sake of this baby?"

"Son, you don't know for sure that this baby isn't yours," Jonathan reminded him.

"I know," Clark conceded after the briefest of hesitations.

"But, again, the chance of this baby being mine is...it's underwhelming, to say the least."

"And remember," Martha put in. "Whatever the sins of the father might be, this baby is innocent."

"I know that too. But...I'm afraid. Afraid that when I find out for sure that he or she is Luthor's child, that I'll never be able to look at him or her without shuddering with the knowledge of the crime that led to his or her conception."

Clark sat heavily in an armchair. He buried his face in his

hands for several long moments. After a time, he looked up again.

"Most of the time, I love that baby," he said at length. "In fact, the love I already have for that baby is pretty much all-encompassing. But then, out of the blue, these doubts will creep up in my mind. I'm...I'm ashamed of them. They've been especially frequent ever since Lois was mandated to have the child's paternity established. I can hardly eat. I can barely sleep without nightmares cropping up."

"Have you talked to Lois about these doubts?" Jonathan wanted to know.

Clark shook his head. "No. She's got enough to deal with. I don't want to scare her by making her think that I'm going to abandon her and the baby. Because I'm not. I'm completely committed to her. And I *will* be there for this child, no matter what. I just...wonder about how much of an emotional bond I'll be able to forge with this child when I know for sure that he or she isn't mine. I mean, for the time being, I can at least pretend that I have a chance of being related to this child by blood. So...did you guys ever have that fear?"

"I was more afraid that we'd never have a child at all," Martha said, shaking her head. "I don't think I really thought much passed that. I was afraid of getting rejected and even more afraid of being accepted as potential adoptive parents but then having no one choose us to raise their child."

"I did," Jonathan admitted, sounding somewhat sheepish, his head hanging slightly.

"Jonathan! You never said a word to me!" Martha replied, shocked.

"I couldn't," Jonathan said simply, his cheeks red. "I didn't want to worry you. And then we got denied, so it seemed pointless to bring it up. What good would it have served at that point?"

"We could have worked through those fears together," Martha argued.

Jonathan shrugged, the movement somehow making him look smaller, in Clark's eyes. "You were going through enough as it was. I didn't want to burden you with my issues, especially when I wasn't even sure how to give the right words to what I was feeling."

"Were you afraid of becoming a father?" Clark wanted to know. He knew that wasn't the case for him, personally. In fact, he'd been looking forward to being a father for much of his life.

"Yes and no," Jonathan replied, looking into the distance, lost in his own memories. Clark wondered what ghosts of the past were floating before his eyes. "I wanted to be a father. I knew, somehow, that there would be no joy in my life equal to what a joy it would be to have a son or daughter to love. I'd hoped, like your mother, to fill this house with the laughter and love of children — two or three was what we'd initially hoped for."

Jonathan sighed over the dream that had been lost, of having a larger family. "And then we found out that it would never be. For a while, I was angry. Angry at the world, at God, but mostly at myself, knowing that there was nothing I could do to make your mother's dream come true — of making my own dream come true. When we finally began to seriously consider adoption, yes, I admit I was apprehensive about everything — the invasive questions and home inspections, the worry that I might not bond with a child that wasn't mine, the fear that I would make a strong bond with the child only to have the mother decide that she wanted her baby back."

"Well, I doubt Lois will take the baby from me," Clark teased weakly.

Jonathan chuckled. "Not likely. I've seen the way she looks at you, son. I've rarely seen love as deep and pure as what the two of you share."

"I'm a lucky man," Clark agreed, nodding.

"And we're thrilled for you," Martha put in.

“So...how did you deal with it?” Clark asked, feeling slightly comforted by his father’s admission, and wanting to find some way to deal with his own anxieties.

“What do you mean?” Jonathan asked, unsure of what Clark was getting at.

“I mean...what changed? When did it change for you? How did you know that you *could* truly love a child that wasn’t your own?”

“I saw you,” Jonathan answered with a fond smile.

“That’s it?” It seemed that his father’s answer was too simple.

“That’s it,” he confirmed with a nod. “As soon as I saw your little face peeking out from that blanket your birth parents had wrapped you in, my fears and doubts vanished. You weren’t someone else’s child. You were *my* son.”

Clark gave his father a wobbly smile, stood, and crossed back over to the fireplace. It was reassuring to hear that he wasn’t the only man in the world who’d experienced doubts over becoming a father to a child he hadn’t physically sired. On the other hand, Jonathan and Martha hadn’t been faced with the choice of raising a child who was the product of a violent crime. Still, it helped ease his mind just enough to uncoil some of the shame he’d been feeling over having such doubts in the first place.

“Thanks,” was all he could say.

Jonathan nodded. “That’s what we’re here for, son.”

“Was there anything else you wanted to talk to us about?” Martha asked.

Clark shook his head. “Not really. I guess I just wanted to know that I’m not the only one out there who has had those irritating little doubts in the middle of the night, the kind that keep you awake for hours — and, in my case, drive me out of bed to fly around the city on patrol, in hopes of clearing my head a little.”

“And do you feel better now?” Martha asked, her voice conveying only curiosity and concern.

“Actually, yeah, I think so,” Clark said. Then, after a moment of pondering the pictures on the mantle which showed him at various stages of his own childhood, a thought struck him. “Hey, can I just run upstairs for a second?” he asked.

“Of course. But what for?” Martha asked.

“I just want to grab something from my old room,” he said, shrugging, even as he pushed himself away from the fireplace. “Back in a minute.”

He mounted the stairs two at a time in his haste. When he stepped into the room which had once been his bedroom and his haven away from the world, he stopped and took a deep breath, savoring the once-familiar smells. The oaken chest of drawers which had once housed his clothing. The cedar toy box in the corner, which he clearly remembered his father building. Truth be told, it was probably one of the very first memories Clark had, as he’d watched his father measuring, cutting, and hammering the wood from the safety of Martha’s lap at the tender age of two and a half. The dusty smell of the old childhood books on the tall bookshelf in the corner of the room.

It brought further peace to his soul.

After half a minute, he stepped deeper into the room, his eyes searching. He x-rayed the toy box first, but didn’t see what he was after. He swept his eyes to the bookshelf and frowned. It wasn’t there either, nor was it atop his chest of drawers. He knelt down, thinking of one possible, final place. He peeked beneath the bed and found the storage bin sitting there. He pulled the dark green plastic box out, popped open the lid, and immediately found what he sought. He grinned as he gently extracted the item from amid the tin robots and hard plastic dinosaurs of his youth, then he pushed the box back beneath the bed.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Jonathan asked, meeting him at the base of the steps.

“I did,” Clark said as he jogged down the steps. He showed

his father his prize.

“Ah,” Jonathan said with a tender smile. “Are you going to give that to Lois?”

“Not right away,” he replied. “Probably closer to the delivery date.”

“What did you...? Oh, my, I haven’t seen that in years,” Martha said as Clark strode back into the living room.

“Me too,” Clark said. “But something about dad’s story made me think of this. Anyway, thanks for putting my mind at ease a little bit. Mom? Did you want me to come fly you out for Lois’ shower in a couple of weeks?”

“No, dear. Your father and I will fly out the regular way,” Martha said, getting up from the couch and hugging her son.

“You know that you don’t have to do that,” Clark told her. “I’m happy to fly you guys out, whenever you want.”

“We know and we appreciate the offer,” Jonathan said. “But it’s good for us to have a paper trail of where we’ve been. Besides, you’ll probably be busy enough without needing to worry about us too.”

“It’s no problem,” Clark insisted.

“We know. But we’re fine, really.”

“Okay,” Clark said in mock defeat, throwing his hands before his face in surrender. “You win. Anyway, I should get going. I know you guys get up early with the harvest and everything. I’d come out for the day and help if I could, but I’m trying to save up as much time at work as I can before the baby arrives.”

“We understand,” Martha said sincerely. “Go on. Go home and get some rest. You look tired.”

Clark couldn’t argue with that. He *was* awfully tired from a week of nearly sleepless nights and fractured rest when he *did* manage to nod off.

“Okay,” he said. “Night, Mom. Night, Dad. And thanks. I didn’t realize just how badly I needed to talk things out until just now when I finally did. It really helped.”

“Good night, honey,” Martha said, pecking his cheek briefly. “Tell Lois we said hi, okay?”

“Will do,” he promised.

As he exited the house and took to the sky, he heard his father say “Did we raise a good boy or what?” That made him smile to himself. He’d always been grateful for having found parents to love him unconditionally. But he’d also always been very, very aware of just how thankful his parents were that they had been the ones to stumble upon the smoking remains of a crashed spacecraft, one which held the most precious cargo in the world — a tiny child they had been able to love and call their own.

Clark made a beeline for Metropolis, racing at nearly top speed, eager now to crawl back into his bed. He did one more swift patrol, but found nothing so dire that it needed his attention. It was the middle of the week and most people were abed at that hour, with mostly just stray dogs and cats prowling around, as well as the occasional rat, especially wherever a dumpster appeared. He heard the squealing of a dying rodent as a cat pounced and secured its meal.

He circled around Lois’ building three times, ensuring that there were no imminent threats, but found only Cedric out on the stoop, smoking a cigar in the cold night’s air. Lois’ windows were dark and lifeless — not even the barest hint of the television or computer’s glow could be seen. He focused in with his hearing and found her steady heartbeat. It was even and almost calm, the way it always sounded when she was asleep. He smiled fondly, wishing he could go to her. Instead, he directed his flight path back home.

As soon as he was safely and snuggly back in his apartment, he shed the Superman persona and slipped back into the soft sleeping pants he’d been in earlier. He took his prize from Smallville and placed it in the black duffel bag he’d only just recently prepared for the hospital, once it came time for Lois to

have her baby. Metropolis General allowed fathers to sleep right in the room with the mothers and their babies, a thing unheard of in any other hospital in the state of New Troy. Clark loved the idea — he didn't want to miss a second of his baby's life, once he or she made their arrival.

Finally, exhausted, he crawled back into his bed. This time, sleep took him to a deep, dreamless, restful place until his alarm woke him in the morning.

Weeks came and went in the blink of an eye. Lois' stomach and the child within grew larger. Clark grew more and more ready to meet his child, and, though the lingering doubts he still harbored never fully dissipated, they shrank measurably. As before, he did not mention those doubts to Lois. He didn't want to scare her, and he was still too ashamed of his fears to admit them aloud to her.

Instead, he focused on the here and now, the things he could fix and change. He relished his work and the satisfaction of bringing criminals to justice — regardless of what suit he wore. He luxuriated in every moment spent with Lois, especially the quiet moments at night, after the stresses of the day had melted away and it was just the two of them, all snuggled up at one or the other's apartment. It didn't matter what they talked about — further debates about baby names, ideas for their future wedding, what movie they should watch. Clark loved every bit of it and remained staggered by the normalcy of it all. There were times where it still felt like half a dream that Lois had agreed to marry him.

October rolled on, unseasonably warm for the city. Lois' birthday came, and Clark did his best to make it the most memorable one she'd ever had. He took her to the museum exhibit he knew she'd been wanting to see, then to her favorite restaurants for lunch and dinner — both local at her request — and even secured her a massage at the premier spa in Metropolis. He hoped that it wouldn't be too much for her, but she claimed her energy level was still pretty high, considering that she had a good two to two and a half months left before the baby would be arriving.

"Are you up for one last birthday adventure?" he asked as Lois finished the last bite of her creme brulee.

"After a meal like that, you might have to roll me wherever it is you want to go," she warned him with a cheeky smile.

Clark chuckled. "Don't worry, we'll drive there."

"Where, exactly, *is* there?" she asked.

Clark grinned. "Not telling."

"Why not?"

"Because," he said, drawing the word out as though explaining to a child, "it's a *surprise*."

"Clark, you *know* how I feel about most surprises," Lois said, arching an eyebrow.

"I know," he said, his hands before him in a gesture of pacification. "But just go with me on this, okay? Trust me."

Lois sighed before agreeing. "Fine. But this had better be a *good* surprise."

"Well, I'm certainly hoping it will be," Clark said, just as the waiter came back with his credit card. He put a down a cash tip in the middle of the table. "Shall we?" he asked Lois.

Lois finished her coffee and nodded. "Right after a ladies' room run."

"Of course," he said, nodding in turn. "I'll wait for you up in front."

"Sounds good."

Lois headed off in the direction of the ladies' room while Clark decided to take the opportunity to use the men's room. It was closer to the front of the restaurant, so he had no problem being done and already waiting for Lois. He took her arm and led her to her Jeep, then blindfolded her.

"Hey! What the...?" she protested immediately.

"No peeking," Clark said, cutting her off, then planted a light kiss on her lips.

Lois huffed in what sounded like feigned annoyance. He knew she could take the blindfold off whenever she wanted, but it seemed like she was going to let him have his little game. He was glad. He'd been working on this surprise for a long time now.

He drove on through the city, the sky above dark and heavy with clouds, while the lights of Metropolis mimicked a bright, sunny day. Clark knew the way by heart. He'd been to his destination several times by foot, by cab, and by air. He knew exactly how long it would take to get where he was going.

It was a short trip, and he tried to keep Lois' mind off the turns and stops of the drive. It was easy enough. All he had to do was use Lois' greatest gift against her. He kept her talking the entire time. Finally, they arrived at their destination. He found a place to park on the street, seamlessly pulling in between an old Ford pickup and a brand new Toyota. He helped Lois out of the car, led her to a certain spot on the sidewalk, and took off her blindfold.

"What do you think?" he asked as the black silky material fell away from her eyes.

"Think?" she asked tentatively. "About what?"

Clark swept his hand before him at the townhouse they were standing in front of. "Of our new home, if you want it."

"Our...new home?"

Clark nodded. "Look, I know it's sudden and everything. Well, for you. I've been looking at places for a while now. This place...it's not in the best shape, at first glance, I'll admit to that. But it's a solid construction, and I've had it checked out, both by a professional and on my own. There's not so much as a speck of mold or old mouse dropping to be seen. The work it needs...it's all cosmetic. I can have this place ready for us to move in to in three days, tops, and that's only because I'm budgeting time for, well, you know." He waved his hand slightly in their secret signal that meant Superman.

"Clark...I..."

"Just...take a look inside with me, please? Before you pass any judgment." He looked at someone coming up behind Lois and waved. "Dirk! Good to see you. Lois, this is Dirk Finch, the realtor for the place. He agreed to come out even though it's late to give us a look inside."

Dirk shook hands with Lois. "Come on, I'll give you the tour. Please, pardon the mess. The former owners were not exactly neat-freaks. When they passed, their children wanted nothing to do with the house. That's actually why it's priced as low as it is. They just want to get rid of it. I think they're in Arizona or something."

Lois looked almost dazed as she took Clark's hand and mounted the steps to the landing as Dirk droned on. Once inside, he switched topics to the particulars of the house — when it was built, how many bedrooms and bathrooms it had, when the roof was last replaced. Clark could tell that Lois was barely hearing the man, based on the way her face fell as they entered into the living room. He didn't blame her for the way her face fell. He'd felt the same way, when he'd initially seen it. He'd seen neater, less damaged shoot-out zones. But, as he'd already told Lois, the damage was only surface deep. The scuff marks in the floor boards could be polished, buffed, or covered over with carpeting. The peeling wallpaper could be torn down and replaced or the walls could be painted. The loose faucet in the kitchen could be tightened up. The broken window in the master bedroom could be replaced. The hideous furniture could be thrown away. He'd already budgeted for new furniture for each room, so the place would have a cohesive look that would truly feel like their own home.

They toured the house, barely speaking, then Clark begged a

few minutes alone to talk things over with Lois. Dirk was happy to do so, perhaps smelling the possibility of a sale and a commission in the dusty, stale air.

“So?” Clark hedged, as Dirk closed the door to the house leaving them alone in the living room. He leaned against the frame of one of the large windows, then decided to sit on it instead. “What do you think?”

“What do I think?” she repeated. “What do I think?”

Clark shrugged. “Well...yeah. Do you like the house?”

“Clark,” Lois said, sounding weary, “I’m not really sure *what* I think. It’s kind of sudden, don’t you think?”

“Not really,” he said with a shake of his head. “I think it makes sense. With us looking at marriage, hopefully in the near future, and a baby, *definitely* in the near future, I think it makes sense to find a bigger place. Someplace where we can set down roots for our family. Someplace where we won’t have to worry about whose apartment the baby will be staying at each night, because he or she will be in his or her own room, or maybe in a bassinet at the foot of our bed. A place where you and I will *always* return to at the end of the day, instead of having sleepovers at each other’s apartments. I mean, as it stands now, we’re practically living together anyway. It makes a lot more sense for us to have only one rent and one set of expenses, like power, heat, water, and groceries.”

“Actually, I agree with you,” Lois said, looking around the living room again. “It *does* make more sense.”

“Plus,” Clark added, taking her hands in her own as she sat down next to him, “I really, really hate being apart from you.”

“I do too,” she admitted. “There was a time where I never thought I would ever want to live with anyone, but being with you has changed all that. Still, this place?” She gestured vaguely. “I can’t imagine how we can afford it, even if Dirk considers it to be low-priced.”

“Ah,” Clark said with a mischievous smile. He took a small, folded piece of paper out of the breast pocket of his jacket and unfolded it. He laid it on the window still between them and smoothed it out so Lois could read it. “I have it all figured out. Here’s our down payment,” he said, tapping the paper with one finger, “leaving this amount over here for repair work and furniture. At the current mortgage rates, we’d be paying this amount here, more or less. Less than our combined rents right now.”

“Okay, but where do we get a down payment like that?” Lois asked, studying the paper.

“It’s all taken care of,” he said.

“How?” she wanted to know.

He shrugged. “Apparently, my parents bought bonds for me ever since they found me. They recently cashed them in and gave me a check for the full amount. They thought that, with the baby coming, we could use it for whatever we needed — even for a house or the wedding. Since I have some money that I’ve been saving myself if I were to ever be married, I thought we could use the money from the bonds on the down payment, the repairs, and furnishing the place.”

“Clark...”

“Come here. I want to show you something,” he said, interrupting her. He took her hand and led her back up the stairs to one of the bedrooms. “I thought this room would be the perfect place for our son or daughter,” he said. He held his hands up like a director framing a shot in a movie. “The crib would go here. The changing table over on that wall, next to the dresser. Over here, we’d put your grandmother’s lamp from your living room and a glider for those middle of the night feedings. What do you think?”

Lois had to blink back tears. “I think it’s perfect,” she said in a whisper as she leaned into Clark, allowing him to wrap his arms around her.

“So...do you think we should get it?”

“I think we’d better, before someone else tries to snatch it away,” Lois said.

Clark smiled and kissed the top of her head. “Excellent! And I didn’t even have to show you the secret closet in the living room to convince you that this place is perfect for us.”

“Secret closet?” Lois asked. Then she shook her head and shrugged. “Well, at least we won’t have to install one ourselves.”

Clark shrugged. “It isn’t as bad as you’d think. Took me an hour to put in the one in my apartment.”

“I’m guessing you, ah, cheated?”

“A little,” he admitted with a blush.

“Clark?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you, for this. I think, once it gets a facelift, this house is going to be perfect for us.”

“I think so too.” He led her back down the stairs to the living room. “It just feels right to me, somehow. I can almost see us setting up the Christmas tree in that corner there,” he said, pointing. “Movie nights at home with our child over here.” He pointed where the TV would go in his mind, then swept his hand over the imaginary couch. “Maybe a family portrait above the mantel here.”

Lois stopped his visions of the future with a kiss. Instantly, his train of thought derailed. Only Lois and her kiss existed.

“What was that for?” he asked in a husky voice when they parted.

“Just because you’re you,” she replied with a smile. “Now, let’s go give Dirk the good news. Besides, the poor guy’s been standing outside for a while, and it looks like it’s going to start pouring at any moment.”

Clark had nearly forgotten the foreboding look to the sky. He’d been too wrapped up in the house that would soon belong to the two of them. “Good point.”

“You realize, of course, this might kill my mother. Moving in with a man without being married to him.” She laughed as she spoke the words.

“Lois, I’m starting to think there is *nothing* that your mother will approve of.” He was only half joking.

Lois sighed. “That might just be the case. Although, she really can’t argue against how good it will be for our baby to have one stable, consistent home. And, she was pretty happy that you and I have decided to get married, though I know it bothers her that I’ve chosen to wait until things settle down after this little boy or girl is born.” She affectionately rubbed the swell of her stomach.

“You should have Lucy move into your apartment once we’re in the house,” Clark said, thinking aloud. “You said she hates her current place and the roommate she’s sharing with.”

Lois smiled brightly. “Yeah, I think she’d love that, actually.”

A rumble of thunder sounded. “Better wrap this up,” Clark said, heading for the door. Dirk was leaning against the light pole outside on the sidewalk. Clark called to him. “Hey, Dirk? Good news...”

In the end, the sellers were in a rush to close on the house. They accepted an offer below what they were asking for, and Lois and Clark were able to secure their mortgage fast enough to close by the beginning of November. True to his word, Clark had the house in pristine condition within three days. He started with the master bedroom, all the while in awe of the fact that he would no longer ever need to spend the night apart from Lois. Next, he did the baby’s nursery, painting the walls in cream tones at Lois’ request, because in her words “Even if we have a girl, a Pepto-Bismol pink room is *not* happening.” He finished the rest of the upper floor before moving to the main floor.

There, he attacked the kitchen first, replacing faucets,

scrubbing tiles, and cleaning away years of caked-on grease that no one had ever appeared to notice or cared enough to clean away. He left the living room for last on that floor. The floors didn't come out quite as he'd hoped, so to hide away all of the ugly scars it bore, he laid down some off-white carpeting that nicely contrasted the wallpaper Lois had picked out for the room. It was more time consuming than he remembered, even with his super speed. He'd only laid carpeting once before with his dad, when his parents had decided to replace the well worn carpeting in their own living room.

The basement, however, took him the longest. Aside from patching several unattractive holes in the walls and giving them a paint job, Clark completely transformed the place, turning it from a dark but dry storage space into a finished, livable family room with plenty of room for his son or daughter to play in one day. He added shelving to some of the walls, ready for all of the inevitable board games and toys. He replaced the inadequate lighting with brighter, more efficient lights which covered the rooms much better. He did find, to his dismay, that the hot water heater was on the verge of giving out, so a fourth day was added where the plumber came and replaced the aging tank.

He'd managed to keep Lois away from the house as he'd worked on it, wanting, instead, to surprise her with the finished product. As luck had it, they were both kept extremely busy with an investigation at work, which left Lois exhausted by dinner time. It was easy enough for Clark to say goodnight to her after dinner and then swing by the house to work at super speed for a few hours.

Now, however, the work was complete. It was time to reveal the fruit of his labor. Once more, he brought Lois to the house, had her close her eyes, and guided her into the living room.

"Are you ready to see it?" he asked her in a playful tone.

"I've been *dying* to see what you've done," Lois said, still with her eyes firmly shut.

"It's not completely finished," Clark warned. "We still have to pick out furniture."

"That's fine. We can look this weekend."

"This weekend is your shower," Clark reminded her.

"That's only for a few hours around brunch on Saturday," Lois argued.

"Still, some of the stores close early on Sunday..." he teased, dragging out the reveal.

Lois was on to his game. "Clark Jerome Kent," she said in a playful warning tone. "Now you're stalling on purpose."

Clark reflexively winced at the use of his full name. "You've been talking to my mother, I see," he replied dryly. "I don't think I've ever mentioned my full name before."

"We had a nice long chat this morning while you were here with the water heater guy."

"Ah."

"So, can I open my eyes now?"

Clark answered by putting his hand over her eyes. "Welcome home, Lois," he said lovingly to her as he lifted his hand away again.

Lois gasped as the room materialized before her uncovered eyes. She stood mute for several long seconds as she took it all in. Her hand went to her chest, then to her mouth. Clark could see the wonderment in her eyes and could practically feel the excitement radiating from her body. He felt as if he were seeing the house completely anew.

If this were a cartoon, he thought wryly to himself, the place would be actually sparkling.

"It's gorgeous!" she finally said in an awestruck, soft voice that fairly trembled with her shock. "I can't believe this. It doesn't even look like the same house." She shook her head. "You must have spent hours on this place, even with your abilities."

Clark shrugged it off. "It wasn't so bad. Most of the problems were cosmetic and didn't require as much effort as it appeared to. Come on, let me show you the rest of the house."

"I can't wait," Lois said enthusiastically.

Each new room brought out new gasps of delight from Lois and made Clark's heart swell with pride at having made her so happy. Lois pointed out many of the details Clark had hoped she would, like the way the fresh coat of green paint in the master bedroom perfectly matched Lois' favorite comforter in her apartment. Of course, since this *was* Lois, the rapid fire chatter and questions didn't surprise Clark in the least. Instead, he reveled in her random tangents and answered her questions as best he could, even discussing where they should place the furniture they planned to buy.

"So..." Clark asked after they had explored every nook and cranny of their new home. "Do you like it?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I *love* it. You did an *amazing* job." She kissed his cheek for good measure.

"I'm glad," he replied. He sighed happily. "We're home, Lois."

"Home," she agreed.

"Clark?" Lois called out, adjusting an earring.

"Yeah?" he replied from the confines of the bathroom.

"Are you ready?"

"Just about," he managed around a mouthful of toothpaste. He spit into the sink. "You?"

"Just need to get my shoes on," she said.

Clark rinsed his mouth out and joined her in their bedroom. "Want some help?" he asked as she struggled to wedge her feet into her sneakers.

"Please," she said, panting from the effort.

He chuckled quietly before dropping to his knees before her. He gently worked one shoe on, tied it, then the other. He winced inwardly to see how swollen her feet had recently become.

"Are you sure you want the sneakers?" he asked. "Not something like the canvas ones that don't need to be tied?"

She shook her head. "The compression from the sneakers actually feels better than when I wear shoes that are more open."

"If you say so."

"I do. Now, come on, we're going to be late for our appointment."

"Okay," Clark said. He followed Lois as she pushed herself off the chair they'd placed in the corner of their bedroom, and down the stairs. "I'll drive," he told her as he locked the door behind them.

"Fine by me," Lois said, now struggling to keep up with Clark's long strides. He realized and deliberately slowed. "I saw that," she said with a smirk.

Clark couldn't stifle his grin. "Sorry. I guess I'm still adjusting to our new pace."

"Sorry," she said as she shuffled along. "God, I feel like a penguin with this waddle."

"Aww, I think it's cute," Clark said, stopping to kiss her before he opened the door to the Jeep for her. "Here you go. Your chariot awaits."

Once Lois was securely in the Jeep, he jogged around to the other side, got in, and started the car. They drove in relative silence to the doctor's office. It was nothing more than a routine check. They were scheduled to listen to the baby's heart and a quick ultrasound to check on the growth, the amount of fluid in the amniotic sac, and the baby's position, as well as Lois' overall health.

"Lois?" the nurse called out, mere minutes after she checked herself in with the receptionist.

"Here."

"Follow me, please."

Clark trailed behind them as they moved out of the waiting room and into the hallway beyond the door. The first stop, as usual, was a check in at the office scale and a check of Lois' blood pressure. As the nurse looked at the results, Clark could see the shadow of a frown cross the woman's features.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Lois, your blood pressure is a little on the high side. I'm going to have the doctor test it again in a bit."

"What does that mean? Why is it high?" Lois wanted to know.

"It could be nothing," the nurse said. "Nerves or the stress of coming up the stairs out front. That's why I'd like to have it tested again."

"But it could be something else," Clark pressed, fear stabbing at his heart.

"It could be. We won't know until we check it again."

The rest of the appointment was a blur to Clark. He was barely aware of the measurements that were taken of the baby, though he was very cognizant of the word "breech." At least the baby's heart rate appeared to be good. But Clark's own heart was pounding, especially once the doctor came into the examination room. He recognized her as Katherine O'Malley, one of the five doctors in the office.

"Hello, hello!" Dr. O'Malley said cheerfully. "How are we feeling today?"

"Okay," Lois answered, "but a little nervous."

"I see your blood pressure was a little high today," the doctor said with a nod as she checked the chart. "Let's just run it again, just to double check. Okay?"

"Okay."

Dr. O'Malley hummed happily as she strapped the blood pressure cuff on Lois' arm. Clark imagined that the delightful tune was meant to help calm her patient. She squeezed the rubber ball on the end and watched the dial intently. Clark could see that she, like the nurse, was unhappy with the result.

"Lois, your blood pressure is still higher than I'd like to see it. I want you to go across the street to the hospital, okay? They'll monitor you more closely and draw some blood for testing."

Clark could hear the increase in Lois' heartbeat as a look of panic came over her face.

"Okay," was all she said in a tone that dripped of worry.

"It's okay," he tried to comfort her. "You'll be okay. The baby will be okay."

"I'll check in on things in about an hour," Dr. O'Malley promised.

Lois nodded. "Okay," she repeated.

Since the hospital was directly across the street, they simply walked over, through the ER doors, and found their way to the labor and delivery ward. Lois explained her situation to the receptionist, but it seemed that Dr. O'Malley had already called over. They knew what was going on and a nurse whisked her away to an observation room, where they hooked her up to a machine which automatically took her blood pressure at set intervals. A very pleasant Indian nurse took Lois' blood in between two of the blood pressure readings and promised that the results would be rushed to the doctor.

For a long while, no one spoke, and only the beeps of the blood pressure machine, the drone of the gears as they inflated the cuff, and the ticking of the clock on the wall broke the fragile silence.

"Clark," Lois finally said as they sat alone in the room, the only other woman in the small room having been discharged mere minutes before.

"Yeah?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Lois, we don't know anything for sure just yet," he reminded her.

"I know that. But I just can't help but feel like something's wrong." In frustration, she thumped the hospital bed she was propped up in with her palms.

"Lois, honey," Clark said, getting out of his chair. He stood and kissed her brow. "Nothing's certain yet. Try to relax."

"I can't," she said in a pitiful voice, almost like a child who wasn't getting her way. "I just want to go home."

"I'm afraid that's not going to be possible," Dr. O'Malley said, coming in to the room, clutching a chart to her midsection. "Lois, I'm sorry, but we have to deliver your baby tonight."

"What? You can't! It's too early! I still have five more weeks to go." Her terrified grip on Clark's hand tightened. Had he been a normal man, he would have feared that his finger bones would have been crushed into dust.

"Lois, you have a condition called preeclampsia. It's very dangerous for you, and the only way we can cure it is to deliver the baby. Also, your platelet count has dropped, and if it goes any lower, we won't be able to place the epidural and you'll have to be put completely under anesthesia for the delivery. I know you don't want that."

Clark saw all of the blood drain from Lois' face. He was certain his own pallor matched hers.

"No..." Lois tentatively agreed.

"When did you last eat?" the doctor inquired.

"Uh, twelve? Twelve-thirty?" Lois stammered, sounding unsure.

The doctor nodded. "We'll get the epidural placed now and schedule you for the C-section around eight." She gestured to the nurse with her. "Wendy here will get you settled into a room. Have you filled out any paperwork yet?"

"No," Clark said, shaking his head, in a daze.

"We'll get that to you right away then," the doctor said.

Wendy dutifully unstrapped the blood pressure cuff from Lois' arm. Together, the three of them made their slow way down the hall to the room Lois would be admitted to. Clark set straight to work filling out the pages that were neatly clipped together on a clipboard. Now that it was getting close to his child's birth, his heart was racing and his hands were trembling. It was hard to focus on the questions before him and to remember to write at a speed that mimicked a normal person. Lois, on the other hand, was helped into a new bed and pillows were added to get her comfortable. She pulled the stark white sheets up to her neck, as though they gave her some protection from the uncertainty of delivering so early.

"I'll be back soon," Wendy promised, "with the anesthesiologist."

As soon as she was gone, Clark allowed some of his nervous energy to escape in the form of his super speed. He finished the paperwork in less than five seconds, and placed the clipboard on the small round table in the corner of the room.

"Are you okay?" he asked Lois in a soft, concerned voice.

"No," she admitted. "It's too early, Clark. What if something goes wrong?"

"I won't let it," he promised her with a tremulous smile.

"Look, Lois, this baby — I'm sure he or she is strong. It has *you* for a mother, after all."

"It's still so early."

"I know," he said, dipping his head in acknowledgement. "I know. But we have to keep you *both* safe. And if this is what needs to be done, then I trust that the doctor is doing her best to make sure that you and the baby both have the best chance of coming out of this healthy."

"I'm still scared."

"I am too." He sat on the edge of her bed and took her small hands in his own, much larger, ones. He gazed deeply into her eyes. "You've done a fantastic job of keeping our baby safe and healthy," he reminded her. "Thank you."

"I just...I can't believe this is happening so fast," Lois said. Was Clark imagining it, or did her voice sound much more confident? And had her racing heartbeat dropped ever so slightly? A knock sounded at the door, followed by, "Hello!"

"Come on in," Lois said reflexively.

A tall, skinny, young man with a curly mop of brown hair and a smiling face strode into the room, dragging a table full of medical supplies with him. He stuck his hand out to Lois.

"Hi, I'm Fred. I'll be your anesthesiologist tonight."

"Hi," Lois said. "I'm Lois, this is Clark."

"Nice to meet you both," Fred said, a smile on his lips as he shook Clark's hand. "Uh, Dad? I need you to step out for a bit, to keep the area as sterile as we can."

"It's okay," Lois said when Clark hesitated. He hated her to be alone. "We need the hospital bags anyway."

Clark reluctantly nodded. She was right. They needed the bags they had left at home, and the baby's car seat, as well as the camera. Now was the time to get those things. He knew that once the baby was born, he would never want to leave Lois' side.

"Okay," he finally said. "I'll be back before you know it."

"Thanks. And, Clark?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't tell anyone yet, okay? I don't want anyone to know until the baby is here and we know exactly who this little person is. Please?"

"My lips are sealed," he promised, crossing his heart for good measure.

Lois smiled at his antics then shooed him away with a hand. "Go."

Clark nodded, then forced himself to leave. It was hard to fight the urge to just fly back to their house at super speed and return with the necessary items. The only thing that stopped him was the need to install the car seat base into the Jeep — a task they had been planning on accomplishing in the coming week. Grudgingly, he drove through the Metropolis traffic, back to their home. He raced up the stairs to their bedroom, grabbed the hospital bags, the camera, and the extra pillow Lois had set aside for her inevitable hospital stay, and bolted back to the Jeep. He unceremoniously dumped everything into the trunk, then ducked back into the house to grab the car seat.

With a little help from his speed reading ability, he blitzed through the instructions. Getting the seat secure in practice, however, took him the better part of half an hour. He just couldn't seem to get the straps right and tight enough, fearing to pull too hard and break the seatbelt that was anchoring the seat in place. At long last, he got it firmly in place and a wave of relief washed over him. He could now, *finally*, return to Lois. He went inside, grabbed the actual car seat, snapped it into the base, and hopped back behind the wheel. He drove with all speed back to the hospital, his heart in his throat, even though he knew he still had a few hours before Lois was scheduled for her surgery.

It felt, to him, like he didn't breathe the entire drive back, and only let go of the air in his lungs when he pulled into the first available spot in the hospital's parking lot. He idly wondered if that was, in fact, true, as he grabbed the bags out of the trunk. The elevator up to the labor and delivery floor was tortuously slow and he tapped his foot impatiently.

"Come on, come on," he muttered under his breath, only stopping when an old woman joined him in the elevator on the third floor.

After a small eternity, the elevator finally opened, spilling him out on the fifth floor. He quickened his pace, nodding and giving the nurse at the reception desk a small smile as he came to a halt before her. She signed him in and then he was on his way again, making a beeline for the women he loved. When he finally reached her room, he felt much of the tension he'd been carrying melt away.

"Sorry it took me so long," he apologized before saying anything else. He dumped the bags into the far corner of the room by the sofa bed, then gestured to her pillow, still in hand. "Do you want this yet?"

"Not yet, and don't worry. I know that the traffic at this hour isn't exactly conducive to a speedy trip."

"It wasn't even that. It was getting the car seat installed," he admitted sheepishly. It felt strange, admitting that he, Superman, had almost been defeated by a small, innocuous plastic device.

"But, it's in now and secure. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay," she said, sounding confident. "It took Fred longer than I'd thought to get the epidural in. The nurse placed a catheter. It's kind of amazing to not have to get up every fifteen minutes to use the bathroom."

Clark chuckled. Maybe he was rubbing off on Lois, he thought. After all, he would have *never* expected Lois to find an upside to a *catheter*, of all things.

"You're comfortable?" he asked instead.

Lois nodded. "As much as I can be."

She was propped up in the bed with pillows to keep her balanced between her side and her back so as not to jostle the epidural line, from what Clark could see. Wires ran from a machine next to the bedside down below the sheets on the bed. A cursory glance at the monitor told him that it was monitoring the baby's heart rate and any contractions that Lois might have been experiencing, even if she wasn't feeling them.

"So, what *can* I do for you? Maybe get you a drink of water or something?"

"I'm not supposed to have anything before the surgery," Lois said with a sigh. "I'm allowed a few ice chips though."

Clark's heart sunk. He knew that Lois had been extra thirsty lately, often toting along a bottle of cold water with her, even on assignments. He gestured to the door. "Let me get you some ice then."

"No need. Wendy brought some right before you got back." She shook the Styrofoam cup on the table next to her, reached in, and popped one in her mouth.

"Oh," Clark said dejectedly. He hated that he wasn't there to help Lois, now especially.

"Thanks for running back home to get everything," Lois said, looking at the untidy pile of bags on the floor. "You found everything okay?"

"Yeah, I mean, everything was basically packed already," he said, nodding. He took a seat in the rocking chair in the room. It was hard wood, but it didn't bother him in the least. He rocked absently.

"So, Lucy called my cell while you were away?"

"Oh?"

"She wanted to know if we could have dinner with her tonight, now that she's finished getting the apartment completely set up and furnished."

Clark cringed a little. He knew how excited his soon-to-be sister-in-law had been at the prospect of having them over once she converted Lois' old apartment into a place that was totally hers.

"So, what'd you tell her?"

Lucy winced a little at the lie she'd told. "That we were on a stake-out. She's going to kill me when she finds out that I lied to her."

"Well," he said with a smirk, "she can't get *too* upset with us once she sees the adorable niece or nephew we're giving her."

Lois laughed — a deep, hearty laugh that stretched much longer than it might have otherwise lasted. It was as if all her fear and anxiety from the day were bleeding out of her in that simple act of laughing. When she finally mastered herself again, she gave Clark the biggest smile she had. It warmed his heart and he found some of his own apprehension melting away in response.

They talked for a while, easily slipping into the playful banter that had defined their relationship almost from the very start. Miraculously, the time flew by, almost without them even noticing. Only the darkening sky outside the windows in Lois' room and fleeting glances at the clock gave them any reference for how much time was slipping by. Soon enough, they were so deeply engrossed in their conversation that they didn't even take notice of those two minor details. They were both laughing hard when Wendy reappeared with Fred.

"Now that's a sound we like to hear around here," Frank joked as the two stepped into the room.

"Is it time already?" Lois asked, sounding genuinely surprised that so much time had passed. Clark saw her sneak a peek at the clock on the wall to confirm it.

Wendy nodded. "It's time to meet your baby, Mommy. Daddy, we're going to take her in to the operating room and get her prepped. She'll get nice and numb for the procedure and then we'll let you come in. Here are some scrubs for you to wear. These go over your shoes and this one here is for your head," she said, pulling the various pieces of pale blue cloth apart to briefly show him what was what. "Ready, Mom?"

"As I'll ever be," Lois said, though Clark could see that she was both eager to meet her child and terrified because it was still so early.

With that, the two wheeled Lois right out of the room, leaving Clark utterly alone. In the sudden silence, the brightly lit room seemed cold and dark. It needed Lois to fill the void with the light and love that only she could provide. He felt silly for feeling lonely in the now empty room. After all, it wouldn't be long before he would be reunited at her side. He quickly pulled the scrubs on, then sat down to wait for the nurse to come and collect him. The scrubs fit him tightly, but, in a way, that was comforting. It reminded him of his Superman costume — the blue suit that always made him feel invulnerable and braver than he might have otherwise felt.

Twenty minutes dragged by with all the speed of a glacier. Finally, a nurse that he didn't know came to get him. He trailed her silently as they walked down the hallway to the operating room, his heart firmly wedged in his throat, his stomach in knots, and beads of nervous sweat peppering his forehead.

"Right in here," the nurse said, opening to the door.

"Thank you," he somehow managed around the dry lump in his throat. He made a beeline for Lois, immediately sitting in the chair that had been placed at her head on her left side. "Lois, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I can't feel most of my body, but I'm fine. I kind of feel like I'm just a head and upper chest. It's so odd."

"Lois?" the doctor said. "We're ready to begin now."

Lois nodded, though the doctor couldn't see through the surgical drape that reached from her body, just below her breasts, halfway to the ceiling. "I'm ready."

Clark placed a quick kiss on Lois' forehead, despite the presence of the paper mask he wore. "You'll do fine," he encouraged her. He took her hand in his own, hoping to lend her strength.

Silence fell over the room as the medical team worked with practiced efficiency. They didn't need to speak to know what needed to be done. Everyone had their job to do. Clark felt his stomach clenched tighter regardless. He wished he knew what was happening. He was tempted to sneak an x-rayed peek at what was happening past the blue paper barrier, but knowing that he'd be seeing Lois' blood and the gaping wound in her body stopped him before the thought was half completed.

It's not a gaping wound, he had to remind himself. It's a small incision. But it's still a wound. It's still going to hurt her. A lot. But it's necessary, to bring this new, amazing little person into the world. I just wish I could take on her imminent pain.

"Ahhh," Lois winced at one point. "I can feel that. I feel tugging. Ow. Ow."

Fred wordlessly upped the amount of medication in the epidural. After a few seconds, he asked, "Better?"

"Much," Lois said, the strain of pain and fear gone from her voice again. "Thank you."

Seconds ticked by, becoming hours in Clark's mind. Whole minutes were years. He wanted the surgery to be over. He wanted his child to be born and pronounced healthy. He wanted Lois' incision to be stitched up and on its way to healing. He said nothing, however, and adopted the mask of Superman — that stoic look that gave away none of his inner emotions. Lois had a similar look on her face as she stared up at the ceiling, though her grip on his hand was like a vice.

"Lois?" Dr. O'Malley said, jarring Clark from his inner reflection. "Congratulations! You have a beautiful little girl."

"A girl?" Lois asked. Then, as it sunk in, "A girl! Is she okay?" Her tears began to leak from her eyes and roll down the sides of her face, leaving muddy tracks of mascara to mark their passing.

"She looks good," the doctor responded.

Clark held his breath as he waited for the tiny, commanding cry that would announce to the world that Lois Lane's daughter had been born. It didn't fail to impress him when he finally heard it, half a heartbeat later. He felt his entire body shudder in relief.

"We have a daughter," he said to Lois, his mirth spilling over into his voice. "A girl!"

"It's a girl," Lois repeated, awestruck.

"Dad? Do you want to cut the cord?" a nurse asked.

Clark nodded and stood. He went to the warming table and beheld his daughter for the first time. She was a tiny, squalling, pink baby, the size of which humbled Clark. He'd never seen a child so small in all his life. Or, if he had as Superman, he couldn't remember in that moment. She had a head of sparse dark hair which was matted down and wet from her time spent floating in her watery home. Her fists were clenched as she cried, while the nurses dried her with soft, thick towels.

My daughter, Clark thought with absolute certainty. *My daughter.* All doubts vanished. *My daughter.*

He took the scissors when they were offered to him and snipped through the spongy umbilical cord precisely where the nurse directed him to. He glanced at the baby's stats on the warming table's computer display.

Seventeen inches. Four pounds. Six ounces. Eight forty-two PM.

Pure perfection.

"How does she look, Clark?" Lois called out.

"She's beautiful," he replied, spellbound.

The nurse swaddled the newborn and briefly showed her to Lois with a cheerful, "Here she is!"

"She's gorgeous," Lois breathed. "Can I hold her?"

"Only for a moment," the nurse said. "I need to get her over to the NICU."

"What? Why?" Lois asked, pure terror in her voice.

"At this age, her lungs are still immature, even though she's breathing on her own. We'll get her on extra oxygen to help with that." She laid the bundle of blankets containing the precious newborn on Lois' chest. "She also will probably need some help maintaining her temperature, so we'll keep her nice and toasty warm."

Clark wasn't sure if Lois was even hearing any of this. She was simply gazing into their daughter's tiny face and crying with what appeared to be unadulterated joy. She nuzzled the infant's nose with her own.

"I love you," he heard her whisper.

Then the nurse was taking the baby, placing her in an isolette, and whisking her away. Lois began to cry harder, the once silent

tears now mixed with a bereaved moaning. Clark couldn't blame her. Having his daughter taken away to the NICU so swiftly after her birth ripped a hole right through his heart. The pain felt ever so similar to a Kryptonite blade stabbing him through the aching organ. It would be worse for Lois, he knew. She was a mother without her newborn in her arms.

And as for himself, he hadn't even gotten the chance to touch her, let alone hold her. Mentally, he kicked himself for not at least taking one finger to stroke her delicate cheek. He watched, frozen in place, as his brand new baby girl was wheeled away, torn in two as to if he should follow behind or stay with Lois.

A pained sob from Lois convinced him to stay put. She needed him. The nurses would ensure that their daughter was well taken care of. He once more reached for Lois' hand and she grabbed it with a death grip. He gave her a gentle squeeze as he forced himself to sit down again.

"I want her back," Lois sobbed.

"I do too," he confided. "But the nurses will take good care of her. They'll get her perfectly healthy so she can come home with us."

"Four seconds," Lois lamented. "I got to hold her for four seconds."

He wasn't sure what he could say to make her feel better, so he said nothing. He simply reached over and gently lifted away her tears with his index finger. She gave him a thankful, but watery, smile in return.

"Lois?" Dr. O'Malley said after a time. "You're all done. Wendy's going to bring you back to your room now."

"When can I see my daughter?" was her immediate response.

"Soon. You need to rest for a bit and then you should be able to go over to the NICU to see your baby."

"I don't want to rest."

That made Clark smile internally. That was the feisty Lois he'd fallen in love with.

Dr. O'Malley finally emerged from behind the partition, her pale yellow scrubs flecked with blood. "I know. But you have to also give the NICU staff some time to evaluate your daughter so they can address her specific needs."

"Fine," Lois replied, grudgingly.

Minutes later, Lois was back in her room. Wendy hooked up a bag to Lois' IV, explaining that the medication inside would help prevent seizures that were sometimes brought about by the preeclampsia. She was warned that it might make her feel ill. Clark could see that it didn't take long for Lois to start feeling the effects of it. Wendy gave him the okay to get Lois some cold water to sip, giving Lois a warning not to drink too fast. Lois sipped at first, then experimented with a larger swallow of water. Almost immediately, she threw it right back up into a basin that seemed to have materialized in Wendy's ready hands. Clark could do nothing more than to hold Lois' hair out of the way.

Once she was done, Wendy gave her a couple of pills to swallow to help with the pain. Lois eagerly swallowed them down, though she admitted to still feeling numb from the epidural. Wendy gave her one last check and then disappeared to her other duties, leaving the new parents alone in the room together.

Thus began the longest night of Clark's life.

After Lois fell into an exhausted sleep brought about by the stress to her body from the surgery, Clark pulled out the small couch in the room into a bed. He lay down and tried to rest, but his mind would not allow him to. He checked on Lois again, but with the new batch of painkillers in her system, it appeared that she might sleep for a while. He slipped out of the room and down to the lobby. He called his parents first, letting them know of their granddaughter's arrival. It was only then that he realized that he and Lois hadn't yet chosen a name for their little girl. Even without a name, however, Jonathan and Martha were thrilled by

the news.

It was the hardest thing he'd ever had to ask of them when he asked them not to fly to Metropolis yet. He knew they wouldn't be allowed in the NICU, so, until the baby came home, there was no use in having them come in to the city. They understood, but Clark couldn't miss the disappointment, especially in his mother's voice.

He called Ellen next. He'd been dreading it, because of her assertive personality. He'd anticipated that she would try to bulldoze her way into the hospital to visit. When he spoke to her, however, she was uncharacteristically reserved. He supposed that, as a nurse, she knew how hard it was for a woman to recover from a C-section, as well as how restrictive the NICU was. It was the same with Sam, and again, Clark contributed it to the man's medical background, as well as the fact that he was in Cleveland at an important conference.

Surprisingly, it was Lucy who gave him the hardest time on the phone. It was all Clark could do to convince her not to grab the first cab she could and speed over to the hospital. He finished that phone call feeling weary deep down in his bones. But he could not yet rest. Perry needed to know of the new addition to the soon-to-be Kent family. The gruff old newsman had never sounded so excited to Clark's ears, even when the biggest news stories of the year were breaking. He gave Clark strict orders to use whatever time he and Lois needed while their daughter remained in the hospital, and then as they adjusted to life as a family of three once the baby was cleared to go home.

Clark called Jimmy last. After all, the man *was* one of his best friends — almost a brother to him in a lot of ways. It warmed Clark's heart to hear how thrilled Jimmy was. He offered to take pictures for them with his camera just as soon as they were ready and able to do so. Clark thanked him and promised that he would take Jimmy up on the offer. It would be nice to have some more professional photographs, other than just the ones had and Lois would snap on their own. He wondered how the few he'd been able to snap of their daughter before she'd been taken away had come out. He wished they could be developed already so that if Lois woke, she could see their baby right away, at least in some form or another.

By the time Clark finished making all of the necessary calls, he felt ready to drop. He ducked out of the hospital, found a secluded corner, and zoomed up into the sky. He punctured through the gathering clouds — it would rain before the night was out — and out past the last thin layer of the atmosphere to float suspended in space. Here, night and day did not exist. There was only an eternal sea of black hosting the weak light of innumerable stars. There was only the never ending glow of the life-giving sun, which fueled his body in ways that neither sleep nor food could. Of course, he knew he would *have* to sleep at some point, but right now, he didn't want to. He merely let himself hang there in space, not part of the stars and separate from the Earth, to absorb as much of the sunlight as he could until his lungs began to ache for want of air.

In the blink of an eye, he was back in that same secluded spot he'd used as a launching site. A light drizzle had begun, but the black, heavy clouds promised a real storm was to follow. He went back inside and found his way to the NICU, after checking to ensure that Lois was still peacefully sleeping. He stopped only to grab one item out of his hospital bag, then he was moving again, anxious to check in on his daughter.

"Come in," the nurse who was there tending to the babies said as she glimpsed Clark standing uncertainly in the doorway. She waved him forward with one hand as she checked an IV drip on a premature baby half the size of Clark's daughter. "I'm Vanessa Halaran, head of the NICU."

"I'm Clark Kent," he replied, coming up to stand alongside the wash station. He started to scrub clean to maintain as sterile

an environment as possible for the benefit of the babies in the room. “My daughter is in here.”

“Kent...Kent...” Vanessa said, thinking. She turned and pointed to one of the isolettes. “Ah, Baby Girl Kent. Right here.”

“How is she doing?” Clark asked, drying his hands.

“She’s pretty stable. Her oxygen stats are a little low, but nothing out of the ordinary for a thirty-five weeker. And she’s pretty dependent on us right now to control her body temperature. But she’s a fighter, I’ll give her that.”

That was more than just a relief to Clark’s ears. “How long do you think...?” was all he could muster.

The dark skinned nurse shrugged. “That’s up to her. I’ve seen babies her age and close to her status leave in as little as a week.”

“A week.” Clark’s heart sunk.

“I know it sounds like a long time,” the nurse said sympathetically touching his shoulder. “Would you like to hold her?”

“Can I?” he asked, hope flooding his heart. If he could hold his daughter outside of the isolette, then surely things couldn’t be too bad.

“Absolutely. It’s good for the both of you. Just sit right here in this rocker and I’ll hand her to you, okay?”

“Okay.”

Vanessa carefully extracted the baby from the isolette, gently moving the wires monitoring her heart, temperature, and the tiny tubes delivering oxygen into her delicate nostrils. Clark was ready when Vanessa tenderly laid the girl in his arms. She then covered the two with a mint green blanket that appeared to be hand-knitted. Clark nodded his thanks, but couldn’t tear his eyes away from the newborn in his arms. He was completely mesmerized as he gazed down upon that perfect face.

The baby mewled a cry only once as she was shifted, then went back to her peaceful sleep. Her comfort at being in her father’s arms seemed to rub off on Clark, and he felt himself growing more at ease in turn. It was the first time in hours that he felt as peaceful as he now did.

“Are you comfortable?” the nurse asked.

“Yes. Thank you, Ms. Halaran.”

“Vanessa, please.”

“Vanessa,” he replied, nodding absently.

“You just let me know if you need to put her down, okay?”

“Will do.”

Vanessa nodded and went back to her task of checking on each of the other babies in the room. At this hour, Clark was almost totally alone, except for one Asian couple standing vigil over an isolette in the far corner of the room. He began to rock in the chair and speak in a low, soft voice to the precious baby in his arms.

“Hi there, little girl,” he said. It was weird for him not to have a name yet to pair with her face. “I’m your daddy. Your mom and I have been waiting a long time to meet you. And you don’t know it yet, but we love you more than anything in this whole world. I love you. I’m sorry that I ever doubted that I could really feel like your dad. But *my* father, your grandfather, was right. All I had to do was take one look at you. There’s no question in my heart anymore. I love you and I will spend the rest of my life making sure that you are safe and happy. I promise you that.”

He placed a light kiss on the girl’s forehead. She was clean and smelled faintly of baby wash.

“You have to fight to get better, okay, sweetie? Your mom and I want you home with us as soon as possible. You’re going to love your house. And your room? Your mother spent hours getting it just right for you. I hope you like teddy bears. Speaking of,” he said, holding up the item he’d taken from his bedroom weeks before, “this is for you.”

The old stuffed bear was patched and worn in places. His tan fur had faded with age but had never lost its softness. The button

eyes it had once boasted, however, had long since been replaced with the shiny black eyes that most stuffed animals seemed to own. His smile was a bit crooked, the thread that created it no longer as taut as it had once been. Clark thought that the toy, while not as attractive as most new stuffed animals, looked well loved and in good shape for its age.

“This was my bear, when I was a kid,” Clark informed his sleeping daughter. “My dad gave it to me, the night he and my mother found me. It was his as a kid, given to him by his father, whose mother made it when she found out that she was going to have a baby. He’s old, this bear, but he’s got a lot of history to him. And now he’s yours — a little friend to watch over you here in the NICU and always.”

The baby made no response, save for a little sigh in her sleep. Clark luxuriated in the sound of her breath as she breathed in and out. He honed in his hearing and listened to the beating of her heart, a sound he had long since become intimately familiar with, ever since Lois had told him that they would be having a baby together.

For a long while, Clark silently rocked his child, until the monitors started to beep. Vanessa all but materialized out of nowhere to check on the baby. She told Clark that the girl needed to go back into the isolette as her temperature had dipped slightly, and that she needed the benefit of the warming lights. Clark reluctantly let the woman take his daughter, feeling bereft as soon as the baby was out of his arms.

Still, there was one upside to having his daughter back in her isolette. Despite the sunlight he’d been able to soak up earlier, he was growing weary once more. He trudged back down the hall to Lois’ room, fluffed the pillow on the couch-bed as best he could, and lay down. As soon as he was stretched out, a call for help reached his ears. He sat up, alert now, listening intently. It was a car fire, but seemed well in hand, as the fire fighters had already arrived on the scene and the vehicle’s occupants had already been rescued. Clark severed the connection and laid his head back down on the flat hospital pillow. If ever there had been a night when Superman had deserved a night off, this was it.

He was asleep in moments.

He wasn’t sure how long he drifted in that black void which seemed to exist outside of time and memory. It couldn’t have been too long, he thought, as the world crashed in around him as he woke. His weary eyes creaked open, his vision still fuzzy as they tried to focus. For a few heart stopping moments, he wasn’t sure where he was. Then, as he saw Lois in the hospital bed, it all came rushing back to him. He was at Metropolis General. Lois had given birth to their daughter, but the baby was in the NICU.

He pushed himself up to sit and pulled his glasses off to rub the sleep out of his eyes. He yawned as he put them back on.

“Lois?” he called softly in the darkened room, lit with only the barest light possible. “Honey? What’s wrong?”

Outside, the storm clouds he’d flown through earlier were dumping their heavy load of rain down upon the city with vengeance. Lightning flickered out beyond the windows and thunder rumbled, a low, rolling sound that seemed to go on forever.

“Clark? I’m okay,” Lois said, her voice conveying anything but the fact that she was okay.

“No, you’re not,” Clark said, going to her side. “What’s wrong?”

Lois shifted and winced. “Well, okay, my pain meds *might* have worn off.”

“I’ll get one of the nurses,” Clark promised, already half way out of the door. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere,” Lois said. Clark could imagine her looking with disgust at the IV lines that were keeping her tethered to the bed.

Lois’ room was right near the nurses’ station, so Clark didn’t

have to go far. A heavy set nurse with a pleasant smile greeted him as he stepped up to the desk. He informed her that Lois' pain management medications had worn off, and she promised to check the chart and be there with more pills in a few minutes. Clark thanked the woman and hurried back to Lois' room.

He found Lois attempting to pump milk for their daughter, since she could not yet go to the NICU to nurse her. He sat in the chair next to the bed, respectfully casting his eyes down at his hands, which lay folded in his lap. If Lois noticed, she didn't say anything.

A few minutes later, as promised, the nurse came into the room, a small paper cup of water in one hand and another with a couple of pills in it in the other. She helped Lois take the pills.

"Thanks," Lois said, swallowing down the rest of the water.

"You're welcome, sugar," the nurse said in a soft southern drawl. "Just let me know when you're done pumping, and I'll make sure it gets down to the NICU, okay?"

"Okay," Lois agreed.

The nurse shut the door behind her as she left them alone. Clark continued to study his hands, giving Lois some privacy. He thought about leaving to give her some time alone to pump, but somehow, he felt that it was more important that he stay.

"Julia," Lois said suddenly, breaking the fragile silence of the room.

Clark had been almost half dozing when she spoke, but was instantly pulled to full wakefulness. "Huh?" His head snapped up to look at her.

"I've been thinking. She looks like a Julia to me," Lois said.

"Not that I got to see her for long. What do you think?"

Julia. The name had never come up in conversation. He turned the name over in his mind.

"Julia Kent," he mused. "I like it."

"Do you really?"

"Of course I do. It's a beautiful name," Clark said. "What made you think of it?"

"I'm not sure," she said, with a shake of her head. "It just sort of popped into my mind just now as I was thinking about her."

"Julia," Clark said in affirmation.

"Julia Rose," Lois said. They had long since agreed on the middle name, which was Lois' beloved but deceased grandmother's middle name.

"Julia Rose," Clark echoed. It somehow just seemed right.

"Julia Rose Kent. I love it."

"I wish I could hold her," Lois said in a voice so soft Clark nearly missed it, after a few minutes of silence. "Do we even know how she's doing?"

"I checked in on her a little earlier," Clark said. "She's doing great. The head nurse in the NICU... Vanessa... I think you'll like her. She let me hold Julia for a little bit." He cast his eyes downward again, ashamed, somehow, that'd he'd been able to hold the baby while Lois hadn't had more than a few seconds with her yet.

"Good," Lois said contentedly. "She needs to know someone is there for her."

"You're not mad?" Clark asked before he could stop himself.

Lois smiled tiredly. "No. I'm happy you got the chance to start bonding with her." She reached out for his hand. He stood, moved to the bed, sat down, and entwined her fingers with his. "We're in this together."

"Always," he vowed.

"She couldn't have a better daddy," Lois said, setting the breast pump aside.

"And the best mommy," he replied, stretching to give her a light, fast kiss on the lips. "Thank you, Lois, for giving me such a beautiful little daughter. She's just absolutely perfect."

"It's pretty amazing, isn't it? What we've managed to bring into this world," Lois said, leaning back against the pillows.

Clark nodded, once more ignoring Lois' misplaced insistence that he had a chance of being Julia's biological father. "Yeah," he said instead.

"I should make some calls," Lois said suddenly.

Clark stilled her with a shake of his head. "Lois, it's five in the morning. Besides, I made some calls after you fell asleep."

"You did?" She looked surprised. "And my mom didn't rush over here while she was still on the phone with you?"

"She wanted to, but I made it very clear that you needed to rest and the baby was in the NICU. She's a nurse, Lois. She understood the situation. Your father as well."

"Good," she said, stifling a yawn.

"Get some sleep," Clark said, affectionately cupping her cheek in his free hand. "You've been through major surgery. Julia's going to need you to be nice and rested when you see her. And I promise, you *will* be seeing her soon."

"The milk..." Lois protested.

"I'll take care of it. You have your very own, personal servant in me, remember?"

"It's always been that way, hasn't it? You've always done so much for me."

Clark shrugged. "I've never really thought about it. I just like doing things for you. It makes me happy to make you happy. Now, sleep. You need it."

"What about you?"

He nodded. "I'm going to try to get a few more hours too."

"Good."

She snuggled back down into her pillows as she pressed the button on the bed to recline as far as she could go. In moments, Clark heard her breathing even out in sleep. He took the small amount of milk that Lois had been able to pump and brought it to the nurses' station, where he spoke to the same woman he had earlier. She assured him that the milk would be brought immediately over to their daughter for her next feeding.

Then Clark was ducking back into Lois' room. He lay on the pull-out bed and closed his eyes. This time, sleep took a little longer to find him, but when it did, he dreamed of holding his little girl, though in his dreams, she was free from the wires that tethered her to the isolette she currently slept in.

"Lois?" called a voice as a knock sounded on the door. A nurse poked her head in as Lois replied that she could enter. "Are you ready to be taken off the IV?"

"God, yes," Lois said, holding her arm out to one side. "I hate needles as it is. Having them in my arm for this long has been driving me nuts."

The nurse chuckled. Clark thought her name might have been Leila. "Oh, I'm right there with you. I don't like them either." She checked the bags hanging from the IV pole, made a note in the chart she carried, then stopped the machine which regulated the drip. "You might want to look away for this," she warned Lois. Lois dutifully swung her head around to study the wall opposite of where Leila was standing. Clark smelled the sharp tang of Lois' blood as the needle came away from her flesh and the sticky red blood bubbled up in the wound. "There we go. All set," Leila said, pressing a bandage down to cover the puncture wound where the needle had been. "Now for the catheter." She moved down to remove the catheter from Lois.

"Can I get out of bed now?" Lois asked anxiously as the tubing came away from her body.

Leila nodded. "It's important that you do. But take it easy. I suggest a shower, just so you feel refreshed and because it's really hard to over exert yourself doing so."

"But my daughter..."

Leila smiled as she checked her chart again. "Your daughter is actually being checked by the doctor right now and having a hearing test done. Don't worry, nothing's wrong. It's just

standard. So, you have some time right now. Trust me. The shower helps. I've had two kids of my own and have always felt like that post-birth shower made me feel human again."

"Okay," Lois relented. "But, could you let me know as soon as I can see Julia?"

"I promise."

Lois nodded and Leila left the room. Clark helped Lois out of the bed, noticing how stiff and deliberate her movements were as she adjusted to the discomfort of moving after surgery. She left go of his arm once she was standing, then slowly made her way into the bathroom. Clark sat on the foot of the bed and flipped through the channels on the television while he waited for Lois to do what she needed to do.

She emerged from the bathroom sooner than he would have thought possible, given the way she'd been moving before. She was clad now in soft pink pajamas and nearly matching slippers. Her hair was dry and Clark vaguely remembered hearing the sounds of a hairdryer while he'd attempted to lose himself to the movie he'd been watching. Lois gave him a smile, which he returned, before gingerly lowering herself to sit alongside him.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"I hate to admit it, but she was right. I *do* feel more human than I did last night." She sighed and Clark put his arm around her. "I hate this. This...not being in control. This...not being able to just get up and go see my daughter."

"I know, Lois. I feel the same way. I'm the strongest man on the planet. I have all of these abilities. But there's nothing I can do to improve the situation. I hate it too."

A knock sounded at the door. It was the nurse, smiling from ear to ear.

"Ready to go see your baby girl?" she asked brightly.

"More than you know," Lois replied, already pushing herself off the bed, sucking in a sharp intake of breath as she moved.

"I know the way," Clark said, when it appeared Leila would be escorting them. He just wanted to be alone with Lois.

Leila nodded. "I'll be around until noon if you need anything."

Clark slowed his pace considerably as he and Lois walked down the hallway toward the NICU. Lois' steps were slow and measured. It seemed that she had a limited range of motion from all the fluids that still lay pooled in her legs from both the pregnancy and the IV drip. Clark knew from what he'd read that the swelling was normal but would be worse from all of the IV fluids she'd been getting. He knew also that it could take a week or two before the swelling finally subsided.

"Are you okay?" he asked in a soft voice as they walked.

Lois nodded. "It feels good to be up and moving, even if it isn't the most comfortable thing between my swollen legs and the stinging in my incision. I just want to see Julia."

"Well, that's good. Because we're right here." He came to a halt and jerked a thumb at the door on the right-hand wall.

They entered the NICU and a reverent silence immediately blanketed them. Clark brought Lois to the sink where they scrubbed clean. Vanessa surprised Clark by still being in the NICU after so many hours. He wondered briefly if she'd managed to get any sleep.

"She's over here," he whispered to Lois, even as Vanessa threaded her way through the isolettes to be near them.

Lois peered through the clear plastic box that housed their daughter. "She really is perfect," she said in awe.

"Just like her mom," Clark replied, smiling down on the baby. "Vanessa, this is Lois. Lois, Vanessa," he said, introducing the two as Vanessa finally reached their side.

"Pleased to meet you," Vanessa said with a genuine smile.

"Can I hold her?" Lois asked eagerly. "I mean, it's nice to meet you too. Clark told me that you two spoke during the night. Can I hold her?" she repeated in a pleading voice.

"We did, and yes, you can. Come, sit here. Good. Now, open up the buttons on your shirt."

"Why?" Lois asked, though her fingers immediately began to obey the nurse.

"We call it skin-to-skin. Sometimes, we see it help stabilize a baby's heart rate, or temperature, or just become overall soothed."

"Oh," Lois said, a bit abashed, as though she should have known that.

"Here now. Come on, little one. Your mommy is here. Oh, oh, ssh now," she crooned to the baby. "Here we go. Ready, Mommy?"

"You have no idea," Lois said with a smile, her arms outstretched to receive her daughter.

Vanessa laid the child in Lois' arms, and Lois instantly pulled the girl to her chest, careful of the wires that trailed along with Julia. Once she was satisfied with Julia's placement against her mother's heartbeat, Vanessa covered Lois with the same mint green blanket Clark had used during the night. As if in response, Julia cracked open one eye, yawned, then closed her eye again.

"Clark! Did you see that?" Lois asked excitedly.

"I did," he told her.

"Oh, Julia," Lois whispered to the baby, kissing her head.

"Mommy's here now. I'm so sorry I couldn't be with you sooner. But I'm here now. I love you so much, baby girl." Clark just watched as mother and daughter were finally reunited. He could see the tears welled up in Lois' eyes. "Mommy is so glad you're here. Daddy and I have been waiting a long time to meet you. Yes we have." Clark marveled at the sing-song aspect to Lois' voice. He'd never heard anything close to it before. "And we love you so, so much. We can't wait to take you home with us. So, please, fight hard so you can come home with us. There are so many people who can't wait to meet you. Two grandmas, two grandpas, an aunt, and a whole bunch of other people who are probably going to call themselves your aunt or uncle, like Jimmy and Perry." She sighed and rocked. "I know you don't have any idea what I'm saying, but believe me, you are such a lucky little girl to have so many people who already love you."

Lois looked up at Clark and smiled. He smiled back, his heart nearly bursting from the pride and love he felt. He was a father.

"Your mom is right," he told the baby. "You are a pretty lucky kid. And so, so loved."

The baby yawned then put a hand to her mouth as she cried. Lois immediately looked back down, then questioningly at Vanessa, who had looked over at the sound.

"Would you like to try nursing her?" the nurse asked.

Lois nodded and automatically shifted the baby in her arms, trying to get her into a comfortable position. Clark averted his eyes while Lois tried to get the baby to latch. But even with Vanessa's expert help, she remained unsuccessful.

"It's okay," Vanessa soothed her after almost half an hour of trying. "It takes some babies a little longer than others to take to the breast. Here, let me get you some of the milk you pumped earlier."

She disappeared for several long moments and came back with a warm bottle. It was probably the smallest bottle Clark had ever seen in his life. Lois placed the rubber nipple before the baby's lips and the girl began to suckle hungrily. Clark could see a mixture of relief and sadness in Lois' face. On the one hand, the baby was eating. On the other, he knew Lois would feel rejected by the girl's refusal to latch directly to her.

To Clark, however, nothing had ever seemed more beautiful to him than to see Lois giving nourishment to their daughter.

"Good news! You get to go home today," the nurse exclaimed, just three short days after the birth of Julia. It was Wendy, oddly enough — the same nurse who had admitted Lois

to the hospital.

“And my daughter?” Lois immediately asked.

Wendy shook her head sadly. “She still needs time to grow and learn to regulate her body temperature.”

“I can’t leave without her!” Lois protested.

“I’m sorry. I truly am.”

“Lois,” Clark said, his heart aching. He’d known all along that it was a possibility, that they might have to go home without their daughter. “We have to do what’s best for Julia.”

“Then let me stay here with her,” Lois begged.

“I can’t do that,” Wendy said simply, though not unkindly.

“Lois, you’ll rest better at home. If you rest better, you’ll heal better,” Clark said. “The sooner you heal, the better, so you’ll be ready for our daughter to come home.”

“But, Clark...”

“I know,” he said sympathetically, cutting her off. He rubbed soothing circles on her back since he was sitting right next to her. “I know. I don’t like it any better than you do. But we have to trust that the doctors and nurses are going to keep Julia in the best health possible. I promise, we’ll be back first thing in the morning to check on her. We’ll spend the whole day visiting if you want. But we need to go home and get prepared for Julia to come home.”

“I don’t want to leave her,” she said in a small voice.

“I don’t either,” he admitted.

Lois nodded finally. “We’re not leaving until I see her again.”

Clark smiled. “Of course not. We’ll get you discharged and then go see our baby, okay?”

“Fine.” She sounded tired and defeated.

“Great,” Wendy said. She placed some papers into Lois’ hands. “These are your discharge instructions — what not to do, and the like. And your prescription for the pain killers is in there. We’ll need you to follow up with your doctor in a few weeks to check out your incision site. Until then, no driving and no lifting of anything heavier than your baby, okay?”

Lois nodded shallowly, clearly unhappy.

“Thank you,” Clark said in her place.

They slowly got their things together, double checking and triple checking that they had everything they needed to bring back home with them. Then they were off to see their daughter. Clark thought the girl looked somehow bigger and stronger than she had during the night. He dismissed the thought almost as soon as he had it as nothing more than a product of his imagination.

He held the baby for a long while, rocking her and getting to feed her a bottle. It was always good to see the girl awake long enough to eat. He cooed to her nonstop, keeping his voice low out of respect for the other parents in the room, including that of a critically ill little girl born at a mere twenty-six weeks.

When it came time for Lois to hold Julia and rock her for a while, Clark saw the occasional tear glimmering in her eyes. During those moments, he had to avert his eyes in order to maintain a grip on his own threatening tears. Seeing Lois’ shattered heart was almost too much for him to handle.

At last, they both knew that it was time to go. Both of them were starving, so Clark drove to a local pizza place, all the while far too mindful of the empty car seat in the backseat of the Jeep. After a shared and somber pizza, they headed home. Clark unpacked the Jeep as Lois made her ponderous way up the stairs toward their bedroom. He winced as he watched her progress, knowing that she still ached from the incision and the pooled fluid in her legs. He helped her up the rest of the way by gathering her in his arms and floating up the stairs rather than mounting each individual step. Lois snuggled mutely against his chest — a silent show of her appreciation.

After Lois showered and dressed herself in comfortable pajamas, Clark took the opportunity to do the same. He left her

reading a book in bed, but came out of the shower to find the bedroom empty. He didn’t have to wonder where she was. He instinctively knew where to find her. He padded quietly down the hall in his bare feet, faint sounds of shuddering cries leading the way to the nursery. The door was slightly ajar so he pushed it open. It made no noise as he did so, thanks to the new hinges he’d put on it when he’d been fixing up the house.

Lois was sitting in the glider chair, absently rocking away the minutes as she cried. Her face was turned away from Clark, so she hadn’t yet seen him standing there in the doorway. He watched for a moment before entering the room.

“Lois?”

Lois sniffled and hastily wiped at her tears with the quilt that had come with the bedding set for the crib. “Oh, Clark,” she said, sounding tired and upset. Those two simple words seemed to convey all her thoughts.

“Sweetie, it’s okay,” Clark said, kneeling down next to her. “This is not a permanent situation. Julia will be home before we know it.”

“It’s just... I never expected to leave the hospital empty-handed,” she said before another sob took her.

“I didn’t either. But she’s doing great.”

“Everyone else gets to come home with their baby and I had to leave her behind.” She sniffled and fell silent for a moment.

“I’m horrible, aren’t I?”

“No, Lois,” Clark said, shaking his head. “What makes you say that?”

“All those other people with babies in the NICU, in worse shape than Julia. They’ll be there for months, and that’s *if* their children come home at all. And here I am complaining.”

“Sometimes, bad things happen. But it doesn’t make you a bad person at all for wishing things had turned out ideally for us even when they haven’t for others,” Clark told her. He reached out and put a hand on her knee.

Her hand covered his. “I know. Logically, *I know* she’s fine, that’s she’s in good hands, that she’s healthy. But I can’t help but worry. What if she gets scared? Or they run out of my milk? You know I’m not producing a lot. What if something else happens? What if some nurse gives her to the wrong family? What if...?”

Clark smiled at her. That stopped Lois in mid-sentence. A wrinkle creased her brow as she caught Clark’s smile.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just... I love watching you like this.”

“Like what? An absolute wreck?”

Clark smiled again. “No,” he said, shaking his head slightly. “Being a mom.”

Lois smiled slightly at that. “You think so?”

“I know so.”

“Hi, Julia,” Lois said in a perky, sing-song voice as the grandmotherly Nurse Opal placed her into Lois’ arms. “Hi, baby. Did you have a good night’s sleep? Hmm?” The baby yawned in response and immediately grabbed Lois’ index finger and brought it to her mouth. “Clark! Look!” she said excitedly, showing him Julia’s latest accomplishment.

“Good job!” Clark praised the baby. Though she’d grabbed their fingers before, suckling on the digit was new. “What a big, strong girl you are!”

“How’d she do last night?” Lois asked as Vanessa Halleran, the nurse they’d mostly been dealing with, came over to see them.

“Really well,” the woman replied. “You can see that we’ve removed the oxygen tubes. The change in her breathing over the last week has been really impressive. We’ve been monitoring her without the extra oxygen boost since eight o’clock last night, while you were both still here. She went all night long without needing any support and without showing any dips in her oxygen

saturation levels.”

“That’s fantastic!” Lois exclaimed in a hushed voice, mindful, as always, of the other families in the room.

Vanessa nodded. “Mmm-hmm. Actually, she’s done so well that the doctor graduated her today. No more extra oxygen for this little lady.”

Clark sighed in relief. It was like a weight had been lifted from his own chest. In a way, it was like he himself could finally breathe now.

“That’s great,” he said, beaming. “Does that mean we can take her home now?”

“That’s up to the doctor,” Vanessa said. “He should be around in a few hours to check on her temperature. She’s been holding steady with it for three days now, so that’s very encouraging.” She gave them a sly smile. “If I had to guess though, I’d say that you’ll need an extra place setting this Thanksgiving.”

Clark gaped. “Are you sure?” Thanksgiving was the following day.

Vanessa shrugged. “Of course I can’t be one hundred percent certain, but knowing Dr. Williams, I’d be surprised if Julia was still here in the morning and not home with you.”

“Did you hear that, Julia?” Lois cooed to the baby. “You might be going home with Mommy and Daddy today.” Clark saw her cradle the newborn extra closely, as if she’d lost some fear that she might hurt the child simply by holding her so closely.

Clark pulled over an empty chair to sit, since the isolette to Julia’s left was unoccupied. His heart hurt seeing the clear plastic incubator empty. Just the night before, it had held the unbelievably small and frail form of a baby boy named Mark, who’d been born at twenty-eight weeks. Clark sent out a quick, silent wish for comfort for the boy’s grieving mother, Claire, who he’d spent some time speaking with as the three of them had kept vigil over their babies.

“I can’t wait to bring you home,” Clark said as he peered over Lois to look at Julia’s face. He couldn’t get over how alert and bright-eyed she seemed this morning. “You know, Mommy and I bought that house for you. Yes, we did. A whole house for you to run around and play in!”

He smiled over at Lois. In a way, it was true. They *had* chosen the place so that they would have a place to grow their family.

“Actually,” Lois confided to the infant, “we really have Daddy to thank for the house. He found it and convinced me to take a chance on it.”

Julia just blinked as she stared up at the face of her mother and continued to suck on Lois’ finger. Lois gently removed the digit from between the baby’s gums and looked to Clark. He was already on the move though, knowing exactly what the baby needed. He went to the small fridge at Julia’s bedside and removed two small bottles — one of breast milk and the other of formula. Carefully making sure that no one was looking and with his back to the rest of the room, he lowered his glasses. Exercising extreme care, he used his heat vision to warm the bottles to room temperature. Then he pushed his glasses back up his nose and turned to Lois.

“Here we go,” he said, announcing the arrival of food to his daughter. “One delicious meal, coming right up.”

“Thanks, Clark,” Lois said gratefully. Then, to the baby, “Look what Daddy got for you!”

The nipple slid into the baby’s waiting mouth and she eagerly sucked down the contents. Once she was done with the first bottle, she happily went to work on the second one. Lois rocked her in silence as she ate. Clark mutely watched, loving every moment of seeing Lois as a mother. Once the bottles were empty, Lois gently patted Julia’s back, and the infant loosed a healthy burp. Clark and Lois both laughed.

“Nice one, kiddo!” he praised her.

Julia seemed to smile in response, though Clark knew from his reading that it was a reflex and nothing more.

“You want to hold her?” Lois asked.

“Absolutely,” Clark replied.

Lois stood and carefully transferred the bundled infant to his waiting arms. A smile spread across his lips as he looked into the eyes of his child. She stared back, appearing to be almost entranced.

How could I ever have doubted? he wondered. *There is no way in Heaven or on Earth that I could not love this little girl. She’s my world. She and Lois are my world.*

“What?” Lois asked, scrutinizing his face.

“Nothing,” he replied as Julia opened her mouth in a yawn. “Just thinking, that’s all.”

“About what?” she pressed.

Clark sighed. He hated to tell Lois exactly what he was thinking. But he’d also promised her that he would never lie to her ever again, ever since she’d discovered his dual identities. Looking at her expectant face, he knew he had no choice but to tell her.

“To be honest, Lois, until I saw Julia, there was always this little kernel of fear inside of me, that I wouldn’t feel this life-changing connection with her, given the circumstances of her conception. Especially given my chances of ever biologically fathering a child. I know, I know,” he said, lifting a hand to fend off her argument, “but we have to be realistic here. Anyway, I was just wondering how I ever could have doubted anything. No matter that the DNA results tell us, I could not love her more.”

“I know,” Lois said with a tender smile of her own. “I see it every time you look at her.”

“Sometimes, I look at her and it’s like my heart is literally breaking,” Clark continued. “I just love her so much. It’s no different when I look at you. Given...everything...we’ve been through, I look at you and can’t believe that you’ve chosen to love me. Being a part of this family,” he said, gesturing to the three of them, “is the greatest miracle I’ve ever experienced in my life.”

Lois’ smile broadened. “I never chose to love you, Clark. It wasn’t a decision I made. It’s just natural for me to love you — like breathing or having a heartbeat. It’s like the love I have for our daughter. It simply is not an option to *not* love you. Does that make any sense?”

“Actually, it makes perfect sense to me,” Clark said.

“Because that’s how I’ve felt about you, ever since the moment I met you. It didn’t matter that when we met you were ranting to Perry and interrupting my interview,” he said with a wink. “It was like...like lightning struck my brain, to be perfectly cliché. I loved you in that moment and that love only grew as I got to know you.”

He bent his neck and kissed his daughter on her forehead. “I love you, Julia.”

They spent the better part of the morning switching their daughter between them. Clark would give Lois breaks to get up and stretch, or to use the bathroom, or just to give her arms a break. And she would take Julia so that he could stretch his legs, or get them both some coffee, or, once, to allow him to respond to an emergency — a scuffle just down the street with had ended with one of the two men suffering a serious stab wound to his chest.

“Hello, hello,” a rotund and bespectacled man said, just after Lois and Clark finished their simple chicken salad wraps for lunch. “I’m Dr. Williams.”

Clark gently extracted his hand from where it was entangled in the blankets Julia was wrapped in. He’d been playing with her minute fingers, getting a thrill every time she wiggled them in response to him when he moved his own fingers. He quickly shook the doctor’s hand, noting how firm and business-like the

man's shake was.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Williams," Lois said as he turned and shook her hand.

"I'd like to examine your daughter, if that's okay." He smiled through his bushy reddish beard.

"Yeah, sure," Clark said, lifting Julia away from his chest and holding her out to the doctor.

Clark felt as though he didn't dare breathe while the doctor checked Julia's vital signs and checked through the overnight chart. He sent up a silent prayer that everything would check out for the best and that his daughter could finally come home. Attempts to read the doctor's thoughts through his expressions proved fruitless. The man could rival Superman in his stoic appearance.

"Mmm-hmm," the doctor hummed to himself as he turned the last page of the chart. He nodded to himself. "Well," he finally announced, looking up at them for the first time since entering the room. "Things look excellent. There's just one more thing and then Julia can go home with you."

"Today?" Lois asked. Clark knew from the inflection in her voice that she was trying hard not to get her hopes up.

"Today," Dr. Williams said with another smile.

Lois let out a strangled sigh of relief, a sound that was all but choked with happy tears. Clark thought he might have heard her gratefully say "oh, God," in that sound. Tears sprang into her eyes and pooled there, glistening like wet stars.

"So, what do we have to do?" Clark asked on Lois' behalf.

"Do you have her car seat with you?"

Clark nodded. "It's down in the car, yeah."

"We just have to sit her in it for a while and see how she does. If she tolerates sitting in the seat well, we'll discharge her and you can take her home. Just in time for Thanksgiving," he added.

"Clark? Could you...?"

"Uh-huh," Clark said, hardly daring to hope, though his heart was racing with the promise of having his daughter home just one more test away. "I'll be right back."

He had to restrain himself from running down the hall, flying down the stairwell, and speeding to the Jeep where it was parked in the hospital's parking lot. He was glad the seat was in the car and not at home. Every day, and most of the time more than once a day, they had both glanced at the empty seat in the car. Each time, it had torn Clark's soul to shreds knowing that their daughter would once more be left behind and the empty seat shuttled to and from their house and the hospital. But now! Now having Julia at home was within a finger's reach from them. All she had to do was prove that she could sit in her seat without any problems.

Clark reached the car, extracted the seat, and shouldered the small duffle bag Lois had packed with potential outfits for their daughter. That bag, like the car seat, had been sitting in the trunk, a constant reminder that Julia could not yet come home with them. But now, *finally*, Lois would be able to choose a "coming home" outfit for their precious little angel. He couldn't wait to see what she would pick.

Entering back into the hospital, he felt so light that he felt in danger of floating. He wanted to sing and dance and tell the whole world that Julia Kent was on her way home. It was a struggle to remind himself that she still had to pass one more test. In his heart though, there was no doubt that she would pass that test with flying colors.

"Back," he announced in a hushed whisper as he rejoined Lois in the NICU. "What'd I miss?"

"One *very* dirty diaper," she quipped with a smile.

Clark laughed. "Good timing on my part," he teased with a crooked smile.

Lois laughed too. "Yeah."

The nurse, Opal, saw that he had returned with the car seat. She came over and gently eased Julia into the seat. The baby protested a little at the unexpected movement and the loss of contact with her mother. Lois murmured soothing words to the girl and, after a minute or two, the infant's cries lessened and broke off. She closed her eyes and slept, while the wires continued to monitor her.

An hour passed in this manner, with Vanessa continuously checking in on things in between checking her other charges. Finally, she turned to Lois and Clark, a bright, genuine smile on her face. Clark's heart leapt into his throat.

"Congratulations! I'm evicting you today," she joked with them as she removed the wires and electrodes that had kept constant vigil on Julia's vital signs.

"You are?" Lois asked excitedly. In her joy, her voice broke free of the perpetual whisper she kept while in the hospital.

"I am," Vanessa confirmed. "She's passed the test better than I imagined she would. You can bring her home."

"Did you hear that?" Lois asked Clark. "She's coming home with us. She's finally coming home." She spoke the words into his shoulder as she hugged him tightly.

Clark responded by giving her a kiss. He kept it brief and innocent, mindful of where they were.

"Thank you. Thank you so much," Clark said, releasing Lois and shaking Vanessa's hand.

"I'm really happy for you," Vanessa said, smiling. "You're such a great family. Now, go on. Get her dressed and ready to go home."

"Clark?" Lois asked.

"Yeah?"

"You've been so great throughout this whole ordeal. I think you should pick her going home outfit."

"Me? But you've been looking forward to this," he replied.

Lois gave him a shallow nod. "That's true, but, really, it's been about going home, more than anything. You've been such a pillar of strength for me and for Julia this past week or so. It's only right that you should pick out what she gets to wear home."

"Okay," Clark said after a moment. "But only if you promise to be the one to dress her. Her mommy should do that."

Lois smiled tenderly. "Deal."

Clark opened the bag and rooted around inside for a moment. Lois had packed half a dozen different options, it seemed. He disregarded them and went for one specific one. He pulled it out a few seconds later.

"Where did that one come from?" Lois asked.

She took the outfit from him to look it over. It was a soft fleece zippered pajama. The pajamas were white and covered with prancing, rearing unicorns and flying pegasi in baby pink and purple, with a scattering of pale yellow and blue stars in the background.

"I bought it for her, the night we had to go home without her. You fell asleep early and I couldn't, no matter how hard I tried. So I went out," he said, making their symbol for Superman. "It was a quiet night and before I knew it, I was at that new baby store on Versailles Place. I went in and saw this hanging on the rack. I couldn't help but to buy it for her. Do you like it?"

"Like it? I *love* it. It's adorable!" she said with genuine enthusiasm. "You've got good taste. At least, in baby clothes," she amended after less than a second. "Your ties leave a lot to be desired."

Clark feigned a pout. "What's wrong with my ties?"

"The one you wore to the Armstrong verdict looked like a two year old got into a box of markers."

Clark deepened his pout. "I liked that one."

"And this is exactly why I'll be buying your ties for now on," she smirked.

"You can *help*," he teased.

Lois shook her head in a silent laugh. She turned her attention back to Julia and started to get her daughter dressed for the most important ride of her young life — that which would take her home. Clark merely watched on, beaming with pride. As the hospital blankets were removed and the pajamas he'd purchased were put on, their old life at last fell away and their new one finally began.

"I'll get it," Clark told Lois as she relaxed on the couch with Julia, an old black and white movie on the television, though neither one had been paying much attention to it. He stood and crossed to the door, just as the doorbell rang again. "Mom? Dad? What are you doing here? I thought I was coming out to get you in another hour?" he asked as he opened the door to let them in.

"Oh, we were able to get an earlier flight," Martha said, dismissing his confusion with the wave of a hand. "And we got a cab from the airport right away. I hope it's okay that we're early."

Clark smiled as he hugged her. "Of course it's fine. I just wish you would let me fly you guys in."

"Nonsense. You've got more important things to do around here than to be bothered flying us in," Jonathan said. "Lois? How are you feeling?"

"Still a little sore from the surgery, but your son has been amazing at trying to keep me comfortable and on time with the pain meds," she said as she stood.

"Oh my God! Is this her?" Jonathan said, his voice melting into a sing-song as he caught his first glimpse of the baby. "She's beautiful!"

"Oh, she really is," Martha put in as she stepped forward to greet Lois and Julia. "Hi, Julia, sweetheart! We've been waiting so long to meet you. We're so happy that you're at home. Yes, we are!" She looked questioning at Lois. "May I?"

"Absolutely," Lois said as she handed Julia over to her grandmother. "I'm so glad you guys could come out."

"Of course," Jonathan said. "We've been dying to meet her." He peered at the baby's face for a long moment. "She looks just like you, Lois."

"I think so too," Clark said.

The truth was, every day and every night since Julia's birth, he'd scrutinized her features, committing them to memory and searching for any hint that she might resemble him. It didn't matter to him either way, but he supposed all parents looked to see if their child shared any features with them. He'd found neither traits of himself nor of Luthor, only a perfect carbon copy of Lois. And that was just fine with him.

"It's like someone cloned Lois," he joked.

Lois just smiled up at him with a playfully self-satisfied look on her face. He stifled the laugh in his throat.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Lois offered.

"Some ice water would be good," Jonathan said, clearing his throat a little.

"I'll get it," Clark told her. Then, to everyone, "Be right back."

He headed off into the kitchen and filled a pitcher with water from the sink. Using a blast of his icy breath, he chilled the water and then made some ice cubes to dump in. He retrieved a few lemons, sliced them into wedges in case anyone wanted one, and put them in a separate dish. As he was taking some glasses out of the cabinet, his super hearing picked up the sound of the doorbell. He heard Lois open the door and greet her parents.

"Mom? Daddy?" she asked, her voice unashamedly conveying her confusion over seeing her parents show up together. "What, uh...?"

"What are we doing here, together?" Sam asked. "Turns out your mother and I booked rooms in the same hotel without knowing it. We bumped into each other in the lobby this morning when we went to get some coffee and decided to split a cab since

we were both headed to the same place."

"The cabbies here are little better than highway robbers," Ellen complained.

Clark grabbed some extra glasses as he listened and then put everything on one of Lois' serving trays. He added a package of chocolate chip cookies and made his way back to the living room.

"I'm surprised you didn't have Lucy meet you at the hotel too," Lois was saying as Clark reentered the room.

Ellen rolled her eyes. "Your sister," she said with no small tone of *harrumph!* in her voice, "will be the death of me."

"Sam. Ellen," Clark said by way of greeting. He allowed himself to sound caught off-guard that they had arrived. "Welcome."

"Hi there, Clark," Sam said, warmly enough. He shook Clark's hand.

"Hi, Clark," Ellen said, giving him a quick hug.

He had to admit, it was progress. Ever since he and Lois had become engaged, both of Lois' parents had warmed up to him more than they had been when he and Lois had been a dating couple with a child on the way.

"Mom, Dad," Lois said, directing them both toward Clark's parents. "These are Clark's parents, Jonathan and Martha. My parents, Sam and Ellen," she said, gesturing between the two sets of parents. "And this," she said, accepting the baby as Martha handed her back over, "is Julia."

Ellen had her arms out and Lois dutifully handed Julia over. "She's gorgeous!" she immediately proclaimed.

"She looks just like you did as a baby, Princess," Sam agreed.

Clark could see Lois beaming with pride as her parents gushed over little Julia. It made Clark's own heart swell as well. Seeing the Lanes as well as his own parents so excited over this new child was something so incredible that he didn't quite have the words to describe it. It wasn't often that he found himself utterly without words — after all, shaping words and phrases was how he made his living. But now he simply stood and watched, unable to forge a single coherent thought.

Jonathan moved over to stand at Clark's side. He gently, but firmly, clapped his son on the shoulder.

"Congratulations, Clark," he said with a smile in his voice.

"Thanks, Dad."

"She really is beautiful."

Clark shook his head lightly. "That's all Lois' doing," he said.

Jonathan nodded his head to the side. Clark dipped his head in acknowledgement, and together the two wandered slightly away from the group to stand near Lois' fish tank. Jonathan leaned against the wall and folded his arms over his chest. For a moment, all he did was look across the room to where everyone else was hovering over Julia.

"So, how are you doing with everything?" Jonathan finally asked.

It was a simple question, with no hidden meanings. Clark knew from his father's neutral tone of voice that he didn't mean anything more than what he'd asked. He wasn't asking how Clark was doing as a father of a child that wasn't his own, biological offspring. He wasn't asking if Clark truly felt like Julia's daddy.

"I'm great," Clark said, meaning it.

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. Remember when I asked you if you'd had any doubts about adopting, back in the day?"

Jonathan nodded. "I remember."

"You said that you lost all your doubts once you saw me."

"I did."

"The same thing happened to me. As soon as I saw her, my doubts were gone. She was so tiny and helpless. All I could think was that she was mine and how much I wanted to protect her."

"Well, you look really happy, son," Jonathan said, his chest puffed up with pride.

"I *am* happy. Everything I've ever wanted — a job, a home, someone to love, a family — it's all finally coming true. Sometimes, I can hardly believe it."

"You know, I might be a little biased, but, if anyone deserves happiness, it's you. And I'm not just saying it because you're my son, Clark. Everything that you do, every day," he said, sketching a quick S over his own chest, "for so many others — it's only right that you should get your happily ever after too."

"Thanks, Dad."

"And how's Lois taking to motherhood?"

"Really well," Clark said. "I mean, Julia's been home such a short time, but Lois has really been great with her. I know she still has her own doubts about whether or not she's doing it right, but she's a fantastic mother. It's been truly incredible to watch. It's weird, but I actually feel...well...privileged to be seeing it. Does that even make any sense?"

"It does," Jonathan said, nodding once in affirmation. "I felt the same way, watching your mother with you."

Clark smiled, feeling the warmth of the love he had for his new, perfect little family race through his body. It was as if every nerve ending was tingling with that warmth, like every cell was ready to burst, unable to contain all of that love. He was a lucky man — he knew it and pondered the wonderment of it every day. And he knew, without a doubt, that Lois felt the same way. He saw it in her eyes every time she looked at Julia. He heard it in her voice every time she spoke of their daughter. To Clark, Lois had never looked so beautiful before as she did as a mother, even in the middle of the night when they were both exhausted and disheveled from the brief catnaps they stole between feedings.

"I'm a lucky man," Clark said aloud, more to himself than to his father.

"I think so too," Jonathan said. "Lois is a wonderful woman — the very kind of woman we'd always hoped and prayed that you'd meet."

"She's pretty special," Clark agreed. "Anyone who can accept me, for who and what I truly am...I'm not sure anyone else *could* accept that but for Lois. And not only to accept that, but to encourage me to continue to be who I am..." His voice trailed off as he sighed contentedly.

"Have you two talked about a date yet, to make things official?"

"No, not yet. Things have been so crazy around here. I don't think we've managed to have a single conversation about anything not related to Julia since she was born." Clark smiled. He didn't mind. Anything that wasn't his daughter seemed, at the moment, to be insignificant in comparison to the wonder that was his baby girl. "Soon though, I hope."

"Me too. You and Lois are so perfect together."

"I mean, it's not such a bad situation now. We're living under the same roof, we work together, we're almost constantly together. It's amazing, getting up in the morning and having her there, going to bed at night and having her there. Sure, we had that to a certain degree before we got the house, but this is so different. It just feels...permanent. It feels like *home*."

Jonathan put his hand on Clark's shoulder. "That's because it *is* home, Clark. Not the four walls, the roof, the plot of land. The kind that's in here." He used his other hand to gently poke a finger at Clark's chest, right above his heart.

Clark nodded, then gazed back at Lois. Almost as if she felt his eyes on her, she looked up and met his glance. She smiled and darted a look at her father, who was holding Julia now. Clark nodded, just deeply enough for her to see. He gave his father one more appreciative smile, then went to join Lois.

That night, as they lay next to one another in bed, Lois sighed deeply. Clark lolled his head to the side to look at her, then promptly flipped all the way over to lay on his side.

"Honey? Is everything okay?"

A smile spread slowly across Lois' lips. "Everything is better than okay, Clark. I was just thinking."

"About?" he asked, hoping to draw out more information. There were times when he wished he also had the power to read at least Lois' mind, if no one else's.

"Did you notice anything strange today?"

"Strange?" he asked, now completely puzzled. "Like that Lucy didn't come to meet her niece, when she was one of your biggest cheerleaders once you decided that you wanted to be a mother?"

"No," Lois said. "I guess you were talking to your dad when Mom mentioned it, but Lucy thinks she's coming down with the flu. That's why she didn't come."

"Oh."

"What I *meant* was, did you notice how my mom and dad interacted with each other today?"

Clark racked his brain. They'd had a perfectly lovely afternoon with both sets of parents. He couldn't, for the life of him, think of anything out of the ordinary.

"I give up," he finally announced.

Lois smiled and shook her head. "They didn't fight once today, Clark. Oh, maybe there were one or two snippy comments that got tossed around by my mother, but they co-existed in the same room for hours without it turning to a verbal war."

Clark thought about it for a moment before agreeing. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I guess I was so busy enjoying our time together as a family that I hadn't noticed."

Lois stroked his cheek affectionately. "Maybe you didn't notice because today was normal for you and your family. You guys don't fight, so you don't notice when fighting is absent. For me...I've been watching my parents duke it out since I was a kid. It's almost jarring to see them getting along for once. I can barely remember the last time they were in the same room and perfectly happy to be there together."

"If it makes you feel any better, Lois, *we* will *never* be that family. You and I are meant for a lifetime of happiness with each other, and our daughter *will* grow up in a household where fighting is non-existent."

"How can you be so sure?" she asked sleepily.

"Because I know us," he replied. "You and I are each one half of a larger, greater whole. You are my heart, my soul, my everything."

"And you are mine," Lois said with a tired smile. She yawned. "Let's get some sleep," she said as the yawn trailed off. "We've got approximately forty-five minutes before Julia will be getting us up again." She grinned. "It's pretty incredible, isn't it?"

"That she's here, home, and healthy? You can say that again."

Lois snuggled into his side and closed her eyes. Clark kissed her on the cheek as he got himself settled. Reaching his arm back behind him, he shut off the lamp on his night stand and then put his arms around Lois. Closing his eyes, he smiled in contentment.

As far as he was concerned, he had the greatest family in the world.

"Lois?" Clark asked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. His sensitive hearing had picked up the sounds of her cries and led him down to Julia's room. He couldn't help the yawn he was attempting to stifle from winning its war with him. He yawned widely, trying to hide it behind his hand. "What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"I can't even feed my own baby," she wailed between sobs. "I've done everything the books say. I'd used all the tricks the nurses told me. I'm been trying to pump milk for over half an hour and only have an ounce to show for it. I can't...I can't..."

"Hey, hey," Clark said gently, jarred now into full wakefulness. "It's okay."

"No, it's not, Clark! I'm a terrible mother! I can't even feed

my own baby! The one thing I wanted to do for her, to give her the best start I could.”

“Lois, listen to me,” Clark said, kneeling before her and lightly placing his hands on her upper arms and pitching his voice just above a whisper. “You are a *fantastic* mother. You’ve done more than anyone has the right to ask of you. You’ve done nothing wrong. A low supply isn’t that uncommon.”

“But... Julia. I want to give her a good start to life. Especially since she was early and given her stay in the NICU.”

“You already *are*,” he reminded her. “It doesn’t matter what you feed her, so long as she’s getting the nutrition she needs to grow.”

“But...” she said, her lower lip trembling.

“No buts. You love her, right?”

“Of course I do,” she said, as Clark wiped a tear away with his thumb.

“Then she’s already getting the best start she possibly can to her life. She’s got two parents who love her more than anything on this Earth.”

“I hate that I’m being forced to feed her formula.”

“It’s not so bad,” Clark said, giving her his best smile. “I was raised for most of my babyhood on formula. Maybe all of it. Who knows, maybe Kryptonians didn’t breastfeed.” He shrugged. “I turned out okay. And so will Julia. I promise you.” He stretched a bit and kissed Lois on the forehead. “Okay?”

Lois gave him a tentative smile. “You turned out better than okay,” she finally said. “You turned out pretty much perfect, as far as I’m concerned.”

“And so will our daughter,” he reaffirmed.

“Our daughter,” Lois agreed, looking past Clark to where Julia lay swaddled in her crib. “God, can you believe that, Clark? We have a daughter.”

“I know. It still feels...” He paused, searching for the right word.

“Surreal?” Lois supplied.

“Exactly,” he said, nodding, pleased with how appropriate that word felt.

“Sometimes, I still can’t believe she’s really here. I know she’s almost a month old now, but still,” Lois admitted as the baby stirred in her sleep, opened her mouth, and began to wail. Lois started to rise but Clark put his hand on her wrist to still her movement.

“I’ve got this one,” he said. He zipped down to the kitchen, fixed a bottle of formula, then dashed back to his daughter’s room, all in less than ten seconds. “No, no,” he said as Lois once again went to stand. “You sit in the chair. I’ll take the floor.” Then he was at Julia’s bedside, gently picking her up. “Hi, sweetie,” he cooed at the baby. “Daddy’s here. Are you hungry? Did you hear that the midnight buffet was open? Hmm? Well, you’re in luck, little girl. Because Daddy has a nice bottle all ready for you. Let’s just get you changed first, okay?”

“You’re so good with her,” Lois observed as Clark gently unswaddled the baby and changed her diaper. “There were times when, I’m ashamed to admit, I wondered if you... well...”

“If I could really view her as my daughter?” Clark asked in a soft tone, his back to Lois as he finished putting the new diaper on.

“Well...” Lois said, drawing the word out, stalling.

“Don’t be embarrassed to admit it,” Clark told her.

“But... I feel so horrible for ever having had that doubt.”

“Is it horrible if I admit that there were nights when I wondered the same thing?” he asked in a voice that barely broke the threshold of a whisper.

“I know. You mentioned it once to me.”

“Right.” He picked Julia up and sat cross-legged on the soft, pale cream carpet of her dimly lit nursery. She made a mewling sound of hunger and Clark happily produced the bottle he’d made

for her. “It wasn’t because I knew she likely isn’t mine. It’s because that, of all the other people in this world, Lex was her biological father. I wondered if I could set aside my hatred of him and what’d he’d done to you — if I could see past the sins of the father for the innocence of the child.”

“You obviously love her. What changed?” Lois asked in a voice that matched his own in softness.

He shrugged gently, careful not to jostle the suckling baby. “She was born. Before that, everything seemed so distant and abstract. I knew she was on her way, but everything felt unreal, to a certain degree. And then, suddenly, she was here and perfect and staring me in the face. Everything, in that instant, became real, and although I loved her before she was born, I was hit with this wave of raw, overwhelming love for her. I knew, in that moment, that I was her dad. My doubts melted away. She’s mine, no matter what the DNA results say.”

“She’s lucky to have you as for her daddy,” Lois said in a soft voice. She’d often told him that, but it still moved him in a way that went beyond words, each time she reaffirmed that for him.

“I feel like *I’m* the lucky one. I have her. And, I have you.”

A tender smile unfurled over Lois’ lips. “Me too. And hopefully, soon, I’ll be your wife.”

“That sounds amazing,” Clark said, looking up from his daughter’s tiny face. “Just say the word and we can do it whenever you like.”

“Well, I *have* been giving it some thought. It’s helped pass the time while I’ve tried to pump milk for Julia. I called the chapel that I’ve always had my heart set on. They had only two dates open, one at the end of January and one in early June. January is a bit too early, especially since I’d hate to expose our daughter to that many people so soon.”

“June it is then,” Clark said knowingly. “Sounds like the perfect month for a wedding.”

“You think she’ll be flying by then?” Lois said, nodding toward Julia, who had gulped down half the bottle already. “She’s already got your metabolism, I see.”

“Lois...”

“I’m kidding!” she said, a glint of mischief in her eyes.

“Actually, that reminds me,” Clark said. “Dr. Klein called earlier, while you were in the shower.”

“Oh? What did he have to say?”

“He’s got the results of the DNA test,” Clark said somberly.

“Oh?” Her joking mood instantly vanished, a marked difference like a cloud suddenly covering up the sun. “Are they...?”

“He didn’t say,” Clark quickly added. “He just said that the results were in and that he wanted to talk to us in person about them. He didn’t want us to trek out in the cold with Julia, especially with her being a preemie, so he offered to come by the house. So, long story short, he’ll be here around three tomorrow.”

“I see.”

Clark could see that Lois was trying very, very hard not to let her worries show. He knew that she was doing her best to put on a brave face, to not let it show just how much she was dreading the results of that court-ordered blood test. He knew he was doing much the same, hiding his true feelings about the results. If he was any judge, he thought he was doing a passable job of it at least. He had long ago come to terms with what he knew the DNA would prove — that he was not genetically related to the precious little miracle in his arms. His DNA was simply too different, too alien, to be compatible for reproduction. It didn’t matter to him. Julia *was* his child. It was as simple as that. But, even so, he knew it would still crush his heart and soul to have definitive, indisputable proof that Luthor had been the one to sire a child on Lois.

He knew too, that it would be devastating to Lois, once Dr. Klein confirmed their worst fears. There was no doubt in his

mind that she would still love Julia as intensely as she did now. But she'd never given up the hope, as far flung as it was, that Clark had been the one to give her such a beautiful daughter. To know for certain that the child was the product of a violent, unforgivable crime would be a blow to her heart. Clark knew that without a shadow of a doubt.

"Everything will be all right," he tried to reassure her, though his voice sounded a little hollow to his own ears.

Lois nodded, unconvinced, and said nothing. Clark wasn't sure what else he could say, so he too, kept his silence. He simply gazed down at his child and watched the last of the formula drain from the nipple into her mouth. He lifted the bottle away, wiped her mouth, then gently brought her to his shoulder to burp her. After a few light taps on her back, the baby belched loudly, then yawned.

Clark kissed her forehead. "Goodnight, baby girl. See you in a few hours. Mommy and I love you," he told her.

Lois' arms were outstretched, waiting for their daughter. Clark carefully stood and placed Julia in her mother's arms. Lois kissed her forehead, cheeks, and the tip of her nose.

"Goodnight, sweetie," she said in a whisper as the child's eyes slid shut. "I love you. Sleep well."

She stood, walked to the crib, and gently placed the infant down. She silently took Clark's hand and led him back to their bedroom, after softly closing the door to the nursery. As they walked, she clicked the baby monitor back on.

"I've been dreading the DNA results," she finally admitted as they both climbed back into bed. "I hate that we've been forced to do this."

"Me too," Clark said. "But you know that, no matter what Dr. Klein has to say, nothing changes for me. Julia is my daughter and Luthor will have no influence in her life."

Lois cracked a slight smile. "It's good to have Superman keeping an eye out on things, huh?"

"No. It's good to have a *father* watching out for his daughter," Clark countered with a grin.

"Somehow, that's a lot more intimidating than Superman," Lois agreed with a yawn.

"I love you, Lois."

"I love you too, Clark."

"Got it!" Clark said as he leapt from the couch, the sound of the doorbell not yet faded.

It wasn't that he was eager to greet Dr. Klein or to get the results of the DNA test. He merely wanted all of the waiting and the accompanying anxiety to go away. And he wouldn't have that until the results were finally out in the open.

As it was, he'd barely slept the night before. He and Lois had rotated feeding and changing Julia, in the hopes that it would allow them both some longer stretches of sleep. They often employed that strategy, and it usually worked, but not last night. Last night Clark had tossed and turned the whole night through. Each time Julia cried, he was instantly and fully awake again, even if it was Lois who was the one who was feeding her. During the times when the infant was blissfully asleep, Clark lay awake, staring at the dark ceiling, his mind spiraling with fresh doubts.

He knew in his heart that nothing would change. He'd already come to accept the fact that Julia wasn't related to him by blood. He'd been at peace with that for a long time. But unusually unformed doubts plagued him anyway, most surrounding Luthor. Would the court sever the man's parental rights, once they knew for certain that Luthor, not Clark, was the father? Would Julia one day grow up and demand to know her birth father? Would she one day don the name of Luthor in an effort to get ahead in life, riding on the coattails of the man whose unwanted seed had contributed to her conception? Would she be forever ashamed once she learned of the man's countless

crimes against humanity?

In the small, gray hours of the morning, it had finally become too much for Clark to bear. He'd pulled on the Superman suit and had gone for a patrol around the city. The December air had been chilly and full of moisture with fog blanketing the city in a nearly suffocating cloud. He'd had to take it slightly slower than normal as he'd scanned Metropolis. But the city was all but asleep at that too early hour, and he'd found nothing insidious going on. He'd returned home, donned his favorite sweat clothes and had tried once more to sleep.

The brief outing must have cleared his head, even if he hadn't realized it. He'd finally managed a couple hours of sleep. He was far from rested, however. Even when he'd been able to sneak out for a few minutes alone in that void between Earth and the stars to soak up some quiet and sunlight, his brain hadn't afforded him any kind of mental relaxation. He was simply far too worked up about Dr. Klein's visit.

Now he stood, just on the other side of the door, about to have the immutable truth out in the open. It was rare that Clark ever felt in danger of being ill, but this was one of those times. His guts were knotted tightly. His heart was hammering away at super speed. He could taste the metallic tang of bile in his throat. A sense of dread cloaked his entire body, weighing him down in a way that nothing else on the planet could. He took a slow, deep breath through his nose and exhaled it through his mouth in an effort to calm his nerves somehow. It didn't work.

He opened the door to greet his guest. "Hi, Dr. Klein."

"Hi, Clark," the man said, warmly enough.

"Thanks for coming," Clark forced himself to say. "I appreciate it."

"Well, like I said on the phone, I'd hate to expose your daughter to any germs that might be floating around in the lab. And I certainly understand not wanting to really venture out with a newborn as it is, let alone with a preemie. But mostly, I think you two are entitled to hear the results of the test from me, personally, not in some random courtroom."

Clark led the doctor into the living room, where Lois was finishing feeding the baby. "Honey? Dr. Klein's here."

It felt like a stupid thing to say, Clark thought, but there was no recalling spoken words.

"Hi, Dr. Klein. Please, make yourself comfortable." She gestured with one hand while putting a pacifier in Julia's mouth with the other.

"She's beautiful," the man remarked before seating himself on the couch opposite where Lois and Clark were. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," Lois replied, casting her eyes down on Julia's face immediately upon speaking.

"I don't want to take up a lot of your time," Dr. Klein said, popping open the slender briefcase he carried. "So, let's get straight to it, shall we?"

"Sounds good," Clark agreed.

"Actually," Dr. Klein said, nervously fumbling with some papers in his hands, which he'd extracted from the black leather briefcase, "it might be better if I speak to you first, Lois. Alone."

Lois shook her head. "Whatever it is, you can talk about it in front of both of us."

"Are you sure? It's a bit...sensitive."

"I'm sure."

"Well...okay then. If you insist."

"I do," she replied, a little impatiently.

Dr. Klein bobbed his head in a slight nod. "I guess then, that I have some good news and some bad news."

Clark hadn't expected that. What could possibly be good about the results Dr. Klein had clutched in his hands?

"The good news first, I guess," Dr. Klein continued, as if speaking to himself. "Well, ah, the good news is, there is no

possible way that Lex Luthor is the father.”

A trillion to one.

Clark’s heart missed a beat and he almost gasped for air. He thought for sure that his jaw hit the floor. He tried to speak but couldn’t. He wanted to laugh, but no sound would come. He made an attempt to look at Lois to make sure that he’d heard Dr. Klein correctly, but found that basic movement denied as he sat frozen in place next to her.

“What?” Lois asked. Judging from the tone in her voice, despite all the reassurances that she’d given Clark that Julia really was his, it was clear that she hadn’t truly forsaken the idea that the baby really could have been Luthor’s.

“I ran the DNA. Twice. There were exactly zero matches between your daughter and Lex Luthor.”

“You’re sure?” Lois asked. Clark knew she needed that confirmation one more time.

“Absolutely.”

Everything had just changed in Clark’s world and the world seemed to tilt crazily on its axis. The impossible had happened. His dread was gone. He and Lois were suddenly free from the looming shadow of Luthor’s influence in their lives. In an instant, Clark had become a father to a little girl who actually shared in his genetics. He was no longer the last living person in the universe to carry on the legacy of Krypton.

“Clark? Clark, did you hear that?” Lois asked.

With a start, Clark pulled himself out of his thoughts. He forced himself to speak.

“Yeah.”

It was the best he could manage under the circumstances. He couldn’t even nod. He still felt as if lightning had struck his brain. He could scarcely think straight and his whole body tingled with a rush of adrenaline that had surged through him at Dr. Klein’s words.

“Did you hear that, Julia? The big, mean Luthor-man can’t ever try to claim that you are his,” Lois cooed to the baby, and Clark had to marvel at how completely in control and calm Lois seemed.

“And...the other news?” Clark finally squeezed out of his constricted throat.

“Oh. That.” Dr. Klein pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped at a few beads of sweat that had suddenly sprouted there. He looked possibly the most nervous that Clark had ever seen the man. “I...uh...I’m not really sure how to say this delicately.”

“Dr. Klein, you know that you can tell Clark and me anything, right?” Lois encouraged him.

Dr. Klein nodded. “Yes, but this is not...some piece to a story. This is something...” He trailed off, at a loss for words, from all appearances. He sighed and looked at Lois. “I’m not even sure if I should be coming to you with this first, or what. But, ah, when you explained your situation to me, about needing the DNA test, you did say that it was either Luthor or Clark who was the father, correct?”

Lois nodded. “That’s right. Why?”

“Well...in looking at Julia’s genetic breakdown...what I saw didn’t look right.”

Instantly, the cold dagger of worry was back in Clark’s heart and chest. “What do you mean? Is she okay?”

“She’s fine, but uh...her DNA doesn’t quite look like any Earth-born human I’ve ever seen.”

Earth-born human. Clark liked the sound of that descriptor. It acknowledged the alien part of his being as something that was truly human, though it set him apart from normal Earthlings.

“What are you getting at?” Lois asked, shifting Julia in her arms, holding her closer.

“I may be sticking my nose in where it doesn’t belong but...if I didn’t know better, I would say that she’s...well...the product

of a night spent with Superman.”

“I...uh...” Lois sputtered.

Luckily, Dr. Klein was too engrossed in telling his story to catch Lois’ stammer. “I know, I know. How can I possibly know what Superman’s genetic makeup looks like? It so happens that I’ve been working with it, breaking his DNA down to read the genetic coding. I’ve been doing it at his request, so that we can both better understand how his body functions and how I can best treat him as a doctor. Anyway, an Earthling’s DNA has four major elements. Adenine, guanine, thymine and cytosine, as you might remember from high school biology.”

“Right,” Clark agreed, nodding, encouraging Dr. Klein to continue.

“Superman has an extra building block in his genetic code. I’ve just been calling it K, for now. You know, for Kryptonian. And the others...well, they are a little different from the AGTC that make up our DNA.”

“A trillion to one,” Clark breathed before he could catch himself from speaking it aloud.

Dr. Klein nodded. “For recombining with an Earthling’s DNA, yes. How did you...?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lois cut in.

“Anyway,” the doctor said, clearing his throat and fidgeting with his handkerchief. “I’m not saying that Julia’s the daughter of Superman. Just that...I found the same anomalies in her DNA as I did in Superman’s.” He cast his eyes down, perhaps ashamed by what he was saying.

Lois and Clark shared a look. It lasted a mere second, but an entire conversation — questions and answers all — took place within it. Clark looked back at Dr. Klein.

“Will...?” He almost couldn’t ask it. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Will the court be informed of Julia’s...uh...uniqueness?”

“You mean the specifics of her genes?” Dr. Klein shook his head. “No. They don’t want to know or care about the specifics. They just want official paperwork telling them if Luthor has a case against you or not. In this case, no, he doesn’t, because the paperwork will state that Julia and he share absolutely no genes in common.”

Clark’s body physically sagged in relief. He’d been worried about that, in the slim chance that something like this came to pass, as astronomically impossible as it had once seemed.

“They won’t care if you or Superman or even if I am the father, not that I’m suggesting that he is. Uh, Superman, that is. At least, they won’t care unless and until one of you files a suit requesting that he take a paternity test.”

“That won’t be happening,” Clark said confidently.

Dr. Klein nodded distractedly, clearly not convinced. He looked uncomfortable, unsure of if he should say anything more, to them or to Superman. Clark looked again to Lois, a silent question in his features. She returned the look, as if telling him that the decision was his and his alone. Clark closed his eyes for a moment and sighed, trying to make up his mind. Coming to a sudden decision, he opened his eyes and met Dr. Klein’s confused look.

“A trillion to one chance of ever having a child,” he said, more to himself than to the doctor. “That’s what you said.”

Dr. Klein nodded. “Yes...”

“And you were wrong.”

“I...guess so. Are you saying...?”

“That she’s Superman’s? That she’s *mine*?” Clark nodded.

“His...? Yours...?” Confusion spread like wildfire across the man’s features.

Clark nodded again. “Dr. Klein...are you in a rush to get back to the lab?”

“No. I took the rest of the day off. Why?”

Clark smiled. “Good. You might be here for a while. It’s long

past the time when you and I need to have a little talk.” He pulled his glasses off as he spoke. “Because now, not only will you be looking after Superman’s...my...health, you’re also the only one I can trust with my daughter’s health.”

Dr. Klein’s lips moved but no sound issued forth. It reminded Clark of how a fish would gape when pulled out of water on his dad’s favorite fishing pole. He felt bad for the man.

“I know you have a lot of questions,” Clark added gently. “And I...we,” he amended, taking Lois’ free hand, “are prepared to answer them all.”

After a moment, Dr. Klein shook his head, as if clearing it. “One in a trillion.” He laughed. “One in a trillion!” He laughed harder, slapping at his knee.

Lois and Clark couldn’t help but join in, their mirth finally spilling over. Never before had they been so thrilled to find out that Dr. Klein had been wrong about something so important.

Clark rocked on his heels, trying to will the minutes away. He strained his hearing, listening for Lois, but found nothing yet. He guessed she had to still be pretty far, if he couldn’t at least hear the sound of her voice. He severed the use of his powers, jolting himself into the realm of normal, human hearing. He tried not to tap his toes in impatience. Discreetly sneaking a glance at his watch, he saw that he still had time before Lois was supposed to arrive. He could barely wait.

This was it. The day he’d been hoping and praying for his whole life. The day he’d wished upon stars for in his youth. The day he’d feared might never come once Lois discovered his secret.

Today was the day when he would become Lois Lane’s husband.

He saw his parents sitting in the front pew of the quaint little chapel Lois had chosen for them to exchange their vows in. His father nodded at him when Clark caught his eye. His mother was busily chatting away with Perry’s wife, Alice. Jimmy, his best man, was leaning a hip against one of the pews. From his stance, Clark guessed he was flirting with Lois’ high school friend, Fran. That made Clark smile inwardly. And yet, his heart ached for the younger man. Jimmy was forever hooking up with the wrong girls. His last girlfriend of five months had dumped him out of the blue just a few short weeks ago, and had moved in with her new boyfriend less than a week after their breakup. At first, Jimmy had been heartbroken. But that had soon turned to pure anger over having been cheated on. Clark wished his friend would find the woman he was supposed to be with.

Clark’s heart was nearly bursting with love for Lois. He wanted Jimmy to know what that was truly like. The man deserved it. Not only was he Clark’s brother-of-the-heart, but he was also the most reliable, hardworking person among Clark’s coworkers. He could always depend on Jimmy to find exactly what he needed, and in short order.

Clark silently observed the rest of the people who’d gathered in the chapel to witness as he and Lois exchanged vows and became husband and wife. Perry was laughing it up with Lois’ uncle, Mike. Ellen was fussing with the way the flowers in Lucy’s bouquet sat — no doubt complaining about Lois and Clark’s absolute refusal to use a wedding planner. Clark’s high school and college friends sat together, talking and laughing. Pete was pointing out something to his pregnant wife. Clark thought it might have been the stained glass window that was behind the altar. Asher, one of his college football teammates, was reenacting — in slow motion — a game winning touchdown he’d made, albeit in a small, quiet way to Thomas.

The organist played her music, filling the stone space with sweet melodies. Lois had requested all classical music to be played while their guests sat in the chapel, waiting for the ceremony to begin. Clark had loved the idea from the moment

she’d suggested it. Now, listening to the beautiful melodies, he was even happier to have agreed to the decision, especially as Pachelbel’s “Canon in D” began. He’d always loved that one, and knew Lois did too.

He saw Lucy take her leave of Ellen and disappear through the heavy oaken doors which separated the inner part of the chapel from the foyer area. He snuck a peek at his watch again, checking to see how close he was to becoming a married man. At the same moment, his super hearing picked up Lois’ racing heartbeat. Concern instantly flooded him. Was she okay? He fine tuned his hearing to find her voice, which was always like a beacon of light in an otherwise dark storm of sound. He heard her huff as she mounted the final step up from the sidewalk into the chapel.

“I can’t believe this day is really here,” he heard Sam say as he opened the door to the chapel. He sounded awestruck and maybe even a little sad.

“Me neither,” Lois said softly. Clark could imagine well enough the smile that would be playing at the edges of her mouth.

It was tempting to sneak a peek through the doors to see how Lois looked. She’d teased him about the dress, but hadn’t allowed him to see it, even going so far as to have the dress stored at Lucy’s apartment until this morning. He sighed so softly it was almost inaudible. He’d made it this long without seeing the dress. He could wait a few more minutes. More importantly, he would respect Lois’ wish to surprise him when she walked in.

“You look beautiful, Princess,” Sam said.

That made Clark ache to see her even more. He bowed his head and studied the pattern in the marble floor instead. It was better than staring at the plain wooden doors, he supposed.

“Thanks, Daddy,” he heard Lois reply.

“I always did dream that one day I’d be able to walk my girls down the aisle at their weddings,” Sam said, a bit wistfully.

That surprised Clark. Lois had made it quite clear from early on in their working relationship that Sam had always resented the fact that he’d never had any sons. Clark hadn’t been able to understand that viewpoint from the moment Lois had confessed it. He understood it even less now that he himself was the father of a little girl. He was completely enamored with his daughter and often thought that there was no better feeling on the planet than that of being a parent of a child — any child, be it a boy or a girl.

Nothing compares to it, he thought to himself. *No rescue I’ve ever made, no ‘victory’ I’ve ever had as Superman or as Clark, has ever compared to what it feels like to be Julia’s daddy. Being with Lois is the only thing that rivals the feeling of having a child.*

Just the very thought of Julia made Clark smile to himself. Each day when he woke, he was thankful to be a father. Each night when he lay in bed before drifting off to sleep, he was grateful to have spent another day with his daughter. Each moment in between, as he watched his daughter grow and learn, he felt so blessed that Dr. Klein had been wrong about his ability to create a child with a human woman.

Earth-born human, he thought to himself with a grin.

Ever since Dr. Klein had used that description, Clark had kept it tucked away in the back of his mind. He appreciated the way the doctor had separated Superman from Earthlings while still acknowledging that the alien was a human being. Since that day, when Dr. Klein had given Lois and Clark the DNA results and Clark had divulged his secret to the man responsible for saving Superman whenever the hero was ill, the doctor had proven his friendship as well as his trustworthiness over and over again. Clark had been infinitely glad that Dr. Klein had full disclosure of things as they had worked together not only to monitor Clark’s health, but also as Lois and Clark had turned to the doctor for

assistance in their stories for the Planet.

He was a good man, Dr. Klein. Clark couldn't have picked a better doctor and friend if he'd tried.

"Are you ready?" Clark heard Sam ask Lois after a moment.

It startled him to hear the voice in his ears. He'd been so preoccupied thinking about Julia and Dr. Klein that he'd forgotten to sever the connection to his super hearing.

"More than you know," was Lois' honest reply.

"In that case, your fiancé is waiting," Sam told her. "Shall we get started?"

Lois didn't reply verbally, so Clark guessed that she had just nodded instead. A moment later, he heard a creak as the wooden doors at the rear of the chapel opened. He saw Lucy stick her head in for just long enough for the organist to see her. Abruptly, the woman broke off what she'd been playing — Clark hadn't been paying much attention to the music and couldn't recall what the song had been — and shifted to Bach's "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring." A minute later, the doors once more opened and the bridal party walked in. It was a small party — just one of Lois' cousins, a friend from high school, a friend from college, and Lucy, who came in last carrying Julia in a mostly plain white dress with a hint of sparkles in the tulle of the skirt. Clark had been the one to find that dress for her.

She was in stark contrast to the teal dresses of the bridesmaids, but in a way that was pleasing to the eye, Clark thought. Then again, he had to admit that he was also the type who thought the clash of primary colors on his Superman costume also looked good. She was smiling widely as her aunt Lucy carried her down the center aisle. Clark heard more than a few "awws" ripple through the gathered guests. At one point, about halfway down the aisle, she spotted her daddy and kicked her legs joyfully, squealing with delight, her smile somehow growing even brighter.

That smile never ceased to swell Clark's heart with pride and love. And, even more amazingly, he saw his own smile in hers. In most ways, she was the spitting image of Lois. But there were some subtle features and characteristics that reminded Clark of himself when he looked at Julia. It was the icing on the cake of his life, as he saw it, to be blessed with a child who actually shared his Kryptonian blood and some of his physical traits.

Lucy reached the end of the aisle. Clark couldn't help but wave just a little at his daughter, just before Lucy gently placed Julia in the arms of Clark's mother. Of course, the child was still far too young to understand the gesture, but she did know who her daddy was and her face lit up when she saw him. It made Clark grin from ear to ear.

My daughter.

Every single day, that same thought had run through his mind, more than once. It never failed to fill him with awe.

My daughter.

The door opened one last time. Clark's attention immediately swerved to where the doors stood wide, giving him his first look at Lois. His heart failed to beat for a moment. His breath was stolen away. His knees nearly faltered, threatening to send him crashing to the floor in absolute wonderment.

He'd always thought of Lois as a beautiful woman. But seeing her in her wedding gown brought that beauty to a level he'd never seen before. There was a sophisticated, otherworldly look to her as she walked, her arm linked with her father's, down the narrow chapel aisle. Clark had always thought of Lois being at the peak of her beauty each time she interacted with Julia, regardless of the baby food stains on her shirt or the messy bun she'd pulled her hair into, or the dark circles around her eyes from a particularly bad night when Julia had barely slept, keeping them both up all night long. But now — seeing her in her wedding dress, knowing that in mere minutes they would be bonded together for life — he saw her natural attractiveness in a

new way.

The dress she had picked was spellbinding, if not something Clark had ever imagined she'd wear. The entire bodice was covered in an elaborate pattern of sparkling crystals. Most of the skirt was plain, save for around the bottom, where the pattern reemerged, coming to a high point right in front that reached nearly to her knees. Clark wasn't sure of the right word for the style of dress. All he knew was that it was mostly formfitting with a skirt that flared just a little and that it was strapless. But, most importantly, Lois looked absolutely radiant in it.

He knew that he was simply beaming as he watched Lois steadily grow nearer to him. His heels lifted off the floor just a little. He willed himself back to Earth and thanked his lucky stars that everyone had been looking at Lois and not him. She caught his eye and smiled at him. Clark tried, but could not make his own smile any bigger or brighter than it already was.

At long last, she and Sam finally reached the small marble altar. Sam lifted Lois' veil, kissed her cheek, and placed her hand in Clark's. He gave Clark a smile that spoke volumes about his approval of Lois' choice in a husband. Clark was glad to see it. Though he got along well with Lois' father and felt that the man approved of him, it was still nice to see the small gestures that reinforced such feelings.

"Hi," Lois murmured in a near whisper.

"Hi," Clark returned in the same tone and volume. "You look gorgeous."

"So do you," she grinned back.

"Dearly beloved," Perry began as the music faded into the air, bringing the small space into a respectful silence. "We are gathered here today for a very special occasion. We are called to witness the union of Lois and Clark in the sacrament of holy matrimony. As all of us here can attest to, Lois and Clark are two very special people."

Perry had surprised them both when he'd confided to them that he could marry them, if they so wished. Clark hadn't even known that the Church of Blue Suede Deliverance even existed, let alone that it was a legitimate group who actually did have the legal right to marry people. But a quick search had proven Perry's claim to be real. He and Lois had been thrilled to accept their boss' generous offer. In many ways, he was not just their boss, but a friend and father-figure as well. Having him officiate their wedding had seemed like the only logical decision.

"I've known these two for a long time. Lois was just a college senior looking for an internship when I first met her. She's been one of my best reporters ever since, and, well, like a daughter to me. And Clark here... well, I don't know him quite as long, but I do know what kind of man he is. Selfless. Caring. Devoted. Passionate. All qualities which, I believe, fit perfectly with Lois. There is no doubt in my mind that the marriage between these two will be the kind that will not only last a lifetime but will only grow stronger with each passing day."

Clark caught the smile that pulled at the corners of Lois' mouth. He couldn't agree more with Perry, and, apparently, neither could Lois.

"Lois, Clark, I understand you've written your own vows?" Perry asked.

Clark nodded. "We have."

"Jimmy? The rings?" Perry prompted.

"Oh, right," Jimmy said in a hushed voice that Clark knew the gathered witnesses couldn't hear. He patted his jacket pocket, reached in, and extracted the rings. In the next minute, Clark gently took up the one he was to give Lois.

"Go on, son," Perry prompted him.

"Lois, I love you," he told her, looking deeply into her eyes — eyes which had lit up his world since the moment he'd first met her. "You are my heart and soul. I can't imagine ever going through life without you by my side. Since the moment we met,

you alone have held my heart. You know me better than I know myself. You know every dream of mine, every joy, every desire, every secret. If someone had told me, years ago when I was so lonely and traveling the world, that I would meet you and of the wonderful family we'd create together, I don't know if I would have believed them, because it would have sounded too good to be true. *You* would have sounded too good to be real."

He smiled at her. "Take this ring," he continued. "I know it isn't much, but it's all I have left to give. You already have my respect, my fidelity, my unending love." He slipped the delicate gold band over her finger. "You make me complete. You make me happy. And I pledge to spend the rest of my life trying to make you feel as good as you make me feel."

When Clark fell silent, Perry nodded to Lois. "Lois?"

Lois dipped her head slightly in acknowledgement, but her eyes never strayed from Clark's. She blindly took the ring that Jimmy held in his palm. For just a moment, her eyes flickered down to the thicker golden band, which so perfectly matched her own. But a second later, she was once more focused only on Clark.

"Clark," she said, her voice quavering with emotion. "I never used to believe that soul mates existed. I thought that, sure, some people were better matches for each other than others. But the idea of finding one, perfect person in this whole, huge world seemed... farcical, at best. And then, one day when I least expected it, Perry teamed me up with the newest member of the Daily Planet staff — you. *You* made me believe in soul mates. You made me believe in *love*, even if it took me some time to realize it."

She blushed at that, probably remembering how their relationship had started out. "Once I learned that love was real — once I came to love you — everything in my life changed for the better. You've made me a better person, simply by knowing you. Today, I gladly bind myself to you as your wife and eagerly look forward to whatever our future brings. My heart is yours, as is my love, respect, loyalty, and soul."

A small, shy smile ghosted across her lips. "I know that our relationship hasn't exactly been conventional — after all, our daughter is here, attending our wedding. But, then again, when has conventional ever been normal for us?" Clark heard a few scattered, half-suppressed laughs at that. "And for that, I'm glad. I love you, Clark, and I look forward to spending the rest of our lives together, facing whatever life throws our way." She slid the polished gold ring over Clark's finger until it came to rest against his knuckle. "In you, I found my partner, my best friend, and my soul mate."

Perry waited until he knew for certain that Lois was finished speaking. He turned back to Clark.

"Clark? Do you take Lois to be your lawfully wedded wife, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," Clark said solemnly, looking at nothing and no one except Lois. He gave her a smile.

"And Lois? Do you take Clark to be your lawfully wedded husband, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do." Her voice sounded reverent in Clark's trained ears.

"Then, by the powers vested in me by the state of New Troy and the Church of Blue Suede Deliverance, I'm thrilled to pronounce you husband and wife. Clark, you may now kiss your lovely bride."

Lois' arms were around Clark almost before Perry was finished speaking. Clark encircled her with his own arms and drew her close.

"I love you," he whispered to her, just before their lips met.

He'd kissed Lois hundreds of times before. And each time had stolen his breath away, even the few which had been ruses

meant to deceive others. But kissing her now, as husband and wife, was somehow different. It felt deeper and more sensual, more bonding and more loving. He felt connected to her in a way that went beyond words, as if their two hearts and souls had actually recombined into one. It sent a thrilling rush through Clark's body and he wondered if she'd felt the same thing.

Reluctantly, he withdrew his lips from Lois'. While he'd been kissing her, the outside world had ceased to exist. No sound, no sights, no other people but the two of them. But now, as the contact with her lips faded, the world once more came crashing in around them. Their guests applauded thunderously. Jonathan beamed with pride as Clark's eyes swept the chapel. Martha was smiling from ear to ear, holding Julia and wiping tears from her eyes. Ellen's eyes were glassy and wet with unshed tears and Sam's smile couldn't have been any bigger. Lucy pulled a tissue from where she'd hidden it amongst the flowers she carried in her bouquet. Jimmy, standing behind Clark, thumped him on the shoulder and back in a congratulatory way.

"Shall we?" Clark asked Lois, uncomfortable with being in the spotlight, even if the day really *was* all about the newly married couple.

"Lead on, husband," she teased him.

"As you wish, wife," he tossed back easily.

He took her arm in his and led the way down the center aisle to the heavy doors at the back of the church. They hadn't been closed since Sam had escorted Lois to her husband, so they stood open wide. Clark was thankful for that. He hadn't wanted to have to stop to pull the doors open. There was no place for them to receive their guests at the chapel, so they headed directly for the limousine which would whisk them away to the reception.

Once the car started moving, Clark finally allowed himself to relax. He sank back into the leather seat, his arm around Lois. He sighed in contentment.

"We made it," he mused aloud. "We're *finally* married."

"Good thing too," Lois sighed while snuggling deeper into his side. "I already love being Mrs. Kent."

"I love it too," Clark said. "Uh, that *you're* Mrs. Kent." He chuckled. In his mind, it had sounded like *he* enjoyed being Mrs. Kent.

"You don't mind if I keep Lane for professional purposes though, do you?" Lois asked, as though it were a sudden thought in her mind.

Clark shrugged. "It doesn't make any difference to me if you want to keep it for that."

"It's just that it's taken me years to establish myself in the reporting world and although we're one of the hottest reporting teams in the country, I don't want people to just associate us with each other. You have your stories. I have mine. We don't always need..."

"Lois, honey," Clark said soothingly to her, cutting off her babble before it could go full force. "I *love* Lois Lane. I love her as a person. I love what her name symbolizes — the struggle she's always fought for the side of justice, years before anyone ever really knew who Clark Kent was. Or knew Superman existed," he added as a whisper in her ear. Her body trembled a little at the intimacy of the moment.

"The truth is," Clark continued, "it doesn't bother me at all what your — or our — byline says. Lane and Kent. Kent and Kent. So long as we go home with each other to our daughter at the end of the day, the ink can form whatever letters you want it to."

"Really?"

"Really," he assured her. He took her left hand in his own. "All that matters is what this ring symbolizes — our unending love for each other."

Lois smiled and kissed his lips. "I love you, husband."

"I love you, wife," he replied with a grin. "You know, I don't

think I'll ever get tired of saying that."

"Good. Because I love the sound of it," Lois said, her eyes sparkling with playfulness.

"Hey, Julia-bear!" Clark said as his mother brought the baby over at the reception, to where he sat in his chair at the dais with Lois.

He and Lois had finally gotten a chance to sit down after all of their professional wedding photos and meeting and greeting each of their guests as they entered the reception space. It had been great seeing everyone, even if briefly. Clark had taken a special delight in seeing his old Smallville High and Midwestern University friends. He didn't often get a chance to visit with them. Usually, when he was back home in Smallville, it was impromptu visits with his parents for advice or dinner. He couldn't just call up his friends and say he was in town. It would look too suspicious. And as for his college friends, they were flung far and wide over the country. Two of his football teammates had been signed by different professional teams, and rarely had time away from the field anyway.

Julia smiled to see her father. Clark took her in eager arms and kissed her all over, making her squeal with laughter. That, in turn, made Clark laugh. His daughter's giggles had always been infectious to him. He simply had no resistance to those peals of laughter.

"Careful. I might get jealous," Lois teased as she slid her arms around Clark while she stood behind him.

"Sorry, honey," Clark said with an unapologetic shrug. "But there's more than one woman in my life." He craned his neck back to look at her and grinned. He looked back to Julia. "Look, sweetie. Mommy's here!" He bounced the little girl on his knee, eliciting further laughter.

"Hi, baby," Lois said, stretching over Clark's shoulder to kiss Julia's nose. The baby scrunched up her face in a smile. "Can you watch Daddy for me?" she asked the infant. Then, to Clark, "My great aunt is demanding photos of me outside of the hall, by the flower garden and waterfall. Even though I've explained to her five times that the photographer already got those shots. Yes, before you ask, the entire Lane family *does* have the personality of a steam-roller."

Clark chuckled. "Go on. Make her happy. She's what? Ninety?"

"Ninety-one as of last Tuesday," Lois corrected him. Though she sighed, he could detect a hint of pride in her that the woman had lived as long as she had thus far.

"Ninety-one," Clark reflexively corrected himself. "Don't worry, I'm sure Julia will take great care of me while you're gone. And if dinner arrives before you're back, well, I have ways to ensure that it's piping hot when you *do* return."

Lois grinned and shook her head. "I know you do." She kissed his cheek lightly. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Or once she runs out of disposable cameras."

Clark watched her walk away, then stood from his seat. He worked his way around the room, chatting with various guests and catching up as best he could with his old friends. He had to pull Jimmy to the side at one point, to warn the man about Lana Lang, Clark's old high school girlfriend. Not only didn't he want to see Jimmy get hurt again — and Clark knew that was inevitable with Lana — but she had unexpectedly attended as his friend Paul's newest girlfriend, much to Lois' ire. Clark had reassured her several times that he hadn't known that she was the guest Paul had decided to bring, considering how messy Clark's breakup with her had been at the end of senior year and the fact that the two hadn't spoken since.

As the minutes slipped by, Julia grew increasingly fussy. She began to wail, complete with big, fat tears which raced down her chubby cheeks. Clark shifted her in his arms so that her head

rested more comfortably on his shoulder. He began to rock and sway as he spoke with people. Julia struggled against him for a moment, then started to calm down. Her arms went to either side of his neck, not quite encircling it, though she did cling to him tightly. Clark heard her yawn softly into his ear. In another minute, as Clark's heart continued to melt and it became harder to concentrate on the conversation at hand, he heard her breathing change in a way that he knew all too well.

Little Julia was fast asleep on her father's shoulder. "Everything go okay?" Lois asked as she came up alongside Clark.

"Just fine," Clark replied. "Although, *someone* didn't take her job of keeping her daddy out of trouble seriously and fell asleep at her post."

Lois snuck a peek at where Julia's head was burrowed into Clark's neck. "She's had a long and exciting day," she defended her daughter with a shrug. "It's not everyday that she gets to see her mom and dad pledge their lives to one another."

Clark resisted the urge to point out that Julia saw that everyday of her life, just not in a formal setting. He opted, instead, to steer Lois to the bar. She looked like she could use something cold to drink. When she chose a cream soda with ice, he knew he'd been right.

"Clarkie!" Lana cried out as she weaved through a small knot of dancing guests as a slow song played.

Clark internally cringed. He'd been trying to avoid speaking with her as much as possible. Judging from the way Lois was clenching her teeth, he guessed she was about as enthused by the idea of speaking with Lana as he was.

"Clarkie! There you are!" the woman said in a sugar-sweet tone that put Clark's teeth on edge. "I've been looking all over for you!"

"Sorry," he apologized, hoping he at least *sounded* genuinely sorry. "It's been a bit crazy today. Uh, Lois, this is Lana Lang." He knew he didn't have to introduce them formally, but it seemed awkward not to. At the very least, it gave him something to say.

"Hi," Lois managed. "So glad you could come."

Clark's ear was trained enough to hear how forced the plesantry was, through the heavy veneer of happiness Lois put into her voice. Lana seemed not to notice.

"So, someone *finally* got Mr. Uptight here to loosen up," Lana said, nodding toward Clark and his sleeping daughter. "Clark was always so skittish about relationships in general that, after we broke up, I figured he'd never settle down. You *must* tell me your secret," she said, winking at Lois.

Lois' grip on her glass of soda was so tight that Clark feared that if she squeezed any harder, the whole thing would shatter into a million pieces.

"There's no secret involved," Lois countered. "Just a mutual love and respect between us."

Clark wondered if that struck home for Lana. He'd told Lois everything about his prior relationships, especially how, while he'd been with Lana, he'd never been given a chance to feel comfortable in his own skin. There had always been some push for him to be something and someone he wasn't.

Lana glared at Lois for a moment.

Yep, Clark thought. *That comment hit home.*

After a silent moment where both women appeared to appraise one another, Lana nodded. "Well, anyway, I just wanted to wish you luck," she told Lois. She didn't need to say it, but her tone implied that the statement was meant to end with *being married to him*.

"Thanks," Lois said with more feigned politeness. "I already consider myself pretty lucky to have found Clark."

Luckily, Paul appeared, seeking Lana to dance with to his favorite song. As he led her toward the middle of the dance floor, Clark breathed a sigh of relief.

“You realize, of course, that she hates you,” he told Lois.

Lois rolled her eyes. “Oh, darn. I was really looking forward to exchanging Christmas cards with her this year too,” she replied, sarcasm dripping heavily from her words. Clark could only chuckle and put his free arm around his wife’s shoulders. “I’m beginning to understand more and more why you’ve always said it was a relief to break up with her,” Lois added after a moment. “And why your sweet mother calls Lana a ‘hateful’ woman.”

“Mom said that?” he asked in surprise. Martha rarely spoke poorly about anyone, let alone people who had once been so involved in the family.

Lois nodded solemnly. “Oh yeah. She had a few more choice terms that she used too. But it’s not important.” She dismissed the idea with a casual wave of her hand.

“No,” Clark agreed, “it isn’t.”

There was a lot of truth to those words. He’d long ago decided that Lana wasn’t worth thinking about if he didn’t have to. The only reason why he’d ever talked to Lois about her was in an honest attempt to fully disclose everything about his past to her. Lana was simply a part of his past that he preferred to keep in his past — way, way in his past. Lois was his true past, his present, and his only future.

“Are you okay with her?” Lois asked.

It took Clark a moment to pull himself out of his thoughts to realize that Lois was talking about the sleeping baby on his shoulder and not Lana. He pulled Lois a little closer with the arm he’d threaded around her.

“Are you kidding? This moment, right now, having my wife and my daughter in my arms is, without a doubt, the best moment of the day,” he responded with complete honesty. He bent his neck slightly to kiss the top of Lois’ head. “For me, this is absolute perfection.”

“Come on, Lois!” Clark called out excitedly, bright and early the next morning.

“Coming!” Lois called back, Martha and Julia hard on her heels. A piece of luggage was slung across Lois’ right shoulder.

“Don’t worry about a thing,” Martha was telling Lois.

“Jonathan and I will be fine looking after Julia. You just go on and enjoy your honeymoon. God knows you two deserve a vacation and some time alone together.”

“Thanks, Martha,” Lois said.

Clark knew there was a lot of truth to what Martha was saying. She and Jonathan had often watched Julia for a night or two while he and Lois worked late or just snuck out for dinner and a movie. He didn’t doubt that they would be just fine for the two weeks he and Lois would be spending in Hawaii. Still, like Lois, he had his reservations about leaving his daughter for so long. Foremost among those reasons was how much he was going to miss his little girl, particularly her giggles and smiles.

“Mom’s right you know,” he told Lois, trying to convince himself fully at the same time.

“I know,” Lois sighed, looking at her daughter’s smiling, happy face. “I’m just going to miss her *so* much!”

“We can come home for a visit any time you want,” Clark reminded her, gently putting a hand on her back.

“I know,” Lois repeated, still sounding saddened at the thought of leaving her baby behind.

As Clark helped her lift the luggage from where it rested on her shoulder, a thought struck him. “How about we make it a point to come home for her bedtime routine? We’ll still get to change her into her pajamas, read her a story or two, and get her all settled into bed. That way, we’ll be the last faces she sees before she goes off to sleep.”

Lois immediately nodded. “I’d like that.”

Clark grinned, pleased with himself. “I thought you might.

Ready to go? We don’t want to be late.”

“Late? I thought that the Superman Express wasn’t bound by a timetable,” Lois teased, making an S on his chest as she mentioned Superman.

“Well...no, it isn’t,” he had to admit. “But I did book some spa activities for us for this morning. I don’t think you’d want to miss that.”

“You did?” she asked, surprised.

He nodded. “I wanted to keep it a surprise until we got to the hotel, but...” He shrugged as his voice trailed off.

“You are an amazing husband,” Lois declared, kissing his lips with butterfly lightness.

He sighed exaggeratedly. “I try,” he teased, shrugging again.

“Bye-bye, Julia,” Lois said, turning back to the little girl. She took her from Martha’s arms and kissed the baby several times. “Mommy is going to miss you so much! Be good for Grandma and Grandpa, okay? I’ll see you tonight, I promise.”

When Lois had her fill of their daughter, it was Clark’s turn to say goodbye. He, like Lois, took Julia in his arms and kissed her all over her face, making the girl laugh hard. “I love you, kiddo,” he told her. “Daddy’s going to miss you, but I’ll see you soon, okay? In the meantime, you’re going to have a great time with Grandma and Grandpa. I promise. You won’t even know that we’re gone.” He kissed her once more for good measure. “Love you, sweetie.”

He looked to Lois once Martha had hold of the infant again. “Ready?”

Lois appeared to swallow around a lump in her throat as she nodded. “As I’ll ever be.”

Clark lovingly scooped Lois up in his arms, unconcerned with the luggage. He’d make another trip or two to get it once Lois got started with checking in at the hotel. Then, finally, they could have some much needed time alone with each other. Though Martha and Jonathan had taken Julia overnight so they could enjoy their wedding night, it would be nice to finally be able to lounge around in bed for as long as they wished. And, considering that he and Lois hadn’t been physical with one another since the night Julia had been conceived — barring the night before as they’d consummated their marriage — Clark was greatly looking forward to having the option to stay in bed and take his time with Lois, without the ever-present threat of a baby crying at a key moment.

“Clark? Are you still awake?” Lois called out from the bathroom.

“Yeah, honey,” Clark said, putting his book down on his lap. He grabbed his bookmark — handmade by this three year old daughter during arts and crafts time with Grandma Kent — and placed it between the pages before putting the book on his night stand.

“Good,” Lois said, coming out of the bathroom, a thin, loose satin robe tied around her.

“What’s on your mind?” Clark asked. As he did so, he peeled back the covers of their bed for her, inviting her in.

She sat, but didn’t pull the covers up just yet. She pulled off the robe and let it fall to the floor, revealing Clark’s favorite lacy red teddy. He growled his appreciation. Lois gave him a wicked smile as she pulled the covers up.

“Not so fast, Superman,” she teased him, putting one finger to his chest when he moved in to kiss her. “We’ll get to that, but, first, I want to talk to you about something.”

“Something good, I hope?” he asked optimistically.

“Well, I guess that depends on what you think about it, but, yeah, I would say it’s something good.”

She was being deliberately vague, Clark knew, and trying to keep him guessing. He decided to play along. “Well, you know that mind reading is *not* one of my abilities,” he teased. “If it was,

we could have avoided a *lot* of misunderstandings through the years.”

Lois rolled her eyes in a good-natured way, though she didn't argue. “The thing is...I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. A *lot* of thinking.”

“About?” he coaxed when she paused.

“I want another baby.”

Clark blinked as the words rushed out of Lois' mouth. Had he *really* heard her correctly?

“What?” he asked, feeling almost breathless.

“It's true,” Lois confirmed. “I want to try to have another baby.” She cringed a little, perhaps somehow embarrassed by the admission.

Clark kissed her forehead. “I want another baby too. I have, for a while now. I just didn't want to say anything until I had an idea of where you stood on the subject.”

“You...do?” Lois asked, sounding surprised by how quickly he'd agreed with her desire to try for a second child.

He shrugged. “Well, yeah. I adore being a father. I would absolutely love for Julia to have a little brother or sister. Being an only child is nice, but having that sibling relationship...it's special. But, ah, you do know that Dr. Klein still believes that our ability to conceive is still a trillion to one, right? That he thinks it was a fluke thing that Julia was ever conceived.”

Lois nodded. “I know. But I don't believe it. We've already beaten the odds.”

“I know that, Lois. But that very well could have been a fluke.”

Lois shook her head. “You once told me that nothing is impossible for the two of us. That our love is stronger than any odds.”

“And I believe that,” he affirmed. “I just...think we need to be realistic about our potential chances. It might not be a one in a trillion chance exactly, but we're still people born of different worlds, with differences in our DNA that may make it harder for us to have another child. That's all.”

“Believe me, Clark, I've thought about that every day since we found out that Julia is your biological daughter. Every time I look at her, I'm reminded of how lucky we are.”

Clark nodded. “So, uh, when did you, uh, want to start trying?” he asked instead.

“Well, tonight would be good,” Lois said with a wicked grin. “Tonight, huh? Tonight sounds good.”

Lois rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and yawned. Clark heard her push the covers aside. He felt the warmth of her body leave as she stood up. She must have stretched — he could hear the slight popping of her bones and joints. She padded across the bedroom and went into the bathroom. A moment later, Clark heard the shower turn on.

Begrudgingly, he pushed himself out of bed, hitting the button on the alarm clock mere seconds before it could start blaring its wake-up request at him. He too stood and stretched, trying to shake the sleep out of him. It was going to be a long, probably exhausting day, but he was looking forward to it. Today they were going to take five and a half year old Julia to the Metropolis Zoo. True, they'd been there before, but Clark always enjoyed the look of wonderment in his daughter's eyes when they went on “an adventure,” as she was so fond of calling their day trips.

He only wished that he and Lois could have given their little girl a brother or sister. For two years, they had tried. For two years, Lois had dutifully charted her temperature. For two years, she had religiously used ovulation predictor kits. For two years, she had taken home pregnancy tests, only to cry on Clark's shoulder when they came back with mocking, stark white negatives. For two years, she had again cried in her pillow when

her menstrual cycle had begun, especially the times when it came late and there had been the smallest sliver of hope that maybe, just maybe, they would be welcoming a new family member in the near future. She had tried to hide those tears, but Clark had always heard the hitch in her breathing, had felt the small shudders of her body against the mattress as she wept, had smelled the salt of her tears. He'd always done his best to console her, but the truth was, he too was torn and bleeding inside.

Of course they had known that their chances of success were infinitesimally slim. Dr. Klein's theory of “one in a trillion” was ever gnawing at the back of Clark's mind. But they had both felt that, after having the surprise of Julia, perhaps the man had simply been wrong. How could they have beaten odds so vast on that one and only night of intimacy prior to their marriage, when their daughter had been conceived? For a time, Clark had wondered if, perhaps, his exposure to that bafflingly new chunk of red Kryptonite had somehow altered his body chemistry enough to allow his seed to fertilize Lois' egg. He'd considered subjecting himself to the harmful stone again if it would increase their chances of success, consequences for his own body and possible pain be damned.

Dr. Klein had swiftly dashed even that small glimmer of hope to pieces after he'd run another battery of tests on another “sample” that Clark had given him. The Kryptonite had no effect on it at all, and it certainly had no bearing on Clark's ability to create a child. Feeling hopeless, they had both mutually agreed to stop actively trying. They wouldn't do anything to prevent a pregnancy, but the charting and timed intimacy would stop. After all, for a time there, even with the burning love they had for one another, intimacy had ceased to be fun, and, instead, had come to feel like a chore.

Even the road to adoption had been filled with potholes. The first two agencies they contacted had assigned social workers to meet with them after their applications had been reviewed. In both cases, the women had gushed to them about what fans they were of their work, had complimented them on what “outstanding” citizens they were, but ultimately felt that their job put them in far too much danger on a regular basis for their agency to consider placing a child with them. A third agency had so many hidden fees that Lois and Clark had mutually decided not to pursue them, fearful that they would run themselves into deep debt with the agency. The fourth one had seemed extremely promising at first, but, as they'd gotten further down the road with them, red flags had started popping up with alarming frequency. So they had begun to dig a little deeper, eventually working with the police to bring down the entire agency, which had been a front for child trafficking. They had won a Pulitzer for the coverage they had provided for the Planet after the ordeal was over, but the entire experience had left them emotionally drained and too scared of the adoption process to try again.

Like it or not, they'd been forced to accept the fact that their family would never be more than three. It had been a bitter pill to swallow, but the worst part was trying to explain to their daughter why most of her friends had siblings while she did not. They had simply told her that sometimes, families were meant to be smaller, and their family of three was perfect. She had accepted the explanation, but Clark knew that more questions would probably come in the future.

Giving up — acknowledging their failure, as Clark sometimes thought of it — on trying to expand their family was simultaneously excruciating and freeing. Stresses fell away from them that they hadn't even been fully aware that they were carrying. Though neither one felt that their marriage had suffered along with their hearts from their infertility, they both admitted to feeling closer once they stopped trying for a baby. Intimacy had regained its fun and spontaneity again.

Still, each day, Clark cursed the differences of his alien DNA

for robbing Lois of the chance to have more children.

THE END

While Lois showered, Clark chose his clothing for the day, then checked in with Julia, rousing her from her bed. She awoke bright-eyed and ready for the day, giving him the wide, excited smile she'd always given him since she was a baby just learning how to smile for the first time. She hugged him tightly around the neck and they spent a few minutes playing together before Clark helped her pick out of her outfit for the day. He left her to get dressed and was about to go downstairs to make them all some breakfast, as well as pack some snacks for the afternoon, when he heard Lois calling to him.

"Clark?"

Instantly, he changed his path to return to the bedroom. He found Lois standing by her side of the bed, already dressed but with her hair hanging still limp and damp. But what concerned him was her face. It was somehow completely blank, devoid of any kind of emotion or hint as to what she might have been thinking.

"Lois? Are you okay? What's wrong?" he asked, his level of concern skyrocketing.

He rounded the bed to get to her side.

"I'm fine," she replied, almost hollowly, looking down, never meeting his eyes.

"You look anything *but* fine, honey," he told her. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Lois said, and Clark thought that hollow wasn't really the right word for the timbre of her voice. More like thunderstruck. "Look."

For the first time, Clark realized that she was cradling something in her hands. He peered over her shoulder to get a better look at what she so reverently held. He was surprised to see a pregnancy test in her hands. He was more surprised to see but one word displayed on the digital screen.

Pregnant.

Tears leaked from his eyes, matching his wife's. He couldn't speak. There simply were no words. All he could do was hug Lois tightly. As soon as his arms encircled her, she began to cry hysterically, uncontrollably. He furrowed his brow, concerned. Wasn't this something they had both wanted for so long?

"Are you okay?" he whispered into her ear.

She nodded, her head buried into his chest. "Better than okay."

"You're crying pretty hard," he observed.

"I know." Her voice was muffled by his t-shirt. "I'm sorry. I'm just...I can't believe this is happening. I'd pretty much given up all hope."

"I had too," he confided to her, holding her just a little closer. "Thank you, Lois."

"Thank you?" she asked, puzzled, as if it was some foreign phrase she did not recognize.

"For this new baby," Clark explained. "For our life together. For Julia."

Lois pulled out of his embrace to look him in the eyes. "You know that nothing is certain yet, right? We still have to make sure that this is a viable pregnancy."

"It doesn't matter. For today, we're a family of four," Clark told her, "no matter what may or may not come in the future."

"We can't say anything yet to Julia either," she warned him.

"My lips are sealed," he promised her, miming zipping his lips shut. "I love you."

"And I love you," she replied, stretching up to kiss him.

Clark eagerly kissed her back, his entire focus on Lois. Nothing else mattered. What would come, would come. He wasn't going to worry about anything. He was simply going to enjoy today — the love of his family, the hope in his heart, and the absence of doubt within him.