

# Nobody's Hero

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Rated: PG-13

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Summary: Upset that Lois appears to have chosen Scardino over him, Clark goes flying. But when he is on his way home, a close call causes him to question himself and his resolve. Prequel to "Just A Man."

Disclaimer: I neither own, nor make, anything. All Lois and Clark characters, plot points, and lines of dialogue belong to DC Comics, Warner Brothers, December 3rd Productions, and anyone else with a stake in the Superman franchise. As always, I'm just playing with my toys.

Author's Note: This story was brewing in my head for some time, just waiting for me to get a handle on it. It is a mostly bleak tale, but will get better later on, I promise.

This story takes place the night Superman wins his court case in "Whine, Whine, Whine." For this one, Lois' chat with Dan lasted until later into the night.

This is part one of two stories. Please find the remainder of this story in "Just A Man," which picks up immediately after this one ends. I don't normally split stories like this, but I just felt this one needed it, with the switch in tone.

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The night air is cool around me, the clouds like thin, familiar blankets cloaking me as I fly. It should be comforting. It usually is. But it isn't. Not tonight. Tonight, it only adds to the unbearable weight of my heavy heart, a physical burden against my body. I'm tired, so tired, in both mind and body, and it's a wonder I don't just drop from the sky like a meteorite.

*Where I am going?* I ask myself, for the twelfth time in as many minutes.

*Away,* comes the same answer, echoed back from the depths of my blackened, moody brain. *Just away. As far as you can get.*

And so, I fly; a slave to that basic instinct, that desire to flee, that need to clear my head.

Completely directionless, I leave Metropolis. North or south. East or west. It doesn't matter. I just need to be away from the city I call my home. The city I am so proud of. The city I love. The city I'm almost about to leave behind, forever, though it breaks my heart to do so.

I don't *want* to leave. I want to stay, more than I can possibly express. But, there is nothing here for me now. Everything is in ruins; toppled, broken, graffitied. Nothing is left standing; whole, pure, unblemished. Sure, there's my job. I love the Daily Planet. I've never felt so accepted, so valued as a reporter, as I have at that paper. It's been a dream come true to work there. And yes, there's Perry and Jimmy too. Jimmy's one of my very best friends, the brother I was never lucky enough to have. Leaving him behind will hurt, and hurt badly. Perry's become a friend to me too, as well as a boss and mentor. He's also been my confidante on more than one occasion, especially as I started to date Lois.

Lois.

I'll miss her the most. I don't think I'll ever get over the pain of losing her, of leaving her behind. I haven't even finished packing my apartment up and already my heart feels as if it's encased in a Kryptonite vice. It hurts so much I can barely fly, barely think, barely breathe.

Is it possible to die of a broken heart?

I don't want to stop, don't want to land, don't want to be forced to

the Earth once more. At least, not until I am far from Metropolis. Someplace far away. Someplace isolated. Someplace where I can gather my thoughts, master the turbulent emotions coursing throughout my veins, and find the courage I so desperately need to say goodbye to the life I've built in Metropolis.

Courage.

I can't help the derisive snort from emerging as I rocket through the night. I have no courage, despite what people might think of me. Clark Kent is a newly-renowned reporter. People assume he has to have real bravery to track down the leads that he does. People assume he has to squash down his fears in order to face the danger inherent in nailing many of the stories he has. If only they knew how rarely Clark has been in *actual* danger, and then only from a radioactive piece of space rock, little shards of the planet he came from, reminders of a world he never really knew. If only they knew that he has no reason to fear thugs with guns, brutes with clubs, ruffians with knives. He would lose the public's respect.

And Superman. Forget it. There is nothing Superman has to fear. Except for Kryptonite. Except for his true identity being found out. Except for inadvertently putting his loved ones in harm's way. There is no courage needed to walk — or fly — into an inferno to rescue someone who is trapped. There is no bravery needed when he steps before a thief with a gun and bounces the bullets off his chest. There is no daring, no guts, required for him to fly into the heart of a natural disaster to lend his aid.

No. I am not brave.

I'm a coward.

I'm a coward because, once again, I'm running. Running from my life. Running from Lois. Running from the inevitable heartbreak. Running from the *current* heartache of seeing her with Scardino. Running from making the decision to tell her my secret, in the vain hope it will make her choose me over him. Running from the possibility that she might *actually* choose *me*, not because of who I am, but because of these powers — the blessing and the curse I carry.

If things had gone differently, I never would have considered leaving. I never would have fled from Lois. Saying goodbye to her is the last thing I've ever wanted to do in my life. In a perfect world, I would spend the rest of my life at her side, loving her, and being loved *by* her in return. In a perfect world, there would be no reason to hold back from her, to continue to carry this secret of mine all alone, to keep Lois shut out from that hidden portion of my life.

But this is not a perfect world.

Lois is with Scardino now. She's chosen him, maybe not because of his looks, or his job, or even for his personality. But simply because of all the things he can do, that I can't always do myself. Like be there for Lois, to listen to her, to keep up a conversation with her, without having to dash off with a flimsy excuse when a cry for help comes in. Clark Kent is two separate men — the reporter and the superhero — but Scardino is perhaps — and it pains me to admit this to myself — the better man. Certainly, Lois deserves one complete man. She deserves someone who can always, *always* be there for her.

And that's not me.

Even if she knew my secret, it doesn't change the fact that I'm always going to be needed at inopportune times. It wouldn't prevent me from having to rush off to save someone just as Lois is about to pour her heart out to me. It wouldn't stop the world from needing Superman, regardless of the fact that he might desire a moment alone with the woman he loves.

Snapping back to reality, I wonder where in the world I am. I begin to scan the sleepy world below me, looking for a landmark to tell me where I am. As soon as I look, I find what I am searching for. The lights; blindingly bright, turning the night into midday. The sounds; traffic, honking horns, police whistles, the mixed voices of thousands, in a multitude of languages. The restless people; still out and about, even at this late hour, shopping, laughing, snapping photos. I can only be in one place. Times Square, New York.

I've always liked New York. There's just something about the

place. Its pulse, perhaps. Like a hummingbird's heartbeat, the city moves at such a fast, relentless pace. It reminds me a lot of Metropolis. I think I would consider moving here, when I leave my home. Or, at least, there *was* a time when I would have made that decision. But not now. Now, it only reminds me too much of the life I'm about to leave behind.

I would love to get lost in the millions that call New York City home. But I know in my heart, I can never do that. In a city of so many, I would find too many reminders of Lois. In a city of so many, I would live my life perpetually throwing a glance over my shoulder and examining each shadow, expecting to see Lois again. I'd inspect every coffeehouse and street vendor, hoping to see her there, ordering her usual brew.

No. Not living my life.

*Existing.*

I fly on. The last place I want to be right now is in New York. I need someplace quiet. Someplace to think. And the city is not that place.

I'm just over Central Park when I hear the cry for help. There's a woman in trouble. Instinctively, I stop in mid-flight and hover, trying to pinpoint the direction where the call originated. I listen carefully, trying to filter out everything else, hoping the woman will call for help again. I can't help but hold my breath in anticipation. It comes out again in a rush as the woman cries out once more, this time, only an unintelligible scream which rips through the night, instead of words. In the next heartbeat, I'm tearing through a cloud, angling toward the ground.

As I land, I find myself next to a disabled taxi. Smoke curls from the front hood. With a quick glance, I see that the engine has overheated, but that there is no real danger. I'm glad of that. Dealing with a fire is not something I have time for, judging from the grunts of pain coming from the backseat of the vehicle. Outside, next to the smoking hood, the driver is frantically trying to call for help on his radio. He sees me, and a look of relief crosses his features.

He appears ready to say something, but there is no time. Before the first syllable makes it passed his lips, it is cut off by a scream. I'm pulling the backdoor open in the very next second, where an extremely pregnant woman is laying across the bench seat, her legs braced against the frame of the vehicle. Her eyes are shut as she tries to push. She's covered in sweat and breathing hard. It seems to me like she's probably been at this a while, and that's not a good sign. Something must be wrong. I swiftly x-ray and find that the baby is breach, and that the cord looks dangerously close to its neck. This woman needs to get to the hospital, *now*.

I tell the driver to get back in the car and buckle in. Once he complies, I fly the entire taxi to the closest hospital. It's a short flight for me to make, though every second, my mind is on the woman in the back, silently willing her to hold on for just a few more minutes. I hear every breath she takes, every moan that escapes her. I can smell the salt of her sweat and tears.

The short flight seems to take forever.

But within minutes, we've arrived. I set the taxi down lightly, then help the woman out of the back. Gently, I scoop her into my arms, her petite frame weighing next to nothing, thanks to my inhuman strength. And yet... it's almost uncomfortable, holding this stranger in my arms. She's the same height and weight as Lois, even has similarly colored hair. But she's not Lois, of course. I can't help but wonder if I'll ever have Lois in my arms again, outside of a Superman rescue, and a pang of pain and guilt lances right through my already bruised and broken heart.

Forcing my thoughts away from the woman I love, I bring my attention back to laboring woman in my arms. She's the one who needs help. She's the one who deserves my utmost attention at this moment in time. I can dwell on Lois later. I carry the woman into the hospital, through the emergency room doors, calling for a nurse as soon as the door slides open. A second later, I'm crossing over the threshold, throwing glances around, searching for help. I've delivered

babies before, but I've never had to deal with one who is breach, and I'm terrified of the complications.

Immediately, thankfully, a nurse comes rushing over, concern written plainly across her kindly face. She leads me to a stretcher as I explain the situation. I set down the woman I'm carrying as gingerly as I would a piece of fine china, getting my first good look at her. The mother-to-be is young, I can see that now under the harsh fluorescent lighting. She can't be more than twenty-one or twenty-two. Between contractions, she begs me not to leave her. I get, through the scattered words tossed in between sharp cries of agony, that her boyfriend is on his way, but that he's coming in from Brooklyn, and it may take him some time. Before I'm even sure what has happened, or if I've even agreed to stay, I'm pacing the hallway beyond the operating room, where the woman's child is being delivered.

Once mother and baby are safe and moved into a regular room, I duck in to check on them. The little boy is perfectly healthy, despite his rough entrance into the world. I'm grateful for that, and smile wistfully at the baby. In my mind, I can't help but see Lois in that bed, holding what should have been *my* son, but is likely now Scardino's. Another involuntary spasm of regret rips silently through me, making it difficult to maintain my carefully crafted mask of polite aloofness.

I'm broken from my thoughts as the new father comes rushing into the room, breathless and clutching a blue teddy bear in one hand, a bouquet of flowers in the other. I'm thankful for the distraction. As the young man coos over his new child, I wordlessly back out of the room and leave the hospital, happy for the new family, but nursing my broken heart.

Once again, I take to the sky, eager to leave the city behind me, feeling that it might suffocate me if I stay any longer than I already have.

It's funny, when I think about it. I *should* be happy. I *should* be completely ecstatic. I *should* be out somewhere, celebrating.

Just this afternoon, I won my court case against Calvin Dregg, the man who thought himself entitled to some sort of compensation after I saved his life. I never meant to hurt him, honestly. All I wanted was to save him from being flattened by the heavy speaker that nearly fell onto him. If it had, it would have crushed him to death, there is no question about that. But the man was greedy. He couldn't see that his life had been spared. He saw only dollar signs.

My career as Superman was in jeopardy. Being Superman is an unpaid job; there was no way the caped hero could afford to pay a lawsuit if I'd lost. Not only that, but everyone would want *their* chance to sue the super-powered alien after a rescue for injuries sustained, both real and imagined. It had already started before I stepped into that courtroom, to the point where I was almost afraid to make any more rescues. It was a challenge for me to appear in public as the superhero. I still did, of course. No matter how hard I try, I can't just ignore a cry for help.

For a while, I was genuinely worried I would lose my case. Greed is a strong enemy to fight against — oftentimes, *too* strong. My lawyer was far from convinced she would ever win a case. The odds were stacked against me. And I *would* have lost, if not for Calvin's wife, Elise. She stood up for me, as well as for herself. She stood before that judge and told the truth — that Calvin would heal in time and would go back to his guitar playing once more. She had the courage to stand against her husband, and to realize that she couldn't be with a man who cared so little for her. She had the courage to leave him.

When that judge dismissed the case, I could have flown to the moon and back in my elation. I was safe. I was free. Superman wouldn't be forced into retirement. I could go about my life — *both* of my lives. And then, Lois stopped me as the courtroom emptied out. I thought perhaps she merely wanted to express her congratulations, which she did. But what came next — I don't think I'll forget that for the rest of my life.

The bombshell was dropped.

She said she had tried to love me — the Superman me — but that she couldn't. She called it selfish to even try. She said there was

someone else. And in that moment, I knew. She'd made her choice.

Scardino.

There was a time, when I was trying to stop Lois from making a huge mistake and marrying Luthor, when I desperately wanted to hear her tell Superman that she didn't love him. I never wanted her to fall for the blue-suited avatar of my powers. I wanted her to love the real man — the one beneath the spandex. But today, hearing her say those words, that she doesn't love Superman, I didn't get that thrill, that rush of excitement, the way I always thought I would. Because it wasn't followed up with her saying that she loves Clark.

I'm above the coast of Maine now, and I settle down atop a lighthouse. This is a good spot to rest for a while. It's peaceful here. Quiet. Maybe I can finally sort through of some of the jumble of thoughts and emotions which lay knotted within me. At least, I *hope* I can. I'm not sure how much longer I can stand it.

I stare out into the endless depths of the night, the sky a deep bluish-black and studded with innumerable stars. The velvet blackness of the ocean is highlighted by sliver-white moonlight, which outlines each tiny wave in an ever-changing pattern. In the far distance, a pod of whales breaks the ocean's surface to take a breath. I watch them in rapt fascination, humbled, as always, by the amazing diversity of life on this planet, and, for the first time in my life, I wonder if Krypton had whales.

I'm not really sure why the thought pops into my head. I've seen whales hundreds, if not thousands, of times before, as I've flown along coastlines and out over the open ocean. Never before have I wondered if whales exist on other planets, or what wildlife Krypton may have once boasted. I suspect, however, that the thought stems from my mood tonight. For the first time in a long while, I'm feeling like the outcast, the alien, I really am.

I was so close.

So close to fitting in. So close to having the life I've always wanted for myself. So close to living my dream. But, in typical Clark fashion, I messed it up for myself.

I should have been honest with Lois. I should have told her the truth about what I really am. I should never have tried to keep my life as Superman a secret from her, especially once we began to date. I should never have tried to cover my tracks with poorly constructed excuses every time I needed to make a quick exit to get to someone who was in need of help. I was stupid in how I handled things. And now, I'm paying the price.

I didn't just nudge Lois in Scardino's direction. I flat out pushed her into his arms.

Looking up at the stars, I feel an incredible, profound loneliness creep over me, in a way that I've never felt before. I've felt all alone plenty of times. When I was younger and my powers were first starting to manifest, I felt so detached from everything. I felt so isolated, knowing I was different, and that no one could ever understand just what it was like for me. But tonight... tonight I feel isolated in a truly unique way, because I've lost Lois. In losing her, I've lost *everything*. I know, deep within, on a primal level, that I'll never love anyone but her, for as long as I live.

I'll need to see her, before I leave Metropolis for good. I owe her at least that much. She deserves so much better than having me slip off into the night, like a thief, only one last farewell note wedged beneath her door, or a cold, impersonal email sent to her computer. I owe it to her to look her in the eyes and tell her that I'm sorry. And I *am* sorry. Sorry I couldn't be the man she deserves. Sorry I'm too cowardly to stay and watch her build a life with Scardino. Sorry for whatever damage I inflicted to her heart.

I just have no idea what to say, or how to say it. I don't have the faintest clue how to even *begin* to verbalize everything that's on my mind and in my heart. I can't imagine finding the right words to make her understand how much she means to me, how much she's changed my life, how much better of a person I am for knowing her.

I could ask her to reconsider things. I could beg for her to stop seeing Scardino. I could plead with her to take me back in an

unwarranted second chance.

But that wouldn't be fair to her. I can't ask her to give up what happiness she's found, or will find, with Scardino. I can't request a second chance, when I was never worthy of the first one. I can't ask her to overlook the tremendous mistakes I've made, while continuing to hide the truth from her.

My parents suggested that I tell her everything. Maybe they didn't flat out say it, at least, not in so many words, but the hint was there nonetheless. I've thought about it before. It would certainly help clear the air with Lois. It would bring to light why I had to leave her so often, a hastily spoken apology barely making it out of my throat before I rushed off. It might even help heal some of the hurt I caused her.

Do I dare?

Do I dare say those four terrifying words?

*Lois, I am Superman.*

Would it grant me Lois' forgiveness? Or would it generate further wrath? Would she choose me, because of my powers? Or would it drive her further from me, my deception only hurting her even more?

I can't imagine Lois not being hurt over the fact that I've been lying to her, almost since the day we met. I can't envision her not being offended that I kept this secret, and instead, pretended to be two different people to her. I can't convince myself that she'll ever forgive me.

After all, I'm a liar. I'm no better than Claude, who seduced her in order to steal her story and advance his own career. I'm no better than Luthor, who put on a charming facade, in order to distract her from the dual life he lived. I'm not a criminal like Luthor, but I *do* mirror him. When I'm in public, as Superman, I put on a certain act, so no one will ever connect me with my true identity — a simple farm boy who wants to make a difference in this world through the power of his words and investigative prowess, if not the powers his alien DNA affords him. And when I am simply being me — being Clark — I put on a certain show in order to fit in — pretending not to have the strength to open a jar, or feigning poor vision, or acting as though I'm tired when I know I have energy to spare.

I always promised myself I'd never be like those men who'd hurt Lois in the past. And now look at what I've done. I've followed directly in their footsteps. I've lied in order to hide what I am — an alien. I've cheated to get the story, though I've never used Lois in that way, blatantly seducing her in order to steal her work, as Claude once did. But I *have* gotten the Superman Exclusive plenty of times, or used my powers to uncover some fact no one else would have been able to find. The only thing that sets me apart from those other men is the fact that I've lied and cheated not to hurt others, but to help.

I'm a deserter too. How many times have I left Lois at the spur of the moment, when I've needed to run off? How many times have I seen that spark of disappointment in her eyes when I've had to pull my disappearing act? And now, this is the second time in as many years that I've made the decision to run from Metropolis. This will be my second farewell to Lois.

The first time, I honestly thought I could be a danger to her. I thought maybe the scientists were right, and I could be some kind of solar conductor. It broke my heart, standing there before her, in the bullpen, saying goodbye. And it broke hers too a bit, I knew it then and I know now. I could see it in her eyes; the hurt, the disappointment, the rejection she felt. True, she wasn't losing the person she loved, but she *was* losing her friend. But I had no choice. As much as I loved Lois — *still* love her — I couldn't risk staying. I couldn't risk her getting hurt because of me. Now, I'm about to do the same thing, all over again, only this time, there is no chance that some fact will come to light at the eleventh hour to save me.

Knowing what I know now about Lois and her past, I'm no better than her father — the man who abandoned the people he was supposed to care for most in his life. I know Lois has always held a grudge against him for leaving her, Lucy, and their mother. Here I am, about to do the same thing; one minute telling her how much I care about

her, abandoning her in the next.

It saddens me to realize it, but many, if not most, of the important men in Lois' life have turned out to be despicable. I always promised myself that I would be better than all of those men, that I would protect Lois from every hurt. But now, I'm the worst one of them all.

Another call for help reaches me. It's the last thing I want to deal with right now, but I instantly make the decision go. I can't help myself. I can't stand listening to a cry for help and not acting. It's just a part of my nature, almost as if it is written directly into my DNA sequence. I stand, orient myself in the direction of the call, and speed off. I don't have far to go. The call came from only fifteen or sixteen miles up the coastline, around a sharp bend and a strand of trees. As I get closer, I can see a small group of people on the sandy beach. A bonfire is burning in the night, one shining beacon in the darkness. And at first, I think perhaps someone got burned. But as I get closer, coming into a landing, I see that's not the case.

A dolphin has stranded itself on the beach. A handful of Good Samaritans are working hard, trying to keep the poor thing alive. But even before I touch the ground, I can see most of them are fatigued. I wonder how long they've been at this. The dolphin looks healthy enough, despite his ordeal, so I am confident enough to gently lift him, once I receive confirmation from a woman who identifies herself as a marine biologist. Slowly, carefully, I lift the dolphin, concentrating hard so I don't lose my grip on his wet, smooth, slick skin. The animal's saviors step back, their buckets still filled with seawater, allowing me the space I need to work. In moments, I'm setting the creature back into the ocean. I watch, satisfied, as the dolphin quickly swims off, torpedoing through the waves once more. Behind me, the people on the beach cheer, but it does little to lift my mood.

I fly back to shore and whole-heartedly thank the people who kept the dolphin alive. And I mean every word of it. All creatures must be protected. All animals are magnificent in their own way. It would have been a tragedy to lose one when it was within our ability to save it. They thank me in turn, though I barely did anything of note. If I hadn't been here, the marine biologist had help coming in anyway. Someone calls me a hero. I thank the man politely, but internally, I scoff at the notion. Saving a dolphin isn't heroic; not when I could lift the weight of a thousand of them all at once, while barely exerting any effort. These people, the ones who labored for hours before I arrived, are the real heroes tonight.

After a few long minutes, I'm finally able to extricate myself from the impromptu celebration which breaks out on the beach. Back into the heavens I rise, glad to be away from the ground once more. I angle back to Metropolis, only because I now reek of the ocean brine. In mere minutes, I'm home, showered, and in a fresh suit, ready to leave again, simply because I can't stand to be here. I can't stand looking at the half-packed boxes which lay strewn about my living room. I can't take the subtle reminders of Lois. So I step out onto my terrace and head back into the night. Instead of flying over the land, I head for that space between the Earth and the rest of the universe, that safe haven I've always fled to when I've needed a moment to sort things out in my mind, or when I've felt the most alone.

Tonight, it seems lonelier than normal up here. It seems too quiet. It seems too... alien.

I hate that I'm feeling this way and I wish I could shake it. I wish the darkness of my mind would disappear. I wish some kind of sunlight would find its way into my brain to alleviate some of my suffering. Not that I don't deserve what pain I'm in.

Tomorrow, I will say goodbye to Lois. I'll give Perry my resignation. I'll finish packing and try to figure out where to go to next. But not to Smallville. There are too many reminders there. Too many memories. One of the best times I've had there, I had with Lois, during the Corn Festival last year. Despite everything that was going on at the time — my powers fleeing in the presence of Kryptonite, learning that I was vulnerable to the radioactive rock, knowing that Trask was out to get me — I'd never before been permitted to be so relaxed around Lois. And she had certainly never been so relaxed

around me. Somehow, unbelievably, she began that assignment as my partner, and ended it as my friend.

I'm starting to run out of air, my lungs starting their slow burn as I reach the limit of holding my breath. I'm forced to descend back toward the Earth once more, though I stay only as low as I need to. I consider taking another breath and going back to that peaceful space again when something catches my attention. I take off like a shot, following the sounds of a fight, until I'm landing between two drunken brawlers outside of the Metro Club. It isn't easy to break up the fight. Both men are completely hammered and violently angry over some perceived offense that I can't quite work out of their slurred speech. I'm finally forced to hail a cab, once one of their mutual friends comes forth to help. The man gets in with his friend, promising to see him home. The other drunk is taken home by his girlfriend, and I am free to leave the scene.

It's been an exceptionally busy night for me. I've had worse nights, there's no denying that. But three rescues inside of as many hours is making this night a much busier one than I've had in a couple of months now. Maybe I should do I quick patrol over the city, just to make doubly sure that all is well.

Picking a direction, I start to leisurely fly over the city, my body high above the buildings, but my heart dragging along the asphalt. I start in the Hobb's Bay section, since that's often where my services are required. It's still a pretty rough section of town, despite the mayor's insistence that he's working to breathe new life and safety into the area. Surprisingly, the neighborhood is quiet tonight, and I move on.

I'm just passing by my apartment when I pick up the sound of a heartbeat.

*Her* heartbeat.

Lois.

My own heart stops as I realize there's something very wrong with the sound of her heart tonight. My stomach drops and in less than a single beat of my own heart, I'm on the ground, kneeling beside her.

She's laying deep in the shadows of an alleyway, bruised and battered. And the blood. There's so much blood. *Her* blood. She's in a pool of it, the sickly red staining the concrete beneath her along with the light sweater she's wearing, right over her stomach. So much blood. It's a wonder she's still alive. Scanning her body, looking to see what damage has been done, I realize what happened.

She's been shot.

I can feel myself going green as I struggle not to vomit. Lois. My Lois. No, not mine. Not anymore. *Lois*. Oh God, please, don't let her die. If I never ask anything of you ever again, please, don't take her from me. *Please*.

I gently cradle her in my arms, careful not to cause more harm than good. I have to chance moving her. I have to fly her to the hospital. Waiting here for an ambulance will take too much time. Time Lois doesn't have.

She stirs in my arms, her eyes weakly flickering open a small crack. She tries to speak, but isn't able to do anything more than move her lips once. I muster a tremulous smile for her, hoping to reassure her.

"It's okay," I say, trying to keep tears from my voice. "I've got you. You're safe now."

"Clark... Clark?"

That's all she says before she slips into unconsciousness. I'm too worried, too frantic, to think about what she's just said, and the potential implications. All that matters is getting Lois across town to the hospital, with all speed. I wrap her in my cape, trying to apply enough pressure to stem the bleeding, without hurting her. And, I hope, it will help keep her warm. Then I'm off, flying her through the dead of night, hoping against hope that I won't be too late, praying the doctors will be able to save her life, silently berating myself for not being there when Lois needed me.

"I'm so sorry, Lois," I whisper as I fly, the rush of the night air whistling in my ears. "Please, forgive me. Please, stay alive for me."

I place a reverent kiss on her forehead, resisting the urge to place my lips on hers. This isn't some fairy tale where true love's kiss will wake the sleeping princess, making everything right in the world once more. This is real life. A kiss won't save her. And it's no longer my place to kiss her so intimately anymore. Her lips...she's chosen to give Scardino the right to kiss them.

I finally reach the hospital and fly straight in through the emergency room door, slowing only enough so as not to go crashing through the sliding glass doors. My head is pivoting from side to side as soon as I enter, searching for help.

"I need a doctor," I cry out, my fear evident in every word and in every note of my voice, not that I care in the least. "Someone, help! Please!"

Four doctors and two nurses come running, their sneakers squeaking on the freshly mopped, tiled floor. One of them is wheeling a gurney and brings it to a halt before me. As gently as I can, I lower Lois down onto it, easing her out of my embrace. I don't want to jostle her. I don't want to cause more damage to her.

In the harsh lighting of the ER, I can see now just how pale Lois is. She's ash white, thanks to her blood loss, and I panic internally. Was I too late in getting to her? Did I make a fatal mistake in not allowing an ambulance to take her to the hospital? What have I done? Why did I have to leave Metropolis this evening? Why couldn't I have patrolled my city earlier? Why wasn't I there for Lois when she needed me?

Her blood has soaked through the tangerine colored sweater she's wearing. The sight of it makes me queasy. Not because it is blood. But because it is *her* blood. Her precious life-force, still seeping out of the bullet hole and the gashes that I now see.

Oh, Lois, what happened to you?

"Thanks, Superman," one of the doctors, a woman with the name of Natalie Rutherford stitched on her white coat says.

"Will...will she be all right?" I ask, doing my best to snuff out the tremble in my voice.

"We'll do everything in our power," the doctor assures me. "You did the right thing, flying her in." Then, to the others with her, she commands them. "Get her prepped. Room 2." At that command, they race Lois away, and the doctor turns to me. "Superman, what happened?"

I shake my head. "I'm not sure. I was patrolling the city when I came across her. I don't know how long she was laying there before I happened to find her."

Dr. Rutherford nods. "Okay. Thanks. I promise, we'll do whatever we can."

I nod. "Thank you. If you don't mind, I'll let Clark Kent know that Lois is here. He'll probably be by soon." I can't wait for the doctor's answer. There's another cry for help. "Excuse me," I say, before streaking back out of the hospital.

I'm in time to race across the four blocks, to where a delivery truck is speeding down the mostly empty streets. The few cars on the road are swerving out of the way to avoid a collision. I slow the vehicle down and get it to finally stop. The relieved driver seems unable to stop thanking me, in between explaining that he couldn't help what happened. The truck was accelerating on its own, probably due to some faulty part within it. I talk with him for a few minutes, making sure he is unhurt, before heading back to my apartment.

I need to change. I need to get out of this soiled, bloodied suit. I need to wash away the stickiness of Lois' lifeblood from my flesh, where it has soaked through the fabric of my uniform. It's not that I've never had blood on me. In fact, I've dealt with this hundreds of times over. Possibly even thousands of times. Sometimes, it's been the blood of those I've saved. Sometimes, it's been that of those who have died. And, on the rare occasion, it's been the blood someone had shed when a new life has entered the world.

Never has it been the blood of someone I've been close to. Never has it been from someone I love. The knowledge that it is so now is almost suffocating.

A scream pools in my throat, begging for release and fighting the bile which has risen there, but I squash the urge to let it free. I can't vent my feelings. Not here. Not now. And I don't have time to fly off to the Arctic the way I long to, like I did when Lois accepted Lex Luthor's marriage proposal. Instead, I fly back to my apartment and shower for the second time tonight. I scrub the dying blood from my body at super speed, then dry and dress just as swiftly.

I'm out the door less than two minutes later, making my way to the hospital. I don't fly there. In fact, I'm not even wearing one of my uniforms beneath my faded jeans and blue plaid shirt. Flying will put me there far too quickly, and I can't afford to raise any suspicions. Lois has been in the doctors' capable hands for less than fifteen minutes. If Clark Kent was to show up seconds from now, it wouldn't look right, even if Superman had flown directly to him, instead of stopping the wayward delivery truck. I'm forced, as a result, to hail a cab.

The ride to the hospital is painful. Every red light mocks me, like the universe is laughing at the obstacles it is throwing in my way, separating me from Lois for as long as it possibly can. And, of course, almost every time we approach a light, it is red already, or just turning from amber to red.

Red.

Blood.

I can't shake the image of Lois' blood, covering my hands, seeping into my suit, carelessly flowing from her wounds. It's all I can do to stifle the shudder that wants to run up my spine.

The cab driver must sense my mood, not that it's difficult to guess, based on the grim set of my jaw and my downcast, troubled eyes. He doesn't bother to make any small talk, and actually lowers the radio station, from where it had been blaring classic rock songs. It's a nice gesture, and some remote part of me is touched by the man's simple, subtle way of deferring to my somber mood. And yet, I still can't appreciate it. Not when my mind is so far detached from my body. Not with Lois barely clinging to life. Not with all of these infernal stops as I try to make my way to her.

At last, we reach the hospital, after what feels like several years of driving, but is, in actuality, only about twenty minutes. Twenty minutes in which I'm not sure if I've breathed or if my heart has actually beat. Twenty minutes of not knowing if Lois is still alive. Oh God, please, let her be alive.

I hand the driver his fare, plus a tip, and mumble some sort of thanks to him. I'm barely aware of the fact that I'm speaking, and oblivious to what I'm actually saying, or if he's responded. Then I'm turning from the cab, heading for the sliding emergency room doors, for the third time this night.

So much has happened in the span of a few hours. It seems a lifetime ago when I helped that young mother into the hospital to deliver her son. It feels like someone else witnessed the new family come together in that hospital room, not me. And now, here I am, back in a hospital once more. Only this time, there is no redeeming element to it. There is no new life coming into the world. I'm not here to witness anything special. There is no joy here.

Instead, a life may well be leaving this world, if, indeed, it already hasn't. There is only bitter grief to this night, within this hospital. With an effort, I keep moving forward, each step feeling like my legs are turning into lead while my knees become melted rubber. A lump lodges itself in my throat, making it difficult to breathe and swallow, and almost impossible to talk. But somehow, I make it to the front desk, and identify myself to the nurse who is manning it.

"My name is Clark Kent," I say to the woman, a Jennifer Burke, by the name on her lapel badge. "My girl...my friend, Lois Lane, was brought in a little while ago by Superman. Dr. Rutherford was going to operate. Lois was in bad shape. Shot, Superman told me. I was wondering if there's been any news yet."

"I'm sorry sir, but I can't release any information to anyone who isn't family."

"Please," I say, fully aware that I'm begging, and not particularly

caring, "I'm all Lois has right now."

"Sir..."

"Look," I say, irritation and fear tainting my words. "Her sister took off with her new boyfriend for parts unknown. Lois hasn't heard from her in over three weeks. Her father is in Germany, I think, at a medical convention. And her mother's in a rehab facility out of state. I'm not sure which one. I'm all Lois has," I repeat, my voice sinking to a whispered plea. "I'm her co-worker and her friend."

"I'm sorry, sir, but rules are rules. Unless Miss Lane clears you, I'm afraid I can't tell you anything."

My heart sinks. But even as it does, a thought strikes me; something I'd nearly forgotten.

"Wait," I say, a tiny spark of hope flaring up within me. "Check your records. Lois was here about a month ago for a burn," I say, remembering how she'd splashed scalding oil on her leg while attempting to cook a meal with me, oil I hadn't been able to stop from hurting her. "She put me down as her emergency contact. Please. Please check."

Nurse Burke nods tentatively and taps away at her computer. I wait breathlessly for her verdict. Seconds seem to slow and stretch out into hours. But at last, the woman nods again, more to herself than to me, from all appearances.

"Ah, yes. Here you are, Mr. Kent. Miss Lane's emergency contact. But I'm afraid I have no updates yet on your friend's condition. However, I'll inform the doctors who are working on her that you wish to be contacted once they have more information."

"Thank you," I say, my breath coming out in a rush. "If you don't mind, I'll wait here."

Nurse Burke nods. "Take a seat. But I'll warn you, it could be hours."

"That's fine," I say, forcing pleasantness into my voice, when all I want to do is rip through the doors of the ER, find Lois, and save her somehow. "I don't want to leave."

The woman nods and turns her attention to a mother and teenage daughter who are just entering the building. Even without my powers, I can see how labored the girl's breathing is. *With* my powers, I can hear the deep wheeze buried within her lungs. I know the signs. She's suffering from a severe asthma attack. Nurse Burke trundles the two women off to a room, and, moments later, I hear the oxygen tank hiss into life, mix with medication, and bring what I hope is sweet relief to the girl.

I take a seat in the large waiting area. At this hour, there are only a handful of people here with me. An older man, coughing into a handkerchief. A woman holding her head and moaning. A college-aged boy admiring the newly placed stitches in his hand, waiting, it seems, for someone else. A couple with a sick baby. A young woman cradling her arm; broken, I can see, with a quick dart of x-ray vision.

I try to settle into the hard plastic chair. I try to make myself as comfortable as I can. But I can't. The plastic is unyielding against my body, not that it matters. I don't feel the discomfort the way a normal person would. All of my uneasiness stems from not knowing that is going on beyond the doors which lead to the operating room area. All of my distress is born from a need to know if Lois is going to make it.

She has to make it. She *has* to. She's the strongest person I know. She's the most vibrant, most lively person I've ever met. She can't just simply fade away tonight. I won't let her. Only... what can I really do? My powers count for nothing right now. Flight, speed, strength... none of them can make a difference. None of them can heal her. Nothing I can do can fix her.

Even my love for her can't save her, despite the intensity with which it burns.

And I *do* love her. I love her more than I can possibly express. More than I ever imagined it was possible to love someone. She means everything to me. Even if she can't feel the same way for me in return, I will never stop caring about her, worrying about her, loving her. I can't imagine my life without her in it.

And yet... I've still made the decision to leave Metropolis, haven't

I? I've made that painful choice to leave her behind and slip out of her life for good. Or... maybe *not* for good. She'll always need Superman, won't she? But will it prove too difficult for me, to continue to play the part of the aloof superhero when she needs me? Will my broken and bleeding heart be able to survive seeing her only in the capacity of the alien she's befriended, knowing I can never see her again as the human man who loves her?

Assuming she makes it through the night.

I have to believe that she will. I can't envision her as doing anything besides pulling through. I *won't*. I refuse to think of Lois dying.

I try to sift through the noise of the hospital, hoping, in vain, to hear the comforting sound of Lois' steady heartbeat. I *need* to hear it, as much as I need air to breathe. I search frantically, broadening out the scope of my hearing, imagining, in my mind's eye, that I'm racing through the halls, peering into every room, seeking the woman I love. I try pinpointing different sounds, attempting to lift out one distinct noise from all the others, all in an effort to find Lois. But there's simply too much going on. The sensory overload is deafening, almost crippling. I can barely hear my own heartbeat over the cacophony of noise that assaults me, making my ears ache.

Machines beeping as they track heart rates. Women in labor, several floors above me. The gurgle of a coffeemaker as it brews a fresh pot. Sneakers squeaking on the tile floors. A hacking cough coming from someplace down the hall. A child crying so hard he's hiccupping. The droning voice of the anchor on LNN, repeating the news on a loop, from the small, wall-mounted television in the far corner of the waiting area. A muffled protest as someone is administered a shot. Doctors and nurses laughing together in a break room. And the sound that makes my own heart seize up within my chest; a code blue being called from the general vicinity of the operating rooms.

I throw a cautious look around, checking to make sure no one is paying any attention to me. Satisfied that no one is, I slip my glasses down just enough to scan through the closed doors. But there is such a jumble of confusion, and so many rooms, that it feels next to foolish to even bother trying to locate Lois. I'm about to give up when I catch a glimpse of Dr. Rutherford, and I know that I'm managed to find the right operating room. She's shaking her head and attaching a bag of blood to an IV pole. I wish I could hear what she's saying. But if she's giving Lois blood, I can only assume that's a good sign, because it must mean Lois is alive.

I watch for a few minutes, until the activity within the operating room makes me too antsy to continue. And besides, I'm not alone in the waiting room. There are others here, and I can't risk raising any suspicions. Regretfully, I push my glasses back up my nose and shift in my seat, still trying to find a comfortable position, and still failing to do so. I glance at the clock and realize that, incredibly, I've only been here for half an hour, though it seems more than a year.

Three men in construction gear come into the waiting room. One of their number is whisked away into a room, holding his left hand before him, grimacing. The appendage is wrapped in a blood soaked towel, and the man's face is ashen. His two friends settle down in chairs opposite me, and converse together in hushed tones, though I can hear every word. It seems news of Superman's deeds tonight have already spread through the sleeping city, indeed, the sleeping country. The men are talking excitedly about the stranded dolphin who was lucky enough to receive a little alien intervention.

Hero, one of the men calls Superman, and the other agrees.

But I don't.

Instead, the term is like a slap in the face to me. I'm not a hero. I'm a failure. How can I be anything else, when I was too late, too preoccupied with my own thoughts, to be there for, to rescue, the one person in all the world who matters the most to me? How can anyone admire anything I do, when there is so much that I *can't* do?

I'm nobody's hero.

For a long time, I stare down at the white tiles on the floor,

ignoring the hero talk and studying the random pattern of navy blue flecks embedded into the surface, until it starts to make me almost dizzy. I note, several times over, the position of various pieces of litter around the waiting area. A black pen, missing its cap, forgotten on the floor beneath the chair where the old man was sitting earlier. A sheet of paper, torn from a child's coloring book, lurking beneath the small table with magazines stacked on top, bright splashes of color scribbled across the picture in no particular order. An abandoned Styrofoam coffee cup on a chair about ten feet away from where I am sitting. A pamphlet about diabetes laying beside the trash can on the opposite side of the waiting area.

My eyes start to rove over the rest of the room. I read each and every sign in the place, trying to occupy my mind. I read both the English and the Spanish translations, until each one seems to have committed itself to my memory, and I no longer have to glance at the wall plaques and papers pinned to corkboards in order to know what they each say. I stand, pace twice, stretch, and rummage through the magazines, trying so very hard to give myself a purpose. There's nothing remotely interesting in the stack, but I pick up a celebrity gossip magazine anyway. It's better than the golf and car magazines at any rate. I skim through the slender gossip rag without really reading anything, without so much as registering any of the words and images that whip past my tired and troubled eyes. Why should I care what celebrities have recently adopted children, or who wore what outfit to the latest red carpet premiere? There is no world outside of this hospital right now.

I'm exhausted from the events of the last few days. I haven't slept well at all. All told, I've slept maybe a grand total of seven hours in three or four days. First, my insomnia sprang from my worries over Lois and her determination to see "Please, call me Daniel." I would try and rest at night, but my mind would never shut off, never stop picturing Lois in Scardino's arms. Not that I ever saw her being overly affectionate to the reckless DEA agent. I never actually saw her kiss him. But try telling that to my overactive imagination. It was a losing battle, and I would only wind up tossing and turning in my bed until morning finally broke or I gave up completely on trying to sleep and went flying.

Then my sleeplessness came from the lawsuit which hung over my head, threatening to force Superman into retirement well before his time. How could I rest when all I could think about was Calvin Dregg's sneering face and whining complaints? How could I shut off my brain when it kept circling over the same questions in an endless loop? What do I do now? What if I lose my case? How will I ever be able to help people again, without exposing myself and being vulnerable to further litigation? How do I just shut off a whole aspect of my life and personality? And if Lois ever found out that I willingly backed away from helping people in need, what would she ever think of me?

I think I caught about an hour and a half of sleep last night, before my case, and only because I finally collapsed out of sheer exhaustion. And tonight... tonight, I haven't seen so much as a single wink of rest. Now, I feel it catching up to me and I wish I could just close my eyes and drift away into the blessed realm of a deep, careless sleep. But I can't. It's far too risky, because I sometimes float in my sleep, especially in times of great stress, like when Mayson died. For over a week, I didn't so much as touch my bed once my dreams claimed me. Now, with Lois' life hanging in the balance, I'm all but guaranteed to rise up out of my chair if I fall asleep and drift about the room like the alien I am.

Besides, do I really think I'll be able to relax enough at all, until I know for sure that Lois is alive and out of danger?

And yet, in the end, hours after I first arrive in the emergency room, I fall into that gray area between sleeping and waking. A profound heaviness settles over my limbs until I don't think I can move them. And what's more, I don't even care. It's soothing to mentally float in this fuzzy place, aware of everything and yet unable to really do much of anything. My eyes close and not even my

immense physical prowess is enough to keep them open, though I *am* able to keep myself from slipping off the edge of the abyss into the full sleep my body so desperately wants, independent of my brain's desire. I hear everything. The mighty sneeze of the woman who just walked in the door. The steady, even, and wheeze-free breaths of the young girl who came in earlier with an asthma attack, now finally well enough to return home. The boasting of the construction worker who came in earlier, proudly showing off the twenty-five stitches he's gotten, and the good-natured teasing of the two friends who accompanied him on his trip into the hospital.

"Mr. Kent?"

The words shatter that delicate balance between sleep and wakefulness. I'm immediately pulled back to the world of reality. My eyes snap open and I'm surprised at how bleary they are at first. I'm forced to blink rapidly for several seconds until my vision clears. Then I'm standing, before I'm aware that I've even moved, and looking into the face of Dr. Rutherford. Of course, I can't let on that I know who she is.

"Yes?" I say instead, figuring that the less I say, the better chance I have of not doing or saying anything that will give myself away.

Dr. Rutherford looks like she's just been through a warzone. Her eyelids are drooping. There are barely visible splashes of blood on her dark maroon scrubs. I can't help but wonder if they belong to Lois. The woman's posture speaks of weariness, and I silently give her credit for being able to stand, unaided, without leaning against a wall at the very least. A glance at the clock on the wall tells me that she's been working on Lois for the last five hours. Five hours? Has it really been only five hours since I found Lois, the precious lifeblood spilling from her wounded body? A grim look is on the doctor's face. Her features are taut, hard, and serious. I reflexively swallow in fear, and shove my hands into my pockets, for what reason, I'm not really sure.

"I'm Dr. Rutherford," she says, introducing herself.

I extricate my right hand from my pocket and shake the doctor's hand. I try to muster up a friendly smile, but my lips wobble on the way up and I know the whole effect has failed. My stomach is doing back-flips and I can taste the bitter tang of bile as it tries to creep up my throat.

"Nice to meet you," I say, feigning calm collectedness. "Lois... is she...?"

Dr. Rutherford breathes out a long breath and nods. "She pulled through."

My legs give way beneath me as my knees turn to jelly. I sink down onto one of the hard plastic chairs, my whole body trembling with relief and pent up worries that now wish to dissipate. But there is a guarded look in the woman's eyes, and I try to brace myself as best I can.

"Thank you," I say, the words hitching in my throat and picking up the tears which are fighting with me to break free, as I battle to hold them at bay. "Thank you."

"Mr. Kent, I have to warn you. Miss Lane was wounded quite badly. She lost a lot of blood. We had to give her a number of transfusions as we worked to control the bleeding and repair the damage. If Superman had been a few minutes later in finding her and bringing her here, she wouldn't be alive now. In fact, she crashed twice on the table, but we managed to bring her back."

"Oh, God," I moan, feeling the bile creep ever further up my throat.

Dr. Rutherford touches one hand to my shoulder in a gesture of comfort. I'm amazed to find how much I need that simple gesture. She's the first person to offer me any bit of hope and reassurance since I walked into this building a little over five hours ago. I soak up that brief moment of contact as though it were an actual ray of sunshine.

"She's stable now," the doctor says, giving me a smile. "Heavily sedated, but stable."

"Can I see her?" The words are out of my mouth before I can stop myself. "Please?"

The doctor hesitates. "She wouldn't know you were there."

"I need to see her, to see that she's okay with my own two eyes. I need to let her know she's not alone. Please. I know it sounds stupid. I can't really explain it any better than that though. And, like I explained to Nurse Burke when I came in, I'm the only one Lois has in Metropolis right now."

Again, I can see her hesitation.

"I promise. I'll be in and out," I say, giving her my most sincere, Boy Scout look.

Apparently, it works. She nods, ever so slowly, like a granite statue come suddenly to life. "All right. A couple of minutes, but no more than that."

"I promise," I repeat, feeling the vice around my heart loosen microscopically.

Dr. Rutherford leads me through the hospital to where Lois is. My senses stretch out before me, trying to connect with her before I reach her. I breathe deeply through my nose, as discreetly as I can, trying to locate the sweet scent of her perfume. But the sharp stench of antiseptics, bedpans, and floor cleaner as someone mops the hall drown out almost everything else. I can smell blood too, the metallic tang of it unmistakable. But now that I am on the same floor as Lois — a *quieter* floor — it is easier for my sensitive hearing to pick through all of the extraneous sounds and hone in on Lois' heartbeat. As soon as I hear that steady, familiar beat, some of my worry fades away, because I know now, for certain, that she is okay.

"Here we are," the doctor says, stopping outside the door to room 616. "I'll be back in five minutes."

"Thank you," is all I can muster, eager as I am to be in that room with Lois.

The doctor nods and turns away. Where she goes is anyone's guess. As soon as she's moving, so am I, ducking into Lois' room. She's laying there in the bed, her eyes closed, her breathing slightly more shallow than I anticipated. But it must not be of a huge concern for the doctors, since there is no tube down her throat to breathe for her. Only a thin, clear line is taped to her face, delivering a steady stream of oxygen to her nostrils. Various wires and monitors are attached to her body, snaking out to a medley of machines which lay crowded about the head of her bed. I take them all in at a single glance. For a moment, I just stand there, feeling relieved, even more scared for her, and lost, all at the same time. Then, finally, I pull the bedside chair right up alongside her and sit.

"Oh, Lois. I'm so sorry," I whisper. "This is all my fault. Please, forgive me."

I pause for a moment, so used to having Lois argue back with me. It's more than eerie when she remains silent and asleep.

"I should have been there for you," I continue, my voice barely above the faintest of whispers, as if speaking too loudly will hurt her further. "Not just tonight, but always. You tried to reach out to me and I always seemed to push you away. I never meant it to look like that, Lois. I never meant to hurt you. Please, believe me. And if you pull through this, I'm ready to tell you... everything. Everything I should have been honest with you about from the start. Just please, don't give up. You're a fighter, Lois. Nothing ever keeps you down for long. Please, come back to me. I need you and I love you, Lois."

In the next instant, I'm on my feet, leaning over her, kissing her brow ever so gently. It's as if she's a delicate piece of thin glass, and if I breathe the wrong way, I'll break her. And yet, I have so much love, so much reverence for her, it would be a cardinal sin for me *not* to kiss her. I want to kiss her lips, to feel their softness beneath my own, but I restrain myself. She's not mine to kiss like that anymore. She's Scardino's. And, selfishly, I don't want my last memory of kissing her to be in a situation like this, where she's unconscious and grievously wounded. Instead, I much rather hold onto the happier memories I have with her.

"I love you," I repeat, brushing a wayward lock of hair from her face. "I'll always love you."

My time with Lois is up. I feel, rather than see or hear, Dr. Rutherford's presence behind me. I sneak in one more soft kiss to

Lois' forehead and clear my throat, fighting down the incessant lump which has taken up residence there.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," I tell Lois. "Nothing will stop me, I promise."

It's true. I have neither the energy nor the slightest desire to be Superman until Lois wakes up and all final doubts about her ability to survive her wounds vanish. I turn, before the doctor — that wonderful, amazing doctor who has saved Lois — can say a word. I don't say much to the woman though. I have a thousand questions all vying on my tongue to be asked, but I can't seem to form a coherent thought, other than the burning love and concern I have for Lois.

Stepping out of the hospital, I'm surprised to see the bright sunshine. I shouldn't be, of course. I'm well aware of how much time has passed since I first arrived here. But, in an abstract way, time felt like it stood still while I was waiting to hear word of Lois' condition. Seeing the sun, it only reminds me of how badly I need to recharge. I know there's nothing further I can do here, and I can't be of any use to Lois if I wear myself out completely. And so, forced to admit there's nothing for me to do, I grudging head for home.

I call Perry as soon as I get in, letting him know what has happened, and he tells me to take as much time off as I need. I'm grateful for that. Perry's always been so understanding, so sensitive to the fact that I'm deeply, madly, hopelessly in love with Lois. Then I call my folks at their hotel. They love Lois like family and are horrified when I fill them in on what happened during the night. I decline their offer to come over and offer what comfort they can. I'm barely awake at this point. I'm pretty sure I've been running purely on adrenaline all night long, and now I've run out. I hang up and crash on my bed, not having the strength to do so much as remove my glasses.

I dream for a while, drifting into my memories with Lois. Dancing with her at the Smallville Corn Festival. Sharing a living space with her while we pretended to be a honeymooning couple at the Lexor while on a stakeout. Our "almost" first date while on yet another stakeout, and the way she seemed hesitant to get off me when we tumbled onto the couch in the dark. The first time I kissed her, not as a ruse or as a goodbye, but as the man who was dating her.

But dreams can be cruel, and mine eventually shift from pleasant ones to nightmares. Lois accepting Luthor's marriage proposal. Almost losing her in a hundred different ways, everything from Lois being pushed out of a plane, to her being stuffed in a barrel and thrown into the harbor, to seeing her nearly covered in concrete. With a jolt, I'm brought right back to the events of tonight. Finding Lois so close to death. Having her blood soaking into my clothes, and being unable to stop it. The indescribable fear she'd die in my arms before I could get her the help she needed. The panic as I flew. And her voice, a gossamer whisper in the night.

*Clark...Clark?*

My eyes snap open. My heart is racing and I'm covered in a sheen of sweat so profuse that my bed sheets are sodden. I gulp in a breath, trying to calm myself.

Lois said Clark's name, when Superman was hovering over her, trying to help her.

Was she calling him Clark? Does she know about the two sides to the one man...to *me*? Or was she calling *for* Clark? And if she was, what does it mean for me?

THE END

To Be Continued in "Just a Man."