

Ambivalence

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Summary: Ambivalence—noun 1: simultaneous and contradictory attitudes or feelings (as attraction and repulsion) toward an object, person, or action; 2: continual fluctuation (as between one thing and its opposite). What if Clark escaped from Luthor's Kryptonite cage just a few seconds earlier, and it forced both Lois and Clark to face up to how broken the events of "Barbarians at the Planet" and "House of Luthor" left them?

Story Size: 76,590 words (417Kb as text)

One painful step at a time, Clark staggered up and out of the LexCorp building. Free. By the skin of his teeth, he'd escaped Luthor's Kryptonite cage, powerless and, he suspected, mere minutes from death. Lois had saved him, or at least his desperation to save her had goaded him to save himself. Cops surrounded the place. Perry and Henderson must have managed to stop Lois's wedding to Luthor. And now that the police were here, now what? He could go inside, find Lois, and—

Clark's breath caught in his chest as Lois came out the front doors. She was beautiful in her wedding dress. Beautiful for *him*, he reminded himself. For Luthor. Not you. She'd chosen Superman's arch enemy over her supposed best friend. He sagged against the side of the building, trying to dredge up enough strength to walk over to her. Her shoulders slumped as Perry gently guided her out of the building.

"I've always been such a good judge of character," Lois wailed to Perry.

Clark stiffened as her words twisted the knife she'd plunged into his heart, slamming him back to the reality of their situation. *Such a good judge of character.* Such a good judge that she'd refused to listen to Clark when he'd warned her about Luthor. Such a good judge that she would trust Luthor's word over his. Such a good judge that she would love Superman even if he were "an ordinary man living an ordinary life."

"Oh, Lois," Clark murmured. She never could be wrong. He knew she was far from as confident as she portrayed herself. She was obviously hurting and a part of him longed to sweep her up into his arms and shelter her from the pain he knew she was feeling. Normally, he would have been able to push his emotions aside and do just that. However, the fact that she hadn't married Luthor didn't change his own personal hell: half of him her "god in a cape" that she was "so completely in love with" and half of him the hack from Nowheresville that she "just didn't feel that way about." They'd saved her from Luthor, but he had no idea what to do next.

"Where's Clark?" she cried.

Clark stayed where he was.

"We're not sure, honey. We haven't seen him in two days,"

Perry said somberly, pulling Lois into a hug.

The crowd gasped and pointed up. Clark couldn't see anything from where he stood.

"Lex! No!" Lois cried.

Luthor must be in trouble. Clark tried to lift off, but his body was as weighted as his heart.

Lois hid her face against Perry. Luthor's body thumped to the concrete.

It was over.

Clark mourned the waste of a life, but even so, a part of him was savagely glad Luthor had precluded any hope of rescue. If he'd lived, they would have spent the rest of their lives with one eye open.

Perry bundled Lois into a car. Jimmy and Jack got in, and they drove off. Good. Lois had escaped most of the press, at least for now. Perry would take care of her.

What about him? He needed to leave before someone recognized him. But go where? He wanted to crawl in a hole and sleep for about a week. And there was no way he had the energy to explain where he'd been for the past two days. Perry was too sharp-eyed to accept anything vague. In fact, maybe he'd better leave a message for Perry now, before they could return to his apartment. He walked to a payphone and dialed his own number.

"Hey guys, it's Clark. I, uh, heard the latest about Luthor. Sorry I missed out on the end of the investigation. I'll check back in a couple of days. Feel free to stay at my place."

He hung up the phone. It'd been tempting to just disappear and he still might. But it wouldn't be fair to Perry, Jimmy and Jack to leave without saying good-bye. Running was second nature, or had been until he'd met Lois. And now she tied him here ... and pushed him away.

Enough thinking. Enough feeling. He held his breath for a moment, trying to still the pain. A cab. A place to stay. Pay in cash so he couldn't be traced, in case he did decide to disappear. He knew the drill.

Clark sighed. Now that he was checked into the hotel, he should probably call his parents, just in case someone tried to reach him there. He dialed the Kansas farmhouse.

"Hello," his mother's voice came through the phone.

"Hey, Mom," he said tiredly.

"Clark, you sound terrible. Are you okay?"

The corners of his mouth turned up. He never could put anything past his mother. "I don't know. I just thought I'd call you before anyone else did. I've been out of touch with everyone for the past couple of days."

"Oh?"

He paused, trying to come up with some gentle way to tell her. There was none. "Luthor had Kryptonite."

He could hear his mother fumble with the phone, then yell for his father. "Oh, honey, what happened? Do you need us to come out?"

His father picked up the extension. "Son, are you hurt?"

"No, Mom," he said. There was no point in them coming, nothing they could do for him—nothing anyone could do. "I'm okay, Dad," he hedged. "Luthor trapped Superman in a Kryptonite cage and held him there for the past two days." Even without super powers, Clark could hear his mother's sharply indrawn breath.

"A cage? How could he?" Martha said, her voice shaking.

Clark thought it was probably good for Luthor that he was dead. Otherwise his mother would be after him. Martha might be small, but she was a fierce woman, especially when her protective instincts were aroused.

"Where are you? Are you safe?" Jonathan asked.

Something uncoiled in Clark's chest in the face of his parents' concern. They hadn't been able to keep him safe for a long time, but they still made him feel safe. "Yeah. Luthor's dead now. I'm laying low for a while," Clark said.

"Wasn't the wedding supposed to be today? Is Lois okay?" Martha asked shrewdly.

"I don't really know. Perry's taking care of her," Clark said. He could practically hear the wheels turning in his mother's brain. "I don't want to talk about it right now, Mom. I'm exhausted. Superman doesn't have any powers, and he's not sure

if they'll come back or not."

"They came back before," Jonathan said.

Clark raked a hand through his hair. "That wasn't—it's different this time. That was minutes. This was two days."

"What happened to the cage?" Martha asked.

"It's still there," he said, his stomach lurching at the thought.

"I guess I should—do something about it . . ."

"You can't go near that thing!" Martha protested.

"Yeah." Clark thought for a minute. Someone did need to do something about it. "Maybe Henderson can take care of it. I trust him," he said finally.

"Okay, son, as long as you think he'll keep Kryptonite secret," Jonathan said, worry lacing his tone.

"Jonathan, he can't just leave it out for someone else to get!"

"I'm just saying be careful," his dad assured her.

"I will be, Dad. I'm beat. I'll call you guys later, okay?"

"Okay. Love you, honey. If you need us to come—" his mother began.

"I'll let you know," Clark said quickly. "Love you too, Mom."

"Love you, son."

"Love you too, Dad. Bye."

Clark hung up the phone and groaned. He wished he could just forget the blasted cage. But his parents were right—that'd be asking for trouble. And even though moving was the last thing he wanted to do, there was no way he was going to call Henderson from his hotel room.

He found a phone booth a couple of blocks away. Henderson may or may not have left LexCorp. He called Henderson's direct line, hoping he wouldn't have to do more to chase the man down. "Henderson."

Clark had never been so glad to hear the laconic inspector's voice. Glancing around once more, he didn't see anyone close enough to hear, so, adopting his Superman tone, he plunged in, "Inspector Henderson, this is Superman. Is this line secure?"

"Just a moment," Henderson said. Clark guessed that he was closing his office door. "Superman, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I heard you were at LexCorp earlier today."

"I was. I have to admit, I expected to see you there too—not that anyone will be too broken up over Luthor's death."

"Trust me, if I could have saved him, I would have," Clark said.

"If you could have? I suppose even you can't be everywhere," Henderson said.

Clark could almost see the man's raised eyebrow. "Indeed. I always regret those I can't get to in time." He took a deep breath, trying to keep his impersonal superhero persona in place. "I am, however, calling with regards to one of Luthor's possessions."

"Oh?"

"Inspector Henderson, it is of the utmost importance that you keep this to yourself," Clark began.

"I can't promise that without knowing anything more, but I'd say the MPD owes you, Superman."

Clark hesitated, then gave in. After all, he didn't really have any other options. "Have you ever heard of Kryptonite?"

"Can't say that I have."

"It's a green, glowing meteorite from my home planet. And it's poisonous."

Clark heard Henderson's chair squeak as though the man were leaning forward suddenly. "Poisonous?"

"Not to humans. Only to Kryptonians."

"Poisonous to you then?"

"Yes. Luthor had a cage coated with it," Clark said, trying to keep the trembling out of his voice. To have been treated like an animal, tortured in so many ways—well, he suspected it would be

some time before he could even say "cage" without feeling ill. He forced himself to continue. "He may have had other pieces."

"I saw the cage."

Clark heard something in Henderson's voice—disgust? And maybe compassion? "Do you think you can dispose of it, quietly? Lead will block the radiation. I'd hate for any other criminals to get their hands on it."

Henderson was quiet for a moment, then sighed. "Yeah, Superman. As I said, the MPD owes you."

"Thank you, Inspector. If you find any pieces, would you seal them in a lead box and give them to Clark Kent?"

"I'll keep an eye out."

"I'd appreciate it. I'll let Clark know that you may be contacting him."

Clark felt a little bit better after wrapping up that loose end. Now he just wanted sleep, hours and hours of it. Despite being bone weary, however, sleep proved elusive. He couldn't stop thinking about what would come after sleep, what would come tomorrow—whether he would return to his apartment, whether he would see Lois. Someone else's options would be simple. Someone else could stay or go. He wasn't someone else. Superman might be gone forever, but he couldn't count on that.

His head hurt, from the Kryptonite or from trying to make sense of the past few weeks; he didn't know. There had to be a way for it to make sense. There had to be a way to sort through his options. Lois would be making a list. Maybe it was worth a try. Her lists always seemed to pull diverse facts and create a whole.

He flipped the light back on, grabbed the ubiquitous hotel notepad, and began to write. Clark could leave and Superman could stay. Clark could stay and Superman could leave. Both could stay. Both could go. And then of course, there was the reality that nagged at him: if he stayed, in either guise, what about Lois? Would they try to repair their relationships, either of them? Did he want to? Did she want to? She had looked for him after her failed wedding. Good old Clark. Always-there-for-her Clark. Why the hell would he be at her wedding to another man? Of course, Perry, Jimmy and Jack had been there, but only to bring Luthor down and to save Lois. Maybe he was being unfair; Clark would have come for those kind of reasons. Maybe she had a right to expect him there.

He stopped that line of thought and started a new list. Clark could stay and have a relationship with Lois while Superman stayed and didn't have a relationship with her. It would solve the problem he'd created when he'd created his alter-ego. Lois had been devastated by Superman's rejection. He'd heard it in the hitch of her breath and the pound of her heartbeat as it sped up. He'd heard it in the tears she'd hidden from Superman. Maybe she'd been devastated enough to move on, to allow Clark a chance.

And yet—somehow, someday, if they were ever to have the sort of relationship he wanted, they'd have to deal with Superman's rejection. Maybe he'd best rebuild that bridge rather than burning it to the ground, at least if he decided to pursue her. And there, that was the crux of the matter: Did he want to pursue her? Did he want a woman who had been so terrible to him?

And so wonderful, his conscience reminded him.

He didn't know. He didn't know if he could bear to keep her in his life. He didn't know if he could bear to lose her again.

His fingers clenched around the list as he re-realized she'd never been his to lose. She'd been the worst sort of tease—throwing herself at him one moment and putting him down the next.

But not on purpose. She didn't know. You haven't told her that you're Superman.

Clark forced his hands to relax and smoothed out the paper

once more. The reality was that he didn't know what he wanted. He hated her, hated what she'd done to him, hated what she'd done to them. He hated feeling this confused. He hated that he still loved her.

He couldn't forgive her, but he couldn't leave her.

... Which meant that he couldn't leave Metropolis. Until his feelings settled one way or the other, he needed to stay and try to figure things out. But that did not mean being best friends with Lois Lane. Not yet. And until his powers came back, Superman couldn't mend or burn any bridges.

Lois woodenly settled herself in the car. She stared at the back of the driver's seat, unseeing, her wedding dress fluffed around her. Lex was dead. Clark was missing. And Clark had been right. She held in a sob. She tried to make sense of what Perry had told her, but it wasn't working. She couldn't even come up with the questions to ask. She shivered. Lex had been dirty enough to kill himself, rather than give himself up. He must have known he'd have been looking at a long prison sentence. And she needed Clark.

"How can you say that, Lois?" Jack demanded.

She forced herself to look in his direction, tried to make her eyes focus. "Say what?"

"You just said that you need Clark," he said flatly.

Oh, she'd said that part out loud. She wondered if she'd said anything else out loud. "I do," she admitted, her throat tight.

"You broke his heart, Lois! How can you ask for him now? Especially when your fiancé probably had him—"

"Jack!" Perry admonished.

Jack subsided, but Lois heard what he'd left unsaid. Her criminal fiancé might be why Clark was missing. They really believed Lex was capable of kidnapping—although she had no idea why Lex would have had Clark kidnapped.

"What arson was it?" she asked, hoping this might give her a clue as to Clark's whereabouts. She remembered that was what Henderson had arrested Lex for—that and other unmentioned crimes. Lex had once told her that he'd done things he wasn't proud of, and she'd always assumed that he hadn't gotten to where he was without bending a few rules—much as she'd done in her line of work—but she'd assumed that he'd meant things like fudging on his taxes or other white-collar crimes. Arson and doing something to Clark were a whole different ball game.

"Maybe we should talk about that later, honey," Perry said, sounding surprisingly tender for her gruff editor-in-chief.

"No," she said. Didn't he understand that she needed to know? Needed to find Clark?

"We'll be at Clark's soon; we can talk then," Perry said.

"Clark's?"

"Yeah, we've been bunkin' with him the past couple of weeks, and there are probably reporters crawlin' all over your place."

She slumped back into the seat. Clark's. Maybe he'd be there. Maybe then she could figure out what was going on.

As they walked in Clark's door, the emptiness hit her. He wasn't here.

"Do you, uh, want to change into somethin' else, darlin'?" Perry asked.

"Yeah," Lois said blankly. She didn't have anything else with her.

"I'm sure Clark wouldn't mind if you borrowed somethin', or one of us can lend you somethin'."

"Yeah," she said again. Clark wouldn't mind. He'd lent her clothes before when they'd been here late, working on a story. If he was missing

"Chief, there's a message on the machine!" Jimmy said, then pressed the play button.

Clark's voice filled the apartment. "Hey guys, it's Clark. I, uh, heard the latest about Luthor. Sorry I missed out on the end of the investigation. I'll check back in a couple of days. Feel free to stay at my place."

Lois noticed that Jimmy and Jack seemed overcome with relief. They'd really been worried about Clark.

"He's alive," Jimmy whispered.

"Yeah, but where is he? Why didn't he say if he was okay?" Jack said. "And where was he?"

"We'll just have to ask Clark when he gets back," Perry said firmly, giving the guys a sharp glance. "Now, Lois, were you goin' to change?"

"Change. Right." She forced herself to walk back into Clark's bedroom. Sweats were in the bottom drawer. T-shirts in the middle drawer. She collected what she needed then went back into the bathroom. They'd really been worried for Clark's life. Why hadn't he said where he was or if he was okay? She shook her head, trying to clear it. Change first, then worry about the rest, she thought, and then promptly realized she had no idea how to get out of her wedding dress ... If Clark were here, she could have asked him to help. It would have been awkward, but less awkward than asking anyone else.

Oh, Clark, where are you? I need you!

How could he leave her like this? It wasn't like Clark to just duck out and leave his friends high and dry—well, actually, it was, but she never would have thought he'd do it now, not when he had to know that she'd need him. She grimaced at herself in the mirror as a sudden thought hit her. She couldn't believe what she was thinking. Lois Lane didn't need people to get her undressed. That was Lois Luthor, and she refused to be Lois Luthor.

A tiny spark of anger lit inside her. She'd gotten herself into this mess, and she'd get herself out of it. She twisted and turned, trying to grab hold of the darn buttons. If she could just get the first couple undone, she thought she'd be able to reach the rest. After five minutes of trying nicely, she gave up. She'd been nice for far too long anyway—going along with Lex's plan for their wedding, Lex's choice of her wedding dress, Lex's blueprints for their house. She strode grimly out into the main area. Jimmy and Jack were sitting on the couch with the TV on. Perry was in the kitchen, looking through Clark's cupboards.

"Lois? You okay?" Perry asked. "I thought you were goin' to change."

"I am going to change," she said through gritted teeth. "I just need"—she dug through the appropriate kitchen drawer and held up Clark's scissors—"these," she said, and whirled around, heading back into the bathroom. Once in the bathroom, she was able to cut enough of the dress to enable her to wrestle it off. It was hideous anyway. No one would be mourning its loss. No one would be mourning the loss of Lois Luthor.

She put on one of Clark's T-shirts and a pair of sweatpants his mom had left the last time she'd visited, and then bundled the dress into a pile. She'd find somewhere to pitch it sometime soon—unless, did she need to return it to Lex's lawyer or the police, along with her ring? Something else to figure out later.

Time for some answers. She tried to still the trembling deep within her and to fan the anger. Now was not the time to fall apart. She'd survived her mother's alcoholism and her father's affairs. She'd survived her parents' divorce. She'd survived Linda's disloyalty and Claude's betrayal. She would survive this too.

She walked back out and sat on the chair across from Jimmy and Jack. "Okay, spill. What arson?" she demanded.

Jimmy and Jack just stared at her.

Perry came and sat down too. "Well, darlin', the reason Jack here isn't under arrest is because we found out he'd been framed." He took a deep breath. "Luthor was the one behind the

bombin' of the Daily Planet.”

“Lex was? Are you sure?” Lois asked, her voice almost a whisper.

“Yeah, honey. I'm sorry,” Perry said.

“So that was the arson?”

“Yeah.”

“What else?”

“What do you mean what else?” Perry asked, stalling.

“Henderson said there were other crimes.”

Perry sighed. “Lois, even Elvis knew when he needed to take a break. You've been through a lot today.”

Jimmy shook his head. “Chief, you know Lois is happiest when she has the most information. Just tell her.”

Lois threw Jimmy a grateful look. “Jimmy's right, Chief. I need to know. I can't just take a break. I need to know.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, Chief, Lois should know what a great guy her fiancé was,” he drawled.

Perry glared at Jack. “All right. I only know the most recent stuff. Clark has some information on earlier events. Luthor—uh, Lex—was ‘The Boss.’”

Lois gasped. “The Boss?” She'd never fainted in her entire life, never even felt close, but now she felt light-headed. She'd heard occasional whispers of a shadowy criminal who ran a lot of the crime in Metropolis called, “The Boss,” but no one would talk, and she knew better than to risk her sources' lives by pushing for information they couldn't safely give. Investigating The Boss had been on her back burner for over a year.

“Yeah.”

“So those other crimes too numerous to mention were related to Lex being ‘The Boss’? Or is there more I should know about?”

“We found out that Luthor was behind all the financial troubles the Planet was havin' right before he bought it,” Perry admitted reluctantly.

“So let me get this straight: Lex sabotaged the Planet, then bought it out once it was about to go under, and then blew it up?”

“Pretty much,” Perry said.

“Okay. Well.” Lois stood up and began fiddling with the souvenirs Clark had displayed on his bookshelves. This was all too much to take in. A part of her kept expecting to wake up and find it was all a nightmare or that she'd somehow slipped into an alternate universe; this place bore such little resemblance to the reality she'd thought she lived in. The only thing she knew was that she needed to be alone. Now. Before she reacted badly in front of anyone. Her apartment was out—unless she could sneak in there somehow. Maybe a hotel room at least for tonight. And a disguise for tomorrow.

“Lois?” Perry said.

“Chief, I think I need some time to myself. I'll find a hotel room; at least, do you know where my purse got to? Did you guys happen to pick it up or my keys?”

Jimmy and Jack shook their heads.

“Um, no,” Perry said.

“Oh, well, maybe my mother has them.”

An hour later Lois had managed to ascertain that her mother was at home, drunk as a sailor, but that she had Lois's things. Perry took her over to her mother's house to pick them up, and then dropped her off at a hotel. Before she'd left, Lois had collected a few things from Clark's and her mother's to aid in her disguise. She sat down on the hotel bed, holding herself perfectly still, trying to slow the multitude of feelings fighting to escape.

She was supposed to go to the police station tomorrow to talk to Henderson. It was not going to be pleasant to tell him that she'd been completely fooled by Lex's façade. How was she ever going to work as a reporter in this city again? She held her breath. Focus on what she needed to do. Think about Lex later. And where was Clark? Was he really okay? Why had he left her

alone? The tightness in her chest intensified. They'd parted on such bad terms the last time they'd spoken, but then Clark had helped to prove that Lex was a criminal—before she'd been tied to him for the rest of her life. He'd saved her life, again. But if he cared, why hadn't he been at the wedding? Maybe he didn't care anymore.

Think about Clark later. Figure out now. What did she need to do now?

She found the complimentary hotel notepad and began making a list. She had to give her statement to Henderson. She needed to quit LNN—there was no way she could work anywhere connected with Lex. Why had she ever thought that she could do television anyway? She had to figure out her apartment—she'd already given her landlord notice. Hopefully, he hadn't rented her apartment to someone else. Maybe she should call her landlord today. She had her keys and purse now.

She still needed a few things to finish off her disguise. Although did she really want to disguise herself? Yes, she'd been duped by Lex Luthor. But did she want to compound the injury to her reputation by hiding from the press? Maybe the best thing to do was to just bite the bullet—tell the press that it was *her* story and to back off.

Did she feel up to that? No, but it didn't matter. She was going to do it anyway. If she couldn't handle the press, she really had gone soft.

She began to pace the hotel room, wondering how the heck she'd gotten herself into this situation. She'd been the best investigative reporter in the city and had somehow missed Lex's true nature so spectacularly as to almost marry the man—it wasn't like she'd missed out on his character from afar; she'd been supposedly as close to him as anyone in his life, and she'd still missed out on it. Her hands clenched into fists. She could feel her fingernails digging into her palms, providing a welcome counterpoint to the emotions rocketing through her body. She went back over the past several months. What clues had she missed?

She sank to the bed as the facts of her situation once more hit her: she had been duped by The Boss and now her life was in tatters. No job. Perry and Jimmy were still her friends, but Clark, the one person in her life that she needed, hadn't been there. She was alone. When the Planet had been destroyed, she'd felt adrift, and so she'd latched onto the security that Lex had offered. She'd acted like she, Lois Lane, had needed a man to be safe. What a crock! She didn't need anyone.

Not even Clark? her conscience prodded.

“Not even Clark,” she said out loud, as though making a vow.

The next day Lois strode up to her apartment building and bulldozed her way through the mass of reporters, all the while refusing to comment. Luckily, her landlord hadn't yet rented out her apartment, so she'd been able to renew her lease. Her answering machine was full of messages from people wanting to interview her about Lex, or offering her money for a kiss-and-tell story. She decided that if she was going to sell her story, it'd be to the Planet—if by some miracle it ever got rebuilt. After changing into one of her favorite business suits, she headed to the police station.

Lois sat in Henderson's office, giving him her statement. Fortunately, so far he'd been impassive about her lack of judgment—no digs about her missing out on Lex's true nature despite her reputation. But, now that she'd started pushing him for information in return, he was being less than helpful.

“Henderson, what do you mean you can't give me anything?” Lois demanded.

Henderson gave her a long look. “Lane, you're not even working as a journalist right now. Why do you need to know?”

"I'm going to freelance," she said flatly. "So spill."

"Can't. I've got an exclusive agreement with Kent. He was the one who headed up the initial investigation, and, as far as I know, you aren't working with him," Henderson said, his arms folded loosely across his chest.

"Henderson, Clark doesn't have a job right now. And anyway, I have more information about Lex than he does."

Henderson raised an eyebrow. "I thought you just got done telling me that you didn't know anything about Luthor's crimes."

Lois rolled her eyes. "I don't. But I do know his associates."

"His criminal associates? You holding out on me, Lane?"

"Of course not, Henderson. Although it's quite possible that some of his business associates were also his criminal associates," she added, thinking of how slimy some of those people had seemed.

Henderson shook his head. "Doesn't matter. I still have an agreement with Kent. If he tells me to talk to you, I might be willing to reconsider."

Lois could tell that Henderson was going to stonewall her. He was one of the few people who could stand up to Mad Dog Lane when push came to shove. "Fine! Do you need anything else?"

"No, Lois," Henderson said quietly. "Just to let you know: the FBI may want to talk to you too. I'll pass along your statement, but they may want to go over it with you."

Lois stood. "Noted," she said and walked out of Henderson's office.

Lois slammed the door to her Jeep, then slumped into the seat. Great. It wasn't bad enough to have all the papers speculating on her capability as a reporter and as a person—the FBI wanted to get in on the action too.

Well, what did you expect? Lex was "The Boss," and you didn't even notice. Your famed reporter's instincts didn't once go off, despite the fact that Clark tried to tell you about him, she thought derisively.

Her jaw tightened. She was the only reporter in Metropolis with three Kerths. What was wrong with her reporter's instincts? Had Lex really been that good, or had she been that blind?

Perry had told her yesterday that he was trying to find someone to buy the Planet, but even if he did, how could she ever presume to go back to her old job? Would the new owner even want her?

Her spine straightened. What was she thinking? Any owner who didn't want a three-time Kerth award winner was an idiot. Besides, this was one instance. How many other criminals had she put in jail through her work? Maybe she couldn't put Lex in jail now, but she could figure out what he'd been hiding. So what if he was dead? Since when had Lois Lane let a little speed bump like that stop her? And once she'd written up all his dealings, no one would dare to say that she wasn't a top reporter. And that meant she'd have to talk to Clark.

It might not be all bad. Clark had abandoned her yesterday, but apparently he'd worked for weeks before that to bring Lex down. On the way to her mother's house, Perry had said that Clark had been the heart and soul of the investigation—and that he'd been frantic to save her, not simply to bring Lex down. Clark could be useful. She just had to be careful not to depend on him too much. And the reality was that she owed him an apology. She had closed the door on a romantic relationship with him weeks ago, and, given how things were going in her life now, she intended to stick with that decision, no matter what she'd thought on her wedding day. But that didn't mean they couldn't resume their friendship.

Two days later Lois headed to Clark's apartment. She'd been through two days of hell, trying to explain to the numbskulls at the FBI that she really hadn't been aware of Lex's criminal

activities. They'd refused to give her any indication of what information they were fishing for, so she'd spent hours repeating herself, all while watching agent after agent smirk through her discomfort. After extracting a promise that she would contact them if she thought of anything else pertinent to their investigation—like she'd help them after the way she'd been treated!—they let her go. She had planned to talk to Clark the day she'd talked to Henderson, but with one thing and another, today was her first chance. She just hoped he'd be in his apartment and not still off wherever he'd been.

Three days after the Luthor-Lane wedding fiasco, Clark found himself sitting on the couch in his apartment. Yesterday the guys had moved into Perry's old house, which hadn't sold. He'd been able to get away with telling them that he'd realized Luthor was after him, and he'd gone into hiding. Not very complimentary to himself, leaving his friends in the lurch, but it was the truth—when viewed in a certain light. He was thankful for the privacy. But having no powers meant that Clark had lots and lots of time on his hands: Time to feel the lingering pain and exhaustion that lived in every cell of his body. Time to fight against watching or reading the news and seeing the death counts in article after article of Superman-less disasters. Time to avoid seeing Lois and to re-examine the hamster wheel his thoughts of her inevitably turned into. Even though he ached for her presence, he hadn't felt up to seeing her mourn her dead lover or to teasing her out of her depression.

A knock sounded. Clark pulled his glasses down, and then growled in frustration. He missed his powers. The knocking continued. He pulled on the long-sleeve shirt he had sitting nearby in case of company and opened the door. Lois. Dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, she still looked beautiful to him. And yet, somehow, seeing her made something in him feel so cold, so numb. He suppressed a shiver.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

"Can I come in?" she asked, taking a step towards him.

"Sure." Clark stepped aside and gestured to the couch. "Have a seat."

Lois sat down. Clark gingerly sat down in the chair opposite, checking that most of his Kryptonite burns remained hidden by his long-sleeve shirt and arranging his hands so the rest were inconspicuous. Before he would have sat next to her. Before he would have broken the awkward silence. Heck, before there wouldn't have been an awkward silence. But now it was after, and somehow when he looked at her, it was as though he were looking through the wrong end of a telescope, as though he were watching himself with her, but not present.

Lois wasn't quite sure how to start this conversation.

"How've you been?" she asked.

"Fine. How about you?" Clark asked in a monotone.

Lois grimaced. So that was how it was going to be. "Oh, well, you know." She took a deep breath. Maybe if she apologized now, Clark would be more willing to let Henderson talk to her, and she really did owe him an apology. "I wanted to say I'm sorry. You told me to investigate Lex, and I didn't. I should have listened to you. I should have trusted your instincts the way you would have trusted mine."

Clark gave a small shrug. He really had no idea what to say to that. "I never had any hard proof, at least not until just before your—until just a few days ago. I would have told you more if I'd had proof." Clark hesitated, trying to find something else to say. Lois never admitted that she was wrong. "I'm sorry too. I'm sorry that Luthor wasn't one of the good guys." That was true. Their lives would have all been so much better if Luthor really had been the philanthropist he'd portrayed himself as.

"Yeah. I still can't believe I didn't see it. Some investigative

reporter I am,” she muttered, looking down at her hands in her lap.

“He was very good at what he did. Most people didn’t see it,” he said, his tone almost clinical.

“You did.”

There was no response to that, so he just sat in silence. She had come to him; she could be responsible for carrying the conversation.

“Well, that sort of brings me to why I came,” Lois said, her hands twisting awkwardly in her lap.

“Oh?”

“Clark, I want to investigate him.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You don’t think it’s a little late for that?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t. There are stories to be written. Lex is—was—big news. People still barely believe he was a criminal. Perry told me some of the information you’d collected, and Henderson already said he’d agreed to give us the exclusive since you and Perry dug up the proof.”

“I see. You came because you want the rest of the information.” No surprise there, he thought bitterly. Of course Lois wanted to take advantage of all his hard work. Of course Lois had talked Henderson into giving her an exclusive even though he’d done the work. Back to the status quo.

“No, I came because I want to investigate him with you. Didn’t you hear what I said? Henderson will give *us* the exclusive—not me.” She hesitated, then added, “He actually refused to talk to me alone. I need to do this Clark. I need to figure out what I missed and how I missed it. I need to figure out if it was me or him. I need to do this for me, but I want to do it with you,” she said, and he could hear the raw pain in her voice.

“Lois, you don’t have a paper to write for. The Planet is gone,” he said flatly.

“Neither do you! Anyway, Perry’s trying to find someone to rebuild the Planet, but even if he doesn’t, I’m sure we could sell stories to the AP or to some other paper.”

“I’m sure we could.”

“So will you?” Lois asked, almost holding her breath in the face of his emotionless silence.

Clark stared at the floor. Should he? Did he want to? Investigating Luthor would at least fill all his empty moments. And really, Superman should be doing something to atone for his stupidity. This would, after all, give him a chance to put his plan into practice—to interact with Lois and to try to push the scale one way or the other, to kill the love or let go of the hate. “All right,” he said quietly. “When do you want to start?” he asked, now looking at her.

“Um, well, I don’t want to interfere with anything you have going on.”

“My schedule is currently wide open,” he said politely.

“Okay, then. How about now?”

“Now is fine. Would you like some coffee?”

“Um, yeah. Coffee sounds good,” she said, hoping the familiarity of routine would serve to thaw Clark a little.

“Then I’ll grab my Luthor notes, and you can look over them while I make the coffee.”

“Sure.”

Clark walked into his bedroom and collected the appropriate files as though on auto-pilot. Lois moved to the kitchen table so they could spread out.

“Here you go,” Clark said, passing her the pile of folders. “I don’t have much.”

Lois frowned. That “not much” had been enough to get Lex arrested. Although given how Henderson had responded “I had to give my statement to Henderson yesterday. From what he didn’t say, I’d imagine he knows quite a bit more by now,” she commented.

“I’m not surprised.”

Lois fingered the files, unsure of how to reply. She’d been shocked when she’d heard that there was more, but it hadn’t phased Clark a bit. Although what was it that he’d said about Lex? That he was a thief, gangster, psychopath, and murderer. Maybe nothing would surprise Clark. She sighed.

By the time she left Clark’s apartment, Lois was exhausted. Clark had been unfailingly polite, which was almost worse than anything she’d imagined. She’d prepared herself for anger or bitterness or friendship. She hadn’t planned on being relegated to strangerhood by her former best friend. Lois knew things had been rocky between them for weeks, really ever since she’d started spending more time with Lex. The fights they’d had at Perry’s retirement dinner and later when she’d seen Clark on the street had been brutal, but they’d had fights before and worked through them just fine. She’d thought Lex was the problem, and now that he was out of the way, they could resume their friendship, or at least fight about their issues and then resume their friendship. She’d always thought that she’d be the one relegating Clark to strangerhood if anyone was going to do that sort of thing. She’d never in a million years thought Clark would shut her out.

Lex, deal with Lex now; Clark later, she reminded herself firmly.

The day had been eye-opening in that respect. On her wedding day she’d been shell-shocked to find out that Lex had been The Boss and behind the bombing at the Planet, but if Clark was right, being The Boss was far bigger than anything she’d imagined. They’d gone over Clark’s notes on Lex’s involvement with the tests on Superman, her father’s cyborg boxers, the Toaster’s, the Metamide 5 experiments, the nuclear plant heatwave debacle that had almost driven Superman out of Metropolis, Miranda’s pheromone, and the Superman clone. Clark had even found hints that Lex had been involved in drug smuggling, gun running, and prostitution rings. How could she have missed out on such evil? How could she have looked Lex in the eye and not seen through the mask? Now she knew what those terrorists at the Planet had meant when they’d said they’d be better off with the cops on their tail than Lex. Her fingers tightened round the steering wheel. What if she’d missed vital clues in other investigations?

Lois groaned. Who was she kidding? She’d never begun investigating Lex, so this wasn’t another investigation. She had missed all those clues about Lex. She had refused to admit that she could be wrong and had stayed on her set course just to prove that she wasn’t wrong—and the whole thing had blown up on her spectacularly. Lois Lane had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was fallible. Maybe she should just throw in the towel. Like Clark had said, the Planet was gone. Maybe it was time for Lois Lane, investigative reporter, to go too. She could move into some other field—something she was more qualified for, something she wasn’t such a spectacular failure at. She could start over.

She snorted. Right. Lex had re-proven that she was a failure at love, a failure at life. And what was left when you got rid of a personal life and a profession? She was a failure through and through. Her father was right, she thought dully. If only she hadn’t talked Clark into investigating Lex. Then she wouldn’t have to know what a horrible person he was. She could have just pretended that she hadn’t gotten married because she’d realized she didn’t love Lex, and ignored the fact that her criminal fiancé had thrown himself off a building rather than go to jail. People confused their feelings all the time. People didn’t almost marry mobsters all the time, especially people whose job it was to expose the truth others hid.

Lois parked her Jeep and squared her shoulders. Time to walk

into her apartment building. The mob of journalists had left, but she still refused to seem anything less than confident in front of anyone who might know about her failed wedding—which was pretty much everyone in Metropolis, thanks to the media. So, head held high, she walked in.

It had been three weeks since Lois's failed wedding. Franklin Stern had bought the Planet and managed to find temporary office space, but it was a cramped sea of beige cubicles and fluorescent lights—a far cry from the soul-filled newsroom at the Planet. They'd been there for a week, and Lois had expected the strangeness between her and Clark to be gone by now.

Once again she found herself studying him. His body was here, going through the motions. In fact, he seemed to be in the office even more than he'd been before; no running off on sudden errands he'd abruptly remembered—maybe his memory was getting better. Regardless, Clark had closed himself off from her and everyone else. She'd done the same thing when Claude had broken her heart, until Clark had coaxed his way into her life and somehow changed her, made it possible for her to open up to others. Now Clark was the unreachable one. Any time she tried talking about their personal lives, Clark clammed up and changed the subject or calmly suggested that their time would be better spent on work. And now that things were winding down with the Luthor investigation, Perry had been putting them on separate stories. Lois hadn't felt up to asking him if Clark had requested the time apart—she didn't want to know.

It's probably for the best, she told herself for the hundredth time. She needed to focus on overcoming this career setback. She needed to re-establish her credibility. She had no time for a relationship, even for a best friend. Plus, she cared about Clark too much to start anything romantically. She was the kiss of death to any relationship. He was much better off without her, and obviously, he'd figured that out. She sighed. If only she didn't miss him so much.

Clark resolutely studied his computer screen. He could feel Lois looking at him, and he had no desire to return her gaze. Three weeks of distance between them—more really, since the distance had begun long before her wedding. Three weeks of investigating Luthor and uncovering the depths of his criminal activities. He could tell it was wearing on Lois, but he still couldn't make himself comfort her. She was the one who had chosen Luthor after all. It wasn't his fault that she'd refused to listen to him. He hadn't created the chasm between them, and he still wasn't ready to try to bridge it. He wasn't even sure it could be bridged anymore.

Superman hadn't returned yet, though his super-hearing was beginning to kick in sporadically. He almost wished it hadn't, that some other power would be first or that all his powers would come back at once. Every day people died because Superman was on vacation, and every day Clark died a little too. His parents tried to help him, but they didn't really understand—no one really could; no one had ever been in his position. Clark heard Lois sigh. He sighed too. They were both hurting, both running, both unable to be where they were, and there was nothing either of them could do about it.

Perry scrubbed a hand over his face. From inside his office he could see Lois looking at Clark and Clark studiously ignoring her. He'd assigned them temporary desks where he could keep an eye on things, but that hadn't helped him figure out what to do with those two. They were like his children, and he'd had such hopes. The four of them had rescued Lois, but it seemed like Clark had been the cost of that rescue. Perry had tried to talk to Clark a number of times, but the young man was more resistant to opening up than ever before. He listened politely to any

number of Elvis stories, but refused to talk about Lois.

Perry leaned back in his chair, staring at the Elvis portrait on his wall. He couldn't decide if it would be better to keep his two star reporters busy on separate stories or throw them together for an extended period of time to force them to talk. Although the reality was that neither of them would react well if they were forced to do much of anything. He'd let them have their space for now, but if this coldness continued for much longer, he was going to get involved. The last thing he needed was for one of them to leave, or for his newsroom to go to hell in a handbasket.

When Lois got home that night, she had a message from her sister Lucy. She wasn't feeling up to talking to anyone, but decided she should probably check to make sure Lucy was okay.

Ring *Ring* *Ring*

"Hello."

"Hey, Lucy, it's me. I got your message. What's up?" Lois said, kicking off her shoes.

"Hey, Lois!" came her sister's cheery response. "I was just calling to see how you're doing."

"Oh," Lois said, winding the phone cord around her finger.

"C'mon, Lois, how are you doing?"

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking. How're you doing?" she answered, hoping her sister would leave it at that.

"Lo-is. This is me. I know I'm just your little sister, but I care. I heard all about the bombing and wedding fiasco from our mother. It sounds like things have been a disaster. You can't really be 'fine.'"

Lois shrugged. There was too much to talk about and it was all too raw. She settled on work as a fairly neutral topic, and work was going fine—at least from a purely professional standpoint. "Clark and I are working hard on the investigation," Lois said quietly.

"And?"

"And"—Lois sighed, realizing Lucy would badger her until she caved—"Luce, I can't believe the stuff we're finding out about Lex. How could I have ended up with him?" she wailed.

"You didn't end up with him," Lucy said promptly. "Ellen said you didn't marry him, and that's why you won't inherit anything."

"You know what I mean."

Lucy sighed. "Yeah, I do," she said soberly. "I've always thought bad judgment in men was sort of hereditary for Lane women," she added.

Lois wasn't sure what to say to that. Lucy had ended up with a long string of losers, and it was true that their father was chronically unfaithful and that Lois herself had ended up in a series of federal-disaster relationships. "But you've never gotten engaged to a many times over murderer," Lois reminded her.

"I'm sorry, Lois."

"Me too."

Lucy hesitated, then asked, "How's Clark?"

Clark. Just thinking about him caused the ache in her middle to intensify. Lex had been bad enough. How was she supposed to handle all this without her best friend? She'd never realized how much she'd depended on Clark until he'd stopped being her rock. She'd never realized how different her life had been before he'd coaxed his way in. She used to be self-sufficient. She'd never needed anyone before him. Her parents' issues and divorce, the fiasco with Linda and Paul, as well as Claude's betrayal, had all so completely shattered her ability to trust that she'd stopped letting people in. She'd even kept Jimmy and Perry at arm's length. But Clark had taught her how to be a friend, how to open up to people, and now she felt alone. She had Jimmy and Perry, but they weren't Clark. She wondered what he would do if she went over to his apartment and begged him to take her back into his life.

No, it's a good thing. This gives me time to focus on my career. And anyway, when have I ever needed a man? she reminded herself.

Even as she thought it, she knew it wasn't true, but she couldn't face the fact that Clark had realized how unlovable she really was.

"Lois? Are you still there?" Lucy called.

"Yeah," she managed, her throat tight.

"Lois, how's Clark?"

"He's—I don't really know how he is. Not good, I guess. Oh Luce, I miss him so much," she choked out.

"What happened?"

"I don't know exactly. I mean, I know it's my fault for ignoring his warnings about Lex and for choosing Lex over him. Ever since my wedding, Clark's been—well, he treats me like a stranger. We still work together, but he's polite now, almost to the point of coldness. I don't know how to explain it, and I don't know what to do about it."

"I'm so sorry, Lois. That sounds awful."

The sisters sat in silence for a moment, then Lois asked, "So, how are you doing?"

"Pretty okay. I'm still working at the club. I did meet a really great guy last week. We'll see if he pans out."

Lois thought briefly of warning Lucy to be careful, but then remembered she had no room to talk. At least Lucy still had the same job as when she'd talked to her the last time. "I'm glad you're doing all right. Thanks for listening, Luce. I should probably—"

"Hey Lois?" Lucy interrupted.

"Yeah?"

"I know how you feel about therapy and shrinks, but I was just thinking that it might help to talk to someone about all this, especially since you can't talk to Clark right now."

"Mmm."

"If you decide you want to talk to a professional—well, I've never mentioned this before, but when I was living in Metropolis the last time, I saw someone, and she was really great. I mean, obviously, I still have a lot to work through—who wouldn't with our childhood?—but it felt good to get some of it out. Her name is Dr. Ruth Friskin. I can get you her information if you decide you want it."

"Okay. I'll think about it. Thanks, Lucy."

"Sure, Lois. Well, let me know if there's anything I can do. I hope things get better with Clark soon."

"Yeah. Me too."

"Bye then."

"Bye, Lucy."

As Lois hung up the phone, she thought about Lucy's suggestion. Did she want to talk to someone? There were days when she felt like she couldn't even breathe from the sheer amount of disaster surrounding her. Her life was like a war zone. She still had no idea how she'd gotten herself into this place. Although, the more she'd thought about it, the more she'd realized that Lex had a good deal to do with the disaster—in blowing up the Planet, he'd lobbed a bomb into her life. She'd never realized what a stabilizing force the Planet had been until it was gone. She'd felt cast adrift and desperate for any port in the storm. Lex had been that stability, especially given how rocky things had been with Clark and with Superman's rejection. Perry had moved on. Jimmy had moved on. She'd never been able to depend on her family. She'd been alone, except for Lex. Clark had carefully refrained from imputing any motives to Lex for bombing the Planet, but she wondered if isolating her was part of Lex's rationale. Of course, it was ultimately her fault for letting Lex into her life.

Abruptly, Lois went to the freezer. Thinking like this called for ice cream. So why had she agreed to marry Lex? Was it just

the security he'd offered? She'd spent hours trying to make sense of the mess, trying to remember what she'd been thinking, but she'd been unable to find anything sensible about the whole thing. She'd arrogantly assumed that she knew how to run her life better than anyone else. Clark hadn't offered any proof of Lex's criminal activities—only vague warnings and a jealous manner—and Lex had seemed so charming. She didn't usually trust people—especially men—but she'd trusted Lex, and she trusted Clark and Superman. His philanthropy had convinced her, along with almost everyone else, that Lex had a good heart—in a way, she'd thought of him like Superman: using his powers for good.

Maybe a list would help? She put the ice cream away and went back to her bedroom. She changed into comfy clothes and pulled out a notebook. What had she seen in Lex? He was charming. He had a forceful personality—she couldn't run over him, which was a must for her. And, even though she hadn't been looking to become rich, the fact that she'd never have to worry about money had played a part in it, especially once the Planet was gone, and she was facing the spectre of unemployment. Plus, Lex had opened up possibilities—his wealth allowed him to offer her the ability to see the world and the status to see behind some of those closed doors. He'd been attractive—at least until the arrest, when she'd seen the arrogance and violence lurking beneath his exterior ... although she had to admit that kisses with Clark or Superman had both moved her far more than any kiss with Lex. And she'd been flattered to have one of the world's most eligible bachelors pursuing her.

It was amazing how she always ended up with such jerks. Maybe Lucy was right—Lane women were pathologically incapable of having relationships with nice guys.

Lois curled up in a ball on her bed and sobbed herself to sleep once again.

Clark stared at the phone. For some reason tonight he had the strangest urge to call Lois and see how she was doing. They hadn't talked on the phone since that fateful conversation before her wedding. It was amazing how heavy the handset had become since then. He mentally shrugged. Even if Lois wasn't doing well, she wasn't likely to confide in him anymore. He'd driven her lover to his death after all. And the reality was that he still couldn't bring himself to comfort her over the loss of Luthor.

He decided to take a quick jog. Ever since he'd lost his powers, it had been harder and harder to sleep at night. He was exhausted, but he had nightmares when he did fall asleep and insomnia the rest of the time, probably from worrying about what Superman wasn't doing any given night. He'd never realized how badly he needed to help, or how small Metropolis was when you couldn't simply fly anywhere in the world to take a break from being here. Jogging for a couple of hours before bed managed to wear him out enough that some nights he was too tired even to dream.

The first time Clark had gone night jogging, he'd been tempted to check up on the city, but quickly decided that until his powers returned, he'd have to be circumspect. It'd be ridiculous if he died in a mugging after escaping Luthor's cage. By now he had a set route. It wasn't as good as flying, but he liked jogging. It made him feel like he was getting somewhere, and there was something so soothing about the city's quiet, the sound of his feet hitting the sidewalk, the cool of the evening. And the repetitive motion left his mind free.

He'd called his parents today, brimming over with frustration. He just wasn't sure he could take being in the same newsroom with Lois much longer. His feelings remained frozen in ambivalence, so he doubted that he could leave her, but he wasn't sure how to stay without losing his sanity. His mother had suggested that he write it all down somewhere. She was right that he'd spent a lot of time writing during his teenage years and that

it had helped. He remembered breaking down in his treehouse and writing about how he'd seen through a wall. It was the first time he'd been forced to accept that he was different. He'd been able to pretend that being stronger and faster than other kids his age was just a matter of good, normal human genes. Even the fact that he rarely got sick or hurt seemed like plain old good luck. But when he'd seen through that wall at school, and his parents had finally told him exactly how they'd found him—well, he'd gone from being a normal human boy to being a freak, all in the space of hours. And so he'd poured out all the confusion and anger into his notebook.

Writing hadn't been his only way of dealing with his differences, but it had definitely been one of the main ones. He just wasn't sure if writing down this situation was wise. After he'd become Superman, he'd been more careful than ever about what he actually put down on paper. And somehow, his emotions almost felt too raw for him to be able to write about them—at least not until they actually finished their Luthor investigation and he didn't have to talk to Lois every single day. He grimaced. A break from Lois. Perry had been putting them on separate assignments with the exception of wrapping up Luthor's crimes. He'd used that to go meet with sources when he couldn't stand to be in the newsroom with her. He was thankful he had at least one out, even with Superman still MIA. Maybe after they finished the Luthor investigation, if he could figure out a way to do it secretly, he could do some writing

A week later, Clark bought a thick journal on his way home from work. He'd barely seen Lois this past week. Perry was assiduously keeping them on separate assignments—a fact that Clark was grateful for. He wondered if Lois had asked Perry for the time apart. Whatever Perry's reasons were, Clark wasn't going to complain. He hoped Perry would keep them on separate assignments for the foreseeable future, at least long enough for Clark to sort through some things.

He'd thought long and hard about his mother's suggestion and had finally decided to write the events of the past couple of months under the guise of fiction. Superman could become the celebrity author persona of an ordinary reporter. Maybe it was a little close to home, but he had the feeling the closer the better in this instance. He needed some emotional distance to make sense, but not so much that it stopped being him, being them. The character of Luthor had given him pause. Clark felt he had to analyze things from his perspective and from Lois's perspective. He supposed that meant he should at least outline some version where Luthor was who he'd said he was—a wealthy philanthropist businessman, a good guy.

Now home, he fingered the journal, flipping idly through the blank pages. Where to start? Should he start with how he saw things and how he felt? Or should he try to see things from Lois's perspective first? He wasn't sure he could do one without the other. Maybe he should start with his side and see where things went from there. He could at least bleed off some of the emotion, which might make it easier to sit in the same newsroom with Lois, hour after hour. His stomach growled. This whole being ordinary thing was brutal. He put the journal down and began fixing dinner, still trying to mentally outline his story—where it would start, where it would end, and how it would get from one place to another.

The next couple of weeks, things continued on in much the same vein. Occasionally Lois would invite Clark over for pizza and a movie, but Clark always told her that he had plans for the night. Things were so tentative between them that Lois didn't even ask what his plans were anymore. The journal was progressing. He had to admit that once he'd gotten started, it was hard to put it down. Superman still hadn't returned, although he

could now write at super-speed which had helped the writing process along quite a bit.

Clark had gotten the characters introduced and their relationships well-established, and he was now on to the sticky period of Lex's proposal and the destruction of the Planet. It was hard to write. He didn't like to remember the jealousy that had eaten him alive, his jealousy of Superman and his jealousy of Luthor. He also didn't like to see how passive he'd been in his friendship with Lois: sure, he'd worked hard to establish a friendship with her—which was something of a miracle in itself since Lois didn't let anyone close enough to be a friend, let alone a best friend—but he hadn't even introduced the subject of romance before his declaration in the park. No wonder she'd been blindsided. She'd told him not to fall for her within days of meeting him, and that had been the last they'd ever openly discussed the subject.

He still felt all the reasons for keeping his love for her hidden. He knew Lois, better than anyone, sometimes even better than she knew herself. She would never have kept him in her life if she'd felt at all threatened, and love threatened her.

He still didn't understand why Luthor's love hadn't threatened her, but maybe it was because Luthor had come into her life as a potential suitor from the get-go—or at least from that first failed interview. She'd had time to adjust to Luthor's attentions. Lois hated to be surprised in her personal life. He wondered what would have happened if he'd suggested moving their relationship beyond friendship before Luthor had proposed, although she believed herself in love with Superman, and Lois wasn't a bigamist—she might have considered it a betrayal to fall in love with Clark. But then why wasn't it a betrayal to fall for Luthor? Or had she not fallen for Luthor? Is that why his love hadn't threatened her? Was it possible that Lois was more afraid of loving someone herself than she was of being loved? After all, loving someone made you vulnerable to them—having them love you didn't make you vulnerable. Maybe she'd let herself love Superman because she'd created this fantasy where he would never hurt her, so it didn't matter if she was vulnerable.

Did the fact that she had warned him off all those months ago mean that she had been attracted to him?

It was definitely an idea worth exploring, especially since they'd had the foundation of friendship coupled with, as the pheromone spray had proven, attraction. The elements of love had been present in their relationship

Clark was also realizing that Lois couldn't allow herself to be wrong. Once she'd committed herself to a course of action, she rarely wavered and never apologized. Given what she'd told Clark about her father, he was fairly certain that was Sam's influence. If she ever made a mistake, then all those years when Sam had been critiquing her, telling her what a failure she was, he'd been right. Lois couldn't admit that she was wrong about Luthor without admitting that she'd made a mistake. That meant that she couldn't allow herself see through Luthor's façade once she'd told Clark that it didn't exist.

Clark looked down at his notebook, reading over what he'd written. Today had been miserable. Lois had been on a rampage and even though they didn't have stories together, he'd still ended up listening to her rant. He was fairly certain she was simply overwhelmed with all the things she'd missed seeing about Luthor, but that didn't make him any less upset. He didn't dare take out his feelings on her though—if nothing else, it'd just widen the chasm between them, which would be a bad thing if he ever decided to pursue her. He sighed. He'd taken out his frustration by writing up a quick version portraying Lois as a shallow groupie, so in love with Superman that she couldn't see past his powers and enamored with Luthor's money and power. But it hadn't worked. If nothing else, writing it down had

convinced him that Lois really did love him, for more than just his powers. Her statement that she would love him even if he were an ordinary man living an ordinary life echoed through his nightmares, feeding his pain and hatred, but she'd really meant it.

Sometimes it drove him nuts that she, who knew Superman *and* Clark Kent better than anyone else, couldn't see their similarities. But then, he went out of his way to camouflage and minimize those similarities—was it really fair to blame her for not seeing what he tried so hard to keep her from seeing?

And there were the differences he cultivated and the differences he'd realized were simply the reality of having two separate identities—differences like the fact that Clark Kent often ran from trouble to “go call the police,” or whatever excuse he gave, and Superman ran to the rescue. He'd never thought about that from Lois's perspective before. He hadn't been able to work that element into his journal, but it was something that had hit him while he was outlining character biographies. He thought she knew Clark wasn't a coward—after all, he was the one who had saved her from Mr. Makeup and had fought Trask in Smallville—but it was possible that Superman made her feel safer, simply because he saved her from trouble.

Regardless, he'd realized that, in a way, he'd made it impossible for Lois to love him because he'd never shown her the real him. The real him couldn't always save the day, but Lois was convinced that Superman would, and the real him wasn't always running away, but Lois thought that Clark did.

He'd always thought that he needed someone to fall for him as Clark before he would tell them about his Kryptonian heritage and all that went with it. He'd always thought that he would share that with only one woman—the woman he married. But maybe it wasn't fair to wait for her to fall for one half of him—and if he was going to say that she only had to fall for half of him, well, Lois had fallen for Superman quite some time ago. And really, Lois was the only woman he'd ever fallen for, the only woman he'd ever wanted to marry, and she cared for both Clark and Superman. Maybe that was enough of a threshold. Maybe, if he wanted to move forward, he would have to show her his whole self—if he could ever actually decide whether he wanted to move forward or to get her out of his life permanently.

All at once it hit Clark that he was beginning to think of himself as one person. His mother had gotten onto him regularly for referring to himself in the third person, but he'd never realized the true depth of that separation. He'd split himself in two so carefully that somehow he'd lost touch with himself—the person who was both personas.

It had taken two months after the failed wedding for the renovated Planet to open. Today was the first day they'd be in the new offices, and Clark walked to work alone. He'd adjusted to working in the same room with Lois, to seeing her every day. Some days were better than others. The week he'd been writing up Luthor as a wealthy philanthropist, he'd gone out of his way to keep an eye on Lois—to do the little things he'd always done before to comfort her. He'd even unbent enough to ask her how she was doing, though not enough to actually talk to her about how he was doing or to spend time outside of work with her. He was sure that, given her understanding of Luthor's character, she must have fallen for him and thus, still be grieving her lost lover. For the first time, he could almost understand why she'd agreed to marry Luthor. The week after, well, it had hit him that Lois might have really loved Luthor, and he'd almost hated her for being so blind to Luthor's true nature. She had let Luthor destroy their lives—all because she'd refused to admit that Clark might be right about him. That week Clark had barely been able to string together two words past the anger choking him. God help him, he was still in love with her. If only he could excise that love and the hurt, then he could be indifferent, could move on.

Unfortunately, he'd never been indifferent to Lois Lane.

He'd reached the Planet. Looking up at the globe, relief surged through him, followed by a bitter taste in his mouth. The Planet was officially back. Back because it had been destroyed. He could almost smell the smoke tinged with printer's ink that had filled the area once the bomb had exploded. If only people and relationships could be as easily rebuilt as things. The Daily Planet was back, but the “hottest team in town” was still in ruins. He was still in ruins, and he was pretty sure that Lois was too. And he still didn't have a clue how to begin that rebuilding process.

Clark had barely gotten his computer booted up when he heard Lois complaining about the new systems. Back in the old Planet building, it seemed natural to go help her, but somehow, the distance between their two desks seemed farther than it had ever been. Fortunately, Jimmy stepped in and began explaining how exactly she could retrieve her e-mail and faxes.

“Lane! Kent! In my office!” Perry bellowed from his office door.

Clark forced himself not to exchange a look with Lois. He had no clue what Perry wanted. At the door Clark gestured for Lois to go first and then followed her.

“Close the door and take a seat,” Perry said, sitting down behind his desk.

Lois sat down. Clark closed the door, then sat down in the other chair in front of Perry's desk. Neither of them said anything.

“Now, I think I've given you both plenty of time to get over whatever it is that's been goin' on with the two of you. Personal problems have no place in the newsroom. I need my best team back.” Perry leaned forward, his elbows on the desk. “And if I can't have my best team back, I'm gonna have a hard time explainin' to the suits upstairs why I'm keepin' you both on. Capiche?”

“Yes, sir,” Clark said.

Lois just nodded.

“All right. Cops found Dr. Heller, a renowned plastic surgeon, dead in a dumpster on Fifth and Pine this mornin'.” He held out a piece of paper. “Here's the info. I want you two to work on this together.”

Clark took the paper.

“Go get me that story!”

Slowly, they both walked back towards their desks.

“Do you mind if I check my voicemail before we go?” Clark asked politely.

“Uh, no. That's fine,” Lois answered.

“All right,” Clark said and headed to his desk.

Lois sat back down at her desk, hoping it wouldn't take Clark long to get his messages so that they could get the heck out of here. Being with Clark was awkward, but not as awkward as being here. New computer systems. New desk. She was just glad Perry hadn't decided to rearrange everyone's desks when they renovated. Jimmy had left his copy of the *Metropolis Star* on her desk. She glowered at the poll visible on the front page, and then pitched the paper in her trash can. Twenty percent of *Metropolis* was anti-Superman. Pah! She'd overheard a few people arguing about Lex and why Superman hadn't saved him. Coming into the building this morning, she'd felt guilty and livid all over again. She (and Clark) had ferreted out a lot of Lex's secrets, but somehow it hadn't made her feel much better. Lex had been a monster, and she had missed it completely. And today, the first day the rebuilt Planet was open, she was sure Lex was on everyone's mind.

No one at the Planet had made the mistake of telling her to her face that it was her fault that they'd been working in temporary offices, but she'd heard the speculation over the past

few weeks. She'd been in a stall and heard a few women in the ladies' room talking about whether Lex had bombed the Planet to get back at her for something, or because he hadn't liked the schemes the Planet had disrupted over the years, or just because he didn't want his wife working there. Many conversations died away when she walked in. Just this morning, Denise had called Lex a "lowlife, scum-sucking criminal" and wondered aloud how anybody could like him. She'd apologized as soon as she'd seen Lois, but it was yet another time Lois had had her face rubbed in the magnitude of her mess. Today of all days, the Planet was the last place she wanted to be. She glanced over at Clark. He appeared to be done with his phone, so she jabbed at her monitor's off button, and grabbed her purse.

Just then Perry came out of his office. He stopped in between their desks with a frown.

"What are you two still doin' here? I thought I sent you to go cover that murder," he said pointedly.

Clark stood. "Sorry, Chief. I was just checking my voicemail in case there were any related messages from my sources. We're headed out now."

"Aw, as long as you're here, might as well listen to this too," Perry said, then turned to yell to the rest of the newsroom. "Okay, everybody, gather 'round. I've got an announcement to make. As you all know, we've been through some pretty difficult times lately, and the new owner feels that some of you might be suffering from stress—y'know, anxiety, short fuses, etc.,"—he turned a beady eye on Lois and Clark, then continued—"so as of today, the Daily Planet now has its very own staff psychiatrist."

"What? Perry, you can't be serious!" Lois yelled. She didn't care what Perry said. No one was going to make her sit on a couch and listen to psychobabble.

Perry gave her a hard look. "Serious as a heart attack. Now many of you might be familiar with this woman from her syndicated column that we've been runnin', 'Healing the,' uh, 'Inner Self on the Couch.'"

"They yanked the jumble puzzle for that. I was just getting good at it," Jimmy remarked.

"Yeah, well, I was gettin' pretty good at it myself," Perry said. "I mean I'm not so hot on this touchy feely stuff so that's why I never read the column. But it's helpin' to sell newspapers, and the good doctor's convinced our publisher that, well, she can be of some help here."

Lois scoffed. "How do we even know that she's a real doctor? Half these media shrinks are frauds."

An attractive redhead marched to the front of the crowd to stand by Perry. "Oh, I'm a real doctor, Ms. Lane," she said in a sweet voice that had a slight edge to it.

Lois fought back a blush. "Of course, I was talking about the other half," she said, pasting on a smile.

"Dr. Carlin, I was just explainin' about you to the staff," Perry said, turning towards the woman.

"I'm looking forward to meeting all of you over the next several days. Please feel free to stop by my office anytime," Dr. Carlin said in rippling tones.

Perry clapped his hands together. "Okay, folks, let's get to it. We've got some blank pages to fill in." He turned to Dr. Carlin and gestured towards the newsroom. "They're all yours."

Dr. Carlin took a few steps closer to Lois, then said with a smile, "Ms. Lane, I'm especially looking forward to meeting with you."

Lois kept the smile pasted on her face. She might have thought about therapy, but if she ever saw a shrink, she would see the woman Lucy recommended, not some sugary sweet woman her employer foisted on her, and there was no way she would ever admit to needing therapy. "Dr. Carlin, a lot of people have tried to get me on a couch, and after all this time, I don't think I'm gonna start with a psychiatrist."

Doctor Carlin gave a light laugh. "In my experience, it's the people who say they're fine that need help the most."

Lois's hands clenched into fists involuntarily. She widened her smile. "Uh-huh. Well, 'scuse me. Have work to do," she said, then headed towards the elevator, hoping that Clark would follow her and that Dr. Carlin wouldn't.

Clark watched Lois's encounter with Dr. Carlin. She was still too stubborn to admit how much the fiasco with Luthor had affected her. She could barely even admit that she'd been wrong about Luthor in the first place, Clark thought savagely, then reprimanded himself for the thought. He wasn't being fair to her. Lois had apologized to him for not listening to him about Luthor, and Lois never apologized.

And, after all, Dr. Carlin was a doctor. They'd interviewed enough medical personnel for him to realize that all members of the medical profession suffered from guilt by association with her father. Maybe Perry would force Lois to talk to Dr. Carlin, just like he was forcing Lois and Clark to work together. Without even glancing back at him, Lois took off for the elevators. He grimaced, then grabbed his coat and followed her. The Daily Planet might be back to normal, but it was looking less and less likely that things would ever be back to normal between the two of them.

They walked in silence most of the way to the dumpster on Fifth and Pine. At first it had been simply uncomfortable, now it was rapidly becoming unbearable. Clark could hear Lois's heart racing, but there didn't seem to be any safe topics to talk about today.

Lois kept walking faster and faster, practically bulldozing people out of her way. Finally they turned onto a less crowded street. A can was on the street, and she kicked it viciously. Clark guessed she was taking out her frustration over Dr. Carlin's remarks, or maybe the fact that she had to work with him again, or maybe simply the fact that it was sunny outside. With Lois, he never knew.

"Did the police say if Dr. Heller was murdered here or just dumped here?" he asked, trying to steer Lois's thoughts onto work.

Lois rolled her eyes. "I have no idea. *You* took the paper."

"Sorry, I forgot." He pulled the folded paper out of his pocket and handed it to her.

Lois skimmed it. "It doesn't say," she said flatly.

"Okay."

As they rounded the corner, graffitied on the wall were the words:

Superman

Tyranny

Over

People

Clark felt his gut clench. He'd written up an interview with Superman as one of the first articles published in the Planet's temporary offices. Superman was currently away for an indefinite period of time. Crime rates had risen initially, but settled back down as the police department handled the increase. In a way Clark had been surprised because he'd primarily helped out with disasters—traffic accidents, fires, and the like—but then again, people slowed down for the cop with the radar gun. He guessed Superman's presence had been just as much of a deterrent. But lately hostility towards Superman was growing. He hadn't saved Luthor—which for some reason had people up in arms, despite Luthor's criminality. And people didn't like that he'd left the city "unprotected." Not that he'd had a choice about any of that, thanks to Luthor, but no one knew that.

Meanwhile Lois gestured angrily at the graffiti. "Look at this! Who are these idiots?"

Clark took a deep breath, willing himself to sound unaffected.

“Well, whoever they are, they were clever enough to create an acrostic,” he said evenly.

“A what?” Lois asked as they began walking again.

“An acrostic. It’s a word or a message subliminally hidden in a series of lines. In this case the first letter of each one of the words spells the word ‘stop.’”

“Oh. Well, they’re still idiots,” she said firmly.

At that moment they arrived at the dumpster in question. Lois walked around it, looking for anything that the police might have missed. She made a face. “It’s ironic, isn’t it? A doctor who makes people look beautiful ends up in a dumpster.”

As she rounded the far corner of the dumpster, a homeless man jumped out and took off running.

Clark slowly ran after him, yelling that they only wanted to talk to him. The homeless man showed no signs of slowing down, and Clark realized he wouldn’t be able to catch up without using super-speed. Fortunately, he’d regained most of his strength, so he grabbed a tire off the ground and threw it at the man. The tire landed dead center over him, and he fell to the ground. Clark jogged over and removed the tire, quick before Lois could see it.

“You okay?” Clark asked the man as he took the tire off.

“Mister, I don’t know nothin’!”

“About what? Relax, we just want to talk to you.”

The man’s eyes widened as Lois came striding up to them.

“How’d you catch him?” Lois asked.

“He got, uh, tired,” Clark replied. He kept his hands close to the homeless guy in case the guy had any more ideas about taking off. “Look, we’re reporters. We just want to know if you can tell us anything about the body that was found in that alley.”

The homeless man’s eyes skittered back and forth between the two of them. He flinched and his heart rate spiked as Lois took a step closer. “I don’t know nothin’,” he repeated.

“Lois, I think some money would be a really good idea about now.”

“Where’s *your* wallet?” she shot back.

Clark suppressed a sigh. Ever since Luthor, some days he couldn’t do anything right. “Coat pocket. Would you rather keep an eye on him while I dig it out?”

“No, it’s fine— *if* you pay me back half.”

“Of course.”

Lois dug through her wallet, pulled out two twenties, and held them just out of the homeless man’s reach. “All right, what’d you see?”

The homeless guy turned to Clark. “I saw two guys dumpin’ a body. I heard one of ‘em call the other one ‘Harry,’ ‘cept that when they left I saw it wasn’t guys, it was chicks.”

“Well, did you get a good look at either of them?” Clark asked.

“Yeah, one,” he said and grabbed the money out of Lois’s hand. He pointed to Lois. “It was her,” he said and took off running.

“Well, that was a waste of forty bucks,” Lois said disgustedly.

Clark wasn’t so sure, but there was no way he was going to actually tell Lois that. The man had been genuinely scared of Lois. Obviously, Lois might hate doctors, but there was no way that she’d murdered the plastic surgeon, which meant the guy must not have gotten a very good look. However, they had learned that two women had been involved, which was more than they’d known before. Silently, he pulled out a twenty and handed it to Lois. “What do you want to do now?” he asked her.

She looked at her watch. “I’d say the good doctor’s office might be our best bet. Think everyone will be out to lunch by now?”

“Do you know where the office is?”

“I think the address was on that paper.”

“Sounds good to me. Is it close enough to walk, or do you want to take a cab?”

Lois cast a sideways glance at him, mentally deciding whether she could put up with the silence for long enough to walk. “Let’s take a cab,” she said.

Without a word, Clark gestured for her to precede him back to the main road where they’d be likely to find a taxi.

“So how do you want to play this?” Clark asked Lois as they walked up the steps to Dr. Heller’s office.

Lois shrugged. “Depends on who’s in the office.”

Clark barely kept himself from rolling his eyes.

A young woman with short blond hair wearing jeans was sorting through files when they walked in the door. “Oh, I’m sorry. The office is closed,” she said.

Clark smiled at her. “That’s all right. We’re not here for an appointment.”

Lois stepped up to the counter. “We’re reporters for the Daily Planet, and we’re investigating Dr. Heller’s murder. Can you tell us anything about what he’d been working on lately?”

The woman smiled and directed her reply to Clark. “I’m sorry. I’m just a temp, so I don’t know anything about Dr. Heller.”

“Is there someone else we could talk to then?” he asked politely.

“Um, not really. I don’t know if anyone else will even be in today.”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to find what we need if we just take a quick look through his files,” Lois said firmly.

The temp frowned uncomfortably. “I’m sorry. I can’t let you do that. HIPAA regulations and all.”

“Are you sure?” Lois asked, holding up a twenty.

“Yes, I am,” the woman replied coldly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

Clark grabbed Lois’s arm. “Thanks for your time anyway,” he said to the temp, and then steered Lois firmly out the door.

“Clark! What do you think you’re doing? We could have talked her into it!” she hissed.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“You’re too cautious! I’m sure flipping through the files would have given us something! You’re always making things harder than they have to be!”

Clark bit back a retort. Using a sledgehammer when you just needed a little honey certainly hadn’t made things easy. The temp had been basically honest and trying to bribe her instead of reason with her had just made the situation impossible. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” he said evenly. “So what do you want to do now?”

Lois glared at him. “I want to look through Dr. Heller’s files!”

“Do you want to wait and see if the temp leaves? Or shall we go talk to our other sources and check back tomorrow?”

She stopped for a moment, considering, then sighed. “Let’s talk to our other sources and check back tomorrow. But if that doesn’t get us access to Dr. Heller’s files, then we come back tomorrow night,” she said severely.

“Okay.”

Lois stalked out to the curb and hailed a taxi. She surreptitiously rubbed her arm where Clark had touched her. He hadn’t touched her in months, and even though she’d been furious with him, it had felt warm and right. She swallowed hard, forcing the rising tears back down. Having Clark agree with her had been almost worse than his usual speech about how dangerous and illegal breaking and entering was. It only served to emphasize the distance between them. He hadn’t even fought with her when she’d yelled at him. She was used to him remaining mostly calm, even when they fought, but not this simple acquiescence It had been over two months since Clark

had been her best friend and Superman had been a part of her life. Back when Lex's power plant had driven Superman away and Clark had left, Lois remembered wondering which of them she'd miss more. Now she knew: Clark.

Oh, she still missed Superman—although in some ways she was glad she hadn't seen him after how awful things had gone that night in her apartment—but normally she'd only seen Superman for short periods of time, only talked to him after he'd rescued her or when he was answering questions about some other rescue he'd just completed. Superman she could live without. Clark on the other hand . . . Clark had somehow become essential to her well-being over the past year, and now they couldn't even have a proper talk. Some days she wished he would just lose his temper and fight with her. At least then she'd be talking to the real him, rather than to this polite stranger that had taken his place.

By the end of the day, neither of them had much to show for their various phone calls. Clark had asked Jimmy to get him Dr. Heller's financial records for the past six months, but Jimmy was backed up with other research requests. He'd promised to try to get the info to them by tomorrow evening at the latest.

"Lois, I think I'm going to head down to the police station, see if Henderson's picked up that homeless guy we ran into earlier today. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay, Clark. See you tomorrow," she replied, noting that he hadn't even asked if she wanted to come with him. She glared at his retreating back. Two could play that game. She shut down her computer and headed home. She and her black clothing had a date with Dr. Heller's office tonight.

The next morning Clark woke up feeling somehow different. Better. He lay there for a minute, trying to pinpoint what exactly it was, and then realized that he was floating. For the first time in months, he spun into the Suit and took off from his balcony to do a patrol. Superman was back! He'd barely started his regular route when his super-hearing cut in. Someone was falling. He bit back a grin. This time he could actually do something about what he heard. It was like having an amputated limb suddenly regrow. He swerved and poured on speed, catching the falling construction worker with plenty of time to spare.

"You okay?" he asked the construction worker, as he set the man down.

"Yeah. Thanks, Superman," the man said.

Another man stepped out of the crowd that had gathered below the falling worker. He glared at Superman, then put his hands on his hips. "Well, isn't this just dandy? Superman finally shows up and saves the day again!" he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Is there a problem?" Superman asked, folding his arms across his chest in his hero stance.

"Yeah! You!" the guy responded.

The construction worker stared at the man. "What, are you nuts? Superman's the greatest!"

"Oh yeah, well, if he's so great, why didn't he save Lex Luthor?"

"I wanted to," Superman said.

"Wanted to?" The man gave him a look that could peel paint. "Wanted to's not good enough. Lex Luther did a lot of good for this city, and *you* let him die."

Clark's thoughts raced. He'd read the polls. He knew that hostility towards Superman had increased, but this was ridiculous. Luthor had been exposed as a criminal—he of all people knew that fact because he'd written a majority of the articles on Luthor, in addition to gathering the evidence in the first place—yet there were people who actually preferred Luthor to Superman. And it was Luthor's fault in the first place that

Superman couldn't save him, not that Clark was going to let any hint of that get out.

He raised his hands placatingly. Maybe he couldn't fix Luthor's death, or the hostility other people felt, but he could try to reach this man. "There's more to it than you know, but, believe me, I didn't want him to die."

The bystander sneered. "Why should I believe you? You're nothing but a freak in a blue suit. You know what I think? You save who you want to save. You call yourself Superman? I think you think you're super god."

Clark had no idea what to say to that. He looked at the man for a moment, then said, "All life is valuable. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have somewhere else I need to be." He didn't wait for a response before taking off and heading towards the Daily Planet.

Clark landed in the deserted alley behind the Planet and spun out of the Suit. Should he write up the story of Superman's return? It was big news, and there hadn't been a single reporter on site. However, Clark Kent had been the one to write up the story of Superman's absence. He wasn't sure he could afford to solidify that connection in people's minds by writing up the story of Superman's return. No, he'd wait. Word would get out, and at one of his rescues the press would be all over him. Having settled that, he walked into the Planet's lobby.

The second he walked through the revolving doors, he saw Lois, talking to the vendor and pouring a box of chocolate bars into her bag. "Am I still getting the bulk discount?" Clark heard her ask.

"Oh sure. By the way, I'm with you one hundred percent. Go get 'em," the vendor replied.

Lois seemed confused by that, but merely agreed with the man, then walked over the elevator.

As much as she tried to pretend she wasn't stressed, Clark had never seen her go through as much chocolate—her drug of choice—as she had in the past two months. He sighed. If only he knew what to do about any of their problems—or could at least decide if he even wanted Lois in his life. He walked over to wait for the elevator by her.

"Morning, Lois," he said.

"Morning, Clark," she replied.

They waited in awkward silence until the elevator doors opened. No one else stepped in with them. Was it that obvious that things were tense between them?

"Clark, do I look okay to you?" Lois asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"People are looking at me funny."

"I see," he said, staring determinedly at the elevator doors. Chocolate. Paranoia now. If only she'd just talk to someone. Get some stuff off her chest.

"Any luck at the police station last night?" Lois asked.

"Not really. I stayed there while the detectives interviewed that homeless guy, but he didn't tell them anything new."

"So am I on my way to the big house then?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Clark said quietly.

"Well, you'll never guess what I turned up last night," Lois said, sounding like the cat who got the canary.

"What?"

"Well, I took a little stroll down to Dr. Heller's office and—"

Clark whipped around to face her. "Lois! What were you thinking? I thought we were going to go back and—" he began, then swallowed his ire. He couldn't let her see how much she'd gotten to him, how much he worried about her. Telling her the secret of his feelings for her had been one of the many bombs that had destroyed their relationship. He had to remain professional. He forced himself to relax, then asked in a cool tone, "Did you find anything?"

Lois's eyes narrowed. "Yes, I did. I copied his year-to-date

file. The most recent surgery he performed was a full-facial reconstruction and had no patient name on it. *And* he billed them for five times as much as the other facial reconstruction surgeries in the file.”

“Sounds promising. Who paid for it?”

“ACL Corporation.” She shook her head. “I’ve never heard of them.”

“Neither have I. Guess we should get Jimmy to look into them.

She tapped her foot. “I hope he’s not still behind.”

“Me too.”

Just then the elevator doors opened. Lois was halfway into the bullpen before Clark had even made it out of the elevator. And people think Superman is fast, he thought sourly.

“Jimmy!” she yelled as she strode towards her desk.

Jimmy was already headed towards her. He glared at her. “I just want you to know. What you did took a lot of guts,” he said in a low growl.

Lois stopped dead. She’d never heard Jimmy sound this upset with her. “Uh—”

Perry and Dr. Carlin walked up. “Lois, what in the Sam Hill was that stunt you pulled last night?” Perry demanded. “Our publisher’s been all over me like a bad rash.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Chief,” she said with a blank stare.

“I’m talkin’ about your virtuoso performance on the late news,” Perry said.

Clark frowned. “You were on the news?”

“Y’know, if you have an opinion to express, you might consider usin’ our editorial page,” Perry suggested.

“I wasn’t on the news.”

“Are you saying you weren’t at that anti-Superman demonstration last night?” Dr. Carlin asked, an eyebrow arched up.

“What? Course not! I was home eating chocolate. Cottage cheese. Chocolate-flavored cottage cheese. It’s a new flavor. I was doing my laundry,” Lois babbled and looked at Clark as though he could confirm where she’d been.

Clark glowered. He couldn’t exactly tell everyone that she’d been breaking into Dr. Heller’s office, and anyway, he hadn’t actually been with her since she hadn’t bothered to tell him what she was up to.

“Lois, you come with me,” Perry said firmly and led her into one of the conference rooms. Clark followed them. Perry turned on the TV and began to play a video of the late news.

The video showed Lois standing in front of the courthouse steps at what was clearly a protest against Superman. She brushed her hair out of her face, then said, “I was there when Lex Luthor died. I prayed Superman would save him, but for some reason he decided not to. I think the citizens of Metropolis have a right to ask: isn’t Lex Luthor’s blood on Superman’s hands?”

Clark felt the breath whoosh out of his lungs as though someone had punched him in the gut. It was one thing for twenty percent of the city to be anti-Superman—it was another thing entirely for Lois herself to be anti-Superman. He’d never have expected this in a million years. She must have loved Luthor far more than he’d realized.

The video ended, and Perry turned to Lois. “Now, I could be wrong. I mean I’ve only worked with you for about five years, but I’m seein’ some remarkable similarities here.”

Lois walked towards the television, then turned back. “That’s not me! It’s some kind of sick joke.” She shot Clark another look.

Clark looked away. He didn’t know what to make of the whole thing, but he knew Lois had been suppressing a lot of her feelings.

“It’s no joke, Lois; it’s a cry for help,” Dr. Carlin said. “What you’re demonstrating are signs of post-traumatic stress: short-

term memory loss, erratic behavior. But I can help. If you’ll let me.”

Lois crossed her arms. “No, thank you.”

Perry put a hand on her arm. “Now, Lois, you know I’m not one to meddle in the lives of my reporters, but I would strongly suggest that you take the good doctor up on her offer.”

Lois’s arms slid to her sides. “Perry!”

Perry gave her a stern look.

“Well, I can’t right now! We have to attend Lex’s will-reading. It’s part of our series on the break-up of Lex Corp,” she said obstinately.

“Yeah, but that’s not ‘til this afternoon. That gives you plenty of time to have a nice little chat with Dr. Carlin,” Perry said.

“Yes, but I’m supposed to meet Bobby this morning, because the will-reading is this afternoon. Look, Perry, can I talk to you for a minute in your office?”

Perry gave her a measuring look, then acquiesced.

Lois dropped her purse off at her desk, then headed in to Perry’s office and shut the door. Perry was already sitting at his desk, but Lois refused to sit. “Perry, I know you’re just worried about me, but that really wasn’t me. I know where I was last night, and it wasn’t at an anti-Superman demonstration.”

“And can anyone else verify that?”

She made a face. “Well, not exactly—although I do have the copies to prove it. I was trying to avoid being seen, if you know what I mean.”

Perry’s eyebrows shot up. “Ah. Somethin’ I don’t really want to know about, huh?”

“Exactly.”

“Then why wasn’t your partner with you?”

“He was busy at the police station. We split up, okay?” Lois said defensively.

“I thought I told you to work on this story together,” Perry said, tapping a pencil on the desk.

“We are! It’s just a—distribution of duties. I did some looking around somewhere, and Clark checked out another lead at the police station.”

“I still think you should talk to Dr. Carlin.”

“Perry, don’t you think I should be investigating who was actually at that Superman demonstration? After all,” she paused as a sudden thought hit her, “after all, we *are* investigating the murder of a plastic surgeon. What if this ties in?”

“Honey, how do you know you’re not actually sufferin’ from post-traumatic stress?”

Lois gave him a hard look. “Perry! How many dangerous things have I been through and not once have you sent me to a shrink!”

“Now, Lois, honey, you know there’s no comparison. You almost married the man. Danger in your personal life is different from danger in your professional life.”

“I said ‘no,’” she said quietly.

“What?”

“I said, ‘no,’ to Lex. I wouldn’t have married him.”

“When?”

“At the altar. Look, Perry, you’re right that I don’t really want to talk about it, but even though I didn’t realize that Lex was a criminal, I did realize that I didn’t love him and didn’t want to marry him, *before* you showed up. Yes, the aftermath has been”—she took a deep breath—“far from pleasant. But I was not on the news last night. How could you think that I’d say something like that about Superman?”

“Maybe because he didn’t save Luthor?”

“Perry, I didn’t want the man to die, but I’m not grieving his loss. *I didn’t love him. I didn’t want to marry him.* I just—didn’t know how to handle things with the Planet was gone.” She shrugged. “I’ll be fine, Perry.”

He gave her a long look. “All right—for now. But if anything

else happens, you *will* talk to Dr. Carlin.”

She shook her head. “If you’re going to make it a choice between keeping my job and talking to a shrink, I’ll talk to a shrink, but really, I’d rather talk to someone other than Dr. Carlin. There’s something about that woman that just strikes me the wrong way.”

“We’ll see,” Perry said. His look softened. “If you need a friend, you know I’m always here for ya, darlin’.”

“Thanks, Perry.”

“Now go finish that story *with your partner*.”

Lois gave him an ironic salute. “Yes, sir.”

Clark watched Lois head into Perry’s office. He hoped Perry would be able to talk some sense into her. She had to know that bottling everything up wasn’t good for her. Although this was Lois—she’d spent her whole life bottling things up. He just didn’t know how much longer she could continue. He shook himself. If he didn’t find something else to do, he’d end up listening in on Lois’s conversation with Perry, and that was the last thing he wanted right now; he didn’t think he’d ever want to listen to her talk about Luthor.

“Jimmy!” he called, walking over towards the young man’s desk.

“What’s up, CK?”

“I need everything you can find out about ‘ACL Corporation.’”

Jimmy dutifully wrote down the name. “Okay, but I still haven’t gotten to Dr. Heller’s finances yet.”

“That’s okay. I’m sure you’re doing your best. Just get it to us when you can.”

“Sure, CK.”

Clark patted his friend on the shoulder. “Thanks, Jimmy.”

As he headed back to his own desk, Clark tried to decide what their next step should be. They’d both called their sources. Maybe he’d check back with Henderson in case anything new had turned up.

By the time he’d finished checking his voicemail and talking to Henderson, Lois was back from Perry’s office. She grabbed a folder of papers out of her bag and brought it over to his desk.

“This is everything I copied last night. I think we should still go back to Dr. Heller’s office this morning in case there are any regular employees we can talk to there.”

Clark stilled. “I thought Perry said you had to talk to Dr. Carlin.”

Lois shook her head. “Not anymore. Anyway, Clark, I think we should look into that too.”

“Look into what?”

“Who was at the demonstration last night!” she said as her eyes flicked heavenward.

“Lois—”

“It wasn’t me, Clark. You know where I was.” She tapped the folder. “So that means there’s someone out there who looks just like me who’s spouting off nonsense about Superman. If these people had any sense at all, they’d realize that Superman can’t be everywhere,” she said matter-of-factly.

Clark just stared at her. He had no clue how to reconcile the grieving almost-widow with this woman.

Lois sighed gustily. “Clark! We’re investigating the murder of a plastic surgeon. I don’t know that these events are connected, but my gut says there’s something there, so let’s start with this folder, and then we can get in a trip to Dr. Heller’s office before we have to be at Lex’s will-reading.”

“Okay, Lois.”

Lois sat down in Clark’s extra chair and flipped open the folder. Just then she noticed Dr. Carlin headed her direction.

“On second thought,” Lois muttered, and closed the folder. “I’m in the mood for some real coffee, Clark. Let’s take this with

us.”

“All right, Lois,” Clark said.

“Lois!” Dr. Carlin called.

“Sorry, Dr. Carlin, we’re on our way out,” Lois said sweetly.

“I thought you were going to come talk to me.”

“Not today,” Lois said firmly. “Or any other day,” she muttered under her breath as she walked away.

Clark gave Dr. Carlin a weak smile, noticing that she was actually watching Lois with a hard look on her face. Clark grabbed his jacket. “We’ll see you later, Dr. Carlin.”

Dr. Carlin just nodded.

“There is seriously something wrong with that woman,” Lois said as they exited the Planet.

“Like the fact that she’s a doctor or something else?”

“Something about her just seems off. Psychiatrists aren’t usually that saccharine. Haven’t you noticed it?”

Clark shrugged. Dr. Carlin’s face when she’d been watching Lois had seemed out of place, however, he wasn’t going to jump to any conclusions yet—merely keep his eyes open.

Lois’s hands clenched into fists. She just wanted to reach over and strangle him. It was like trying to talk to a brick wall! “Well, since you’re my partner right now,” she said, forcing her voice to sound bright, “it’s your job to trust my instincts, and my gut says there’s something wrong with her.” Lois just hoped that her instincts hadn’t gone on permanent strike. They hadn’t gone off around Lex. If they started going off around people without a reason, she’d never live it down.

Clark’s jaw clenched. Trust her instincts? Right. Like the way she’d trusted his instincts when he’d talked himself hoarse trying to warn her about Luthor for months before she’d almost married the man. This was exactly why partnership with Lois didn’t work, why a relationship with her would never work. Not only did she refuse to deal with the reality of her situation by talking to someone about all the feelings she was bottling up, but she never listened to him and always expected him to listen to her. Real equal. He snorted. She’d told him when they’d first met that she was top banana, and, even after all these months, nothing had changed.

“What?” Lois demanded, noting that the tick in his jaw had begun to pulse.

“What what?” Clark asked in a cool tone.

“You snorted. What?” she repeated.

“Nothing,” he said evenly. “Where do you want to get coffee?”

Her eyes narrowed. “What are you thinking?”

“Lo-is. I’m thinking about where we’re going to get coffee.”

She halted. “You don’t believe me that something’s wrong with Dr. Carlin, do you?” she challenged, her hands going to her hips.

“I didn’t say anything,” Clark said.

“You didn’t have to. I could hear you thinking it from all the way over here.”

Clark took a deep breath, visibly calming himself. “I haven’t known her long enough to form an opinion. Do you want to get coffee and look at the folder now or shall we get a cab to Dr. Heller’s office first?”

Lois glared at him. “I want to know why you snorted.”

Clark stared back for a moment, then relaxed. The past couple of months had given him plenty of practice at keeping things on a professional level. He just hadn’t had to spend as much time in close proximity with Lois as he’d done the past couple of days. If nothing else, he knew he could out-wait Lois any day of the week and twice on Sundays. “Lois, that has nothing to do with work,” he said in a colorless voice. “Now, coffee or Dr. Heller’s?”

Lois held her ground, silently refusing to move on until he

gave.

Clark stood there too, then glanced at his watch. “If you want to stand here for a while, maybe we should plan to split up,” he said politely. “We probably won’t have time to do coffee and Dr. Heller’s before the will-reading unless we get going now.”

Lois growled. “Fine! But don’t think I’m going to just drop this! We *will* come back to this later!”

“Which coffee shop do you want to go to?” Clark asked again.

“Sally’s.”

“All right.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

Lois was still fuming. She’d been patient with Clark for months, and he still refused to let her in. Even if he’d never loved her or had fallen out of love with her, that didn’t mean they couldn’t go back to being friends. She’d thought they were best friends, and now they barely talked. She slowed as the sense of loss hit her once more. He’d been right there for just a second. She had felt him thinking at her, just like in the old days. Yes, he was upset, but he’d been there. And now he was gone again. She didn’t know what to do. Maybe this wasn’t fixable.

Clark was forcing himself to focus on the little things around him. The sun was warm against his face. The sky was blue. He could hear children playing in the distance and the dull roar of the city. He watched the people walking past them. A man rushing by wearing coveralls—a laborer late for work? A woman, paper in hand, studying the street signs and building numbers. A teenage boy with a backpack slung over his left arm. The boy reminded Clark of Jack. He wondered how his young friend was doing. Jack had left to attend college upstate about three weeks ago. Clark made a mental note to write him on one of his evenings off. The sights and sounds were soothing, reminding him that there was more going on in the world than him and Lois, and making sure there wasn’t any space in his brain to think about what had happened between them.

They both ordered their usual, then sat down in a booth. Lois pulled out the folder and opened it. “Do you want the most recent half or the older half first?” she asked.

“I’ll take whichever half you’re not starting with.”

She scowled at him. “Fine. Take the old half then,” she said and slapped half the stack in front of him.

“Thanks,” he said.

Before long they were both engrossed in the paperwork.

“Clark, look at this,” Lois said suddenly. “I was comparing the other facial reconstructions to that recent one by ACL, and I just noticed the patient’s physical characteristics.”

Clark held out a hand for the page in question, then skimmed through it. “So?”

Lois rolled her eyes. “So, female, my height, my weight—it all adds up!”

Clark’s eyebrows shot up. “You think someone created a double of you?”

“Well, I know I sure wasn’t at that demonstration last night and whoever it was on the tape looked an awful lot like me.”

“Hmm.” Clark replayed the tape in his mind. “You might be right! She used her left hand to push her hair out of her face. You’re right-handed.”

“I told you it wasn’t me! Now we just need to figure out who’s behind ACL. Then we’ll have our killer.”

“Because the homeless guy saw ‘you’ dumping the body.” Clark smiled. “So do you want to call Henderson or shall I?”

“Why would we call Henderson?” Lois said scornfully.

“Lois, if there’s a double of you out there committing murders, don’t you think someone in the police department should know about it—preferably before you get arrested for something she does?”

“Fine, Mr. Always-By-the-Book, we talk to Henderson—but

only if he agrees to give us the exclusive.”

“So do you want to call him or shall I?” Clark repeated.

“Why don’t we just go down there? Maybe he’s found out something more by now.”

Clark glanced at the clock hanging on the shop’s wall. “He hadn’t as of an hour ago. I talked with him on the phone this morning, and he said nothing new had turned up.”

“You already called him?”

“Yes, while you were talking to Perry.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t get a chance to. I’m telling you now. Do you still want to go down there?”

Lois sighed. “No, I guess not. Let’s just call him on our way to Dr. Heller’s office. I’m sure there’s a payphone somewhere along the way.”

“All right. I didn’t see ACL on any of the other invoices. How about your half?”

“No,” Lois said shortly, then shoved the papers back in the folder and got to her feet. “Coming?” she threw over her shoulder.

“Right behind you.”

Henderson had asked them to bring in their copies of the invoice and suggested that Lois be a little extra careful in the foreseeable future. They’d told him they’d head to the station after finishing up the will-reading. The temp was again the only one in the office, so Clark gave her a business card and politely asked her to have a member of the staff call them whenever they got in. They’d grabbed a quick sandwich and were about to head to the will-reading when Clark’s super-hearing cut in: a mugging, not too far from where they were.

“Lois, I just remembered I need to pick up my dry cleaning real quick. I’ll meet you at LexCorp,” he said and bundled her into a cab.

Lois rolled her eyes. “Fine,” she said to the closed door. Actually, even though she was annoyed that Clark was running off, she could do with the break. She leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes. It had been a long day. Finding out about that double. Having to deal with Dr. Carlin and convince Perry that she didn’t need to see a shrink. It said something about her apparent emotional stability that people were more willing to believe she’d cracked up and started attacking Superman than that someone had created a double of her. She knew she had days where she was falling apart, but she hadn’t thought it was apparent to anyone else—except maybe Lucy, and maybe Clark, although lately he seemed willfully oblivious to her emotional well-being.

Clark finished dealing with the mugging, and then made his way over to LexCorp where the will-reading had just begun. He slid into a seat beside Lois.

“Did I miss anything?” he asked in a whisper.

“Not really,” she replied.

They both tuned back in to hear Sheldon Bender, Luthor’s lawyer, listing off the various beneficiaries. Suddenly, Mr. Bender looked right at Lois and smirked. “Proceeds will go to the ACL Corporation which administers an annuity to his ex-wife, Mrs. Luthor,” he said and then looked back down at the paper in front of him.

Clark looked at Lois. She sat there, gaping at the lawyer.

“Are you okay?” he asked in an undertone.

“I can’t believe it! He never said a word about—That lying, no-good—” she exploded in a fierce whisper.

Clark could see several journalists turn towards the disturbance. The last thing Lois needed was to have her reaction splashed across all the papers. He put a hand on her arm. “Shhh, Lois! Do you really want everyone to hear this?”

“He was married, Clark. All those times he told me I was his first true love,” she hissed.

In a whisper, he replied, “Lois, maybe we should just try to find her. Wait, Lois! ACL!”

Lois’s eyebrows shot up. “Lex Luthor’s ex-wife is out to get me? Why? It’s not like I stole him away at the homecoming dance,” she said.

“Who knows? Let’s just find her.”

“Yeah, I’d like to meet the woman that said I do, before I did,” she said savagely, then shook her head. “Almost did. Didn’t.”

“Let’s go,” Clark said and steered her towards the door, figuring they could at least get out before the journalists swarmed around them.

Clark could hear Lois’s heart rate headed through the roof as they rode the elevator down. Tremors passed through her body every so often. Thankfully, they made it out of the building without a single person stopping them.

“Are you all right?” he asked softly.

“He lied to me, Clark!”

Clark’s mouth twisted. “Lois, you knew he lied to you.”

“Not about this. He didn’t need to lie about this,” she said in a forlorn voice.

Clark pulled her hand through his arm and rubbed her hand soothingly. “You’re right. He didn’t.”

“I thought he was at least telling the truth about the way he felt about me,” she said with a slight catch in her voice.

“Lois, did you—” Clark began, intending to ask if she’d really loved Luthor, but then decided he couldn’t handle hearing her say that she had loved him. “Did you want to head over to the MPD now, or do you need some chocolate ice cream first?” he finished.

“Ice cream,” she said, sounding like a little girl.

“Okay, let’s get you some ice cream then.”

Clark took Lois to Fudge Castle and bought her some chocolate ice cream. Lois ate about half her ice cream, then gave the rest to Clark. Clark polished it off in silence. Now that they were sitting here, he realized he couldn’t make himself finagle her around to opening up about Luthor and his ex-wife. A part of him was blazingly angry that she’d been so devastated over Luthor’s lies—that he had yet another confirmation that she’d actually cared about Luthor and a reminder that she’d refused to listen to her “best friend.” He forced his jaw to relax before he left bite marks in the spoon, instead concentrating on the taste of the ice cream and finding pictures in the random sprinkling of glitter on the Formica tabletop.

Clark set his spoon down with great care and leaned back in his seat. “So where do you want to start?” he asked Lois.

Lois took a deep breath. “Well, we’ve got two angles—ACL Corporation and Mrs. Luthor. Let’s go see Henderson, and then why don’t you head back to the Planet and see if you can find out anything else about ACL? I’ll go over to the Bureau of Vital Statistics. Maybe I can get a lead on Mrs. Luthor.”

“Okay. Sounds like a plan,” Clark agreed.

“Have Jimmy check into Mrs. Luthor while you’re at it,” Lois ordered.

“Yes, Lois,” Clark said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice but failing.

She glared at him.

Clark stood and held out her coat to help her into it, then gestured for her to precede him out of the shop.

They took a cab to the MPD. Lois sat perfectly straight in her seat, making sure that she didn’t even brush up against Clark. It reminded her of when she and Lucy were young, and they’d draw imaginary lines down the middle of the car’s backseat, proclaiming that neither could cross. She was pretty sure she’d

fall apart all over Clark if he touched her, and that was the last thing she wanted to do. It was obvious that he didn’t want her to open up to him. He hadn’t said a word at Fudge Castle. She needed to focus on the story. She was Lois Lane, a professional from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. And she needed to prove that she still had it. If it turned out that she and Clark couldn’t work together, she had no intention of being the one to leave the Planet.

Henderson was his usual enthusiastic self when they sat down in his office. “So who’s after you today, Lane?” Henderson asked sardonically.

Lois smirked. “Evidently Mrs. Luthor.”

Henderson’s eyebrows shot towards his hairline. “Mrs. Luthor?”

“We get the exclusive, right, Henderson?” Lois asked pointedly.

“Of course,” he replied in a monotone.

“Well, like we said, we found out that ACL Corporation paid for the last surgery Dr. Heller performed, and if you look at this”—Lois pulled out the invoice in question and set it in front of him—you’ll see that he billed them for five times his usual amount. The patient stats also match mine—same height, same weight. And that homeless guy said he saw ‘me’ dumping the body. And ‘I’ was supposedly on the news at an anti-Superman demonstration last night.”

“What’s that got to do with Mrs. Luthor?”

Lois glared at him. “I’m getting there! We attended Lex’s will-reading today and ACL Corporation also administers the fund set up for *Mrs. Luthor’s* annuity. So there you go. Find Mrs. Luthor and you’ll bag Dr. Heller’s killer. You’re very welcome.”

Henderson gave a slight grimace. “So why are you sharing these wonderful gems of information with me?”

Clark leaned forward. “We figured if someone is impersonating Lois and going around murdering people, someone in the police department should know about it.”

Henderson nodded. “Glad to hear one of you has some sense.”

Lois made a small sound of annoyance, but Henderson ignored her.

“I know it’s a waste of time to tell you to be careful, but have you considered what you’re going to do about an alibi, Lane?” Henderson asked.

“Alibi?”

“Y’know, that thing where someone else can verify your whereabouts during the time a crime was committed?”

Henderson leaned back in his chair. “I’d say we should avoid tipping our hand just yet, and that means giving the double enough rope to lead us back to her boss, whoever that is—which means you’ll need to be able to prove that you haven’t committed whatever crimes she does. And, if you do get arrested for something she does, call me, and I’ll take care of it.”

For a split second, Clark thought about suggesting that Lois stay the night at his place. But then reality set in. They hadn’t spent time together outside of work in months, and there was no way he wanted to change that. Not after the strain the past two days of just working together had put on him. Plus, if he had to run out for Superman duties, he wouldn’t be able to be her alibi anyway. But if he didn’t offer ... Perry. He could mention it to Perry, and maybe Perry could talk Lois into staying with him and Alice.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine, Henderson,” Lois said.

“Riiiiight. I’m just trying to make my job easier, Lane.”

“Fine. I’ll think about it. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have our own job to get back to.”

Outside of the MPD, Lois and Clark stood in awkward

silence for a moment.

Clark ran a hand through his hair. “So, I guess you’re headed to the Bureau of Vital Statistics, and I should get back to the Planet.”

Lois nodded. “Yup. Don’t forget to ask Jimmy about Mrs. Luthor.”

Clark didn’t even bother to respond to that. He wasn’t sure he could refrain from sarcasm or from commenting on how she’d reverted back to babysitting him through investigations. “I’ll see you later,” he told her, then turned to walk back towards the Planet. Once she was out of sight, he ducked into an alley and changed. He needed to take a quick side trip to Kansas to give his parents the good news in person, before Superman’s return got out. More than that, he needed a break from everything Lois Lane-related.

When Clark arrived, his dad was on a ladder painting the barn. Clark suppressed a sigh. He kept telling his parents to save jobs like those for when he came to visit. “Hi, Dad!” he said, hovering next to him.

Jonathan started and almost fell off the ladder.

Clark steadied him. “Sorry.”

“Give me a little warning next time, son,” Jonathan said, mopping his brow. He smiled. “I take it your powers are back.”

“Yup,” Clark said with a grin.

Martha came hurrying out, a huge smile on her face. “Was that our son that I just heard?”

“Hey, Mom!” Clark landed and gave her a hug.

“I’m so glad you’re better, honey,” his mom said.

“So how are things going at the Planet? You said you were going to be back in the building earlier this week?” Jonathan asked.

“Yeah. Yesterday. It’s okay,” Clark said slowly. “Perry partnered Lois and me again.”

“How’s that going?” Martha asked.

Clark made a face. “About how you’d think.”

“That bad, huh?” Martha said. “You both just need to talk to each other.”

“I don’t think I’m ready to, Mom. And I know she’s not ready.”

“How do you know that if you won’t talk to her?” Martha demanded.

“Mom, you don’t know Lois. She’s a master at bottling things up. It takes some serious skill and patience to get her to open up.”

“So?”

“So, I just don’t have that right now.”

“Clark, you were her best friend. How do you expect her to get through this without your support?”

Jonathan began to descend the ladder, recognizing this was shaping up to be a lengthy discussion.

“Oh, Dad, here. Let me,” Clark said, taking the paint and paintbrush from his father. He began to paint the barn at super-speed, finishing it up only seconds later. “Anything else you need me to do while I’m here?” he asked.

Jonathan shook his head. “Thanks for offering though.”

“I know someone else who’s pretty good at bottling up their feelings,” Martha said, giving Clark a pointed look.

Clark threw his hands in the air. “It’s not that I don’t want to talk about it. I just don’t know what to say. Lois doesn’t want me right now. I know she’s having a hard time. Today we found out that Luthor had been married before, and she broke down over the fact that he’d lied when he’d said she was his ‘first love.’ I took her out for ice cream. I did what I could, okay?”

“Did you talk to her?” Martha asked, her arms crossed.

“Um, well, not exactly.”

“Uh-huh. That’s what I thought.” She dropped her arms to her sides and took a step closer to Clark. “Honey, I’m just

worried about you. I know you miss her, and you can’t fix your relationship without talking.”

Jonathan nodded. “She probably needs someone to talk to right now.”

“You’re probably right,” Clark agreed, figuring it was the quickest way to end the conversation. His parents just didn’t understand how resistant Lois was to talking or how heartbroken he was. Most days equal parts of ice and rage burned through his veins. He was almost positive he wouldn’t be able to say anything nice, so it’d be far better just to say nothing at all.

Martha gave him a long look. “You said you bought a journal. Are you still writing in it?”

“Yeah.”

“Has it helped at all?”

Clark considered. “I think so. I can’t say that it’s helped me sort through my feelings exactly, but at least I know why I’m feeling what I’m feeling. And I have a little more sympathy for where Lois was coming from.”

Martha patted his arm. “You just keep at it, honey.”

“Thanks, Mom. Well, I should get back to Metropolis. I just wanted to drop in to let you know that I’m back before you saw it on the news.”

“We’re glad that you’re better, son,” Jonathan said, squeezing Clark’s shoulder.

“Stop by for dinner sometime soon,” Martha said and gave her son a quick hug.

By the end of the workday, Clark had accomplished absolutely nothing. He’d asked Jimmy to follow up on Luthor’s first wife, but Jimmy was still swamped. He’d spent a frustrating couple of hours trying to find anything at all on ACL Corporation, but had been completely unsuccessful, and he’d called Sheldon Bender’s office several times, trying to get past the receptionist and actually talk to the lawyer; Mr. Bender’s office was no longer taking his calls. He’d passed Henderson’s concerns about an alibi for Lois along to Perry, but he wasn’t sure Lois would even be back in the office. He decided to give it up as a bad job and head home for the night. Just as he was shutting down his computer, he heard a bulletin on someone’s radio about a fire going on at one of the chemical plants near the waterfront. It sounded like a job for Superman.

When Lois got back to the Daily Planet, Clark had already left. Perry called her into his office right away.

“Lois, Clark filled me in. I’m sorry I didn’t realize that woman was a double.”

“It’s okay, Chief. I know I’ve been kinda stressed lately,” she said magnanimously.

“How are things goin’ with you and Clark?” he asked.

Lois stilled. She wasn’t even sure how to answer that question. Apparently, they were both professional enough to work together. There’d been several—no, make that “many”—tense moments, but they were still making progress on the investigation. And hopefully, eventually, Clark would let her back in. “Okay, I think.”

Perry gave her a long look. “You let me know if there’s a problem, y’hear?”

Lois nodded.

“Now, where are you stayin’ tonight?”

“At my apartment. Why?”

“I thought Henderson told you to make sure you had an alibi.”

“Chief, Henderson is just overreacting.”

“Why don’t you stay at my place? We’ve got a guest room, and Alice would love to have you.”

Lois actually considered it for a moment, but then decided that she wasn’t up for hours of Elvis, and she did not appreciate

Clark or Perry trying to babysit her. “That’s okay, Chief. I’ll be fine.”

“Lois—”

Jimmy burst in the door. “Chief! It’s Superman!”

“Jimmy! What have I told you about bargain’ in—what? Superman? Where?”

“There’s a fire at one of the chemical plants on the bay!”

“We’ll finish this later. Lois, get down there and get me that story! Olsen, go with her and get me some good photos!”

“On it, Chief,” Lois said as she and Jimmy headed out the door.

The next morning Superman was on the front page of both the Planet and the Star. Clark hadn’t been too surprised to see Lois at the fire. She’d stuck around until almost midnight when things had finally died down enough for Superman to answer questions. Several other journalists were on site, and he’d been asked all the questions he’d expected: Where were you? Why did you go? Are you back to stay? Where were you when Lex Luthor died? And on and on. He’d simply told everyone that he’d been called away and detained longer than he’d expected, that he still cared about Metropolis, that all life is valuable and he regretted that he hadn’t been able to save Lex Luthor, but that he’d had to accept early on that he couldn’t be everywhere and save everyone, as much as he might wish that he could. He refused to give out information on where he’d been or what he’d been doing on the basis that it involved other people than just himself. And then he’d excused himself to continue helping the firemen make sure the fire was completely out. It had only taken about another hour or so before he’d finished up at the fire. After that he’d done a quick patrol, and then he’d gone flying. Of all the things he’d missed, he’d missed flying the most. He’d spent hours reacquainting himself with all his favorite haunts and drifting above the clouds. It had been exactly what he’d needed after two grueling days spent with Lois.

Clark glanced down at the papers in his hand. The Metropolis Star had written their piece in such a way that Superman looked completely irresponsible. The Planet had, of course, been kinder. Lois had managed to convey the idea that Superman was but one man trying to plug thousands of holes in a dam. He did what he could when he could. Clark read through her article a couple of times, still not sure how he felt about it. Contemplating Lois’s obvious sympathy for Superman felt like wiggling a loose tooth. How could the one woman who understood that side of him so well be so horrible to the rest of him?

Lois was already at her desk by the time Clark walked in. He’d done another patrol that morning before coming to work and was running late. It was amazing how quickly he’d gotten rusty at the skills needed to juggle his dual personas.

“Morning,” Lois said as he walked past.

“Morning.”

“Any luck on your search for ACL?” Lois asked.

Clark sat down and began booting up his computer. “None. It’s not listed anywhere. Now Luthor’s lawyer won’t return my phone calls. You?”

She sighed. “I spent three hours at the Bureau of Vital Statistics yesterday. There’s no marriage certificate on Lex in this state or any other.”

Just then Jimmy walked past, laden down with a stack of files.

“Jimmy? Find anything on Luthor’s marriage?” Clark asked.

Jimmy stopped, a grin on his face. “You bet I did! Turns out he was married on a ship in the Caribbean.” He dug through the pile of folders he was carrying and pulled out a paper. “I found this wedding announcement that ran in the Planet ten years ago,” he said, handing the paper to Lois.

Clark walked over and glanced at the paper Lois held.

“No picture. No maiden name,” Lois said.

Jimmy nodded. “Yeah, I know, but I’m gonna try to track down that ship’s captain as soon as I deliver these,” he said, shifting the pile of folders.

Just then an older man with thinning hair and wearing a police badge stepped over to where they stood. “Lois Lane?”

Lois turned to face him. “Yeah?”

“Detective Ryder, Metropolis PD. You want to tell me where you were last night around one o’clock?”

“I’m not sure—probably on my way home from covering that fire,” she said with a shrug. “Why?”

The detective frowned. “Can anyone verify that?”

“Which part? That I covered the fire? You can read the Planet’s front page for that.”

“What’s this about detective?” Clark asked.

“At 1 a.m. last night a guard was assaulted outside Lex Luthor’s penthouse by a woman he’s identified as Miss Lane.”

Lois gave Clark a quick glance. They did want to catch the double’s boss, which meant reacting exactly as she would have if she hadn’t known about her double. “Well, that’s ridiculous,” she protested.

“This picture was taken by a security camera outside the penthouse. As far as we can make out, the only item taken was an engagement ring Mr. Luthor had given Miss Lane worth a half a million dollars.” The detective pulled out handcuffs. “Miss Lane, you’re under arrest.”

Lois arranged her face in a portrait of shock. “What?”

Detective Ryder proceeded to put the handcuffs on Lois. “For aggravated assault, breaking and entering, and grand theft,” he said, and led her away.

Lois sighed as she waited in the holding cell. She really should have spent the night at Perry’s. It had just been the last straw having Perry call her in and tell her that Clark had tattled to him about Henderson’s need for an alibi. She didn’t need to be babysat. After all, it wasn’t as though she were completely helpless. Ever since she’d almost married Lex, people had been watching her, waiting for her to make another mistake. And then seeing Superman last night. Not that she’d really seen him that closely. He hadn’t even answered all that many questions before returning to the fire. But just knowing that he was back Well, she’d gone home to a hot bath and some cold ice cream. She hadn’t felt up to packing the things she’d need to stay at the White’s. At least Henderson already knew about the double. Hopefully, he’d get her out of here before too much longer.

The police station was full of anti-Superman protestors as Clark and Perry waited for Lois to be released. Clark had called Henderson right away, but they’d still had to get Lois out on bail for now.

Perry looked around in disgust. “This resentment with Superman is gettin’ out of hand! What these people need is a good swift kick in the rear.”

Clark nodded. He had to admit that the resentment had felt bad when he hadn’t been able to be Superman—now that he was having to deal with people’s ire even in the midst of rescues, he wasn’t sure how to handle it. Would it be like the heatwave where the city drummed him out of town?

“Thanks for getting me out so fast,” Lois said, walking up to where Perry and Clark stood. “Another minute and I would have been judging a best tattoo contest. So, what’d Henderson say?”

Clark glowered. “He wanted to know your alibi. I won’t repeat what he said when I told him that I wasn’t sure that you had one.”

“Lois, honey, you okay?” Perry asked.

“Fine.” She sighed. “Let’s just find this woman and

whoever's behind her."

"You go get 'em! I need to head back to the Planet. I'll leave you two to plan your strategy. Oh, uh, we're keepin' this double business between the three of us and Henderson, correct?" Perry asked in an undertone.

"I think that'd be best, Chief, although maybe we should let Jimmy know. You never know what he might be able to dig up," Clark said, then added, "And if Lois or I run into Superman, I think we should let him know as well. Just in case."

"Dr. Carlin's gonna be after you to talk to her, y'know? And if I really believed you were the one doin' these things, I'd be orderin' you to talk to her in a heartbeat," Perry said.

Lois rolled her eyes. "I am not going to talk to that woman. I know you two don't believe me, but there's something wrong with her. Anyway, I'll just make sure I'm not in the office today."

Perry nodded. "Sounds good. Be careful, darlin'."

"Okay. I have to go sign for my purse," Lois said and walked towards the counter.

"Keep an eye on her," Perry said to Clark.

"I will, Chief."

"I know you will, son," Perry said, then left.

It took Lois a few minutes to sign all the necessary paperwork and for the police to find her purse. As they walked out the door to the station, Clark's jaw was beginning to ache. He couldn't believe that Lois had once again gone against everything people told her—Henderson, himself, Perry. They'd all tried to make sure that she was safe, that she had an alibi, but no, the great Lois Lane knew better than all of them. It was just like Luthor all over again. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself, but the words burst out of his lips of their own accord. "I thought you were going to make sure you had an alibi!"

Lois glared at him. "Clark, we just need to find the double. Don't get so worked up."

"Lo-is! What if we can't find the double? What if whoever's behind her simply kills her and disposes of her body before we can prove that she exists?"

"I know she exists!"

"I get that! What I don't get is how you think you'll be able to prove that you didn't commit these crimes come trial time! You knew someone was after you, and you didn't do a single thing about it! You *aren't* invincible!"

"I know that!"

"Do you? Have you even considered that the plan might be for her to just kill you and take your place? You never—" Clark forced himself to break off there. He strode ahead a few paces. He couldn't let her get to him. Worrying about her safety was just another road back to being helplessly in thrall to her. He took several deep breaths and counted backwards from one hundred in Arabic at super-speed a few times. Once he felt calm enough, he waited for Lois to catch up.

"So what do you want to do now?" he asked in an even tone.

Lois threw her hands in the air. "What do I want to do now? I want to talk to my best friend! I want you to stop this nonsense and actually talk to me. Yes, I probably should have gone to the trouble of making sure I had an alibi—which I would have done, if you hadn't butted in and talked to Perry yourself last night."

Clark's eyes widened.

"Yes, I know what you did, buster"—she poked her finger into his chest—"and I didn't appreciate having Perry call me in and tell me that my 'partner' had filled him in on how much danger I was in. Danger, ha! Clark, this woman has just been trying to discredit me. She's not going to kill me. I wish you would just trust my instincts!"

Clark took off walking down the sidewalk again. He was fairly certain that Lois was just desperate to prove that it had been Luthor at fault rather than her instincts, but that didn't help how he felt. She wanted him to trust her instincts and completely

ignored his. She wanted him to go back to being her best friend—barely an apology from her, no acknowledgment of the hell she'd put him through—just c'mon, Clark, why can't you just be good old best friend Clark? Well, he couldn't do it anymore! He couldn't!

A beeping intruded into his consciousness, and he realized that his beeper was going off. He slowed and checked it: Jimmy. A payphone stood a few yards away so he went over and called Jimmy. Lois followed him.

Jimmy's cheerful voice came through the wire. "Hey CK! Good news! I found the ship's captain who married the Luthors. He's at the, uh, Queensland Retirement Home."

Clark forced his voice to sound cheery back. "That's great! Thanks, Jimmy!"

"Yeah, anytime. Just put in a good word for me with Perry."

"Sure thing," Clark said and hung up the phone.

"Well?" Lois said, tapping a foot.

"Jimmy said he found the captain who married the Luthors. Sounds like our next move is to interview him, unless, of course, your instincts have something else they'd rather do," he said sardonically.

"No. Talking to the captain is a good next move."

"I'm so glad you approve," Clark muttered under his breath.

"Clark, don't start with me!" Lois said.

Clark swallowed back all of the retorts that sprang to mind, annoyed that he'd let her get to him so far as to forget his politeness. The rest of their trip was made in stony silence.

"Captain Keene?" Lois asked, walking up to the portly gentleman sitting on a park bench the staff had pointed out to her.

The man looked up and smiled broadly. "Yes!"

"Hi, I'm Lois Lane, and this is Clark Kent; we're from the Daily Planet."

"Nice to meet you both."

"Can we talk to you for a minute?"

Captain Keene chuckled. "Hey, I'm retired. You can talk to me for a year! Oh, please, sit down," he said, motioning to the chairs opposite him.

"Captain, it was our understanding that you performed the marriage of Lex Luthor," Clark began.

Captain Keene nodded. "Yeah, I married him. Some kid called and said you'd be coming by. Course Luthor wasn't anybody then, but I could tell he was a comer. And that bride of his—she was—"

"Something like me?" Lois broke in.

"No, much prettier. And really built." He frowned. "Now, what do you suppose would make a fella like that jump off a building? You'd think with all of his money, he'd have come up with a better escape plan. Still don't understand why Superman didn't save him."

Clark cleared his throat. "Captain, do you remember the name of the bride?"

"Sure! Mrs. Luthor!" he said and laughed heartily.

Neither Lois nor Clark laughed.

The captain looked at both of them. "Hey, that's a joke. I'm retired, I ain't senile. Kid said you might want to see a wedding picture." He picked up the photo album sitting on the bench beside him, and began to thumb through it. "I got pictures of everybody I ever married. Oh, ah ha! Here you go!" he said and handed them the album.

Lois and Clark bent eagerly to look at the photo, then stared. Neither of them had seen this one coming.

"Lex Luthor and Ari Carlin. Married October 8, 1984,"

Captain Keene said.

"Arianna Carlin is Mrs. Luthor!" Lois said triumphantly, relief spreading through her body. It was Lex at fault, not her instincts. "Clark, I hate to say I told you so, but—" she broke off,

remembering that Captain Keene apparently liked Dr. Carlin.

“That guy in the alley! He thought he heard ‘Harry.’ It was ‘Ari!’” Clark said.

“We’ve got her!” Lois exclaimed.

Clark stood and offered his hand to Captain Keene. “Thanks a lot, Captain Keene. You’ve been a lot of help.”

Lois stood too. “Yes, you have,” she added.

“No problem at all. Nice chatting with you folks,” the captain replied.

They’d borrowed a phone to call Henderson—who had said that he’d send someone to the Planet and put out an APB on Dr. Carlin if she wasn’t there—and were now headed back to the Planet themselves.

“I told you there was something wrong with that woman,” Lois crowed as they walked out of the retirement home. Clark barely kept from rolling his eyes. “Yes, Lois.”

“You just need to learn to trust my instincts, Farmboy.”

The muscles around his eyes tightened. “Yes, Lois,” he said. Much more of this and he was going to start sending out resumes, he told himself.

As the taxi pulled up to the Daily Planet, they could see smoke billowing out of the newsroom windows and filling the globe. Clark immediately ran into the building, yelling “Somebody call the fire department!” Lois started to run after him, but caught sight of her double opposite her in the revolving door and instead ran after her.

Clark made his way up to the newsroom floor, changing into the Suit as soon as he could find a secluded spot. Upon reaching the newsroom, he realized it was filled with tear gas rather than smoke. Fortunately most of the gas was still in the newsroom, rather than dispersed throughout the whole building. The canister must have just been opened. “Everybody get down and remain still!” he commanded. “I’m going to neutralize the gas.” He blew freezing breath through the air, and the gas turned to snow.

Superman walked over and helped Perry up. “What happened?”

Perry glanced around the newsroom. “Have you talked to Lois or Clark?” he said in an undertone, his lips barely moving.

Superman nodded slightly.

“It was Lois! She came in here, and she threw a tear gas canister,” Perry said loudly.

Superman gave him an almost imperceptible wink. “Did you see which way she went?”

“Yeah, back down the elevator.”

Clark immediately flew out the window and scanned the street surrounding the Daily Planet. A tan purse in the deserted alley beside the Planet caught his eye. Lois had been carrying this just five minutes before. He picked it up, then changed out of the Suit and headed into the Planet, his heart in his throat. Hopefully, Lois had somehow dropped this on her way in, and he’d find her up in the newsroom.

As he stepped out of the elevator, Perry looked up. “Clark! Where’s Lois?”

So she wasn’t here already. He held up her purse in answer. “I don’t know. Where’s Dr. Carlin?”

“She left before it happened. Why?” Jimmy asked.

Clark grimaced. “Arianna Carlin was married to Lex Luthor.”

Perry stared at him. “I don’t believe it! She was the one who created the double?”

“Yeah. And I bet she has Lois now,” he said grimly.

“I can’t believe that woman pulled the wool over my eyes like that,” Perry lamented.

Jimmy put a hand on Perry’s shoulder. “Don’t feel so bad, Chief—she wrote the book on it.”

“What?” Clark asked.

Jimmy picked up a book off his desk and held it up. “This is her book on subliminal advertising. I was going to ask her to sign a copy to give to my mom for her birthday.”

“That’s it!” Clark exclaimed and strode into the conference room Dr. Carlin had appropriated as her office. Perry and Jimmy followed him.

Jimmy frowned. “What is it, CK?”

Clark pointed to a stack of papers on Dr. Carlin’s desk.

“These are all of Dr. Carlin’s latest columns.”

Perry peered over his shoulder. “Exactly what is it that you’re lookin’ for?”

“Subliminal messages,” Clark said and began scanning the page. He’d noticed that subliminal messages didn’t have the same effect on him as they did on normal people. Moments later, the pattern jumped out at him. “I’ve got it! When you link together the first letter of each one of these paragraphs, it spells the message ‘Superman is evil.’”

Perry shook his head. “Well, I’ll be.”

Clark handed the top sheet to Perry, exposing the one underneath it. “Man of steel wicked.” He flipped to the next. “Superman must die.” He turned to look at Perry. “It’s no wonder that twenty percent of Metropolis is suddenly anti-Superman,” he said, warmth spreading through his chest as he realized the dislike had been artificial.

“Yeah, well, the doctor’s got a loyal followin’.” Perry grabbed the stack of columns. “Let’s see what she’s got planned for tomorrow.”

“Lane murder of Superman good?” Jimmy read. “Is that really what it says?”

Perry’s mouth swung open. “That lunatic’s plannin’ on having Lois’s double kill Superman?”

“She’ll tear the city apart over Lois’s trial,” Clark said.

“Well, now we *know* she’s one brick shy of a full load. Nobody can kill Superman,” Perry said.

Just then the phone began to ring, and Jimmy picked it up. The color drained from his face, and after a moment, he squeaked out a “Let me get him.” He hit the hold button, then turned to Clark. “CK! It’s Dr. Carlin. She’s on line two.”

Clark immediately picked up the phone. “Dr. Carlin?” He turned to Jimmy and Perry and grimaced. “Where are you? ... Yes, I see. I’ll do my best to find him.”

Perry and Jimmy waited with ill-concealed impatience for Clark to finish.

“Well?” Perry said as soon as Clark hung up.

“She’s at Luthor’s penthouse, and she has Lois. She says Lois ‘dragged her there and is now threatening to kill herself unless she can speak to Superman.’”

“Sounds like a set-up if I ever heard one,” Perry said. “I wonder what she thinks she can accomplish.”

Clark shrugged. “I don’t know, but I don’t want Lois to get into any more trouble than she’s already in. I’d better go try to find Superman. I’ll tell him to look things over before he goes in. Jimmy, call Henderson and tell him about Dr. Carlin and where she is.”

With that Clark took off for the stairs, and then super-spined up the empty stairwell to the roof.

Lois glared at Dr. Carlin as the woman replaced the receiver on the phone. Once again she had jumped in without checking the water level. When she’d seen her double leaving the Daily Planet, she hadn’t been able to resist following her. Unfortunately, the double and Dr. Carlin had caught her, held her at gunpoint, and brought her to Lex’s penthouse—which was why she now found herself sitting on a couch in Lex’s office, trussed up like a chicken and gagged.

Dr. Carlin turned to Lois. “Perfect. Clark will testify at your

trial that I was only concerned with your well-being. The helpful therapist to the end. Of course, you'll tearfully insist that you've been framed—that it was actually *me* who brought you here and killed Superman. Classic guilt transference."

Lois shook her head back and forth until she managed to work the gag down off her mouth. "Why are you doing this?"

Dr. Carlin gave her an extra sweet smile. "Everyone knows how much you love Superman—several of your colleagues confirmed that you and he are very 'close' friends"—the smile slid from her face—and when he dies, you will know the pain I felt when you drove the love of my life to his death."

Lois shook her head in disbelief. "You're the one who needs help! Nothing can kill Superman."

Dr. Carlin held up a green glowing bullet. "You remember Kryptonite? You were the one who named it, and this gun"—she picked up a gun off the desk and showed it to Lois—"that *you* bought, will kill him with it."

"I didn't drive Lex to his death."

"You're in a state of denial Lois. Too bad we don't have time to explore that." Dr. Carlin turned slightly to yell into the adjoining room. "Hurry up! He'll be here in a minute!"

Lois's double walked into the room.

"Who are you?" Lois asked the woman.

The double grimaced. "Let's just say I was an accident victim in the right place at the right time."

Dr. Carlin picked up a syringe and a bottle. "Lois, you look a little stressed," she said, her voice dripping with mock concern. "As your doctor, I'm going to prescribe a light sedative." She walked over and, with the double's help, injected the drug into a struggling Lois.

Once he got to LexCorp, Clark carefully x-rayed the penthouse. Lois lay on a couch in front of a fish tank, tied up and apparently unconscious. Dr. Carlin stood in the adjoining room, talking to Lois's double. He surveyed the place. No lead boxes. No sign of the cage Lex had made—although he trusted that Henderson had taken care of it. Dr. Carlin held a gun, but surely she wasn't naïve enough to think that guns worked on him. He made another sweep of the place, and, still finding nothing, he cautiously moved closer, alert for any hint that the ex-Mrs. Luthor had acquired some of her husband's Kryptonite. Nothing. He landed on Luthor's balcony and strode in to where Lois lay. He x-rayed her bones, trying to make sure it was safe to move her.

"Superman, we've been expecting you," Dr. Carlin said, walking into the room. "Don't worry about Lois. I'd much rather have her suffer for the rest of her life. I never wanted to kill her."

Superman automatically crossed his arms over his chest and widened his stance. "No, just frame her for my murder. I really thought you were smarter than this."

Dr. Carlin smiled at him and raised her gun. "I really am," she said, and then she shot him.

Superman didn't even flinch—until he saw that the bullet was Kryptonite. He couldn't completely avoid it, but he managed to shift so that it hit his left shoulder instead of his heart. Even so, the pain was incredible. He fell to the ground and lay there, trying to breathe in spite of it. Having the Kryptonite actually inside of him was so much worse than the cage had been.

Dr. Carlin walked over to him. "I can imagine what's running through your head right now: shock, confusion, outrage." Her voice hardened. "The same emotions I felt when you let Lex die."

She moved to place the gun in Lois's limp hand, saying, "You'll wake up in a few minutes, although I'm sure you'll wish you hadn't." And then she and Lois's double left.

Clark forced himself to think. He couldn't dig the bullet out himself, which meant that he needed Lois. "Lois! Lois! Can you hear me?"

Lois remained limp on the couch. Clark just hoped that Dr. Carlin had been telling the truth when she'd said that the sedative would wear off shortly. He tried to roll over so that he could crawl towards Lois, but it was no use: the Kryptonite inside had rendered him practically immobile. He looked back over at Lois. Why hadn't she just stayed right behind him when he'd run into the Planet? Or waited in the lobby? She knew people were after her! He gritted his teeth—partly in pain and partly to keep from gnashing them in frustration.

"Lois!" he tried again. If only he had some water or something to wake her with. Wait a minute! The fish tank! He focused the flickering bits of his remaining heat vision at the fish tank behind Lois and managed to make a hole in it. Water spurted out onto her face. She stirred.

"Lois!"

Lois sat up and looked around her. Horror spread over her face as she took in Superman on the floor. Dr. Carlin had been right about the Kryptonite. "Superman?" She walked towards him, then clutched her middle as she saw the bullet hole in his shoulder. "Superman! I'll call an ambulance!" She began walking towards the desk, still feeling a bit unsteady from the sedative.

"No! Too long!" Superman said, gasping in between words. He groaned. "It has to come out. Now."

"I know it has to come out, but I'm just not sure I'm the best person to do it," she said, keeping a tight grip on the terror trying to find its way into her voice.

"Please, Lois, please."

Lois nodded resolutely, and then looked around for something to use as a lever. A dagger-shaped letter opener caught her eye. She grabbed it and knelt beside Superman. Her hands were shaking uncontrollably, but she tried to still them, at least long enough to dig the bullet out. Carefully, she inserted the dagger and felt around for the bullet, trying to avoid breaking any of it off in the wound. Superman writhed as she moved the dagger around in his wound, but Lois forced herself to look only at the bullet hole. She could feel the bullet. She managed to slide the dagger underneath it and pushed up. The bullet, following the course of least resistance, popped back out of the hole. She grabbed it and held it away from Superman. Her eyes widened as Superman's shoulder immediately healed up.

"Get that away from me, please," he said, still gasping for breath.

She backed to the far side of the room, and Superman grabbed hold of a chair and pulled himself to his feet. "Thanks, Lois." He glanced down at his shoulder, marveling that it had healed so quickly—maybe being directly in the sun's rays had helped, or the smaller size of the Kryptonite piece had made it easier for his body to heal, or maybe he was starting to build up an immunity. Whatever it was, he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. He looked back at Lois. "If you don't mind putting that in a lead box, I'll come by later tonight to pick it up. I'd better go collect Dr. Carlin and your double now. Clark said he had Jimmy call Henderson, so I imagine the police should be here shortly. Will you be all right?"

Lois nodded.

"See you later," he said and lifted off.

Clark barely had the strength to fly and he could tell that he wasn't going to be doing anything strenuous for a while, but his powers were all there, and he wasn't about to let Dr. Carlin get away. Who knew what else she had up her sleeve? But this time, he was going to go about it the smart way. He x-rayed the cars and managed to figure out which vehicle she was in. Then he welded the doors shut from 1,000 feet up, just in case she had any more Kryptonite on her. And finally, he blew out the tires to make sure she wouldn't be going anywhere. Flying closer, he realized he couldn't feel any Kryptonite, so either she didn't have any

more with her, or it was shielded. He zipped home and changed Suits—no point in giving anyone else ideas about Kryptonite bullets—then returned for the car and flew it back to LexCorp and the waiting police.

As soon as he set the car down, Superman told Henderson that Dr. Carlin and Lois's double were in the car and asked for a private word. When he agreed, Superman flew him to the top of a nearby building. It was the first time Clark had ever seen the inspector look truly surprised.

Clark assumed his hero pose, then asked, "Inspector Henderson, are you aware of Dr. Carlin's identity?"

"Mrs. Luthor, yeah. Jimmy filled me in."

"She had Kryptonite."

Henderson shook his head. "Those Luthors. We didn't find any more than just the cage, by the way."

"Thanks. I appreciate you taking care of the cage and keeping an eye open. I've already taken care of the piece she used on me just now, but she may have more. I'd prefer not to get publicly exposed to it—that's why I brought her car to you. The doors are welded shut, so she shouldn't be escaping any time soon."

"I see. Would you mind opening at least one of them before you go? It'd save us quite a bit of time."

Clark hesitated. If Dr. Carlin did have Kryptonite with her . . . "I'll try it, but if I feel Kryptonite, I'll have to excuse myself."

Henderson nodded once. "Fair enough."

Fortunately, Dr. Carlin didn't have any more Kryptonite, so Superman was able to free her into the waiting hands of the police. Lois carefully kept far away from him—a fact that Clark was very, very grateful for on many levels. He hadn't thought he could get more conflicted, but now he knew he'd been wrong. Lois had saved his life. He'd seen how scared she was of digging the bullet out, and she'd done it anyway—done it because she loved Superman. It was yet another instance where in one fell swoop she'd managed to be absolutely wonderful to him and yet break his heart. Fortunately, Clark hadn't been at LexCorp at all, and since Lois was carrying Kryptonite around, there was no way he was going to show up there as himself. So, he'd have at least a couple of hours before he'd have to talk to her.

Superman left, and Clark went back to the Planet. He didn't plan on staying long in case Lois showed up with the Kryptonite. Happily, by the time he'd gotten back, Lois had called in the story and told Perry she'd be out of the office for the rest of the day—something about needing to run errands. Clark was guessing that meant she was out looking for a lead box. He definitely needed to get that Kryptonite away from her. If she ever found out that he was Superman, he didn't want her to have access to Kryptonite. Clark looked over their story, and then sent it on to Perry. Sometimes he hated doing stories this way—having to act like he was clueless about the resolution of their investigation and letting Lois tell her side and her side alone—but that was the reality of his double life. And, after living without Superman for two months, he found himself much more willing to put up with those difficulties. He finished up his stories for the day and headed home.

After picking at his dinner and performing a sedate patrol of the city, Clark turned his flight path towards Lois's apartment. He'd been procrastinating, and he knew it. Lois had been in danger once again today. She hadn't been kidnapped or attacked since the Luthor fiasco. He'd almost forgotten how his stomach tied in knots whenever he went to her rescue. And now, Superman had to pick up the Kryptonite bullet from Lois, and he owed her a huge thank you, but he still wasn't sure how to handle what would most likely be an awkward meeting. He'd managed to control his frustration, but then he'd remembered that this would be the first time Superman would really talk to Lois since

she'd almost married Luthor. He could see her window now. The window. The last time Superman had entered that window Lois had been wearing a satiny blue nightgown. His jaw tightened. Lois had been dressed for seduction—as though she could force Superman to love her or to confess his love for her—even though she'd rejected Clark's declaration of love mere hours before.

Clark felt his chest grow tight, despite his invulnerability. Lois had always been able to affect him, make him breathless, make him sweat, make him lose control. She was like Kryptonite. He didn't know why he put himself through this, why he couldn't just leave her and never look back. How could she have been such a tease? How could she have dressed in that, that thing, for Superman? Clark let out a ragged breath. How could she be so beautiful, but only for other men? For Superman and then for Luthor. Never for Clark.

He paused midair and concentrated on regulating his breathing and slowing his racing heart. Lois had saved his life today. Superman should be grateful. He was grateful. Lois had been a good friend to Superman. Strange that it felt more like rubbing salt in a wound than being saved. He'd written their story from both their perspectives as far as the night of her declaration of love, but he'd gotten stuck trying to write that section from Lois's perspective. He still didn't understand what exactly it was about Superman that she loved—at least if you got rid of the powers and flashy suit. She'd said that she would love him even if he were just an ordinary man living an ordinary life, and he believed she'd meant it. What was it that she saw in Superman that she didn't see in Clark? He had no idea. And he wasn't sure what the best way to get that information from her was. Should he ask her as Clark? Should he ask her as Superman?

Tonight Superman needed to mend his bridge, or burn it. But which did he want to do?

Lois had been pretty wonderful to Superman today, digging that bullet out, disposing of the Kryptonite. He stared up at the stars, thinking hard. Journaling had made him realize that maybe he was being unfair to her. Lois didn't know that he was Superman. Maybe, just maybe, it was time for Superman to be a friend to her. He hadn't been much of a friend, he realized. He'd been so cautious of destroying his chances as Clark that he'd been careful to keep their interactions to a minimum. Lois was definitely pouring more into their relationship than he was. His lips curled in a wry smile. Lois was putting all the effort into their relationship as Superman. He was putting all the effort into their relationship as Clark. The perfect phantom love triangle.

He forced himself to stop and examine that conclusion. What effort had he put into his relationship with Lois as Superman? He saved her life, but he saved everyone he could. She'd saved Superman during the heatwave and defended him regularly. It was one of those facts of life you could count on—the sun would come up tomorrow, and Lois Lane would defend Superman from any criticism she heard.

He hadn't told her about Luthor as Superman—partly because she'd been so adamant when he'd tried to talk to her as Clark, partly because it would have hurt too much if she'd dropped Luthor on Superman's word alone, and partly to protect her. But, if he'd really loved her, maybe he should have put his hurt and pride aside and just done it—gone to her and told her that her boyfriend was a crime lord. He'd been terrified to put her in even more danger—what if she'd asked Luthor about Superman's suspicions? She'd been in danger either way though, and by not telling her, he might have caused her greater pain; he was sure that her heart had been broken and her self-confidence severely shaken.

If he apologized for not telling her and for his completely unnecessary crack about her robe, it might help with the awkwardness between them, and it might show her that her hero wasn't perfect. It might help her to see the man under the Suit.

And it really was her due, considering what a good friend she'd been to Superman. He still couldn't believe that he'd been so rude that night. Yes, one part of him had wanted to see just how far her Superman crush extended—she'd have slapped anyone else who implied they would take advantage of her, but with Superman she'd just blushed and continued on with her spiel. Yes, his heart had been broken. Yes, she'd been unknowingly pouring gallons of salt on his broken heart. But his mother would have had his hide if she'd heard him.

Clark set his face, and Superman tapped on Lois Lane's window.

Lois held the small lead box. She shuddered. Despite his rejection, despite her feelings for Clark, she still loved Superman, and seeing the man she loved bleeding and in such pain . . . well, she didn't know how she'd been able to remove the bullet with her hands shaking as badly as they had been. In the shock of the moment, that night had been forgotten. And now, he would be coming, and all the spoken and unspoken things between them would be there. She still didn't know how she felt. He'd hurt her. Why hadn't he been able to believe her when she'd said that she knew him and loved him for himself, not for what he could do? Was it possible that there was someone else? Or that she'd misread his attentions? And how could Superman be so venomous in his rejection? Was it her? And she'd run to Lex. Even if Superman had feelings for her before, he'd never be able to forgive her for that. From what Clark had said, Lex had been Superman's enemy, and she had allied herself with him. She put the box down and made a circuit of her living room, half-heartedly straightening the already pristine room for the umpteenth time. This was going to be so awkward.

tap *tap* *tap*

Despite the fact that she'd been listening for just such a sound, Lois started. Superman was here. She walked over the window and opened it. "Superman. Come in."

"Hi, Lois," he said as he landed in her living room.

"Here's the bullet. I guess that stuff really can hurt you," she said, handing him the box, still feeling a little hurt that he'd never told her the truth about Kryptonite.

He took the box. "Apparently so." He moved a step closer. Time to take his lumps. "Lois, thank you for what you did today. I would have died if you hadn't intervened."

Lois looked down. "Anyone would have—"

"Not anyone," Superman said, with a wry grimace. "I can't see Ms. Carlin sticking around to help."

Lois gave a forced chuckle. "Fine. Any decent person. Anyway, you've saved my life plenty of times. I'm just glad I had a chance to repay the favor."

"Lois, you don't owe me for saving your life. I'm just glad that I've been able to get there in time thus far."

"Me too."

Silence fell between them. What would be the best way to bring up the topic? Clark had no idea how to proceed. Superman had never just sat down in Lois Lane's apartment and chatted with her. They had short, usually disaster-related, conversations, and then he left. But maybe, for this, they'd both be more comfortable sitting down. At least it would signal to her that he wanted to talk the thing out.

"Well, I—" he began.

"Yeah, I guess you'd better be going then. You're probably pretty busy," Lois said with determined cheerfulness. Maybe she could get him out the window before things got any more awkward.

"Actually, I was going to say that I'd like to talk to you for a bit if you have time. No one needs saving right now, at least that I know of. Perhaps we could . . . sit down?" he finished.

"Um, well, sure." She walked over and sat down on one of

her love seats.

Superman took a seat on the opposite love seat. Lois couldn't help but think how out of place he looked. Had she ever seen Superman sit? And those primary colors looked positively garish next to the subdued cream of her love seat.

"Lois, I owe you an apology," he said, deciding on the straightforward approach.

"Oh?"

"Actually, I owe you a couple of apologies. That night—well, I just want you to know that I have never and would never use my powers to take advantage of your privacy. I should never have made that crack about a lead-lined robe, and I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?"

"I didn't really think you would," Lois said, blushing. "You just sounded so matter-of-fact about it. Thank you for telling me though."

Superman took a deep breath. "I also want to apologize for not sharing my suspicions about Luthor with you. I was unsure of the best way to handle the situation, and, in my confusion, I handled it badly. I'm sorry."

Lois studied the carpet. "It's not your fault that I let myself get taken in by such a crook. Lots of other people had suspicions as it turned out—Perry, Henderson . . . Clark."

Superman hesitated, but then the words tumbled out of their own accord. "Lois, Luthor was very good at what he did. Don't let one rotten man destroy your confidence. You've brought down plenty of other criminals," he said seriously.

Lois could hardly believe how nice he was being. She chewed her lip. Maybe last time had been out of character for him. But why?

Did it matter? She was just thankful to be back on friendly terms—more than thankful, especially since she was so lonely lately. She missed Clark. She hoped that he had someone to talk to. A thought hit her: maybe that was why Superman had been so angry that night—maybe Clark had told Superman how he'd declared his love to her, and she'd rejected him. Maybe Superman was just angry on his friend's behalf? But then why would that affect whether he believed her?

"Thanks, Superman. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?"

"No." He stood. "Thank you again for rescuing me. You've been a great friend to me, and I appreciate it."

She stood too. "Um, Superman . . . you're welcome."

He knew the signs. There was something else she was trying to decide if she wanted to talk to him about. Did he stick around and wait for her to make up her mind? Did he even want to hear whatever she wanted to say? He could just fly off. It might be better for both of them. "Was there something else you wanted to talk about?" To his chagrin, the words left his mouth before he could drag them back.

"I don't really know. Oh, did Clark tell you that we've been investigating Luthor?" She sat back down.

Superman sat down, sighing inwardly. He hated using "Clark told me . . ." Oh well. "I was aware of that, yes."

"I think we've pretty much finished our series on him, but I thought I'd see if you knew of any of Lex's activities that we missed. Is there anything you think we should be looking into?"

"I think Clark is aware of everything I'd be able to suggest."

"Oh. I see," she said.

Clark could see the hurt in her eyes. Was it really such a big deal to repeat himself if it made her feel better?

Yes! It is! Why can't she just accept that I know what I'm talking about? Why does "Superman" have to tell her for something to be true? a part of him demanded.

Maybe she's just trying to fix things by showing she's willing to listen to someone about Luthor. Just give her the benefit of the doubt, he coached himself.

I'm tired of giving her the benefit of the doubt! that agonized part of his soul replied.

He could feel the coldness spreading through his veins. He needed to get away from her before he lost control and lashed out again. She had just saved his life. She was Superman's friend, and nothing in her relationship with Superman would let her realize how much she'd hurt him. That was the real problem. The hurts she'd inflicted had been to Clark and to him, the man who was both Clark and Superman. If he wasn't Clark, it wouldn't have ripped his soul to shreds when she'd said that she would love Superman even if he were an ordinary man. So, keep things light. Remember you'll have to fix whatever damage you cause now if you ever tell her that you're Superman. Right.

"I'm sure you're both doing a fine job," he tried again. "If there's anything I can do to help, please let me know."

"I already asked if you had suggestions," Lois said, a slight edge to her voice.

Clark gritted his teeth, then forced himself to reply politely. "Do you have a copy of your notes I can look at? It'll be faster than me telling you anything you already know."

"Sure. Just a minute." Lois took out a pile of papers that Clark was already very, very familiar with and handed them to him.

Clark flipped through them at super-speed. No point in wasting time. "I don't see anything in particular that you're missing. I'll think about it some more and get back to you if something occurs to me."

"I see. Superman, can I ask you something?" Lois asked as another thing she'd been wondering about came to mind.

What did she want to ask? Clark wasn't sure if he could hold onto his hurt or his temper for much longer. "On the record or off the record?" he asked in a cool tone.

"Um, I'd really like this just to be a conversation between friends. We are, aren't we?" Lois asked, her heart pounding.

Clark sighed inwardly. "Yes, Lois. You've been a very good friend to me," he said, mentally substituting "Superman" for "me." "What did you want to ask?"

"Why didn't you save Lex? I mean, not that I'm blaming you. I know you can't be everywhere. But ... well, you didn't announce that you were leaving until after he died—unless of course you left before Clark printed that interview—and it just seems out of character for you, and ever since my double brought it up, I've been wondering about it."

"Lois, I would have saved him if I could have," Superman said.

"So you couldn't save him? But why not? Once I started wondering, I looked, and there are no records of you helping out somewhere else. Had you already left for wherever you went?"

Clark sighed. How much should he tell her? He needed to tell her the truth about where he'd been before her wedding someday, but was that day today? She'd kept the information about Kryptonite out of her article on Dr. Carlin. She'd proven herself a good friend to Superman.

But not to Clark.

Regardless, she'd been a good friend to Superman, and Superman was the one in her apartment right now. He'd barely managed to tell his parents about it and had refused to give them details—how could he tell Lois? But if he just said he didn't want to talk about it, he'd hurt her more, again. Maybe the bare bones would satisfy her?

What was he thinking? This was Lois Lane. She'd ask until she had an answer that she liked. Could he tell her without hurting her? Tell her and hurt her. Not tell her and hurt her.

"Lois, it's not something that's easy for me to talk about, and it's probably not something that would be easy for you to hear. Are you sure you want to know?" Clark asked, then cursed himself as he realized that he'd just guaranteed he'd be talking to

Mad Dog Lane.

"You don't think I can handle it? Well, listen here, Superman, you may be, well, you, but that doesn't give you the right to—"

"That's not what I meant," Clark cut in. "Lois, I know that I've hurt you, and I know that Luthor hurt you, and I don't want to add to that pain. That's what I meant."

"Oh. Well." Lois thought for a moment. Did she want anything new to deal with right now? But if he didn't tell her, she'd just be waiting for the other shoe to drop. "I think it's like a band-aid. Just rip it off. Otherwise, I'll always be wondering what it is that I don't know," she finally said.

"All right." Clark knew he was going to have to tell her, but he didn't think he could look her in the eye while he was doing it. He couldn't bear to see her concern for Superman, even if it did mean that she at least cared about one part of him. He stood and walked over to stare out one of her windows. "Luthor had Kryptonite. He—held me prisoner for a couple of days, and by the time I'd finally escaped, I didn't have any of my powers. If I could have saved him, I would have." Just thinking about it brought back the cold sweat of his green-hazed nightmares.

"Oh, Superman," Lois breathed. She moved to stand next to him. Something about his posture seemed forbidding, and she didn't think he'd take it well if she touched him, but she just wanted to be close, to comfort him with her presence. She'd never imagined something like this. Clark had been right when he'd told her that Lex was a monster. Her eyes filled with tears, and she blinked them back.

Clark's eyes slid closed. How could concern feel so much like a knife?

"Are you okay now? I mean you seem okay, but, are you?" Lois asked.

"Yes, my powers are back," Superman said evenly. "Thank you again for taking care of the Kryptonite today and for not putting it in your article."

"I couldn't let information like that get out—at least, I guess it must be somewhat out, but not any more out than it already is. The world needs you. The fewer people who know that there's something out there that can hurt you, the better."

The world needs Superman. He cut that line of thought off before it had time to grow into full-fledged bitterness. "I agree," he said quietly, still looking out the window.

"You haven't told anyone where you went yet—" Her eyes widened. "Did you even go anywhere, or were you just recovering all this time?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you where I went for the safety of others involved."

"I would have helped you, Superman. If you ever need help, you can always come to me."

"I know," he said shortly. He wasn't sure what else to say or even if he could make himself say anything constructive. It was common knowledge that Lois would always go out of her way to help Superman. He wished she was half that dedicated to Clark. Plus, that common knowledge put both of them in danger; only today she'd been used to lure him into a trap. Better to play down that connection, and, in fact, maybe he needed to talk to her about distancing themselves.

Lois continued to watch Superman. From where she stood, his face was in shadow. Something was definitely—off. He wasn't the same man she'd known months ago—the man she'd fallen in love with—nor was he the man from that night. The sense of connection was as strong as ever, but something had happened between them. She knew her declaration of love was part of the problem, though neither of them had spoken of it. She still wanted to know why he'd been so angry that night, but she wasn't sure she wanted to bring it up. She just wanted to get back to no more awkwardness between them; dropping both that night and where he'd been in his absence would be more likely to

accomplish it.

“Lois, I was just thinking,” Superman said, a touch of hesitancy in his manner. “Today you were kidnapped, in part to get to me. Maybe it’s time we distanced ourselves a bit more, at least publicly.”

Lois frowned. “Distance ourselves more? What do you mean by that?” She had no idea what they’d have left if he distanced himself from her publicly—they hardly ever saw each other privately. Rescues, she guessed.

Superman turned to look at her. “Honestly, I’m not sure what it would entail. I just know that I care about you, and I don’t want to put you in the position of having criminals come after you to get at me.”

“Superman, criminals already come after me. Often.”

“I realize that your stories frequently have that result.

However, I also know that the perception is that you and I are close, and therefore, criminals can use you to attack me.”

Lois looked down. She knew he was right, but she refused to admit it. Besides, it wasn’t like she couldn’t take care of herself. She inhaled sharply as a sudden thought hit her. Look at everything with Lex. She couldn’t take care of herself. Had Lex used her to capture Superman? It wouldn’t surprise her. And that would mean that today was the second time Superman had almost died because of her. Just like the rest of her friends, she was ruining his life. She slumped. “Fine. You’re right. What do you want to do?”

Superman started. Lois Lane admitting someone else was right? He’d guessed that a lot of her brash manner of late stemmed from losing some of her confidence in the Luthor fiasco, but this was ridiculous—she was barely even Lois Lane right now. How could he have missed how badly she was doing?

Because he’d been too wrapped up in how badly he was doing.

Right. So did he try to be a friend to her right now? Did he try to get her to talk about it? Did he want to? No. But she was hurting. He closed his eyes and tamped down his own hurt and anger. He opened his eyes. “Lois, are you all right?” he asked, trying to infuse concern into the question and leave out everything else; he still ended up sounding almost wooden.

Lois snorted. She’d almost married the greatest unhung criminal in the US and managed to lose her best friend in the process. Why wouldn’t she be all right? she thought sarcastically. “I’m fine, Superman. Why?”

“You’ve been through a lot recently.” Clark paused, trying to think of what he could say without letting his bitterness out. He didn’t think he could reassure her that she was the best investigative reporter in Metropolis right now. Maybe there wasn’t anything he could say. He shook his head. “I don’t know the best way to proceed as far as taking the attention off you—other than giving you fewer exclusives. Unfortunately, you’ll always be known as the reporter who got the first exclusive and who kissed Superman before Nightfall. And, of course, I do rescue you quite often—but that has nothing to do with our relationship and everything to do with the nature of your job. Do you have any ideas?”

“Not really Can I think about it and get back to you?”

“Sure. You know how to reach me.”

“Yell ‘Help, Superman?’” she said sardonically, thinking she’d be more likely to do that these days than ask Clark to get him a message.

“That works,” Superman said. He still couldn’t decide how to find out what exactly Lois thought she saw in Superman, but the thought of asking her point-blank was far from appealing. Maybe Superman should just leave, and Clark could go back to trying to fathom his partner’s thought processes on his own. He wasn’t sure if he could bear to talk about it or hear about it in either guise. He shook himself slightly, shutting down those lines of

thought. Thinking about any of that in Lois’s presence was a sure way to end up lashing out at her. “Thanks again. I should probably go finish my patrol.”

“Oh, okay. Well, I guess I’ll be seeing you around.” Lois held her curtains open, trying to portray the friendly, collected hostess.

“I’m sure you will,” Clark agreed, positive his partner would find herself in some life-and-death situation before long. He gave a little wave, then took off out the window.

Lois closed her window and sank to the couch. Distance herself from Superman? Did everyone in her life hate her for being taken in by Lex? She’d never thought she had the perfect life before, but now she longed for the days before—back when Clark had been her best friend, before the Planet had been bombed, back when she’d been in love with Superman and he’d seemed attracted to her, back when the thrill of the investigation was what she lived for, when she’d had the respect of her colleagues in the news business and she’d been the top investigative reporter in Metropolis. Some days she felt like Lex had managed to destroy her life completely.

No, not Lex. She’d done that all on her own. How had she been taken in by him? She found herself asking that question over and over, but never coming any closer to an answer. Asking the question hadn’t done anything, and, after encountering Dr. Carlin, she didn’t think she could stomach talking to Dr. Friskin right now. What could she do? She’d used her skills as an investigative reporter to ferret out Lex’s secrets after the fact. Maybe she could use those same skills to come to some sort of understanding of her own secrets—the ones she kept even from herself. She stared thoughtfully at the window. Superman seemed to believe in her investigative abilities. What if she thought of this as just one more investigation? She could pretend that she was figuring out someone else’s life. She fingered the hem of her shirt. How would she begin that sort of investigation? Like any other. Collect the pieces, and then start putting them together. Resolutely, she grabbed her satchel and found a pad of paper. It couldn’t hurt, and it might help. At this point, she was willing to try almost anything.

Three hours later, her coffee table was littered with lists. She’d decided to work from a big picture perspective, so she’d started with a list of all the romantic relationships in her history—Paul, Claude, Lex, Superman, and, upon reflection, she’d added Clark. She’d also decided to include her father since he’d set the tone for her relationships with men. She’d made a list of all the things that had attracted her to them and all the ways they’d failed her.

Paul, Claude, and Lex had all been womanizers, just like her father. In the midst of each relationship, she’d thought the man would be faithful to her once he’d professed his love, but none of them had. Paul had moved on to Linda before Lois had even really begun a relationship with him, and she’d later heard that he’d slept with a succession of other girls even while Lois had been trying to get his attention. Claude also had a reputation as a ladies’ man, and she’d seen firsthand the number of women he went through during his stint at the Planet. She’d discovered that Lex had been sleeping with Mrs. Cox during their engagement period and had evidently had relationships with Dr. Baines and Miranda. Who knew how many other women he’d been with just in the period she’d known him? And as far as Superman went, she’d never seen or heard that he was involved with anyone.

Clark had women chasing him left and right. However, other than the kiss with Toni Taylor, Lois had never seen him reciprocate. There had been that incident with Cat right after he’d begun working at the Planet, but Clark had steadfastly denied that anything had happened. At the time, she’d been skeptical, but now, with the benefit of a year’s association, she didn’t think

Clark would lie about something like that. Although he had lied about Superman's globe. Well, technically, he'd just not told her about it. He hadn't flat out lied. So maybe she could believe him about Cat. And despite trying to dig up dirt on him while they'd been in Smallville, only two girls had surfaced—Rachel Harris, whom he'd taken to the prom as a last minute replacement date, and Lana, the girl who'd broken up with him just before prom. Clark was a nice guy. She wasn't sure why he was still single.

She shook her head, forcing her mind back to the other men on her list. Her father had never used her. In fact, he'd never had a use for her since the day she'd been born a girl, rather than the son he'd always wanted. She'd spent the first fifteen years of her life trying to gain his approval, but then realized it was a complete waste of time. If she never again heard him tell her what she was doing wrong, it'd be too soon. Paul hadn't used her either, despite the fact that he was the type. Linda had gotten there before he'd had a chance to try anything with Lois—for the first time she felt a fleeting moment of gratitude for Linda. Not that she'd ever be grateful that Linda had been such a backstabber, but things could have been much worse. Claude had used her and stolen her story—the less she had to think about that the better. Lex hadn't used her, nor had he been verbally critical like her father; he'd actually seemed very supportive—telling her that she was attractive, talented, etc., etc. She still hadn't figured out why he'd wanted her. Had Miranda sprayed him with the one hundred percent pheromone? It didn't seem likely since he'd never reverted to the soppy, poetry-spouting, worshipful attitude he'd had right after the incident, but he'd definitely stepped up his pursuit of her after that point.

Superman had never used her. Lex had tried to kill him on her wedding day. Had that been the source of her value? After all, Lex had seen Superman declare his love for her under the influence of the pheromone. She grimaced. It would be a blow to her ego if she'd just been yet another battle in Lex's war on Superman. Lex couldn't have known that he'd only won her hand after Superman had rejected her. Superman had never used her and neither had Clark, but that was a result of their character qualities—their strong respect for people.

She'd also made some lists of the character qualities she'd noticed Lucy preferred in her relationships, figuring there must be some commonalities, and it was easier to see Lucy's hang-ups. The guys she picked were all losers—often jobless, always lazy, always looking for a quick buck, often with a rap sheet, always physically attractive, but with little substance; Ken dolls the lot of them. None of the men Lois had dated were lazy in any way. Paul worked hard at the paper. Claude—well, actually, come to think of it, Claude was pretty lazy. Why else would he have stolen her story? Lex had worked hard to run his criminal empire. Clark worked hard at the Planet, despite his frequent disappearances. Superman worked hard all the time, pouring himself into helping everyone he could. All the men on her list were physically attractive, and sadly, Clark and Superman were the only ones with any real substance. The others had been simply out to get whatever they could for themselves. She'd thought Lex had substance, but that had only been because he'd fooled her into believing his own press. And unfortunately, she'd thought the same thing about Paul and Claude until she'd gotten to know them. It was like she turned off her investigative radar whenever she decided to let someone into her life.

She glanced back down at her lists, noting that there was one common denominator between everyone but Clark: power. Paul had been the editor at the college newspaper where she'd worked as a reporter. Claude had been the Planet's "star reporter" (she had no idea how he could have gotten such a title given his mediocre writing) and she had been a lowly researcher at the time. Lex had been the third richest man in the world and definitely the most powerful man in Metropolis, at least until

Superman had come onto the scene. She'd thought both Lex and Superman had used their considerable power and influence for good, which had definitely attracted her—especially after seeing Paul and Claude use their power for their own self-interest.

Both Lex and Superman could have had any woman in the world they wanted. In hindsight, it was ludicrous to think that they would choose a reporter, even if she had been the best investigative reporter in Metropolis by a wide margin. Thinking about that fact, she felt a tingle go down her spine—the kind of tingle that meant she was on to something. But what? Her breath chuffed out in frustration. Maybe if she came at it from a different angle.

Why had she rejected Clark? He was the oddball on this list, just a generally nice guy who was gorgeous, had a good sense of humor, comforted her whenever he was nearby—or had comforted her before their friendship had fallen apart—and maintained his small town values even in a city as big as Metropolis.

She'd told him from the get-go not to fall for her. Why? She tried to remember what she'd been thinking back then. She'd seen the admiration in his eyes, and her response had been automatic. She didn't have time for a relationship. Yet she'd gone on to fall for Superman and to date Lex—not even all that long after she'd warned Clark off. Why? Part of it had definitely been his similarities with Claude. Oh, not similarities of character, but simply the fact that he was an attractive co-worker. She couldn't afford to get involved with anyone at work again, especially not a reporter who could be competition, and once she'd gotten to know him and begun to enjoy having him as her partner, she couldn't afford to lose that. If she'd been so daft as to begin a romantic relationship with him, she'd have lost her partner when it all blew up.

But that still didn't explain why she'd turned him down after the Planet had been destroyed. Habit, maybe? She winced, remembering how she'd asked him to contact Superman for her right after turning him down. And she'd turned to Lex instead of back to Clark when Superman had rejected her. And Clark had known what kind of person Lex had been. No wonder he was barely talking to her these days. Pain lanced through her chest as she realized that she'd been too afraid of losing Clark's friendship forever to take a risk on a romantic relationship with him, and she'd lost it anyway. At her wedding she'd been able to admit that deep down she'd wanted a life with Clark, and now they barely spoke.

What she needed was a strategy. She was willing to let go of having a romantic relationship with him in favor of just regaining his friendship. But Clark seemed to have shut the door on any sort of relationship with her, other than a professional one.

She slumped against the couch. Who was she kidding? She had no idea how to even formulate that kind of strategy. She'd never pursued anyone's friendship. And the only times she'd pursued a guy romantically had ended up in disaster.

A thought whispered through her brain: Clark had done it. Coaxed his way in, pursued her until he'd gained her friendship. How had he done it? What exactly had he done? A thousand little things that all added up to her trusting him: coffee fixed perfectly every morning, a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear, those comforting hugs, that dazzling smile of his, his good-natured teasing, his ability to stand up to her without belittling her, their ease of working together and how their styles complemented each other, all those stories they'd worked on together and not once had Clark tried to further his career at the expense of hers, the way he seemed to enjoy her, to accept her for who she was, the way he'd been a perfect gentleman when she'd been high on pheromones and desperately chasing him. She still didn't understand that last one, especially in light of his confession of love. How had he managed to resist? Her brow furrowed. He'd

said he wasn't attracted to her, but that was patently false. Oh well. At least Clark had never told anyone about that embarrassing period. In fact, Clark had never given away anything she'd said in confidence to him. He was just an all-around good friend. Even just yesterday he'd taken her out for chocolate ice cream when she'd been upset over Lex's ex-wife. Clark knew her. So where did that leave her?

She didn't know how he took his newsroom coffee—other than that he put some ungodly amount of cream and sugar in it. He'd never really shared confidences with her. She hadn't ever asked or made herself available to listen. She'd noticed that occasionally he'd seemed down, but Clark never stayed upset for long, so she'd never asked what was wrong. And when he'd been devastated over his apartment robbery, she'd used his pain as a springboard for her story. What kind of friend was she? Why would Clark trust her in the first place?

She thought back, trying to figure out how she'd become the kind of person who was incapable of being a good friend. Asking people about their problems led to lengthy conversations she didn't have time to listen to—at least not if she wanted to stay the best investigative reporter in Metropolis. Moreover, she was uncomfortable with people's problems. Heck, she was uncomfortable with her own problems. It was much easier to pretend that work was all that mattered. But Clark had shown her that there was more to life than work. Clark liked to mix play and work, like when they'd spent their whole stake-out at the Lexor playing board games. If Clark hadn't been there, she would have just sat around, watching the offices across the way and sorting through research or catching up on other work.

She hadn't accepted Clark for who he was—she'd turned him down in the park, and even before then, she'd compared him unfavorably to Superman quite a bit.

She'd apologized for not trusting his instincts about Lex, but she hadn't changed her behavior. Even the past couple of days, she'd simply demanded that he trust her instincts and never asked him about his. She'd rubbed it in his face when she'd been right about Dr. Carlin, but Clark had never once said "I told you so" about Lex. Instead, he'd said, "I'm sorry that Luthor wasn't one of the good guys." That was Clark all over. Wishing that she hadn't had to go through the pain of nearly marrying a gangster.

Lois stood up and began to pace. She didn't like the secrets she was keeping from herself. Finding out that she hadn't been a good friend, had simply taken Clark's friendship ... it wasn't pretty. But if she was going to win his friendship back, she'd have to do something different.

So! Coffee: She might not know how Clark took his newsroom coffee, but she did know where to buy his "regular." Confidences: She could start paying attention and actually asking him what was wrong if he seemed down. Attitude: She really needed to work on not belittling Clark, on showing that she did appreciate him. She'd been so afraid of him using her to further his own career that she hadn't ever really told him how much he meant to her—except during Nightfall when he'd had amnesia and again on the day when she'd rejected his love, and that meant he probably hadn't really heard that he was her best friend. Besides, she, more than most, knew how painful it was to be told or shown only on rare occasions that you were "important." How many times had she wished her parents would forego Christmas gifts and simply tell her throughout the year that they cared about her?

She stared at the pile of lists on the table. There was more to find, and she knew it—but she wasn't sure she could handle learning another of her own secrets today. She stacked the lists and put them in her bedside table. Deal with this secret first, and then she could work on figuring out the next.

The next morning Lois left for work a little early. She

stopped by her and Clark's favorite coffee stand and asked Ben, the owner, for "Clark's regular" too.

Ben leaned forward eagerly. "Does this mean you two are finally dating?"

"I beg your pardon!"

Ben backed up, his hands coming up in a placating motion. "Ms. Lane, I've been selling you coffee since before Mr. Kent started working at the Planet. You've never bought coffee for someone else."

Lois fumbled with her wallet, trying to hide how flustered she felt. She forced herself to shrug nonchalantly. "Not that it's any of your business, but no, we are not dating. It's just my turn to pick up coffee today."

Was she really that selfish? She tried to think of the last time she'd done anything for anyone. Clark was always going out of his way to do little things for people—refilling the break area napkins when they were almost empty, starting a new pot of coffee when he finished off the old one, holding doors for people, asking various of their coworkers about their kids, making sure that he looked at Jimmy's latest photos and encouraged him, snagging her favorite kind of doughnut before they were gone, and on and on. He was always ready with a smile and a kind word—or at least he used to be. Lately, he'd been more withdrawn, but he still did small things for others all the time, even if he didn't go out of his way to chat with anyone. She'd just chalked it up to his small-town values, but maybe there was more to it than that.

She walked into the bullpen, still thinking about it. She'd gotten here before Clark, so she set his coffee down on his desk and proceeded to boot up her computer. Just then, Clark walked out of the elevator. She surreptitiously watched him as he headed towards his desk. He still had a friendly "Good morning" for the people he passed. She usually just ignored everyone until after she was settled at her desk, and then she only talked to the people she needed something from—i.e., Clark, Perry, and Jimmy. He stopped in front of his desk and stared at the coffee as though someone had put a foreign object there, then sat down.

"Good morning, Clark," Lois said, walking over to his desk.

"Morning, Lois? I'm glad you made it out all right yesterday," Clark said, staring at her.

Lois waved nonchalantly. "It was fine. Superman came to my rescue like always."

"Uh-huh." Clark gestured to the coffee. "Thanks. What do I owe ya?"

"Nothing. I just figured it was my turn to bring coffee today—well, realistically, it's long past my turn, but I figured I'd start making up for it today by bringing some in." She forced herself to breathe, then added, "I hope that's okay."

"Sure. Thanks. I'll get coffee tomorrow."

"You get coffee all the time. It's not necessary."

"O—kay."

"I mean, I appreciate that you bring me coffee. I just wanted to return the favor. I'm not trying to tell you to stop bringing me coffee." She pasted a smile on her face. "Anyway! What do we have going on today?"

"I haven't checked my e-mail or the wires yet, but I'm guessing you want to dig a little deeper into Mrs. Luthor's dealings."

"That sounds like a great idea," she said enthusiastically.

Clark's eyes narrowed. "Are you feeling all right today?"

She nodded. "Yep. How about you? Have an okay night last night?"

Clark leaned back in his chair and studied her. "Okay. Give. What do you want?"

"What do I want?"

"Yeah, you obviously want something." He sighed. "Lois,

you don't have to buy me coffee and ask me how my night was. Just ask for whatever it is that you want."

Lois raised her eyebrows. "I was serious about just returning the coffee favor. I don't want anything," except your friendship, she added mentally.

"O—kay. Well, then. Dr. Carlin. How do you want to go about it?"

Lois turned in the general direction of Jimmy's desk. "Jimmy!" she yelled. She turned back to Clark. "Let's have Jimmy pull whatever he can. He's probably already got some stuff from when we asked him to track down ACL. Maybe we can both check our e-mail and the wires, and then go over whatever Jimmy's managed to pull."

"Works for me."

"Unless you have another idea?"

"No. That's fine with me."

Jimmy hurried over, his arms full of files. "Hey guys! Sorry, I was trying to explain something to one of the new research assistants. She's really cute, but she's never really had to use systems like ours and—"

"That's great, Jimmy," Lois cut in. "We need everything you can get us on—"

"Dr. Carlin?" Jimmy smirked. "Already done." He set the stack of bulging file folders on Clark's desk. "I figured you guys would want to start in on her after CK said she was Luthor's ex. I had some time, so I started pulling stuff yesterday afternoon."

"You're the best, Jimmy," Clark said, standing up and clapping him on the back.

"Yeah, well, I've learned from the best," Jimmy said. "Now, I better get back to work." He turned to head back to his desk.

"Good luck with the research assistant," Clark called after him.

"Thanks!"

"So, which half of the files do you want to start with?" Clark asked Lois.

"Um, whichever you're not starting with."

Clark gave her another long look. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"I'm fine!" Lois grabbed the top batch. "I'll start with these," she said and stalked back over to her desk. Good Lord, was it that unheard of for her to be a little nice? She growled as she started flipping through the files. In the old days, she and Clark would have taken the folders into a conference room, or at least sat at each other's desks, but if she suggested that, Clark would probably look at her like she'd grown an extra head. The same way that I did . . . , she realized. When he first was nice to her, she kept waiting for the mask to drop. It took a long time for her to realize he wasn't just smarming up to advance his career. Patience was not her strong suit, but it looked like she was going to have to develop some.

A couple hours later, Lois had finished going through her stack of files. She stretched, rotating her neck to try to work some of the kinks out. Clark had left some twenty minutes ago, presumably to grab lunch. She'd thought about asking him if he wanted to get lunch together, but she figured that'd be jumping the gun. Clark had turned her down almost every day for over a week after her almost wedding until she'd finally stopped asking him. Maybe once she'd softened him up a bit with coffee and being nice, he'd be willing to try lunch. It'd be interesting to find out if he'd had similar thoughts when he was trying to become her friend. Maybe later, if they ever managed to become best friends again, she would ask him.

She took the completed pile of folders over to his desk and picked up the other half. They were neatly stacked, so she assumed he was done with them. There hadn't been much in her half—just enough to convince her there was more somewhere else. Bobby had agreed to meet them this afternoon. Hopefully,

he'd know something useful. Her stomach growled, and she remembered she still hadn't had lunch. She glanced at the clock. They were both ending up with a late lunch. Maybe she'd just pick up a sandwich from the deli down the street. She restacked her folders and put a note on Clark's desk, then left.

Walking down the street, she heard the sonic boom that indicated Superman was at work somewhere nearby. She still wasn't sure what to make of their encounter last night. How exactly did he want them to distance themselves? A big part of her job was to write up investigations that involved Superman—usually because he'd had to save her towards the end of them.

Really, he was just talking about changing public perception. One would think the fact that she'd almost married another man would have shifted that, but apparently not, at least not for Dr. Carlin. Well, and a lot of the papers had portrayed her as a gold-digger who had lost out in the end. And, judging from what she'd overheard, her co-workers thought she'd accepted Lex because she'd given up on Superman and he was the next best thing. It was painful how close to the truth they'd come. She'd even overheard people arguing that Superman hadn't saved Lex because Lex had taken Lois away from him. Lois had been horrified by that idea. People obviously didn't know Superman if they really believed that, although she'd read Clark's sidebar about Dr. Carlin's columns. People couldn't help it if they'd been brainwashed to believe that Superman was wicked.

Lois sighed. Distance herself from Superman Despite her feelings for Clark, she was still more than half in love with the man of steel. She didn't want to distance herself from him. Didn't he understand that she was willing to take the risks of being associated with him?

But what about the risks to him? That was what it really came down to. He'd almost died, twice now, because of the perception that they were close. Lois sped up. If she really cared for him, she'd have to distance herself.

They could stage a public fight. Superman probably wouldn't go for that—a fake fight didn't fit in with truth and justice. She could date someone else. She shuddered at the thought. He couldn't show anyone else attention or he'd be in the same place all over again, just with someone who wasn't her. They could appear to drift apart. He could stop giving her interviews and exclusives (other than when it was related to a story she was already working on), and she could be more circumspect in her affections. She probably shouldn't have kissed him in front of live television cameras that were being broadcast worldwide, but she'd wanted him to know that someone on Earth cared about him as a person, rather than what he could do for them. Oh well. It wasn't like her life was normally all that safe anyway. Drifting apart was probably their best bet.

After ordering her sandwich, Lois noticed a young woman who was struggling to open the deli door, her arms full of one of the deli's office-sized take-out boxes. Lois wondered why the woman hadn't simply gotten the food delivered, but something about the woman still appealed to her. Lois walked over, opened the door, and held it for her.

"Thank you so much! I wasn't sure how I was going to get out of here on my own," the woman said, smiling at Lois.

"You're welcome," Lois replied, hesitantly smiling back.

"You do have your hands full."

"Well, have a good day! And thanks again!" the woman said.

"You too."

Lois wasn't sure why, but the exchange had touched her. Was this why Clark was so willing to do little things for others? The simple joy of helping a fellow human being? He cared about others. She cared about her career—and Clark cared about his career too—but Clark cared about a lot more than just his career. She would have to think about it some more and maybe experiment.

Clark finished dealing with the freeway accident and interrupted three muggings before returning to the Planet. He didn't bother stopping for lunch. Now that his powers were back, he didn't have to eat, and he found himself too stressed to want to eat most of the time. He still wasn't sure what to make of Lois's behavior today. She'd said that she didn't want anything from him, but she'd sure acted like it. Maybe she'd ask for whatever it was later today or tomorrow. It drove him crazy when she tried to butter him up—partly because he so desperately wanted her to act that way normally and partly because she believed he wouldn't help her out unless she manipulated him into it. He didn't know what he'd done to make her think that about him. Although, maybe it said more about her than about him. Anyway, all he could do was wait for her to make her move.

Lois was already at her desk when he exited the stairwell. He quietly walked to his desk, noting that she'd swapped piles with him. Without a word, he began reading through the pile she'd had.

Before long, Lois walked over to him. "Have a nice lunch, Clark?" she asked.

Clark raised an eyebrow. "Fine. Did you find anything in your pile?"

"Hints. That's about it. I noticed she had quite the import/export business. I wonder if there's something there. And what about earlier this year when the Carlin building got bombed because Lex was testing Superman? Think there's a connection?"

Clark tapped his pencil to his chin. "You might be right. I remember reading something about the Carlin building when we investigated the bombing. Wasn't it held by"—he closed his eyes, trying to picture the name on the paperwork he'd looked at almost a year earlier—"Sasho Corp?"

"Yeah. Wasn't there something about them in one of those folders?"

"Not in anything I've looked at."

Lois dug through the pile. "I think it was in"—she held up a folder—"this one."

"Hmm. Why would Luthor bomb one of Dr. Carlin's buildings, if it was hers? Unless they had a messy divorce or she was in on it too—like with the Daily Planet: they bombed the building, and then collected the insurance on it."

"And since it was their building in the first place, it would have been easy to set up the separate surveillance system, and they could bury the investigation on the bombing," Lois finished.

Clark nodded. "That sounds about right. So maybe we should find out how much the building was insured for."

"Jimmy!" Lois called.

Jimmy came rushing over. "What's up guys?"

"Find out anything you can about the Carlin building—especially how much it was insured for and who got the insurance money after it got bombed," Lois ordered.

"We already know that it was Sasho Corp that owned at least part of it—I remember that from when it was bombed, but check if anyone else was listed as part owner," Clark added.

"Sure, guys," Jimmy said.

"Thanks, Jimmy. You're the best," Lois said.

Jimmy looked like he wasn't quite sure what to say to that. "Um, you're welcome?"

Clark gave him a small smile. "We really do appreciate it." After Jimmy walked away, Clark turned back to Lois. "Have you talked to Bobby about Dr. Carlin?" he asked.

Lois shook her head. "Nope, but it's on my list for this afternoon. You coming along?"

"Yeah."

"Anyone else you think we should talk to?" Lois asked, sitting down on the edge of Clark's desk. She figured she might as well make it clear from her body language that she was going

to stick around and listen.

Clark shrugged. "Henderson, of course. Figured we would both put the word out to our regular contacts that we're looking for information about Dr. Carlin. Have you asked your contacts about Luthor's body?"

"Not recently. Why?"

"It just seems like the ex-Mrs. Luthor might know something about it, and, with her in jail now, maybe something will turn up."

"She did tell me yesterday that Lex was the 'love of her life.' That was actually why she wanted to destroy my life—since I supposedly drove Lex to his death." Lois rolled her eyes. "Obviously, the woman didn't understand that Lex threw himself off a building."

"I guess we all have a blind spot when it comes to the people we love," Clark said quietly.

Lois's hastily indrawn breath was easily audible to both of them.

"I didn't mean it that way, Lois," Clark said quickly. "I just meant that—never mind." He sighed. "What time does Bobby want to meet and what are we supposed to bring?"

"3 p.m. and Greek."

Clark glanced at his watch. "Want me to run pick something up and meet you there? I assume we're meeting at the regular spot?"

"That would be great. Yeah, regular spot. Thanks, Clark."

After Clark left, Lois found herself sitting at her desk simply staring at the papers in front of her. She couldn't seem to make her brain register anything her eyes were seeing. A blind spot for the people we love ... Did Clark really think that she'd loved Lex? Is that what he'd been referring to? Or had he just been talking about Dr. Carlin? She shook her head. Given the tension between them, there was no way she was going to ask.

Clark heaved a sigh of relief as he took off from the Planet's roof and flew towards Greece. Between his own conflicted emotions and her hurt over the whole Luthor fiasco, being around Lois felt like navigating a minefield these days. Two very broken people didn't make for a good mix. He was just thankful that she hadn't pressed him on the whole "we have a blind spot for the people we love" thing. He'd really just been thinking of Dr. Carlin when he'd said it, but then he'd realized that she might have thought he was trying to get in a dig over Luthor; and then there were days when he felt like screaming his frustration to the heavens over her blindness towards him. She still loved Superman. It had been so evident in the way she'd looked at him. She was still in love with a spandex Suit made by his mother. Not the man underneath. Not her best friend. A Suit, some flashy superpowers, and the pedestal she'd put him on. He shivered. The one woman he'd ever fallen in love with, and she couldn't see him. Fate had a brutal sense of irony.

Lois was waiting for him when he walked up to her Jeep. He'd been careful to land in a deserted alley a few blocks from their meeting place and walk the rest of the way. Unless he wanted to deal with the headache he'd get from turning his super-hearing on continuously, Bobby could sneak up on even him. He carefully knocked on the passenger-side window and then got in.

"Hey," he said awkwardly.

"Hey."

"So did you find anything else after I left?"

"Not really."

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a few moments, then Bobby sat up in the backseat.

Lois gasped. "Why do you always have to do that?" she demanded.

"I heard things were rough between you two, but I really

thought after this morning, it wouldn't be nearly this bad," Bobby said with a smirk. "Did you get him the wrong coffee or somethin'?" he asked Lois.

Lois frowned at him.

Clark turned to sit sideways in his seat. "Nice to see you too. So, what do you know about Arianna Carlin?"

"What'd you bring me?"

Lois rolled her eyes. "It's Greek food."

Bobby returned her eye roll exaggeratedly. "Thanks. I can tell that from the way it smells."

"I picked up some gyros, a salad, baklava, and a coke," Clark said, handing the shopping bag full of food back to Bobby.

Bobby rooted around in the bag and began picking at a gyro, his face filling with ecstasy. "Well, for this I'll tell you that the chick used to be married to Lex Luthor. Even after they split, she was his partner in some of his not-so-legitimate businesses. Oh, and she's been seen a lot with his doctor in the past couple months."

Clark's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Bobby, have you heard anything about Luthor's body?"

"Not exactly. I did hear a rumor that last night some guys moved some equipment with what looked like a body in a glass coffin—like the guy inside was Sleeping Beauty or somethin'—but I couldn't tell you who they were or who the body was or where they took it. Could be Luthor. You want me to check into it?"

"Definitely," Lois said.

"All right. Well, good luck you guys. I'd hate to see you stop workin' together," Bobby said and got out of the car.

"So what do you think?" Clark asked Lois on their way back to the Planet.

"I think I want some baklava now," she said with a pout in her voice.

"Besides that."

"What kind of glass coffin would that be?"

"I have no idea," Clark replied. "I mean, I've heard of cryogenics, but I'm not sure if they'd actually be able to revive Luthor—if that was him in the coffin. But, this is Luthor. I'm pretty sure he was behind the Superman clone. And if Mrs. Luthor's been seen with his doctor ..."

"Yeah." Lois shuddered. "I can't believe he might be alive. Dr. Carlin did seem almost—obsessed with Lex. I wouldn't put it past her to try to save him, assuming such a thing is possible."

Clark thought about asking her how she felt about that. After all, if Luthor hadn't killed himself, she would have been married to the man. "Do you know his doctor's name?" he asked instead.

"Um, I think it started with a K. Kenny, Keane, Kelly, maybe? We can get Jimmy to look into it when we get back."

"All right. So what else do you want to get done tonight? Finish looking through the files?"

"Yeah, and maybe put the word out to our contacts."

It was late by the time they were done reading through their respective folders and still they'd only found hints. That morning Clark had realized that their inability to work together was hampering the investigation. Not going through the files together had slowed things down, but that didn't mean he had any idea what to do about it. [i]Talk to her;[/i] his mother's advice echoed through his brain. He suppressed a snort. Right. Just talk to Lois Lane. What exactly was his mother expecting him to say? He'd given and given and given over the course of their past arguments, but they'd finally reached a point where Lois had to give some ground, and that was as likely to happen as for pigs to fly. He suddenly imagined himself flying a pig across the city, and wondered how many people would be forced to do things they'd sworn never to do. The corners of his mouth quirked up.

His whole life might have fallen apart, but at least he still had his sense of humor, right?

He glanced up at Lois. She was still in the process of finishing off e-mails. The gulf between their desks seemed unbridgeable. He didn't even know what he'd have to hear in order to want to bridge it, let alone what kind of words could bridge over his declaration of love and her rejection, or her lack of trust in him, or her choosing Superman over him, or the fact that she'd told Superman she'd love him even if he were an ordinary man living an ordinary life, or the fact that she'd chosen Luthor over him. There were days when he felt like the silence between them crackled so loudly it was a wonder even his super-hearing could break through it.

Lois's voice cut through his musings. "Can I give you a ride home?" she asked.

This time Clark did look at her like she had two heads. "No, thanks, Lois. I've got some errands to run on my way home."

"All right, well, have a good night," she said, her smile looking forced.

He put his chin in his hand, resting his elbow on his desk.

What exactly was she up to? He shook his head. Maybe she'd tell him what she wanted tomorrow.

When she got home, Lois ordered take-out from Mr. Singh's and pulled out her personal investigation notes. Time to discover another of her secrets. She read over her lists again. Maybe she needed to come at this from a different angle. Instead of trying to figure out every single thing the guys in her life had in common, she should figure out what the commonalities she'd already found said about her. Power and position had been something that had come up. Why was she attracted to men with power and position? What was it about her that wanted that?

She stood up and began pacing. She couldn't be shallow enough to like men simply for that—could she? No, that didn't make sense. It wasn't like she went out of her way to find men who had power and position. She just wanted someone she could respect, someone who wasn't a slacker, someone successful at life.

"Let's see. Was Lex actually successful?" she asked herself. "I mean, he was great at what he did, but he was a crime lord. And he was very successful at deception. Maybe it's not success that's the key. Or maybe I should be thinking about how he appeared rather than how he was."

She paused in her pacing, staring hard at the window in front of her. What had been her first impression of Lex? A wealthy businessman who avoided talking to the press, but was willing to make an exception for her—even though he'd never truly made that exception since he'd slithered his way out of the interview. He'd made her feel quite desirable. She resumed her pacing. Maybe that was it. Superman treated her the same way. She remembered the time he'd burst into the vault at the Metropolis Gold Repository and carried her out, cradled in his arms. He'd been shaking slightly, as though terrified of losing her. And there was that sense of connection that she couldn't quite explain, but had felt from the moment she'd first flown with him.

"What about Claude?" Claude had definitely made her feel desirable. He'd wined and dined her. The fact that the Planet's top reporter, who also happened to be foreign with a very attractive accent, was taking notice of her, despite her youth and inexperience, had felt wonderful. Her stomach roiled just remembering how naïve she'd been. She'd taken his interest in her work as approval and interest in her, instead of realizing that he was stealing her story. Just the fact that she'd let a man like that near her once again made her desperate for a shower. She shuddered, trying to drive Claude's essence out of her brain.

"So Paul," she said resolutely. "Paul was so handsome. And I did feel special having the editor pay attention to me—not that it

was actually special since Paul spread his favors around all the time.”

Lois slumped down on her poorly shaped couch. Sifting through the rubble left by one disastrous relationship after another was far more difficult than she'd expected. Paul had broken her heart. Claude had broken her heart. Lex had taken her self-respect. She'd always been furious at Linda for stealing Paul, but it hadn't been entirely Linda's fault. Clark would be faithful to whatever woman he ended up with—he wouldn't let himself be stolen. Likewise with Superman, if he ever decided to have a relationship. Paul and Claude and Lex and her father all chose to be men who could be tempted.

She frowned. Each of those men were good at making a woman feel wooed, but none of them were actually men who would stick around. Why was that? Maybe there was something to the whole “practice makes perfect” thing. Clark was attractive, but he'd never gone out of his way to pursue her. He'd just announced that he was in love with her. Superman hadn't set out to attract her at all. He'd rejected her declaration of love. Their connection, or whatever it was, seemed to be completely separate from either of their actions.

Where did that leave her? She looked down at her papers again. What was it about her that made her end up with men who were powerful, but unwilling to commit to one woman? She started back at the top of the list, her eyes lingering on her father's name. Sam Lane. He'd never made her feel wanted—quite the opposite in fact. She'd spent most of her life trying to gain his approval until they'd had a fight in high school and hadn't really spoken until that business with his cyborg boxers. She'd always thought that he'd have to admit she'd succeeded once she'd proven herself as a reporter—that she'd been right to go into journalism instead of medicine. But that had been a ridiculous hope. Her father would never be proud of her because she could never be the son he'd wanted. It was an impossibility. She shook her head as though she could shake the thought away and doggedly returned to her list. Her father was evidently good at making other women feel valued—at least she assumed he was since he'd had more affairs than she could count. And he'd been in a position of power over her.

She walked over to the freezer and got out some ice cream. Pretend it was Lucy's life. Lucy dated all the same type of guys too—even if they were a different variety than Lois's type. It was like she had the same relationship over and over, just with a different body on the other end. She was fairly certain Lucy only dated guys who were incapable of fidelity. Was that her? Dating her father over and over again?

“Am I somehow re-creating that relationship? Or trying to prove to my father that I can date successful guys?” she asked herself.

A sudden memory flashed through her mind—her father making a sarcastic comment to her mother about their daughters' love lives and how it would be a miracle if they found anyone worthwhile who wanted them.

Unwanted.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she almost choked on her ice cream. That was the reality of her childhood. Unwanted by her father because she wasn't a son and could never live up to his exacting standards. Unwanted by her mother because children were an inconvenience to her alcoholism. Lucy wanted her—but that was because Lucy needed someone to take care of her, not because she wanted Lois for herself. She collapsed against the counter. She'd thought she'd dealt with all this years ago. She'd shut her parents out of her life and set her own course. The tide of emotion rising in her chest and threatening to overwhelm her said otherwise.

No wonder she was perpetually attracted to men who were seemingly successful. If she married someone like that, if

someone like that wanted her, she'd be disproving her father's statement and his whole attitude towards her. She'd prove that she was lovable.

A knock at her door jerked her out of her reverie. She stowed the ice cream back in the freezer and ran her fingers under her eyes to make sure no tears had leaked out. A glance through the peephole showed Mr. Singh's delivery boy. It had taken them long enough.

The next morning Lois looked back over her how-to-pursue-Clark list from the other night. She wasn't going to bring coffee again today, just in case Clark decided to reciprocate from yesterday. No need to set herself up to look ridiculous. Besides, if Ben thought buying Clark coffee once meant they were dating, he'd have them married if she bought Clark coffee two days in a row. So, what did that leave her with? Clark wouldn't go to lunch with her. She could still ask how his evening had been. Maybe something else would strike her on her way to work or once she got there. She dressed and headed into the office a little early.

A delivery man with an armful of packages was heading into the Planet. Remembering how good it had felt to help the woman in the deli the day before, Lois held the door for him and smiled. “Nice day,” she said.

“Thanks!” the man said, returning her smile. “It is. I'm really enjoying these sunny days. Not looking forward to winter.”

“Me too. Well, have a good day,” she said, a trifle awkwardly. “You too.”

The elevator was already waiting when she got to it, so she was able to get right on. The research assistant who had caught Jimmy's eye was the only other person who got on. Lois gave her a slight smile and said, “Good morning,” surprising even herself.

The girl's eyes widened, then she looked down at the floor, mumbling “Good morning” back.

Lois wondered a bit at that. She knew she had a reputation for ruthlessness in pursuit of a story and perhaps a bit of a temper, but had it grown to where the new people were afraid of her even before seeing one of her passions? Perhaps so. The thought, which once would have comforted her as evidence of her dedication to her career, now seemed yet more evidence of her failures. She swallowed hard, forcing the emotion back into its little box. She was not going to go soft. Lex might have ruined much of her life, but she refused to give up her career. Work was no place to deal with personal feelings. Her experiences with Claude had taught her that.

Willing herself to look unaffected, she strode out of the elevator and over to her desk, giving people curt nods as she passed. With deliberate movements, she hung up her coat and booted up her computer. Taking a few deep breaths now that she was where no one could see them, she forced herself to calmly read through her e-mails and look over the wire.

Clark stepped out of the elevator, carefully carrying two cups of coffee from Ben's. Lois was already in. He walked over and set the coffee on her desk.

“G'morning, Lois.”

Lois turned and gave him a slight smile. “Thanks, Clark.”

He shrugged. “It was my turn,” he said and headed over to his own desk.

Lois picked up her coffee and a notebook, then followed him, sitting on the edge of his desk the way he'd sat on hers uncounted times. It was amazing how just being with him soothed her, despite the distance between them. “How was your night?” she asked.

“Fine,” Clark said, holding in a grimace. For some reason the fact that everyone knew Superman was back meant there had been more work for him than usual. He hoped things would settle

down soon. “You?”

“It was okay, I think.”

Clark stared at his computer, putting all his focus into booting it up and getting ready to work.

“So, uh, I was thinking we should make a list of what we want to get done today,” Lois said.

“Sounds good. What do you have so far?”

“Well, actually, I haven’t started. I thought I’d see what was on your mental list first.”

Clark gave her a quizzical look. “Okay. I didn’t get a chance to talk to Henderson yesterday. Did you?”

“Nope.” Lois wrote “Henderson” on her notepad.

“Have you talked to Jimmy yet this morning?” Clark asked.

“No, not yet.”

“I hope he found something on Sasho Corp and Dr. Kelly.”

“And the Carlin building,” she added, writing all three items on her list. “Have you heard anything else from your contacts?”

“Not a thing. You?”

“Not yet.”

“So do you want to call Henderson or shall I?”

Lois made a face. “I’m probably in his black book right now. Maybe you should call him.”

“All right.”

“Do you want to take our research into the conference room?” Lois suggested.

Clark looked down at his desk. Did he want to spend hours in a conference room with Lois? No. But would the conference room be the fastest way for them to finish this investigation? Yes. He forced himself to meet her gaze. “If you want to,” he said shortly.

“All right then. Well, I’ll just let you check your messages, and, uh, I’ll finish checking mine, and then we can get our stuff from Jimmy and take it into the conference room.”

Clark gave a short nod, then picked up his phone.

Realizing that was probably a hint for her to leave, Lois stood up and walked back over to her desk.

How had Clark done it? How had he kept pursuing her day after day even though she’d treated him so badly? How had he kept from becoming discouraged or just plain tired of dealing with her crap? Just get through today, she told herself. Worry about tomorrow, tomorrow.

She finished going through her e-mail and voicemail—nothing related to Dr. Carlin there. Time to head into the conference room.

“Jimmy!” she hollered.

After a few moments, Jimmy arrived at her desk. “Hey Lois! Want your research from yesterday or already onto something new?”

She gave him a small smile. “Yesterday’s. Find anything interesting?”

“I pulled the latest financial reports from both Sasho Corp and Dr. Kelly, as well as any other background information I could find. As far as the Carlin Building went, Sasho Corp was the only one who was listed as an owner. But get this: they took out an extra insurance policy through—dah duh dah!”—Jimmy flourished a folder—“Lexel Investments. Sound familiar?”

Lois’s brow furrowed. “Was that the—”

“Same company Luthor used to turn the Daily Planet’s bombing into a windfall—yes,” Clark said, walking up behind her.

Lois turned to face him. “Sounds like we might be onto something.”

“Well, let me know if you need anything else,” Jimmy said, handing the stack of folders and paperwork to Clark.

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark said as Jimmy walked away. He turned to Lois. “Henderson wasn’t in the office yet so I left a message for him. Shall we?” he asked, gesturing towards the

conference room.

Lois nodded and picked up her coffee.

An hour later Lois was wondering what in heaven’s name she’d been thinking when she’d suggested working in the conference room. Getting through their files faster, rebuilding their friendly rapport—all that jazz, she reminded herself. She hadn’t planned on sitting through the sizzlingly awkward silence that had descended the moment they’d split up the files. Patience. It had taken Clark weeks to earn her trust. She had to give him the same courtesy. Maybe another gesture?

She glanced down at her coffee cup, and then surreptitiously over at Clark’s. “I think I need some more coffee,” she said, standing up. “Want some?”

Clark didn’t even look up. “No, thanks.”

Clark heaved a sigh of relief once Lois was out the door. Sitting for over an hour in silence had been as draining as he’d expected. It made it difficult to concentrate on the files in front of him. Glancing out the window into the newsroom, he ascertained that no one was watching, and then flipped through the rest of his files at super-speed and the remaining half of Lois’s. At least he could figure out which ones to spend more time on. Leaning back in his chair, he stared up at the ceiling. The answers were here on this table somewhere. Or at least the next step. Dr. Carlin had been involved in Luthor’s criminal endeavors. It was really past time to see what Henderson had gotten from that woman and Lois’s double. Maybe he could use that as an excuse to take a break in a little bit.

“Whatcha thinking?” Lois asked as she walked back in.

Clark sat up. “Just about how Dr. Carlin is connected to all these pieces . . .” Suddenly he smacked himself in the head. “We’re idiots!”

“Speak for yourself,” Lois said, raising an eyebrow.

“Bobby told us that Dr. Carlin was involved with Luthor’s criminal activities.”

“We knew that already.”

“Yes, but what we should have done was cross-reference the list of companies ACL’s connected to with the list we already have of Luthor’s criminal companies.”

Lois nodded slowly, then smiled. “Good call! So shall we get Jimmy on that while we go check out Dr. Kelly, or did you want to focus on Sasho Corp?”

Clark stared at her. A compliment? From Lois? What was the world coming to? Or rather, how much longer would it be before she finally asked for whatever she was maneuvering him around to?

“Clark?” Lois prompted when Clark remained staring at her without answering her question.

“Oh. Um, either is fine with me.” He grimaced. “There’s not much to go on as far as who exactly owns Sasho Corp. There’s a board listed, but I didn’t see any obvious connections between them and Dr. Carlin—we’ll probably have to dig deeper. However, I did find out that they used some of the same shipping companies ACL did.”

Lois tapped her chin. “Maybe Lex owned Sasho? Or maybe Lex and Dr. Carlin owned Sasho? Let’s have Jimmy cross-reference what he can find out on Sasho Corp with ACL and Lex’s companies. We can check out Dr. Kelly in the meantime.”

“Sounds good. Did you read the folder on her?”

“Yeah. Looking through her file, there’s not much there. She was a renowned physician before Lex hired her as his personal physician. Judging from her finances, he made leaving her other patients very much worth her while.”

Clark nodded. He’d super-spiced through that file and the contents hadn’t much surprised him. “Luthor probably didn’t want to share a doctor with anyone,” he said, trying to keep the

bitterness from his tone. If there was one thing Luthor had been good at, it had been taking what he wanted regardless of how anyone else felt about it. “So do you want to interview her or just skip straight to the stakeout since we already know she’s involved with Luthor and Dr. Carlin?”

Lois’s brow scrunched up. “Why don’t we skip straight to the stakeout, and then if nothing turns up we can tell her that we’re doing a follow-up on Luthor and see if that makes her nervous enough to slip up.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. I’ll go talk to Jimmy to get him started. Did you want to finish flipping through the rest of these files now or wait until we get the correlations?”

“Um, what do you think?”

Clark shrugged. It really didn’t matter to him if they spent the morning looking through the folders. Although, on the other hand, that meant they’d be spending the morning in awkward silence ... maybe it’d be better to wait. “If we wait, we might catch more. We could check with our sources again this morning. Try to get in touch with Henderson. I’ve got a couple of back-burner articles from before that I should look at anyway.”

“Oh, okay,” Lois agreed. “Well, I guess I’ll just collect these then.”

“I can do that,” Clark said, determined to maintain politeness and to keep Lois from having any extra opportunities to manipulate him. He began gathering the folders and stacking them, making sure to keep them in the four distinct piles they’d had. “I can keep them at my desk if you need the space.”

“Uh, I have space for them,” Lois said and opened the conference room door.

Clark waited for her to exit, set the stacks on her desk, then said, “Okay, I’ll go find Jimmy.”

Lois sat back down at her desk. With difficulty she refrained from holding her head in her hands and instead began rechecking her e-mail and phone messages.

Clark felt his shoulders relax as he walked away from Lois. They’d gotten through that in one piece and now they could take a break from each other—at least until they started the stakeout. What a nightmare that was going to be! He shook his head. Cross that bridge when he came to it.

Fortunately, Jimmy was at his desk. “Hey, Jimmy—”

Jimmy looked up with a smirk. “Something new for you guys already?” He looked pointedly at his watch. “Didn’t you just get here an hour ago?”

“Yeah, well, you know how it is.”

“What can I do for ya?”

“We need a correlated list of the companies that Luthor, ACL, and Sasho Corp did business with.”

Jimmy whistled. “You guys don’t ask for much, do you?”

Clark gave a small smile. “It’s because we know you’re up to the challenge.”

“All right, all right. I’ll have it to you as soon as possible.”

“Thanks, Jimmy,” Clark said and headed back towards his desk.

Now he just had to decide how to fill the time until Jimmy had the list, or until they decided they should start their stakeout. He actually did have some small back-burner articles he could work on. Or he could go check with his sources who didn’t have phone access. That might be the best use of his time. And it would have the added benefit of being out of the office.

After arranging with Lois that they’d start their stakeout at 3 p.m., Clark was in and out of the office. He talked to Henderson and his other sources, did a couple of Superman rescues, worked on his back-burner articles, and wrote up the more newsworthy rescues he’d done that day.

Clark kept his eyes trained on the building in front of them.

Dr. Kelly had an office in a building with several other professionals. People came in and out of the building from time to time. “Did we find out if Dr. Kelly is even treating any patients currently?” he asked.

Lois smirked. “Nope. Just that ACL Corp has been depositing some serious cash into her account ever since Lex died.”

“Huh. That’s not suspicious,” Clark said sarcastically.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“Well, I guess we’ll see,” Clark said, hoping that would finish the conversation for now. It was strange: stakeouts with Lois used to be one of his favorite pastimes. Sitting here, with all the awkwardness between them, he almost couldn’t remember why he’d enjoyed them so much. He held in a snort. He’d been like a lovesick puppy, happy just to be in her presence in hopes of someday moving their relationship forward. She’d definitely broken him of that fantasy. Why were they doing this again? Oh right. Perry couldn’t justify both their jobs if they weren’t partners, and Clark didn’t really want to move Superman away from Metropolis.

Lois shifted in her seat, trying to come up with a neutral topic of conversation. “So, um, how did writing your articles go?”

“Fine.”

“What were you working on?”

Clark held in a sigh. “Perry had me write a piece on that new soup kitchen downtown.”

“Oh yeah. I heard about that place. What’d you think of it?”

Clark shrugged. “It was about like most soup kitchens.” He noticed a young man walking into the building they were watching and decided to use him to stay on safe conversational ground, i.e., work. “Did Jimmy run any of Dr. Kelly’s known associates?” He gestured towards the young man. “Any chance that some of these people are actually here to see her?”

Lois sagged slightly. “No, Jimmy only listed Lex and Dr. Carlin, and of course, any of Lex’s other employees are possibilities. She’d been working for Lex for the past ten years. Jimmy didn’t pull further back than that.”

Clark nodded. “Gotcha.”

Lois considered suggesting they do a little unauthorized reconnaissance later that night, but decided not to push Clark. If they didn’t find anything within a day or two, then she could start pushing. She let the silence string out between them. It was obvious that Clark didn’t want to talk, at least not to her. How had they spent their stakeouts before? When she’d been partnerless, she’d used the time to catch up on work or to start new investigations. But ever since their first long stakeout in the honeymoon suite, Clark had made stakeouts fun. They’d played word games, asked each other trivia questions, made up outrageous stories about the people around them, occasionally talked about their pasts, and speculated on their work. There had never been an in-between for her: an awkward stage, where one simply sat with someone else in heavy silence. None of the people Perry had tried to partner her with had stuck around long enough to do stakeouts. So now she had no clue what to do. What if it was Clark, sitting with her in a prickly silence? What would he have done? He always seemed to have some innate understanding of when she needed space and when he could push. She didn’t have that.

Well, if she were to push, the way he used to push She thought for a few moments. Clark would have tried to start something silly to lighten the mood—the same way he’d pulled out the board games and just expected her to play on their first stakeout. A silly game Nothing brilliant came to mind. Oh well, they could always fall back on the alphabet game: find an object and add a ridiculous adjective to go with it. She studied the building in front of her.

She cleared her throat. “Atrocious Awning,” she said, hoping Clark would just go with it.

“Hmm?”

“Atrocious awning,” she said a little more forcefully. “Your turn.”

“What if I don’t want to play?”

“You really want to just sit here for hours on end?” Lois said, trying to infuse some humor into the question. She remembered how horrified Clark had seemed at the idea of working through their stakeouts.

Clark shrugged.

“C’mon, Clark! Atrocious Awning—it’s your turn.”

Clark huffed internally. Lois just couldn’t leave him alone. Maybe he liked the quiet.

Who was he kidding? He hated the suffocating emptiness between them. Maybe Lois had the right of it. At least they could fake the trappings of a truce to make their situation bearable. “Bright Balloons,” he said unenthusiastically.

The game limped along after that. Lois wasn’t sure she wanted to keep playing. Clark was usually the one full of enthusiasm for games. Playing games with him was fun because he was having fun. Playing games with him now, when he was obviously bored and barely engaged, was significantly less so. Although she wasn’t playing to have fun; she was playing to draw Clark out, to show him that she wanted their friendship back.

If nothing else, the experience had her in awe of Clark’s patience. How often had she met one of his ideas with sarcasm or indifference? And yet, he kept trying, kept pushing. And somehow, in pushing her, she’d become a better person with him than without him. She pondered that. It was true. She was a better person today than she’d been before Clark had come into her life, even with all her hang-ups. Clark had taught her how to be a friend, how to have fun. It was part of why she wanted to keep him in her life.

The hours passed agonizingly slowly. Finally, Lois suggested dinner. If nothing else, it would keep their mouths busy for a few minutes. Plus, hungry people were cranky people. She did not need Clark any crankier than he already was.

“Dinner? What if Dr. Kelly leaves?” Clark asked.

Lois tilted her head. “Well, what if one of us gets dinner while the other keeps watch?” She swallowed hard, reminding herself that having Clark back in her life was more important than any story. “You can call me if Dr. Kelly leaves.”

Clark whipped his head around to stare at her. “All right. What is going on?”

“What do you mean ‘what’s going on’?”

“I mean, what is going on?” His eyes briefly closed of their own accord. “Look, I know you believe that the vast majority of people won’t do nice things without being sweet-talked or forced into it. What I don’t know is why you think I’m one of those people. I can’t promise that I’ll do whatever it is that you’re angling for me to do, but I do promise that I’ll at least think about it. So stop trying to manipulate me and just ask for whatever it is that you want.”

Lois flinched. “I’m not trying to manipulate you.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not! I swear! I just ...” Her hands twined together in her lap, then restlessly shifted along the steering wheel. “I just—miss you. I miss our friendship. I want you as my friend again,” she finished in a quiet voice.

Clark rubbed his forehead, wondering if he’d heard her properly. Be her friend again? That’s what all the rigamarole of the past couple of days had been about? Clark didn’t know what to say to that. He didn’t even know what to think about it. No mention of his love for her. No mention of her rejection of him. No mention of the fact that she hadn’t trusted him.

“Clark?”

Clark’s hands fell to his lap, and his gaze followed them. “I

don’t know what to say, Lois.”

“Say you’ll be my friend again,” she said, her voice breaking.

Clark lifted his eyes to hers. Tears were pooled in her eyes and tugged at his heart. That was something he couldn’t afford so he shifted to look out the window. “Lois, this is something I’ve thought a lot about. I’m just not sure—”

“I said I was sorry, Clark, and I am. I’m sorry that I didn’t listen to your instincts about Lex. I’m sorry that I said all those horrible things to you.” She swallowed hard. “Everything that happened with Lex made me—well, it made me take a hard look at myself and I”—she looked down at the console between them—“I don’t like what I’ve found. I wasn’t a good friend to you before. I guess I didn’t really know how to be a friend.” She gave a shaky chuckle. “It’s no surprise given my past. I am trying to change though.” She forced herself to look at Clark once more. “All I’m asking for is another chance. I know it’ll take time. I know things can’t just go back to the way they were before—and I don’t want them to. But I miss you. I want you as my friend.”

Clark sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Lois, I can’t promise anything right now. I’ve been trying to, um, work through some of the mess with Luthor, but it’s slow going.” He paused for a moment, then continued in a hoarse whisper. “Some things are just too broken to fix.”

“Clark, I know that, believe me I do. You, um—you know a fair bit about my family. And I know I wasn’t a good friend, but I’m trying to be a better one now.”

“Lois, honestly, some days I’m not even sure I want to try,” he admitted quietly.

Lois hissed as though in pain, then gave a bitter chuckle. “Who would have thought?”

“What?”

“Us. You spent so long working for my friendship, and I just threw it away, threw you away,” she trailed off in a whisper. Then, clearing her throat, she continued, “I never would have expected us to reverse roles.”

Clark leaned away from her. No. He wasn’t throwing her away. His actions didn’t even come close to what she’d done. He had never been dismissive of her or rejected her.

Except for right now, his conscience pointed out.

“I never would have expected you to be the kind of person who can’t forgive, even though a part of me knows that what I did was unforgivable. I want to be your friend, Clark. A real friend. The kind of friend you were to me.”

Clark sat in silence. The idea of Lois being the kind of friend to him that he’d been to her was seductive beyond belief, yet he wasn’t sure that he could trust her. Had they reversed roles? Was he refusing her simply because she’d refused him? He wouldn’t be that petty, would he?

Lois wiped the tears from her face. “Could we maybe—maybe just take it one day at a time? Can we try again?”

Clark winced. Try again? He didn’t know, and he still hadn’t figured out if he wanted to leave Metropolis or throw caution to the winds and pursue Lois once more. Although in some ways trying again was all he’d been doing. Taking one day at a time, trying to sort out his feelings. He took a couple of deep breaths. Maybe this was what they needed—for Lois to try. Maybe that would help him decide if he really wanted her in his life or not. Lois actively trying was definitely different.

Clark turned back to Lois. “Okay,” he said softly.

“Okay? Really?” she asked, the corners of her mouth tugging upwards in a small smile.

“Yeah. Really. I’m not sure how much I can put into our friendship right now, but if you’re willing to try”—he took a ragged breath—“I’ll, um, do my best.”

Lois put a hand on his arm, and Clark managed to keep himself from flinching away. “Thanks, Clark.” She turned back to watch Dr. Kelly’s office. “So what do you want to do about

dinner?”

“Are you hungry, or are you asking because you think I’m hungry?”

Lois shrugged. “I’m not starving yet, but I could eat.”

“All right, what sort of something do you want?”

“Um, I’m flexible. Do you have a preference?”

“Lois, being my friend doesn’t entail bending over backwards. That’s not the kind of person I am. If you have a preference, just say it. I’ll tell you if it sounds bad to me.”

“Okay, um, Chinese?”

“All right. I’ll go pick some up. I need to stretch my legs anyway. Do you want anything in particular?”

Lois shook her head. “The food you get is always great. Whatever sounds good to you.”

“Okay. I’ll pick something up. Try not to get into trouble while I’m gone,” he said with a tiny smile.

“Will do,” she said, returning his smile.

Fortunately, Lois was still there by the time Clark got back with dinner. He’d been a little leary of leaving her all alone, but really, he’d needed a breather. Be friends with Lois again? He shook his head. He had no idea what to even think about that.

“Thanks, Clark. You always get the best Chinese, ever since our first assignment.” She gave a small chuckle. “Someday you’ll have to tell me where you get it. I’ve tried quite a few Chinese places, but none of them ever seem as good as the ones you find.”

Clark held in a sigh. Telling Lois the fact that he got Chinese food from China was trouble waiting to happen. It meant telling her that he was Superman. Would she be able to see him after that? See the man who was both Clark and Superman? Maybe this whole trying a friendship thing was a bad idea. He’d spent most of the last year tied up in knots because of this exact thorny issue. The definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result, right? So where did that leave him? His hand clenched into a fist. Insane. He’d just agreed to try a friendship with Lois. To put himself in the same patterns all over again.

He took a deep breath, forcing himself back to the present. They were stuck in this car for now. Professional. He could do professional. “Thanks. Guess I’m just good at finding things,” he said lightly.

Lois smiled. “Yeah, you do seem to have a knack for that.”

Ten minutes after they’d started eating dinner, Dr. Kelly walked out of the office building. Without saying a word, they packed their food up, and Lois discreetly pulled the silver Jeep out to follow the doctor’s car.

“Any bets on where she’s headed?” Lois asked Clark.

“Not really. There’re too many options depending on how deeply she was involved with Luthor’s criminal activities. We also have no idea how much Luthor trusted her. She may be carrying on with his plans, or she may be coming up with something entirely different.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

They drove on in silence until Dr. Kelly pulled into the Perpetual Pines Cemetery and stopped.

“Huh. Not where I would have expected,” Lois commented. She grabbed a flashlight out of her bag and eased herself out of the Jeep, taking care to close the door quietly.

Clark followed.

Dr. Kelly wended her way through the various gravestones and monuments until she reached a mausoleum and went inside.

“What do you think?” Lois whispered.

“I think we should wait and see what happens,” Clark replied, pulling his glasses down and x-raying the building. Dr. Kelly rotated a candelabra lit with light bulbs, and a casket slid to the side showing a set of stairs. She walked down them, and the casket returned to its previous location. Unfortunately at least

part of the belowground area was lead-lined. Clark could see part of the stairs, but a wall intervened, and Dr. Kelly was lost to sight. He pushed his glasses back up. He was pretty sure he’d hear when the casket moved again.

“I guess,” Lois said dubiously. “If she’s not back out in a few minutes, I vote we at least go look in the mausoleum. Maybe it’ll give us a clue.”

Clark made a noncommittal noise.

“So, have you ever been in a cemetery at night?” Lois asked quietly.

“Yes,” Clark replied.

Lois nudged him. “C’mon. More details. I once followed this crazy guy who was digging up bodies and using them to commit insurance fraud.”

Clark gave her an incredulous look.

“Long story.” She waved a hand. “Your turn!”

Clark thought furiously. He’d actually been in several cemeteries at night. He’d always found them peaceful places, plus they made for a quiet, usually uninhabited, place to take off and land, both before and after he’d become Superman. He’d also chased various criminals through them. For some reason superstitious people thought they’d be able to evade an apparently supernatural figure by detouring through a cemetery, as though he’d be trapped inside. However, none of those instances were anything he wanted to share with Lois. That first time he’d been in one though . . . “When I was a kid, a friend dared me to spend the night in a cemetery.” He shrugged. “I did it.” And, as the cemetery had been an old abandoned one a couple miles from town, it had been blissfully quiet, blissfully still, and fascinating to walk through, reading the crumbling headstones. It was part of why he’d begun using cemeteries later in life to hide his super activities.

“Well, yeah. Everyone does that. I guess I keep forgetting you grew up in Kansas. Not much to do around there for excitement, other than the corn festival,” she teased.

“If you say so,” Clark said.

The silence hung between them until a few minutes later when Clark heard the casket shifting once more. Apparently whatever Dr. Kelly was doing didn’t take long.

Dr. Kelly came out of the mausoleum, and they furtively followed her back to her car.

“What do you want to do now?” Clark asked after they’d gotten back into Lois’s Jeep.

Lois thought for a second. “Let’s follow her for now. My gut says this is probably the jackpot, but maybe there’s more.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Do you think Lex’s body is in that mausoleum?” Lois asked, pulling out to follow Dr. Kelly. “But why would a dead man need a doctor?” she added.

Clark grimaced. “Who knows? Clone? Cryogenics? Luthor always had some crazy scheme, and it wouldn’t surprise me to find out that his associates are the same way.”

Dr. Kelly turned to enter a residential area, and, before long, pulled up in front of a luxurious townhouse. They watched her get out of her car and go into the townhouse. Clark looked at the number. “This is the address Jimmy has for her.”

“Clark, let’s go back to the mausoleum. She’s probably here for the night. What do you think?”

“Sure, Lois.”

Clark scanned the inside of the mausoleum. No hidden cameras. Apparently no security at all, other than the hidden entrance. Something about that set him on edge.

Lois moved around the room, feeling the walls for something out of place. As she did so she dislodged the candelabra and it swung sideways. “Ah ha!” she said, turning it as far as it could go. The casket once more slid to the side. “Well, I guess we know

where she went,” Lois whispered.

Clark nodded.

Cautiously, they made their way down the stairs, Clark holding Lois back so he could take the lead. At the bottom, they halted to survey the room. It was little more than a concrete box, much like the old bomb shelters. The glass casket Bobby Bigmouth had mentioned was in one corner. Various machines beeped from nearby—as though they had entered Dracula’s ICU.

“Clark!” Lois squeaked, walking towards the casket.

“I know,” he agreed quietly. The body inside was almost certainly Lex Luthor’s, and the idea that he was alive and on life support in this very bunker left a sick feeling in the pit of Clark’s stomach.

“Well, well, well—Lois Lane. I’ve been wanting to run into you for quite some time,” said a female voice from behind them.

They turned as one to see Dr. Kelly standing at the top of the stairs, a gun in hand and a large man standing just behind her.

“Why?” Lois asked defiantly.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t notice you following me?” she asked with a smirk.

Neither of them replied.

The woman remained focused on Lois. “I’ve heard so much about you,” she cooed, then added in a hard voice, “You ruined the only real man in Metropolis.”

“If you’re referring to Lex Luthor, I don’t know why you think I ruined his life,” Lois shot back. “I had nothing to do with the initial investigation.”

“Oh, but it was the Daily Planet bombing that started the whole thing.” She took several steps towards them, halting just out of reach. The man followed, also wielding a gun. “I think we can all agree that you were the catalyst for that.” She held up a hand to forestall any response from Lois. “Now, I’d say turnabout is fair play: You put Lex in a coffin. This is a cemetery. I’m sure we can find someone who’s willing to share their coffin with you. No one will ever find you, either of you,” she said silkily.

Clark glanced around the room. There was neither time nor space to change into his Suit without anyone noticing. He’d have to do whatever he did as Clark.

“Any last words?” Dr. Kelly purred.

Lois nudged Clark and subtly glanced at the man standing beside Dr. Kelly. He gave an almost imperceptible nod.

“Yes! What is it with Lex and psychopathic women?” Lois demanded, throwing herself at Dr. Kelly. The gun went off as it flew out of Dr. Kelly’s hand, but the bullet missed everyone.

Fortunately, after being powerless for so long, Clark had a very good idea of how hard a regular person would punch. So, he carefully tackled the man and punched him just hard enough to render him unconscious.

Dr. Kelly went flying backwards from Lois’s tackle. They grappled, each trying to reach the gun. Eventually, Lois was able to get in a good kick—one that sent Dr. Kelly stumbling directly into the coffin. The machines immediately began beeping rapidly as the heartbeat skipped and eventually flatlined. Dr. Kelly ran over to where the long beep issued from the machines and frantically pushed buttons, her eyes skittering between the coffin and the machines. “Lex! No! No!” she screamed, running over and putting her hands on the coffin.

Clark turned to help Lois. Together they managed to subdue Dr. Kelly. Lois found some extra cords in a cabinet and used them to tie up Dr. Kelly, who continued to struggle and wail. They also tied up her associate, and Clark took the precaution of emptying both guns.

“I’ll go call the police,” Clark said.

Lois nodded. “Sounds good. I’ll keep an eye on them. I wanna go through these cabinets anyway.”

“All right.”

Clark maintained normal human speed until he was able to

get under cover, then changed into the Suit and returned to Lois.

“Lois,” he called as he came down the stairs.

“Superman!” she responded, taking a half-step towards him before she remembered their last conversation. Distance, she reminded herself. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard a gunshot, but it looks like you have things under control. Need some help taking out the trash?”

Lois turned back to the file cabinet. “I don’t think so,” she said, forcing her voice to sound uninterested. “Clark went to call Henderson. I imagine he’ll be back any minute. I want to make sure Henderson sees all this anyway.”

“Very well.”

“Thanks for the offer though,” she added, looking up at him.

Superman nodded, then went outside, changed back into his Clark clothes and called Henderson, all the while feeling a little baffled. Lois had seemed so upset at the idea of distancing herself from him. Yet here she was, acting as though he were no one special. He hadn’t expected it to be so easy for her. Perhaps she hadn’t really loved Superman after all. It should have thrilled him; instead he was left with an ache in his chest and a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. If Lois truly got over Superman, what was he left with? He already knew that she didn’t love Clark—would never want more than a friendship with him.

Mentally he shook himself as he headed back down the stairs into the bunker. Now was not the time to dwell on Lois.

Lois looked up from the file cabinet and smiled. “Clark! Look what’s in here! It’s too bad there’s not a copier.”

Clark walked over. “What’d you find?”

“Nothing much.” She smirked. “Just a whole other section of Lex’s empire—one that we hadn’t connected with him yet. And check it out: Sasho Corp records. There’s definitely something there.”

“Great! These two give you any trouble?”

“Nope. Dr. Kelly went off on another rant about Lex and how I’d killed him twice now, but I’ve been ignoring her.”

“Good.” Clark laid a tentative hand on her shoulder. “Luthor made his own choices and so did Dr. Kelly. You didn’t kill him—either time.”

She smiled up at him. “Thanks, Clark.”

Clark gave her a small smile, then began to read through the folders at super speed, flipping through each of them as though he were skimming.

It had been four days since they’d discovered Dr. Kelly with Lex’s body. The time had passed in a flurry of investigation. The files in the bunker had resulted in a second wave of Luthor-related arrests, and Dr. Kelly was being held without bail, charged with attempted murder. Luthor’s body had been returned to the coroner.

Lois hadn’t even touched her personal investigation. Just maintaining her equilibrium in the face of finding Lex alive and then watching him die a second time—not to mention the emotional effort of pursuing Clark—had been all that she could handle. But now that things were starting to settle down a bit, she’d decided to call Lucy. It was the first time she could remember ever going to her sister for advice, but she was feeling stuck, and Lucy had actually seen a therapist about the same childhood that Lois had lived through. It was possible that Dr. Friskin had given her some good advice.

After work, Lois changed into comfy clothes and ensconced herself on the bed with ice cream, her lists, and the telephone.

Ring *Ring* *Ring*

Lucy answered almost at once. “Hello?”

“Hey Luce. It’s me,” Lois said.

“Hey Lois! How’re you?”

Lois suppressed a sigh. “Um, okay? It’s been kind of a long week.”

“What’s up?”

“Not much—just found Lex Luthor’s body. Basically, he’d hired Dr. Frankenstein, and she was in the process of bringing him back to life,” she said quickly, then added, “Y’know, the usual.”

“Ugh! Really?”

“Yeah. Really.” Lois shuddered. Lex had been alive when they’d found him. Alive. If Dr. Kelly’s procedure had worked, he could have come back and come after her. Maybe before that might not have bothered her so much, but now, having spent the past four days yet again plumbing the depths of his depravity and re-realizing that Lex never gave up—she forced herself back to the present. “But that wasn’t actually why I was calling,” she said.

“Oh?”

“Um, I wanted to, uh—you said that you went to see Dr. Friskin—”

“Did you go see her?” Lucy interrupted.

“No, not yet. I had a psychiatrist try to kill me last week, so I’m kinda not ready to see another one, at least not right now.”

Lucy chuckled. “I don’t know how you survive your life. I would hate your job.”

Lois frowned. “It’s not all like that.”

“Uh, Lois—” Lucy began.

“Anyway, I didn’t call about my job,” Lois said forcefully. She hesitated, then took the plunge. “I was wondering if we could talk about what Dr. Friskin told you.”

Silence reigned for a long moment, and then Lucy spoke.

“See, this is why I didn’t tell you about Dr. Friskin before. You were supposed to go see her yourself, not pick my brain.”

“Please, Lucy.”

Lois huffed. “Only if you don’t make fun of me.”

“Why would I make fun of you? When have I ever made fun of you?” Lois demanded.

“Or tell me what to do,” Lucy said severely. “I’m doing this my own way right now. I don’t want your advice. If we have this conversation, it’s sister to sister, not little sister to big sister. Got it?”

“Okay. I’ll—I’ll do my best,” Lois promised.

“What do you want to know?”

Lois swallowed hard. “After everything happened with Lex, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. I’ve been trying to figure out why Lex, why I couldn’t see that he was evil, why I was attracted to someone like that in the first place, why I let him make all of ‘our’ decisions. I realized that part of it was because he made me feel valued. I mean, he could have had any woman in the world, and yet, he wanted to marry me. When we were kids I overheard Dad telling Mom it’d be a miracle if we ever found anyone worthwhile who wanted us, and I realized that ever since then I’ve been trying to prove him wrong.”

“Ouch! Sounds like something Sam would say,” Lucy said in a hard voice that Lois couldn’t remember ever hearing.

“Yeah,” Lois said quietly, then added, “I just wondered if you think our childhood has affected your love life, and, if it has, how. Did Dr. Friskin say anything about all that?”

“Yes, it’s affected my love life—obviously,” Lucy said, and Lois could practically hear her eye-roll. “Do you think I really want to date losers? Or to break up with any nice guys that slip through the cracks?”

“Um—”

“Don’t answer that! It was rhetorical.”

Lois gave a forced chuckle. “My lips are sealed.”

“Good. I don’t know what to tell you, Lois.” Lucy paused, then continued, “Dr. Friskin helped me realize that I date jerks because I don’t think I deserve someone nice—part of that whole unloved child thing—and because I don’t want to be Ellen.”

Lois’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean you don’t want to

be Mom? Mom was married to a jerk.”

“Ellen was married to a jerk, and her father was a jerk, but she let Sam destroy her. She didn’t become an alcoholic until after Sam started having affairs. She loved Sam, and it destroyed her,” Lucy said quietly.

Lois shook her head. “I’m confused.”

“Lois, it’s much easier not to love someone who’s a jerk. You can like them. You can even feel affectionate towards them. But the relationship just doesn’t go deep enough for love. I like to date. I like to have fun with guys. Dr. Friskin actually thinks that’s just me trying to get the attention I didn’t get as a child. She had just suggested that I take a break from dating right before I left Metropolis. But I’m not ready to make that big of a change right now—maybe when things are more stable.”

Lois almost bit her tongue to keep herself from pointing out that a big part of the instability in Lucy’s life was caused by the parade of men she went through. She’d agreed to keep her mouth shut—she just hadn’t realized how hard that would be. “Okay. So you specifically pick jerks to date so you won’t end up like Mom?”

Lucy was quiet for a moment. “Well, it’s not really a conscious choice. I only date guys I’m attracted to, and that bad boy image is attractive to me. So more often than not, I end up with jerks.”

“So Dr. Friskin’s advice was to stop dating altogether?”

“Well, that was the first part of her advice. She told me that my past is like a weighted vest—y’know, like that one I got for working out right before I moved here?”

“Um, yeah. What about it?”

“Dr. Friskin said that I can’t keep my childhood from affecting my love life—it’s impossible to throw away your past—all I can do is choose how it affects me. So, she said that I can pretend I’m not wearing it—I can avoid doing things because my past makes them difficult, or I can wallow in it—spend all my energy trying to get rid of something that can’t be gotten rid of, or I can use it to become stronger—I can acknowledge it’s there, but do hard things anyway.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah, that’s about what I said. Sorry I don’t have a better answer. I wish I could tell you that it’s easy to just move on. Obviously, I haven’t done it yet. But I figure I’m at least semi-aware of what I’m doing in my love life now, which is a step in the right direction, right? Can’t fix a problem you don’t know you have.”

“Yeah.”

“So, speaking of guys, how are things going with Clark?” Lucy asked.

Lois gave a small smile. “Better, I think.”

“Yeah?”

“He’s agreed to give our friendship a chance. That’s progress. And, uh, I realized that I wasn’t a good friend to him before. I didn’t listen to him. I didn’t really trust him. I didn’t value him the way I should have. So I’m trying to change.”

“Well, as Dr. Friskin would say, ‘that sounds like excellent progress,’” Lucy said with a smile. “I really am proud of you, Lois. It’s not easy to admit that you made a mistake.”

“Especially after having our father,” Lois said wryly.

Lucy gave a bitter laugh. “Lois, that was only you. He criticized everything you did, but at least you got some attention. He didn’t even care enough about me to remember that I was there most of the time, and when he did remember, he brushed off any ‘failures’ because he said that I was just too air-headed to do any better.”

Lois searched for something to say. She’d never realized that their father had been so cruel to Lucy. “I’m sorry, Luce. I guess I was just so focused on my own problems that I never realized how awful he was to you.”

"It's okay, Lois. I really appreciate all the stuff you did do for me when we were younger."

"I love you, Luce," Lois said, her throat clogged with tears. "I'll always be around to help."

"Thanks. I love you too, Lois."

They were silent for a moment, before Lucy continued, "Well, I guess I should get going, otherwise I'm going to be late for work."

"Okay. Call me back sometime when you can tell me how you're doing. Thanks for talking, Luce. It helped."

"You're welcome, Lois. Bye!"

"Bye," Lois said and hung up the phone. She opened her ice cream and took a bite. Talking to Lucy had actually been helpful. She hadn't looked through her list of guys from a safety standpoint. It explained a lot—like why she'd rejected Clark. She hadn't been able to figure that out the last time she'd looked at her lists, but she was pretty sure it was for the same reason Lucy dated jerks.

She'd been guarding her heart even more zealously after Claude had broken it. Love had been her ideal, but it was just too hard to be that vulnerable. Superman was the exception, but that was only because, silly her, she'd thought he'd never break her heart. He was safe, whether her subconscious figured he would never be in a relationship with her or that he would never hurt her. After all, Superman was pure good—or at least she'd thought he was pure good before he'd rejected her. Now ... she was starting to see him as just another man—a powerful, honest, good man, but still a man.

Lex had made her feel wanted, but she'd never loved him. She'd known that even on the day he'd proposed. But that was part of what had made him safe enough to marry.

Clark though, he had potential. Even from that first moment when she'd seen admiration in his eyes and had told him to keep it to himself, she'd felt it. She could fall for Clark. She'd admitted it on her wedding day: Lois Lane-Kent. None of the other guys she'd been involved with were forever types, but Clark was. And that was why she'd run as fast as she could from a romantic relationship with him. Loving him meant that her heart was incredibly vulnerable. It was no wonder she'd been so desperate to regain his friendship. She needed Clark—because she loved him.

Which left her where? What was it Lucy said Dr. Friskin told her? She couldn't get rid of her past, but she could choose how to handle it. She could choose if she was going to continue rejecting love, rejecting Clark.

She sighed and collected her ice cream to put it away. It was no wonder people complained counseling was exhausting. It was 8 p.m., and she was ready for bed.

The weather was practically perfect—clear blue skies, plenty of sunshine—and they were walking to work together for the third day in a row. Lois had asked, and, in keeping with his agreement to work on their friendship, Clark had acquiesced. Even though conversation still kept to work for the most part, Clark felt almost hopeful; it felt like they were on the right path. Lois's apparent character adjustments had held for the past week. She still snapped at him occasionally, but she was making a concerted effort to listen to him, and he appreciated it. Maybe it was time to try talking about things of a more personal nature.

He glanced sideways at her, then said with a smile, "Well, you must be excited."

She returned his glance. "Oh, I don't know Clark, we've walked to work the past *three* days." She smirked. "Walking to work with you isn't really the thrill it used to be."

He chuckled. "No, no, no. The Kerth awards. They announce the nominees today."

"Oh, is that today?" she said innocently.

Clark refrained from rolling his eyes. "C'mon, Lois, you get nominated every year."

"Oh, not *every* year." Lois grinned. "Just every year since I've been eligible."

"I bet you'll win it for the Bolivian drug cartel series."

She shrugged. "Well, the dinner's always fun. It'll be a nice way for me to break in that new black dress I bought." She had a sudden thought. It was rather soon, but she was allowed to bring a date to the Kerths. She could ask Clark. Even if he said no, asking would be an opportunity to be intentional about her past. And if he said yes, it'd be a chance for them to move things forward. Her heart sped up. She took a deep breath, pasted on a teasing smile, and turned towards him. "Did you get your tux yet?" she asked.

Clark stared at her. "The dinner's just for nominees, Lois."

She steadied herself. "And their dates. You want to go?"

Clark slowed. Go? Was Lois asking him as a friend or was this a date date? They had yet to address his ill-fated declaration of love. It wasn't something he wanted to talk about with her, at least not yet. She'd apologized. She was working on changing. But some part of him was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Trust was something that took time to rebuild. He'd agreed to work on their friendship though, which meant spending time together outside of work. "Sure," he said shortly.

Lois forced a smile. "Great! Why don't you run in and get a tux," she suggested, gesturing at the nearby tux shop. "I'm going to go to the bank. I'll meet you back here in five."

"All right."

Clark walked into the tux shop and ordered a tux. This was something he wanted, he reminded himself as the saleswoman took down his measurements. Lois was almost certain to get the award, and this way they could ease into hanging out together again. In fact, this might be better than doing a movie night or something along those lines. There'd be lots of other people around and not much opportunity for private conversation. Plus, the night had an agenda. They wouldn't be sitting around awkwardly. The thought made the weight in his chest lighten. He could do this. They could do this.

Lois wasn't waiting for him when he got back outside, so he headed over to the bank. Looking in through the front window, he could see that the bank was full of people apparently collapsed where they'd been standing, as though the building had been gassed. Lois was laying on the floor in the middle of what had been the queue. He rushed in and crouched down by her. Thankfully, she seemed to be asleep, rather than injured. He shook her gently. "Lois! Lois!"

She stirred, then slowly sat up. "Clark?"

"You okay?"

She looked at him dazedly. "The last thing I remember I was standing here, and I felt really tired."

"Well, apparently you weren't the only one," he said, giving her a hand up.

"What could have knocked us all out so fast?" she asked, noticing that everyone around her was still asleep, though starting to stir.

"I don't know," Clark said. As he turned to look with her, he saw the open bank vault. "But somebody made a big withdrawal," he said, pointing to the vault.

A voice issued from speakers inside the vault: "Hello, Metropolis. I'm here to teach you a lesson: don't get too attached to material things because you won't have them for long—but you will catch up on your rest, and you're gonna need it," the voice said, finishing with a maniacal laugh.

Lois snorted. "What is it with psychopaths and their attempts at 'witty repartee'?"

Clark shrugged. "Who knows?" He turned and began helping people up, making sure they were uninjured.

Lois followed suit.

Lois had been on hold with the police for over forty-five minutes and transferred back and forth several times. She'd been on the phone for so long that Clark had finally left to go talk to the bank manager to find out if anything new had turned up while the police were investigating. She was reaching the end of her limited supply of patience. In the bank, she'd been able to be sanguine about the robbery—the bank had insurance after all—and she was more focused on figuring out who exactly had committed the robbery and how they'd done it. Waiting around on hold had given her time to realize that it was *her* bank that had been robbed. Her account. Her money. Her ability to pay her bills that was in jeopardy. She'd been in the bank to make a withdrawal so that she could go get groceries. She knew that these things could stretch out, and she was starting to get stressed about her finances in the interim.

Finally the police captain she'd been on hold for came on the line. "Ms. Lane, you have to understand—"

"Look, I've talked to your sergeant, your detectives, and your lieutenant. Now, Captain, how can the police have no leads?" she demanded.

"Ms. Lane, that's not true—" the man began.

"Oh, I see. You have leads. You're just not willing to share." She gritted her teeth. "Didn't your mother teach you it's rude not to share?"

The only response was the sound of a dial tone.

"Hello? Hello?" she said. Please don't have hung up. Please don't have hung up, she begged internally. She did not want to go through the rigmarole of trying to get a live human being on the phone again! Not today.

No one answered.

She slammed the phone handset onto the receiver. Today was not turning out to be her day. She grabbed a pen and her notepad and began trying to write down the names of everyone she'd talked to at the police station so far. There had to be someone she could persuade to share their information. Unfortunately, the pen was being less than cooperative.

Jimmy walked up, chuckling "'Didn't your mother teach you it's rude not to share?' Good one!"

"Didn't your mother teach you it's rude to eavesdrop?" she shot back, drawing circles on the pad and shaking the recalcitrant pen. "What is with this pen?"

"It's not a pen," Jimmy said, leaning on her desk.

She turned the force of her displeasure on him. "Jimmy, if this is some zen parable about pens not being pens and desks not being desks, I'm not in the mood."

Jimmy stood up. "Hey, trust me. This'll cheer you right up. It's a bug. I stuck it on your desk." He pulled a mini headset out of one ear and handed it to her. "Look, you listen on this. Cool, huh? I got it at Spies R US."

She flipped the "pen" and headset over, reading the label. "Super-hearing for sale."

Jimmy shrugged. "Well, it's not super, super. It's only got a range of about 500 feet, but here's the cool thing: see this switch?" He took the headset back and manipulated a tiny red switch. "AM/FM radio."

Just then Clark came striding towards them, holding a VHS aloft, his expression triumphant. "I got it!" he proclaimed, walking past them towards the media center.

Lois's gaze followed him. "What?" she asked.

"Video from the bank's security cameras." Clark moved to put the VHS in a VCR. "Now maybe we'll find out why the police have such a tight lid on this thing."

Lois and Jimmy both hurried to join him.

Clark smirked. "The bank manager was a fan—plus he appreciated us sticking around until the police got there this

morning. Pays to help out, eh?" He pressed play.

As the video showed the bank's door opening and everyone in the bank collapsing, Clark heard a buzzing hum come from the speakers. He pointed at the television and turned to look at Lois and Jimmy. They were both staring at the screen, heavy-eyed and swaying where they stood.

Clark paused the video. "It's the sound," he said.

Jimmy's eyes opened. "Sound?"

"What sound?" Lois asked, shifting to wake herself up.

"The sound in the bank, here." He gestured to the TV. "The one that made you guys just—made us all just—get drowsy, just now."

Jimmy peered at the TV screen. The tape was frozen on several men in black leather jackets and motorcycle helmets entering the bank. "Look! Check it out!"

Clark immediately turned to stare at the TV, trying to figure out what had sparked Jimmy's interest. "What?"

Jimmy jabbed a finger at one of the men in the foreground. "That jacket! I wonder where he got it."

Lois frowned. "Will you pay attention?"

Jimmy shrugged. "Can't a guy appreciate a good jacket?"

Clark turned to stare at him, eyebrows raised. "A biker jacket?"

"Don't tell me you've never thought about getting a biker jacket," Jimmy said. He smirked. "It'd probably be a good look on you, CK." Returning his attention to the TV, he shook his head. "Wow, the first sound that could put a whole room to sleep."

"No, I think Yanni did it first," Lois said, turning to walk back to her desk.

Clark ejected the tape, then followed. He briefly considered returning to his own desk, but they did need to decide where they were going to go from here, so he sat down in the chair next to Lois's desk.

Just then Perry strode out of his office. "All right, everybody, let's gather 'round and listen up," he yelled. "Nominations for the Kerth Investigative Journalism Prize are in, and I'm happy to announce that one of our very own has gotten the nod—"

Lois hugged herself internally. Finally! Something about this day was going well. Perry said the same thing every year, and it never failed to embarrass her. But she loved being the best investigative journalist in Metropolis, and she loved that everyone knew it. God knew she needed it this year. After everything with Lex, it was good to be reminded that she was still number one. She tuned back in to Perry.

"so let's have a big round of applause for—" Perry continued.

Lois stood, a huge smile on her face.

"—Mr. Clark Kent," Perry finished, waving a hand towards Clark.

Lois sat down with a thump.

Everyone else clapped.

Clark stayed seated, not quite sure that he'd heard correctly.

Perry walked over to where Clark sat. "Well, c'mon, Clark, don't be shy. Stand up!"

Clark stood, and Perry shook his hand.

"Y'know, I think you stand a real good chance of winnin' this," Perry said. "That retirement home scandal—"

Lois turned abruptly, looking up at Perry. "Wait! He got nominated for the retirement home piece?" she demanded.

Perry nodded. "He certainly did. It was first-class journalism. Emotional wallop."

Lois turned back to her desk, cradling her head in her hands. Her lungs ached, as though no matter how deeply she breathed, she just couldn't get enough air. So much for being the best in the business. How could they have nominated Clark? Especially considering that he'd been nominated for his story on a *retirement home scandal*. The Bolivian drug cartel series Clark

had mentioned that morning had had a global impact—laws had been re-written, crooked politicians ousted, and lives changed. Far more impact than the ten old people Clark’s story had affected.

Jimmy walked up to them just then. “Good pictures too,” he added, “if I say so myself.” He looked at Perry. “They didn’t happen to mention?”

Perry frowned. “Olsen, that was your first photo assignment. Even Secretariat didn’t win the purse the first time out.”

“Who?” Jimmy asked.

Perry gave Jimmy a disgusted look. “Boy, I’m glad you’re not in sports.” He turned to Lois. “Now Lois, don’t you, uh, have anything to say to Clark?”

She grimaced. “Uh, right.” She swallowed hard and stood, pasting on a smile. “Clark, I, uh—I’m very, uh—”

Clark raised his eyebrows. “Surprised?”

“Stunned, shocked, in need of oxygen,” she replied breathlessly, her voice going up as she sank down into her chair.

Perry leaned down. “Lois, you’ve been nominated every year. You won three times. Don’t go gettin’ petty. The Planet is a team. One person’s success is everybody’s. You got it?”

She nodded. “Gotten,” she gasped, swallowing down tears.

“Good.” Perry turned back to the newsroom at large. “All right, everybody, let’s get back to work.”

“Congratulations, CK,” Jimmy said, slapping Clark on the back and walking away.

Clark smiled at him, then sat back down in Lois’s extra chair. “Look, Lois—”

Lois grabbed a notebook, and interrupted him. This was not a conversation she could pull off today. “Here’s what I think: I think we should do a ‘who’ and a ‘what.’ Who has the capability of making these sounds? And what would make them?”

Clark sighed. “Sure, Lois. Do you want the ‘who’ or the ‘what?’”

“I’ll take the who,” she said.

“Okay, let’s get started,” he said, standing up to return to his own desk.

Clark skimmed through several articles. He found himself alternating between reading at super-speed and getting lost in thought. Lois had been flabbergasted that he’d been nominated. He knew it was because she’d been expecting it to be her, but it still stung. She’d never appreciated his writing, not from day one. Puff pieces. That’s what she called the sort of features he excelled at. He liked the fact that their strengths were so complementary. He did the emotional angles, and she was good at cold, hard facts. Together their writing became something more than what either of them could manage alone.

He glanced over at her. Her shoulders were slumped as she scrolled rapidly through information. She was the picture of frantic misery. He stared down at his desk once more. In a way, he felt guilty, as though it was his fault the committee had picked his article over hers. He knew her confidence had been severely shaken from the whole Luthor fiasco, and she hadn’t rebuilt enough to be able to handle a blow like this, at least not well. It was no wonder that she’d been so touchy earlier.

“Did you find anything?” Lois asked.

Clark looked up. “Every object has its own natural frequency. Now the theory among physicists is: find the precise frequency—it’s like a code—and you can make anybody or anything do whatever you want: fall asleep, blow up, disappear . . .” He walked over to sit by Lois. “That is the what. Now the who—”

“There are four cutting edge experts in the field,” Lois said. She gestured to her computer. “One of them died of a coronary four weeks ago. Another has been on a research trip in the Antarctic for the last six months, and then the third is a rock musician, Lenny Stoke,” Lois said, pulling up Stoke’s bio on her

computer.

“Sounds familiar,” Clark said, looking over her shoulder at the photo of Stoke.

Lois shrugged. “Put out a couple of albums. Great reviews. No sales. Heavy into sonic R&D. Had some bad luck financially—patents stolen, accountants ripping him off, that sort of thing. And then”—she clicked a key to advance to the next screen—“there’s Derek Camden. He cracked up because he tested a new kind of thought-altering sound on himself. He got shipped off to some state mental ward. Released six weeks ago. Current whereabouts unknown, but get this”—she shifted to look up at him—“Stoke and Camden—they worked together once.”

“Sounds like we’re onto two very likely suspects,” Clark replied.

“Yep.”

“So who do you want to go after first? Camden or Stoke?” Clark asked.

“Why don’t we collect any possible leads, and then we can go check in with our sources and follow up on anything else we find?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Less than an hour later they were walking out the front doors of the Daily Planet. Lois took a deep breath. The day couldn’t get any worse, right?

“So who do we go after first? Camden or Stoke?” she asked Clark.

Clark hesitated. Thinking about the Kerths had made him realize that he’d have to ask Lois to the dinner if they were to go together. He’d committed to working on their friendship, and that’s what he was going to do, even if it was uncomfortable. “Actually there’s something I want to ask you first,” he said slowly.

“Shoot.”

“Since we already went ahead and made plans, I was wondering if you’d like to go to the Kerth awards.”

Lois stopped in her tracks. “You mean as your date?” she asked incredulously.

“I was gonna go as yours,” Clark pointed out.

Lois glared at him. She couldn’t believe that Clark was jumping on the “Lois is incompetent” bandwagon. Just because she hadn’t been nominated for the Kerth didn’t mean that she’d descended to mere arm candy. It was how every other arrogant male reporter Perry had tried to partner her with had treated her: the helpless damsel, useless at real investigating, good only for adding photogenicity to the team and seducing information from suspects. “So you want me to hang on your arm and smile and tell people how proud I am of my great big reporter man?” she cooed.

Clark huffed. “You know that’s not what I was trying to say. *You asked me.* You were the one who wanted to work on our friendship. I just thought we’d have fun and since you already bought that dress—”

Lois started walking down the street once more. “I did not buy that dress for the awards! I bought that dress . . . around the same time as the awards,” she spluttered, waving her arms. “It was a coincidence, and, to tell you the truth, I don’t even like the stupid thing, and I’m returning it!”

“Lois, I know you’re upset because I got nominated—”

She whirled to face him. “That is ridiculous! We both did great stories. Mine destroyed an international drug network, and yours told the really searing truth about old people—and—” she stamped her foot—“I can’t believe that! I mean there’s got to be some mistake! Doesn’t there? They lost my story, or their brains were taken over by aliens, or something—because—” She gasped, trying to hold back the tears. Because the Kerth Committee can’t think I’ve lost my edge, she finished mentally.

She couldn't already be a has-been. She refused to believe her career was on the downhill slide. She looked up at Clark. Hurt spread over his face for a second before sliding into his now customary polite blankness.

And now she'd hurt Clark.

She gave a forced watery chuckle. "Oh God, look at me, this is really pathetic, isn't it?" She reached out a hand to touch his arm, but then thought better of it. "I'm sorry, Clark. I didn't know I could be this small. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Clark tried to look sympathetic. "It's okay." He took a deep breath. "I know you were expecting to be nominated. Everyone was expecting it—"

"Not everyone," Lois muttered, thinking of all the articles on her failed wedding that had portrayed her as someone with more luck and guts than integrity and smarts.

"No one's universally popular," he said with a shrug. "So do you want to come with me or not?"

Lois frowned. "Oh, Clark, can we talk about this later?"

He nodded. "Okay, so who do we go after first? Stoke or Camden?"

"Let's go for Stoke," she said, resuming their walk. "My gut is that he's the driving force even if there is a partnership."

"Yeah, but Camden, he—" Just then Clark's super-hearing cut in with a strange sound. He'd have to put this on hold. "Look, um, maybe the smart thing for us to do is to split up, so we can cover more ground. Two likely suspects. Two of us—" he said, trying to make it sound eminently logical.

Lois frowned. "Split up? What are you? Oh, oh, I get it." She took a step towards him, putting her hands on her hips. "You've got a lead that you want to take care of on your own."

Clark started walking backwards. Superman really needed to check out that noise, but he hated to leave Lois this way. "Look, no, that's not it."

Lois followed him. "No, really, Clark, it's fine! It's fine!" she said, the tone of her voice screaming the exact opposite of her words.

"You go after Stoke. I'll find Camden, and we'll meet back at the Planet, okay?" Clark said quickly, then turned a corner and rushed out of sight before she could follow.

"Right! And then you'll have your next award all sewn up. Notice how I'm not getting mad about this?" she yelled after him. "You know why? Because I'm a lot bigger than that!" she finished, kicking a nearby trashcan. She strode down the street, barely even paying attention to where she was going. Never, ever think the day can't get worse, Lois, she told herself.

How could he? That one tiny taste of fame had obviously gone to Clark's head, and now—she slowed—now she was losing him again, or she'd never had him. After all, he was right: she was the one who'd asked him to be friends again, and he'd only reluctantly agreed to try—not even to be friends, just to try.

She held back a sob. She'd thought she was moving on, getting past the mess Lex had made, but here she was: no Clark and lined up to be ridiculed by her peers. She just couldn't hear it all again. Once it got out that she hadn't been nominated, journalists throughout the city would be all over her, and the furor had just begun to die down. The first month after her almost wedding she'd been inundated with sneers and snide comments from competing journalists. Perry had managed to intimidate most of her co-workers into keeping their mouths shut, giving several lectures on gossiping. But she'd seen the papers; she knew her reputation was in tatters. It was part of why she'd handled the situation with Dr. Carlin the way she had. After listening to the thirtieth comment about how her career was all talk, how she must have been taking credit for someone else's work, or that her almost-marriage to Lex Luthor had exposed her as a gold-digger without morality, or hearing all the debate about how many cover-ups she'd participated in—well, she'd just lost

it.

Her jaw clenched. She'd tried letting Clark back in, which had obviously not been the best idea. She'd tried adding more to her life than her career—again, not the best idea. It was time to push all that aside and claw her way back to the top of the pile. Preferably ASAP before the suits decided she was the expendable one in the "hottest team in town," and she ended up jobless while still waiting for her bank to collect their insurance.

Clark found a deserted alley and changed into his Suit. Flying in the direction of the sound he'd heard, he spotted one of the thieves from the bank standing outside an antiques store, obviously keeping watch. Everyone nearby was asleep or unconscious. He landed behind the black-helmeted man.

"This ends here," Superman told him, advancing.

The man turned and raised a strange looking gun at Superman. He fired, and the sound Clark had heard earlier was repeated, but it had no effect on him. "How right you are," the man murmured, turning a dial on the sound gun and shooting once more.

Pain shot through Clark's skull, and he could no longer tell which direction was up. He wasn't even sure if his feet were on the ground anymore as he collapsed in a heap on the street. The sound continued on and on, driving its way through his body. Clark shook his head, trying to clear his wavering vision so that he could do something about the thief, but it didn't help. He groaned as his stomach lurched.

"Superman, this sound is for you," the thief said as he kept the sound gun firing on Clark. "Now I'm sure you never thought your super-hearing would make you super-vulnerable. Underneath that steel skin, you're just a sensitive guy, aren't you?" the man mocked.

Clark forced himself off the pavement and stumbled backwards.

"Your equilibrium's shot," the man continued, closing the distance between them. "In a minute, you won't even walk again, let alone fly," he said, his voice dripping with satisfaction.

Police sirens filled the air, and the man whipped around to face the two incoming police cars.

"Drop your weapon, and put your hands in the air," the police instructed as they got out of their cars, guns trained on the thief.

The thief turned the dial on the sound gun and fired at the police. One by one they were thrown backwards.

Clark gritted his teeth and dragged himself upright. He could barely see through the pain and dizziness, and there was no way he could do anything to help the police right now. He had to get out of here. With a supreme effort, he managed to take off.

It was a miracle that he made it back to his apartment. His head ached. His vision swam, and he barely managed to make it to his bathroom before vomiting up what little he'd eaten that day. He crawled back into the bedroom and pulled off his Suit. Maybe, if he just lay in bed in the sunshine for a while, things would stop spinning, and he could try to get some actual work done.

Booting up her computer, Lois collected her coffee cup and defiantly made her own coffee. She'd slipped back into thinking that she needed Clark when she should have been focusing on fixing her career. She hadn't even touched her personal notes last night. Clark hadn't made it in yet. Probably still chasing down leads, she thought sourly. She had spent the rest of yesterday touching base with her various sources and doing some more digging into Stoke's career. No one knew anything about the sound man, but everything she'd learned about Stoke had only confirmed her initial gut reaction.

Perry moved to stand by her desk as Jimmy walked by and dropped a copy of today's paper in front of her, saying, "Never

thought I'd see it—Superman having to run.”

Lois picked it up and looked it over. “Well, knowing Superman, you won't have to see it again. He'll think of something,” she said, hoping it was true. She'd known him for almost a year, seen how invulnerable he was, and this was the second time in less than a month that she'd seen him injured. She hoped that if he was badly injured and needed help, he'd come to her.

“Yup, he sure will,” Perry agreed. “But until that time, this paper's number one priority is findin' out who that lunatic is.”

Lois nodded. “I'm on it, Chief.”

“That-a-girl!” Perry said, turning to walk back to his office. Just then Clark walked by on the way to his desk. Perry stopped him with a loud, “Oh, Clark!”

Clark grabbed his ear and exclaimed as Perry's yell reverberated through his head. He'd ended up spending the rest of yesterday in bed and still wasn't sure how functional he'd be today—it was as though he was hearing nearby sounds with his super-hearing, and the pain was radiating throughout his head and down his neck. He couldn't exactly call in though. There was no way he could explain why he was such a mess today. “Yes, Chief?” he managed.

“What'd you find out about that sound man?” Perry asked.

“Um, well, uh—” Clark hedged.

“He's probably got plenty. He's been out chasing leads,” Lois said.

Thank God for somewhat accurate alibis. He had been chasing a lead—maybe not a journalism lead, but a Superman lead. “Yes,” he agreed.

“Without me,” Lois added.

Clark scowled. “No,” he said, rubbing his aching neck.

Jimmy walked up, looking concerned. “CK, you feeling okay?”

“I just have a little headache.”

“It's fine, Clark,” Lois said, bringing the conversation back to where she'd been steering it. “You've decided it's best to work on your own.” She kept her face impassive. “I've decided you're right. No argument.”

Perry held up his hands. “Uh—just a minute. Now is there somethin' goin' on between you two I don't know about?”

Just then a voice sounded throughout the city. “Hello, Metropolis. For those of you who haven't read the papers, I'm the one who brought Superman to his knees. In celebration of that momentous event, I'm creating a new tax: the sound tax. The rate: fifty percent of all money in Metropolis banks. The money will be bagged and waiting outside each branch by 9 a.m. tomorrow. Oh, and one final message to Superman: try and stop me, please.”

Clark forced his face to remain blank. He still had no clue how to handle Metropolis' latest troublemaker.

Jimmy turned and loped towards the elevators.

Perry, who was still standing by Clark, yelled after him, “Olsen! Where're you goin'?”

Clark grabbed his ear again. He swallowed hard against the bile rising in his throat.

“I'm going to get you some page-one, prize-winning pictures, Chief,” Jimmy yelled back.

Perry shook his head. Kids. He turned back to Lois and Clark. “All right, what do we got?”

Lois pulled out an enlarged version of one of Lenny Stoke's album covers, and Perry and Clark moved to stand by her.

She held up the cover so they could see it. “That's our man, Lenny Stoke.”

“Clark, what's your read on this?” Perry asked, frowning.

“Well, Stoke knows a lot about sound, but among experts he's considered hit-and-miss. He doesn't have the technical know-how to pull something like this off.” He opened the file

folder he'd brought with him from his desk and grabbed a full-page photo. “On the other hand, Derek Camden does,” he said, holding up the photo of Camden.

Lois shook her head. “It's Stoke, Chief. I know it. The theatricality of it all. The ‘look at me, see how great I am.’ It's pure rock and roll!” she argued.

Perry put his hands in his pockets and looked down at the desk, trying to decide how best to handle the situation. Things had been tense between Lois and Clark for months, and he'd been thrilled to see them making progress the past few days. Now they were back on the verge of open warfare. “Well, it sounds to me like you all are headed for a”—he brought his hands together in front of him—“fork in the road,” he said, his hands moving in opposite directions.

“He forked first,” Lois said petulantly.

“All right. Now if you want to go your separate ways on this, be my guest. Just bag me a headline,” Perry finished as a copy boy came up with proofs that needed his approval. He turned to deal with the proofs.

Clark leaned down on Lois's desk. Split up? Things had—sort of—been going so well the past few days. They were trying. He hadn't even realized how much he'd gotten on board with the whole trying thing until he was faced with returning to their previous distance. If only Lois hadn't jumped to him trying to steal her story. Even after a year of them working together, she still defaulted to thinking he was just like Claude. “Lois, this is stupid.” He swallowed. “I'm sorry I ran off. I'm not trying to steal a story from you. It was a—personal thing. Now, come on, let's work together.”

Lois glared at him and leaned in. “No. Way.” She stood up and walked away.

Clark stood, his gaze following her.

Perry returned to Lois's desk. “Son, I've seen her like this before. The doors are locked, the alarms are on, and you ain't gettin' in.”

Clark grimaced. “Well, I guess time apart isn't such a bad idea.”

At least he knew now: Lois had chosen her career over her friendship with him. It didn't shock him by any means, but it still hurt. He guessed the progress they'd made hadn't really been all that solid.

When Lois returned to her desk, both Clark and Perry had left. Since she hadn't been able to get any good leads the day before, she'd decided to take the bull by the horns. Lenny Stoke owned Stoke Club and apparently kept up with his rock-and-roll career by playing there. She pulled up a file on Stoke and flipped through the photos they had of him. Each showed him with a different woman, or two. “Hmm. Likes trashy brunettes,” Lois said thoughtfully.

Clark had managed to get a meeting with Derek Camden's doctor. They'd agreed to meet at a coffee shop. Dr. Briggs was right on time. They got their coffee and settled at one of the sidewalk tables.

“Thanks for seeing me, Dr. Briggs,” Clark began.

The doctor nodded. “You wanted to talk about Derek Camden?”

“Yes. As I said on the phone, I'm investigating the sound man. Camden has the expertise to design the sounds we've found, but I wanted your opinion about whether or not he would be capable of it in his—state, as well as any information on his whereabouts.”

“You do understand that our hospital files are normally confidential, Mr. Kent, but under the circumstances—no one wants a psychopath who can best Superman on the loose. I'm not sure that Derek would be capable of masterminding something

like this given his current mental state, but he was released into the care of a friend.”

“Let me guess: Lenny Stoke,” Clark said wryly.

Dr. Briggs nodded. “I spoke to Derek not long after his release. He said that he and Stoke had a new business venture in the works. The last address I have for him was”—he opened Derek’s file and consulted his paperwork—the Stoke Club.”

“Thanks. You’ve been a lot of help,” Clark said.

“You’re welcome, Mr. Kent. I hope the police are able to stop the sound man soon.”

That evening Clark walked into Stoke Club. It was loud, dark, and crowded—basically like most other rock clubs he’d been in. He found a waiter bussing a table and asked if the man knew if Derek Camden stayed here.

“Yeah, Camden was living in a back room over there,” the waiter replied, looking towards a back hallway. “Weird little guy. Kinda jumpy.”

“Thanks,” Clark replied.

“Sure,” the waiter replied as he finished with the table and moved to start on another.

Clark headed towards the back room, weaving his way through the crowd. Surreptitiously scanning the area to make sure no one was paying him any particular attention, he ducked into the room. Hopefully, if someone noticed, they’d think he was trying to find a bathroom. The room was obviously unoccupied. A corkboard with notes hung above a desk in one corner. Scanning it, a card scratched out with permanent marker caught his attention. He x-rayed it and discovered a phone number, which he committed to memory.

Before he could do anything else, the door opened. Clark whipped around as two muscular blondes in black wearing headbands that identified them as security entered.

“Hey, what are you doing in here?” the guard in front demanded.

“I’m, uh, looking for a bathroom?” he replied.

The woman gave him a disbelieving smile, then snapped her fingers at the other security guard.

The second guard came forward, grabbed Clark’s arm, twisted it behind his back, and manhandled him out the door. None too gently she shoved him back out into the mass of people.

Clark staggered, then regained his balance and turned to look at the two women.

“The bathrooms are that way,” the first woman said, pointing across the room.

Clark smiled and gave a little wave. “Thanks,” he said, walking away.

Since the room was crowded with people and full of small tables, he walked along the bar, trying to keep an eye out for Camden. Unfortunately, he tripped over a man sitting at the bar and fell right into the woman seated next to him. “I’m sorry! Sorry!” he said awkwardly. As he stood up and looked the woman in the face, he realized it was Lois sitting there, dressed in a black leather biker vest and black leather pants, heavily made-up, with her hair teased. He stared at her blankly for a moment, then asked, “Lois? What—why are you dressed like this?”

“You’re too much competition for me, Clark, so I’m chucking my career and becoming a groupie,” Lois drawled.

Clark grimaced. “Look, I’ve got a lead on Camden. He was staying here in the club in a back room.”

Just then, a voice came over the club speakers, announcing Lenny Stoke. Lois turned to watch the stage as Stoke came out and began to play.

She turned back to Clark. “That’s great, Clark. I’m happy for you. But, um, you know what? I have my own leads,” she said, an edge to her voice. “So what else is there to say, but see you at the finish line,” she said walking away without waiting for a

reply.

Clark stared after her. Things were worse than he’d realized. It was like Lois had put him back at square one, and he didn’t have the energy or the will to regain the ground they’d lost. His heart sank. He couldn’t work with Lois if she was going to treat him the same way she had in the beginning. He remembered thinking just a couple of weeks ago that he’d send out resumes if things got much worse. This was worse. He hated the idea of leaving Metropolis. He was past the lovesick puppy stage though. Kick a dog often enough and it stopped coming around.

The noise level increased, and his ears protested. He covered them, and after giving Lois one last look, he left.

Lois pushed her way to the front of the crowd around the stage and started dancing. Unfortunately, there were several other women trying to get Stoke’s attention and they bunched up, forcing her back. Security saw the scuffle and dragged her out of the crowd. She scanned the place thoughtfully. There were several burly men drinking at the bar. She pulled cash out of her biker vest and waved it at them. They appeared interested, so she explained what she wanted. They boxed her in and made their way up to the front. Now with plenty of clear space to dance, she did her best to attract Stoke’s attention. It worked like a charm. As he played, he kept his eyes on her to the exclusion of the rest of the crowd. Once he’d finished the song, he handed her his guitar pick.

Five minutes later they were seated at a table with their drinks.

“You see, I think it gets to a point in a relationship—you know one that’s got this kind of immediate connection,” Stoke said, gesturing with his hands.

Lois pasted a look of rapt attention on her face and leaned forward.

“But it’s not about me, Lenny, and you—” He stared at her for a long moment, then asked, “What was your name again, darling?”

“Linda,” Lois cooed.

“Right, Linda, of course,” he agreed with a chuckle. “But my point is, Linda, that it’s not about names, or identities, or the five or ten minutes we’ve known each other, my darling. Time is irrelevant. Something else is taking over.”

Lois opened her eyes wider. “Wow! What?” she breathed.

“This,” Stoke said, leaning in to kiss her.

Lois leaned forward as though to reciprocate, drink in hand. As she leaned, she poured half her drink on Stoke’s shirt and leather vest.

Stoke jumped back.

“Oops! Oh! I’m so sorry!” Lois said.

“Not to worry, darling,” Stoke said, brushing his shirt and vest off.

Lois surreptitiously slid Jimmy’s spy pen into Stoke’s vest pocket.

Stoke looked down. “What’s this?” he asked.

Lois froze.

“You’ve gotten some on the old vest here, my darling,” he continued, taking the vest off.

“Oh . . .,” she said, smiling.

Stoke chuckled. “Don’t worry about it.” He sat back down. “Now where were we?”

“Hey Lenny!” the head security guard called.

He looked over at her. “Yes?”

“There’s a message for you,” the guard replied.

“Right. Thank you.” He turned back to Lois and stared at her blankly for a few seconds.

“Linda,” Lois prompted.

“Linda, I won’t be a moment,” Stoke said, standing up and starting to walk away.

“Lenny!” Lois called after him.

He turned back. “Yeah?”

“Uh—” She smiled and grabbed the vest off the back of his chair, holding it out for him to put on.

Stoke put the vest on, saying, “How kind of you, my darling. Thank you.”

Lois leaned forward, her hands on Stoke’s shoulders. “Don’t forget me,” she purred into his ear.

Stoke nodded. “Not to worry.”

Lois simpered as he walked away. Thank God that he’d left and that she’d managed to keep from kissing him. She stayed at the table, pushing the mini headset farther into her ear, trying to hear the feed over the noise of the club. Unfortunately, all she could hear was static interspersed with faint music.

A few minutes later the security guard returned. “C’mon you guys, party’s over,” she announced. “Everybody out! Out! Out! Out! Come on, out. You guys out!” she yelled, shooing people out of the club.” She tapped Lois on the arm. “Hey, you too, honey. Come on, let’s go.”

“Lenny asked me to wait,” Lois said, staying seated.

“And I’m sure he meant it at the time,” the guard said, then grabbed Lois’s upper arm and hauled her towards the door. “Come on, sweetface, let’s go. Let’s go!”

After leaving Stoke Club, Clark had returned to the Daily Planet and called the number he’d found. Naomi Valdez didn’t speak English too well, but fortunately Clark was fluent in Spanish. She’d been a friend of Camden’s in the hospital. She didn’t know where he was, but she did mention that Camden liked to go to Echo Canyon.

Resting his arms on his desk, Clark held his head in his hands. He had a lead to follow up on Camden, although at this point, it’d be better to check it first thing tomorrow morning. It didn’t feel like a success though. Lois hadn’t wanted to partner with him—yes, he knew he’d precipitated her decision by leaving her to go be Superman. But that was just it: Superman would always be there. He’d been down the road of giving up that part of himself, suppressing and hiding who he was; it wasn’t a road he was willing to ever go down again—Lois herself had helped convince him of that. The reality was that their partnership had been harder than pulling teeth the past few months, and there seemed to be no way to change the factors that made it so—when did something become too difficult? When did he cut his losses and move on? He’d already stayed in Metropolis longer than anywhere else, other than Kansas. He still wasn’t sure he could go through with leaving Lois—not unless he just did it. He glanced up at Perry’s office. His light was still on despite the late hour. Looking over at Lois’s empty desk, he made up his mind. Lois had said there was no way she was going to work with him, and it was time that he accepted that.

With a heavy heart he made his way up to Perry’s office. Perry was just coming out, but stopped when he saw Clark.

Clark took a deep breath. “Perry, can I talk to you?”

Perry paused. “Sure, Clark. What is it?”

“Privately?”

“Yeah, c’mon,” Perry said, turning to head back into his office.

Clark closed the door behind him. “I need to know if I can count on you for a reference,” he said bluntly.

Perry stared at him for a moment, then shook himself. “Now, son, you know that Lois just needs time to cool down.”

“I know that. I’ve actually been thinking about sending out resumes for a while now. I just . . .” Clark shrugged.

“Clark, you’re like a son to me,” Perry said, putting a hand on the younger man’s shoulder. “I know it’s been rough ever since Luthor—well, it just takes time to heal. Give yourself some time.”

Clark shook his head. “Chief, time isn’t going to change my feelings.”

Perry held up a hand. “How ‘bout this? Wait a month, and if you still feel this way, you can ask for a transfer to another Planet office, or you can stay here and partner someone else. We have bureaus all over the world. I’d hate to see you go work for a rival paper.”

“What about ‘the suits’?”

“Don’t you worry ‘bout them. They won’t want to see you at a rival paper either.”

“I’ll think about it.” Clark opened the door. “Thanks, Perry,” he said as he walked out.

Clark looked up at the sky from outside the Planet. He wasn’t really in the mood to go home to his empty apartment, nor to do a patrol.

Suddenly the sound man’s voice rang throughout the city: “Listen up, Metropolis.”

A vibrating hum filled the city, and Clark heard what sounded like buildings rumbling. He sighed, then found a deeper patch of darkness and spun into the Suit. Some days he just couldn’t catch a break. As he got closer to where the rumbling was located, he could hear a muffled “Help! Help!” He sped up, following the cries to their source. He was horrified to see Jimmy tied to a metal support in one of the disintegrating buildings, another support about to crash onto him. Even moving at super-speed, he only just managed to catch the support before it hit Jimmy. He lowered it to the ground, released Jimmy, and flew both of them out of the collapsing building. Setting Jimmy on the ground, he instructed him to run, then, using his heat vision, he began destroying the small speakers that dotted the nearby buildings.

He blew out those he could see before the sound man responded.

“Well, well, look who’s back for more. This is super!” came the sound man’s voice.

Clark lifted off and flew in the direction the voice had come from. Suddenly, the hum changed to a torturous whine that pierced his brain. He shook his head, trying to focus. He managed to burn out another speaker before the pain in his head and dizziness overcame him, and he fell out of the air onto a car, crashing through the roof.

“Like my new sound? This doesn’t just attack the eardrums, Superman. This is a frequency of 500 million megahertz tearing through you, melting that metallically dense nervous system of yours.”

Clark lay on the destroyed roof of the car, trying in vain to get his wavering vision clear enough to see the speakers.

“To put it a little bit more simply: this is your brain, and this is your brain on sound. Any questions?” the sound man continued.

Clark finally gave up on using heat vision to destroy the speakers. Instead, he ripped the steering wheel out of the car and flung it at the nearby speakers, ricocheting it off the building walls to hit them one by one.

The sound stopped abruptly. “Well, well, well, you must be quite a pool player. I believe that makes it your shot,” the sound man commented through his remaining speakers.

Clark looked around, trying to see if the man might be nearby. “You can’t hide forever,” he said.

“Believe me, I don’t intend to.”

Quiet filled the air, and Clark shakily lifted off. Now he definitely didn’t feel capable of a patrol. He hated to disturb them this late, but he knew his parents would always welcome him, and a piece of his mother’s pie with a side of parental support sounded just about perfect right now.

Lois huffed as she entered the Daily Planet bullpen. She

hadn't bothered to go home and get out of her skimpy undercover outfit, but she had covered it up with an overcoat. Various pains and huge hair was all she had to show for her time at Stoke Club. She ached from shoving her way through the adoring fans, her head pounded from the noise level, and she was exhausted. But she refused to quit. Just because she hadn't been nominated for this year's Kerth didn't mean she couldn't start working towards next year's. She'd prove that she was the best if it was the last thing she did.

Jimmy was sitting at her desk, typing on her computer. She walked over and glowered at him.

After a few seconds he turned and looked up. "Uh, hey Lois, I was just borrowing your computer. I hope you don't mind," he said.

Lois continued to scowl and impatiently tapped her fingers on the shelf by her desk.

"Uh, you see, Superman saved me from this building the sound guy blew up. Even though I'm not a reporter, I thought I'd write down a few paragraphs for the chief, but, uh, I can finish it someplace else," he continued.

Lois intensified her glare.

"Uh, yeah, let me get out of your way," Jimmy said, rushing to vacate her chair and collect his papers off her desk.

Lois sat down and pulled the mini headset out of her ear.

With a grin, Jimmy gestured to it. "Hey, you're wearing the receiver for my spy pen. How'd it work?"

Without a word, she threw it in the trash can. Ignoring Jimmy, she rifled through her drawer and got aspirin. She didn't think she'd be able to refrain from killing someone if her headache didn't get better, let alone be able to think straight.

"Uh-huh," Jimmy replied. Carefully keeping his distance, he reached down and removed the mini headset from her trash can. "I can see you're not really into the talking thing right now, so I'm just gonna give you some space."

Lois opened her aspirin bottle and removed a couple pills. She closed the bottle, then returned it to her drawer and slammed the drawer shut.

"Like a couple of blocks," Jimmy added, hurrying away.

Lois stood up with a groan. She needed water to take the pills, but walking over to the water cooler was far from her idea of a good time. She was just drinking down the pills and water when Perry walked by, carrying his briefcase, clearly on his way home.

He stopped when he saw her, internally shaking his head. Lois dressed in the wildest getups in the pursuit of a story. "Got a minute?" he asked.

Lois wearily readjusted her coat. "Sure, Chief. What's up?"

"Why don't you step into my office," Perry replied.

In silence they made their way into Perry's office. Perry turned the light back on and gestured for Lois to take a seat. He closed the door, then sat on the edge of his desk. "You doin' all right? I know you were upset earlier about the Kerth."

"Yeah, Chief." She sighed.

"You know that the Kerth committee has nothin' to do with whether you're a good writer or not, don't ya? You're one of the best, no matter who they decide to award the Kerth to."

"I am?"

"Of course! You don't need them to tell you that. It's not like you to let someone else have a say in your life anyway," he added.

Lois sat in silence, digesting that thought. Was she letting the Kerth committee have a say in her life? She had gotten upset with their nomination and spent the past couple of days frantically trying to prove that they were wrong ... She was, wasn't she?

"Now, you wanna tell me what's goin' on with you and Clark?" Perry asked.

"Huh?"

"What was all that forkin' earlier?"

Lois huffed. "Chief, I told you: he forked first."

"Uh-huh. And you had nothin' to do with things stayin' that way."

Lois looked at the floor. "Well"

"That's what I thought." He paused for a moment. He hadn't planned on talking to Lois tonight, but with Clark out of the office, this seemed like a golden opportunity. He didn't want to lose either of his best reporters. "Clark was in here tonight," he said.

Lois looked up at him.

"Seemed to think the split was permanent."

"He's the one who was trying to get the story without me!"

Lois protested. "He forked first," she reiterated.

"Lois, you're one of the best in the business, but you're better with Clark than without him—professionally and personally. Now I've tried to stay out of whatever's goin' on with the two of you, but when one of my reporters tells me he's gonna start sendin' out resumes, I can't just let things go."

Lois stared at him blankly. "Sending out resumes?" she squeaked.

"Sendin' out resumes," Perry repeated. "Now, if you two can't work together, I need to know. Clark agreed to wait a month. I want you to take some time and think about it." He stood up. "And if you need to talk, I'm here for ya, darlin'."

Lois nodded dumbly.

"You gonna be okay?"

Lois nodded again and stood up.

"All right. Just let me know what you decide."

She nodded once more and walked out the door.

In a daze she made her way back to her desk. Clark? Sending out resumes? She remembered how he'd tried to convince her to work together again. She stared, unseeing, at her empty computer screen.

"Hey, Lois," Jimmy called, returning to her desk. He handed her the mini headset. "Here! It'll pick up the bug now."

Lois stared at the headset for a long moment, then swallowed. "What was wrong with it?" she croaked out.

"Nothing. You just had it set to AM Radio," Jimmy said and walked away.

She almost wept looking at the tiny button. Maybe she deserved to be a has-been if she was going to make such rookie mistakes. Her job wasn't at stake anymore, but that didn't keep her life from collapsing around her ears for the second time in less than six months. Suddenly the bullpen felt far too small.

Lois wasn't even quite sure how she made it home. She remembered sitting at her desk, and then the next thing she knew, she was sitting on her bed.

Wasn't this what she'd just decided she wanted? To let go of Clark and focus on her career? Clark leaving would facilitate that. But now that she was truly facing that reality—the reality of him being gone, body and soul, instead of just emotionally distant—she found that it wasn't what she wanted at all. Clark. Leaving. She couldn't make her brain accept those two words together.

She wasn't even sure why it was such a blow.

No, that was a lie, and she'd spent the past few weeks trying to stop lying to herself. The truth was that she loved Clark. The thought of him permanently gone stole her breath in a way that nothing ever had. It had been hard when he'd quit during the heatwave, but not hard like this. Not hard like losing a part of herself.

He'd wanted another chance, and she'd turned him down. Why?

She'd never expected him to leave for starters.

She thought back to when he'd run off. She'd been in the middle of a meltdown over the Kerth award, and realizing that

Clark had been about to steal their story had been the last straw. But even as he'd been walking away, he'd denied trying to cut her out. And later he'd said that it was personal, not story-related. Would getting nominated for the Kerths really have gone to Clark's head?

No, that wasn't who Clark was. If there was anything she'd learned about him, it was that his life was made up of much more than work. He still spent inordinate amounts of time working, the way she did, but he cared about more than work. It was that example that had inspired her to try doing things for others the past couple of weeks.

And Clark had never stolen a story from her—well, except for that one time when he'd scooped her while she was occupied at the Metropolis Sewage Reclamation facility, chasing down the fake lead he'd sent her. But that had been payback for stealing his story and didn't really qualify as stealing. It had actually been part of what had made her respect him. In fact, far from stealing stories, Clark had shared leads with her even before they'd been partnered.

No, Clark wasn't the issue. It was the prospect of professional ridicule and losing her standing as a reporter. It was the thought of the Kerth committee agreeing with the myriad of people who thought she'd lost her edge (or had never had one) as evidenced by the fiasco with Lex. It was the thought that maybe they were right.

Lois hugged herself as that filtered through her consciousness. Were they right? Despite months of asking herself that question, she was no closer to an answer.

Perry didn't seem to think so. Even tonight he'd told her she was "one of the best." And he'd chided her for her response to Clark's nomination. He'd flat out said that the Kerths didn't have any bearing on whether her writing was good or not.

Why couldn't she have that kind of certainty? Why couldn't she separate herself from all the negative opinions of her?

She stared at her bedside table where her personal notes were. All these secrets were interconnected, twined to the point she almost couldn't untangle them enough to examine.

She was attracted to successful men because she was trying to prove her father wrong. Maybe she was attracted to success for a similar reason. Her father had never approved of her becoming a journalist, not that he'd ever approved of anything she'd done. It was difficult to approve of something someone did when you didn't approve of who they were. She remembered winning her first Kerth and thinking maybe it would prove to her father that she hadn't made a mistake choosing to go into journalism. She remembered hoping that he'd finally be proud of her, finally want her. Such naïveté.

Such absurdity to want his approval in the first place. Her father was a successful doctor, and that was the only thing he was successful at. He had failed at life. So why bother trying to gain his approval? It was something that baffled and frustrated her to no end.

Maybe this was another area Dr. Friskin would advocate that choice Lucy had talked about. She couldn't get rid of her past, but she could choose what to do about it. And in some ways, she had. She had moved out early. Before the cyborg boxers, she hadn't spoken to her father in years. She'd refused to listen to his criticisms. She'd invited him to her wedding, but he'd been too busy to attend and it was a good thing too or she'd have heard all the exact same things her colleagues were saying, but from her father.

Wait a minute. If it was something her father would say, was it something worth listening to?

Probably not.

After all, in his book, her lack of success made her unlovable, which, come to think of it, didn't make any sense at all. If you had to be perfect to be loved, no one would ever be loved.

Plus his definition of success was so narrow, so unfulfilling. Yes, she wanted to be good at her job, but she'd discovered that she wanted so much more than that. She wanted to love her job and be good at it. She wanted to change the world. She loved the thrill of the pursuit, of discovering someone's secrets, and of preventing crimes. She cared about justice—it was part of what attracted her to Superman. And she loved writing. Investigative reporting was everything she was passionate about all wrapped up in one package. And by that definition, the Bolivian drug cartel story had been a success, regardless of what the Kerth committee had thought of it. Maybe they'd just wanted to give someone else a chance. She'd taken it personally, but maybe it hadn't been personal. After all, like Perry had said, Clark's retirement home scandal story had emotional wallop—it wasn't her cup of tea, but some people went for that kind of thing. In fact, it fit Clark perfectly. He cared about the disenfranchised. And he'd made a difference in those elderly people's lives.

And even if the Bolivian drug cartel story had been nominated, it was only one of her stories. Like Perry said, she couldn't let the Kerth committee run her life. It was hard work, but she loved her job, and she would do it no matter what anyone said.

She stood up and began changing out of her groupie disguise. For the first time since Perry had told her that Clark was considering leaving, she felt like she could breathe. There was a way to fix this. She just had to find it.

She'd fallen back into her old ways, but she didn't have to stay there. In fact, she didn't want to. She didn't want to live her life only caring about her job. She thought back over the past few weeks. All those little things she'd been doing—opening doors, saying "good morning," refilling items in the breakroom, pursuing Clark ... Putting herself out there was hard, but the reality was that being more open actually added depth and dimension to her life; maybe it was love in some cosmic fashion bigger than romantic love. Just because she had trust issues didn't mean she should never trust. That would be the same as making sure she never did anything where she noticed that she was wearing the "weighted vest." No, the thing to do was to work at trusting.

And the person to start with was Clark.

She decided to go to his apartment and apologize, explain what had been going on with her, tell him that she wanted to go to the Kerths with him. Maybe then they could get back to the story. Clark didn't know about the bug, and she definitely wanted to go back to Stoke Club and see what they could uncover. After changing into her favorite breaking and entering outfit, she collected everything else she'd need for a stakeout, put it in the Jeep and headed to Clark's.

When she got there, the lights were off. She knocked on the door repeatedly, but no one answered. Either Clark was sound asleep or he was out chasing another lead—or he was ignoring her. She would wait on the steps for a bit in case he was out.

After waiting for over half an hour, Lois decided to leave Clark a message, and then go to Stoke Club. She considered breaking into his apartment and writing him a note—and if this had happened six months ago, she probably would have, because Clark wouldn't have cared—but she was pretty sure that it'd be a bad idea right now. She didn't need to put any more strain on their already disintegrating relationship by invading Clark's privacy.

So, she used a payphone to leave a message on his machine, telling him that she wanted to talk and that he was welcome to join her in staking out Stoke Club.

Once she got to the Club, she put the earpiece in her ear. This time there was no weird static or bits of music, but there wasn't anything else either, just silence. Lenny must have discovered the pen, or he'd taken the jacket off, or he might be sleeping. Even if

he was the sound man, the deadline wasn't until 9 a.m.

She pulled out a thermos of coffee and her personal investigation notes. It had been a while since she'd done an overnight stakeout by herself, but she still knew that keeping busy was the way to stay awake.

She wrote up her latest realizations—that she herself was pursuing success because she'd subscribed to her father's absurd view of success, and she'd been trying to win his approval.

So what had happened with Lex?

The answer came to mind at once: the same thing that had happened with the Kerth—she'd attached her worth to her father's definition of success, and, when the Planet had been bombed, she'd been desperate to prove that she was lovable. Lex had manipulated her, had kept her off-balance and in a whirl.

For the first time since she'd found out about Lex's true nature, she knew it wasn't entirely her fault that she hadn't seen it; the deck had been stacked against her.

Clark landed in front of the Kansas farmhouse. Despite the late hour, the lights were still on. He spun into his Clark clothes and knocked on the door.

He heard his mother's footsteps almost immediately. Martha opened the door. "Clark! What are you doing here?" she asked with a smile, still in her day clothes.

"Hey, Mom," he said, stepping in and catching her in a long hug.

"Is that our son?" Jonathan called from the top of the stairs.

"Yes," Martha called back. She looked up at Clark. "What's wrong, honey?"

"I can't just come by for a piece of pie," he said, trying to sound teasing, but unable to get the flat tone out of his voice.

"You're always welcome, son. You know that," Jonathan said as he came down the stairs, genuine welcome and concern in his bearing, despite the fact that he was already in pajamas and a robe.

"Thanks, Dad."

"I do have pie," Martha commented. "You look like you've lost a little weight. How much have you been eating lately?" she demanded.

"Um . . . you know I don't have to eat—"

"Yes, but your body is used to it," she said severely.

"Been a bit busy," he began.

"We heard about that incident with the—what are they calling him? The sound man? We assumed you'd tell us if you were really hurt, but—you are all right, aren't you?" Martha asked anxiously.

Clark winced internally. He'd been in knots, even more than usual, over this split with Lois—so much so that he'd forgotten to update his parents. "Um, yeah." He rubbed the back of his neck. "It was rough, but I'm okay now. We still haven't caught him yet."

"How's Lois?" Martha asked, walking into the kitchen.

"Lois is—Lois is—I don't know." Clark sat down at the table and put his head in his hands. "I asked Perry for a reference tonight."

He wasn't looking at her, but he could feel his mother's stare as she put the pie on the table and dropped into the chair next to him, taking one of his hands in hers. "Clark, honey, what happened? You've been so happy in Metropolis."

"I got nominated for the Kerth Investigative Journalism Prize."

"That's great, son!" Jonathan said.

"And Lois didn't, even though she'd been nominated every year since she's been eligible," Clark said flatly.

"So she was upset?" Martha asked.

Clark snorted. "That's one way to put it."

"How does that fit with leaving Metropolis?" Jonathan asked,

sitting down at the table.

"About a week ago we talked, and Lois apologized for being a bad friend and for not listening to me about Luthor. She said she wanted to be friends again."

"That sounds promising," Martha said.

"Yeah, sort of. I still don't know how I feel about everything, but things were good for the past week or so. Lois has even been working on changing how she treats people. It was quite refreshing . . . and then the Kerth nominations came in and . . . I just can't do it anymore. She wants to dissolve our partnership. She thinks I'm trying to steal her story, steal her award . . . It's just too hard," he mumbled.

"Clark, you said you've been journaling. What did you find out?" Martha asked.

Clark hesitated.

"Talking it out might help," Jonathan added.

Clark sighed. "Lots of things. I don't even know where to start."

"Did you figure out where Lois was coming from?" Martha asked.

"Sort of." He grimaced. "Luthor was a smarmy scoundrel, but almost no one could see that side of him. He was so practiced at misdirection and manipulation that it was like watching a magician. Anyway, I'm pretty sure Lois actually believed his image; when I wrote that version I could see why she'd fall for him—a rich, powerful philanthropist. I can't see Lois wanting to be treated like a queen, but, evidently, she liked it."

Lois had seemed so impressed when she'd told him that Luthor had taken her out for Italian food in Italy. He swallowed down the bile rising in his throat. It wasn't the same thing at all, but he'd so wanted to be the one to introduce Lois to the joys of flying halfway 'round the world for dinner.

"So she had good reasons for being attracted to Luthor?" Martha prodded.

"Yeah." Clark sighed again. "And once she'd told me that I was wrong—that Luthor was who he presented himself as—then she couldn't let herself see anything else."

"Let herself?" Jonathan asked.

"Yeah. Lois can't admit mistakes, or at least she couldn't. As I said, she did apologize last week. But in general—well, I probably shouldn't go into the reasons; suffice it to say that Lois's history makes it almost impossible for her to admit when she's wrong."

"Then did she have a choice?" Martha asked.

"Of course she had a choice," Clark shot back.

"I thought you just finished telling us that with her history she couldn't let herself see that Luthor was anything other than what she'd believed in the first place," Martha said gently.

Clark raked a hand through his hair. "I—that—she—I don't know!"

"Honey, you said that Luthor was able to read people and manipulate them extremely well. Given Lois's history and the situation that Lex Luthor put her in: could she have done anything differently?"

"Mom, everyone has a choice. You can't say that people make bad decisions because they don't have the option to make good ones."

"That's not what I'm arguing. I'm just trying to help you see Lois's perspective."

Clark deflated. "I know, and I think I have. I wrote her perspective, at least the parts of it I could figure out." He exhaled heavily. "You're right. She was in an untenable position. And I—I made it worse," he mumbled. "When I told her that I loved her, I took away my support as Clark, and then I rejected her as Superman because I was hurt, but she couldn't have loved me. Without knowing who I really am, it's impossible for her to truly love me." He paused, then continued. "And I didn't want to tell

her that Luthor was evil as Superman. At the time I was confused, and I thought that I was protecting her, but, through this whole process, I realized it was just spite and the fact that I couldn't handle having her believe Superman over Clark."

Jonathan put a hand on his shoulder. "Son, you know it wasn't a contest."

"Yeah, I just—she's always compared me to myself, and it hurts, y'know? Hearing how great Superman is and how not-great Clark is. She's done it from day one. I thought I'd been able to just brush it off. I knew she wasn't trying to hurt me as badly as she did. It's just—" He turned away from his parents, his head bowed. "Am I really that bad? Am I always going to be alone? I mean, the one woman I've ever loved, and she loves half of me and can't stand the other half."

Martha exchanged a worried glance with Jonathan.

"Oh, honey, no. You're wonderful, and we love you. You're such a gift to us, and if Lois can't see how wonderful you are, then she doesn't deserve you," Martha said stoutly, then added, "But if Lois asked for your friendship back, I doubt she 'can't stand' you. And, Clark honey, you just said that you'd made it impossible for her to love you."

Clark nodded slowly.

"Then, sweetheart, you can't blame her for not loving you until after you give her that chance," Martha said.

"Yeah. I guess you're right. I just—I don't know if I can do it."

"Do what, son?" Jonathan asked.

"Put myself out there again. Let myself love someone who didn't trust me and who even just yesterday freaked out and refused to work with me, despite the fact that I apologized. She chose her career over our friendship."

"Well, why wouldn't she choose her career?" Martha asked. Clark frowned.

"Clark, it's a huge part of who she is—it's part of what you love about her: that she's passionate about her life and passionate about justice—and you're her *friend*, not her boyfriend, not her husband, not anyone who should be put above her career. I know it hurts because you want to be more—"

Clark made a noise of disagreement.

"Don't argue. I'm your mother. I can tell what you want underneath all that confusion, and correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure all this is what attracted you to her in the first place."

Clark's eyebrows went up.

Martha smiled. "Lois is a mix of determination and vulnerability. Right now it sounds like her insecurities are getting the best of her, but you love that she's both a strong-willed woman and one who has a soft heart. You wouldn't want to be with her if she didn't have that heart, and she wouldn't be your match if she wasn't such a strong woman."

Just then they heard a newscaster announcing a serious fire in Chicago. Clark grimaced. Fires were the worst. "I'm sorry, guys," he said, standing up. "I should . . ."

"It's all right, son. Go," Jonathan said, standing up to give him a hug.

"Come back if you need to talk some more," Martha said, also hugging him. She hesitated, then added, "And bring Lois for dinner if you do end up telling her."

After putting out the fire and helping with the aftermath, Clark decided to detour up to the Arctic for a swim before heading back to Metropolis.

He landed on the glacier he'd split when Lois had agreed to marry Luthor. The peace and quiet and beauty made it an ideal place to think. It fed his soul to be away from all the suffering man caused.

He thought back to his mother's conclusions—Lois hadn't

really had a choice. Agreeing to marry Luthor had been a natural result of who she was and the circumstances she'd been in. Luthor had used his considerable charm to blind her and to keep her too off-balance for her reporter's instincts to even kick in.

He'd had a hand in it too—by professing his love as Clark and rejecting her as Superman, he'd left her without any support, any other fallback than Luthor, and he'd made it impossible for her to see him, the man under the suits.

He idly traced shapes in the snow as he thought about the past few days. It hurt that Lois had chosen her career over him, but like his mother had said—it was because deep down he still wanted more, not because she shouldn't have put her career first. Actually, a lot of the small day-to-day hurts of the past year fit in that category—wanting more had made all those times when she'd given him less stick out like a sore thumb. As much as he tried to deny and suppress it, he still wanted Lois.

Just thinking about her brought her image instantly to mind. He smiled at her intentional lack of fashion sense tonight; Lois always did love to dress up. It was one of her endearing quirks. There were so many things he liked about her. And here too his mother was right: he did love her blend of strength and vulnerability. She wouldn't be Lois Lane without it.

He loved Lois.

He loved that she threw herself into life, her passion for justice that he sometimes thought rivaled his own. Superman intervened while a crime was being committed; Lois prevented them from being committed in the first place. And he loved her softer side—the side she almost never showed anyone. He hated how wounded and unable to trust her life had left her, but winning her trust had been a precious gift.

He loved Lois, faults and all.

And, as he'd realized early on in his journaling, if he was really going to pursue her, he'd have to show her who he was, who he really was. It was a step he'd never taken with anyone, and the thought terrified him. In many ways, he was even worse than Lois at trusting people. He'd never stayed anywhere long enough to practice it, and he'd spent his whole life hiding who he was. But if he was ever going to have a wife, a family—like he'd told his father he wanted—he'd have to let at least one woman see him. And Lois was the only woman he could see himself wanting enough to take that risk.

He swam through the ocean, trying to get the worst of the soot and smoke out.

Finally, he headed back to his apartment. He figured he had about three hours before sunrise when he planned to track down Camden.

Changing into shorts and a T-shirt, he sat on his bed. Tell Lois. He wasn't worried that she'd misuse the information; it was how she'd handle it and what it would do to them that had him in a cold sweat. He'd spent hours thinking about it in the past, what probably added up to days worth of daydreaming, but now that he was staring cold, hard reality in the face, he wasn't sure how to go about it or even if he could. Tell Lois. How did he even start? Just jump right in: "I'm Superman." Give her background information? Tell her as Clark? Tell her as Superman? Would she even listen to him past that first sentence? Hear out his explanation? See him, the real him? Or would she jump straight into blazing fury and/or self-recriminations for not realizing it on her own?

Maybe he should write out what he wanted to say and see if there was a way to arrange it all that would keep Lois listening until he got to the end. He picked up the journal he'd spent so much time on and flipped to the back. It was practically full, full of all the heartbreak they'd been through together. It was their story.

His heart sped up as a thought came to him. What if he gave her their story? He could give it to her and ask her to read it, and

then they could talk about it when she was done.

It might be better that way anyway—he'd give her the pieces, but let her put them together.

Three hours gave him plenty of time to type it up and edit it. He wasn't sure if he'd have the guts to go through with giving it to her, but typing it up was a step in the right direction.

The next morning Clark flew out to Echo Canyon, where Valdez had said Camden might be. It was a state park—no houses or camping, just an old ranger station to check. He landed out of sight and changed into his Clark clothes, then walked up to the station.

The moment he was in sight of the station windows Derek Camden came out, a shotgun held in his shaking hands. "Are you my appointment in Samarra?" he demanded.

"Pardon?" Clark asked.

"Are you death come to visit me?"

Clark held the man's gaze, trying to appear as non-threatening as possible. "No, I'm a reporter; you're Dr. Camden, right?"

"You—you—you work for him. You're his assassin,"

Camden said, pointing a trembling finger at him.

Clark held up both hands. "Dr. Camden, I'm not an assassin. I'm just here to ask you about your sound research—specifically the sounds used in Metropolis lately, the ones that put people to sleep and blow things up. Do you know anything about them?"

Camden peered at him, as though trying to take his measure through a haze, then lowered the gun. He nodded and tapped his chest with the gun. "Here, all from my heart, my soul."

Clark's eyes widened. "Doctor, be careful," he said, taking a step towards him.

Camden cringed away, his arms coming up in front of his face. "Don't touch me!"

Clark stepped back. "Calm down. I'm your friend. Stoke lied to you. He said that he was your friend just to get you out of the hospital, and then he stole your inventions, right?"

Camden began to pace. "No, no, he stole my dreams. He—he wants to keep my dreams. He wants to end my body and keep my dreams," he said, his eyes full of tears. He turned and began to yell into the canyon, listening to the echoes: "Thief! Killer! Destroyer!"

Clark glanced at his watch. He was running out of time, but Stoke was still capable of stopping him in his tracks. "Dr. Camden, can you tell me anything about the frequency that hurts Superman? What makes it so"—he searched for the right word—"powerful?"

"Power, Lenny—Lenny has the power," Camden rambled.

"What power?"

"The power, the power, it's all about power. It doesn't work without power. Where is he getting the power?" Camden's eyes widened. "I never could find the power. But Lenny found the power. He stole the power. Now he is the power, and now he's coming. He's coming for me. He's coming for you. He's coming for everybody, and nothing can stop him," Camden finished hysterically.

Clark started to reach out a comforting hand, but Camden flinched back again, so he let his hand fall to his side once more. "Don't worry, Dr. Camden. I'll let the police know about Stoke," he said, hoping it would temporarily comfort the man and resolving to make sure Camden was returned to his doctor after the situation with Stoke was concluded.

Lois sat up sharply. The bug had been silent for hours, but all at once, mumbling had begun. Now, she could clearly hear Stoke: "Mayor Sharp, I do hope you're not trying to trace this call, because I've routed it through three islands, four oceans, and five continents. You'll be drawing social security before you ID me."

She held in a squeal as she took notes. She'd been right! Stoke was the sound man!

"Now listen to me: I also hope you don't think this is a negotiation," Stoke continued. "This is not a negotiation. This is a demand. So what's it to be, Mayor Sharp, yes or no?" He paused, apparently waiting for the mayor's response, then continued, "I see. Well, then I suppose it's time for a little more show and a little less tell."

There was a faint bang, and then Stoke yelled, "All right, boys, into the cellar. We need some more power. Let's go!"

Lois chewed on her lower lip. Stoke was sending his men into the cellar for more power. What did that mean? How could they get more power from the cellar?

"We're in position," a faint voice came from over the bug.

"Are the speakers set?" Stoke asked.

"Four minutes and city hall will be ready to fall," the voice replied.

"Set the focus of the speakers for the triangulation coordinates I gave you. The angles must be positioned for maximum sympathetic vibration," Stoke instructed.

Lois glanced at the clock. There wasn't time to get a tactical police team in there. Maybe, if she snuck in, she could unplug Stoke's whatever it was that generated the sound. If the back door hadn't been one of those exit-only, handle-less doors, she could have picked the lock. That left the front door, and picking the lock in broad daylight would be asking for trouble, which meant a frontal assault. It would have been easier in some ways if she'd still been in her groupie outfit, but she had to try something.

She knocked loudly on the front door. Before long the three blonde security guards that she'd run into the night before opened the door and stood in the doorway, arms crossed.

"Hi. I just wanted to give you girls a tip," Lois said, a patronizing smile on her face. "See, Lenny told me he likes his women, well—how should I say this?—smaller than the average milk cow. So, if I were you, I'd either lose some poundage or start grazing someplace else."

The guards took a step towards her, their arms dropping to their sides, obviously preparing to deal with her.

"Should I be using smaller words?" Lois asked, backing up.

The three guards came out onto the portico, the club doors swinging closed behind them.

Lois dropped into a tae kwon do stance. "Look, girls, I don't want to hurt you."

The lead guard walked up, and Lois shoved a potted tree onto her, then ran behind a pillar.

"She went that way! C'mon!" the guard yelled as she worked to untangle herself from the tree.

The other two guards ran after Lois.

As they came into view, Lois picked up a large sidewalk sign and whacked each of them. They both fell to the ground, unmoving. She dropped the sign and walked back towards the front doors only to have the head guard jump in front of her with a "Hi-yah!" They both settled into martial arts stances, then began trading kicks and blocks. Finally, Lois dropped into a crouch and pulled the rug out from under the guard, who fell with a thud and a groan. The woman lay there, dazed. As she tried to sit up, Lois walked over and, using her index finger, pushed the woman's head back into the ground. "By the way: your roots—they're a little dark," she said. The woman's eyes fluttered closed.

Lois walked into the building without any further interference. No one was waiting. In fact, she didn't see anyone. She cautiously made her way down the stairs to where she hoped the cellar was and began looking around for some kind of switch or cord.

Suddenly, she felt a rush of wind, and then the lights went out.

Clark was significantly later getting to Metropolis than he'd planned. On his way back, he'd gotten caught up in moving a stalled car off train tracks, succeeding mere moments before the train reached that intersection.

By the time he'd reached Stoke Club, it was mere minutes from the 9 a.m. deadline. Flying above the club, he x-rayed the building and saw men tapping into the city's power lines. "Well, that explains where he's getting the power," Clark murmured. He could go in and unplug Stoke, which would take care of protecting City Hall.

The three female guards from the night before were unconscious on the sidewalk in front of the club. He had a sneaking suspicion he knew who was responsible for that. Where else would Lois be but where trouble was at? he thought with fond exasperation.

At super-speed he ran through the front doors, down the stairs, past Lois, and over to where Stoke was plugged into the city's lines. He knocked Stoke's thugs out, and then pulled the cords out of the wall, disconnecting the power from Stoke's machine. The lights went out. He broke down the door of the room where Stoke had been, striding in. Hopefully Stoke wouldn't have had time to get his weapon set to whatever frequency it was that was so painful.

He glanced around the empty room. Stoke was nowhere to be seen. Just then Lois came running in.

"Superman!" she called.

Stoke jumped out of an alcove, holding a gun, a large black glove on his hand. "Surprise!" he called, grabbing Lois and holding the gun to her side.

Clark super-spiced over to rescue her, but was thrown backwards.

Holding onto Lois, Stoke began circling around Superman towards where his machine sat. "As you can see, Superman, this glove is not just an affectation. It's a little something I dreamt up called the Wall of Sound: a sonic barrier so dense that nothing can get through—not even you."

Clark made another attempt to get through the barrier, but without success.

"No plug to pull. Independent power supply," Stoke continued.

Clark grimaced. He stared at Lois, trying to come up with some way to reach her. His gut roiled. Even after a year of rescuing Lois Lane, he'd never gotten used to it.

Stoke looked back and forth between Clark and Lois. "Oh, that's wonderful. That lantern-jawed look of concern for human life. How super of you," he said in a mock-impressed voice.

Clark ignored Stoke.

"Am I missing something? Is there something going on I'm not aware of?" Stoke asked. He inhaled sharply.

"She's your girl, isn't she, eh? It is unfortunate, however, because she only has five seconds to live," he said, viciously tightening his hold on Lois.

Lois let out an involuntary yelp. Even in the middle of her terror, for the first time ever she was annoyed with Superman. Yes, she'd been obvious in her infatuation with him in the old days—but come on! How were they supposed to convince the bad guys that she wasn't special to him when he kept looking at her that way?

Clark's brain kicked into super-speed. The only way to save Lois seemed to be to leave her, to build up enough speed to break the sound barrier, but he never could leave Lois Lane—and, for the first time in months, he didn't want to. A sudden thought hit him: light was considerably faster than sound. Perhaps his heat vision could go through the sound barrier.

"Four. Three," Stoke continued.

Clark started to back away, as though giving in to Stoke, but instead focusing his heat vision on Stoke's gun.

Stoke hissed and dropped the gun. Lois used the distraction to elbow him in the gut. While he was doubled over, Clark burned out Stoke's glove as well, then super-spiced to remove both gun and glove from Stoke's vicinity. He crushed the gun and threw the glove to the ground hard enough that the electronic bits tinkled in protest.

"How did you do that?" Stoke asked incredulously.

"Simple. Light travels at 186,000 miles per second. Sound only moves at 688 feet per second." Clark took a step towards Stoke. "Now, let's go for a little ride."

"No, no. You see, you don't understand. I have this problem," Stoke said, backing away. "It's kind of a rain man thing. I hate flying," he finished, his voice cracking.

Clark walked up to him and grabbed him around the waist. "You'd hate it more if I dropped you, so you'd better hold still," he said, picking Stoke up and flying him out of the building.

After Clark had dropped Stoke off at the police station and filled Henderson in, he returned to Stoke Club in his Clark clothes. Lois was still there, practically glowing as she rooted through Stoke's computer. He found himself simply watching her before she saw him, the way he had in the old days. Yes, he loved Lois Lane the way she was. He wasn't quite sure why he'd spent all that time and energy trying to fight it.

"Lois! Are you all right?" he called, walking over to her.

A smile lit her face as she looked up at him. "Clark! You finally made it!"

"Made it?"

"Yeah, I left a message on your machine last night."

"You did?" Clark frowned. He hadn't even realized that he'd forgotten to check his machine when he'd gotten home from Chicago. "Oh, well, I didn't get it. Sorry."

Her brow furrowed. "What are you doing here then?"

"Camden. I caught up with him out at Echo Canyon this morning. Stoke stole the sound technology from him. Apparently you know that already though," he said, gesturing at the sound generator.

Lois looked down at the machine. "Well, not exactly. I knew that Stoke was making the sounds. I guess you were right after all."

"We were both right," Clark said.

Lois smiled again. "Yeah, so why don't we *both* go back to the Planet and write up the story?" she suggested.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry, Clark." She pushed her hair behind one ear. "I—well, I was panicking over the Kerths, and I overreacted. I shouldn't have taken it out on you though."

"No, you were right. I shouldn't have run off. I promise I wasn't trying to steal your story though."

She gave a little chuckle. "I know. I just forgot who you are for a bit."

Clark frowned. "Who I am?"

"Yeah. You're the guy who gives me leads even when we weren't working together. You'd never steal a story," Lois said.

Clark's throat closed up as he realized that Lois really did trust him, even if she forgot it from time to time. "Thanks, Lois. That means a lot." He cleared his throat. "I, um, owe you an apology too."

Lois raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"You were right before, when you said that I hadn't forgiven you, that I was refusing to forgive you." He grimaced. "I was hurt, and I've been keeping you at arm's length, even after I agreed to work on our friendship. I'm sorry."

"Clark, I hurt you. You should have been hurt."

"I know, but I was talking to my parents last night, and for the first time, I really knew that it wasn't on purpose."

Lois took a deep breath. "I wasn't trying to hurt you. I was

just being stubborn and blind. I never wanted you to leave though—not then and not now. Clark, Perry said that you're talking about leaving the Planet; is that true?"

Clark shook his head. "Not anymore." He hesitated, trying to decide how best to explain the conclusions he'd come to. Although, as he thought about it, he realized that his reasons were now moot: Lois had apologized. Lois wasn't putting him back to square one. His heart felt lighter than it had in months. "I was—feeling frustrated and confused, but my parents reminded me that I've been happier here than I've ever been. I have no plans to leave."

"Good," Lois said, feeling the knot in her chest loosen.

Just then they heard the sound of police sirens. "Guess the police made it," Clark said.

"Yeah. You about ready to go write that article?"

"Sounds good to me."

Clark left the Kerth Awards with Lois and Perry, a Kerth of his own in hand. After finishing their article on the sound man, Lois had told him that she wanted to go to the Kerths with him.

He'd spent the past week re-examining the conclusions he'd come to on that iceberg—going over and over them, considering and reconsidering the idea of giving Lois their story. After their conversation in Stoke's basement, Lois had returned to her pre-Kerth-nomination friendliness, and it had solidified for him that she was really changing. And he'd changed. He'd finally accepted that she hadn't meant to hurt him. He'd made up his mind that he wanted Lois, and this time he wasn't going to wait until they were close friends again and then spring it on her once more. He'd tell her from the get-go, and then they could move on from there. They had enough of a friendship for that, and she was worth the risk.

Timing-wise, giving her the manuscript after the Kerths seemed like the best time to do it: they'd been too busy to spend time together outside of work until tonight. Plus, Lois had tomorrow and the next day off, and he thought it would be smarter to make sure she had time to process than for him to tell her and have to work together less than twenty-four hours later. Of course when he'd picked her up tonight and seen her looking stunning in her black dress with her hair up, he'd found himself reconsidering—she was so beautiful inside and out, and he ached at the thought that tonight might be their last evening together if she couldn't accept his dual identity.

"Oh boy, what an evening," Perry said as they walked out the doors of the Metropolis Press Club and into the night. "I tell you—now I know exactly how the colonel felt when Elvis brought home that first gold record." He pointed to Clark's Kerth. "Clark, I'm so proud of you I can't see straight."

Lois looked up at Clark with a smile. "Not as proud as I am. That was a great speech."

Perry gave her a look. "Well, now, that's quite a little attitude change," he commented.

Lois returned his look. "I'm just glad to have such a good partner," she said lightly, looking over at Clark. She'd gone to Perry the day after they'd written the sound man article and told him that she agreed that Clark was good for her and that she was willing to do whatever it took to keep him as her partner.

Just then a car horn sounded. Perry looked over and realized that it was his wife, Alice. He smiled and gave a little wave. "Oh, I'm comin' honey," he said. "Y'know every time Alice sees me in one of these monkey suits she can't wait to get me home and tear it off," he muttered to Lois and Clark. "I'll, uh, see you two later," he said and walked towards the waiting car.

Lois and Clark laughed.

"See you, Chief!" Clark called.

Lois threaded her arm through Clark's, and they began walking down the street. "So, how did I rate as a date?" she

bantered.

"Oh, A+," Clark replied.

"I hung on your arm decoratively," she said, tightening her grip.

Clark nodded mock seriously. "You did."

"—fawned appropriately," Lois continued.

"Absolutely."

"—and just faded into the background during your big moment," she finished.

"You were beautiful, yet invisible," Clark concurred with a smile.

"Mmm, make me go through another night like that, and I'll rip out your spleen!" she said with teasing growl, then chuckled.

Clark chuckled with her. "Okay. Fair enough," he said, sobering all at once as he savored the feel of her on his arm and tried not to think that he might never have the chance to ask Lois to go through any sort of date again. The folded manuscript inside his interior jacket pocket crinkled as he shifted restlessly. That wasn't something he was ready to talk about just yet. He held up his Kerth, looking at it consideringly. "You know, it's not quite as big as I thought," he commented.

"And not quite as shiny close up. You know, you win a few of these, you find out they don't mean as much. Quick rush, a few pats on the back, and then you're back on the beat, only as good as your next story," Lois said, as the truth hit her once more. She couldn't believe that she'd given the Kerth Committee so much say in her life. She glanced back at the club. "Tonight wasn't as bad as I thought it would be," Lois remarked.

Clark looked down at her. "Oh?"

"Yeah, part of the reason I was so upset was because I didn't want to deal with all the gossip. I figured there'd be even more of it than usual tonight, but, surprisingly, I didn't hear much."

Clark frowned. "Gossip?"

Lois focused on the sidewalk. "Yeah. I don't know if you kept up with the gossip after Lex and I—well, you could hardly avoid it since it was splashed all over the papers." She waved a hand in the general direction of the club. "Everyone was talking about how almost marrying Lex had proven that I wasn't a good investigative reporter, or that I was in on his deals, or some other variation. I expected to hear everything all over again when you won the nomination instead of me." She gave a forced smile. "I thought the committee must have agreed with the gossip, and that's why they didn't nominate me."

Clark brought them both to a halt and held her gaze. "Lois, you're the same reporter you've always been: hardworking, dedicated, passionate, and good at what you do. You're the best reporter in the city—you always have been, and you always will be."

"Oh, Clark, thank you." She exhaled shakily. "You're such a good friend. I'm really sorry I got all wound up about the award."

He gave her arm a gentle squeeze. "It's okay," he said, resuming their walk. After a few moments of silence, he returned to their previous topic. "So, where do you think I should keep it?"

Lois shrugged. "I'm the wrong person to ask. I keep mine behind some books. I love looking at them, but after everything I've learned the past few weeks, I'm not sure they mean as much as they used to."

"Really? What've you learned?"

Lois smiled ruefully. "I used to think that I needed my Kerths to prove that I'm the best—probably comes from my dad and his constant criticism. I don't think I ever told you this, but he didn't even want me to go into journalism. Anyway, last night I realized that the Kerth committee doesn't determine if I'm a success or not—I know what I want out of my stories: to change things for the better. If I do that, then I'm a success no matter what anyone else says or thinks. And anyway, I want to be a success at life, not just investigative journalism."

“That sounds very wise,” Clark said quietly. It was moments like these that left him in awe of Lois. She was such a strong woman, and she’d only grown stronger—strong enough to go after what she wanted, strong enough to admit when she was wrong . . .

They walked the rest of the way to Lois’s apartment in companionable silence, neither wanting to break the spell between them.

“Come up?” Lois asked.

“Sure.”

“Are you okay? You were pretty quiet tonight,” Lois said, unlocking her door.

“Yeah. Just thinking.”

“About?” she asked, opening the door and flipping on the lights.

Clark followed her in. “This,” he said, raising his Kerth. He looked down at her and took a deep breath. “Us.”

Lois caught her breath. After everything that had happened between them, she hadn’t thought Clark would still be interested in an “us.” She’d been so thankful to regain his friendship that she hadn’t dared hope for more, despite the fact that she now knew she was in love with him, had been in love with him for ages.

“I know we talked about our friendship,” Clark continued, “but I still want more than that.”

“Clark—”

Clark held up a hand. “I realized though that I went about it all the wrong way, and I’m sorry. I’ve”—he swallowed hard—“I’ve never really done this before. I don’t know how to do relationships—not the kind I want to have with you. I shouldn’t have sprung it on you, especially not then when you needed my friendship. I panicked and hurt you.”

“Clark, I didn’t handle things well either and—”

“Lois,” he interrupted her, “I want to talk with you about this, but I—well, in the course of trying to get over the Luthor situation, I realized that I wasn’t being fair to you. There are things about me that you don’t know, that you should know before you decide if you want to try a relationship with me. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking, and I realized that, despite all our issues, I still want to try us.” The word “love” hovered on his tongue, but he ruthlessly suppressed it. He wasn’t going to make the mistake of rushing her again.

Lois’s brow furrowed, as a wave of *deja vu* hit her. *There are things about me that you don’t know.* There was something about that phrase . . . She mentally forced herself back to the present. “What don’t I know?”

“I’m honestly not sure how to go about telling you. I’ve never told anyone a lot of it.” He started pacing. “You know all those nights when I was busy right after Mr. Stern bought the Planet?”

“Yeah,” she said, still frowning. She had no idea where Clark was going with this.

“I was so frustrated and hurt and confused. I didn’t know which way was up anymore. I couldn’t even talk to my parents about it. My mother suggested that I write it all out—she knew writing had helped me work through things in the past. Anyway, I typed it up.” He pulled the manuscript out of his coat pocket. “I’d like you to read it, and then, if you still want to talk, I’d like to talk about it.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to just tell me?” she asked. “Not that I’m trying to say I don’t want to read what you’ve written. I mean, I always enjoy your writing, so of course I want to read this, but maybe it would be better if you just told me?”

Clark shook his head slightly. “I—like I said, I’m not really sure *how* to tell you. I really think this is—well, here.” With shaking fingers Clark held out the manuscript. More than anything at that moment he wanted to take it and run, to return to

the status quo of their friendship. They’d only just gotten it back on track, and, for a brief moment, he wondered if he was rushing things. But if the past few months had shown him anything, it was that moving backwards was an illusion. They had to move forward if they were ever going to truly get past Luthor and all he’d done to them. And, as he’d decided that night on the iceberg, he loved Lois and telling her was necessary in order for them to move forward. He glanced down at the manuscript, feeling the moments stretch, as though he had jumped into super-speed while he waited for Lois to take it. He felt naked, more exposed than he’d ever been in his life, and she hadn’t even read the thing yet.

Lois took the manuscript. She’d never seen Clark so rattled. Whatever was in here must be pretty important to him.

Clark backed towards the door. “Okay. Well, um, thanks again for being my date. It really meant a lot that you came tonight.”

Lois smiled up at him. “It meant a lot that you still let me come with you. I really am proud of you.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you later,” he said, opening the door. He paused in the doorway, staring at her, soaking in the reality of them, storing it up in case this was his last chance. And then he left.

Lois changed out of her dress and into her pajamas, all the while glancing at the manuscript Clark had given her. She’d never really thought of Clark as someone with real secrets. Sure he was a little strange at times, but that was just Clark. No mystery about it.

So what kind of secrets did he have? Some kind of criminal past?

But that didn’t fit Clark at all. His idea of a criminal past was probably getting a ticket for jaywalking. It had taken quite a bit of work on her part to drag him around to the idea of breaking and entering as a valid investigative technique. Well, there was one surefire way to find out.

She settled down on her bed and turned to the first page.

“Be careful with Lyle. You don’t know him like I do,” Jerome Knight told his partner, Lola Dane, as she prepared to join Lyle Richards in the ambulance.

Lola gave a slight nod, obviously not agreeing with Jerome’s assessment, but not wanting to start another fight in front of Lyle. After all, she was the one dating the man. There was no way Jerome knew Lyle better than she did.

Jerome, however, remained steadfast in his concern. In the course of researching his next book, he’d come across several disturbing facts about Richards—facts that all added up to Richards being a crime lord. He’d tried to talk to Lola about them, but she’d refused to listen. He could never tell if it was stubbornness on her part, or if she was really in love with the man.

The ache in his chest grew as he watched Lola ride off with Richards. He’d fallen for Lola from the moment he’d met her. Unfortunately, Lola didn’t trust easily, and she’d shot him down less than a week after they’d met. It had taken him months just to gain her friendship. And then Richards had swooped in and swept her off her feet. Jerome thought he’d be able to reconcile himself to the situation if it had been what was best for Lola. But it wasn’t. She was balanced on a knife-edge, and she didn’t even realize it.

And even if Richards hadn’t been around, there was Charlie King, a best-selling author that Lola had run into from time to time in the course of her investigations. His debut novel—a fictionalization of a child slavery ring he’d broken up in Nepal—had been a best seller, and Charlie had worked hard to continue the trend. He was rarely seen outside of book signings. No one but his publisher knew much about Charlie King, other than that he was rich and a good writer.

Jerome sighed as he thought once more about Lola and her crush on Charlie; Charlie could never have a relationship with her. The media would be all over it, and they'd never have any privacy—not to mention what Charlie's enemies would do to her. Privacy and safety were the main reasons Jerome had created Charlie King in the first place—not that he'd known his book would be such a best seller.

Lois stared at the manuscript, her head spinning. Only one more page left. She turned to it and began reading.

“Charlie, is there any hope for us? You and me? I'm so completely in love with you. I can't do anything else without knowing.”

Jerome stared at his partner, the words she'd said barely registering. He'd thought his heart couldn't ache any more than it had this afternoon when she'd turned him down, but he'd been wrong. After a moment he realized that she was still waiting for an answer. He sighed, shaking his head. “Lola, I do care for you. But there are things about me that you don't know, that you may never know.”

His partner took a step towards him, dewy-eyed and still full of hope. “It doesn't matter. I know you. I don't mean you, the celebrity, or you, the author. If you were just an ordinary man living an ordinary life, I would love you just the same. Can't you believe that?”

She would love him even if he were someone ordinary, someone like her partner—the same man she'd rejected only this afternoon. He forced himself to speak past the spike of pain and bitterness her words had caused, forced himself to be gentle to the woman he loved, the woman who'd ripped his heart out. “I wish I could, Lola. But under the circumstances, I don't see how I can,” he said, turning and leaving before either of them said anything else hurtful.

Jerome walked out of his partner's apartment, barely able to keep from running into the hallway walls. His lungs burned with the effort of dragging air past the lump in his throat. He'd lost her. She had turned him down earlier that day, and now he'd turned her down. It had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done, but he couldn't have continued the charade indefinitely—not with Lola. And she would have been livid once she'd realized that the man she'd already said “no” to had simply gone around her wishes by getting her love in another guise. It would have been tantamount to stealing. He wanted to be loved for himself anyway, not the successful writer character that he played a few hours a day.

Some might say that Charlie King should never have fulfilled Lola's request—just not shown up that night—and he'd thought seriously about blowing her off. But the reality was that he'd never been able to ignore Lola's wishes. He'd hoped that being rude to her when he'd first gotten there would have kept her from saying what he'd thought she was going to say—or at least proven to him that she wasn't infatuated with the Armani suits and money, or whatever it was that she liked about Charlie King; if anyone else had been that rude, they'd have been leaving her apartment wearing a handprint. It hadn't worked though, and now he had a stomach churning with guilt to add to his list of physical complaints.

Lois felt the typed pages slip from her fingers. She'd had a niggling feeling after reading the beginning, but she'd read on, hoping against hope to prove herself wrong. Unfortunately, she'd never told Clark what Superman had said that night, and the story matched up too well for doubt. Thinking back she realized that she'd never seen Clark and Superman together, and it was for a good reason: Clark was Superman.

No wonder Superman—no, Clark—had been so angry that night.

She felt a fleeting moment of gratitude that Clark hadn't let

her talk him into just telling her. She wasn't sure how she would have reacted, but it wouldn't have been pretty. Most likely, she wouldn't have gotten past the initial statement of his identity. Now she had a glimpse into the backstory, and she wasn't sure what to do with it.

She stood up and began to pace. Clark was Superman. It felt like saying the sky was green or some other ridiculous, obviously false statement.

Clark had lied to her. The one person she never, ever, ever would have thought capable of real lying, and he'd lied to her, practically every moment of every day. Lied about who he was. Lied about all those little things he suddenly remembered he had to go do. She'd been hurt when he'd lied about Superman's globe, but this went far beyond that.

Wait a minute. That had been Clark's globe. Jack had stolen Clark's globe. No wonder he hadn't been honest with her—it would have meant opening a Pandora's box.

And she had been awful to him, absolutely awful. She'd thought she'd treated him poorly when she'd been thinking of their friendship, but now, knowing that he was Superman ... scenes swam through her consciousness—the time she'd said Clark was the “before” and Superman was the “way, way after.” The time when she'd belittled his amnesia—which now that she thought about it, no wonder Superman had been missing for those days!

Seeing his perspective on the whole Lex fiasco and their relationship (relationships?) in general—she didn't know how he'd done it, how he'd stuck around and pursued her. Or why. He'd said that he loved her that day in the park, and it was obvious from his story that he thought of himself as Clark, rather than Superman, but she had hurt him—far more than she'd realized. Clark's anguish had poured off the page, and now that she had an insider's perspective, she could see that he'd spent the past few months bleeding in her presence, while she'd been oblivious—trapped in her own pain and crisis of confidence.

Clark was Superman.

She wanted to hang onto her anger—Clark had *lied* to her—but somehow it kept dissipating in the knowledge that she had hurt him just as much, if not more, than he had hurt her.

Clark was Superman.

She just couldn't wrap her brain around it. She had to see him, to move this whole thing out of the realm of fantasy and into reality.

Despite the late hour, the lights were on when she got to Clark's apartment, but he didn't answer the door. She couldn't wait another day to talk to him, so she let herself in. Clark was gone. He must have just stepped out—maybe an emergency? She headed towards the couch, then detoured to look at the souvenirs Clark had on display. She found herself looking at the apartment with new eyes. She'd known that he'd traveled the world, but she'd never cared. From the moment she'd met him, she had categorized him as a hick, and much of that had never changed. Yes, she'd realized that hick did not equal stupid after meeting his parents, but it had still equaled an uninteresting background. And now, knowing that he was Superman, she was voraciously curious.

Superman hadn't shown up until a year ago, but she clearly remembered seeing pictures of Clark as a young boy. In a way, it was a comforting thought; Clark had lied to her about Superman, but perhaps not everything was a lie. There were things she knew about him. She had seen his first grade picture. She had met his parents. Wait, Clark's parents—were they from Krypton too? Why had they come to earth? And Clark clearly saw himself as Clark, not as Superman, but if he'd been raised as a Kryptonian She had so many questions.

She turned in a slow circle, studying the apartment, trying to

reconcile the down-home country boy with the aloof, larger-than-life superhero.

It didn't help. This was Clark's apartment; there was nothing of Superman's visible—not that she'd recognize anything other than the Suit and the globe. She thought about rifling through his apartment to see if she could turn anything up, but discarded the idea. For the first time she wanted to wait for someone to tell her their secrets. For the first time she *could* wait because Clark would tell her when he was ready.

Just then she heard the whoosh that signaled Superman's arrival coming from Clark's bedroom. His balcony. Of course. How convenient.

"Clark?" she called, wanting to let him know she was here—though she doubted that she could surprise him with those super senses of his.

In the bedroom Clark stilled for a moment before rapidly changing out of the Suit. After a brief hesitation, he left his glasses off. He'd been so preoccupied that he hadn't even realized Lois was here. He hadn't expected to hear from her for a couple of days at least, and he'd been mentally bracing himself for an outcome that involved leaving Metropolis. Taking a deep breath, he walked out of his bedroom.

Lois almost started to see him—without his glasses, wearing a T-shirt and jeans with his Clark hairstyle, he was a man she'd never seen. She studied him, realizing that this was the real him. She couldn't believe that a pair of glasses had fooled her for more than a year. And yet it was more than just the glasses—there was something different in the way he carried himself. The Suit seemed designed to stand out and Superman commanded attention and respect, whereas Clark fit in so well he became almost invisible.

They stood in silence for long moments, each studying the other.

"You lied to me," Lois said, then mentally cursed herself for letting those words be the first to leave her mouth. That hadn't been how she'd wanted to start things off at all.

Clark hesitated. "Yes." He took a step towards her. "I lie to everyone; no one can know about Superman. Can you imagine what my enemies would do to you, or Perry and Jimmy, or my parents, if they found out?"

"Your parents? They aren't from Krypton?" she asked, distracted by his concern for them.

"No. They're really Kansas farmers."

"Why—Why didn't you become Superman earlier? When did you get here? Why did you come? Who are you really?"

Clark gestured to the couch. "Maybe we should sit—unless you really want to have this whole conversation standing in the middle of my living room," he said, trying to inject a note of levity.

Lois sat down, and he joined her on the couch, turning to face her. "I came to earth when I was a baby. My parents think I was about four months old. They were headed home from town, and they saw what looked like a meteor streaking across the night sky and landing in a nearby field. When they investigated it, they found me. They hadn't been able to have children and thought it was some crazy government agency that had put a baby in space, so they buried my ship and implied that I was a relative's unwanted child. They were thrilled to adopt me and have loved me as their own ever since. It wasn't until I was twelve that my powers started manifesting."

"Wait! You didn't know you were from Krypton?"

Clark shook his head. "No, not until last year when I found my ship and the globe in Bureau 39's warehouse."

"What ship?" Lois frowned, remembering the photo of the man with Superman's "S," and then quickly added, "That projection from the globe?"

"A hologram of my birth father. The globe contained

messages from my birth parents explaining who I was. That's part of why I was so frantic when it was stolen—it's my only real link to them"—he grimaced—"plus there's enough information for someone to piece together more than I want known, like that I was sent to Kansas as a baby."

"Why did they send you?"

Clark studied the couch cushions. "Something happened, and Krypton exploded. My parents modified a space probe so that they could save me—that's the ship that Bureau 39 had. I'd show it to you, but it was too big to take when we were there, and it went missing when they cleared out the warehouse."

Clark looked so sad in that moment that, despite the confused mass of emotions roiling through her, Lois couldn't help but comfort him. She put a hand on his. "I'm so sorry. They must have really loved you though to send you away."

He turned his hand up and clasped hers, meeting her gaze. "Thanks, Lois. I don't know exactly how I feel about it. I'm glad that I know who I am—there was always something missing when I didn't know who my parents were or why they'd given me away—but my birth parents are just people in a hologram. The Kents are my real parents."

"Maybe we can find your ship someday," she said, already mentally flipping through her contacts to decide who would be most likely to know about it.

"I'd like that. I'm sure if anyone can get a lead, you can."

She gave a distracted nod. Clark had arrived as a baby, but Superman hadn't show up until a year ago. She refocused her attention on him. "You said that your powers started manifesting when you were twelve, but Superman didn't become active until a year ago. What changed? What made you decide to become Superman?"

Clark smiled. "You."

Lois's eyes widened. "What?"

"Lois, even though I've never told anyone about my powers, I've always wanted to help people with them—and I have helped as best as I could. Once I graduated college, I'd move somewhere, freelance a bit, and help people until I did something to make someone suspicious. Then I'd move on. When I came to Metropolis and met you, I knew I wanted to stay here. Plus, getting a job at the Planet was a dream come true. I started trying to figure out how I could help without being caught, and that day that I saved that man in the sewer explosion—you remember that, don't you?"

Lois nodded, mentally flagellating herself for having missed so many clues. Little things had begun making sense in the wake of Clark's manuscript, and she had the feeling she'd be continuing to put things together for quite some time. It was still galling though to realize that she'd missed things even from the very beginning. "So that was you."

"I tried to pass it off as the man being delirious, but, yeah, it was me. Remember what you said to me?"

Lois tried to remember, but she'd been focused on Platt and the Messenger. Sadly, Clark and most of the things he'd done had been incidental at the time, so she'd forgotten them. "I have no idea."

"You told me to 'bring a change of clothes to work.'"

Lois let out a small chuckle. "How did you get 'become Superman' out of that?"

Clark chuckled too. "Because a costume just made so much sense. That had always been my problem—trying to hide in plain sight. A costume is just another way to do that. And because I take my glasses off, people never think Superman is hiding. Nothing about the Suit is secretive."

"Far from it," she agreed with a laugh.

"Yeah," he said, trying not to blush. "You should have seen some of the other ones. Trust me, that was the best."

"There were others?"

“Yeah, my mom made several different types. The Superman Suit is the one we liked best.”

“My mother made it for me,” she said wonderingly. “You told Platt’s daughter that your mother made it.”

“She did.”

“I thought that meant your Kryptonian mother made it, that maybe you’d been sent here to help or something.”

“That’s what you were meant to think,” he said.

Lois sobered, remembering how many things she’d misunderstood, how huge the lie was, and how awful she’d been to Clark. She pulled her hand from Clark’s and focused on the designs in his living room rug.

Clark let her go, but using his index finger, raised her chin so that she was looking at him. “Lois, I know I lied to you. But I’ve never told anyone. Neither have my parents. Lying to you wasn’t personal. When I was younger, when I first discovered that I was different, my dad used to tell me that if anyone found out about my powers, they’d lock me up in a lab and dissect me like a frog. I’ve had that hanging over my head most of my life, and, after our experiences with Bureau 39, I’m pretty sure my dad was right. It makes it a little hard to have relationships.”

Lois felt her heart break at the picture Clark had painted—a boy, alone and living in terror that someone would find out and take him away from the parents who loved him. Not being able to tell anyone who he really was, to never be himself around anyone—it must have made him so isolated. She understood why Jonathan had been so paranoid, so desperate to protect the son he clearly loved, but she wished they’d been able to keep the secret without passing on all that fear to Clark. She blushed as she realized that she’d been one of the most avid searchers for Superman’s secrets in the beginning. Once more the memory of how she’d treated Clark rose to the surface—how could she have said that Superman’s eyes were radiant brown, not dull, insipid, mud-brown like Clark’s? Weeks ago she’d realized that she was a bad friend to Clark, but knowing the truth of who he was, this was beyond being rude—she’d been dismissive and downright cruel. She couldn’t believe he could still want her. She studied her hands where they rested in her lap. “I was so horrible to you. I don’t know why you would decide that I’m worth the risk.”

“I was horrible to you too. I didn’t tell you about Luthor—”

“You tried to.”

“Yes, I tried to, as Clark. I didn’t tell you as Superman. I was confused, and I wasn’t sure that you’d listen to me since every time I tried to talk about Luthor we ended up fighting, but the reality is that I should have told you as Superman. I was hurt, hurt that you thought Superman was so much better than Clark. This is new to me. I haven’t gotten this whole dual identity thing figured out yet.” He shook his head. “Regardless, I didn’t handle Luthor well. I didn’t handle our relationship well. I didn’t pursue you as Clark, and then rushed you. I gave off signals as Superman. I knew I couldn’t have a relationship with you as Superman; it was just hard to suppress my feelings for you when I felt like you actually saw me whenever I had the cape on. I raised your expectations, and then rejected you—”

“I rejected you first though,” she said in a small voice.

“Lois, you didn’t know—”

“Yes, but I should never have asked you to contact, um, you, after I’d rejected you. That was cruel and insensitive. I’m sorry.”

Clark took a deep breath. “I can’t pretend that didn’t hurt, but as I said, I didn’t handle it well either. We both made mistakes. It’s not a matter of who made the most mistakes—the question is where we go from here.”

Lois blushed at the intensity in his voice. Where they would go. For the first time since she’d learned the truth of who Clark was, it occurred to her that it made sense that she’d been in love with both Clark and Superman. The past few months she’d realized that she would choose Clark, but now she didn’t have to

choose. Although, knowing how messed up she was, the idea of being in a relationship with Superman was daunting. She still couldn’t believe that a pair of glasses had fooled her for so long. “Why do you wear glasses?” she asked suddenly.

“I got them in junior high,” he said. He suppressed a sigh, remembering all the anguish of the revelation of his abnormality. “I can’t tell you what it was like having my powers appear. My parents had told me I was adopted, but not how they’d found me. I was at school when I saw through a blackboard. I was bored and not really paying attention, and suddenly I could see into the classroom next to us. That was actually when I first started writing—as a way to try to deal with going from being a normal kid to some kind of freak in the space of a day. Anyway, we discovered that I couldn’t see through lead, so my parents got me a pair of glasses with leaded glass lenses while I was learning to control my powers. The ones I wear now are plain glass, but they remind me to be careful using my powers.”

She looked up at him, tracing the lines of both Clark and Superman in his face. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it.”

“You weren’t supposed to see it. I work very hard to camouflage and minimize any similarities between Clark and Superman. So far no one’s figured it out. It doesn’t make you any less of a reporter that you didn’t see it. You’re used to Clark being the one to run away from trouble to go call the police, and you’re used to Superman coming to the rescue. Why would you think that they’d be the same person?”

“You say ‘Clark’ and ‘Superman’ like neither of them is you, but when I was reading your story I got the impression that you see yourself as Clark. Which is it? How do I know what’s true?”

Clark slid his hand between them, holding it out so that she could take it once more. Lois hesitantly put her hand in his.

“Lois, I’ve never lied to you about anything except being both Clark and Superman. Both of them are me. And everything both of them have told you is true. You know me—better than anyone. Honestly, it’s only been after Luthor that I’ve started to come to terms with who I am—the man who’s both Clark and Superman, or neither if you want to look at it that way. I used to think of Superman as a two-dimensional character and of myself as the real person, but during my journalism I realized that Superman isn’t two-dimensional. Superman is the side of me that can use my powers openly, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t use them the rest of the time.”

“You don’t?” She shook her head. “You do?”

He chuckled. “If you could clean your apartment in ten seconds flat, wouldn’t you?” Without waiting for an answer, he continued, “Of course I use my powers when I’m not wearing the Suit. I can’t even shave without using my heat vision.”

“I suppose x-ray vision would come in handy in our line of work,” she said, trying to imagine how she’d use those powers in everyday life if she had them. Then she gave him a playful slap on the arm. “No wonder you’re so good at finding things! You use your powers all the time, don’t you?”

“Gives us a little extra edge,” he said with a smirk.

She stared at him wonderingly. “You don’t even need me to be your partner, do you? You could probably investigate circles around me. Why—”

“Why are we partners?”

She nodded.

“Lois, I love being your partner. I have no desire to strike out on my own—”

“That’s where you went!” she exclaimed as she remembered the argument that had prompted the temporary split in their partnership.

Clark frowned. “When?”

“When you said we should split up and I could chase down Stoke while you hunted for Camden. You were chasing down the sound man, weren’t you? You must have heard something. Why

didn't you take me with you? Wait—are you okay? That article said that Superman had to run away from the sound man.” She gasped. “Dr. Carlin! You were shot! Clark!”

Something in Clark's chest loosened at the sound of her panic and concern. She cared about him, not just Superman, but him. He gently squeezed her hand. “And you saved me. You were so brave.”

“I don't know about that. Terrified is more like it.”

“But you still dug that bullet out. You still saved me even though you were scared. You did great, Lois.”

She blushed.

“And yes, chasing down the sound man is where I went. I heard something and went to go catch him. I didn't take you with me because I couldn't explain how I'd heard it or go change into Superman without you knowing about me. As far as things with the sound man went, I'm all right now. If the cops hadn't shown up, I wouldn't have been, but they did. I spent that afternoon in bed because I could barely move. I wasn't trying to cut you out of the story.”

She gave a half smile. “I know. As I said, I realized that you aren't the kind of person who steals stories. I really am sorry about freaking out over the Kerth. Perry said that I'm a better writer with you than without you, and he's right. I know I give you a hard time about the touchy-feely stuff, but I don't really mean it. I just—” Lois paused, searching for the right words.

“Have an image to maintain?” Clark suggested, unsure he'd heard her correctly. She'd apologized for not trusting his instincts and had deferred to him while investigating Dr. Kelly, but she'd never said anything positive about his writing style before. He'd always thought she considered him a lightweight.

“That's part of it. I am a woman trying to make it in a man's world,” she said. “But it's also not a style I'm very good at, and I've found that Perry doesn't give me as many of those assignments now that I have a reputation for hating them. Anyway, I know I don't tell you often enough, but you've always been able to move me with your words. It wasn't the style of article that bothered me about the Kerths—once I'd thought about it, I realized it was a perfect article for you to have been nominated for because you care about the disenfranchised, and your writing is so perfect for highlighting their plight and getting people to really care about it. Like I said, I just freaked out because I thought the Kerth committee agreed with the gossip, and I used the fact that my article had a larger global impact to argue against it. I really do like that our styles complement each other.”

Clark's mouth swung open. “Wow, um, thanks, Lois. Me too.”

They sat in silence for a moment, both deep in thought. Clark decided to ask the question that had plagued him for months. “I'm sure you noticed where I ended my story,” he began.

Lois nodded.

“Well, part of the reason that I didn't get any further was because I gave you the edited version that was a combination of two versions—one strictly from my perspective and one from yours. I was trying to figure out how I felt and where you were coming from. But I got stuck writing your perspective after that night. Well, even that night. I know you meant it when you said that you would love me even if I were an ordinary man living an ordinary life—”

“Clark,” she swallowed hard as her stomach roiled. “I'm so sorry. I knew something was wrong with Superman, and after reading your perspective on the past few months, I couldn't believe how I'd treated you.”

“Lois, I'm not trying to assign blame. I'm just trying to understand. Can you tell me what it was about Superman that made that side of me so attractive to you?”

“I know,” she said, thinking that she didn't deserve someone

like Clark who had forgiven her for something far larger than she'd had any idea of and was actually trying to understand where she'd been coming from. She cleared her throat. “Well, it wasn't you. I realized that I had a, um, block as far as letting myself have feelings for you. Not because of who you are, but because of who I am. You know I don't trust people. I'm actually trying to change that—to let people see me and to care about others, not because of who other people are, but because of the kind of person I want to be. Anyway, I realized that I could let myself love Superman because I never expected you to hurt me. Superman seemed larger-than-life and good in a way that meant I wouldn't be risking my heart at all. And, well, there's a lot that goes into it, but basically, I thought I needed to have someone successful love me in order to prove that I was lovable—can't get much more successful than Superman,” she said with a wry smile. “I mean every woman in the world wants to be with you.”

Clark shook his head. “No, all those women want to be with the fantasy of Superman, not the reality of me. Lois, I am far from perfect. I have an even harder time trusting people than you do. I work obscene hours. I have to run off at a moment's notice. Some days I'm a wreck when a rescue goes badly. And, even though I don't want to, I think I've proven that I will hurt you. I'm human.”

She gave him a small smile. “Don't you mean Kryptonian?”

“Yeah. And that means a lot of things I probably don't even think about. Having a relationship with me means dealing with all of that. I'm not normal,” he said.

“Who is?”

Clark gave a half-shrug. “Pretty much everyone else on earth.”

Lois gave him a look. “No one feels normal. Everyone feels like they don't fit in at some point or another.”

“Yes, but they actually are normal.”

She shrugged. “My point is that it isn't just you who doesn't feel like they fit in. No one fits in even though we're all pretty similar.”

Clark hesitated. Was it really that simple? He'd been focused on the fact that he was so different from everyone else, especially in the early days when he'd been learning to control his powers, but maybe he should have been recognizing the similarities—after all, no one knew that Clark was from another planet. “Hmm. I guess I've spent so much of my life wishing that I were normal that I never thought about that.”

Lois frowned. “Clark, do you think that's why you didn't see yourself as Superman?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, like you said, Superman is the side of you that's not-normal. Maybe you were predisposed to think of ‘Clark’ as yourself because you wanted to be normal so badly.”

Clark stilled. He'd never thought of it that way, but it made a lot of sense. “See, this is why I need you. You see me better than anyone else, even before when you thought I was two people. You understand that side of me better than I do some days.”

Lois blushed. “I think it's just common sense.”

“Not at all,” he maintained. Then, remembering why Lois had said she'd been attracted to Superman, he asked, “You do know that you don't need someone to prove that you're lovable, right?”

“I'm starting to,” Lois said slowly.

“Good. Because I think you're very lovable, no matter what anyone else says or thinks or who loves you.”

“Thanks, Clark.”

He cleared his throat. “I know why I reacted the way I did after Luthor proposed, and hopefully I conveyed all that in my story, but can you, um—”

“Explain my side?”

“Yeah.”

She stood and began pacing in front of him. “I don’t know. It didn’t make sense. You know how I jump into the pool without checking the water level. I just”—she waved her arms in the air—“I just couldn’t deal with losing the Planet. I’m a different person now, and I would handle it differently if it happened today, but at the time, I thought I was losing myself, losing everything that made me worthwhile. It goes back to lots of boring family stuff.” She huffed. “No, that’s a lie. I’ve been doing this thing lately: trying to catch the lies I tell myself. It’s not really ‘boring family stuff.’ It’s just—uncomfortable to talk about.” She turned to study Clark’s bookshelves. “See my dad wanted a son, not a daughter. So I was never good enough for him. And even though I rebelled and went into journalism instead of medicine, I was still trying to prove to myself that he was wrong.” She sniffed, trying to keep the tears from overflowing. “I ended up with Lex because I was trying to prove that I could be a success, that someone successful wanted me.” She turned to face him. “But, Clark, I said ‘no.’ I realized that I didn’t want to marry Lex, so you know that part with the ‘do you so-and-so take so-and-so to be your lawfully wedded husband?’ I said ‘no.’” For the first time since she’d done it, the memory brought a smile to her face. “You should have seen the look on his face.” She giggled. “It was like he’d never heard the word before in his life.”

“He probably hadn’t,” Clark said dryly.

Lois gasped as she realized where Clark had been those two days he’d been missing around her wedding.

“What?” Clark asked.

“What did Lex do to you?” she demanded.

“What?”

“You told me that he had Kryptonite and held you prisoner.” She held his gaze. “Clark, what did he do to you? And don’t give me any of that ‘it’s too much for me to hear’ crap.”

Clark winced. “What exactly do you want to know? I already told you the basics.”

“How did he get you there? Why did you go? How’d you escape?”

“He left a message for Superman on Clark’s machine saying that he wanted to talk to me about you. I went because I was worried, and I hadn’t thought about him having Kryptonite. I was arrogant and stupid. I escaped because he came down to gloat just before your wedding and left the keys where I could see them and a cummerbund around my neck. I was able to use it to get the key, and then I changed into my Clark clothes and escaped.”

Lois wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. She felt like he still hadn’t answered her question, but maybe now wasn’t the time to press. But if not now, when? “What was the Kryptonite like?”

“Uncomfortable,” he said shortly.

Lois frowned at him.

He held up a hand. “I know you want more details, but I’m just not comfortable talking about it. I don’t like thinking about it, let alone talking about it. Here; I’ll tell you exactly what I told my parents: Luthor had a cage coated with Kryptonite.” He suppressed a shudder. “By the time I got out of it, I was completely drained of my powers—obviously, since it took them weeks to come back.”

“Oh, Clark, that sounds awful. I mean, when you said that he had Kryptonite and held you prisoner, I wasn’t envisioning a cage.” She exhaled noisily and sank back onto the couch, exhausted by the reality of all Lex represented. “Treating Superman like an animal sounds like his style. He probably hated that you were more powerful than him,” she said, staring at the television in front of them.

Clark winced. He had been treated like an animal, but hearing it aloud sounded so much worse than in his own mind. “We weren’t on good terms.”

“I can’t believe that you had this whole”—she waved a hand in the air—“relationship with him and I didn’t know anything

about it, not from you—either of you—or Lex.”

Clark made a face. “We were enemies. I wouldn’t call it a relationship.”

“You know what I mean. It was obvious that you didn’t like him, and he wasn’t a fan of you either, but I thought that was just a personality clash. I know I’ve said it before, but I am sorry that I didn’t listen to your instincts. You’re so good at listening to mine. I just didn’t want to admit that mine might be wrong, that they didn’t even go off around the most evil man I’ve ever come into contact with.”

“Lois, he kept you so off-balance they didn’t even have a chance to go off.”

She looked over at him. “I actually came to that conclusion too. It helps to hear it from someone outside the situation though.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m outside it. Anyway, thanks for telling me. When I was trying to understand where you’d been coming from, I realized that I had made things a lot worse. When I told you that I loved you, I took away my support as Clark—not that I’d been able to be supportive about Luthor, but I could have at least listened to you. And, as I said, I should have told you about Luthor as Superman.”

Lois put a hand on his arm. “You do know that I would have believed Superman, but only because I knew he might have seen things with his powers that I wouldn’t have. I can’t say that my feelings for Superman wouldn’t have played into it, but I wasn’t ignoring your warnings because I thought you were lying—you’d just never given me anything more than insinuations. And I knew you were jealous.”

“Yeah. And you were right: I was. I wanted what he had. I still do,” he said quietly.

Lois shifted to hold his gaze, searching to see if he really meant what he’d said. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am. Even the past few months when I’ve been hurt and angry, I still haven’t been able to leave you. I—I never thought I’d tell anyone about my Kryptonian heritage, except whoever I married—and I’m not talking about marriage yet—but I realized that I’d made it impossible for you to love me because I’d never let you see me. I rushed you before, and I’m trying to avoid that now, but, Lois, I know I want us, whatever that looks like. I don’t know how to do a relationship like this where the other person knows about my powers, where I’m trying to be Clark Kent, Kerth-award winning investigative reporter”—he shot her a teasing look—and Superman—I’ve never tried it. But after realizing what life without you would be like, I realized that I want to try, even if it’s hard and messy. Life is hard and messy. I don’t know why I expected a relationship to be any different.”

“Clark, are you sure? I mean, look at what a mess I made of things before.”

“I want you. I love who you are, mess and hang-ups and all. You wouldn’t be you without them and you are beautiful to me. The question is: what do you want?”

What did she want? Having a relationship—a real relationship—with Clark was so much bigger than whether she wanted Clark or not. She knew she wanted him; she loved him. But a real relationship would require her to be as fierce in her personal life as she was in her professional life. It meant things like telling Clark the kinds of things she never told anyone—everything from her past to her closet Ivory Tower obsession. It meant sharing herself. It meant being honest about her own secrets and continuing to work through the ones she’d already discovered. She mentally grimaced, realizing that she could only get so far by herself which probably meant that it was time to call Dr. Friskin. Having a real relationship would be a huge step.

And there was the whole dating Superman thing: she’d always wanted to support him, to provide companionship, and to be there for him after rescues, but now that she was faced with

the reality—could she actually do it?

For a moment she considered telling Clark “no,” that she wasn’t ready and wasn’t sure she ever would be, but then the thought of life without him hit her once more. If she refused, he’d move on, eventually date and marry someone else. She didn’t know how things would go if they tried a relationship, but she was certain she never wanted to be without Clark.

She took a deep breath, straightening her spine as she resolved to meet the challenge head-on, to refuse to let her past determine her future. She reached up to cup his cheek. “Yes, I do want us. I don’t know how this will go. You know I’m a mess. I realized on my wedding day that I don’t want to be without you though.” She hesitated, then plowed on, remembering how heartbroken she’d been on her wedding day realizing she’d never told him how she really felt. “I love you, Clark.”

He put a hand over hers, drawing her closer. “I love you too, Lois. We’ll just figure it out together.”

“Yeah,” she said, leaning towards him.

He took the hint and kissed her. It was everything he’d remembered and more. Kissing her without the secret between them, here in his Clark clothes without his glasses, knowing that she loved him, made every single one of his daydreams pale. He pulled back, sliding his hand up to caress her cheek.

“So what now?” she asked, looking up at him, a smile that felt permanent on her face.

He shrugged. “We take it a day at a time?”

“Yeah.”

“And”—he glanced at the clock—“it’s the middle of the night. Want me to take you home and maybe we can do something tomorrow on our day off?”

“That sounds nice. What’d you have in mind?”

“We haven’t done pizza and a movie in a while, or we could go out on a real date. Maybe I could even take you to that Chinese place you like so much.”

Her eyes narrowed as she realized how Clark was always able to find such good food. “It’s in China, isn’t it? That’s why you wouldn’t tell me where it was.”

He grinned. “Yup.”

She couldn’t help but smile back; he was so boyishly pleased. “How about I call you in the morning whenever I wake up? How much sleep do you need anyway?”

“Less than you,” he said teasingly.

“No wonder you can eat whatever you want and still look like that!” she exclaimed.

Clark chuckled fondly. He’d known that Lois would be curious about every single facet of his powers and that she’d intuitively grasp things left and right, but it was still fun to watch. “I get most of my energy from the sun. I do need some sleep, but only about four hours per night. It was more when I was a kid. And I eat because I like to eat, not because I need to. My metabolism doesn’t seem to have a problem with whether or what I eat.”

“I guess I’m going to be finding out little things like that for a while, huh?”

“Isn’t that what dating is all about?” he said with a smile.

“I guess.”

“So, want me to take you home?”

“You mean walk me home?”

“No, I mean fly you home,” he said with a grin. “I’ve always wanted to fly you somewhere as myself.”

Lois opened and closed her mouth. Sure a part of her had dreamt of that when she’d imagined dating Superman, but it had been in a this-will-never-happen kind of way. “I’d love that!”

“We can even take the scenic route if you want.”

“Um, okay,” Lois said.

Clark stepped away from her and spun into the Suit.

Lois gave a little gasp as she realized how quickly he was

able to change. “No wonder you can pull off being two people. I never even realized that I’d never seen both of you together until I was reading your story.”

Clark held out a hand and Lois took it, walking to stand right in front of him. Holding onto her hips, Clark lifted them off and flew them out the window. “That’s definitely part of it,” he agreed.

As Clark lifted off with Lois in his arms, Lois put her arms around his neck, her heart racing as she realized that it was the fulfillment of all her dreams, but at the same time better than anything she’d ever imagined. Somehow even with Clark in the Suit, he was still himself. Superman was the fantasy, but Clark—the Clark who was both Clark and Superman—was the real thing. She could never have made a life with Superman, but a life with Clark was a definite possibility. He was right. She did know him—maybe not as well as she wanted to, but that was what dating was for, as he’d said.

“So what’s the scenic route entail?” she asked coyly.

“What do you want it to entail? This isn’t the last time I’ll take you flying, so we don’t have to do much if you’re tired.”

“I am tired, but I’m enjoying this too much to want to go home any time soon.”

Clark thought for a moment, then flew them high enough that they could see the sunrise over the curve of the earth. “How’s this for scenic?”

“It’s beautiful,” Lois said, looking around in awe.

“Yes, it is,” Clark said, staring down at her. “And it’s even more beautiful having someone to share it with.”

Lois caressed the nape of his neck, once more realizing how lonely Clark must have been. Not only had he spent his life hiding, he had so many experiences that he couldn’t share with anyone. She pulled him closer, pressing a soft kiss on his lips. “Thank you.”

“For?”

She waved a hand towards the sunrise. “This. For being you. For letting me see the real you. For pursuing me all those months ago when we first met. I’d never appreciated how much effort you went to until I was trying to pursue a friendship with you. We never would have gotten here without you.”

“It was worth it. Trust me, the pleasure is all mine,” he said, tightening his hold on her.

Before long, Lois began to hold back yawns, and Clark decided it was time to get her home. He flew down, skimming over Metropolis on the way to her apartment. Looking down he could see the Daily Planet rising up, whole and unblemished. Maybe that had been his problem the past few months, he mused—he’d been trying to figure out how to rebuild what they’d had before Luthor when he should have been trying to build something new.

Just like he’d done to the Daily Planet, Luthor had lobbed a bomb into their relationship—a bomb that had only been able to destroy so much because their foundation had been unstable. In a way Luthor had done them a favor: they might have taken much longer to actually deal with these issues without his intrusion into their lives—not that Clark was going to be thankful for the man any time soon. They’d spent the past few months sorting through the rubble and clearing away what was unusable. Yes, they would use much of the same foundation they’d had before, but many of the old blocks had been riddled with secrets and bitterness, poisoned by his lie and Lois’s scorn. They’d both changed and it was time to do something new. Something stronger than ever.

THE END