

Single Petal of a Rose

By Raconteur <raconteur27@yahoo.com>

Rated: PG-13

Submitted: October 2009

Summary: A determined assassin has it in for Lois Lane, but it's her relationship with Clark that is threatening her peace of mind. A story inspired by the music of Duke Ellington.

Standard disclaimers apply. I don't own the characters, the music, or any of the recognizable elements from the show. I hope no one minds if I use them here. Many thanks to my beta reader, Avia, for all of her help with this, and to Janet, who did a fabulous job as my General Editor in preparing this story for the Archives. Thanks also to the readers on the fanfic message boards who provided constructive comments on the story. This story takes its inspiration from the Duke Ellington piano piece by the same name. I highly recommend the version from "The Ellington Suites." Any and all comments welcome.

Henderson removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Look, I really need to get a statement from her." The exasperation dripped from his voice. He craned his neck to try to get a look into the private hospital room.

"I understand, detective..."

"Inspector," Henderson corrected automatically as he handed her his somewhat worn business card. He really should get a holder for those instead of just carrying them loose in his pocket, he thought idly. Henderson watched the young doctor's eyebrows disappear into her hairline. He might not have been what she was expecting the head of the Detective Bureau to look like, but to be fair, the petite little blonde who stood in front of him, blocking his way into Lane's room, looked more like a MetU freshman than an ER doctor.

"Inspector Henderson," the female version of Doogie Howser continued. "Her injuries are minor, but Ms. Lane is lucky to be alive."

"Lane isn't lucky," Henderson replied drolly. "She's immortal. If it were possible to kill that woman she'd be dead a hundred times over by now."

The pony-tailed physician did not seem amused. "Let me check in on her," she said. She backed into Lois's room and Henderson stepped into the doorway.

"Ms. Lane, the Chief of Detectives is here to see you," the doc explained so genially that Henderson couldn't think of a better adjective to describe her than 'perky.' "He has a few questions he'd like..."

"Come on in, Henderson," Lois interrupted. She turned toward him and he could see the tiny butterfly bandage covering the stitches under her eyebrow. Red abrasion marks stood out against the skin of her chin and neck.

The kid doctor smiled and excused herself, explaining that she'd be just down the hall. Henderson stepped by her, hoping his smile didn't seem too smug. "Who's trying to kill you now, Lane?" he asked, knowing he sounded annoyed. In reality, it was a miracle Lane hadn't given him a heart attack yet. He didn't much care for reporters; they had a tendency to jeopardize ongoing cases because it was easier to play fast and loose with the law than to rely on honest investigating skills. Lane, however, was as much an asset as she was a liability. And if he was going to be fair about it, she was often a tremendous help to the department, even if he and his cops didn't want to admit it.

"I don't know," she said. For the first time, he noticed that all the color had drained from her face. She looked scared and if there was one thing Bill Henderson would have bet his pension on, it was that Lois Lane did not get scared.

There would obviously be no petty barbs or sarcastic quips tonight. He could cope with a change in tactics, though. He'd spent the better part of a decade working on sensitive crimes. It had destroyed marriage number two, but he'd learned a thing or two in the process. He could remember how to interview a witness without giving her the third degree. He pulled up a chair to her bedside. "So tell me what happened."

"I was getting into my Jeep," she began. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear awkwardly with her left hand. "I put the key in the ignition, but the engine wouldn't turn over. I'd just had a tune up, so I knew there was nothing wrong with the car. I panicked; I figured it might be a bomb and I got out and started running. Then 'boom.'"

Henderson frowned. "How did you know? That it was a bomb, I mean. It's not something the average person would have guessed."

"I have a few more brushes with death than the average person," she replied wryly. The trademarked Lane sarcasm was back, but he noted that it disappeared just as quickly as it returned. "Last year I did a series on organized crime in Metropolis and got a series of pretty nasty threats. Someone from the Bomb Squad was nice enough to show me how to search my car for explosives. He mentioned that ignition triggers often keep the car from starting."

"You got lucky, Lois."

"I know," she replied dully. He expected her to fight back, but she said nothing further.

"You're what, twenty-eight now?"

"Twenty-six," she corrected in an unaffected monotone.

Geez, he'd forgotten just how young she was. "You need to be more careful if you want to live to see twenty-seven. I want to assign a police detail to you."

"Bill, I can't do my job with a pair of uniforms following me everywhere," she declared, but not as emphatically as she had every other time he recommended she avail herself of police protection.

"You're not even sure who's trying to kill you. You aren't safe."

"I know."

They both turned around at the sound of a knock on the doorframe. Her partner, Kent, stood in the doorway, an anxious look on his face.

"Come in, Clark," she said.

He entered, carrying a bouquet of yellow roses. He set them down on the table beside her bed before turning to acknowledge Henderson with a slight nod and a tight-lipped expression. Kent turned back to his partner. "How are you?" he asked earnestly.

"I'm okay," she replied.

"I came by last night but they said you weren't supposed to have visitors until this afternoon," he explained.

"I know. The nurse told me that you and Perry were here most of the night."

Kent looked down almost sheepishly. While he didn't particularly want to bust up this tender moment, Henderson still had a job to do. "The Jeep must have been rigged up some time during the day yesterday. It's definitely not that hard to figure out which car you drive, so where you live is just as easily accessible..." Lois's eyes grew wide.

"You shouldn't go back to your apartment," he continued, more thinking aloud than talking directly to her. "Is there anywhere you can stay? Somewhere out of town?"

"I'm not running away," she replied stubbornly.

"Be rational," Henderson rebuked. "Someone is clearly

willing to go to great lengths to kill you. You can't just ignore this."

"What about Superman?" Kent asked. It wasn't a bad idea, Henderson admitted to himself. Big Blue would certainly be able to provide ample protection, better even than Metropolis's Finest.

"No." Lane's tone was just plain obstinate.

"It's the only way to keep you safe," Kent said, almost pleading with her to listen to reason. Henderson wasn't holding out hope.

"I can't ask that of him, Clark," she replied. "There are plenty of people who need Superman a heck of a lot more than I do. What if he heard a call for help while he was babysitting me?"

Her partner nodded in apparent understanding. Henderson, however, was surprised. What reporter wouldn't want Superman as a captive audience? He'd half expected Lane to jump at the opportunity to spend that much time with the century's biggest story. "Well, this leaves us with a problem. You'll be discharged today and we still don't have a place for you to go. Look, all I need is a day or two to have your apartment swept and set up a couple of plainclothes cops on watch."

"You can stay with me," Kent said without hesitation.

"All right, Kent, your place is clean," Inspector Henderson announced as he handed Clark his keys. He'd zipped home before Lois had been discharged to fly all of his spare suits out to the farmhouse, knowing that the cops would be likely to find them in their search of his apartment. It was still a bit odd to have strangers rifling through all of his stuff, especially since he already knew the apartment was clean. He picked up Lois's bag, packed by the female cops who had started the search of her place. Lois followed just a step behind him as he unlocked the door and held it open for her.

"Thanks," she murmured quietly.

"You know how to get in touch with me," Henderson said, still standing on the stoop.

Clark nodded. "Thanks, Inspector." The sardonic cop gave Clark a half smile before turning and walking back toward his car.

He walked back into his apartment to find Lois standing just inside the entryway, her arms folded across her chest, looking like she was trying to keep warm. "Can I get you some tea?" he asked.

"Sure," she replied.

Clark carried her bag to his room. "You can take the bedroom."

"Clark, I don't want to be any more of an imposition than I already have been." She looked up at him, seeming so small, but so much more together than anyone who'd almost been killed had any right to be.

He turned back to her and smiled. "Hey, you met my mom, you know she'd never let me make you sleep on the couch."

"And I wouldn't want you to get in trouble with your mom," she replied with a faint smile.

"You got that right." He put her bag in his room and made his way to the kitchen. "Make yourself at home," he called to Lois as he started boiling water for the tea. "I rented Lethal Weapon II and III; they should be on the coffee table."

"These were due today," he heard her call back.

"I'll pay the late fee," he replied. Like he would have remembered to return a couple of stupid videos when he'd spent the entire day and the previous night pacing anxiously and desperately waiting for news about her condition.

"Clark Kent, Boy Scout no more," she responded.

He carried the two cups of oolong tea to the living room and handed one to Lois. He sat down on the couch, pleasantly surprised when Lois chose to sit down right next to him and not on the other end of the sofa. She seemed intently focused on the

movie that was just starting, but he could barely take his eyes off her. Truth be told, he was terrified. He'd heard all about Lois's penchant for getting into life-threatening scrapes and he'd seen more than enough in the last few months to know that everything he'd heard was true.

Superman was taking the night off, even though Lois had emphatically stated that she didn't want to be a burden on the Man of Steel. He'd been somewhat surprised by Lois's reaction to his suggestion that Superman keep an eye on her. Clark had been expecting her to jump at the chance, given just how star-struck she seemed to be. But she'd thrown him by refusing Superman's protection. Sure, Lois didn't like to be handled, but he knew she meant it when she said that she didn't want to keep Superman from helping the people who needed him. For all her cynicism, Lois was at heart an idealist and Superman was a big part of that idealism.

He stretched his arms across the top of the sofa and leaned back against the cushions. Lois moved closer to him and leaned against his shoulder. Wordlessly, she raised the cup of tea to her lips. Clark felt a smile tug at the corner of his lips. He wanted to tuck the errant strand of hair that fell over her eye behind her ear but he didn't move.

Two hours of jokes and chase scenes later, Lois had fallen asleep, her head still resting against his shoulder. He reached out and finally took the opportunity to brush the hair away from her face. "Lois?" he whispered quietly. Drowsily, she lifted her head and opened her eyes.

"What time is it?" she murmured.

"About eleven," he replied. "You can go ahead and take the bathroom first."

"Thanks," she said as she stood. "For everything, Clark. I don't know what I... I wouldn't have known where else to go."

"You're always welcome here," he said softly, his voice wavering slightly.

Lois looked in the mirror over the sink, examining the cut over her eye. Her head still throbbed, but the ache was duller than it was before. She took the painkillers she'd been given and dug her toothbrush out of the toiletries bag that had been packed for her. She was glad that she'd been lucid enough to write down detailed instructions for the cops who did the packing. She fumbled a bit to brush her teeth left-handed. The brace on her wrist was really making life difficult.

She'd changed into her MetU t-shirt and sweat pants, exhausted and hoping for a decent night's sleep. Normally, she never slept well if she wasn't at home, but something about Clark's place was remarkably inviting. On top of that, she was dead tired.

Of course, she'd fallen asleep with her head on her partner's shoulder. She almost couldn't believe it. It definitely wasn't something Lois Lane would do. It had to be the knock to the head. Yep, definitely the concussion. But there had been something nice about it. She didn't want to admit it, but she really didn't want to be alone. Lois was so used to taking it on the chin, getting back up, and continuing to fight. This wasn't the first time someone had threatened to kill her and it certainly wasn't the first time that someone had come close, but this time, she had no idea who was trying to do her in. She had a laundry list of people who were angry with her, but no good leads to narrow it down.

She padded out of the bathroom and crossed Clark's room back to the living room. Her host had changed into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. The fabric of the shirt was stretched tight over his broad shoulders. He must have spent all of his free time in the gym. Clark was almost as well-muscled as Superman, but she couldn't think of anyone less intimidating than her partner. He smiled his bright, perfect smile at her. How was it that this green,

junior reporter managed to make her feel so comfortable?

“Bathroom’s all yours,” she said. Lois noticed the pillows and blanket piled up on his couch. She really did end up with a farm boy in shining armor for a partner. He’d gone far beyond just being polite by offering her a place to stay. Letting her take the bed was pure, old-fashioned chivalry. Despite the initial teasing banter, he’d done the same when they were undercover at the Lexor. A blush crept up her cheeks as she remembered The Kiss. It may have been a ruse to fool a maid she didn’t even know was coming, but it was still the best kiss she’d ever experienced. Lois realized that didn’t say much for her love life, but she chose not to dwell on it.

“Hey.” She turned around, having not heard Clark come back into the living room. “I’ll be just out here if you need anything,” he explained.

She smiled. “Thanks. Goodnight, Clark.”

“Goodnight.”

Lois stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself in a towel. She dressed and made her way to the living room just in time to see Clark come through the door carrying grocery bags. Her sleep had been blissfully dream free and she felt a bit better than she had the night before.

“Fresh OJ and croissants from my favorite bakery,” he announced. He put the bags down on the kitchen table and handed her one of the still warm, flakey pastries.

She pulled off a piece and popped it into her mouth. Just like all the food Clark managed to find, it was out of this world. She had no idea how he knew all the best places in Metropolis. She was a local and didn’t know any of the places he seemed to frequent. “You’re something else, you know that, Smallville?”

Clark merely chuckled. He got dishes and glasses from his cabinets and began to set the table. “I’m planning to talk to Henderson and go down to the police lab today. I’m not sure they have any new info for us yet, but it can’t hurt.”

“I want to go with you.”

He frowned slightly. “You sure you’re up to it?”

“Are you handling me?” she asked.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he replied, holding his hands up in surrender.

“Good,” she said, triumphant.

“This was a pro job, Lane,” Henderson explained as he paced around the charred and twisted chassis of what used to be her beloved Jeep.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better? At least the people trying to kill me go to great lengths to do the job right?” The sarcasm hid the anxiety that grew inside her. She was supposed to be in that Jeep. She was supposed to be dead right now. There would have been nothing left of her but just enough ash to fill a Secrets tin.

“Well, it narrows the list a bit. You can forget the two-bit street hoods and small time political cronies. Your guy’s either an expert himself or has the kind of cash it takes to hire one.”

“Was there anything particular about the device itself?” Clark chimed in. “The accelerant or the explosives used?”

“Pretty textbook,” Henderson replied. “We won’t know for certain until we get the results from the lab, but it looks like pretty high quality, untraceable domestic explosives. Nothing exotic, nothing unusual. Trigger connected to the ignition, explosives linked to the fuel line so it used the car’s own gasoline as the accelerant. It’s simple and efficient.”

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” Lois kept staring at the desiccated hull of her car.

“Not about the Jeep, but we’ve finished checking out your place. You can go home tonight. I’ll have a couple of plainclothes staked out outside your building all night.”

“Thanks, Bill,” she replied. The laconic detective gave her the closest approximation of a smile he was capable of. “You’ll let me know if you learn anything from the lab results?”

“Of course.”

Clark started toward the garage exit and turned back toward her, his hands in his pockets. She hurried to catch up to him and they crossed the police impound yard together. They walked in silence toward the street and headed toward the busy intersection where it would be easier to hail a cab.

“I really loved that Jeep,” she said wistfully.

“I know,” he replied. “But I’m glad it was the Jeep and not you.”

“Are you getting soft on me, Smallville?” she asked, still trying out the new nickname for him, and deciding that she liked it. He stopped abruptly and turned to face her, a frown marring his face.

“I heard about the explosion,” he began somberly. “And it scared me to death. I was sure you’d been killed. The police at the Planet told me you were in the hospital, but when I got there they wouldn’t let me see you and they wouldn’t tell me about your condition because I wasn’t family.” She listened quietly to his explanation, noting the gravelly tone his voice took as he spoke. She had no idea he’d been so worried about her. She had no idea he cared that much.

“Hey, I’m fine,” she said, trying to make her tone light, knowing that her voice wavered, belying her fears. She nudged him in the side with her elbow and they continued walking.

Clark swooped down over Suicide Slum, flying the last rounds of his evening patrol. The city was pretty quiet tonight. He’d plucked up a couple of car thieves in the act and had helped out at a minor traffic accident, but there wasn’t much that called for Superman’s attention. Instead, he’d spent the bulk of the time he’d allocated for his patrol investigating the area outside the Daily Planet building, where Lois had parked her Jeep for the very last time. The explosion had been too small to cause significant structural damage, but it could have easily killed Lois. He was still thanking the fates and any deities that may have had a hand in saving her life. Of course, her own quick wits had gotten her out of the jam, but she had been incredibly lucky. He’d felt a sharp twist of pain in his gut as he’d examined the scorched concrete and asphalt where the Jeep had once stood. The crime scene investigators had gone over the area with the proverbial fine-toothed comb, and he hadn’t found anything that they’d missed—just a few remaining fragments of safety glass and gasoline residue.

A light rain began to drizzle down around him as he flew over the streets of Metropolis’s roughest neighborhoods. A sharp, cold gust of wind swirled between the warehouses along the riverbank. He finished his patrol over the desolate streets and made his way uptown to Carter Avenue.

Closing the refrigerator door, Lois decided she simply wasn’t hungry. It wasn’t as though there was anything appetizing in her fridge anyway. She really had to figure out where Clark ordered his Chinese food from. Picking up a sweatshirt from the basket of freshly done laundry, she pulled it on and checked her thermostat. There was clearly something wrong with the stupid thing. The needle was at seventy degrees but her apartment felt like an icebox. She cranked up the heat, hoping to jump-start the system. She folded her arms across her chest and suppressed a shiver. Drifting toward the window, she stared out at the raindrops, hitting the glass and falling on her fire escape with an audible ‘plink.’ The soft drizzle was turning into a downpour. The sky looked almost purple, backlit by a full moon that was shrouded in the cloud cover. Down below on the street, a pair of cops sat in one of those plain looking blue sedans that only undercover cops

drove.

Lois yawned drowsily. Suddenly she felt incredibly tired. She supposed that it was to be expected. She'd had a rough couple of days to say the least. In a sense, it was nice to be back in her own apartment. It was jarring to be yanked out of your home, told it wasn't safe. Her apartment had been given a clean bill of health, however, no bugs, no bombs. At the same time, her place felt terribly empty. Several times, she'd picked up the phone, thinking to call Clark, but she never did dial his number, not sure what she would say if he answered. She was certain that if she'd asked, he'd come over and keep her company, but she really didn't want to impose on him any further. She stifled another yawn.

He had his own life; he didn't need to spend his time babysitting her. Besides, she was the senior partner in this pairing, she didn't want him thinking that she needed to be looked after and handled with kid gloves. She'd done just, just fine before he'd shown up. She was the youngest Kerth winner ever and the only one to nab the award for three consecutive... consecutive years. Lois steadied herself against the sofa and shook her head woozily. Yep, she was Lois Lane, award winning investigative journalist and boy, was she tired.

Her eyelids began to droop and she felt herself begin to nod off even as she stood. Her head jerked upward. It wasn't late. There was no reason for her to be so... so dead on her... feet. 'Come on, Lane, focus here,' she told herself. She just needed a nap, yes, a nap, a nice... long... nap. Starting to fall forward, she nearly tripped as she caught herself. Steadying herself once again she realized something was definitely wrong. She couldn't... quite... put... her finger... on it, but there was... something... not right. Yes, something... wrong. Leaning against the wall, she dragged a chair toward the smoke and carbon monoxide detectors on her wall.

Clumsily, she put one foot on the seat of the chair. She nearly fell backward, but managed to plant both feet on the ground once again. Steadying herself, she managed to step up onto the chair. The room began to spin. Yes, it spun slowly as the air was too... heavy to move quickly. She swam through the soup of the room's atmosphere as it swirled around her. Gracelessly, she planted both hands on the wall in front of her. Now... all she had to do... was check the detector. Right... first, she needed... to unscrew it. With thick fingers, she twisted the plastic cover until it fell off. She tried to catch it but it fell between her hands and landed on the floor. She peered through heavy lidded eyes at the fuzzy, blurry image of the device's innards — all wires and little lights. Lois grasped for the thin little wires.

'Wait a minute,' she thought as she fingered the green wire. 'This wire... has been cut.' She squinted at it. Yes, this... was a very... very... very bad thing. Someone had tampered with her carbon monoxide detector. Now, if only... she could remember... what she should do. 'Get out,' her brain slurred. She swayed and she let her eyelids finally drop. She just needed... a little rest. That was all.

Clark stood in between the buildings, trying not to draw the attention of the plainclothes cops just across the street. The rain was now falling in fat, heavy drops, drenching the suit and soaking him to the bone. He couldn't have cared less, though. He wanted to stand outside her place, just to make sure everything was okay. Clark scanned the street again before peering up through her window.

His jaw dropped in horror. 'Oh god,' he thought as he darted across the street, through her window and caught her just as she teetered and fell off the chair toward the floor. Unnoticeable to anyone else, he realized the apartment was filling with carbon monoxide. He flew her out of the building as quickly as possible and landed with her still in his arms, beside the cops' car.

"Superman, what happened?" one of the officers yelled as he

leapt from the car.

"CO poisoning," Clark explained grimly. He remained focused on her vital signs. Her pulse was still strong but her breathing was shallow and erratic. "I'm taking her to MetroGen," he declared before taking off.

Within moments, he landed outside the emergency bay of MetroGen. He raced into the hospital, carrying a still drowsy Lois. She opened her eyes and looked up at him, clearly dazed. "Superman?"

"Everything will be okay," he said, hoping he sounded convincing, and not afraid. He gently lowered her to the gurney that an orderly and a doctor had wheeled toward him. "Her apartment was filling with carbon monoxide, she'd just passed out when I found her," he explained. Clark began to follow them as they rushed into the Emergency Department, but the triage nurse intercepted him.

"Superman, if you'd like to wait, you can wait out here. Let the doctors help her," the nurse lectured gently. He thought better than to protest and merely nodded. What seemed like an eternity passed before a doctor came out to the waiting area to talk to him.

"I'm Dr. Hoffman," he declared as he pulled his hand out of his lab coat pocket and extended it to Superman. Clark shook it somewhat absently. The doctor looked young, no trace of gray in his light brown hair, but he seemed confident and relaxed. He hoped that was a good sign.

"How is she?" A note of anxiety crept into his voice.

"She'll be fine," Dr. Hoffman said with a reassuring smile. "But she was lucky you were around. Do you know anything about her other injuries?"

Clark rubbed at his neck in a rather un-Superman like gesture. "Someone tried to kill her a few days ago. Car bomb."

The doctor chewed his lip. "She's even luckier than I thought. So you don't think the CO exposure was accidental?"

Clark shook his head grimly. He folded his arms across his chest in an attempt to keep from fidgeting. He didn't like hospitals much and liked them even less when Lois was the patient.

"I'll want to look at her medical records. Was she brought here?"

"Yeah. I think the doctor that treated her was Dr. Burke."

"I'll talk to her. You've been a tremendous help, Superman. If you'd like to see Ms. Lane now, I think she'll be up for it."

"Thanks," he replied gratefully. He followed Dr. Hoffman to the curtained off area where Lois was sitting upright in bed. She smiled at him as he approached. Relieved, he returned her smile.

"I'll be back in a few minutes to check on you, Ms. Lane," the doctor said before retreating.

"How are you?" Clark asked softly, trying to remind himself that he was here as Superman, not Clark. He was supposed to be in control and calm, not fretting with worry.

"A little scared," she admitted. "And really tired. But I can't even begin to thank you enough. If you hadn't been there..." her voice wavered as she trailed off.

He covered her hand with his much larger one. "Is there somewhere I can take you? When they release you, is there somewhere you'd feel safe?"

"You mean outside the city?" she asked.

"Yeah," he replied. "Anywhere in the world, you name it, I'll take you there."

She shook her head slightly. "I won't feel safe until whoever's trying to kill me has been caught and Henderson needs my help to do that. I can't just run away from this."

Clark understood. He didn't agree with her, but he understood. "Your apartment isn't safe."

"I know," she conceded quietly. "I don't really think I'd want to go back there now anyway."

"Wherever you want to go, I'll stay with you, if you like."

"I can't ask you to do that," she said. "People need you."

"And what about you? Lois, someone's come pretty darn close to killing you twice in just the last few days. If something happened to you..." he began, but didn't trust himself to finish that thought.

She smiled tremulously at him, her eyes unusually bright. "I'll be okay," she offered, squeezing his hand tightly.

"You have been such a wonderful friend," he began, swallowing around the lump in his throat. "I couldn't bear to lose you. Stay with Clark, please. I'll check in on you, but I'd feel better if you stayed with him."

"I can't impose on him any more than I already have," she responded stubbornly.

"Clark feels exactly the same way I do," he replied, entirely honestly. "You could never be an imposition." She finally nodded in acquiescence.

Dr. Hoffman returned as promised. "Your lab results look fine," he explained. "If everything checks out, I'll be able to release you tomorrow, but only if there's someone you can stay with."

"I'll go get Clark," Superman said. "He'll want to see you."

He waited just long enough for the doctor to complete his exam before rushing back into the hospital. He made his way back to Lois, relieved that she'd agreed to stay with him. She may not have realized it, but despite her protestations, she was getting Superman's undivided attention for as long as it was needed. She'd claimed that other people needed him, but who could have possibly needed him more right now? He hadn't been holding his emotional cards particularly close to the vest this evening, but he wouldn't have been able to fool her if he'd tried. Besides, there was no reason why she couldn't know that Superman considered her a friend.

Clark's heart grew just a little bit lighter as he saw her face brighten at his approach. "Clark." She smiled as she said his name and reached her uninjured hand to him.

"You okay?" he asked softly as he took her hand.

She shrugged. "I'll be fine."

"I talked to Henderson," he said. "Superman is going to check out my apartment and make sure it's safe."

"Thank you. I'll be gone as soon as possible."

"You can stay as long as you need to," he insisted. "Having you stay at my place isn't a burden, Lois."

"Three days of living with me and you'll be singing a different tune, Smallville," she said with a faint smile.

Lois walked into Clark's apartment, relieved to be out of the hospital and somewhere she felt safe. Clark followed her inside, carrying her bag. "I'll take your stuff to the bedroom," he said. "Is there anything you need? Anything I can get you?"

"I'm fine," she replied. She'd spent the entire day stuck in the hospital while Clark and Henderson had spoken to the Fire Marshall and the building inspector. A repairman had accessed the building the day before while she was gone. He'd had the proper work permits, but he was still the best lead they had. Unfortunately, no one remembered what he looked like or which company he worked for.

She sat down on the couch, feeling drained. Clark reappeared from his bedroom and made his way to the kitchen. He returned a few minutes later with two cups of oolong tea and sat down next to her. "We're going to find out who's doing this," he said solemnly, the deep tone of his voice reassuring.

"I hope so," she replied.

He placed his hand on hers. "I promise," he insisted.

"I can still hear the explosion ringing in my ears," she said quietly. "I'm so afraid, Clark." He put his arm around her and pulled her close. She went willingly, letting herself be enfolded in

his embrace.

"I know," he whispered. He stroked her hair softly. She felt tears roll down her cheeks and she screwed her eyes shut. A sob escaped her lips and she did nothing to fight it. Her body trembled and she felt Clark's arms around her tighten. She cried herself to the point of exhaustion. Eventually, she raised her head from the hollow of Clark's shoulder and looked up at him. He gave her a slight, half smile, but she could see the worry in his eyes as he brushed a strand of hair away from her face. She closed her eyes and put her head back on Clark's shoulder, enjoying the reassuring weight of his arm around her. For a long while they sat in companionable silence. She felt so relaxed she could have dozed off right there on his couch.

"I should let you get some rest." His voice was soft and gentle.

"I can't kick you out of your bed again," she replied.

"And I'm not letting you sleep on the couch," he countered.

"It's a big bed, why don't we share?" His words of several weeks ago came back to her. "We can share the bed. We can both behave like grownups."

"I don't want you to be uncomfortable," he said earnestly.

"I'll be fine, and we'll both get a decent night's sleep."

He stood and picked up the mugs of half-consumed tea from the coffee table. "Are you sure you're okay with this?"

"Yes, I'm sure," she insisted. And she was. Sort of. She stood and walked toward Clark's room. She knew she didn't want to be alone and she felt so safe around Clark. Lois couldn't figure out exactly what it was about him that was so reassuring. What it was that put her at ease. She changed into a tank top and flannel pajama pants and headed to the bathroom. She emerged to find Clark in the bedroom, having changed into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. He smiled as he stepped past her toward the bathroom. She stood in the middle of the room, waiting, uncertain. She shouldn't have been nervous; they were just going to sleep after all. Besides, this was Clark. She was comfortable with Clark. There was absolutely no reason to be nervous. None at all.

The bathroom door opened and Clark padded back into the bedroom. He moved to one side of the bed and pulled back the covers. She turned down the other side of the bed and climbed in. He turned off the light and she heard the soft clatter of his glasses as he placed them on the nightstand. He lay down beside her, keeping a safe distance between them. Both of them remained flat on their backs, neither moved. She tried not to be so aware of his presence. "Good night, Clark," she murmured as she closed her eyes, willing herself to just sleep.

"Good night," he whispered.

It was a long while before Lois fell asleep. He'd stayed awake, motionless, but unable to sleep. He'd listened to her breathing and the sound of her heartbeat. Her pulse had raced as he climbed into bed next to her. She was nervous. He hated the thought that he was making her nervous. But he had to admit he wasn't entirely calm, either. Of course, his racing heart was due to the fact that he was dumb in love with the beautiful woman lying beside him. God, he hoped he wasn't going to float in his sleep. He turned his head slowly and looked at her. Her eyes were closed and she lay completely still.

She was gorgeous. Utterly and perfectly gorgeous. Her skin was marred by the dark stipple of scrapes from her recent brush with death, but her beauty was untouched. It came from her strength. From her dogged pursuit of justice and the truth. And from her unyielding passion to simply make things better. He was in awe of her. He, a man who could bend steel, who'd flown a space shuttle into orbit, who'd seen the world entire, was completely in awe of her. Clark wondered if she knew.

She'd warned him not to fall for her, but it was far too late. She wasn't pushing him away anymore, but whether she'd ever

see him as anything more than just her partner at work was still uncertain. There wasn't any question in his mind that what he felt for her wasn't mere infatuation. Sure, he was awestruck, but it went so much deeper than that, and the intolerable knot of worry that had formed in his gut over the last few days was proof of that. He was quietly trying to deal with the guilt of having failed to save her when she'd needed him. He should have been there; he would have noticed the car bomb. He could have kept it from detonating. And he should have realized that the carbon monoxide was pouring into her apartment much sooner than he did. He'd been too slow; he hadn't been attuned enough to her, to whether or not she was in trouble. The guilt had kept him awake all of the previous night.

Clark listened to her breathing as it grew slower; her heart rate was calm and steady. He watched her as she lay in quiet repose. He was thankful that she felt safe with him, especially at a time like now, but he couldn't help resenting just how safe she thought he was. When he'd lost his memory after his collision with the Nightfall asteroid, she'd told him that she thought of him like a brother. He hated being stuck in that box. She cared about him, but not the way he cared about her. Thinking about this all night was going to drive him nuts and it certainly wasn't going to solve anything. He closed his eyes, hoping sleep wouldn't continue to elude him.

He'd finally started to drift to sleep when her voice cut through the fog of his drowsiness. Clark was awake instantly. "No... no..." she murmured. She turned away fitfully.

He touched her shoulder. "Lois," he whispered gently. She didn't wake up.

"No," she repeated. Clark squeezed her shoulder and said her name a little more loudly. "No!" this time, she shouted. He nearly jumped back, concerned that she was reacting to him. Her eyes flew open and he could see the hunted expression etched on her face. "Clark," she breathed his name, her voice threatening to break. She went willingly into his arms.

"It's okay, I'm here," he soothed. She clung tightly to him as he ran a hand gently up and down her back. He could feel her heart thundering in her chest. Her breaths were shallow and rapid. "It's going to be okay." After long moments, her body finally stopped trembling.

"I'm sorry I keep falling apart on you," she murmured against his shoulder. He tightened his arms around her.

"It's all right; you don't need to apologize," he replied. He stroked her hair absently, letting the soft silk spill through his fingers. Neither one said anything. After a long while, he broke the silence. "Nightmare?" he ventured.

"Yeah," she said. "It was the car, again. This time I didn't make it out." Her voice wavered.

"Shhh... you're okay, you're safe."

She lifted her head from his shoulder and looked up at him. Her dark brown eyes glistened. He reached up and brushed a tear away from her cheek with his thumb. Lois placed her hand on top of his. "I know," she whispered. She put her head back on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

"Everything will be better in the morning," he said.

"Yeah?" she asked.

He tightened his arm around her slightly. "Yeah," he whispered. "We'll get back to investigating and we'll find out who's doing this. We're Lane and Kent; we always get the bad guys."

"Right," she murmured. He continued to hold her and after a long while, he was certain she'd fallen back to sleep. His own eyelids grew heavy and he finally drifted off, the woman he loved curled up beside him, in the strong circle of his embrace.

Lois turned the little metal key over between her fingers. It was just a key, right? And she was going to give it back the

moment she saw him, so it was no big deal at all. After a long moment of internal debate, she pulled her purse out from under her desk and removed her brand new ring of replacement keys. Her old keys had been melted into a single undistinguishable lump in the blast. The only sensible place to put the key was on her key ring.

Lex had left the bullpen only ten minutes ago. He'd raced in dramatically, a look of concern on his face. "Lois, darling, are you all right?" he'd asked as he swept into the newsroom. He'd hurried down the steps to her desk, where she'd been reviewing the Fire Marshall's report on her building. None of the other apartments had been affected, thankfully, so none of her neighbors had been hurt. Nevertheless, her apartment was without heat and she wasn't in a hurry to return.

She'd assured Lex she was fine. In his typical, charming way, he'd offered her an apartment in one of his buildings. "I'm certain you'll find the accommodations adequate," he'd assured her suavely. "I know that there is no place like home, but I hope that you'll find this place a suitable second." He gave her his standard, dashing smile.

"That's very thoughtful of you," she'd replied. "But I've been staying with a friend."

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable in a place of your own? I have a security detail that will keep you completely protected, and you won't even notice their presence."

"Really, I'm fine."

"Oh." He'd seemed crestfallen by the fact that he wasn't able to sweep in as the hero this time. He managed to recover with grace. "Well, the offer stands, of course, if you change your mind."

She smiled. "Thanks, Lex." With that, her billionaire would-be benefactor made his grand departure. His offer hadn't been as off-putting this time. When the Nightfall Asteroid had threatened, Lex had offered her a lifeboat, but only as part of a quid pro quo. He'd attempted to put a subtle spin on it, but she knew exactly what he meant. He'd wanted to make her dependent on him for her survival; the helpless little woman he kept around because she was pleasurable company. This time, at least he hadn't made any overt references to an expected exchange.

She sat back down and continued fiddling with the key Clark had left for her. He'd rushed out to the crime lab while she'd been on the phone with Henderson. On his way out, he'd dropped the key on her desk. She'd looked up at him, puzzled.

"Spare key to my apartment," he'd explained. "If I'm not back by the time you want to head out, I'll meet you at my place."

He'd left nearly two hours ago and the newsroom was now almost empty. Lois tucked the keys back into her bag and powered down her computer. With a great deal more caution than she was accustomed to exercising, she headed out and hailed a cab. Nervously checking to make sure that no one was following her, she looked over her shoulder out the taxi's rear windshield, but didn't notice anything out of the ordinary.

The cabbie dropped her off in front of Clark's apartment and she fished out the keys. She opened the door to Clark's place, as though it was a perfectly natural thing to do. Lois walked into the apartment. She hadn't spent much time in Clark's apartment when he wasn't there, but it was still inviting and comfortable. Walking over to his mantle, she looked at the pictures and mementos he kept there. Pictures of his parents, his gameball, statuettes that she bet he'd acquired in exotic locales like Tanzania and Nepal. There was so much more to her partner than she'd originally imagined.

The door behind her opened and Clark entered, carrying bags of groceries. "I picked up some stuff for dinner. We usually have takeout; I thought cooking would be a nice change."

"Well, you know I can't cook," she began.

“Not a problem, my pesto sauce is foolproof,” he said with a grin.

She hurried over to help him with the bags, but he waved her off. “I’ve got it,” he assured her. “Sorry it took me so long. Superman had to help out at a big accident in the Washington Tunnel; I figured I should get the story.”

“Was anyone hurt?” she asked as she followed him into the kitchen. He placed the grocery bags on the counter and she helped him unpack them.

“Nothing major,” Clark replied. He took off his jacket and his tie and tossed both of them over the back of a chair. He unbuttoned his shirtsleeves and rolled them up to his elbows. “I uh, Superman had to rescue a few people, but no one was seriously injured. Any word from Henderson?”

Lois shook her head. “They’re still trying to match M.O.’s with people I’ve helped put in jail, put out of business, or whose lives I’ve otherwise ruined.”

“How’s that going?” he asked as he pulled a couple of pots out of a cabinet.

“It’s a longer list than I realized.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of this. We’ll find the guy,” he said reassuringly as he filled a pot with water and placed it on the range.

“I wish I was as confident as you are,” she replied glumly as she unpacked the pine nuts and basil from the shopping bag.

Clark sidled up next to her and draped a reassuring arm around her. “Hey, we’re the best team in town, remember?” he asked as he gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

“Are you always this irritatingly optimistic?” she asked, giving him a half smile.

He merely grinned in response. “Do you want to pick out a wine while I chop the basil?” She slipped out from under his arm and suddenly missed its solid weight on her shoulders. It felt oddly, indescribably *right* there. She shrugged off the feeling as the product of nothing more than anxiety and stress, and the growing sense of fear and loneliness inside her. There was nothing quite like standing at life’s precipice, looking down into the chasm of your own mortality and getting a good hard shove from behind, getting battered by the heat and concussive force of an explosion, to make you feel tiny and helpless. To make you feel like you’d never get your footing or your balance back again. To make you cling to the first solid and dependable thing in sight and to hold on indefinitely.

No, she wasn’t going to be small and weak, and she wasn’t going to cling. She wasn’t going to hang desperately on her partner, unable to let him go. She was going to put herself back together, pick herself up, dust herself off, and be Lois Lane again. She was going to start by finding the lousy scumbag trying to kill her and make sure that he spent some quality time as the guest of the government in a facility upstate. Actually, the first task in front of her seemed to be the selecting of a proper wine for dinner. Lois scanned his wine rack before settling on a pinot grigio. She dug around in the cabinets in search of an ice bucket.

All of the pots and pans and colanders and things she didn’t even recognize confirmed that Clark actually used his kitchen. By Metropolis standards, it was a huge kitchen, with plenty of cabinets and prep space. Her kitchen was largely a waste of space; an unused stove, mostly empty cabinets, and a fridge full of old Chinese food, condiments, and a produce drawer with wilted vegetables and fuzzy fruits. Even if she knew how to cook, she had very little free time and what she did have, she wouldn’t have spent cooking. Besides, why cook when you lived in a city with as many great takeout places as Metropolis had? Cooking for one didn’t make any sense, either. Of course, cooking with Clark was turning out to be more enjoyable than reheating leftover pizza. And, when you were making enough for two people, it didn’t seem like such a futile exercise. Besides, Clark

actually seemed to know what he was doing, she mused as she watched him add the chopped basil to the food processor.

Lois stepped back away from the table. “This looks amazing,” she said as she looked at Clark’s handiwork. He uncorked the pinot grigio and poured generous amounts in each of the two wine glasses on the table. In typical Clark fashion, he held out her chair for her before taking his own seat directly across from her.

“Was everything okay at work after I left?” he asked, almost anxiously as he unfolded his napkin and placed it in his lap.

“Yeah,” she replied absently. “Lex came by.” She watched as Clark’s eyebrows practically disappeared into his hairline. He took a sip of his wine, but said nothing. She looked down at her plate to avoid making eye contact. “He offered me a place to stay.”

“With him?” There was an edge to Clark’s voice.

“No, an apartment in one of his buildings,” she corrected him hastily. She looked up at him, but he was suddenly focused on the pasta in front of him.

“Oh,” he said as he lifted his gaze to make eye contact with her. “Did you...?” he ventured.

“I told him I had a place to stay,” she replied with a smile.

“Well, until I wear out my welcome.”

“You could never do that,” he said, giving her the earnest, reassuring answer she wasn’t expecting in response to her bit of self-deprecation.

She gave him a somewhat tremulous smile, unsure why she felt so emotionally off-balance with him tonight. She had to admit, though, that the situation was unfamiliar to her. Most of the time when a guy expressed this level of concern, it just meant that he thought he could use it to his advantage, or that he reveled in being the big strong protector man, and she cared for neither the mind games, nor the condescending misogyny. But she knew that Clark’s concern was genuine and that he respected her. He didn’t treat her like she was helpless or dependent on him. No, he knew that she didn’t like being handled, that she could take care of herself, even though she very obviously needed a friend at that moment. Then again, they always said that in a crisis, you find out who your true friends are. There was no question that that was what Clark was. He was probably the best friend she’d ever had.

“Have you talked to your parents?” he asked.

“Dammit, Clark, why did you have to go and step on that emotional landmine?” she wondered. Although it was through no real fault of his own. She’d never really explained why she and her father didn’t get along and he’d never even met her mother. “I called both of them today. The only thing they’ve agreed on in twenty years is that I should get out of Metropolis.”

Clark pulled a face. “Do they know you’re staying with me?”

She shook her head. “I told them the Planet was putting me up somewhere.” He looked almost wounded by the comment. “I know Henderson said the Planet phones were clean, but I didn’t want to take the chance. This guy already figured out how to get into my car and my apartment.”

He nodded in apparent understanding. “One of the detectives said they were still following up on the maintenance man who accessed your building. It’s the best lead they’ve got.”

“But it’s still not much,” she countered, suddenly feeling rather pessimistic. “It’s just so frustrating. We’re not supposed to just wait around for the bad guy to get caught. I want to *do* something. *Anything*,” she vented.

Reaching across the table, he placed his hand on hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I know,” he said softly. “But until we’ve got a lead to follow, the only thing that matters is keeping you safe.” A slight blush crept up his cheeks. “I’m sorry, I just realized how patronizing that sounded.”

“I know what you meant,” she replied. And she did. Coming from anyone else, she wouldn’t have tolerated the sentiment. But for whatever reason, Clark was different. Her almost dying twice in the last few days seemed to have shaken him up just as badly as it had her. “I just hate feeling helpless.”

He smiled faintly. “If there’s anything you could never be, Lois, it’s helpless.”

After they cleared the dishes, they settled into his living room to go through a stack of records and call logs. As she tried to figure out who came in and out of the Planet building the day of the explosion, Clark sifted through the prison visitor and phone logs, trying to piece together who that had a grudge against Lois could have arranged the hit on her apartment. Every once in a while, Lois found herself sneaking glances at her unassuming partner. He was fully engrossed in a sheaf of papers, his glasses slipping slightly down the bridge of his nose and a lock of thick, dark hair spilling over his forehead.

She tried unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn. Clark glanced at his watch. “It’s almost midnight,” he said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to keep you up this late.”

She smiled at him, still amazed at how considerate and downright nice he was. “Considering you’re helping me find the person who’s trying to kill me, I’ll let it slide, Smallville,” she said. She wondered if he had any idea how much this meant to her. Not just his help, but everything he was doing to make her feel comfortable. To make her feel like she didn’t need to be afraid.

Lois lay back on the pillow, staring up at the ceiling over Clark’s bed, examining the crumbly popcorn patterns of the plaster. Maybe if she closed her eyes, she could pretend she’d fallen asleep in the two minutes since Clark had entered the bathroom. It would be much less awkward if she wasn’t awake when he slipped into bed. She heard the faucet in the bathroom shut off and the door opened. Too late. Clark padded into the bedroom, dressed for bed in an old, worn-out t-shirt and sleep shorts, but still wearing his glasses. He scrubbed a hand through his hair, in an irritatingly endearing gesture, causing a single lock of hair to fall over his forehead. Why did he have to look so boyishly cute? And when did she start thinking of Clark as cute?

He climbed into bed and turned onto his side toward her. She turned toward him, not leaving much space between them. He propped himself up on his elbow. “You know, you’re about the bravest person I’ve ever met,” he said quietly. “You’re amazing, Lois.”

A blush crept over her. Why did he have to be so darn sweet? “Thank you, for everything,” she said. “For letting me stay here; for helping me find this guy.”

“That’s what partners do,” he replied simply.

She grinned and shook her head. “You’re going above and beyond the call here.”

“Hey, most guys wouldn’t think of spending quality time with a beautiful woman as a burden.”

He’d called her beautiful. He smiled, but said nothing to back away from his statement. He turned over and placed his glasses on the nightstand and turned off the bedside lamp, leaving them in darkness, except for the light filtering in through the curtains from the neon sign hanging over the diner across the street.

“Goodnight, Lois,” he said softly as he rolled back onto his side. She could see the outline of his face in the darkness, so close to hers.

She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. Her eyes, adjusting to the dark, focused on his lips. And then she did something remarkably stupid. Her heart thundering in her chest, beating hard against her ribs, she pressed her lips against his, ever so briefly. She lay her head back on her pillow. “Goodnight, Clark,” she whispered.

He blinked several times, resisting the urge to touch his mouth where she’d just kissed him.

Lois had kissed him.

He’d been so surprised — so taken aback — that he’d frozen, incapable of responding. It was the briefest peck of a kiss, almost platonic, really. But it was something, wasn’t it? Lois had kissed him. He closed his eyes, his heart racing. Lois had actually kissed him.

The first rays of light filtering into the room through the window woke her. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, momentarily startled when she realized she wasn’t alone. Clark was still asleep, his head on his pillow, so close to hers. The corners of his mouth turned up in a slight smile.

“Hey,” he whispered, revealing the fact that he was awake. Without opening his eyes, he reached for his glasses. He put on his glasses as his grin grew wider.

“Good morning,” she said softly.

“Morning,” he replied, rolling to prop himself up on his elbow. “Sleep well?”

“Yeah,” she admitted. In fact, she’d slept great. “Do you want the bathroom first?”

“It’s all yours,” he offered graciously. “I’ll see what I can do about breakfast.” Still smiling, he got out of bed, padding toward the kitchen.

Lois mentally shook herself when she realized she was watching him as he walked away. Well, he was pretty cute, she had to admit. All muscles and boyish smiles. And warm, dark, gentle eyes. What was she doing? She didn’t think of her partner like that. But then again, she had kissed him last night...

“Bagels okay?” he called out from the kitchen.

“Huh?” Oh, right. Breakfast. “Sure,” she replied. Lois stood and stretched as she slowly made her way to the bathroom. Hopefully a shower would clear her head.

“Delivery for Lois Lane,” the messenger called out from the elevator bank.

From the other side of the newsroom, Clark watched as Lois turned toward the deliveryman. His stomach twisted itself in knots as he ducked into a supply closet. Bursting out a sliver of a moment later, he tore across the newsroom in a blue and red blur, snatching the package from the hands of the terrified deliveryman. He flew out one of the enormous windows and straight up into the sky. Carefully, he examined the plain, brown paper wrapped package. The name and address were written out neatly and carefully. Unsurprisingly, there was no return address. He x-rayed the contents of the package, committing to memory the layout, design, and materials of the small explosive inside. He looked at it from every angle, studying how the triggering mechanism was designed to go off once the package was opened. Satisfied that he understood the device, he removed the wrapping paper to save the handwritten address and crushed the package in his hands, containing the blast.

Superman flew back into the newsroom only seconds after he’d first appeared. He frowned sternly as he marched up to the still stunned messenger and grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket, hoisting him into the air.

“What’d I do?” the frightened man exclaimed, his voice cracking.

“Who gave you that package?” Superman demanded.

“Answer me!” he barked when the messenger took too long to respond.

“Look, I just make deliveries for LexExpress,” the nervous man replied, his feet dangling above the ground. “The package was marked hand delivery, so I brought it up here. I’m sorry, I didn’t know what was in it.”

“Superman, it’s okay,” he heard Lois say. He glanced at her, standing just behind him, looking ashen. He lowered the deliveryman back to his feet but didn’t let him go. Turning to Perry, who’d come out of his office demanding to know what was going on, he said, “Mr. White, could you have security hold on to him? I need to speak with Inspector Henderson.”

“Sure thing, Superman,” Perry replied. “Jimmy! Get security up here right now,” the editor bellowed.

Clark figured the messenger was probably telling the truth, but he wasn’t going to take any chances. Once the security guards had detained the messenger, he took off for One Police Plaza. He wanted to work with the bomb squad while the design of the device was freshest in his mind.

The sharp “boom” of the explosion nearly caused her to leap out of her skin. She felt Clark’s hand on the small of her back and relaxed slightly, almost as though he was able to drain the tension from her body. He’d called her from the police department, telling her that he’d run into Superman there when he’d stopped by to see if there was any news.

“Sorry!” someone called from the other end of the massive forensics lab.

“Dammit, Diaz, can you lay off on blowing things up for just ten minutes?” Henderson snapped back irritably. It was the most ruffled Lois had ever seen the normally staid inspector.

“The problem is, our bomber has no real M.O.,” the detective continued.

“You mean you can’t match it to anyone?” Clark asked.

“No, I mean there’s nothing unique at all about this bomb, either. It’s almost like he picked the most generic trigger, explosive, and design he could think of. Normally when we see that, it’s on the crude devices of a novice. But this guy knows what he’s doing. The bomb was simple, no bells, no whistles, but it was made carefully, by an expert.”

Lois wondered idly how they could figure out so much about something that had blown itself up. “So where does that leave us?” She rubbed at her wrist absent-mindedly. She’d taken the brace off that morning. Her wrist was still a little tender, but trying to type with that damn thing was next to impossible.

“Without much to go on, I’m afraid,” Henderson replied. “There are a couple of people with explosives skills who are probably nursing a heck of a grudge against you, Lane, but they have very particular M.O.s. Bombers consider their devices to be works of art. None of the guys out to get you who are sophisticated enough to pull this off would have used this design. And this style of bomb doesn’t look anything like the stuff made by the guns for hire we know are active in the country.”

“So I might have a brand new arch nemesis out to kill me,” she said darkly.

“What about the packaging?” Clark asked. “You mentioned that Superman brought it with him.”

Henderson frowned again. “Block printing on the address, so it’ll be hard to match to handwriting. Nothing else that was unique or unusual. We’ll check the routing label and see where he sent it from and when. Maybe we’ll be lucky and he dropped it off in person.”

“How about the repairman at Lois’s building?” Clark ventured.

“The work order itself was real — the right stationery from the building management company and the right carbon copy from a legit contractor, but everything else was bogus. There was no request for maintenance and no one employed at the contractor whose name matches the one on the work order.”

“How’d he get in the building?” she asked.

“Your doorman let him in,” Henderson replied. “He asked for the guy’s ID, and asked to see the work order, before letting him inside. He had all the right paper, Lois.”

She nodded and said nothing. Henderson continued. “The guy either knew the doorman was new on the job, or he just got lucky.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” Lois said flatly. “Which means he’s careful and thorough.” It was hardly much to work with.

They sat in total silence on the cab ride back to Clark’s place from One Police Plaza. His warm, large hand covering her much smaller one was a reassuring presence, but his expression was unreadable. Their meeting with Henderson had been disappointing. On the plus side, they’d managed to cross some of the suspects off the list, but they didn’t have any promising leads. She’d felt completely deflated when Henderson confirmed that the trail was cold. He’d tried to convince her not to be discouraged, but she couldn’t help but feel powerless and vulnerable. As they sat and listened to Henderson rattle off the details of the investigation, Clark had surreptitiously taken her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. She couldn’t have been more grateful for his support. It was probably the only thing that kept her from losing hope.

She wasn’t used to being this helpless, but they had almost nothing to work with. All they knew was that the attempted hits on her apartment, her car, and the Planet had been arranged by a pro.

Lois looked up at Clark. The tiny muscle in his jaw was twitching, the way it always did when he was tense. He turned to look at her and the stern look on his face melted away. His lips turned up in a gentle smile that reached his warm, brown eyes. “You okay?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“We’ll go through every source we have,” he said. “Nobody pulls off something like this without other people knowing what’s going on.”

She knew he was right. Their more unsavory sources were plugged deeply into Metropolis’s criminal network. Someone would have to know something.

“Yeah, I know where to find you,” she said as she hung up. “Tiny Jim will meet with us tomorrow.”

“You think he knows something?”

“Hard to say,” she replied with a frown. “He seemed pretty cagey.” She put the phone on the coffee table and flopped down on the couch.

“That’s a good sign. Tiny Jim’s always cagey when he knows something he shouldn’t.” Tiny Jim was originally Clark’s source but the guy seemed to prefer talking to Lois. It wasn’t hard for Clark to figure out why. He loosened his tie. “Why don’t I get us some dinner; how does Chinese sound?”

“Great,” she replied. “You finally going to tell me where it is you get that amazing takeout?”

“Hey, a guy’s gotta have some secrets,” he said with a grin. “I’ll be back soon.”

In the alley behind his apartment, he took off, flying high over his city. He didn’t like leaving her, even if it was just for a few minutes. If she knew how much he worried about her, she’d bristle. But this time it was different. This guy was giving them nothing to work with. For all his powers, he had no idea how to solve this. He shook his head ruefully. They had to catch this guy. Even though spending practically twenty four hours a day with Lois made it much easier to keep her safe, he knew how off-balance this whole thing was making her feel. She hated being afraid. She hated feeling like she wasn’t in control.

She’d been unusually quiet during dinner. He could tell that the near misses and investigation were starting to wear on her. Frankly, it was impressive how she’d been able to carry on

almost like this was some ordinary story. But then again, Lois was never one to just wait around for someone else to come to the rescue. Half the time, she managed to do her own rescuing. The other half, however, typically required the help of Superman. Or at least the National Guard.

She'd suggested turning in early and much though he wanted to join her, it wouldn't have done any good for his sense of equilibrium. He loved having her around, though he would have greatly preferred it if it wasn't because someone was trying to kill her. But having her so close by made it harder and harder to pretend he wasn't in love with her. She seemed to seek out the small gestures of support and friendship he'd been eager to provide, but he knew that being the target of three well-planned assassination attempts was the real reason for that. If she let him hug her just a little more often and for a little longer than usual, it wasn't because she wanted any more from their relationship than friendship. His brain knew that, but the heart had a way of hoping against hope.

A few hours after she'd gone to bed, he decided to call it a night himself. He turned off the bathroom light and walked softly across the bedroom, hoping not to wake her. He waited for a brief moment at the edge of the bed, just watching her sleep. Lying on her side, her dark hair fanned out over the pillow, she seemed so peaceful. Clark turned down the corner of the covers on his side of the bed, but though he tried to do so gently, he managed to wake her. Her eyes flew open with a start.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean to wake you."

She smiled, looking relieved, and propped herself up on one elbow. He could hear her heart racing, the pulse point on her neck fluttered and throbbed almost imperceptibly against the fair, delicate skin, but it had already begun to slow down. "What time is it?" she asked, still a bit sleepy. He tried not to gaze for too long at the way her gray tank top molded itself to the curves of her slender body.

"Almost twelve," he replied. He turned away from her as he took off his glasses and placed them on the nightstand. He sat on the edge of the bed and lay down, rolling to lie on his side, facing her. "Goodnight, Lois," he whispered. She lay so close to him that he had to will his hand not to reach out and brush away the soft tendrils of dark hair that spilled over her face.

"Goodnight," she said softly, closing her eyes. For a long moment, neither one moved or even breathed. He closed his eyes, willing sleep to come, but knowing that wasn't exactly how it worked.

With his eyes closed, he didn't watch her lean closer to him, he felt it. He had only a brief moment before her lips touched his, the span of a single heartbeat to figure out what he was going to do. He could remain impassive again, just like he had the previous night. It would be the safe thing to do. The prudent thing to do. He felt her lips brush gently against his.

And he kissed her back. She froze, but only for a moment. Before he had a chance to regret what he'd done, her arms slipped around his neck and her lips parted underneath his. He groaned and threaded a hand in her hair. Dazed, deliriously so, he didn't notice the long minutes pass. The only thing he was aware of was Lois, in his arms, kissing him, moaning softly, and threatening to drive him completely insane. She pressed the length of her body against his as he rolled onto his back. His hands settled at her sides as her fingers buried themselves in his hair. She tore her lips from his to trail kisses along his jaw and up to his ear. He felt the breath escape him in a sharp gasp as she captured his earlobe between her lips.

She had him pinned to the bed under her slight weight. Even though it should have required no effort whatsoever for him to free himself, he was pretty sure at that moment that he couldn't have done so even if he wanted to. And he certainly didn't want to. His arms tightened around her, pulling her even closer as her

lips found his again. Daringly, his tongue darted out, insisting entry to her mouth. The soft, muffled sound of contentment she made as he deepened the kiss was his undoing.

He was wrapped up in her, in the sweet, vanilla scent of her skin, the sound of her breath catching in her throat, and the shower of sparks that seemed to rain from her fingertips, sending jolts of pleasure skittering across his skin everywhere she touched him. Her hands wandered down to the hem of his t-shirt and were soon trailing over the skin of his stomach. He felt his muscles tighten reflexively under her touch. A shiver ran down his body as he tried not to laugh. He wasn't supposed to be ticklish. He was invulnerable, for goodness' sake! She raked her fingernails gently against his sides in the most maddening way possible, obviously looking to exploit his newfound weakness.

Eager to put an end to the assault, he did the first thing that came to mind. He rolled over, pinning her to the bed this time, though he kept his weight propped up on his arms. She looked up at him defiantly with passion-darkened eyes and pulled him back down toward her. She kissed him hungrily, her hands once again embarking on their own journey. They slipped under the soft, worn cotton of his t-shirt and started to pull it upward, exposing more of his skin. He grabbed the t-shirt in his own hands and quickly tugged it up over his head. He threw it carelessly to the floor. One fewer barrier between them. He touched her cheek gently, avoiding the angry red abrasions that marred her skin. He turned his attention back to the most important thing in the world at that moment. Kissing Lois.

She kissed him back just as eagerly, moaning into his mouth. He could feel his heart pounding against his chest, his pulse thundering in his ears. He broke off the kiss, both of them breathing heavily. The gauzy haze of passion surrounding his mind started to clear slightly. "What are we doing?" he murmured breathlessly. Part of him regretted the words before they'd passed his lips, but he needed to know that this was what Lois wanted.

"Clark, just kiss me," she whispered. That he could do. No problem.

Her hands trailed up and down his back, sending shivers along the length of his spine. She whimpered a soft protest as their lips parted. The whimper became a sigh as he began to trail a line of open-mouthed kisses down her neck to the warm hollow at the base of her throat. He could feel her pulse pounding under his lips. He couldn't help the slightly self-satisfied smile that turned up the corners of his mouth at the thought that he was having the same effect on her that she had on him. Her fingers tangled themselves in his hair as she murmured his name. Hearing her whisper his name so breathlessly, her voice low and thick with desire, was the most powerful aphrodisiac he'd ever known.

Rolling onto his side to lie beside her, Clark drew one hand slowly down her side to rest at the curve of her hip, his thumb stroking a small path along the hem of her tank top. He lifted his head to look at her. She touched his face, letting a finger trace the outlines of his lips. He kissed the pad of her finger softly. The expression on her face was unreadable, her eyes dark and almost mischievous. She held his gaze, intent on studying him. Her other hand rested on his forearm. Her fingers, drawing absent patterns softly over his skin, were distracting. The temptation to surrender himself to her ministrations and the extraordinary feelings she was managing to evoke in him was tremendous. But this was moving faster than he ever thought it would. He had to know if this was right. He swallowed roughly. "Is this what you want? I mean, we don't have to... I know this has been a really awful week and I don't want to take advantage of that."

"I want this," she insisted. "I want you." She framed his face with her hands and pulled him back down to kiss him. "I want you, Clark," she whispered in his ear. Clark let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding in, relieved and thrilled by her

words.

He captured her lips and kissed her fiercely. “God Lois, I want you so badly,” he breathed. “I always have.”

Did he really mean that? Had he always wanted her? No, it was just one of those things guys said, she thought distractedly, as he kissed the sensitive spot behind her ear, sending a delightful shiver through her. Part of the act, obviously. Sweet nothings murmured in the dark in a well-planned seduction... No, wait, that wasn't fair. Clark hadn't set out to seduce her.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered in her ear, his breath warm against her skin. She wasn't sure how he could say that with a straight face, given the mess of scrapes and bruises she was sporting. He pushed aside the thin strap of her tank top and kissed the bare skin of her shoulder. The hand resting on her hip began to stir. It slipped under the hem of her shirt to gently stroke the skin of her stomach. His touch was so reverent and undemanding. Her experiences weren't all that extensive, but she had never been with a man like Clark before. She'd come to assume that all men were the same in bed — they were too focused on getting what they wanted to notice or care about their partner's feelings.

Clark's hand traveled slowly up her side, almost hesitantly. He looked at her, the question clear in his eyes. She merely nodded in response, before arching her back upward, allowing him to slip the tank top up higher. Lois crossed her arms and grabbed the hem of the shirt, pulling it up over her head before discarding it somewhere in the darkness. Silently, he simply looked her, as though he was transfixed. It was strange, but she didn't feel self-conscious. She didn't shrink from his gaze. But she saw him wince and realized that the large, fading bruise on her side had caught his attention. A sudden sense of vulnerability cascaded over her. He was probably disgusted.

“I can't do this,” he whispered.

She tried to will away the tears that were starting to well up in her eyes. “I know with the bruises I'm not much to look at...” she began, her voice fragile and thin.

“Lois.” Her name seemed to escape his lips in a shocked gasp. “God, you are so beautiful,” he insisted. “I just... how could I have been so stupid to forget that you're hurt? If I made it worse...”

“You won't,” she assured him, the hesitation and fear now gone. “It doesn't hurt anymore. Honestly, I forgot it was still there. I'm fine, Clark.”

“You're sure?” he asked, his tone anxious and nervous.

“I'm sure,” she promised him. She drew him back into her arms, relishing the feeling of his warm, soft skin against hers. He reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, the sweetest smile on his face. Clark was very quickly becoming the best lover she had ever had. There wasn't really a question anymore; they were going to do this. It was what she wanted, wasn't it? The feeling of his lips against hers provided the answer in short order. It was. She could feel her pulse thundering in her ears, her entire body flushed with warmth.

Lois let her hands wander over the wonderfully muscled planes of his shoulders and back. For as long as she'd known her partner, she'd known that he was possessed of the most beautiful body, perfectly sculpted as though it had been carved from a piece of marble. She still didn't know how he did it — he ate nothing but junk food half the time and still managed to have a body that really should have been criminal. She was suddenly less inclined to feel any irritation toward the peculiar mix of metabolism, genetics, free time spent in the gym, and just plain luck that gave Clark a physique that she could have happily spent the rest of her life admiring.

He ran one hand down the length of her arm to take her hand in his, entwining their fingers. Their lips parted and their eyes

met. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I love you,” he whispered.

He felt her body go rigid underneath him. And suddenly, she was scrambling to get away from him. Clark didn't resist at all, quickly rolling away to allow her to move. He practically jumped back as though he'd been burned, and emotionally he had been. She pulled the sheets up around herself and leaned against the headboard on the opposite side of the bed, as far away from him as she could possibly be while still in the bed. She looked at him somewhat warily, like a trapped animal, deciding whether to fight or flee. He scrubbed an agitated hand through his hair and sighed, feeling a tightness in his chest that made him think his heart was going to burst, or perhaps just break.

“Lois, what's wrong?” he asked softly, not looking up, not able to stand the anger and accusations he knew he'd find in her eyes.

“Why did you say that?” she demanded, trying to keep her tone even, but he could hear the tears in her voice.

“Because I do,” he replied simply. He reached out to put a hand on hers, but she pulled back and his heart was shredded to ribbons.

“Don't say it, Clark. Not you,” she warned.

“Is it that terrible?” he asked, knowing he was doing a poor job of hiding the hurt in his voice.

“Look, I know it's something guys say even though they don't mean it, but not you. Because when you say something like that, you have to know that I'm going to want to believe it.”

“And I want you to,” he replied earnestly. His only hope was to lay everything on the line. He might have already screwed everything up irredeemably, but he still had to try. “Because it is true, it always has been. And it'll be true tomorrow morning. Lois, I didn't say ‘I love you’ because I'm trying to seduce you. I mean... I'm pretty sure we were going to well... you know...” he felt a blush creep up his face. “If I hadn't said it. If anything, I think it looks like I've just sort of made things worse for myself.” He hoped the self-deprecation would work. Maybe she wouldn't feel the need to take the shot at him if he took it first.

The expression on her face suddenly softened and he realized he was wrong to assume that she was going to kick him when he was down. This wasn't about him. It had nothing to do with him. It was about Lois, about the fact that she still wasn't certain she could trust him, at least not with her heart. “Why?” she asked simply.

How could she not know? She had to know how brilliant and gorgeous she was. How any guy in his right mind would want her. And how, after working with her for months and seeing what a wonderful person she was, her partner couldn't help but fall deeper in love with her. Lois had always seemed self-assured — she knew she was the best and she was way too observant not to notice that men found her incredibly attractive. No, she'd used her beauty to her advantage on occasion to land an elusive interview or infiltrate some criminal scheme, making Clark more than a little jealous and worried for her safety.

But there was apparently a big difference in knowing you were wanted and knowing you were loved. His heart seemed to break all over again and a sudden anger came over him, anger directed toward whoever had made her wonder if she could be loved for who she was. She looked at him warily and he realized that again, he was probably doing a rather poor job of hiding his feelings. “Do you have any idea how amazing you are?” he asked. She looked downward, avoiding his gaze. “You are the most incredible person I've ever known. You're brilliant, and passionate, and loyal, and caring, and stubborn...” She frowned and opened her mouth to protest, but he didn't allow her to. “But that works for you since you're almost always right. And you know it doesn't hurt that you're a total knockout.”

She gave him a slight, half smile as she nervously tucked a strand of hair behind her ear in an endearing gesture he'd come to love. "Clark, I can't, I mean, I'm not ready..." She looked away as she trailed off.

"I know," he responded softly. Hesitantly, he reached out again and she let him take her hand in his. "And it's okay; I don't expect you to say it back, at least, not now. I hope eventually... but not before you're ready."

"You really mean it, don't you?" she asked, her tone incredulous. She kept looking downward, not making eye contact with him. With one hand, she clutched the bed sheets to her body.

It stung to know that she found it so difficult to believe him. "I love you, Lois. You're all I ever think about. I've been in love with you since the day I met you. And I don't just want some one-night stand with you. I want more."

"This is just so much," she began.

"Too much?" he asked. "It's all moving too fast, isn't it? I'll go sleep on the couch. We can talk about this in the morning." He started to get up, but she held tightly to his hand.

"Don't go," she said simply. His heart suddenly lightened. "It's not too much."

He drew in a deep breath. "You have to know how much I want this, how I've dreamt about this, but I don't want us to do anything you're not ready for. I don't want you to regret this in the morning." He looked down, ready to insist that he go sleep on the couch.

"Clark." His eyes met hers. "I want more, too. With you." He felt his heart stop. She wasn't making any promises, but he understood that he'd asked her to trust him fully, knowing how hard it was for her to do that. And she was taking a huge leap of faith with him. She let the sheet fall away as she moved toward him, allowing him to draw her into his arms. He smiled as he pulled her close, falling back against the pillows with the most wonderful, beautiful, brilliant, and vivacious woman in the world following willingly in his arms. He could feel her smile against his lips. Kisses grew more passionate. Caresses less hesitant. Limbs tangled and their remaining clothes were quickly discarded. His head buried against her neck, he breathed in the scent of her. Clark's heart thundered in his ears; the only thought in his mind was the fact that making love to Lois was so much better than he could have ever imagined.

Exhausted, sated, and happier than he could remember being, Clark felt himself succumbing to a deep sleep. Lois was already sleeping, her head pillowed on his chest, and his arms wrapped tightly around her. Drowsily, he dropped a kiss on the top of her head before finally drifting off.

It was a scientific fact, Lois's drowsy, sleep-addled brain decided firmly, that there was no greater luxury, no more wonderful and decadent indulgence than five hundred thread count, long-staple Egyptian cotton sheets. Funny, she'd never pegged Clark as a hedonist. The bedding seemed even more luxuriant today, she thought as she stretched out lazily. It must have been the fact that there was nothing between her skin and the sheets. A low blush slowly crept over her as she realized why that was. She'd slept with her partner. With the wonderful, kind, generous, and gorgeous man who still held her so securely in his arms.

Last night, she hadn't sought out security. It wasn't vulnerability that sent her racing into Clark's embrace. It was desire — not fear — that roared in her blood. And the desperate need to prove that no one so consumed with passion and fierce defiance could possibly be mortal. The squall and storm of her emotions, the wildfire that raced through her veins, these things couldn't be snuffed out like pathetic embers by some cold-blooded assassin.

And then Clark went and made it about love.

She'd panicked — prepared to retreat back to the safety of tightly controlled emotions and brave façades. His desire burned just as brightly as hers, but it was fueled by love, not some fearsome need to prove he was still alive. And that had frightened her. Because love entailed expectations and expectations led to heartbreak. To the emotions that made you feel small and helpless and vulnerable. And yet... there she was, living a hair's breadth from death. Didn't she want to know what it was like to be loved? To see what that love might become? Didn't she want to take that chance?

If she'd had any reason to doubt his words, his actions last night put all her hesitations to rest. His touch had been so reverent, so worshipful. With every look, every kiss, every caress, he'd paid silent homage to her. And the idea that she could stake her claim to immortality with some casual fling with her partner became absurd.

Lois Lane was alive.

Lois Lane could never die.

Because she'd been loved.

Soft gray light filtered in through the windows. Rain hit the glass in a soothing rhythm, tugging her back toward sleep. It was still early, she told herself as her eyelids grew heavy. She gave in and sleep overtook her.

"Morning, beautiful," he said cheerfully as he pressed a kiss to her hair, as though there were nothing more natural in the world than the two of them waking up together.

"Morning," she murmured in reply. "What time is it?"

"A little after ten," he said.

"What? Why didn't you wake me up?" she asked, about to scramble out of bed.

"Relax," he said almost breezily as the arm draped over her pulled her back more tightly against him. "It's Saturday and there's nowhere we need to be until one."

The need to spring to action disappeared as quickly as it had materialized. Relaxing lazily didn't come naturally to her, but this was definitely something she could learn to enjoy. She put her head on his chest, smiling contentedly. This was nice. Lying in bed here where the outside world and the madman trying to kill her didn't exist. No, here there was just this big, comfortable bed and the warm, strong arms of... what was Clark now? Her partner, her friend... her boyfriend? The smile slowly faded and died. "Everything's different now, isn't it?"

"Not everything," he replied. "But I guess a lot of things are different. Last night... you know I meant every word I said."

"I know." They were both silent for a long moment. "So where do we go from here?" she wondered aloud.

He tilted her chin up and gently kissed her lips. "You can have the bathroom first. I'll go make breakfast, and we'll talk about it," he said. "How do pancakes sound?"

"Great," she replied with a smile. He kissed her again before slipping out of bed. She watched appreciatively as he crossed the room to his dresser and pulled out a pair of sweatpants. He pulled them on and walked through the archway toward the kitchen.

He gave her a sheepish smile. It wasn't the first time she'd caught him staring since they'd sat down for breakfast. It wasn't even the second. She must have thought he was as bad as a love-struck teenager. But how could he begin to explain what he felt? How could he tell her how badly he'd needed to be with her, to hold her in his arms while she slept? How could he tell her the only time in the last few days when he hadn't worried about whether he'd be able to keep her safe was when he'd held her so close he couldn't just hear her heartbeat, he could feel it? Like it was a part of himself.

"So, you know what I want," he said as he cleared the sticky, syrup-doused plates from the table. "I want a relationship. I know

we've been moving pretty fast, but I'm not in a rush. We can slow this down." He sat back down at the table and looked across at her, noticing the hesitant expression in her eyes.

"Do you think last night was a mistake?" she asked quietly.

"No!" He realized how emphatic his tone was from the startled look on her face. Clark reached across the table to cover her hand with his. "Last night was amazing; it was more than amazing. At least... it was for me." Suddenly, the thought that his perception of last night might not have been the same as hers crossed his mind.

"It was incredible," she agreed as she turned her hand to interlace their fingers. He tried to contain his relief.

"What I meant was, I've had a long time to think about this. How I feel about you; what I want."

"And it's all pretty new to me," she admitted.

"So why don't we start with a date?" he asked. "After we catch this guy and things settle down a bit..."

"Do we have to wait until then?" she asked, looking up at him through her dark lashes. Clark merely smiled. "I mean, given how busy we both are, and how often I manage to get into trouble, it's not like we can be sure there will be a better time than now. Besides, I'm not going to let some crazed pyromaniac dictate how I live my life."

God, he loved it when she babbled. "How about dinner tonight, then?"

"I'd like that," she replied with a small smile.

He almost couldn't believe what had happened in just the last twelve hours. He couldn't believe he and Lois had made love. Somehow, it was almost harder to believe that they were consciously choosing to pursue a relationship. Last night could have been written off as a moment when emotions clouded all reason. But now, Lois was entertaining the possibility that she might want more than friendship with him. For a brief moment, he wondered whether it was time to tell her the truth. To tell her about Superman. Not yet, another part of his brain countered. She knew that he loved her; she thought she might want to see where their relationship could go, but the secret was forever. It wouldn't be fair to her to burden her with that knowledge, knowing their lives would be permanently linked by that secret, even if their relationship didn't work. Besides, didn't she have enough to worry about for now? Couldn't they just take this one step at a time? Surely that was the prudent approach, his brain told him.

"You musta made some mean cats real angry, Miss Lane," Tiny Jim said in his low drawl. Even at the tail end of winter, he still wore a tank top undershirt with his jeans and work boots, displaying the large tribal band tattoos that circled his massive, bronze biceps. He crossed his arms over his immense chest and glanced back at his auto shop.

"Sad what happened to your Jeep, too. It was a nice ride."

Tiny Jim, the ironically named Tongan monster, was easily the biggest mechanic in Metropolis. He did outstanding work for people who needed fast, tough cars — not all of them for legitimate reasons.

"Any idea who was behind it?" Clark asked, cutting to the chase.

Tiny Jim shrugged his giant shoulders. "I ain't heard nothing concrete. But I do know who it isn't. Every dealer, pusher, conman, gangbanger, and wannabe mobster in town has been warned that if they help whoever's trying to off you, the Boss is gonna put them in a world a hurt."

"Who's the Boss?" Lois asked before Clark had a chance.

"I don't know and I'm glad I don't know, because everyone in this town who ain't dumb as sh..." The enormous mechanic caught himself before saying something indecent in front of a lady. "...bricks is afraid of the Boss."

Lois chewed her lip thoughtfully but said nothing. "Have you

heard anything else?" Clark asked.

"Nah, man. But hey, if it helps at all, the Boss has made you untouchable. This cat's gotta be pretty stupid if he tries to whack you again."

"I think I'll still sleep better when this guy's off the streets," she replied dryly.

"I hear that," Tiny Jim replied with a slow nod. "And hey, when you get a new ride, let me know if you want any work done on it. I'll give you a deal."

Lois gave him a slight smile. "Thanks."

"No problem," Tiny Jim replied. "Stay safe, Miss Lane. Catch you later, Clark," he said with a wave of one large mitt of a hand.

He watched as Lois pulled the lapels of her overcoat closer together. "Well, that was sort of useful," she mused.

"But it pretty much just confirms what we'd suspected," Clark said as he jammed his hands in his coat pockets. "Which means, we don't even have a list of potential suspects."

Lois stopped suddenly. "What if we're doing this backward? We're doing this deductively — trying to make a list of potential suspects and then crossing off the ones that don't have the ability and opportunity."

It clicked suddenly in Clark's mind. Good god, she was brilliant. "We should be doing this inductively — figuring what type of person would have the skills and opportunity and then seeing who among them would have the motive to try to kill you."

"Exactly," she replied. She held her hand up for a moment. "Bomb makers are particular. They find a style they like and they stick with it. The bomber had no M.O. because he didn't learn how to make a particular type of bomb. He learned how to disarm bombs. We start with bomb squad employees, current and former, military ordinance specialists..."

Clark smiled and shook his head. She never ceased to amaze him. "Come on, let's get out of here." It wasn't the best neighborhood, so they would have to walk at least a few blocks before they could catch a cab to the Planet.

She pushed the 'Down' button on the elevator and closed her eyes. They'd made a particularly uncomfortable call to Bill Henderson about potentially disgruntled bomb squad members and had only started to figure out what sources they could contact about potential suspects with the right type of military experience. But at least they had a roadmap.

"So are you going to tell me where we're going for dinner?" she asked as she turned to look at Clark.

"Nope," he said with a boyish grin. "It's a surprise."

"I hate surprises," she mumbled.

"It's only a few more hours," he replied as he kissed her forehead.

She smiled as she closed her eyes. "I can't wait." And she couldn't. She felt a tingle of anticipation run through her. Over and over again this week, she'd seen how much everything familiar could change in a blink of an eye. She'd cheated death three times, mostly by blind luck, but somehow, the change in her relationship with Clark seemed even more important. How could things between two people change so quickly? Although maybe last night was just the first time she'd been really honest about the way she felt about her partner.

They crossed the deserted lobby to the exit. Just as he opened the door, Clark's cell phone began to ring. He pulled his phone out and answered it. He frowned as he listened, giving short, noncommittal responses. As he hung up, he gave her an apologetic smile. "The weekend editor wants my notes on the state legislature investigation."

"It's okay, go," she replied.

“You’re sure?” he asked.

“I’ll be fine,” she insisted.

Clark gave her a quick kiss. “I’ll meet you at my place soon. Our reservation is for seven thirty.”

Despite his attempts to keep everything a secret, Lois had managed to wrestle out of Clark an assurance that they weren’t going anywhere too fancy. When she’d thought of the list of things she’d need while staying at Clark’s, she hadn’t anticipated any need for her little black dress. She settled on her favorite skirt and a particularly well-tailored blouse. She checked her reflection in the mirror; she’d used a good bit more makeup than usual, but the slight redness that remained from almost faded abrasions was well-concealed. Lois smoothed an imaginary line from her skirt, trying to tell herself to relax, that she was going out with Clark and had no reason to be nervous. But it wasn’t working. How could one person make her feel so safe and so afraid at the same time? After last night, everything was different. Everything was up in the air between them. Where they went from here, where their relationship was headed, it all seemed to rest on what happened tonight.

She looked at her watch. It was past six thirty and Clark wasn’t back yet. Apparently he’d had to walk Myerson through the entire investigation. Perry had pulled Clark off all his stories, freeing him up to help Lois investigate, which meant other reporters had had to take over. Clark had called twice to check in and make sure she was okay. Under any other circumstances, she would have scolded him for treating her like a little girl, but just this once, she was entirely okay with it.

She heard the front door open and looked out into the living room to see Clark descending down the steps. “Everything okay?” she asked as she walked toward him.

He grinned. “You look amazing,” he said as he kissed her. “And everything was fine. I’ll be ready to go in a few minutes.”

A scant fifteen minutes later, he reappeared in the living room, having showered, shaved and changed into dark gray slacks, a blue button-down shirt, and a black leather jacket. He carried a single, yellow long-stem rose in his hand. He held it out to her.

“It’s beautiful; thank you,” she said as she took the rose. The soft petals were only beginning to open up. “Yellow roses twice in one week. Someone must like me,” she said with a smile. “The yellow ones are for...”

“Friendship,” he finished.

Her inquisitive mind kicked itself into overdrive. Why a yellow rose? He obviously knew what it symbolized. What was he trying to say? Maybe he wanted them to be nothing more than friends. Maybe he’d reconsidered. Maybe he thought last night was a mistake. Her pulse began to race; she was suddenly certain she wouldn’t be able to take Clark’s rejection. He’d be kind, but there was no gentle way to rip out someone else’s heart. While a parade of fears traipsed through her mind, Clark walked into the kitchen and returned with a large bouquet of bright red roses. She felt the corners of her mouth turn up in a smile and the vise gripping her heart suddenly disappeared.

“Oh Clark,” she murmured in a soft whisper, her voice suddenly failing her.

“I think you know what these are for,” he said. He leaned toward her and gave her a slow, lingering kiss.

“Mmmm,” she heard herself sigh as their lips parted. She looked up at him, startled to see the desire in his dark eyes. His gaze held hers, and she couldn’t look away.

After a long moment, Clark cleared his throat softly. “Let me put these in some water for you,” he said, gesturing toward the flowers. He disappeared into the kitchen once again and returned a few moments later.

“How did you manage to get all those roses into the

apartment without me noticing?” she asked as she followed him toward the front door.

“Secret,” he replied simply. “Ready to go?” He held her overcoat for her. She slipped into the proffered coat and turned back around toward him. He was smiling at her like she was the most important thing in the world.

“I love you,” he said as he dipped his head to kiss her again.

It was such a wonderful thing to hear, but she didn’t know how to respond. Lois had only just begun to allow herself to look at Clark as something other than a friend. She was falling for him, quickly, too, but she wasn’t ready to return his declaration. She was afraid that there was only so long he could go, however, not knowing whether she felt about him the way he felt about her.

He tilted her chin up, gently tracing the outline of her lower lip with his thumb. “You don’t have to say anything,” he said, clearly reading her thoughts.

“You mean so much to me. I just need time to figure all this out.”

“I know,” he replied, dropping a kiss against the crown of her hair. “And I can wait. Are you okay with me saying it?”

“I really like hearing you say it,” she admitted as she wrapped her arms around him. He enfolded her in a warm embrace.

“Good. I kind of get a kick out of it,” he said with a grin.

Lois listened in wonder as Clark chatted amiably with the waiter in French. The waiter left them a pair of dessert menus and faded quietly into the background. She’d taken French in high school and college and could still read a menu and order, but Clark spoke the language with an ease that made it seem natural. The maitre d’ and the waiters all seemed well acquainted with Clark, which didn’t surprise her. He seemed to know the very best out-of-the-way places in the city. Warm, inviting, and intimate, this quiet little restaurant certainly qualified as one of Metropolis’s best-kept secrets. The soft flicker of candles and the warm tingle of peppery syrah seemed to wrap her up in an almost drowsy sort of contentedness. She couldn’t remember ever being this comfortable. Clark reached across the table to take her hand in his.

“So just how many languages do you speak?” she asked.

“Fluently? Half a dozen. I can order dinner in 347,” he replied.

“You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“Monsieur, madam, anything for dessert?” the waiter interrupted as politely as possible.

“I really shouldn’t,” Lois demurred.

“Molten chocolate cake,” Clark replied as he handed the waiter back the menu. He looked directly at Lois. “Two forks.”

“I’m going to have to move into my gym,” she said.

“You look spectacular,” he replied.

Lois felt herself blush. “Yeah, well, I still haven’t figured out your secret. You eat whatever you want, don’t you?”

Clark nodded somewhat sheepishly.

“And you still have a body to die for. How?”

He arched a brow at her. “To die for, huh?” he teased.

Perhaps he was expecting her to retreat from her rather bold pronouncement, but she simply leaned toward him, a slow smile spreading across her lips. “How do you do it?” she insisted.

“Born lucky, I guess,” he ventured.

The waiter returned with the desert, setting the plate, artfully garnished with a drizzle of chocolate sauce and fresh raspberries, in front of Clark. He picked up one of the two forks and looked at her expectantly. “I promise, it won’t bite you back,” he teased.

“I never have dessert,” Lois protested.

“Just try it,” he replied. With his fork, he cut off a neat piece of the warm, dark confection and held it up to her.

“Oh, why not?” Lois thought to herself. A simple little bite

couldn't hurt. She leaned forward obligingly. She closed her eyes as she savored the rich, decadent taste. "Mmmm," she sighed contentedly. Slowly, she opened her eyes, the sensuous, velvety flavor of the desert still lingering on her tongue. Her gaze met Clark's and she was startled by what she saw — a look in his fierce, dark eyes she'd seen only once before. Even obscured by his glasses, she could see the same glint of fire and heat. She felt flushed with the memories of the previous night, of her uninhibited responses to his touch, the feel of his warm hands against her skin, and the sound of his voice as he'd cried out her name.

Chocolate had nothing on Clark Kent.

He seemed to shake himself mentally as he gave her a half smile. He used the edge of the fork to cut off another small piece of the cake. "Another bite?" he asked.

God, how was she supposed to keep her composure through the remainder of dinner when he looked at her like that?

She lifted her wine glass from the coffee table and leaned back against the couch. The cabernet had opened up nicely, she noticed as she took a small sip and breathed deeply of the wine's aroma of chocolate and coffee. "Okay, so if you had to listen to just one album for the rest of your life, no other music, which one would it be?" she asked.

"Hmm..." he mulled over the question for a long moment before deciding. "'London Calling,' The Clash," he replied.

"Really?" she said, seemingly surprised. "I don't think I would have pegged you as a Clash fan."

"What, are you saying I'm too straight-laced for English punk?"

"You said it, I didn't," she said with a grin.

"I had to go all the way into Wichita to find it. I was fifteen years old. It was my rebellious phase," he explained.

"You had a rebellious phase? Please, Kent," she retorted playfully.

He smiled as a distant memory came to him. "I used to go up to the hayloft and just listen to that record all the time."

"I take it your parents weren't fans?"

"Mom didn't mind, but Dad hated it." He draped an arm over her shoulders and pulled her closer. "What about you? Godzilla attacks and eats your entire music collection and you can only save one; which is it?"

Lois nudged him good-naturedly in the ribs. "'The Ellington Suites,'" she replied without hesitation. "I took lessons from the time I was four until I left home for college. I was so tired of Mozart and Chopin by the time I was thirteen I thought I never wanted to see a piano again. And then I heard this recording of 'Single Petal of a Rose,' and I was hooked. Have you ever heard something so beautiful it just made your heart ache?" she asked as she turned to look up at him.

"Yeah," he said almost breathlessly, his gaze holding hers.

Lois felt a blush creep over her complexion. "I figured out how to play it by ear and bought every Ellington record I could find. I'll bet my dad hated it as much as yours did."

"Your dad hated you listening to jazz?" Clark asked quizzically.

"Well, he thought it wasn't appropriate for a young lady, probably because I started hanging around that jazz joint on 44th by the time I was sixteen." Off Clark's arched brow, she continued. "Whatever, thanks to him I was spending most of my time in boxing gyms by the age of eight. Which one is actually more inappropriate?"

"So you were hanging out at bars in Devil's Den when you were a kid?"

She smiled at him. "I had the lousiest fake ID. The waitress wouldn't let me near the bar, but she'd bring me a soda and let me stay and listen. I couldn't afford to keep paying the cover

every night, so the house band used to let me sit and listen after school when they rehearsed."

He kissed her temple. "And I thought I was the rebellious one."

"Well, pretty much everything I did from the time I was twelve was one long act of rebellion."

"That was when your parents divorced, wasn't it?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yeah," she replied. She leaned against his chest and he draped his arm around her, drawing her close.

"It must have been hard." He spoke softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Well, we were used to keeping up appearances." A tone of bitterness crept into her voice. "We had the right brownstone on the right street in Parkside Hill," she continued, referencing one of Metropolis's poshest neighborhoods. "We belonged to the right church and the right clubs. Lucy and I went to the right schools. So what difference did it make if Daddy had a string of badly concealed affairs and Mother dealt with them by finding her way to the bottom of a bottle of gin?"

"Lois..."

"I'm sorry," she said hastily. "That's probably a lot more than you wanted to know."

"I want to know. Everything you want to tell me, I want to know," he assured her as he kissed the crown of her hair.

"I think that's enough true confessions from me for one night. What about you? Penny for your thoughts," she said quietly.

"There's not much in there you haven't already heard," he joked. She could tell he was trying to lighten the mood and she was thankful for it.

"Oh yeah?" she challenged.

"I'm an open book," he replied flippantly.

"Liar," she challenged.

"Okay," he admitted. "Maybe a few of the pages are stuck together."

"So what are your really big secrets, Clark Kent?"

"Well, what do you want to know?"

Lois arched a brow. "What really happened between you and Cat Grant?"

"Nothing," he practically sputtered.

"You turn the darkest shade of red whenever anyone brings it up. It's cute." Lois replied with a bemused smile.

Clark allowed himself to smile at her gentle teasing. He took a sip from his wine glass. "I have never slept with a woman I wasn't in love with." It was technically true. And technically true was still true. "Why? Were you jealous of Cat?"

"Jealous? Me? No, I was just worried about your taste in women."

"I have excellent taste in women," he replied. He picked up her hand where it lay against his chest, stroking the back of her hand with his thumb.

Her head still resting on his shoulder, she looked up at him through her dark lashes. "So you're attracted to me?"

"I'm insanely attracted to you."

"How come you weren't affected by that pheromone stuff Miranda sprayed in the newsroom?"

"I don't know. But she did use a diluted formula; maybe it just didn't affect everyone." He hoped that sounded reasonable. "Anyway, I'm glad it didn't work. It was tough enough behaving myself when I wasn't completely drugged."

"You were a perfect gentleman. Even though I made a total fool of myself," she replied.

"You weren't yourself. If I'd been affected, I'm pretty sure I would have done something you would have hated me for."

"If anything had happened, we would have both been responsible, or well, not responsible to the same degree," she

replied.

He shook his head. "It's not the same."

"Are you going to give me that sexist nonsense about taking advantage of a helpless woman?"

He laughed softly. "This certainly isn't about you being helpless. But it still would have been us doing something that you never would have wanted. I was already in love with you then. I wanted to be with you."

"Oh. Well, I still wouldn't have hated you," she said definitively.

Clark dropped a kiss on the crown of her hair. She looked up at him silently. Her lips parted ever so slightly and he took that as his invitation. He touched her cheek as he closed the distance between them and kissed her softly. She moved easily into his arms as she kissed him back. His heart thundered in a rapid, uneven staccato in his chest. She had no way of knowing it, but she'd gotten under his skin. She was in his blood, moving inside of him. She consumed him. He couldn't think about anything else. Breathlessly, he broke off the kiss and slowly opened his eyes. He watched, mesmerized, as she reached out to brush a lock of hair away from his forehead. "It's getting late," he heard himself say.

"I'm not tired. Are you?" she replied, arching a brow suggestively.

"We don't have to rush back into this. I'm not... expecting anything tonight," he ventured.

The smile on her lips faded and died. "Are you saying you don't want to?" she asked, and he could hear her trying to mask the hurt in her voice. God, he hated the thought of ever hurting her.

He took her hand in his and interlaced their fingers. "Of course I want to. I just want to make sure that you do, too. I don't want you to feel rushed into this."

"I want this, Clark," she said, her tone soft, but insistent. Her hand skimmed lightly up the front of his shirt as she easily undid the first button and then the second. She kissed him again as her hands trailed down his newly exposed skin. He exhaled sharply as she untucked his shirttails. She shifted until she was straddling him, her hands parting his open shirt. Clark pulled her back down to kiss her again. He felt her gasp as he swiftly sat upright, gathered her into his arms, and carried her toward the bedroom. There were much better places to do this than the living room couch.

If she needed any evidence that he'd been teasing her while carrying her over the threshold of the Honeymoon Suite at the Lexor, she certainly had it. Clark carried her like she weighed nothing at all! She placed her head against his shoulder, her hand upon his chest, feeling his heart pound under the warm skin and firm muscle. Her own heart was thundering like a jackhammer in her breast as anticipation spooled tightly in her stomach. She could feel herself growing impatient. Every moment when she wasn't kissing him, when she couldn't bury her hands in his hair or let them wander across the smooth, muscled planes of his body, was torture.

He didn't bother to turn on the bedroom lights. A sliver of light from the diner across the street filtered in through his window, and she could make out the shapes of the furniture in shadows and silhouettes. He laid her down reverently on the bed and shrugged out of his dress shirt, which fell softly to the floor. He sat down gently on the edge of the mattress, one hand planted on the bed on the opposite side of her. She ran her fingers lightly up his forearm and over the hard curve of his triceps. He leaned down to kiss her and she wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him toward her.

Without breaking off the kiss, he untucked her blouse from her skirt and began to deftly undo the buttons. His lips trailed

downward, along the line of her jaw, down her neck, to the hollow of her collarbone. She tangled her fingers in his thick, dark hair. "Oh, god, Clark," she whispered and she felt him smile against her skin. Lois sat up to rid herself of the superfluous blouse. She looked at her lover, unable to make out the expression on his face, unsure if his eyes held that warm, deep look of concern for her, or if they were darkened with desire.

He caressed her cheek and lightly drew his thumb along the outline of her lips. He kissed the corner of her mouth before whispering in her ear. "Make love with me."

She answered by kissing him thoroughly. Slowly, they discarded their remaining clothes as their hands continued their unhurried explorations. The previous night, their lovemaking had been almost frantic, two people caught up in a moment they knew they couldn't let pass. Tonight, she couldn't help but feel like she had all the time in the world, all the time she needed to learn everything about her partner. Her eyes adjusting to the darkness, she could see the sweetest smile on his lips as he leaned toward her to kiss her. He enfolded her in a strong embrace, holding her tightly, silently promising that he would keep holding her, that he wouldn't abandon her. That he was hers. She reached up to touch his face. Suddenly, his body went rigid. He turned stone still as a look of horror settled on his face. "Oh, god," he whispered hoarsely, as he placed his hand on top of hers.

"Clark?" She heard a voice so small and thin ask that she didn't recognize it. He moved away from her and was suddenly standing at the foot of the bed, panic still etched in his expression.

"Lois, I'm so sorry," he said roughly. "Please, sweetheart, don't go anywhere, I'll explain everything when I come back."

Fury began to boil up inside her. What the hell did he think he was doing? Before she could launch into a tirade though, she was struck dumb by the sight of him turning into a blur and then Superman appearing in front of her. She scrambled to cover herself up, gathering the bed sheets around her naked body. "I'm so sorry," Superman said, but with Clark's voice and with Clark's haunted expression still on his face. With that, he disappeared in another blur.

Tears filled her eyes. He'd lied to her.

And he'd left her.

The two things she thought Clark Kent would never do.

He was consumed with dread. The explosion had rattled him from clear across town. As he rocketed through the sky, he could only hope that it had sounded worse than it was. Approaching the source of the explosion, his stomach sank like a stone.

St. Vincent's Children's Hospital.

Clark immediately spotted the cause of the explosion — a transformer that had caught fire. Doctors, nurses, and orderlies were already at work evacuating the patients, but many couldn't be moved easily and rescue crews had yet to arrive. If they were using oxygen tanks anywhere near the explosion, it was likely to get a whole lot worse very quickly. He put out the fire immediately and turned his attention to the injured. The cries for help were quickly undoing his composure. They were just little kids. And they wouldn't have been in St. Vincent's unless there was something terribly wrong with them to begin with.

Taking directions from the doctors, he helped move the children away from the damaged wing of the hospital. Firefighters arrived and began cordoning off the blast zone. He wasn't sure how it was possible, but no one had been killed in the blast. But that miracle didn't make it easy to carry badly burned children from their rooms.

Her hands trembled with... anger, shock, disbelief; she didn't know which. She put her clothes back on, swearing silently under her breath with every garment she collected from the bedroom

floor. In the living room, she grabbed her purse. She couldn't go home, but she sure as hell wasn't going to stay there. It didn't matter. She could check into a hotel. Hopefully he'd have the sense to stay away from her. She slipped on one heel and then the other and stormed toward the stairs to the door. She rolled her ankle, a sharp pain shooting up her leg.

"Dammit!" she cursed angrily.

Damn him.

Bastard.

But she paused, thinking about the absolutely haunted look on his face. She'd been so stunned by the incomprehensible revelation that Clark and Superman were the same person that she'd paid no attention to anything he said. But the look on his face was seared into her memory. Whatever it was that had pulled him away had to have been something terrible.

'Don't do it, Lane,' she warned herself mentally. 'You're mad at him, remember? And you have every damn right to be.' Against her own better judgment, she turned around, hobbling painfully on her turned ankle, and picked up the remote control from the coffee table. She turned on the local news channel.

"Superman and firefighters have responded to the blast at St. Vincent's Children's Hospital on Metropolis's Upper East Side," the anchorman said somberly as the screen cut away to a terrifying overhead camera shot of the hospital. In the moonlight, the dark smoke could be seen rising from the gaping hole in one wing of the hospital. "No reports yet on whether anyone was hurt or killed in the explosion, but we remind our viewers that St. Vincent's specializes in the treatment of childhood cancers and other serious, chronic conditions. These are very sick little kids in this hospital."

She closed her eyes, willing herself to stay mad at him. He'd lied to her. For months, he'd lied to her. God, he must have laughed at her, too. She'd made a fool of herself over Superman, not realizing he was none other than her farmboy of a partner. What sort of sick game was he playing at?

And then she imagined him at that fire. She imagined him answering prayers and cries for help.

'Damn him,' she thought again, with less conviction.

"We can handle most of the injuries here, but we're not a trauma center, or a burn center, Superman," Dr. Pickens explained. The middle-aged doctor looked shell shocked, and with good reason, Clark thought grimly.

"How can I be of the most help?" he asked.

"The nearest burn center is across town at MetroGen. The most critical cases should go there," the other man said. "New Troy Burn Clinic in Eastchester is next. You won't be able to just fly them there, not with these burns."

Clark nodded grimly. The exposure for the burn victims during even a short flight was life-threatening. "I'll get ambulances, medivac helicopters, whatever I can, and get them there."

He found evac choppers and physically carried them to the hospital much faster than they could have flown there under their own power. Clark then grabbed an ambulance and began transporting doctors and their patients to the other hospitals. He ferried children to every burn center that could help. Even though he helped complete the task much faster than it would have been done without him, it was still maddeningly slow.

Weary and reeking of smoke, he flew home, his thoughts so deeply troubled by the sight of the small and frightened victims of the blast that he couldn't even bring himself to think about Lois. But he knew that angry wouldn't begin to describe the mood she'd be in.

Incandescent was probably more like it.

He scanned the apartment while he was still flying over it, relieved to find that she was still inside. The stormy expression

on her face made him dread what was about to happen. Clark landed on his balcony and walked into the bedroom. Without bothering to change out of the suit, he walked into the living room. She turned away from the television to look at him.

"Did everyone survive?" she asked quietly.

He nodded. She closed her eyes and exhaled deeply. The silence dragged out until he couldn't take it anymore. "I'm sorry..." he began.

"Don't," she snapped. "Just don't."

"Look, I didn't mean for things to happen this way..." he said somewhat helplessly.

"Whatever you're going to say is only going to make me madder," she retorted. "And it isn't fair because I can't be mad at you because you were off rescuing children and only cold-hearted, selfish people could possibly be mad at someone who saves children, but you lied to me and right now I can't make myself think about anything besides that." She started for the front door.

"Wait," he called out. "It isn't safe." It was true. And the fact that someone out there was trying to kill Lois was the one thought that blotted out all the others. But he did also hope that if she stayed, maybe he could start making this right.

"I know that," she said flatly. "But I can take care of myself." He watched dumbly as she left and wanted nothing more than to follow her. Instead, he just stared at the door that had just slammed behind her. God, how had he gotten himself into this mess?

"Henderson, I'm not accusing anyone on the bomb squad of anything," she snapped irritably, cradling the phone against her shoulder as she sat at the small desk in her room at the Luxor. "I'm just trying to figure out if there is anyone you should be looking at."

Lois listened as Henderson explained something she already understood full well: cops didn't go around investigating other cops unless they had good reason to believe the target had done something wrong. Luckily for her, in a perverse sort of way, the bomber had twice targeted her in public places, where his bombs could easily have killed innocent bystanders. The growing public panic and uproar meant the police were under a lot of pressure to find the perpetrator before he actually did kill someone. She was under a lot of pressure, too, from ordinary citizens calling and writing to the Planet to complain that her presence was making the whole city less safe. Hiding out at the Luxor and staying clear of the Planet was a temporary fix, but no more.

She'd realized when she'd checked in the night before that Lex had apparently planned for this contingency. The hotel manager approached her as soon as she'd shown the woman at the check-in desk her identification. Discreetly, he'd checked her in under a false name and told her to contact him directly if there was anything she needed. In truth, she found it a bit creepy; she had no doubt that the manager's next stop would be to call Lex and let him know she was there. And yet... she needed the anonymity. With her name off the hotel's register, it would be that much easier to hide from the crazed killer who knew where she lived, where she worked, and what her car looked like.

Making Henderson promise he would call if he had any new information, she hung up the phone and turned back to her meager file. The police had been able to track down the LexExpress where the package had been mailed from the barcode. The clerk who'd been working that evening vaguely remembered the sender because she'd recognized Lois's name from the paper. She'd described him as a white man in his mid-thirties, average height, average build, brown hair, thus describing about half of the members of the 50,000-strong Metropolis PD. Not to mention countless other citizens of the city.

Jimmy had begun cross-referencing every story in the Planet's archives from the last twenty years that dealt with the bomb squad, gleaned names and events that might help her figure out if it really was one of the City's Finest who was out to get her. She'd begun digging into his results, trying to match names to other stories she'd worked on. The motive may well have been revenge, she surmised, for something that had happened to someone else — perhaps she'd put a family member or loved one of the bomber in prison.

She worked well into the night, not just because her own life was at stake, but because it kept her mind off Clark Kent. Every time she thought about him — which was more often than she'd wanted to admit — it made her skin burn with anger. How could he have claimed to love her while at the same time, lying through his teeth about damn near everything?

Clark Kent, who bumped into things and spilled coffee on himself, who couldn't open a pickle jar, who hid behind glasses he didn't need and a country hick, aw-shucks demeanor, was in reality a god in a cape. She couldn't imagine why he did it. Why did he bother to hide, pretending he was something he wasn't? Was it really just to prove that he could? That he could fool the whole world into thinking he was just an ordinary man, living an ordinary life?

She shook her head. This endless loop of questions wasn't getting her anywhere. It certainly wasn't helping her put the creep trying to kill her behind bars.

Clark stared at Lois's empty desk. Granted, the entire bullpen was empty late on Sunday nights, but he'd been stealing glances at her desk all day, wishing she was there. She wasn't answering her cell phone, but Perry had told him that she'd called earlier to explain that she'd be keeping her distance for the time being. The night before, he'd followed her cab to the Lexor—just to make sure she got there safely. The old editor asked if something had happened between them, but Clark had been noncommittal. What could he have possibly said as an explanation?

He'd already run through all of the active members of the bomb squad and had crossed them all off his list. Many of them he knew as Superman, but that didn't stop him from investigating them. But he couldn't put a motive to a single member of the unit. So he turned to those who'd retired, resigned, or left due to disability. Without cooperation from the police department, though, it was hard to put together a complete list of people to investigate.

Sighing, he leaned back in his chair. He desperately hoped that as soon as this jerk was behind bars, he'd have a chance to put things right with Lois. She couldn't stay mad at him forever, could she?

Actually, knowing Lois, she probably could. The hurt and angry look on her face when he'd run out on her the night before still pained him. He'd been so confident, arrogant even, when he'd assured her that she could trust him. It had been downright idiotic of him to let things go as far as they had without giving a moment's thought as to whether it was time to tell her the truth about him. He might have been different from the other men she'd known, but apparently not that different. He wondered if she'd ever trust him again.

'Why should she?' his conscience demanded of him. 'She trusted you. When you told her you loved her, she believed you.' Clark groaned. He wasn't going to win a war with the better angels of his nature. No, he'd thrown his lot in with his libido and now everything was catastrophically fouled up. But it wasn't raging hormones and lust that had led him to sleep with Lois, he countered. Dear god, he loved this woman so much he couldn't see straight. He'd never believed that he could love anyone as deeply as he loved her. Almost losing her three times in little more than a week had made it that much harder for him to control

his emotions when it came to her. So why hadn't he just been honest with her? Because he'd needed her so badly. Telling her he loved her had nearly driven her away. Adding a far more shocking revelation on top of that while she was being hunted by a merciless assassin would have been a terrible idea. Which was exactly why he should have been decent enough to ignore what he needed and resisted the overwhelming urge to take their relationship forward. Yeah, right. Like he could have possibly exercised that sort of willpower when it came to Lois.

He wanted to call her. Just to make sure she was okay. It was abundantly clear, however, that she wouldn't appreciate the gesture. He was starting to get a headache, which didn't make any sense because he didn't get headaches. Clark reached into his desk drawer and pulled out the CD he'd borrowed from the paper's music editor. He put the disk into his computer's CD ROM drive and turned on the speakers, hoping Ellington could do for him what aspirin couldn't. He sighed and leaned back in his chair, searching rather naively for a connection to her through something that she loved so much. Something that belonged to her.

It didn't take him long to figure out why she'd fallen in love with this particular piece of music. Why she spoke about it so reverently. It was complex and ephemeral. The theme kept changing, subtle variation on subtle variation, so that just when he thought he knew what was coming next, it changed on him, and he had to stop guessing and just let the music take him where it wanted to go. And he found himself following it willingly, eagerly, just in hopes of hearing a few more beautiful strains. Clark couldn't help but close his eyes as he listened to it. Delicate and haunting, each note seemed to stay with him long after it faded away. He was filled with a sense of wonder. And sadness.

"lo?" came the muffled voice on the other end.

"Where's David Parker?" she demanded.

"What? Lois, is that you?" Jimmy asked.

"David Parker was on the list in the press release seven months ago of officers who'd passed the exam and were selected for promotion to sergeant. Three months later, he's not on the promotion list. Where'd he go?"

"You sure he was bomb squad?"

"It says right here," jabbing at the press release as though Jimmy could see it on the other end of the phone line. "Explosives Disposal Unit."

"He wasn't on the lists CK and I went through today, so he isn't with the bomb squad now. Maybe he transferred."

"Meet me at the Planet in fifteen minutes," she said.

"Now? It's five in the morning..."

"And when someone's trying to kill you, I'll return the favor, Jimmy," she replied dryly. She found her shoes and grabbed her jacket before rushing out of the hotel room.

"Thank you very much, sir, you've been a big help." He hung up the cell phone and turned the key in the ignition of his car. It hadn't been hard to do. After Superman had busted into Lane's place, he knew there was no way she'd keep staying at home. Initially, he'd thought she'd skip town, but she just kept showing up at work like nothing had happened. It had pissed him off a little, he realized. He'd made a list of the nicer hotels in town, not too far from her apartment or office — the sort of places where a paper like the Planet would put its employees up. Pulling out his old uniform, he'd visited the hotels and asked the managers to please give him a call if Ms. Lane checked in. It was a matter of some urgency, he'd assured them.

He frowned as he pulled away from the curb outside the Daily Planet. He hadn't seen her enter and he'd been out there since seven in the morning. It didn't matter. He had a lot to do today. Never in his life had he ever imagined that he would turn

into the sort of person he hated. The sort of person he'd spent his career trying to stop. It almost shocked him how quickly he'd made the transformation, like stepping across an invisible line. But what else could he have done?

It was all her fault. Mike was a good kid. He'd just gotten caught up in something way bigger than he could have understood. He'd tried to get Mike out of it, but Lane had broken up the car theft ring before he'd had a chance. Once the story was out there, there was no way the prosecutor was going to take it easy on Mikey; why would she need to? The evidence was all there.

It had torn him apart to see his little brother hauled off to juvie like some thug. Mike had pleaded with him to get him out of there. Already skinny, the kid had lost weight. When he visited him, he couldn't ignore the fact that the look in his little brother's eyes was hollow and haunted. He couldn't imagine what they were doing to him in there and Mikey wouldn't tell him.

He spent months doing nothing but trying to get his brother out of juvenile detention. It had cost him his job. But he didn't care about that.

Last week, he'd gotten the worst phone call of his life. Some low-level functionary had called him to tell him Mike had been killed in a fight. That was it. Nothing more. His brother was dead. Killed in a cesspool masquerading as a correctional facility. Put there by Lois Lane.

Lois had apparently come and gone before he'd gotten into the office that morning; a rather nasty traffic accident had forced him to detour on his way in. He wondered idly how long they could work for the same section of the same paper and keep avoiding each other. Sighing, he pushed his chair away from his desk. He wasn't getting anything done here. A patrol would give him a chance to collect his thoughts and perhaps see if Henderson had anything new to report.

"Hey Superman!" Flying high over Centennial Park, Clark heard the voice. The man didn't sound like he was in any danger, but Clark zeroed in on the source anyway. He flew back down, landing just in front of the African American police officer. Clark didn't know him personally, but he recognized him from the city's SWAT team.

"What can I do for you, officer?" Superman asked.

The cop rubbed at the back of his neck. "Look, I don't want to say anything about another cop, especially since I don't know anything for sure, but I think there's someone you should look into about these bombings."

David Parker was exactly who Lois was looking for. She knew it. Now, if she could only find him. A month ago, he'd just disappeared from the face of the earth. He had no family left in Metropolis and no one knew where he might have gone. She regretted what had happened to him. There was no way she couldn't. Parker hadn't started as a homicidal maniac. He'd been driven there. And he blamed her for it. There would be time later to figure out just how much of the blame she needed to shoulder for this, she told herself.

She kicked off her heels and sat down on the bed. This was getting her nowhere. At least Henderson now had a suspect. Her room phone rang. She stared at it for a moment, wondering who would be calling her. No one knew she was here. It was probably just the Concierge's desk, she mused between rings. Or perhaps it was Lex. She didn't know why that possibility filled her with dread. Whoever it was, they apparently weren't planning on hanging up. After the sixth ring, she picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Lois Lane?"

"Who is this?" she asked, frowning.

"My name is Peter Loss," the voice on the other end began.

"My badge number is D8726359..."

Lois fumbled for a pen to write down what he was saying. "What can I do for you, Officer Loss?" she asked cautiously. She recognized the name and confirmed the badge number against her list of the officers assigned to the explosives disposal unit.

"You're in danger, Ms. Lane," he continued.

"I think anyone who reads the news knows that," she replied.

"I know who's trying to kill you. I need to talk to you tonight."

Lois took down the information and promised to meet him before hanging up. She grabbed her cell phone and dialed a familiar number.

"Lois?"

"Someone calling himself Peter Loss just called me and asked me to meet him at the diner on East End Drive and 105th Street," she said flatly.

"That doesn't make any sense," Clark replied. "Superman talked to Loss a couple of days ago; he didn't know anything.

"And Peter Loss has no reason to have a grudge against me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to meet him," she responded.

"Lois, you know this is a trap," Clark retorted.

"Which is why I called you," she said matter-of-factly. "I figured you'd want to know. I'll call Henderson on my way there, but I don't want Parker to bolt."

"How'd you know it was him?" He sounded surprised.

"Later," she said, rushing for the door once again.

He hung up the phone and rushed to the stairwell off the bullpen, tugging at his tie as he went. At least she'd thought to call him, he mused. That had to count for something. He took off in a colorful blur, darting across the night sky to the diner where Lois had agreed to meet 'Peter Loss.'

Worry ate away at his gut and he could taste the bile in his throat. Why hadn't he stopped her? 'Quit kidding yourself, Kent,' his brain retorted; he wasn't exactly in much of a position to stop Lois Lane from doing anything she intended to do. He just had to trust that he'd be fast enough. Given what he now knew about David Parker, he had every reason to believe that the man intended to kill Lois the first chance he got. Clark had to make sure he never got that chance.

He hovered overhead, waiting for both Lois and Parker to show up. A dark, nondescript sedan pulled up first. Not long afterward, a cab dropped Lois off. Clark zeroed in on the sound of her heartbeat, thundering in her chest. He recognized the man stepping out of the sedan as David Parker from the photographs. Clark tuned out everything else to listen to their conversation.

"You're not Peter Loss," Lois said flatly.

"You're not the crusading good guy you claim to be," Parker retorted.

"I'm sorry about what happened to your brother," she replied.

Clark watched as Parker balled up his fists. "No you're not! Mike is dead because of you! Because you wouldn't just let the police do their job. I couldn't save him, but at least I can make you pay."

Parker reached into his jacket and Superman dove toward him. Before he could disarm Parker, Lois did the job for him. She'd kicked the gun out of Parker's hand just as he'd pulled it from his coat. It clattered against the pavement in the darkness. Clark grabbed Parker before he could lunge at Lois.

"Thanks, Superman," she said evenly, with none of the typical hero worship or awe in her tone.

Clark nodded, tight-lipped, before rising up into the air with Parker securely in his grip. Taking out a handkerchief, he quickly found the gun and picked it up. He intended to drop the would-be assassin off at the nearest police station and get back to Lois as quickly as possible.

He returned mere moments later to find her trying to flag down a cab. “Can I give you a lift somewhere?” he asked softly. “I can hail a cab, thanks,” she replied, her tone clipped.

“Can we please talk about this?” he insisted.

“Honestly? I’d rather not,” she replied. A cab pulled up to the curb and she got in. He watched dumbly as it drove away.

Lois left the police station around noon, having given her statement and easily picked Parker out of a lineup. She flagged down a cab and headed back to the Planet. In truth, all she’d wanted to do was go home, but while she couldn’t write the story, it couldn’t exactly be written without her, either.

With no small degree of trepidation, she stepped out into the newsroom. It was so strange to feel so uncomfortable in a place she’d come to consider her home. She hadn’t taken more than two steps before she caught Clark’s eyes. He gave her the faintest of smiles, but it died quickly when it wasn’t returned.

“Let’s get this done,” she said simply as she dropped her purse on her desk.

She went through the details with Clark, working through it like it was just another story. There was a tension between them — they hesitated before finishing each other’s sentences. They awkwardly spoke over one another with apologies and false starts. He seemed pained by the sudden and dramatic change in their relationship, but there wasn’t much she could do about that. He was the one who’d lied through his teeth every damned day since she’d met him. Just the thought was enough to make her as mad as she’d been the moment she’d found out. But the article was written anyway and Clark sent it to Perry.

Lois started pulling together notes for her next story, happy to be able to focus on her computer and block out the rest of the newsroom. “Lois, Clark, excellent work,” Perry bellowed from his office about twenty minutes after getting their copy. “Now get out of my newsroom. Take the rest of the week off. That’s an order.”

In the background, she could hear Clark gathering up his stuff and shutting down his computer, but she kept ignoring him. She could feel him standing behind her and it raised her hackles. “Reform in the juvenile corrections system,” he read aloud. She hated it when people read over her shoulder.

Lois didn’t turn around or otherwise acknowledge him. “I’m doing this for Michael Parker, not David Parker,” she said, her tone even harsher than she’d intended.

“I know,” he replied. “You couldn’t have known what was going to happen. You did the best you could. That’s all you can ask of yourself.”

She’d said something similar to him once. It was so odd to think about having said that to Clark, while talking about Superman, oblivious to the fact that they were one and the same.

“You heading out soon?” he asked. She finally looked over her shoulder at him. He seemed to be holding his breath, hanging on to some invisible hope of setting things right.

“I’m going to keep working,” she replied, turning back to the monitor.

“Good night, Lois,” he said. She watched him walk away, looking for all intents like a defeated man. He waited for the elevator, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Goodbye, Clark,” she whispered once the doors had closed behind him. She didn’t know exactly how good his hearing was, but she imagined he’d heard her. Dammit, he had no idea how much he’d hurt her. Despite a lifetime of experience, she had completely bought into the idea that she could trust him. What a farce that had been. So why on Earth did she care about the wounded look in his eyes?

She needed to work. That was all. She could plunge into her work and go back to ignoring the cape-wearing fraud who had so badly thrown her off balance. It was almost an hour before Perry

came out of his office and loudly chased her out of the newsroom. Unhappily, she shut down her computer and headed for the elevators, not really sure where she was going to go.

“Little girl, you are a sight for sore eyes! Come give your ol’ Uncle Charlie a hug!” Charlie was most definitely not her actual uncle, but he never failed to make her smile.

“How have you been, Charlie?” she asked, letting the older African American man pull her into a one-armed hug as he laid down his saxophone. The bartender and the waitress were occupied clearing tables. With the evening’s music set over, the bar’s patrons had mostly filtered out. Charlie had lingered longer than the rest of his band; he always stuck around to chat about jazz with whomever wanted to. She couldn’t imagine anyone would try to rush Charlie out just to close the place for the night. This was practically his bar.

“I can’t complain,” he said with a slow nod. “You all right? I’ve been hearing the wildest things in the news about you.”

Lois shrugged. “Don’t believe everything you hear,” she said. “You look like you got the blues, honey. You want to sit a while?”

“Yeah,” she admitted. She pulled the piano bench forward and sat down. It had been years since she’d seen Charlie. He seemed older than she remembered. The laugh lines around his eyes were deeper. He moved a little slower, too. But ever since she’d been that rebellious teenager, he’d watched out for her.

Superman flew high over the city; not because there were any crimes to stop or emergencies to respond to. Because he had nothing better to do. He knew better than to go home. He would just sit on his couch, flip through the channels pointlessly and wonder why he’d been such an idiot. There were a million things he should have done differently. Had he actually thought about what he was doing instead of falling headfirst into bed with Lois, he might have had a real chance to build a relationship with her. Instead, he was flying around, spending way too much time in his own head.

He’d already flown over her apartment twice. And her gym. He’d checked out the Planet three times. He just seemed to drift in the direction of the places he associated with her. As he flew over the southern edge of the park, he drifted westward toward Devil’s Den. A haunting and familiar sound was drawing him in.

He’d listened to the piece so many times in the last two days that he knew it by its first few bars. Just like he would have known its player anywhere. In the darkened lounge, he watched her thin, graceful form and the languid movement of her body as she played. The way she stretched to play the shimmering arpeggios. The powerful, commanding movements of deft hands as they played each chord. How was it that she’d sprained her wrist barely more than a week ago? Her shoulders swayed slightly as she reached across the keyboard for the notes. Her fingers seemed to soothe and charm the piano with a delicate touch, gently encouraging it to ring out each perfect note at precisely the perfect moment. He watched, enchanted by the way she moved, the way the music seemed to spill over, whirling around as it enveloped the entire room. She played with her eyes closed, knowing the keys by memory and feel.

An odd anticipation grew inside him as he watched, never able to predict the rhythm of her movements, never knowing just how far she’d have to reach in her sinuous stretch for a distant chord, amazed at how her fingers fluttered over the keys in those spine tingling ripples of notes. Clark felt a bit dumb. The piano was a mystery to him. Low notes on the left, high on the right, but he never would have been able to produce anything other than disjointed, jarring sounds. Lois was the instrument’s breath; she gave it life and made it sing. She made it whisper something

in his ear so beautiful it made him ache. The high notes fell softly from her fingers like rain, the embellishments cascading over her and him as well as he stood, unnoticed and likely unwelcome, in the far corner of the lifeless bar.

She played the familiar variations of the lines and he listened for the changes, the way the music teased you as it drew you in and surrounded you, the sudden swells and soft sighs of the notes and chords. He listened to the coda he knew so well as it drifted toward the ending, flirting with a resolution it would never give him.

“Bar’s closed, son,” the older gentleman sitting near Lois called out as soon as she’d finished playing. The man seemed to have noticed Clark several minutes earlier, but hadn’t said a word, probably out of respect for the piano player. Lois turned to look at him. He thought he saw a flash of anger in her expression, but it was gone just as quickly as it had formed.

“What are you doing here, Clark?” she asked abruptly, her posture suddenly stiff.

“I...” he hesitated. “Please, just give me a chance to explain...”

The old man frowned severely at him. “You want me to get rid of him?” he asked Lois, in a protective, almost fatherly tone. The man was at least thirty years his senior, but Clark didn’t doubt that he would try to use physical force to remove him from the bar.

“It’s all right, Charlie,” Lois replied, her tone much softer. She closed the cover over the piano keys and stood up. She gave the old man a hug. “Thanks for everything.”

“You’re always welcome here, sweetheart,” he replied. “Especially now that you don’t need a fake ID to get into the bar.” The old man laughed and Clark watched wistfully as Lois smiled at him.

Lois followed Clark out of the bar, crossing her arms over her chest as she did so. He hadn’t worn a topcoat, but then again, it wasn’t like he’d needed it, she mused to herself. “Can we go somewhere and talk?” he asked, his tone soft.

“My apartment,” she replied simply. She raised her hand to flag down a cab, catching a look of disappointment in his eyes. He’d probably wanted to fly her there. Maybe he thought that he could impress her. Maybe he figured that distracting her with the flight would make her more agreeable to whatever his ridiculous explanation was. She shivered slightly in the cold wind, but waited silently until a cab finally approached. Lois gave the cabbie the address, but otherwise, they rode the entire way without saying a word to each other.

Once inside her apartment, she finally felt free to unleash all the angry, half-formed feelings that had been building up for days. “How dare you?” she demanded. “How dare you tell me I could trust you while lying about something like this?” She watched as he winced slightly. Good, she thought to herself. He deserved it. “All this time, pretending you were an ordinary man. Pretending you were just some...”

“Hack from nowheresville?” he supplied.

“Cute,” she snapped irritably. She dropped her coat, purse, and keys in one heap on the kitchen counter before stalking back into the living room. Tears sprang to her eyes. “Why did you do it?” she asked, her voice threatening to give out on her. “What were you trying to prove?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Lois, I wasn’t trying to prove anything. I didn’t do this to hurt you and I’m sorry. I know it’s not enough, but...”

“You’ve been lying to me every day since I met you; why should I believe you now?”

He shook his head sadly. “I’ve only ever lied to you about one thing. And believe me, I didn’t want to.”

“Then why did you?” she demanded.

Clark sighed, his shoulders sagging. “It’s not like I could have told you when we first met. I don’t go around telling people, ‘Hi, I’m Clark Kent, and by the way, I can fly.’” Lois could feel her expression settling into a scowl. She didn’t exactly appreciate his sense of humor at the moment. “But the more we worked together, the more time we spent together, the harder it got.”

“And you didn’t think that maybe before claiming you loved me and sleeping with me would be a good time to let me in on it? What did you expect to happen? Did you expect me to go on believing you were two different people?”

“I didn’t plan this. It’s not like I had some sort of road map all laid out. Yeah, I know I screwed up, but before I met you, I’d never told anyone about myself. My parents are the only ones who know.”

She’d almost forgotten about his parents. “Are they really your parents? I mean, I know you’re adopted...”

He looked almost wounded by the question. “They found me in a field when I was a baby. They raised me. They’re the only family I know,” he said. “I really am Clark Kent. Superman was just something I invented when I moved here so I could help out and still have something of a life.”

He sounded so lonely and she suddenly found herself imagining what it must have been like for him growing up, being so different from everyone else. She wondered how he’d come to the decision to never tell anyone about himself. What a burden that must have been. No wonder he hadn’t told her... Dammit, now she was defending him.

“I’m sorry I got this completely wrong. But I wasn’t just claiming to love you. I do love you. I hope you believe me.”

She did. She didn’t want to admit it, but she did believe him. Lois sat down on the couch, unsure how to answer him. “Were you ever planning on telling me?”

“Of course,” he replied. He sat down on the opposite couch, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “But I didn’t think it was fair to burden you with this until you knew how you felt about us.”

“Clark, don’t patronize me...” she began, but he cut her off.

“For as long as we work together — probably longer — I’m going to have to ask you to lie and cover for me. I’m going to ask you to leave newsworthy things out of stories, even when it violates your sense of journalistic ethics, just so I can keep doing my job as Superman. Besides, this isn’t just my secret,” he explained. “My parents’ lives would be ruined if anyone found out. You didn’t know I was Superman and people still tried to use you to get to me. Have you thought about how much harder it’s going to be now that you know? You know something that people would kill to find out and they might try to make you tell them. If someone gets the slightest hint that you might know something about Superman, then I’ve put your life in danger. If you were me, who would you burden with that kind of information?”

She shook her head. “You still had no right to tell me I could trust you — to sleep with me — without ever telling me...”

“I know,” he admitted. “I don’t regret what happened between us. I can’t. But I regret how it happened. Believe me, I never expected things to move so quickly. Lois, this is all new to me. You’re the only woman I’ve ever loved...”

She leapt to her feet. “You sonofa... Clark Kent, how can you keep lying like this?” she demanded, her blood suddenly boiling.

He blinked for a moment, seemingly in a stupor. “What? Lois, what are you talking about?” he stammered.

“You told me you’d never slept with a woman you weren’t in love with. Now you’re telling me you’ve never been in love before. You do the math. It doesn’t add up.”

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger, pushing his glasses up out of place. “Yes it does,” he said, his eyes still shut.

She found herself in the unusual position of not knowing what to say. Clark looked down at his hands for a long moment. “Ever since I was a kid, I never let myself get too close to other people. I was always afraid someone would find out and then I’d get taken away from my parents and dissected like a frog. It’s a tough habit to break.”

She sat back down wordlessly. It was strange to hear him admit to being afraid of anything, especially the idea of being held against his will and cut apart. She wondered if his parents had had to teach him to hide, or if he’d been so afraid of what made him different that it came naturally to him. “I’m sorry I yelled at you...” she began, unsure how exactly to say what she wanted to say.

“It’s okay,” he replied. “I mean, it’s not like it’s a normal thing for a guy my age to be admitting to. I can see why you thought I was lying.”

But he wasn’t a normal guy. Otherwise, she would have found his confession to be unbelievable. Normal guys who were as attractive as Clark had, at best, the personalities of pet rocks. They certainly weren’t as kind, intelligent, and interesting as her partner. And she would have had to have been blind not to notice the women throwing themselves at Clark since the moment she’d met him. It certainly wasn’t a lack of opportunity that was responsible for his... inexperience.

“This is so embarrassing,” he muttered softly and she realized how long they’d been sitting in silence.

“No,” she began. “I am surprised... I mean, you certainly seemed to know what you were doing when we... uh...” she felt a blush creep over her complexion. “But I think I understand why you waited. I just don’t know if I understand why you stopped waiting... I mean... with me.” The awkward sentence tripped from her tongue as she struggled to make sense.

“I’ve thought about you... I’ve thought about making love to you since pretty much the day I met you,” he admitted. Her cheeks burned, flushed with the thought of how badly he’d wanted her. If he noticed her blush, he did nothing to acknowledge it. “When it happened, when you told me you wanted it to happen... I couldn’t have said no to you if I’d wanted to.”

He finally looked up at her, his gaze intense. She remembered the last time he’d looked at her with that kind of intensity. Desire spooled tightly deep inside the pit of her stomach. He’d just dragged her across the entire emotional spectrum inside of ten minutes and all she could think about was how his hands and his lips had felt against her skin. She shivered as the memory became an almost physical sensation. Dammit, she’d sworn that she wasn’t going to let him talk his way out of this. So why was she about to forgive him for everything?

“I was so afraid of losing you. The first attack... I wasn’t there when you needed me. At your apartment and the Planet, I barely made it in time. I know it doesn’t excuse what I did, but I needed you so badly. And I wanted to be what you needed me to be. I want to make things right between us,” he said quietly, but his tone was insistent. “I want to tell you everything. I want you to trust me again.”

Her resolve crumbled even further. “You’d tell me anything I wanted to know, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah,” he replied, his voice a bare whisper.

“What if I needed time — time to figure all of this out?” she ventured.

“I’d wait as long as you needed,” he said without a moment’s hesitation. He was giving her control. Over their relationship. Over what it turned into.

She nodded but said nothing. “It’s getting late,” he began. “I should go.”

“I’ll call you. Soon,” she promised.

He smiled faintly in response. Clark stood up to leave,

suddenly spinning into the suit. She couldn’t help but admit that it was impressive. She stood and followed him to the window. He turned to look at her before departing. “Goodnight, Lois,” he said as he reached out to touch her cheek gently.

“Goodnight, Clark,” she replied softly. He lifted off and flew out the window, traveling too fast for her to watch him as he crossed the night’s sky.

He landed on his balcony and made his way inside, trying not to track mud all across the apartment. Another suit completely ruined. He peeled it off and stepped under the stream of hot water. Not long after he’d left Lois, torrential rains in Mexico had triggered a series of devastating mudslides. He’d spent the last two days rescuing the stranded and diverting rivers of mud away from vulnerable homes and vital roads.

He’d been too late to save some people. He’d tried to keep his composure as he completed the task of finding the victims under the horrible blanket of earth and mud. But every body he uncovered was someone’s mother or son or husband or wife. They had family members searching frantically for them. And in just one horrible moment, they would tumble out of panic and anxiety into an earth-shattering despair. He would see them, in that split second before their world was about to be torn apart, and he knew the words he was about to say were going to destroy whatever hope they had and strangle them with grief.

It never got any easier. He’d been doing this for long months now and getting there too late, having to begin a sentence with ‘I’m sorry for your loss,’ watching the horrible realization of death settle onto someone’s face, still destroyed him, little by little. He’d done everything he could, he reminded himself. The mudslides had struck without warning. Even if he’d been just floating over the storms, waiting in case something might happen, he still wouldn’t have been able to save everyone.

Grateful to be clean again at last, he stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. He noticed the little light on his answering machine blinking and padded across the apartment, still wet, to check the message.

<<Clark, it’s me. I’ve been watching the news and I’m worried. Please come over when you get this.>>

He spun into a clean suit and flew back out the window into the night’s sky. Bare moments later, he landed in Lois’s living room. She startled him by throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him fiercely.

“Are you okay?” he asked, hugging her back.

“I’m fine,” she insisted. “I was worried about you. I saw you on the news. You looked like you could use a friend.”

“You have no idea,” he admitted, his voice gruff. Clark closed his eyes and relished the feeling of holding her in his arms. The MetU sweatshirt she wore practically engulfed her, making her look tiny. Yet somehow, she could wrap her arms around him and protect him from the things in this world that were too big for him to face. He breathed deeply the smell of her skin, trying to will the images of the last few days out of his mind.

Lois sat down beside him on the couch, her leg touching his. Neither said a word. Hesitantly, he reached for her hand. Just a few days earlier, this wouldn’t have been an act of courage. She slipped her hand into his much larger one. They sat in silence for a long while. She meant what she’d said about him looking like he could use a friend. The circle of people he could turn to at times like this was so very small and she’d wondered if he would call his parents in the middle of the night to burden them with something like this. It suddenly didn’t matter that she was still angry with him. He’d been there for her at her lowest point; the least she could do was keep being his friend. Lois closed her eyes, feeling the way his body moved ever so slightly with each

deep breath. Finally, she looked up at him to find him watching her, his dark eyes unreadable.

"I love you," he whispered. "I'm sorry for how everything turned out..." he began. Lois shook her head and pressed a finger against his lips.

"You don't need to explain," she replied. "I think I understand now what you meant. About this being a burden."

"Most days, being Superman is pretty much the greatest thing in the world," he said, his tone almost wistful. But not on days like today, she thought silently. It didn't matter how many people he'd saved. How many people were alive because he had been there to help. All he thought about were the people he hadn't saved. She could tell, just by the anguished look in his eyes.

"It was awful," he said, almost too softly for her to hear. She squeezed his hand gently.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked nervously.

"Not yet," he replied with a sad shake of his head. "If it's okay, I just want to sit here with you for a while."

She nodded, not trusting her own voice. Lois closed her eyes and let her head fall against his shoulder. He rested his head against hers, still holding her hand. His thumb traced absent patterns on her skin and she wondered at how such a feather light touch could feel so intense.

Uncertainty still roiled inside her. How was it that she couldn't walk away from him? He had lied to her. He had told her to trust him and she had. She'd trusted him so completely. All of her experiences should have been warning enough, but no, her stupid heart had decided to take a flying leap with him.

Except he could fly and she couldn't. So guess who'd ended up dashed on the rocks below, shattered into a million little bits? But as she turned to look at him, she could tell that tonight, he was the one holding together all the countless shards and fragments of himself. Here he was, as wounded and vulnerable as a man could be.

And yet he chose to be with her.

That was, in essence, what trust was, wasn't it? The knowledge that there was someone you could be around without the walls and the façades. He usually wore the suit like it was armor. With his stern expressions and arms folded across his chest, he created even more distance between himself and the world. But that was all gone now. He wasn't using the suit to keep her away.

"When I became Superman, I had no idea what I was doing," he said, his voice practically shaking. "I'd make mistakes, or I'd get to a rescue too late. I thought it would get easier, but so far, it hasn't. Sometimes, even when I don't do anything wrong, there's just nothing I can do. Choosing which cries for help to answer, whom to help first..."

She wondered how he could stand it. "I hate that it was so hard for you."

Lois felt him shrug beside her. "What choice did I have?" he asked rhetorically. "I have these powers and I spent so long hiding them, even though I could have helped so many people. Every day I wasn't Superman, people died. People who didn't have to."

"You hid to protect your family. You help because it's who you are. You just needed time to reconcile the two," she said, as much explaining it to herself as she was to him.

"Thank you," he said, raising her hand to his lips. "For always making me feel good about Superman. I couldn't have figured out how to be him without you."

She shook her head, taken aback, really, at how much credit he was laying at her feet. "Everything good about Superman is there because of who you are. How much you care."

It hadn't been that long ago — mere weeks, really — that Lois Lane had secretly dreamed of being the person who took care of Superman. Who comforted him when the burdens of

being a hero were too much. How naïve she had been. How completely wrapped up in hero-worship. It wasn't possible to be the person he relied on without sharing in the weight of his pain. She hadn't understood that then. She did now.

She awoke, surprised to find herself in bed. The last thing she could remember was sitting beside Clark in her darkened living room. After a long while, he'd begun to doze off. She must have fallen asleep, too. So how had she ended up in bed? Was he still there? She turned onto her side. A single red rose and a folded piece of paper lay on the other pillow. Lois sat up, taking the note in her hands. She unfolded the paper.

Thank you. For everything.

CK

A faint smile tugged at the corners of her lips. He had penmanship that would make a sixth grade teacher proud. As she gently lifted the rose from the pillow, she wondered — not for the first time — how they'd gotten here. If only he'd told her the truth before. But even though she couldn't dissect his actions without coming to the conclusion that he'd been a complete dolt, she could no longer deny the simple fact that he had wanted to tell her his secret, even if he had waited too long.

He'd spent twenty-eight years keeping people away. And in one incredible moment, he'd broken all of his own rules. He'd shared with her something he'd never allowed himself to experience. Not because he lacked self control. And not because he was like other men, with only one thing on his mind. He'd made love with her because he wanted her to be part of his life in a way no one else had been before.

She owed him a phone call. It seemed like forever ago when she'd promised she would call him and they would talk about where they might go from here.

He knocked on her front door, trying to swallow around the boulder lodged in his throat. He'd been anticipating and yet dreading this conversation all day. Desperately, he prayed she hadn't asked him over to break his heart. After the previous night, he didn't doubt that he could trust her with his secret, no matter what happened. His fears were much more selfish than that — he wasn't afraid that she'd expose him and put his parents in danger, he was afraid she'd tell him she didn't want a relationship with him. Or worse, that she'd tell him that he'd betrayed her trust too badly for her to want a relationship with him.

"Hi Clark," she said softly as she opened the door. She was dressed casually in a black t-shirt and these old, worn-out jeans that hugged her body in all of the right places and... dear god, he needed to pull himself together. Her heart was beating out a rapid rhythm. She was nervous. Or uncomfortable.

He was doomed.

"Hi Lois," he managed.

"Come in." She stepped to the side, allowing him to enter. She walked slowly toward the living room and he followed, trying not to look too glum.

"I've been thinking. About us," she began. "I'm not sure you can understand how mad I was at you."

Yep, utterly and hopelessly doomed.

He hung his head, glad that she was facing the other way. Suddenly, she spun around, crashing into him. Reflexively, he caught her, his hands on her arms, keeping her from losing her balance. Her eyes met his and for some reason, he couldn't seem to let go of her. Her skin just felt so soft and warm under his hands. After a long, sheepish moment, he finally dropped his hands and she took a hesitant step backward, looking like she was trying to find her footing.

"But I don't think you meant to hurt me," she finished her previous thought.

"I swear I didn't," he agreed earnestly, wondering if there

was anything he could do at this point to help his own cause.

“Just don’t do it again,” she whispered, her voice unsteady.

His arms were around her in an instant, enfolding her in his embrace. He felt her hug him back and he let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding in. With one hand, he cradled the back of her head against his shoulder. He kissed the crown of her hair and closed his eyes.

Being in his arms felt so inexplicably right to her. She did the only thing that felt natural. She kissed him. Gently, hesitantly. He kissed her back, but drew away before she could deepen the kiss. He touched his forehead against hers and she delicately removed his glasses, placing them on the coffee table. He reached up with one hand to caress her cheek and she looped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer so she could kiss him again. Her lips parted under his and she buried her hands in his thick, dark hair. His tongue met hers and she sucked gently on his lower lip. He groaned against her mouth as he tore himself away. “Do you want to take things slowly?” he asked, panting for breath.

Perhaps she should have said yes. But in truth, she didn’t want to. Besides, it wasn’t like they could unwind the last two weeks and undo all of the startling revelations. She’d already taken the crazy, giant leap of faith with him once and she’d firmly decided to do it again. At the moment, all this talking meant that they weren’t kissing and that seemed... wrong. She closed her eyes and kissed him once more. “We can... do this... slowly...” she murmured against his skin as she trailed soft, open-mouthed kisses along his neck.

“Oh god, Lois,” he whispered. She stood on her toes and heard him inhale sharply as she captured the soft lobe of his ear between her lips. His entire body seemed to tremble and she shivered in response, amazed that she could have that sort of effect on the Man of Steel. He swallowed roughly. “You’re sure you don’t want to slow things down?” he asked, his voice thick with desire.

“That depends. Are you keeping any other major secrets from me?” she whispered teasingly in his ear.

“I get my Chinese food from a place in Hunan and my croissants from a bakery in Aix en Provence,” he murmured.

“The Egyptian cotton sheets?”

“Egypt.”

“Anything else?” she asked, her lips inches from his.

“I buy your roses in Quito.” He inhaled sharply, his muscles tightening under her fingers as she trailed her hands along his sides.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” he confirmed.

“Good. Then I’m sure,” she whispered. She felt his hand thread itself in her hair as he pressed the length of his body against hers. His lips brushed softly against her temple. “I’m going to make you take me to all those places,” she said dreamily.

“Any time you like,” he promised. “I want to show you the world, the way I see it,” he whispered in her ear.

She closed her eyes. She’d daydreamed about flying with Superman to all the places only he could go. “Sounds wonderful,” she murmured.

“I want to fly with you along the Great Wall,” he whispered as he kissed her cheek. “I want to walk through the ruins of Ephesus with you.” He kissed her neck. “I want to kiss you on the top of the Eiffel Tower.” He captured her lips in a fierce kiss. “And make love to you on a black sand beach in Costa Rica.” He sucked gently on the lobe of her ear before pulling back to look at her with passion-darkened eyes. “And I want to watch the sunrise with you on this little island in the South Pacific that no other human being has ever set foot on before.” A ripple of pleasant tingles cascaded down her spine as she imagined the warm sand, his soft skin, his hands, his lips...

She shook her head in wonder. “Is that all?” she asked, her voice unsteady.

He looked at her with a straight face but a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Well, it’s a lot for one night, but if there’s something else you wanted to do, I’m sure we could work it in.”

Abruptly, he stepped away and opened the large window, allowing a sharp breeze to enter the apartment. Her jaw fell slack as she watched him spin in a colorful blur until finally Superman was standing in front of her. “Now?” she asked, flabbergasted.

“Right now,” he agreed, reaching out his hand to her. She took his outstretched hand. He pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly. Clark flashed her the sort of smile that made her heart beat just a little bit faster and then lifted her up in his arms. She closed her eyes and breathed in the clean scent of his skin as he floated them off the ground and flew through the window and into the night’s sky.

“Sun’s coming up,” he whispered to his lover, sleeping in his arms. Her lips curved into a slow smile before her eyes opened.

“Good morning,” she murmured.

He kissed her forehead. “Good morning,” he whispered in response. He pulled her into his lap as he sat up, adjusting the cape to keep them wrapped up in it. A soft breeze whispered through the trees and the sky slowly began to lighten. On the distant horizon, the first sliver of sunlight could be seen. They watched in silence as the sky turned from violet to orange and finally to a deep, azure blue. The clear water lapped the edge of the bay and the sand grew warm under the fine morning sun. Lois started to doze in his arms and he couldn’t help but smile. It had been an amazing night. Even better than he’d imagined it would be. He kissed her temple and let his head rest against hers.

True to his word, he’d answered her every question, describing how each power developed and when, telling her the little he knew about his birth parents and how they’d sent him to Earth to save him from a dying planet. It was easier than he’d imagined. Having her know these things about him just seemed *right*.

God, how he loved this woman. In less than two weeks, their relationship had gone through every upheaval imaginable. It was almost too much for him to keep up with. But now, he hoped they could build something real — something permanent — together. It was, of course, much too soon to talk about such things, but he didn’t doubt that Lois was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. He was thankful for the fact that he no longer had to lie to her. Or pretend to be something he wasn’t.

It was probably time for him to fly them home, he mused, sad that the night had to end. It was afternoon in Metropolis, and their enforced vacation was coming to a close.

“I can’t believe I slept through the entire flight,” she murmured as he set her gently on her feet. “I love flying with you.”

“I love flying with you,” he replied simply.

She stood on her toes to kiss him. “This was amazing,” she said.

“We’ll do it again whenever you like,” he promised.

She kissed him again. A long, slow, wonderful kiss that made him wrap his arms around her and float them off the ground. “I’m going to hold you to that,” she whispered against his lips.

“You’d better.” He set her back down again, a little reluctantly. “Sleep well,” he said softly as he kissed her forehead. “I love you.”

“Goodnight, Clark,” she whispered back.

Even before she was awake, she reached for him. The cool pillow beside her was still indented as a reminder that he’d lain there during the night. But he was most definitely not there now.

She opened her eyes, scanning the still, dark room for him. A strange sense of loneliness settled over her. She had only been aware of his absence for a few moments and she was already wondering how she was going to get back to sleep without him. Their relationship was still so raw and young, so how was it that she slept so much better when he was there? And it wasn't that she didn't like sleeping alone. Frankly, she'd always preferred having her own space. Except when it came to Clark.

They'd only been back at the Planet a few days, but they'd fallen back into the comfortable routine of their partnership, much to Perry's relief. And even though they spent all day together, they were working their way toward an unstated understanding that their evenings would be spent together too, Superman's work notwithstanding.

She hated waking up like this, but this was going to be only the first in a long series of mornings when she'd wake up alone. Being with Clark guaranteed that. Lois didn't even notice that she was thinking about their relationship as a permanent thing. That simple but monumental assumption had crept up on her, catching her unawares. There was no big epiphany moment. Nothing earth-shattering to demarcate the radical change in the way that "their future" and "her future" had melded and merged into a singular concept. She just knew that she was happier with him than she was without him. And the longer she knew him, the stronger that feeling of happiness was.

Closing her eyes, she fell back against the pillow. Dawn was still a ways away and she could have used the sleep. So why was it that all she could think about was the empty space beside her, where her lover had lain?

He stepped off the elevators and began looking for her immediately. An emergency had called him away in the early hours of the morning. By the time he was done helping with the chemical spill, she'd already left for work. It had taken him three showers to get the smell of sulfur out of his hair and skin, but at least he could use the story as an excuse for his tardiness.

Clark walked to his desk, frowning slightly in puzzlement. A large bouquet of yellow roses with red tips sat in a vase on his desk. He found the small envelope half hidden among the flowers and opened it.

I think you know what these are for.

LL

He chewed his lip. Yellow roses with red tips were for friendship that grew into love.

Did she mean that...

Clark suddenly realized that he could hear her heartbeat. He turned around to find her standing behind him. She nodded and gave him a tremulous smile. Clark pulled her into his arms. "I love you," she whispered. He responded by kissing her as though the whole newsroom wasn't watching.

"Way to go, CK!" he could hear Jimmy yell.

"Oh good lord," Cat muttered under her breath.

A dozen other cheers and whistles blended together to drown out the newsroom's usual din. Reluctantly, Clark pulled away from her. He smiled at the somewhat stunned look in her eyes.

"Hey, hey, hey! Is this a newsroom or Studio 54?!" Perry demanded from the doorway to his office. But as the old editor retired back into his office, Clark could hear him laugh and mutter, "it's about damn time, son."

He smiled at Lois and reached out to touch her cheek. "I love you, too," he said softly. She pulled him closer and he savored the feeling of holding her, totally oblivious to the eyes focused on them and the sounds in the background of ringing phones and news reports on television monitors. His world shrank down until there was nothing in it except the woman in his arms.

THE END