

Injustice For All

By Deadly Chakram <dwelf82@yahoo.com>

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Summary: After the execution of Lois Lane-Kent for a crime she didn't commit, things spiral out of control for the Man of Steel.

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"Have you any last words?" The voice was cold, practiced, emotionless.

"I'm truly sorry that Sykes died, but *I didn't do this*," Lois said defiantly. "I don't know how, but someone else is responsible and framed me."

The warden didn't move, but Clark could see the subtle rolling of his eyes.

"Anything else?"

Lois looked through the glass separating herself from the handful of people who'd turned up to watch her die.

"I love you, Clark," she said.

Clark saw tears brimming in her eyes, then the glimmers as they fell onto her cheeks. His fist clenched as he heard her sobs and increased heart rate. He could all but smell her fear. He came to a sudden decision.

His secret be damned, he was going to break her out of that death chamber.

"Lois!" he called out, determination falling over him as he got up out of his chair — so quickly that it fell over — and stepped forward.

I'm coming, he swore to her in his mind.

He saw Lois' eyes widen in surprise. She knew what he was about to do.

"And don't count on your friend, Superman, coming to bust you out of here," the warden said, his back to Clark, unaware that he was about to eat his words.

Another guard moved to the warden's side, a small lead box in his hands. Clark saw it only too late. The warden nodded and flipped open the lid. Inside the observation room, a second guard opened an identical box. Clark crashed to the floor as the assault from the Kryptonite hit his body, while inside the death chamber, at a word from the warden, the lethal cocktail of drugs was injected into Lois' veins.

"Clark!" he heard her cry out.

A scream ripped from his throat.

It felt like his very soul had been torn away, leaving nothing but pain in his otherwise hollow shell of a body.

How long he lay there, the pain in his heart far greater than that caused by the deadly green stone, he didn't know. He wasn't aware of anything other than the knowledge that Lois had just been murdered. He never felt the gentle hands of his parents as they tried to help him. He never heard the wailing of the Lane family as their daughter and sister died. He couldn't hear it as Lois' pulse slowed, then fell heartbreakingly silent. He couldn't hear the last, shuddering breath that she exhaled. He never heard the warden confirm that Lois Lane, wife of Clark Kent, was well and truly dead.

Later, he stood by her lifeless body where it lay abandoned on a gurney, trying to will her back to life with the power of the love he had for her. But, of course, this was real life. In the end, it was Jonathan who finally had to pull Clark away from his vigil over the corpse.

The next few days were a blur for Clark. For the rest of his life, he could scarcely recall any of the details. A funeral was planned. Clark chose to have a two day wake to accommodate family, friends, colleagues, and anyone from the general public who might have wanted to say their final goodbyes to a woman who'd once been known as a pillar of truth and justice. The funeral mass was held in Lois' childhood church — he only hoped she would have approved of that decision. Lucy seemed to think that Lois would have, at any rate. At the cemetery, Clark secured a spot right at the top of a slight rise in the land, beneath the spreading branches of a massive maple tree. It was peaceful there. Secluded too, as it was in a far corner of the cemetery.

Only snippets of those bleak days remained in his flawless mind. Funny stories told about Lois, in an effort to make him laugh and smile, even if only for a heartbeat or two. Meeting new people from Lois' past. Seeing old faces he hadn't seen in years — friends of his, former Daily Planet staff members — and family members he'd only met at their wedding, only a couple of short months before. Noticing that far fewer people came to pay their last respects as he'd hoped or imagined, thanks to Lois' newly tarnished reputation. The halting, tear-filled eulogy he was barely able to deliver at the funeral mass. Watching as the pristine gray casket was lowered into the ground at the cemetery, wanting so much to jump down into that dark hole in the ground and die alongside her. The duel between his inner heartbreak and total numbness.

Mostly, he forever after carried guilt in his heart.

He'd failed Lois. He'd let her go to the meeting with Sykes alone. He'd failed to find the evidence he needed to clear her name and save her life. He hadn't been able to push past the Kryptonite poisoning to break down the walls separating him from Lois when she'd been strapped to that chair, with that accursed IV in her arm, ready to receive the chemicals that ended her life.

Guilt that he eventually *did* find the evidence that proved Lois' innocence. Evidence that plenty of people rejected as fabricated anyway.

Then there was the guilt over all the things he hadn't been able to do *with* Lois. The anniversaries they never got to celebrate. The children he'd never helped to give her. The life he hadn't been able to show her, despite the fact that she was the *most* deserving person on the planet. The happy home life he'd promised her, the one she'd never had as a child. The loving, secure family life her warring parents had robbed her of having.

He'd never grow old with her.

The day after the burial was the hardest part for Clark to deal with in the aftermath of Lois' death. Family and friends went back to their own lives, save for his parents, who stayed on for a couple of weeks in a show of support for him. Clark was left in his empty house — no longer his home — unsure of what to do. Loneliness descended on him. He felt...tired. Tired of hurting. Tired of living.

Tired of fighting for justice when the justice system had so badly failed both Lois and himself. He felt lost too. What was he supposed to do now? Where was he to go? Metropolis, once the place he'd been searching his whole life for, was suddenly as unfriendly and uninviting as an alien planet. The Daily Planet felt like a prison.

But he had nowhere else to go. So he stayed in the house of broken dreams and continued working at a paper he no longer felt any passion for.

And Superman?

For the first time in Superman's few years of life, he ignored the calls for help, at least in those first difficult weeks.

In fact, for the first weeks after Lois' death, he did only three things — work to clear his wife's name, sit by her grave, and sleep only when he passed out from sheer exhaustion. He didn't eat. He barely spoke, unless it was absolutely necessary. Words took too much effort for his emotionally drained state for him to waste them on anything that wasn't part of his investigation or spoken quietly to Lois while he sat vigil at her final resting place.

Slowly, he felt his heart harden to the world. He all but stopped caring about anything. He withdrew from everyone and everything. And people respectfully gave him his space. Even Jimmy didn't press him, and he was like a brother to Clark. Everyone just assumed that, at some point, Clark would snap out of it and return to his old self, even if Clark himself knew that there would never be any going back to the man he'd once been.

Things only unraveled further from there. Overcome with shame over a testimony he couldn't even remember giving, Perry took his own life — a single bullet that tore through the roof of his mouth and into his brain — not even a month after Lois' death. Ellen Lane slipped back into old habits and eventually drank herself into liver failure and death, while Sam threw himself into his work, almost completely disappearing off the map. Lucy *did* disappear, running off with some guy she'd met over the internet. Clark had tried searching for her, but it soon became apparent that she didn't *want* to be found. Jonathan and Martha's home was hit by a tornado while Clark was abroad, dealing with a mudslide. Clark buried them in the Smallville cemetery in one plot, knowing they would never have wanted to be separated, even in death. Jimmy eventually quit the paper and went on to open his own photography studio, his passion for exposing the worst of society gone after losing his mentor and his two best friends — one to death and one to grief.

In less than a year, Clark had nothing left to live for. Nothing left to protect. Nothing left to fight for.

Oh, he still kept up the facade of Superman. There were people out there who still needed help. But he wasn't the same Superman the world had known before Lois' murder. He rarely spoke a word, unless it was to reassure someone he was saving, or to ask police or fire officials for a briefing before he walked into a situation. But that was it. The press didn't get a word out of him. Bystanders were ignored. Courts never saw him. His statements to the police were typed up and dropped off at super speed so that no one saw him, let alone tried to speak with him.

More and more, he felt his life slipping away. Superman slowly consumed him, while Clark Kent fell to the wayside and faded. Eventually, he gave up on trying to be Clark. He sold the house he and Lois had so eagerly bought together and, instead, built a humble lodging for himself out of ice and snow in the frozen nothingness of the Arctic. It wasn't home. Not by a long shot. Nothing had been home for him since his soul mate had died.

His zest for journalism burned out and died, leaving not even a single glowing ember or spark behind. So it was the easy and natural thing for him to do when he handed in his resignation to the *Daily Planet*. Perry's successor, a hard-bitten woman named Daniela Waters, had tried to convince him to stay, but Clark simply hadn't had the heart to. Each day he sat down at his

workstation, looked over to what had been Lois' desk and relived all of the excruciating pain her absence caused. Still, he knew that seeing it empty would be far easier to bear than when someone else eventually occupied that space. He didn't want to see the day when some other woman or man took over the desk and erased the fact that it belonged to Lois Lane.

Finally, the day came when Clark Kent ceased to exist altogether.

No one noticed.

But the public had noticed the changes in Superman. And it demanded answers from the Man of Steel. Seeing nothing left to lose, Clark reluctantly called for a press conference. When the day came, he donned the costume of Superman and flew to the Daily Planet. It only felt right to keep that one piece of his past — Superman's link to the paper — intact.

"Good evening, everyone," Clark said as he touched down in the newsroom.

Pens flew into action as he spoke. A hundred cameras flashed. Video cameras whirred into life. Audio recorders made copies of every word he spoke.

"I know you all have questions about my recent...change in behavior," he said hesitantly, choosing his words carefully.

"More like an entire personality shift," someone mumbled. Scattered agreement followed.

"The thing is," Clark continued, ignoring the remark, "there's been a lot of changes going on for me lately."

"Yeah," someone else shouted. "Your little girlfriend, Lois Lane, got what she deserved."

"Lois was innocent!" Clark couldn't help but shoot back, harsher than he'd intended. "She was innocent and they killed her anyway."

A snort of derision came from the same man. "Even if she was, so what? It doesn't explain your sudden bad attitude."

"*They killed my wife!*" he bellowed, so loudly it nearly shook the Planet's foundation. "*What do you expect of me?*"

Too late, he realized what he was saying. In a rare event, the entire newsroom went stock still and silent. Indeed, the very world seemed to be shocked into muteness. It lasted only a few precious heartbeats before the explosion of disbelief, anger, accusations, questions, and even sounds of approval began. Clark motioned for everyone present to settle down.

"Yes," Clark said, in a calmer, quieter voice. "Yes," he said again as the last grumbles died down. "That's right. I'm...I was... Clark Kent. I've lied to the world for long enough. But, now I have nothing left to lose. No loved ones to protect by keeping my true identity secret. No real life that I'm trying to preserve. But now? Now Clark Kent is dead. My wife's death..." he paused, swallowing around the lump in his throat. "I've no reason left to be the man I was. So this...this farce of a superhero is all that's left."

A rapt silence ruled as everyone awaited his next words.

"I'm sorry," he finally said after a moment. "I'm sorry I've lied to the world all this time. I'm sorry for the deceptions I've pulled, to maintain the lie that Clark and Superman were two different people. I'm sorry that I was selfish enough to have ever thought I could have a real life, outside of my powers. But the truth is...while I had a normal life and all the things that went into it — cooking, paying rent, doing the laundry, going to the movies, planning my wedding — I loved it. Being Superman...it was never the life I wanted. This...this cardboard cutout of a hero that I've become...it was born out of a desire to help. It was my way of reconciling the fact that I have these extraordinary powers. It sprung from a misguided belief in the justice system. Clark was always the real man behind the hero. I grew up as Clark. I lived as Clark. I always thought I would die as Clark."

He closed his eyes for a second as he sighed sadly. "But Clark died the moment Lois did, even if I played as Clark long

enough to prove my wife's innocence. So now, here I stand, all that is left of me. I know I have no right to ask anything of anyone, but... I'd like to ask that my privacy be respected. No questions about Clark or the life I used to live. No questions about Lois. I won't answer them."

"What about Superman?" a young woman near the front asked. "Are you... still going to help?" Nervousness danced in her words, as though she feared that he might say no.

Clark almost mustered a saddened half-smile. Almost.

"Of course," he said. "For as long as I have strength in my body, I will do what I can to protect the innocent people of this planet."

"CK! CK!" called out a familiar voice.

Jimmy.

Of course his old friend would be there to see Superman speak. He'd been a true friend to both of Clark's personalities — the human and the alien hero.

"Jimmy," Clark said, this time the ghost of a smile gracing his lips.

"Will you ever... you know... be CK again? This Superman thing... it's not permanent, is it?" Sadness shot with fear suffused the younger man's words.

Pain lanced Clark's heart as he slowly shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy. But Clark has no more reasons to live." He glanced around the room at all of the reporters clamoring for his attention, so that they could ask their questions and get answers they could print in their articles. "No more questions," he said, knowing his tone was brusque.

Carefully, he lifted up off the ground and floated toward the open window of the Planet's bullpen. Not long before, he'd flown out that window to help his fellow Kryptonians avoid a civil war. Back then, Superman had flown away from his press conference, not knowing if he'd ever return to Earth and the people he loved, everything in the world pulling him back, compelling him to stay. Now, Superman was flying away, without a single reason to look back, no threads of life keeping him anchored to the world.

When he was high enough, he turned and sped through the window, fast enough to tear apart the sky about the building with a sonic boom. He knew, from experience, that people had come to associate the sonic boom with the fact that Superman would not be returning to that place. They would know that the press conference was now truly over.

With nowhere else to go, he headed back to the lair he'd created for himself in the frozen north. He sat down on a thick blanket as soon as he was inside, then picked up his favorite picture of Lois — a shot of her, alone, laughing on their wedding day as they celebrated at the small, intimate reception they'd thrown. She looked so incredibly happy and full of life in that photo. Looking at it, it was hard to believe that someone so young, so good, and so giving could have been so senselessly executed. Not only executed, but ruthlessly set up so another could benefit from her murder.

"Well, I've gone and done it now, Lois," Clark told the image of his wife. It made him feel better to speak aloud to her, as though she was sitting right next to him. "The world now knows who Superman used to be. I didn't mean for it to happen. It just... came out in the heat of the moment. I'm tired, Lois. Tired of lying. Tired of pretending. Tired of holding in my secret when there's no reason left to *keep* it a secret. I have nothing left to protect. Everyone I care about is gone. Well... there's Jimmy. But no one associates him with Superman. Not the way they did with Lois and Clark, at any rate."

He sighed noisily. "I don't know if what I did is right or wrong or if it will even make any kind of a difference whatsoever. But what's done is done. There's nothing I can do to change what happened today. And the weird thing? All my life, I've feared this moment — when my secret would get out and everyone would

know about Clark Kent's extraterrestrial roots. But now that it *is* out there for everyone to know... I'm actually really okay with it. Like I told the world, Clark Kent is dead. The justice system killed him in the same instant that they executed you for a crime you never committed."

He paused for a moment, just gazing at that frozen moment in time that he held in his hand, taking in all the details of her laughing, smiling face. "Ever since I was a child, I was taught to believe in the justice system. Be good, do good, and good things will happen to you. Be bad, do bad, and bad things will happen. I was naive enough to believe those lies. Never again. Karma is an idiot's invented notion. The legal justice system is a joke at best. You were the best person I've ever known and..." He bit back a sob that was threatening to overtake him, but he couldn't stop the tears that leaked from his eyes and raced down his cheeks.

"I miss you, Lois," he said after a few minutes of struggling to master his emotions. "Every second of every day. You made me a better person. You gave me a million reasons to believe in the good in the world. All my life, I'd strived to be the best person I can be. Helping others both with and without my powers. Saving people. Fighting injustice. Preventing wars. Putting criminals behind bars to make the world a safer place. Destroying an asteroid the size of Metropolis so that it wouldn't turn this planet into comic dust. Forgive me, Lois, I know you'd hate hearing this but... I feel like... to what end have I done these things? The world's no safer than it was five years ago. Sure, maybe Nightfall didn't wipe out all life on Earth, but decent people still can't walk down the streets at night without the fear of being raped or mugged or killed. Countries still teeter on the edge of war. There is still theft, violence, people who go hungry or who shiver on the streets without anywhere to go."

He sighed again. "Superman can't even put a *dent* into it all. Every time I catch one criminal, more just pop up in their place. Even with the other 'supers' helping out... our efforts amount to pretty much nothing. Meanwhile, the people we care about get hurt." He paused for a moment, his heart breaking to think of his next words. "I failed you, Lois. In every single way, I failed you. As a friend, I lied to you about my powers, because I was afraid of losing you. I flaked out on you constantly, even though I knew that for you, trusting someone enough to allow them to befriend you — *especially* as a best friend — was a huge deal. As a boyfriend, I still hid my abilities. Instead of trusting you, I constantly ducked out on you, usually right in the middle of important discussions. I made you feel like I didn't care about you or that I was too afraid of commitment to give you the life you deserved. As a fiancé, I left you behind on Earth while I agreed to help an alien race who, as I later learned, are *not* my people. And as a husband, I let you go, alone, to meet with a source. I should have gone with you. Even if I didn't go as Clark, I should have hovered nearby as Superman, just in case. But I didn't. It's my fault that everything happened the way it did. I'm sorry, Lois."

He knew what she would say, if only she could.

It's not your fault, Clark. I'm the one who insisted that I go to the meeting alone. You can't blame yourself for something that was completely out of anyone's control. I was framed, plain and simple.

"If one of us had to die," he whispered morosely, "it should have been me."

It was truthfully the way he felt. He wished everyday that the Kryptonite the prison warden and the other officer had kept out as a precaution against Superman rescuing Lois Lane had managed to kill him. He loathed the fact that he was still allowed to live on while his soul mate lay decaying in a grave, unjustly killed by a greedy district attorney and a demented professor. Oh, the truth had come out as Clark had found the proof — too late! — to clear Lois' spotless name. But even then, D.A. Michael Clemmons had managed to get the lightest sentence possible. And while Clark

wasn't a man who sided with death and violence, it seemed more than unfair that Clemmons got to live while Lois didn't.

"Don't worry, Lois," he said, once more looking at the photograph. "I'm not looking to end my life. As much as I want to be with you, I know there's still work for me to do before I cross over to the other side."

He brought the frame to his lips and reverently kissed the glass before returning the photograph to the rough shelf he'd created out of ice. Then he lay down on the blanket, but sleep was elusive. He wound up staring at the picture of his wife.

"I love you, Lois," he whispered to the empty, lonely space around him.

For a couple of hours, that's all he did. Just laid on the floor, staring numbly at the image of Lois. Eventually, he got up and forced himself to leave his little lair of isolation and fly around, listening for those in need. For hours, he tended to one emergency after another. He was about to head back to what now served as his home, to rest for a couple of hours when his sensitive hearing picked up something.

"Clark? Clark Kent!" came one jarring cry. "*Clark Kent!*"

"Jimmy?" Clark asked, screeching to a halt, up amongst the clouds.

"CK, I know you're out there somewhere!"

Jimmy's voice was clear and strong, with no hint of fear or pain in it. It made Clark curious. He decided to fly down and see what it was that he wanted.

"Jimmy?" he asked cautiously, as he came to a light touchdown on the roof of Jimmy's apartment building. "Are you okay?"

"CK," the younger man acknowledged, turning around to face Clark. Relief was evident in his features, as if he hadn't really believed that Clark would respond to his call. "You came. I wasn't sure. I've been trying to reach you since the end of the press conference."

"I'll always come if you call and it's possible for me to get here," Clark swore. "You're my friend, even if I've been a crummy one myself lately."

Jimmy shook his head. "I never faulted you for withdrawing from everyone. I can't swear that I would have handled things any differently, had it been the woman I loved."

"Thanks for understanding," Clark said with a slight bow of his head. "So...what can I do for you? What do you need?"

"Just...to talk," Jimmy responded hesitantly, as though afraid of scaring Clark off.

"Jimmy..."

"No, listen," Jimmy said, shaking his head again. He sighed. "So...it's true then."

"What's true?" Clark asked.

"You really *are* Superman," the photographer replied, awe in his voice.

Clark closed his eyes for a second before answering, "Yeah."

"Cool," he breathed, that same, child-like awe coating his words and gracing his features. "I mean...I think that's really great, CK."

"You aren't offended that I never told you?" Clark asked warily, remembering all too well how hurt Lois had been when she'd figured out his secret life.

"Not at all. I get why you did it, CK. Protecting those you loved. Giving yourself a chance of a normal life. Not allowing the man in blue to swallow up your identity. I get it, CK," he repeated, shoving his hands into his coat pockets.

"Jimmy...I'm not..." Clark had to turn away, his next words so hard to say to the brother of his heart. "I'm not CK anymore."

"That's where you're wrong, CK. Like it or not, Clark Kent is still alive, somewhere inside of you, even if you feel like he's gone forever."

"He *is* gone, Jimmy," Clark argued, placing his hands on the

high brick wall that ran around the roof's edge. "He had no purpose in this world, no reason for existing. All that's left is this avatar of Kryptonian powers standing before you."

"No purpose? Have you forgotten how many criminals you caught when you were working for the paper? How many slumlords you took off the streets? How many corrupt politicians you exposed? How many friends' lives you enriched? How much you've meant to me as a friend?"

"Jimmy, you know I value your friendship. You've always been like a brother to me. But I can do more to help people as Superman than I ever could as Clark. Admit it. You know it's true."

"No," Jimmy said, very firmly. "I don't believe that."

"Well...I do," Clark replied regretfully and with finality.

"Even so," Jimmy said after a moment of silence. "Can I still call you CK? I just...there's no way I can call you Superman, knowing that you're my best friend."

Jimmy's words hit Clark right in his heart and sent shockwaves through his soul. As he'd flown around, even though the world now knew his secret, Superman was the only name that had been used to call for him. Only Jimmy insisted on using the name he'd grown up under, the only identity which used to matter to him.

"Okay," he agreed.

Jimmy's smile was one of relief. "Thanks," he said.

Clark nodded once, unsure of how to proceed from here.

"Look...CK..." Jimmy said after a minute. He sounded uncertain of himself. "I know you're a busy guy and all but...if you ever need a friendly face or a listening ear, I'll be here for you. I may not be able to fix all of the rotten things that have happened, but with me, you *never* have to be Superman. You can still be Clark. And even if you don't want to talk but just want to...I don't know, have a meal with a friend or play video games or whatever, well, I'm here for that too."

"Jimmy..."

"In fact," Jimmy continued, steamrolling right over Clark's protest, lost in his own thoughts. It reminded Clark all too clearly of how Lois used to become so absorbed in her thoughts that she ceased to acknowledge the world around her. "I'll keep every Thursday night open. No late photo shoots. No late meetings with perspective clients. No dates. Nothing. Just a standing invitation for you to come over, if you want. I'll be right here, with the apartment window open for you. No need to call, of course. Just drop on by. Of course, you can drop by whenever, but Thursdays I can guarantee that I'll be around."

"Jimmy, don't put your life on hold for me," Clark said, feeling guilty that Jimmy would set aside one day a week for him, and knowing that it would be a rare thing, if at all, that he would take Jimmy up on his offer.

Still, beneath that wall of guilt that was washing over him, there was a spark of gratitude and a feeling like some iota of humanity was restored to him, albeit briefly.

Jimmy shook his head. "I'm not. Look, CK, you've done more for me than I can ever repay you for. You helped me find my courage when I was Perry's gofer. You cleared my name when I was accused of murder. You even helped me repair some of the damage to the relationship between my dad and me. You saved my life when that youth-sucker machine turned me into an octogenarian. And I...well...I miss you, CK. I miss grabbing some pizza and seeing a movie with you. I miss playing basketball with you after work. I miss running research for you and..." He abruptly cut off his words.

"And Lois," Clark quietly finished for him.

Jimmy nodded. "Yeah," he said in a matching tone. "And Lois. I never understood it, before you came to the *Planet*, why Lois was always nice to me, even when she was kind of frigid to the rest of the staff. But I always valued her friendship."

“She was a special woman,” Clark agreed.

“Yeah, she was.” Jimmy sighed and fell silent for a moment before speaking again. “I may be the only one who realizes it right now, but the world is a lot poorer for the loss of Clark Kent and the addition of a full-time Superman. So... will you come over, at least once in a while?”

“I’ll try,” was the best Clark could offer him.

It was enough. Jimmy nodded. “That’s all I ask. That and...be careful out there, okay, CK?”

Clark nodded. “Thank you, Jimmy. For everything. For not hating me for not telling you about who I am. For trying to save what’s left of my soul. For being a true friend.”

A neighbor’s radio caught Clark’s ear. He instantly turned in the direction of the source as he listened closely. Jimmy seemed to understand and fell respectfully silent. Clark grimaced. A nuclear reactor was leaking.

“I have to go,” he said to Jimmy.

“Then go,” Jimmy encouraged. “I just hope to see you soon.”

Clark nodded once before taking off like a shot into the cold night air. As Jimmy and his apartment building fell away from him, so did any of his recaptured humanity. And as he went about his business of saving innocent lives and fixing the leak, he once more slipped completely into the alien that his DNA proclaimed him to be.

Four more months passed before Clark had both the time and the heart to take Jimmy up on his offer to share a meal and friendly conversation. He was both nervous and looking forward to seeing the last remaining person on the planet that he actually cared for, and who still wanted to speak to him. He nearly chickened out of going. After all, Jimmy would never know if he lost his nerve — it wasn’t like he’d called in advance to say that he was going to stop by. But he knew Lois would have wanted him to do everything and anything that might give him a modicum of happiness. So he left the pauper’s shelter he’d built for himself and flew to Jimmy’s apartment. He stopped outside the window, though it was open and waiting for him to step inside, just as Jimmy had promised him. He knocked gently on the window frame.

Jimmy immediately looked up from his plate of baked ziti and his laptop. Clark saw the way the man’s face instantly flashed an entire pantheon of emotions — happiness, gratitude, relief, concern for Clark, even a little uncertainty about how to proceed, openness, welcoming friendship, and complete attention to the friend who hovered outside his sixth-floor apartment window.

“Hi,” Clark said quietly.

“Hi, CK.”

“Can I come in?”

“Of course. I’ve always hoped you’d take me up on my invitation.”

Clark nodded once in acknowledgement. Then he gently stepped into Jimmy’s home.

“It’s kind of brisk out tonight. Would you like me to close the window?” Clark offered.

“Yeah, thanks. That’d be great.”

Clark closed the window, but didn’t lock it, as he was planning on leaving Jimmy’s place the same way he’d come in. When he was done, he gestured to Jimmy’s laptop.

“Working on anything interesting?” he asked.

“Not really,” Jimmy said, moving into the kitchen. “Just a wedding I shot last weekend and two maternity shoots from the week before. You want some ziti, CK?”

Clark nodded. “Sure, thanks.”

“When was the last time you ate?” Jimmy asked knowingly.

“The night before Lois was murdered,” Clark admitted, his voice barely audible.

“Then I’ll give you an extra large serving,” Jimmy replied,

trying to lighten the mood, and trying to hide his shock. Clark didn’t blame him for his shock. After all, how many people really thought about Superman’s need for food — of the lack thereof. “I think you’ll like this. It’s my mom’s recipe.”

“I didn’t know you cooked,” Clark said, breathing in deeply all the wonderful scents hanging in the air. “But if it tastes half as good as it smells, you may have missed your calling as a chef.”

Jimmy chuckled. “Mom always insisted that I learn how to fend for myself, as she put it. Cooking, cleaning, laundry, ironing.”

“I think Lois would have argued the cleaning thing,” Clark lightly joked, remembering the complaints Lois had had when she’d stayed with Jimmy for a couple of days, not long after Clark had started at the *Planet*.

This time, Jimmy laughed deeply. “Yeah...well...as you can see, I’ve turned things around quite a bit since then.”

Clark glanced around at the mostly neat apartment. “Yeah,” he agreed.

“Here, CK,” Jimmy said, handing him a plate piled high with ziti and melted mozzarella. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Sure,” Clark said, moving toward the small wooden table in the corner of the living room, where Jimmy had been sitting.

“What do you have?”

“Beer, Pepsi, Mountain Dew, lemonade, ginger ale, coffee, tea, ice water...”

“A Pepsi would be great,” Clark said as he sat down, stopping Jimmy in his tracks.

“You got it,” Jimmy replied with a smile. He brought the can of soda to the table and sat down across from Clark. “I have to admit, CK, at first...I wasn’t sure you’d really ever come.”

“I wasn’t sure I would either,” Clark confessed, biting into a forkful of pasta. His eyes opened wide. “Wow! Jimmy! This is fantastic!”

Jimmy blushed. “Thanks. I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it? Maybe you *should* become a chef,” Clark said with genuine praise in his voice.

“Nah. I have a handful of recipes I do well, but other than those, well...I’m a much better photographer than I am a cook.”

“How *is* the photography going?”

“It’s going well,” Jimmy said, nodding to himself. “I’ve been working pretty steadily. Weddings, engagement shoots, maternity shoots, some magazine work, birthday parties and the like. I’d like to go on safari in Africa at some point to shoot the wildlife.”

“I bet you’d get some amazing shots,” Clark encouraged. “Let me know when, and I’ll fly you out myself.”

“Let you know? So I’ll be seeing you a lot more?” his friend asked hopefully.

Clark chuckled. “You keep making food like this and you won’t be able to get rid of me.”

Jimmy laughed a little. “Deal.”

A comfortable silence fell between them as they ate. Neither one spoke again until their plates were empty and their stomachs were contentedly full.

“So...how are you doing, CK?” Hesitation and concern suffused Jimmy’s words.

“I don’t know,” Clark said after a moment. “I’m a mess, Jimmy.”

“I’m here, if you want to talk about it,” Jimmy offered.

Clark nodded his appreciation and sighed heavily. “Since I was a kid, I knew I was different. I knew I’d never fit in. I could try, I could pretend, I could hide everything that sets me apart from everyone else, but I would never *be* like everyone else. Not really. As I grew up, I had friends, but I was always lonely. Always felt like the outsider I am. Always yearned for a normal life. Then I met Lois and, for the first time in my life, I felt...like I was a part of the world, not just some...some visitor just here to...I don’t know. Observe the world? Lois gave me a sense of home. Once

she learned my secret...for the first time in my life, I felt...*safe*. She was my heart, Jimmy. My soul. My reason for being.”

“She was a good woman.”

“The best,” Clark agreed. “Without her, I’m lost. Part of me misses being Clark. Part of me feels free, that I don’t have to pretend to be normal anymore. It’s almost a relief, not having to keep that delicate tightrope walk of appearing human every second of every day. Part of me hates being Superman.”

“You...really?” Jimmy asked, scrambling for words. “I always got the impression that you enjoyed being Superman.”

Clark sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “It’s complicated. I love helping people, Jimmy. I always have. It gives me this...this rush, you know? To save a life. To catch a criminal. To do what I can to make this world safer. But now? Now, I catch these criminals and feel like I’m wasting my time. One gets locked up in jail, seven more pop up. I see all these evil people doing these horrific deeds. I see all this suffering. And so many times, I see those criminals getting these ridiculously light sentences. The man who framed and murdered my wife is serving the lightest possible sentence, *and* has the option for early parole if he behaves himself in prison. All because he used to be a big-shot, and because he knows too many people who have strings they were able to pull for him. Another case in point — three months ago, a seventeen-year-old murdered his grandmother in cold blood and, because he was six days shy of eighteen, he stood trial as a juvenile and got what amounts to a slap on the wrist, compared to what he probably would have gotten had he been charged as an adult.” Clark shook his head in disgust. “I never saw it before, but let’s face it. Justice doesn’t exist. This is a land of vanishing liberties and injustice for all.”

“You do so much good though, CK,” Jimmy reminded him. “So many people would be dead now, if not for you. Hell, our entire world would be extinct, if not for you.”

“Nightfall,” Clark muttered.

“Yeah, Nightfall,” Jimmy said with a serious nod. “Not a single person would be alive if not for you.”

“And I almost failed,” Clark pointed out.

“But you didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t. But I came too close to it for comfort.” He sighed and took a last, long sip of his drink. “Some nights, I lay awake and wonder if I’m even making a difference anymore. Would the world really miss Superman? It doesn’t miss Clark Kent, that’s for sure. Do I even *want* to be missed by people who only care about one half of the whole man? Or...well...the only half of the whole that’s left.”

“The world loves you, CK,” Jimmy tried to reassure him.

“Only because I’m the alien freak with powers who flies around doing his best to help. They care only about what I can do for them, Jimmy. Not for who I am.”

“I care,” Jimmy said softly. “You’re my best friend, CK. It kills me inside that you...well...aren’t living your life as CK anymore. It’s like...I don’t know. I guess it feels like you’re punishing yourself for something that isn’t your fault.”

“I’m not punishing myself, Jimmy. I just...I have no reason to continue on as Clark. Lois was my reason for being.”

“I’m not sure that’s the healthiest line of thinking, if I can be honest here,” Jimmy said gently, reaching across the small table and briefly touching Clark’s shoulder.

“Maybe not, but I can’t help how I feel,” Clark said, hanging his head.

“I know,” Jimmy sympathized. “Look, I don’t mean to pry or tell you how to grieve or anything but...have you...thought about talking to someone?”

“Like a therapist?”

Jimmy nodded. “Yeah.”

Clark bit his lower lip in thought and shook his head. “No. I tried that once, the first time I was exposed to red Kryptonite and

it caused me to feel apathetic. Dr. Friskin was nice enough, and I did talk to her, hoping to find an answer to my sudden change in attitude. But I was never comfortable with the process.” He shook his head as he made a firm decision. “No, I don’t want to talk to a doctor.”

“Okay,” Jimmy said with understanding and a single nod of his head.

“This...all of this,” Clark said, gesturing vaguely, “is something I need to figure out — or not — on my own.”

“Not on your own, CK. I’ll always be here. I may not know exactly what you’re going through, but I *do* know that you are my friend and that you’re hurting.”

“Thank you, Jimmy. It’s nice to have one person I can rely on.”

Clark did not make dinner with Jimmy a regular thing, though not through a conscious decision, at least at first. He did it when he could, but more often than not, he was tending to a rescue during those Thursday nights. And when he *could* make them, he found things slowly changing. As the years passed by, Jimmy fell in love with a woman named Leila and before long they were married. Shortly after the honeymoon, they became pregnant with their first child, a daughter named Samantha. More children followed — twin boys, Logan and Thomas, another boy, Anthony, and finally one more girl, Elizabeth.

Each time, Clark’s heart nearly burst with happiness for his friend. Each time, Clark’s heart nearly stopped beating under the weight of sadness it bore. It wasn’t that he begrudged Jimmy his happiness. He truly loved the fact that Jimmy had found his soul mate and had the family he’d always hoped for. But that didn’t cancel out the fact that Clark knew he would never have these things for himself, despite how much he might wish and pray to wake from the nightmare that was his life since Lois’ death. All he’d ever wanted in life was a wife and children of his own. And that had been stolen from him.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to find love again. It was the knowledge, deep down at the very core of his being, that Lois had been the one woman he’d been meant to love. No one else could ever compare to her. Everyone else seemed like pale imitations of the perfection that had been Lois. Besides, he’d given up on the idea of a normal life. There was only Superman left, and Superman wasn’t a normal guy with a normal life. Superman didn’t date, didn’t marry, didn’t raise children.

Superman was a perpetual loner.

To his credit, Jimmy begged, pleaded, and did his utmost to try to make Clark spend time with the family and to feel included, but all it did was to make Clark feel like an intrusive third wheel. All it did was drive the knife in Clark’s heart in a little deeper, every time he saw Leila smile at Jimmy the way Lois used to smile at him. All it did was kill him a little inside, every time one of the kids called him “Uncle Clark,” knowing that no tiny voice would ever call him “Daddy.”

For a long time after his bombshell announcement that Clark Kent and Superman had been one and the same, Clark avoided going to Lois’ grave. It seemed like the media set up camp at the headstone, waiting for the grieving widower to show up, to document the flowers he wanted to lay on his wife’s grave and capture images of the tears in the broken hero’s eyes. But, eventually, even those vultures, as Clark came to view them, gave up, and he was finally able to visit Lois’ final resting place in peace, without having to sneak in like a thief in the middle of the night.

He made it a point, once a year on their wedding anniversary, to go out for a nice dinner, and silently toast the wife who’d been torn from his side. After only a couple of years, the pattern became apparent and offers for free meals came pouring in from various restaurant owners. Clark was thankful, but gently declined the

offers. It didn't feel right to him, to be given something for free, just because of his superhero work and maybe some genuine pity for him. He paid for each of those meals with the money from his cashed-out bank accounts and left generous tips as well.

And each day, he found himself using his voice less and less until even the public started calling him the Silent Hero. That wasn't to say he never spoke at all, but it did become quite rare for him to give public statements of any kind. Amongst the masses, Superman speaking to a person — even in the throes of a crisis — became a bragging right and something to covet. But even those words were few and carefully selected.

The only time he spoke freely, and at length, was when he was alone and talking to Lois, hoping her spirit could still somehow hear him, even if she couldn't respond.

Life eventually became unbearable for Clark. He hated being with people. He hated being a recluse. He had no desire to attempt to go back to living a civilian life. He'd long since had any kind of joy in living exclusively as Superman. He grew listless and depressed. His thoughts grew ever darker.

Oh, he still empathized with all the innocent people he helped on a daily basis. He still felt the same heartache and guilt any time he wasn't able to save someone. But when it came to criminals, his tolerance was gone. He didn't intentionally hurt anyone, and he never put anyone in any kind of danger, but he couldn't muster up the energy to care if something *did* happen to a criminal. He'd been to a number of emergency situations where the local law enforcement had been forced to discharge their weapons against a suspect. Most had gotten away with moderate to severe injuries. A handful had been killed. None of those situations had moved Clark at all. His disdain for the criminals hadn't softened into concern because they'd been injured, as it once had. He felt nothing as he gazed upon their dead bodies laying on the ground in pools of their own blood.

And then, one night, the unthinkable happened.

A cry for help cut through the wind and rain as Clark patrolled Metropolis. Instinctively, he altered his flight path and sped to the source of the call. Within ten seconds, he was at the scene — a desolate, single-lane road just on the outskirts of the city. He found a single car crash, the sporty red vehicle smashed into a massive maple tree. Clark swiftly dropped from the sky, slowing only once he was close to the ground. He landed whisper-lightly on the rain-slicked roadway. Cautiously, he approached the destroyed car. Pained moaning came from within.

"Hello?" he called out, as he reached the side of the vehicle. The door was hanging on by a thread and creaked in the wind. "Can you hear me?"

"Su...Su...Superman," came the acknowledgement from within.

Clark's blood froze in his veins.

"D.A. Clemmons," he spat out.

"Help me," the disgraced former D.A. replied. "Please."

"Give me one good reason why I should," Clark replied coldly, his eyes narrowing.

It should have scared him, how easy it was for him to simply stand there and not offer his assistance. But the years without Lois had changed him. He felt neither satisfaction nor horror over the man's current situation. He made no move to help. He simply stood with his arms crossed over his chest, trying to hide how much it hurt his heart to see his wife's killer.

"I'll die if you don't!" the man pleaded desperately.

"So?"

"Please! I don't want to die!"

"Are you afraid to die?" Clark asked harshly.

"Yes," Michael Clemmons admitted after an excruciatingly long pause.

"Well, so was my wife when you had her murdered to advance

your own pathetic career."

"I was wrong about that!" Michael quickly added. "I regret what my actions caused."

But Clark wasn't convinced about the former D.A.'s sudden and convenient change of heart. He kept his arms crossed and shook his head.

"Too little, too late," he said in a voice devoid of any compassion.

"You're supposed to help people," Michael grunted through gritted teeth. "You've sworn to protect people!"

"So did you," Clark reminded him.

"You can't leave me like this!" Michael's voice was growing more strained. His breathing had turned ragged. His time was short now. "You're not the Superman the world once knew."

"You're right, I'm not. And you have yourself to thank for that," Clark countered. "You murdered my wife for your own gain. You got what amounted to a slap on the wrist for it. And then you got yourself out on parole way ahead of when you should have been eligible, by pulling every string and exploiting every loophole in what passes for a justice system in this broken country. Goodbye, Mr. Clemmons."

With a mock salute, Clark rose from the pavement and slowly flew up into the sky. Behind him, he heard it as the former D.A.'s condition worsened by the heartbeat, until Clark could no longer hear anything at all — not a gasp, not a cough, not the man's steady heartbeat as it slowed into nonexistence. But it wasn't until the next morning, when the news broke of how, hours after Clark had left the scene of the accident, another driver had come across the wreckage and dead body, that it finally hit Clark.

He'd allowed a man to die.

He could have at least *tried* to save him, even though the official police statement had made it clear that the man's injuries had been far too grievous to survive. Even if Clark had flown him to the hospital, Clemmons wouldn't have made it.

Instantly, Clark felt the weight of Clemmons' blood on his hands.

He reasoned with himself. Or, rather, he tried to.

He wasn't responsible for the accident that had claimed Clemmons' life. He hadn't caused the rain. He hadn't been the one to lose control over the car. He hadn't had a hand in the tree growing where it did, in a perfect path for the car to hit it. And, he told himself, over and over again, Clemmons had been too injured to save. Moving him could have even caused him to die faster.

It didn't work. The guilt tore him apart. And yet, in a twist that Clark couldn't understand, he was immensely glad that justice, such as it was, had been served. He'd never before believed in the concept of "a life for a life." But in this one circumstance, he could think of no more appropriate punishment for the man who'd murdered Lois Lane and, by extension, Clark Kent.

It was unnerving, to feel such a conflict of emotions raging so strongly inside of him. And to feel any degree of relief or happiness over another man's death, no matter how evil that man had been, scared Clark down to the very marrow of his bones. Sure, he'd felt a sense of relief when Lex Luthor had died — both times — but not like this. With Luthor, the relief had been born out of a knowledge that his loved ones were now safe. It was different with Clemmons. His death didn't protect anyone. Lois was already dead. Any relief brought about by Clemmons' departure from life was born out of a desire for vengeance.

For half a year, Clark wrestled with these demons. He barely slept, thanks to recurring nightmares that took place on the night of the accident. He shied away from the rest of the world, only tending to the worst disasters. He hated the sunlight, though it nourished his body, because he felt as though it exposed his great sin to the world.

Eventually, he couldn't take it anymore.

A plan formed in his mind.

It would be risky, he knew, but if he did it right, he would never have to suffer from such guilt again. So he carefully plotted every minute detail, and waited patiently for his opportunity. Then, finally, on the anniversary of Lois' murder, he set everything into motion. To have his chance on such a night felt almost poetic to him.

He flew to his destination at breakneck speed. He didn't care to take in all of the sights and sounds of the world. He hadn't for a very long time. There was no beauty, no magic, no wonderment left to touch the place where his heart and soul had once resided. He only wanted to do what needed to be done.

He arrived at S.T.A.R. Labs in the cold, dark, dead hours of the night. A skeleton crew of security were the only souls around. It was easy to avoid them, making his moves when they turned their backs. Likewise, once he was inside the building, it was easy to avoid the detection of the security cameras. All he had to do was move at top speed. Oh, he knew that, eventually, his actions would be noticed — he had to pause at each door to swipe the security key card he'd stolen from a dozing guard — but he hoped, by that time, his mission would be complete.

It was funny. He'd thought he'd be nervous, breaking into S.T.A.R. Labs like this. He'd imagined shaking hands, rapid breathing, his heart beating so fiercely it would nearly burst out of his chest. But he wasn't. He was calm and collected. He felt surer of himself and steadier than he'd had in a long time.

At last, he reached his second to last goal, all without incident. Dr. Klein's office. For a moment, Clark had to admire that the older man had opted not to retire, though he was well beyond when most men gave up working to pursue a more leisurely lifestyle. He quietly slipped inside the man's private office and quickly retrieved the specialized keys he kept there — and those, too, were kept safely under their own lock and key. Gripping them tightly, he moved on, striding purposefully to his final destination. In mere moments he was there.

The vault.

Swiftly, Clark applied the keys to the series of locks that kept the vault sealed shut and as secure as possible. He let the computer scan his handprint and retinas, knowing that only he and Dr. Klein's biometrics had been programmed into the machine. It recognized him and the door swung open. Clark took a moment to simply stand there and gaze in at the rows of lead boxes lining the vault's shelves.

"And now it ends," he whispered to himself as he entered the cramped room. "I'm coming, Lois."

He flicked open the locks on two of the largest boxes, which sat side by side. In one motion, he pushed the heavy lids open. Immediately, the Kryptonite's poisonous effects began to ravage his body. In agony, he fell to his knees. He doubled over, grunting against the rock's assault. In another moment, his muscles had turned to jelly and he collapsed fully, laying curled in a fetal position on the cold tile floor.

For long minutes he lay there, feeling his life bleeding out of him. Thoughts were obliterated by the searing, white hot pain tearing through his body and brain. Breathing became an exercise in torture. Nothing existed but the pain. Cleansing pain, as Clark had called it to himself, when he'd first had the idea to end things. Internal fire to burn away his sins. Poison to purge his body of the toxic thoughts and feelings he'd developed toward the world. A green death to spirit him away from life, for his will to live had long since withered away, turned to ash, and been carried away by the wind.

Darkness enveloped him. His vision faded, faltered, then died away. His ears heard nothing but the frantic pumping of his blood in his veins. At some point, he passed out, while the radioactive pieces of his home-world slowly killed him.

Clark's eyes gradually creaked open, then immediately shut

again as pain exploded in his head and against the brightness of the sunlight. He groaned, his entire body seeming to throb with every beat of his heart. He briefly wondered if this was hell, but it hurt too much to think and he abandoned his train of thought. He tried to sleep again, to dull the pain, and was successful. He must have slept for hours. When he awoke, the sunlight in his room had shifted position and changed colors.

This time, as he came into full wakefulness, he felt no pain. He experimentally moved his fingers and toes, then, finding that well within his ability, he tried moving his arms and legs. He lolled his head to one side, toward the light coming in from the large windows in the room. Beyond the glass, the sky was ablaze with reds and oranges, heralding the sun's departure.

But where was he?

The room he was in was completely foreign to him. He tried to take in all of the details, hoping it would give him a clue. Pristine white walls. A large fireplace of white and gray marble to his right, with a comfortable blaze dancing inside the hearth. Furniture of dark wood, possibly mahogany. Colorful paintings on the walls by an artist Clark didn't recognize. Bookshelves, each one without a single open space to spare on his left. The softest bed, pillow, and sheets he'd ever felt in his life. No, this couldn't be hell, he realized. Where were the raging fires and brimstone and pitchfork wielding demons he'd always heard tell of?

"Damn," he swore under his breath in a nearly inaudible voice. His attempt to join Lois on the other side had failed.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," a deep, familiar voice came from behind him.

Clark sat up with a start and whipped his head around toward the voice. A man dressed in jeans and a gray t-shirt was entering the room, looking relieved to see Clark finally awake.

"Bruce," Clark growled. "I should have known."

"Are you feeling okay?" the billionaire asked.

Clark shook his head. "I'm alive. So, no."

Bruce's eyes narrowed and his relief instantly turned to a scowl. "You mean, the Kryptonite..."

"It was intentional," Diana supplied as she sauntered into the room and leaned against the doorframe, no trace of a question in her voice. Clark was surprised to see her out of her usual Wonder Woman attire, wearing instead a pair of dark blue jeans and a salmon-colored turtleneck sweater.

Damn! Clark swore in his mind. He'd been so successful at avoiding the other superheroes in the world for so long.

"Yes," Clark admitted instead, no shame at all tainting the word.

"You moron," Bruce said, shaking his head. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"What Bruce means," Diana interrupted, trying to soothe over Bruce's angry accusation, "is that when Lantern found you, barely clinging to life at S.T.A.R. Labs, and brought you here, we'd hoped that it had been some kind of accident."

"It wasn't an accident," Clark snapped. "Maybe next time John should mind his own business."

"Why?" Diana asked. "You've always been the one who talks people down from suicide. Something like this... it just isn't you." She moved in closer as she spoke. She pulled a chair over to the bedside, close enough to be friendly, but far enough to give Clark some personal space.

"I did it because I'm tired," Clark said, watching as she sat down. "I'm tired of hurting. I'm tired of fighting. I'm tired of being alone. I'm tired of *life*."

"Clark..."

"No, Bruce. This isn't some knee-jerk, spur of the moment decision. I've been thinking about this for a while now. It's what I wanted," Clark said firmly. "What I *still* want."

"Then you're a bigger idiot than I thought," Bruce countered, following Diana's lead and pulling up a second chair. "Killing

yourself isn't the answer."

"Then what is?" Clark fairly roared.

"You aren't the only one with problems," Bruce calmly replied, crossing his arms over his chest. "I should know. But not everyone chooses to run from their problems."

Clark chuckled in a manner that let them know he wasn't actually amused. "Running? You think I'm *running*? You have *no idea* of what's been going on in my life."

"Then tell us," Diana said in a hard tone.

Clark fell silent, thinking. Was it better not to say a word? Or should he unburden his heart to these two former colleagues and risk their scorn? No, he *had* to tell someone about the crushing depression and guilt he felt, or he would go crazy.

"Clark?" Diana prompted after a couple of minutes had passed.

He sighed. "Okay," he said at last. He had to look away from them, or he'd be too embarrassed to continue. He looked down, instead, at the navy-blue comforter on the bed. "I guess...I should start by saying...I...I haven't been the same since...since Lois died," he managed to get out in halting tones.

"No kidding," Bruce deadpanned from the armchair he was sitting in.

Clark nodded once. "Her death...it's changed me. Aside from being severely depressed, I'm finding myself becoming more and more cynical about, well, everything."

"We've noticed that Superman has grown...harder, more distant," Diana said, almost to herself.

"Then, about six months ago, I...I did something I never thought I'd do. I...I purposefully let a man die."

Bruce's already-frowning face instantly deepened in concern, or maybe judgment, Clark wasn't sure.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his voice nearly slipping into the commanding tone of Batman.

"I came across a car wreck one night," Clark clarified. "When I landed, I realized it was the D.A. responsible for setting up and murdering Lois. He was hurt badly, and I know he would have died even if I'd done something to try to help, but...I didn't even try. I looked him in the eyes and *refused* to help him. I...I acted on vengeance. That's something I've never really done before. Not like this."

"And now you have the guilt of your actions," Bruce supplied.

Clark sighed again, heavily. "Yes. But it's more than that. Part of me is appalled that I did what I did. And part of me is happy that he's dead."

"So...you feel guilt for being glad to see him dead. And that's eating you alive," Diana said, as though looking for confirmation.

"Yes." Clark hung his head in shame. "My head...my heart... everything is a complete mess. I don't know what to do anymore. I don't even know who *I am* anymore."

"Well, killing yourself isn't the answer," Bruce repeated with certainty.

"And what is?" Clark asked, bitterness mingling with utter hopelessness in those words.

"Join us," Bruce said. "Come back to the Justice League. After all, it was *you* who first had the idea to create an allied network of heroes."

"Bruce is right. We need you," Diana added. "The two of us are doing our best but," she said with a shrug, "*you* were the glue holding things together. Everyone looked up to you. Respected you. Everyone was ready to follow you into whatever battles or situations or...whatever might come our way. How we've lasted these years without you...I don't even know."

"No."

"You could at least think it over," Bruce argued.

Clark shook his head. "I don't need to. Look, I'll admit it, I still think the League is a good idea. But I just don't have the heart to pretend that there's such a thing as 'justice' to fight for. Not

anymore."

"Everyone loses people they love," Bruce said in a hard tone.

"It's not just about Lois," Clark argued back. "Look, I've put a *lot* of people behind bars. Everyone from your local, run of the mill mugger, to your drug lords, to corrupt politicians, to serial killers. I've followed their stories as they've been put on trial and been sentenced. And you know what I've seen? Murderers that get less jail time than drug dealers. Rapists who get away with it because of some stupid technicality. Thieves that barely get a slap on the wrist and then are turned loose on the streets again just to become repeat offenders."

He shook his head after a moment. "I'm starting to think it just isn't worth it, to keep fighting."

"Of course it is!" Diana said, leaning forward in her seat just a little. "Okay, sure, I agree that sometimes the justice system fails. And it *is* frustrating. But that doesn't mean we should give up on the idea of making the world a better place. Just think of how many lives you've saved! Planes that were crashing, until you got to the scene. Hostage situations that you ended. Mudslides. Earthquakes. Fires of every kind that you rescued people from."

"Nightfall," Bruce added.

"I know," Clark said with a shake of his head. "I know it's not just about putting criminals away in jail. I know there are far more innocent lives that are directly — or indirectly — saved by the things I do. But...even that...it wears on me. All the people I *can't* save. All of the senseless death and destruction. All of the ways my powers — limitless as they may seem to everyone else — *are* limited. Every time I get to a crisis five seconds too late. Every decision I have to make, knowing that whoever I choose to help will live and the one I don't choose will die. Every natural disaster that I can't get to because I'm assisting at some *other* natural disaster, or police standoff, or apartment fire, or sinking cruise ship, or peace negotiation, or what have you."

He took a breath, hung his head, and sighed softly. "Lois was the light in all of that darkness. She was the one who healed my soul, more effectively than the sun heals my body. Without her... all of that darkness is crushing down on me. I'm not even sure how I've made it this long without her. I just can't do it anymore."

"The Clark I used to know would have reminded you that there are plenty of wonderful, beautiful things about that world to marvel at and draw strength and inspiration from," Diana said quietly, looking down at her hands in her lap.

"The Clark you used to know was a fool," Clark countered.

"Come back to the League," Diana offered again. "We're your friends. Not a single one of us hasn't felt like you do at least once. That our efforts are in vain. That we can't possibly ever do enough. We can support you."

"Look, I appreciate the offer, but I'm definitely not in the right headspace for that."

"Just...keep it in mind. The offer stands for as long as the League does," Diana said, giving him an encouraging, albeit small, smile. "You have our word on that." She looked to Bruce, who nodded his agreement.

"Thanks," Clark said gently, careful not to get her hopes up. He knew he would never return to the League. "I should probably go," he said after a minute of awkward silence. He made ready to get out of bed when Bruce's hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"You're not going anywhere."

"You can't stop me, Bruce," Clark challenged.

"Less than twenty-four hours ago, you were a hair's breadth away from death," Bruce said flatly, his voice brooking no argument. "You aren't going anywhere until you've had a chance to fully heal."

"I'm fine," Clark said.

"No, you aren't. Go ahead, try to float up out of the bed," Bruce challenged as he sat back.

Clark tried, and found, much to his chagrin, that the billionaire

was right. His powers, despite the fact that his body had laid in sunlight all day, had not yet fully returned. He'd come too close to dying. His body was far too drained. He would need more time before he was back to what passed for normal for him.

"Fine," he huffed when it became apparent that his friends were waiting for a response. "But only until I can fly. Then I'm out of here."

"Fair enough," Bruce said diplomatically. "Come on, Diana. Let's let him rest. Alfred will be along shortly with something for you to eat."

"No, wait," Clark said, sitting up a little straighter. "I've been asleep the entire day. I don't mind if you stay for a bit." As much as he hated to admit it, even to himself, it was nice to have people — other superheroes, in particular — to talk to, instead of the suffocating silence of isolation.

Bruce nodded once. "Sure. I'll ring for Alfred to come up now, with dinner for all of us."

By the next evening, Clark was back to his old self. All of his powers had been restored. He'd even felt well enough to leave his bed and walk about Wayne Manor. He'd been careful to stay indoors in areas with large windows, which allowed the sunlight to work its magic on his body. He dared not step outdoors. If it was known that Superman was hanging around Bruce Wayne's mansion, the rumor mill would spark. People might suspect that the billionaire playboy was more than what he seemed. People might even connect the dots between Bruce and Batman, if they thought about things long and hard enough.

Clark didn't want that.

It was bad enough that he'd stirred up public curiosity in general when he'd come clean to the public about his dual identities. It had created a bit of trouble for the other "supers" out there. He wasn't about to risk it again. So, instead, he had had to content himself to wandering about indoors. And, though he wasn't particularly interested in food, he did share his meals with his friends. He had to admit, the food was exquisite, and it was nice to eat. When was the last time he'd eaten? he'd wondered to himself as he'd finished the last bite of his breakfast. Since well before he'd allowed Mr. Clemmons to die, that was for certain. Probably on his and Lois' wedding anniversary.

Fifteen years.

He and Lois would have been married for fifteen years now. They could have had one or more teenaged children by now. They definitely — he was certain — would have had a few more journalism awards under their belts. Maybe even the coveted Pulitzer. He wondered if they would have still been living in their townhouse, or if their family would have needed a larger place by now. He wondered how different his entire outlook on life would have been, had Lois lived.

"Where will you go now?" Bruce asked that night, as Clark prepared to leave the mansion. He'd purposefully waited until the cold, dark, post-midnight hours, to help keep prying eyes blind to the fact that Superman was in Wayne Manor.

"I don't know," Clark admitted. "Maybe back to where I was living before. Maybe someplace new. I don't really belong anywhere."

"And you'll be all right?" Diana asked, concerned.

Clark shrugged as he put his back to them. "I'll never be all right. Not really."

"Promise me that you won't do...what you did...ever again," Diana pleaded.

"He won't," Bruce said confidently.

Clark spun back around. "You can't stop me, Bruce," he said, letting defiance ring in his voice.

"I already have." Was Clark imagining the sense of arrogance and pride in Bruce's words?

"Bruce?" Diana asked, confused.

"The stash of Kryptonite that S.T.A.R. Labs had? I've taken great pains to see that you'll never find so much as one radioactive atom of it, let alone enough for you to commit suicide with."

Clark could have punched Batman's smug face as he stood there, leaning against the wall, his entire body posture relaxed.

"That's not your decision!" he said instead, his anger and indignation erupting.

"It's not yours either," Bruce shot back. "The world needs Superman."

"The world was getting along just fine, well before I ever put on the suit," Clark argued, crossing his arms over his chest. "It will find a way to be just fine without me."

"That's not true," Bruce said, shaking his head, his voice calm but intense, like always. "The world has become a better place with Superman in it."

"Clark Kent too," Diana put in. "You've done so much good in both of your identities."

"An illusion," Clark said. "Yeah, sure, I can do something like put the head of Intergang behind bars. But all it does is make way for someone worse, someone far more evil, to move into that role."

"Clark, you aren't thinking straight," Bruce said.

Clark shook his head. "No. For the first time in my life, I *am* thinking straight. Seeing the world for how it really is, not through the rose-colored lenses of a dreamer."

"We've been talking," Diana interrupted, taking two steps forward and drawing Clark's attention from his self loathing. "Maybe you should take some time off. Bruce is willing to put you up here, in the manor. You'd have the run of the place, a roof over your head, food, and, most importantly, company. Or, if you'd prefer, you can stay in one of the rooms at the Hall. There's at least one of us around more often than not, so you'd have company but more than enough privacy too. What do you think?"

"It's a generous offer, but, if I stay here, I draw attention to the fact that Superman and Bruce Wayne are friends. That's not something we can afford — for people to suspect that maybe there's more to the billionaire," Clark said, once more putting his back to his fellow superheroes. "And I have no right to anything about the Hall. Not one of the rooms, not one of the candy bars we've got stocked away for meetings, not a glass of water from the kitchen sink. So, thank you, but I'm fine on my own."

"You aren't fine!" Bruce growled. "You need help. The world cannot afford to have a suicidal superhero flying about."

Clark paused a moment before answering. He moved his head to the side, not quite looking back over his shoulder.

"You're right," he said quietly. "A suicidal superhero would be a disaster. So...I quit."

And with that, he took off through the open window, never to look back.

Years passed. The world went from bad to worse. Crime rates rose. New terrorist groups sprouted up like weeds. Drug lords grew bolder. Once-"safe" areas became dangerous. Wars broke out — a few times, to the point where most of the world's population believed the end was near. Oh, there were still those who fought for truth and justice. Some groups even wore attire that bore Superman's S, to show both unity and an adherence to the ideals the former hero had once embodied.

Speculation about Superman ran rampant in the beginning. Had he died? Had he abandoned Earth again, as he had when the survivors of Krypton had come begging for his help? Had he retired? Had something else happened to him? Had his powers somehow vanished? Had he mentally snapped — from the unjust execution of his wife, from the stress of being the hero around the clock, from something else altogether? Had he gotten ill, somehow?

So Clark was forced to break his silence once again. He called

another press conference and made it official that he had quit the hero business, though he made it clear that his retirement didn't mean the world was on its own. After all, the Justice League still survived — however tenuous that survival really was, behind the scenes. And, even if it *did* collapse, Clark had faith that the individual members would still fight for justice in their own ways.

In retrospect, as the world deteriorated, Clark often wondered if he'd done the right thing in announcing his retirement. Had it made the world's villains bolder? Had those who might have otherwise been too afraid of being caught by the Man of Steel grown more confident in his absence? But what was done was done and he couldn't change it.

At first, it was hard to ignore the cries for help. Each one of them cut Clark's heart. But, eventually, apathy took the place of his once-tender, compassionate spirit. He learned to tune out the cries for help. He stopped checking on the news. He stopped caring about everything and anything. He felt himself wasting away as he hid himself from the world and everyone in it. He felt himself growing a little less "super" with each passing year. And still he hid in his icy cell of solitude.

All the while, he searched for any hint of where Bruce might have hidden the world's stash of Kryptonite, but his efforts remained in vain.

Then, one day, the unexpected happened. He became keenly aware of how *cold* he was. Up until then, not even the most extreme temperatures had bothered him. Oh, he could feel coldness or heat, but it was little more than an awareness. The cold couldn't penetrate his flesh to chill him down to his bones. He didn't shiver. He didn't experience coldness in the way that it could numb one's fingers and toes. Heat couldn't burn him. His skin never reddened in painful sunburns before peeling to give way to toasted tanned flesh. He didn't sweat.

But now he felt the cold seeping into deepest parts of his body. The tips of his fingers, his toes, even his nose were tingling with numbness. His body shook involuntarily as it struggled to get warm. His teeth chattered so hard he thought that surely they would chip against each other and break. He stood in the middle of his little cave, taking stock of his meager possessions. He picked up the framed photo of Lois.

"Looks like it's time to move on," he told the lifeless image, his voice creaking with the effort of speaking.

He picked up a spare cape and used it to carry his belongings, rather like a hobo's pack. Without looking back, he sped away from the frozen, desolate hell that had been his home in his self-imposed exile. He didn't even have to pause to plan where he'd go next. He knew just the place, and angled his flight path directly to the uninhabited speck of an island that he'd often used as a getaway back in his old life, before he'd even known Lois. It was perfect. The weather was pleasant all year long. Coconut trees, taro plants, even banana trees were in abundant supply, if he felt like eating — now a long distant memory for him. And he could easily fish or dive for things like lobsters, crabs, and shrimp.

Clark had to admit it, but he still loved that island, despite the sadness that had always accompanied it. It had forever been a place he'd retreated to when his loneliness had threatened to suffocate him. He'd never gotten the chance to share it with Lois, though he'd planned on bringing her there as soon as her trial was over. What a fool he'd been! He'd assumed that it would be an easy enough thing to prove her innocence. He'd seriously underestimated his and Lois' opponents.

Moments after leaving the world of ice and snow behind, he landed on the sandy shore of the island. He put his makeshift pack on the sand and stood for a moment, hands on his hips, contemplating his new home. There was a cave in the stone cliff side to his right, at ground level, well above the high tide line, right where the trees all began to grow cheek by jowl. It was the perfect spot, facing west, and giving him an uninterrupted view of

the sunset. All his life, he'd had a special fondness for sunsets — the colors had always seemed sort of magical to him.

He immediately claimed the cave as his new residence.

"Well, Lois," he said, later that night, by the light of a simple campfire he'd made on the beach, looking up at the stars glistening above, "how do you like our new home? I really wish I'd gotten a chance to show you this place in person. Just one happy memory of being here with you would have obliterated all of the sadness this place has always embodied for me."

He paused for a few minutes, just studying those heavenly points of light.

"I haven't been the same since you died. But, I think... I might be seeing you again soon. That is, if God or the universe or whatever can forgive me for all the hideous mistakes I've made in my life. I've turned my back on the world for a long time now. I've let my powers waste away, unused, where I'd once sworn to myself that I would use them to better the world. It's just been so hard to care about anything with you gone. It's not your fault. It's totally mine. I'm not strong enough to be without you. But now... I can feel my time growing short. It used to scare me, the idea of death. But I've been ready for death for many years now. I want to be with you, Lois. I only hope that you can forgive this pathetic shell of a man that I've become. Because I know I'm not the same man that you married."

Three months later, at the age of eighty-seven, Clark Kent, once known as Superman, quietly passed away in his sleep.

Lois woke up, tears streaming down her cheeks, wetting the pillow beneath her head. She blindly reached over to her husband's side of the bed, only to find it empty. Her eyes shot open, instantly jarring her into full wakefulness. She almost called out for Clark, but then she saw something in the glow of the streetlights that filtered in through the slats of the Venetian blinds on their bedroom windows. A sheet of paper, laying on Clark's pillow. She reached for it and then rolled onto her back before switching on the lamp on her night stand.

Lois,

Mass shooting in Arizona at a street fair. I might be a while. I didn't want you to worry. Be home as soon as I can. Love you!

Clark

The note, she knew, would have been fired off in a second or less as he raced to get to the scene. But Clark had still managed to retain the obsessively neat handwriting that was distinctly his. It made her smile, despite the lingering fear and sadness that was clouding her thoughts. In fact, she was so worked up that she thrust aside the bed sheets and got up. She threw on her winter bathrobe to ward off the chilliness of the night and the residual chill her dream had injected her body with.

She padded downstairs and into the kitchen. Normally, she would have gone straight for the carton of chocolate ice cream in the freezer. But not tonight. She didn't want anything cold. Instead, she fixed herself a hot cup of oolong tea — Clark had converted her into becoming a tea lover — and heated up one of the brownies Clark had made the night before in the microwave, just enough to make it warm, not hot.

She took her snack into the living room and settled on the couch. But before she could do so much as reach for the television remote, the doorbell rang. She glanced at the clock. Twenty after twelve.

"Who the hell could that be?" she muttered to herself, debating whether or not to she should answer the door at this hour.

Whoever it was out there was insistent though. The bell rang three more times before Lois finally abandoned what remained of her snack and answered the door.

"Who the hell..." she managed as she pulled the door open. She didn't get the rest of the question out.

"Sorry to bother you, Miss Lane...or, should I say, Mrs.

Kent.” A grin accompanied the words.

“H.G. Wells!” Lois said in surprise. “What are you doing here? Please, don’t tell me there’s another curse or something that we have to play *Back to the Future* to stop.”

“Nothing like that. But...I do need to talk to you. May I come in?”

Lois moved aside and gestured for the older gentleman to come in. “Of course. Make yourself at home. The tea kettle should still be warm. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“No, thank you,” he said politely as he stepped into her living room, while she hung his coat and hat up on a peg by the door.

“Here,” Lois said, joining him in living room and leading the way to the couch. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you, Lois,” he said with a soft smile that lasted only a moment before it fled again.

“What can I do for you? Clark’s not home, otherwise I’d wake him up to come and chat as well.”

Herb shook his head. “It’s not Clark I need to speak with. It’s you.”

“Me?”

He nodded slightly. “I wanted to talk to you about the dream you just had. The one so terrible it froze the marrow in your bones and exiled you from your bed to seek comfort in a midnight snack,” he said, nodding toward the remnants of her tea and brownie.

“How did you...?”

“I’m the one who gave you that dream.”

“You...what? I’m afraid I don’t understand,” Lois said, confused.

“It’s a bit complicated to explain, but what it boils down to is that I have a device that can implant memories into a person’s mind. I borrowed it from another dimension and the far distant future,” he said, anticipating her questions.

“Memories? But that was just a dream,” Lois said.

Herb shook his head again. “Was it *really* just a dream? Didn’t it have a certain feel of reality to it? Did it not invoke particular emotions, as you watched the events play out?”

Lois hesitated for several long heartbeats before answering.

“Yes,” she admitted. “Throughout the dream, I could *feel* Clark’s depression. His loneliness. His rage. His hopelessness. His cynicism and eventual apathy toward the world. It felt so real, like it was actually happening to me...even now, I can’t completely shake the feelings from my heart.”

“That’s because it wasn’t a dream. All of what you saw *will* come to pass. Unless, of course, you listen carefully to what I have to tell you,” Herb warned her.

Lois leaned forward in her seat just an inch or two. “I’m listening.”

“Good. Now then, in two days’ time, one of your old sources, a man by the name of Sykes, is going to contact you and ask to meet with you privately. He’s an unwitting pawn in a larger plot. He’ll hand you a gun that, unbeknownst to him, will be rigged to shoot on its own, regardless of the fact that your fingers will be nowhere near the trigger. You will be arrested, tried, found guilty, and executed. And Clark will lose his way. The promised utopia of the future will become, instead, a desolate, dangerous, terrifying dystopia, ruled by ruthless people like our old friend Tempus.”

“No,” Lois breathed, horrified. “Clark’s too good a man to let that happen.”

But Herb shook his head sadly. “In other universes, that might be the case. In this one, however, once the light in Clark’s world is gone — that is to say, *you* are gone — the darkness will take hold. His spirit will die alongside you. And the world will be doomed.”

“What can I do to stop this?” Lois asked, afraid for Clark.

“Don’t meet with Sykes,” Herb told her in earnest. “At least, not alone. Take your husband with you, in the guise of the superhero, should you choose to go to that meeting. Do not, under

any circumstances, take that gun.”

“Clark will destroy it before it can hurt anyone,” Lois vowed. “We’ll nail Mr. Clemmons *and* Jefferson Cole.”

Herb smiled. “I’m glad to see you remembered who’s behind the plot,” he said approvingly.

“How could I possibly forget?” Lois asked.

“Well, that’s the trouble with the device. Memories can be fickle things. Some people remember every last detail of what they’ve been shown. Others can barely remember the vaguest details, once they awaken. Most fall somewhere in between, remembering select pieces of the information.”

“Just...why? Why would anyone go to such a disgusting low to frame me for murder?” She feared the answer, but she had to know.

“Power, Lois. At least, the *promise* of power. Mr. Clemmons thought to use the trial as a public relations stunt. He’d capture a monstrous killer and the people would rally behind him when he ran for political office. It was never about *you*, per se. You were just—he paused and shrugged—a convenient target.”

“Well, that makes me feel great,” Lois muttered.

“Don’t take it personally,” Herb said, trying to make her feel better.

“Can I ask a question? About Clark?”

Herb nodded. “If I can answer it, I will.”

Lois nodded in turn. “After my...passing...he really put his back to the world?”

“I’m afraid so,” Herb said with a sigh. “As you know, there are many, many universes out there. Some are grossly different from this one — ones where Lex Luthor is a hero and Superman is less than noble. Some where Clark Kent is the cover for Superman. Even ones where *you* are the Kryptonian hero and Clark Kent is no more than your average Joe. And some very closely resemble this one. In some of those universes, your name is cleared and you and Clark go on to live long, happy lives together. In others, you die, and it only commits Clark more firmly to his personal vow to help the world. It depends on so many variables. It seems that your Clark, however, is particularly prone to his emotions. His heart is especially...not quite fragile, but...let us say, tender.”

“Is he the only one who...?” She couldn’t finish. The thought of Clark becoming so depressed that he’d actually quit being a hero and had tried to take his life was just too horrible to give voice to.

“No,” Herb said with a shake of his head. “This isn’t the only universe where your death has triggered such a downfall for both your husband and the world.”

Inexplicably, that lifted some of the burden from Lois’ shoulders.

“In that dream...vision...memory...thing,” Lois continued, her mind whirring, “Clark lived to be eighty-seven.”

Herb nodded. “That’s right.”

“Is that...?” She gulped, trying to force the words to come. “Is that...set in stone?” She couldn’t even look the time-traveler in the eyes. She kept her gaze trained on her lap.

Herb smiled fondly. “No, it isn’t. At least, I don’t believe it is. In most other universes, when those Clarks have been allowed to live out their natural life spans, they have lived long past the age of eighty-seven. On average, it’s been about one hundred and three. I think your Clark just...gave up. He lost his will to live. And it killed him well before his time.”

“And those other Clarks?” Lois asked, pulling her gaze from her fingernails and looking Herb straight in the eye. “The ones with a Lois who survived? How did they take her eventual death? I mean, one hundred and three is a long time for a regular person to live. You can’t tell me all of them got so lucky as to celebrate that many years with their husband.”

“Ah,” Herb said, smiling and with a twinkle of mischief in his

eyes. “But most of them have!”

“How?” Intrigue dueled with Lois’ disbelief.

“Pregnancy.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Did you know, Lois, that when a woman becomes pregnant, some of the baby’s shed cells stay within the mother? Yes, it’s true,” he said in response to her surprised look. “Those cells can migrate all over the mother’s body and become part of her other organs...brain, blood, heart, et cetera. In your case...at least in that of your otherworldly counterparts, those cells, and the DNA they contained, changed you. You never developed the ability to fly or see through walls, but you seem to have gained the aura that protects Kryptonians exposed to a yellow sun.”

“So...what? The others became...immortal?” Lois replied, half joking, half confused.

Herb chuckled. “No, not quite. Everyone dies eventually, Lois. Even Superman. But that aura did extend their lives past what it probably would have been.”

Lois fell silent as she frantically tried to process this new revelation. After a minute or two, she spoke again.

“So...this means we can have children together? I know Clark’s worried that we might be too different to be able to successfully bring a child into this world.”

She let the hope in her heart shine through. Truth be told, Clark’s concerns scared her too. Though she’d never thought it possible in her past, she now very much wanted to be a mother. The idea that she might never be able to conceive a child with her husband hurt her heart in ways she couldn’t properly express, and they hadn’t even discussed when they might start trying.

Herb paused, sending Lois into silent panic.

“I don’t know,” he admitted somberly, after what felt like a year. “Most of the other Lois and Clarks I’ve studied are able to have children. Some, for various reasons, can’t for relatively mundane reasons like ovulation issues, egg quality, sperm counts, and the like. Some can’t because of unique variations in their particular DNA.”

“But most can?” Lois asked, holding her breath as she waited for the answer.

“Most can,” the time traveler confirmed for her. “Some have only one child, some have six. Most have one baby at a time, some of them have twins, even triplets, and, in one case I know of, quadruplets. There’s really no way I can guarantee anything for you, you see. In this universe, the only story that’s been written is the one you saw in your dreams. There’s no telling what might happen when we rewrite that story.”

Lois nodded, swallowing around a lump in her throat. “I guess I didn’t think about it that way,” she confessed.

Herb nodded. “I wish I could put your mind more at ease.”

“No, no. You’ve done more than enough. I owe you more than I can say. Thank you, for coming to warn me about the future.”

“If my visit helps you and Clark both to live, it is enough,” Herb said soberly. “And now, I really must be on my way. It’s getting late and I’m sure you’d much rather get some sleep than sit here with a meddling old man.” He grinned as he stood. “Good night, Lois. Thank you for hearing me out tonight.”

“No, thank *you*. Clark means everything to me. I’ll do whatever I can to protect him.” She stood and walked with Herb as he made his way to the door. “Thanks, again, for the heads-up,” she said as they reached the front door. She helped him into his coat.

“I have every confidence that, when I next check in on this universe, all will be right,” he said with a smile as he adorned his hat.

Lois couldn’t help but smile in return. “Thanks.”

“Goodbye, Lois. I’m sure we’ll see one another again,” Herb said as he stepped out into the night. With a flash of light, he was gone.

“I’m sure we will,” Lois whispered into the dark before shutting the door and securing the locks.

She padded back to the living room, picked up her now cold cup of tea and brought it to the kitchen. Deciding that she wasn’t going to fall asleep any time soon, she made herself a second cup and brought it back to the living room. She flicked on the television. One of the stations was rerunning old episodes of *The Ivory Tower*; but Lois soon found that she wasn’t really paying attention to the images on screen. Her mind was on Clark, and all the things H.G. Wells had shown her.

Clark arrived home less than an hour later. He must have flown directly into their bedroom window. When he entered the living room, he was already back in his bedclothes — no more than a pair of silky black boxers and his bathrobe, which was loosely tied, giving Lois a glimpse of his muscled chest beneath.

“Lois, honey?” he asked softly as he approached. “Is everything okay?”

Lois nodded. “How bad was the rescue?” she said instead as he sat next to her on the couch.

“Bad. But not as bad as it could have been. Thankfully, it was mostly injuries and very few deaths. Still, some of the people I helped...not all of them are going to survive.”

“And the shooter?” Lois asked quietly.

“Killed himself as soon as he realized I was on the scene. I hadn’t even landed yet.”

Lois reached out to him and touched his shoulder in a comforting manner. His entire posture screamed his exhaustion — both mentally and physically. He was slumped forward, elbows on his knees, his shoulders drooping, dark circles beneath his eyes. *Defeated* was the word that came to Lois’ mind.

“I’m sorry, Clark. I know you did what you could. There are people who are going to live because you were there to help tonight.”

“I know. It’s just...I wonder, you know? What made the guy do it? What was he trying to accomplish? What drives a man to turn his back on his fellow man and inflict such pain and suffering? I saw children tonight that I had to try and comfort because their parents were dead or too injured for them to see. The youngest one was...I don’t know. Maybe five? Six?” He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “I’m so thankful to have you, Lois. Without you, seeing things like what I did tonight...it would break me. Having you to come home to makes it all bearable. You are the light in the darkness for me. You always have been, even when we were just tentative colleagues at the *Planet*, not even friends yet. Thank you.”

She smiled tenderly at him. “And you’ve always been the same for me. I might not fly around the world saving people, but you saved me from myself. You are my safe haven. My source of strength. My home.”

Clark sat back, leaning against the couch cushions and took Lois into his arms. “So...why are you awake anyway? You weren’t waiting up for me, were you?”

Lois shook her head. “No. I had a bad dream, then decided to get a snack. And...well...we had a visitor, while you were gone.”

“A visitor?” he asked, sounding worried. “At this hour of the night? Who in their right mind...?”

He didn’t get to finish before Lois interrupted. “H.G. Wells.”

Clark’s face went ashen and he groaned. “Do I even dare ask what he wanted?” he asked in a resigned, tired manner.

“Oh...it’s nothing that the two of us can’t handle. Come on, let’s go on up to bed and I’ll fill you in,” Lois said, leaning in and kissing him chastely before standing.

Clark stood and with a gentle, practiced motion, scooped up Lois in his arms. “You’re right,” he said, gazing down on her with a loving smile. “There’s nothing we can’t handle together.”

THE END