

Man or Monster?

By Anti-Kryptonite <dreamnovelist@gmail.com>

Rated: PG

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Summary: Lies grow and build and feed on each other until they become an unsolvable puzzle. Clark's tired of trying to solve the puzzle, tired of trying to keep his separate lives balanced while watching the woman he loves fall victim to Luthor, so he does the only thing he can think to do. He tells the truth. (Set during the Season 1 finale)

A/N: This story took a VERY long time coming – two years, actually – and it never would have been completed if it weren't for the efforts and encouragement and (gentle) reminders from my very talented beta-readers. So HUGE thanks go to Deadly Chakram, Lynn S M, and Morgana for their patience, and for never giving up on getting the end of this story. Thank you, too, to IolantheAlias for the great GE job!

Chapter 1: I Have a Lot to Tell You

The park looked different in the dark than it had in the daylight yesterday, when Lois had sat on a bench and smiled at him and asked him to be her partner a breath before turning him down when he offered her his heart. People had been walking the pathways then, chatting conversationally to each other, completely oblivious to the sound of his hopes and dreams shattering into a million pieces when Lois so politely let them fall to the hard ground of reality. The fountain in the distance had sounded loud in his hearing, mainly because he'd been focusing on it in an effort to try to calm first his nerves and then later his wretched anguish, but now it was only a tinkling even though he actually stood right in front of it instead of sitting on what had become, in his mind, The Park Bench.

The Park Bench, where he had made a last-ditch effort to prove that his optimism wasn't delusion, that his hopes weren't just baseless dreams, that his friendship with Lois was more than platonic. The Park Bench, where Lois had put a hand on his arm and smiled at him and told him she could never love him, never see in him anything worth pursuing, never do more than pat him good-naturedly and tease him casually and call on him in the middle of the night but only for work or maybe, at most, some friendly encouragement.

The Park Bench.

The capitals said it all, really, and the uppercase P and B had grown to such dimensions in his mind that they could encapsulate all the heartbreak and grief and the overwhelming, barren future that had so suddenly sprung into life before him.

Which was why he really couldn't explain why he was here now, pacing in circles around the sparkling fountain, stealing glances of the stars that had been his only real company since the morning before rather than flying up to meet them, adjusting his glasses to make sure he hadn't forgotten them — after all, he'd spent so much time in the Suit and so little time as the ordinary man Lois could never love that he'd hardly be blamed for forgetting the glasses that both gave him freedom to live his life and imprisoned him in a life *sans* Lois — and waiting.

Waiting for Lois Lane.

The same Lois who had been so carefully polite — even kind, really, for her — in rejecting him and then, without even losing her friendly smile, asked him — the man she couldn't love — to fetch her the only man she *could* ever love.

The only man she could love, but not, apparently, the only man she could ever marry.

The same Lois who had just that evening blamed him for ruining Perry's retirement dinner and accused him of jealousy in a tone that displayed none of the friendliness she had shown the morning before, even while she demanded that same friendship from him.

The same Lois who might possibly be accepting Luthor's engagement ring any moment, any day, any time at all. But, Clark found himself thinking almost bitterly, since Superman had rejected her, why *wouldn't* she accept Luthor's proposal? Why *wouldn't* she grab hold of this chance for happiness, this proof that Lois Lane was more than enough to ensnare the most important man in Metropolis, the third richest man in the world, the greatest philanthropist on the eastern seaboard?

Why *wouldn't* she forget all about Clark Kent, the nobody reporter from some hick town that wasn't even on the map?

But... Clark frowned and looked around once more, stretching his hearing out tentatively. Where *was* Lois?

"I need to talk to you," she had told him over the phone, and for once, he hadn't been able to read the emotion in her voice. He had wondered, almost idly, whether that was because they had acted like strangers at Perry's retirement dinner or because she was feeling some emotion he hadn't yet encountered in her.

"You just talked to me," he had replied, and he wasn't proud of the stiffness in his own tone, though that, at least, he knew the cause of without any trouble.

"Please, Clark," and her voice had softened and turned quiet and malleable, which had made him weaken — which had doubtless been her goal. No one could manipulate him more often — or more openly — than Lois Lane.

"All right," he had agreed, not quite petulantly, almost wearily. "Where?"

And then she had told him to meet her at the fountain in Centennial Park in twenty minutes, and he was here, but she wasn't, and it was just like her, really, to make him wait even though she was the one who had called him out.

Frustrated, Clark ran a hand back through his hair, cutting off his resentful, circular thoughts. He was pacing in circles, thinking in circles... eventually he was afraid he would just start spinning in circles, and he let out a mirthless laugh at the image that popped into his mind of a brightly colored whirlwind spinning through Metropolis like a top, revealing and then concealing Superman in an endless... yes... circle.

He was crazy. That was the only explanation. He had been disappointed and hurt at The Park Bench, but it was The Window that had really severed his hold on sanity and crushed his rational thinking.

The Window.

Lois's Window.

That was Superman's nightmare, though, not Clark Kent's, and right now, he was Clark Kent.

And Lois was late.

Trying not to jump out of his skin with impatience — trying to restrain the instinctual urge to leap into the sky and flee to the relative safety of the dozen cries for help emanating from various corners of Metropolis — he set himself to the task of trying to figure out *why* Lois would want to talk to him only an hour after calling out disdainful words to him as he walked away from her and Luthor's strings-attached limousine.

Was she in some kind of trouble?

Had she stumbled into another story and still just assumed he would roll over and capitulate and be her reporting partner?

Had someone threatened her? He felt a low rise of protectiveness start building up within him at that, and marveled at the ability of Lois to inspire such feelings in him even after what had happened between them.

Or — and this was his worst fear, yet the most likely possibility — did she just want to tell him that Luthor had managed to easily deflect all of Clark’s suspicions and that she had thus accepted his proposal?

If that was the case, Clark was sure that one of two things would happen. One, he might instantaneously disintegrate, might just turn into a pile of dust when he looked at her and knew for a certainty that he was looking at the future Mrs. Lois Luthor, bought and paid for through deception, trips to the opera, snippets of misleading information for articles, elaborate compliments... and a diamond ring that was likely the size of that chunk of Kryptonite Trask had chased down in Smallville. Or, the other option, he might shake apart, just tremble with anger and horror and guilt and confusion and fear and terrible, awful jealous pain and *fury* and fly into a million, billion pieces.

Either way, whichever, he’d end up scattered in the wind, lost to the vastness of open air, strewn through the skies. Which was an oddly ironic end for the only man who could fly.

Just then, Clark caught the sound of Lois’s heartbeat and the click of her shoes on the sidewalk and the steady cadence of her breathing. Belatedly, he realized that he had frozen at the sound, just like a dog on point, and he shook his head at himself and perched on the edge of the fountain, doing his best to look disinterested and casual and knowing he failed miserably.

After a moment, though, listening to her grow ever nearer — soothing his sense of protectiveness with the slowness of her step — he gave up the useless pretense and stood to his feet. Then, realizing that staring in the direction she would appear also resembled a dog hearing its master coming up the walk after a long day at work, he ducked his head and stared fixedly at his feet. That, too, seemed wrong — he certainly didn’t want her to think he was too embarrassed or ashamed to look her in the eye — and so he looked upward toward the concealed moon, only to think that maybe that would just serve to remind her of Superman, and that was the last thing he wanted to bring up, for both their sakes.

After all, The Window lurked in wait, ready to haunt Superman given the least opportunity.

So when Lois finally came into sight, Clark was staring at the ripples in the fountain and mourning the loss of his easiness with Lois. He wished, as he had been wishing since only seconds after he’d said it, that he had never confessed his love to Lois. It could have remained unspoken, surely, the elephant in the room everyone avoided mentioning and treated like an old stray that had wandered in and since been adopted somewhat off-handedly as the family pet. After all, if his declaration hadn’t won him Lois’s heart or, at the very least, stopped her from marrying Luthor, then what point had there been in laying bare his innermost hopes and desires and dreams, which had turned out to be so much less invulnerable than he was?

“Clark?” Lois called softly, and finally, he let himself look up.

He felt his heart seize up within him and wondered what Lois would make of that if she possessed the ability to hear his heartbeat. Would she recognize why he responded such to the simple sight of her? Would she recognize it and simply accept it as her due? Or would she be confused by it? Certainly, he was often confused by what he heard and saw in her. If he hadn’t been so confused, in fact, maybe he wouldn’t have been stupid enough to give her opportunity to use on him a weapon even more painful than Kryptonite — the weapon of her casual, almost patronizing rejection.

“I’m here,” he said softly, pitching his voice to carry past the splash of the fountain.

She squinted in the darkness, past the spray obscuring his face and misting his glasses, and then stopped in mid-step to stand there and regard him uncertainly. “Clark?” she said again,

and Clark felt a sudden irrational anger with her. Why did she always make *him* declare himself? Why couldn’t she, just once, come out and say what she wanted or what she needed or what she expected of him instead of always playing games with his heart? Didn’t she realize that in waiting — expecting — him to betray her, she was betraying *him*, preemptively lashing out against his expected disloyalty?

With great effort, he kept that burst of painful anger off his face and replied mildly, “I said I was here.”

She stepped forward then, farther into the light of the moon and stars reflected off the shimmering water in the bowl of the fountain, and Clark found his eyes darting immediately to her left ring finger. He was surprised the trees in the distance didn’t sway with the force of his sigh of relief when he saw that the finger was beautifully bare.

“I... I needed to see you,” Lois said tentatively, almost as if it were a peace offering. If it was, it wasn’t a very good one, but Clark was doing his best not to start another argument. He didn’t want to have to add The Fountain to his list of capitalized words.

“That’s why I’m here,” he said neutrally as the radio in a passing car informed him of the possibility of a tornado touching down in Kansas over the next few hours. Then, unable to help himself, he took a step nearer Lois and asked, a bit anxiously, “You’re not in any trouble, are you? You’re okay?”

“It’s nothing like that, Clark.” She waved her hand — her bare hand — dismissively. “Don’t be such a worrywart.”

A hot flare of anger burst inside him and flooded his veins with flames. Hastily, he squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head. His heat-vision had never yet exploded from him without his direction, but then, he had never been so angry before either, so he judged this a “better safe than sorry” situation. Only when he was certain he had an iron — or rather, steel — grip on his powers did he allow himself to look back at Lois.

“Wow, thanks, Lois,” he said, clipping his words off short to ensure he didn’t say something he’d later regret. “Glad I came out here in the middle of the night for that piece of advice. I think I might actually take you up on it and *stop* worrying about you. If that’s all, then, I’ll just wish *you* a good night because mine’s certainly been something of a disappointment so far.”

He knew he wouldn’t leave, not without hearing her out, but he did turn and pretend he could actually walk away from her.

“Clark, wait. I’m sorry.” The words were grudgingly spoken, but it was an apology, and that was more than he’d ever expected to get from her, so he found himself stopping in his tracks and turning back toward her. “I didn’t mean that. It’s just... it’s been one of those nights, you know? Well, of course you know — I mean, you just told me you’d been having a bad night, and I know I’m partly to blame for that, but our argument aside, I hardly think your night has been anything compared to mine. Coming to see your almost-fiancé to maybe tell him... well, never mind what I was going to tell him. But coming to see him and then hearing him on the phone talking about Kryptonite will do that to a person, you know? So, anyway, I thought I should let you know since you’re far more likely to see Superman sometime soon than I will, and he might listen to a warning coming from you better than he would from me. Or I think he would anyway, but since I still haven’t figured last night out, maybe I’m wrong about that. Of course, you don’t know anything about last night, so I don’t even know why I’m talking about it other than the fact that it’s why I’m here — to tell *you* about the Kryptonite so you can tell Superman.”

He was gaping at her, flat-out staring, which was what he usually did when Lois went into one of her no-breathing, nerves-showing, rambling rants. But when she mentioned Kryptonite and Luthor’s name in the same sentence... well, all the heat left from his burst of anger flashed into ice and cold chills swept through his body.

“Kryptonite?” He felt himself pale, felt himself stagger, felt himself sit heavily on the edge of the fountain. All other sounds faded away into a distance that even Superman couldn’t broach.

Aside from what had happened at The Park Bench and The Window, Luthor possessing Kryptonite was his worst fear.

“Clark...” The smallness of her voice demanded his attention and shook him from his panicked thoughts. “Why would Lex want Kryptonite?”

The question stunned him and left him speechless. Was she really asking him to tell her the truth about Luthor? Had she finally realized that the smooth-talking billionaire wasn’t what he appeared?

“Wh-what did he say?” Clark felt suddenly cornered, and the customary evasion fell from his lips... and he *hated* it. He *wanted* Lois to know the truth behind Luthor — not the ordinary man behind the hero but the monster behind the man — wanted it so *badly*, as if he were a starving man suddenly coming into sight of a mountain of food. And yet, instead of running to eat, he was turning away from that food... and it was the exact opposite of what he should be doing. He needed to tell her the truth now... didn’t he? But he had been lying so long, he wasn’t sure he knew how to pick apart the threads of his deception.

Lois shrugged and wrapped her arms tightly around herself, a move that made him inexplicably want to hug her. She was wearing a sweater even though the air was warm, and its light blue folds made her look tiny and fragile and young, so Clark swallowed and looked away because he wasn’t ready yet to touch Lois again, not after what had happened the last time.

“He was on the phone making what sounded like a business transaction,” Lois explained impatiently. “Then he hung up and started talking to that horrible Mrs. Cox. He said he’d be very interested in seeing if the Kryptonite actually worked. But really, that doesn’t even make sense because we don’t even know for sure that Kryptonite exists. And Lex loves mind games, so it was probably a simple question that he was answering, sort of a hypothetical...” But her voice trailed off, and Clark wondered if she had realized just how ridiculous her excuses sounded.

“Clark,” and her voice was abnormally calm, as if she had separated herself from this conversation, and Clark was afraid, deathly afraid, that his chance to show her Luthor’s true colors had already passed him by. “What would Lex want with Kryptonite?”

“H-he hates Superman,” he replied, stammering in his delayed haste to get the words out before she could stop him, before she could turn around and walk away, walk out of his life and straight into Luthor’s arms. “He sees him as competition, as an obstacle to his goal of becoming the most influential citizen of Metropolis and the most powerful criminal.”

“Criminal?” It was hard to tell what Lois was thinking — which was so unusual that it seemed almost alien, certainly more alien than he had ever truly felt — impossible for Clark to tell if she was really listening to him or only paying enough attention to be able to shoot him down once again. “Does Superman know that Lex hates him?”

“Yes,” Clark answered simply, cowering away from the memory of The Window, afraid it would leap up and attack him at even this mention of Superman.

“And does Superman know about your suspicions of Lex?”

“He...” Clark swallowed, every possible answer he could give laid out before him like an extremely complicated maze. Only, he was nowhere near as skilled at finding his way through it as the rats in laboratories were. “He’s the one who passed along much of the information I know.”

“Then why hasn’t he done anything about it?” Lois asked matter-of-factly — so matter-of-factly that Clark gaped at her, wondering if the woman he loved had been replaced with a robot that could only regurgitate Luthor’s excuses. “If what you say is

true, Superman would have seen to it that Lex was punished.”

With a sigh that reached deep into the depths of his being and sent the bleak, searing ashes found down there out into the open air to coat the shimmering water in the fountain with an invisible miasma of despair, Clark stood and thrust his hands into his pockets. “Superman stands for truth and justice, Lois, so he needs proof to take Luthor down. He can’t just manhandle him into a prison cell, no matter how much he might want to. And believe me, I’m looking for the proof he needs. But... if Luthor has Kryptonite, then I guess I need to look faster.”

Lois canted her chin defiantly and finally the anger that was surging within her became visible in the flashing lightning storm playing through her night-dark eyes. “Superman would have told me if this were true. He would have warned me. And why didn’t he — why didn’t *you* — ask me for help if you were investigating Lex?”

“Because of *that*,” he exclaimed, pointing at her, still feeling cornered and defensive, still afraid of saying too much, of not saying enough, so incredibly weary of walking this tightrope between truth and deception. “Because you call him ‘Lex.’ Because you’re dating him. Because you refuse to believe anything bad about him and have not once thought to investigate him on your own even after he shot a man right in front of you without so much as batting an eyelash. You were supposed to be getting the first one-on-one interview with him, Lois, or have you forgotten that? What happened to not getting involved with your stories? What happened to never letting anyone else get there first? What happened to not sl —” Hastily, he cut himself off, knowing he was going too far, before resuming in a quieter voice. “Why would Superman ask you for help when you’re so obviously caught up in the same lies Luthor tells everyone else? Why would *I* ask you for help when you’ll barely let me say his name without jumping all over me? You’re an investigative reporter, Lois — *investigate*.”

Lois trembled with anger — actually, *visibly* trembled with anger — and Clark realized with familiar despair that he had said the wrong thing again, that she still wasn’t listening to him, that he was trapped in a situation he had no clue how to handle.

And sirens were going off across the city, and there was a news report about a cruise ship in trouble, and a bank alarm was sounding, and he could hear a tidal wave beginning to build up near Indonesia, and... and he was so *tired*. Exhaustion flooded through him, so much that he actually felt himself waver and had to spread his feet and brace himself to keep from collapsing to the ground. He wished he could fly away, wished he could flee whatever poisonous, agonizing words Lois was about to hurl at him, wished he could rescue everyone who needed him... but escape wouldn’t solve this, wouldn’t help him, and even if he flew to the ends of the earth and rescued people from dawn to dusk and from twilight to sunrise, he would never be able to run from the sound of her beautiful voice rejecting him yet again, never be able to make himself solely into someone she could love.

“That is *not* fair!” Lois hissed. “I *have* interviewed Lex, and I have written stories on him, and I *do* let you say his name — in fact, I even came tonight to hear what reason you have to think Lex is a murderer or psychopath or monster or —”

“Try ‘all of the above,’” he couldn’t resist interjecting, though he knew it would do no good, would only make her even more furious with him, less inclined to listen to him.

“— well, you know what, Clark? I still haven’t heard a single rational reason or any solid proof to make me distrust Lex. You’re just jealous, Clark, and Superman... well, I don’t know what his problem is — if he even knows. You could be lying about that too for all I know.”

He felt the anger that was rapidly becoming familiar rise up to engulf him once more, enough so that he almost saw red and

had to squeeze his eyes shut again, but he was so tired of being mad at her, so sick of fighting with her, and the sound of nearby fire alarms was distracting him. Lois thrived on anger, embraced it and used it to make herself stronger, to lock herself behind ever-higher walls, but Clark couldn't do that. He had always been slow to anger, but after his powers had developed, he had specifically cultivated an easygoing manner. Anger had too much possibility for catastrophe, too much potential for tragedy, too much room for hurt in it.

And Lois... well, it was worse being angry with her. Terrible to shout at her, awful to look at her and want to shake her slender frame, so soul-crushingly exhausting being at odds with the woman to whom he had, however unwisely, given his heart.

And what did it matter, in the end? Why should he argue with her over this when nothing he said would penetrate her fury-strengthened walls? Anything he said would anger her and everything that made her angry would further deafen her. It was a useless battle... and yet he couldn't stop himself from trying anyway.

"You want rational?" he asked her in a voice so blank that she actually blinked and took a step backward. He sank down onto the fountain and looked up at her, not even caring anymore that his lowered position could give her the wrong impression. "I can't give you that, Lois. Yes, I'm jealous — I admit it! Are you happy now? Yes, it kills me to know that you're considering his marriage proposal even though you're not sure you're in love with him when you didn't even take a full second to give me the same consideration. And no, I don't have enough proof — if I did, do you think I'd keep repeating my same warnings to you knowing that you haven't listened to a single one of them? But I did *not* lie about Superman's involvement in this investigation, and the fact that you think otherwise..." He stopped, thought about it, and then shook his head. "No, I guess that doesn't surprise me, after all. In fact, I should have expected it, all things considered."

Lois was silent. That was harder to bear than anything else because a torrent of words meant Lois was dealing with something and he could usually tell where she was heading, but silence? Silence was a blank slate that could conceal endless rejections and condemnations and accusations. So he looked away, out over the city of Metropolis, *his* city, the city presently calling for Superman from a hundred different directions as it did every hour of every day.

"Clark..." In direct contrast to those frantic cries and jagged alarms and far away news reports, Lois's voice was gentle and soft and kind, which was enough to make him take in a shuddering breath in order to keep his eyes directed away from her. And then she touched him, a warm, light hand resting on his, laid atop the cool marble of the fountain, and he could hear her settle herself beside him, could feel her presence so near him, could sense her eyes intent on him.

And suddenly he wasn't tired at all. He was on fire, alive and vibrant and viewing the world through an explosion of color and sensation and life that hadn't been there before.

And he was numb. Completely and utterly numb, as if all emotion, all feeling, all thought had been scoured away to leave only the bare bones. He felt abruptly disconnected from his body and his name — both of them — and his situation, felt his great and awful love for Lois as a force as powerful but as distant, as unknowable, as the ocean. It still called to him, was still obviously there, but it was abstract and it changed from wave to wave and it was liquid, moving and shifting and alien to his solid form.

Slowly, infinitesimally, sure that if he moved too quickly, he'd shatter — and wouldn't that be a startling event for Lois to witness and have to try to explain in her next LNN story? — he pulled his hand out from under hers. "Don't," he whispered, so

quietly that it was almost drowned by the bubbling of the fountain. "Don't play with my heart."

"Clark, I'm not." She sounded so sincere, so earnest... but she had sounded just like that at The Window, and he could no longer pretend that that night was only Superman's nightmare. Because no matter how much he wished otherwise, that had been Clark Kent's nightmare too, just as The Park Bench was shared with Superman. Both man and hero pierced to the core by the events of both, those capital letters stabbing them at every point.

"I'm not entirely rational when it comes to Luthor," he said before she could say anything else, before she could revisit one of those moments and possibly finish the job she had already started. The numbness that had engulfed him seeped into his voice, so pervasive that he didn't even feel a twinge to see Lois scoot an inch away from him at the sound of Luthor's name, so all-encompassing that he could scarcely hear the world crying for a hero he wasn't sure he could be anymore. "But that doesn't mean I'm wrong. Luthor's going to end up hurting you, Lois, along with a lot of other people."

Lois cocked her head and studied him as if she'd never seen him before, and he wondered if she could see the cloud of frozen detachment, if it showed clearly around him, outlined him in a nimbus or aura.

"All right, Clark," she said coolly, her hands now clasped in her lap as she regarded him. "You want me to investigate — let's start with you."

And the numbness wasn't as all-consuming as he'd thought because a frisson of fear ran through it like a crack in a glass globe.

"How do *you* know so much about Kryptonite?" It was an accusation as much as it was an inquiry for information, a challenge more than a question, but Clark considered it anyway. In fact, he took a long moment to ponder his answer even though the fire alarms were growing more pressing, the cruise ship was rapidly taking on water, there were three more cries for help in the surrounding city blocks, and that tidal wave was growing ever larger and nearer land.

Finally, tired of trying to think his way out of the situation, he simply shrugged and said, "I was there in Smallville, too, remember? I helped discover Kryptonite."

"And how did you learn that Lex was supposedly a criminal?" Lois demanded, intent on her prey as she leaned nearer him. "Tell me why you think he's evil. How do you know of his crimes when nobody else does?"

The answer to that question was so much harder than she knew, so much more difficult to put into words, and that was why he had never tried to explain it and why Lois had never listened to his vague warnings and fear-hampered caution. But strangely, Clark didn't feel afraid anymore. He should have, probably, should have been terrified that telling Lois anything would give Luthor power over him even above and beyond the threat of Kryptonite.

But it didn't.

Didn't because what it did matter anymore? If Lois would betray him, then what point was there in staying? If there was no hope of her love ever being given to both sides of him, then what was the point of keeping up the pretense? If Luthor could be brought down, then what was the point of lying any longer?

Or maybe it was as he had originally thought and he was just crazy. He had heard of such things, complete psychotic breaks. Maybe his had occurred at The Window, or maybe even earlier, at The Park Bench, and his insanity had convinced him that he was a superhero who could reject Lois as easily — *ha!* — as she had rejected him. Maybe he had imagined being able to fly and leap tall buildings and catch bullets and resist Lois Lane. Maybe he was just an ordinary man broken by the realization that he wasn't enough, not nearly enough, to deserve Lois.

Or maybe he was just sick and tired of the lies.

Clark took a deep breath and stood, looking down at Lois, facing her in the dark, studying her features reflected in the light, almost completely detached from this moment, this scene, this revelation. “How do I know?” he repeated, as conversationally as if they were discussing the grass along the pathway or his parents’ health. “Because I’m Superman, Lois. I know all of this because I’m Superman, because I’ve seen Luthor commit the crimes, because I’ve heard him, because I’ve confronted him and he’s admitted it, because he hates me even more than I hate him and for less cause. But he gets away with it, and I can’t seem to stop him, and I know if I were smarter, I wouldn’t be in this mess, but it is what it is and I don’t know what to do.”

She was shell-shocked, perhaps a bit disbelieving, staring up at him as if she’d never seen him before, and maybe she hadn’t, but there was nothing to do now other than to press on, to say everything that had been boiling within him for so long.

“I want to fight for you, Lois,” he said, marveling at the neutral tone of his voice, “but I won’t fight *with* you anymore. And I don’t know if you love him, but if you do, then of course you have to stand by him. Only, I can’t figure out where that leaves us, which is why I avoid you and I vacillate between arguing with you and trying to understand you. I hate lying to you, and I’m tired of evading, and I can’t stand hurting you, and I know I’m not being the friend you need or the hero you want, but there you have it — the whole truth behind Clark Jerome Kent.” He paused, thought a moment, distantly ignoring the byplay of shock and astonishment and a hundred other different emotions playing across her face, then added, “And I know you’ll be even angrier with me for saying this, but at this point, I think it does need to be said — please, no matter how much you hate me now, don’t print this, for my parents’ sake if nothing else. Most especially, don’t tell Luthor because he’s actually, I’m realizing, my arch-nemesis. And I didn’t even *want* an arch-nemesis.”

He forced himself to stop then, knowing he was rambling, unable to pretend any longer that this speech that unveiled him and completely stripped him of his last defenses didn’t affect him, already beginning to be a little frightened of how resigned and numb and *uncaring* he felt.

And still Lois just stared at him, her eyes large and black and shimmering suspiciously in the night. And something within him moved, threatened his detached state, made him reach up his hand to brush a finger against her cheek — just to make sure she was warm because she looked so frozen and still — before he remembered that she wouldn’t want him to touch her, wouldn’t want him anywhere near her. He was the ordinary man she could never love and the superhero she idolized, but now, with this secret told, he was neither, and she would hate him for taking both those men away from her.

So he dropped his hand before it could reach her and he took a step back so that he wasn’t crowding her.

“I do love you, Lois,” he said because, regardless of his emotions or the situation, he couldn’t *not* say it. “If you can’t remember anything good about me after this, at least remember that. I love you, and I’m only a call away. Always.”

When her expression degenerated into a mask as empty as his future, he felt another frisson run through his aura, another tremor endanger his world of surreal calm, a surge move through that far-away ocean. And he knew he needed to get away, needed to give her space, needed to find out about Luthor’s Kryptonite, needed to answer the cries for Superman... needed to get away from Lois so that he wouldn’t end up disintegrating into that pile of Kryptonian dust.

Needed, above all, to escape before the last remaining pieces of his dreams were completely obliterated and the world’s icon of hope lost every shred of it.

So he looked at Lois one more time — one *last* time? — an

ocean of feeling in his eyes, and then he lifted straight up into the air without bothering to change into his Suit and he rose toward the stars that would, he was sure, be his only company aside from his parents from this day on.

He had been wrong.

The Park Bench and The Window had been nothing, nothing at all, compared to The Fountain.

Chapter 2: Looking at You

“Wait!” Her voice didn’t distract him from his bid to escape whatever new pain she might try to inflict, but the hand that reached high above her head to grab hold of his ankle did succeed in freezing him in place. No matter how many calls for help there were, Clark couldn’t risk hurting her by tearing himself free of her insistent grip.

“I have to go, Lois,” he told her, wholly unable to comprehend what possible reason she could have for standing on her tiptoes and clutching his foot. Maybe if he had spun into the Suit, she would have realized that he was obviously needed elsewhere.

“No,” she said firmly, and there was no hint at all of the disbelief or astonishment he had seen scribed across her features a scant moment before. Instead, there was icy detachment, as all-consuming as his own, a terrible blankness to her eyes, as if she had disconnected herself from him. And that... that was terrifying.

It seemed The Fountain’s potential for pain hadn’t yet come to an end.

“Lois, I have to go,” he said, but he had already said that, already uttered that same collection of words, and it did no more good this time than it had the last.

“You can’t just say — can’t just reveal — you can’t just do *that* and then fly away!” she exclaimed, tugging at his pants leg until he accommodated her and dropped downward. Stubbornly, though, he kept the soles of his feet an inch off the ground, unwilling to concede defeat so easily.

“People need me.” The statement fell so effortlessly from his lips and yet it was the first time he could remember ever being able to speak it aloud. How many times had he needed to get out of the newsroom or a taxi or an interview or a quiet evening with a friend and been unable to tell anyone the true reason he was leaving? How many times had he uttered feeble excuses and hated lies in place of this simple sentence composed of only three words? It was, at once, incredibly liberating and terribly frightening to finally have the truth exposed to open air.

“What do you mean, people need — ” Lois abruptly cut herself off, her eyes widening in realization and her hand dropping away from his sleeve. It was only then, in the face of her slow reaction, that Clark realized she was still processing what he had foolishly told her. The one time in his life he hadn’t held back what he was thinking, what he was feeling, what he was doing — the *one* time, and now she could destroy him with one word, one wrong reaction. It was why he had tried to flee, why he *needed* to get out of there, why he was so afraid to look her in the eye and see what she was thinking.

Because once he saw it, once she said it... then he would know, and there would be no going back, no second chance, no hope that one day she’d accept and love both of him. There’d be only her rejection, her horror, her condemnation, and it was hard enough being Superman when she adored him; he didn’t know how he’d do it when she hated him.

“There’s a cruise ship sinking in the Pacific,” he said woodenly. “And there are three muggings occurring within twenty city blocks of here that the police won’t get to in time, and tornados are about to touch down in Kansas, and a tidal wave is going to be hitting Indonesia in a couple hours.”

“Stop, just stop!” Lois held up a hand as if to ward him off

and another surge tremored through that ocean held within him. Did she really think he'd attack her? Was she afraid of him? Disgusted? Or, worst of all, *disappointed* in him? He wished he'd left, wished he hadn't let her pull him back to the earth, wished — for the thousandth time — that he had never admitted anything at all to her, not about his heart and not about his alter ego. A sense of urgency overtook him — because she was thinking this through right now, reordering her thoughts and perception to fit with reality, but he knew that if he wanted to protect what was left of his heart, he had to leave before she finally accepted this truth, this fact, this revelation, and lashed out at him.

“Lois — ”

“No!” Lois took a deep breath and then looked straight at him. He felt the breath in his lungs compress into a lump of lead in his chest, felt his heart cease beating, felt the entire world pause on this threshold between his truth and her reaction. “You need to help people? Fine. But I’m coming with you.” And she stepped right up to him and put her arms around his neck, and Clark thought he might literally burst into flames right then and there, might spontaneously combust from the contradictory pleasure and pain searing its way through him from the warmth of her against him. She raised her eyebrows impatiently, and under the weight of her expectation, he found himself lifting up into the air, moving more out of habit than anything, his arms automatically closing around her even though a moment earlier, he wouldn’t have bet even a dollar on his chances of ever getting to hold her again.

Lois stared at the ground disappearing beneath them, then back up at him, a maelstrom of emotions and thoughts playing across her face. “This is crazy, Cl — Super — argh! Who *are* you? You... you’re not...” She shook her head angrily and let out a frustrated growl. At least there was emotion on her face, in her voice; at least that blankness had seemingly been banished from her. Clark only wished he could similarly fight back the numbness engulfing him in its abstract embrace.

“I’m Clark,” he said, and for all that it sounded inane, he so desperately wanted that to be the truth, so fiercely fought to ensure that that statement remained the honest-to-God truth at all times, no matter what he wore. He couldn’t imagine being anyone — anything — else, couldn’t imagine a day when he could no longer be the man his parents had raised him to be. Clark was a human, a man who belonged here, a man who could have friends and family, a regular, *ordinary* man who wasn’t feared for spectacular powers.

A man who put on an incredibly tight Suit to use those powers without sacrificing his life. A man who loved the woman now staring at him with an expression he dared not interpret.

“I’m Clark,” he repeated — a vow, a prayer, an impossible dream.

“No, you’re not!” Lois snapped, loosing an arm from his neck to wave toward the far-away ground. “You’re not Clark! And you’re not Superman. You’re... you’re a liar. I don’t know you at all. You’re just like the rest.”

Something broke inside Clark, something precious and fragile, something that had been hidden deep within him since he’d first found out he was different. It shattered into a million pieces at Lois’s last whispered statement, and Clark mourned it, this loss of hope, this severing of his dreams, this lumping in of his face with Claude and Paul and Lex — consigned to her past, banished from her future.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and it was true. He was sorry for disappointing her, sorry he couldn’t really be two different men, sorry he had so rashly let loose of the truths boiling within him, sorry she hated him.

“No, Cl — Sup — ” Again, she snarled in frustration, but her glare never wavered from him, and he shrank before it, looking

away again, out toward the cry for help he was rushing to answer. “Don’t apologize,” Lois ordered him coldly. “I don’t need apologies. I want an explanation. So explain it to me — make me understand.”

“Understand what?” he asked, and flinched from the dullness of his own tone. He tried to summon the mental image of his parents, tried to remember the hopeful optimism of their advice and acceptance, but they shimmered liquidly in the clouds above and disappeared with the ripple of a passing breeze. He tried to concentrate on all the cries for Superman, but they shrank away into the distance, drowned out by the sound of his heart stubbornly continuing to beat in his chest despite its wounded condition.

“Understand *you!*” Lois didn’t even seem to notice that he had set her down — a block from the crime he was about to stop — didn’t let her arms fall from him even though he had dropped his own hands away from her as soon as his feet touched the street. “You’ve been lying to me the entire time I’ve known you — both of you — and I think I deserve an explanation! About you *and* about Lex! An explanation and *proof!*”

Before, something had broken in Clark, but now something different, something more volatile and dangerous and strained snapped inside of him, and white-hot sparks leapt to encase his mind in a glittering burst that dazzled his vision and turned his voice harsh. “Oh, I get it. Now I understand. Because Superman is *me*, he’s suddenly prone to suspicion, and because I’m *Superman*, I’m suddenly worth listening to? You know what, Lois? I don’t have time for this. I warned you about your fiancé, and I already tried at Perry’s retirement dinner to give you the evidence I had against him, and you heard him talking about Kryptonite on your own — you’ve investigated people and companies for far less than that, but it’s your prerogative what you do about it now. I’m done, okay? I’m just...” The brittleness in his tone made his voice crack and he had to stop, had to look away, had to close his eyes, had to direct his hearing to anything other than Lois’s pounding heart. “I have to go,” he said quietly, not even waiting for the tremulous words to be fully uttered before he was rising into the sky and darting down a block to spin into Superman in the shadows and step out into the light to stop a common criminal.

It was what he had always wanted, the ability to help others without hurting Clark Kent, but something must have gone wrong because Clark Kent was hurt now more than he’d ever been before in his life and there didn’t seem to be a cure for this pain.

It took only a moment to turn a cry for help into a grateful call, only an instant to turn Superman back into Clark Kent, only a heartbeat to find himself in front of Lois again. She didn’t look happy, but for once, Clark almost didn’t care.

“There are other crises,” he told her succinctly. “I have to go.”

But once again, as if he were stuck in a never-ending cycle, as if his actions were as circular as his thoughts, Lois reached up, this time grabbing hold of his sleeve to haul him back toward her. “Stop running away from me!” she demanded, anger blotting out anything else that might have touched her features.

“Right,” he said derisively, striking out because there was nothing else for him to do, no hopeful goal, no beautiful dream of a future spent with her to keep his hurt and anger and despair from spilling out on the ground all around them. “Because *you*’ve never ran from anything in your life.”

“Why are you mad at me?” she cried, releasing her grip on him and stepping back.

She no longer held him to the earth, but Clark stayed where he was anyway, a foot in the air, trapped by the force of his astonishment, frozen in place, gaping down at her.

“I mean,” she looked away before tilting her chin defiantly and staring him straight in the eye, “I know why you’re mad

about Lex. But *you're* the one who lied to me! Why are you mad at me for believing the lies *you* told me?"

His shoes sank onto the sidewalk, his weight an almost physical burden as the power of flight left him, leaving him alone and vulnerable and unable to escape. "I'm not," he said so quietly it was almost inaudible. "I'm not mad you believed I was two people. I'm not mad at all. I'm just..."

Hurt. And sad. And disappointed. And so terribly exhausted. And wholly, utterly destroyed. Because he knew she couldn't have known Clark and Superman were the same man, but why couldn't she have loved Clark as much as she idolized Superman? Why couldn't she have given Clark the same chance she'd given Luthor — was seemingly *continuing* to give to Luthor? Why had she so easily been able to dismiss the real parts of him when he couldn't, for the life of him, tear himself away from her?

"Clark."

He almost collapsed then, almost lost all density and strength in every part of his body, almost turned incorporeal and ghosted away. She had called him Clark. Not Superman, not some amalgam of Superman and Clark, not liar, not any of the names she doubtless was thinking at him. Just Clark. And when he had only moments earlier given up all hope of ever being Clark to her again, this seemed a touch of grace he hadn't even dared hope he'd be given.

But when he looked at her, he didn't see the understanding he yearned for. Instead, he saw a brick wall that hadn't been there since before he'd sent her on a wild Godzilla chase, a coldness that had disappeared after he'd failed to spread her secrets around, a distrust that had never truly been directed his way at all. And it hurt. It hurt almost as badly as any of the other capitalized events.

"You finally told me your secret," she said neutrally. "Finally. So... why now? Why this moment?"

Clark's heart sank even deeper into his chest cavity, carving out a black hole that threatened to turn everything inside him into a vacuum. Because this wasn't Lois-Lane-his-friend-and-partner speaking; this was Lois-Lane-prize-winning-investigative-reporter. *Ruthless* investigative reporter.

"Because..." He paused to search for an answer he didn't have. It was crazy to have told her knowing that she'd hate him — hate Clark Kent *and* Superman — knowing she'd want some means of vengeance for the lies he'd told her, knowing she could go straight to the one man who could apparently do no wrong in her eyes. He'd known it was crazy even while he told her, and he could no more explain it now than he could then.

But Lois wouldn't accept that non-answer, and he knew it. Knew he was trapped. He needed an answer, one that made sense, one that was true, and one that didn't make her hate him any more than she already did.

But what kind of answer could accomplish all that?

"You needed to know," he finally said, and it was as much the truth as it was an evasion. He had dreamed of her knowing, had held it to him like a bright, golden fantasy of better-days-to-come, but it had always been far in the future. Now... now that future had arrived to engulf him in gold that turned to dross and light that faded into shadows.

The murmur of a nearby fire leapt into focus with the crash of a falling support beam. Clark's head snapped toward it, seeking the incident with his telescopic and x-ray vision, zeroing in on the sound, peeling away every wall and building and car between him and the danger.

"I have to go," he said suddenly, his need and haste apparent in his voice and every line of his body.

Lois narrowed her eyes as she watched him, and even without x-ray vision, he could see the thoughts in her head — see her thinking back to every other time he'd turned his head and

immediately made a quick excuse to disappear. But instead of ranting about his deception, she simply stepped close to him again, took firm hold of his sleeve, and said, "Not without me. You've lied enough — to me, to your friends, to the whole world. For once, let me see who you really are."

Her demand hurtled from her lips to hit his heart like stones, beating at him, battering against his insufficient defenses, breaking whatever hold on his emotions he still retained. Anger flooded through him like outreaching waves from that ocean of emotion within him — anger because he had spent eight months showing her more of his true self than anyone other than his parents had ever seen, had just revealed to her the secret that could completely ruin his life and decimate all that he was, had *told* her he was Clark... and she didn't see it. Had never bothered to look past his façade in the way he saw past hers. And he knew it wasn't her fault, knew he had intentionally fooled her into thinking Superman was a man apart from Clark Kent, knew it was wholly irrational to blame her for her blindness... but he had just stripped himself bare and still she wouldn't look at him, wouldn't listen, wouldn't believe him, wouldn't give him even the merest sliver of a chance.

She wanted Superman? Well, he could be Superman. She wanted to see what he did on rescues? Well, he'd show her. She wanted to understand him? Well, he didn't know if she would, didn't know if she would set aside her anger long enough to see him, but he'd try to make her understand. He'd show her Superman on rescues, and he would let her see that Superman without Clark Kent was nothing, nothing at all.

So he stepped away from her and spun into his Suit — ignored her open-mouthed shock — moved nearer her and swept her up into his arms — pretended he didn't wither inside at the sight of her flinch — and flew upward, this time able to attain the skies without being halted — dismally aware that he was bringing all the pain of The Fountain with him, protected within the shelter of his arms.

The three muggings, four robberies, and two fires he dealt with in Metropolis took less than an hour despite the fact that he kept detouring to drop Lois a safe distance away each time. They had no time to exchange any words, which Clark viewed as a blessing. He had said too many things he shouldn't have today, heard too much in the past several hours that he had hoped never to hear from her. The heavy, overwhelming silence was better than that, even though he knew he'd probably regret it when Lois finally got a chance to release everything she was doubtlessly composing in her head.

He just hoped he alone heard whatever words she was preparing for him — an infinitely better option than hearing them broadcast from every television tuned to LNN.

Days before, he would have sworn that no matter how she found out his secret, Lois would never betray him. But that was before. Before Luthor had proposed. Before Lois had actually seriously considered accepting his proposal — even gone to his gleaming tower to take his ring. Before she had turned into a stranger he didn't know. Before *he* had lost all sense of the rational and the sane. Now Clark didn't know what Lois would do, couldn't even begin to predict her actions.

Or maybe he was just afraid to do so.

"There are tornados touching down in Kansas," he said as he swooped down to land before her — so much closer to the site of the fire than he had originally placed her — soot staining his cape and making him feel gritty and brittle.

Lois's chin tilted defiantly. "You're not leaving me here."

"Lois..." he began, but then, inexplicably, he just ran out of words. Ran out of any arguments, any momentum, any reason to argue with her. He had told her he was done fighting with her, and despite the anger rolling within him like the tide, that was still true. So, feeling his shoulders slump, he nodded. "Just make

sure you stay where I put you — tornados are dangerous.”

He thought she might have rolled her eyes, but she ducked her head as she did so, so he couldn't be sure. Regardless, he determined to put her down even farther back from the danger zone than he had originally planned so that she wouldn't reach it before he could disperse the twisters. He had never felt more disconnected from Lois, never felt so resigned concerning her, but that didn't mean he could envision her hurt or worse.

Before, every time he'd picked her up, he'd been intent on the sounds of whatever crime had been occurring, focused on deciphering which incident needed him first, distracted by trying to figure out where he could leave Lois so she wouldn't get hurt, preoccupied in formulating his plan of action. But now, with no alarms to capture his attention, he had nothing to protect him from the feel of Lois in his arms, from the scent of her hair and skin so close to him, from the sound of her heart beating and her even breaths and her small shifts, from the sensation of her warmth seeping into him, threatening to melt that haze of numbness that cloaked him in what little protection it could offer. Now, with her in his arms, he had only a trip that stretched out an eternity between Metropolis and Kansas, with nothing at all to keep him safe from Lois's soft proximity.

And with her so silent, with her face so near to his, with her arms so trustingly looped around his neck, with her expression quiet and relaxed... well, suddenly he was having a hard time remembering that the anger hidden beneath his invulnerable surface had been ignited by her, that the very real pain lodged like concrete in his chest had been inflicted by her, that the multitude of memories starting with capital letters and boiling within him had become off-limits to his own recollection because of her part in them.

“Lois.” Her name had emerged from his mouth before he'd even realized he meant to speak it, and though the wind loudly rushed past them, he could tell Lois had heard him because she tilted her head to meet his eyes, her blue sweater a bright patch of color amid the midnight sky. Her dark gaze was intent on him, pulling even more words from him. “Lois, why are you doing this? What do you expect to learn about me by coming to these rescues?”

Her eyebrows rose and she gaped at him much as he had done to her when she'd asked him why he was mad at her. But that question had had an oh-so-obvious answer while this... this was a mystery to him.

“You've been to rescues before,” he pointed out just to show her why his question was perfectly reasonable.

“Yes, I've been to *Superman* rescues,” she said, and her frigid tone made Clark imagine the cold night air was actually affecting him, pebbling his flesh and sliding icy drops down his spine. “But that was when I thought Superman was a selfless man who had chosen to devote his *whole* life to helping others. Now...”

That anger — growing much too familiar within him — stirred, trembling on the brink of explosion as he awaited the rest of her answer. But, he reminded himself, she was in the air right now, completely vulnerable, wholly dependent on him, so Clark put a lid over his simmering emotions, knowing he didn't have the luxury of expressing them as thoughtlessly as everyone else could.

“Now,” Lois continued obliviously, “I know that that's not true. I thought I understood you — understood *Superman* — but apparently he's a liar, not at all like the man I thought I knew. So, I want to see who you really are.”

He clenched his jaw, the only outlet for his hurt and fury he allowed himself. “You really think I'm going to do these rescues differently?”

“I don't know!” she cried, and the undercurrent of frustration in her voice snapped outward to slap him. “That's why I'm coming with you. I don't know you — Clark — Superman.

You're not what I thought you were — it turns out that apparently no one is — and I... I just want to — *need* to — understand just how much everything has changed. You're not the Superman I thought, but you're not Clark either. I mean, Kansas isn't even your home!”

“Yes, it is,” he said quietly, his anger beaten back by the despair encroaching along the edges of her voice, his heart so greatly attuned to her that he couldn't help but soften at this sign of her distress. For the first time, he cursed himself for telling the truth — not for his sake — but for hers. “I was raised in Smallville, Lois. This is my home.”

“So you say,” she scoffed. “But I can't believe anything you say, can I? Or Jonathan and Martha, apparently, because they lied too!”

“You're right,” Clark said, and now the chill of the air, climbing up from his spine to enter his throat, had taken root in his voice, freezing it and turning it bleak and barren. “I guess lying is only acceptable when you do it.”

Before she could respond, he swooped downward and set Lois down on the ground beside a public shelter. He opened his mouth to tell her to be careful, noted her features set in stone, and closed his mouth over the useless warning. As his hands slipped away from her, he wondered at the conflicting feelings of regret at losing that contact and impatience to flee her painful, turbulent presence. The wind swirled strongly all about them, pushing him toward Lois one moment and tugging him away from her the next; he stood stolidly, refusing to move an inch before its insistent influence. Lois's hair danced wildly about her head, but her expression never wavered, refusing to let him in behind her walls.

With a last long look at her, Clark turned and took a step away so that the wind called up in his wake wouldn't buffet her, but he was stopped in mid-motion by the sound of her voice softly saying, “Wait.”

Unwillingly, unhesitatingly, he looked over his shoulder at her, already bracing himself for whatever last parting shot she had ready to throw his way.

“You're coming back, aren't you?” she asked, and though she tried to make the question sound casual, the tremor running through her voice gave her away.

“I could never leave you, Lois,” Clark said, and wished that for once he *was* lying. But he already knew he was speaking the unvarnished truth. No matter what she said to him, what she did to him, no matter who she married, he didn't know that he'd ever be able to leave her behind and put her out of her mind, ever be able to escape the piercing quality of those capitalized words — knew that no matter where he was, every park would remind him of The Park Bench, every window would bring to mind The Window, and every time he caught the sound of water, he'd remember The Fountain.

“You're flying away,” Lois told him, as if he didn't know that, as if she didn't believe his assurance, as if his impending absence actually affected her.

“I told you, I'm always a call away. Call my name, and I'll come to you immediately.”

And before she could ask him what name to use — before he was reminded that she didn't know him at all anymore — he employed his superspeed and flight to leave in a burst of primary colors.

As soon as he took to the air, the wind assaulted him with all the force of a cosmic storm, tearing ruthlessly at him, shrieking accusations in his ears, pulling and pushing him in a hundred different directions all at once, embracing him even as it sought to tear him to pieces. He ignored it all, kept his flight path steady, never let his gaze waver from the forming cyclone before him, stretched out his hearing past the screeching gusts to the towns and settlements below, ready to swoop down and haul anyone out

of the path of danger should it be needed.

Tornados were common in Kansas and even before Superman was a glimmer in the back of his mind, he had already faced and fought back dozens of twisters, so many that his mom had jokingly referred to him as Smallville's very own champion. Back then, he had felt guilty about not helping when the tornados had touched down anywhere outside a hundred-mile radius of Smallville, had worried that he wasn't doing enough, wasn't doing all that he could. And now... now it was still the same. His playing field was oh so much larger, but there was still so much he didn't do, so many he couldn't save, a multitude of crimes he never stopped. His parents told him he did enough, but... did he, really? After all, if he didn't insist on remaining Clark, didn't cling to the sole bastion of his humanity, didn't refuse to even picture a life empty of all that the ordinary man offered him, well, then he could be Superman all the time, could double — triple, quadruple — his effectiveness.

But then he'd be lost. And selfish or not, he could no more bring himself to set aside his glasses than he could cut Lois out of his heart.

Only... even now, he didn't think he *wanted* to rid himself of his great and awful love for Lois Lane. It was painful, yes, but it was also beautiful and uplifting and sometimes the only thing that kept him going, that kept him putting on his cape to be stained in yet another fire or drenched in a storm or almost pierced with a hail of bullets, the only thing that made it worth everything he did and endured. His love for her was an ocean that could so easily pummel him and drown him in dark depths, but it was gorgeous, too, and touched his very soul and gave shape to the contours of his inner self and brought vitality and light and purpose to his life after a long famine of useless drifting and uncertain wandering. She gave him a home, which was something he couldn't help but be grateful for even when that home was shaky and weak and agonizing.

His thoughts went around and around, aiding and abetting his movements to turn back the force of the wind and rain and stormy elements.

And there in the heart of the storm, as he increased his speed to an increment that no human eye and few human technological achievements could follow, Clark let out a mirthless laugh. Only hours earlier, he had imagined himself as a brightly colored cyclone spinning across Metropolis's sky, and now, in Kansas, he really was spinning there like an absurd top, corralling the tornados and the wind and the clouds into a funnel that he directed upward until it all fizzled with a last sullen gray mutter and disappeared into skies suddenly blue beneath a sun smiling down at the revealed patchwork earth.

Clark himself looked down at that chessboard of fields and houses and roads. It was a view that illustrated clearly just how disconnected from Earth he really was, and countless times in his past that had troubled him, had worried him that he could so easily be cut loose from the only home he'd ever known.

But no longer. Because now Lois was down there, waiting for him, probably looking up at the sky in anticipation of his return. And yes, she was furious with him, and in all likelihood she hated him, and she had already told him she could never love him even a fraction of the way he loved her... but still she was there. And because she was there, he had something to return to, a tether that kept him grounded, that *connected* him more surely than any other known material could manage, with a strength that rivaled and dwarfed his own.

So, no longer a top but now an arrow, he plummeted back to the ground, a ribbon of blue and red spiraling out behind him as he zeroed in on the woman who could both destroy him and build him up with no more than a glance.

And she was there — again, not in the same place he'd left her — and she was looking upward at him and she calmly met his

eyes when he alighted on the ground, as if he were nothing more than a bird trained to return to its master after completing its task. That was something he could have easily resented, but he chose not to, chose instead to look at her and hope — still, unceasingly, ever and always — that he could change her mind. That he could, through sheer persistence and wishful thinking and powerful, desperate hope, make her love him.

Except he didn't want to have to *make* her love him; he wanted her to love him freely, wanted to *be* someone she could love, wanted to get down on bended knee and beg her to just for a moment *try* to love him.

Dizziness, he concluded, not inclined to be honest in his thoughts even if he did strive for truthfulness as much as possible. He was dizzy from clearing up the cyclones, and that was the reason for his disjointed, random thoughts, the way they — he groaned inwardly to have to use the word again — circled round and round each other, the irrationality and yet fierce yearning inherent in them.

"The cruise ship or the tidal wave?" Lois asked without even mentioning the premature ending of the tornados, without the slightest hint that she saw anything in his expression, without any other words exchanged between them. And though he knew better than to expect anything from her, though he knew it was his own fault they were in this mess, he couldn't help but shrivel inside at the observation that she had yet to call him by name, had yet to look at him and *know* him, had yet to relax her walls by even an iota.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the extraneous thoughts, he said, "The cruise ship," and he swept her once more into his arms and took to the skies, and in the presence of her walls, found himself diving back behind the relative safety of his paltry shield, the aura of detachedness that became less *detached* every time he reached for it.

A shiver trembled through her slender frame, and Clark chose to interpret it as a chill. He slowed his speed to hold her with one arm and reached behind him to gather up his cape and wrap its folds around Lois. The cold registered against his skin even if it didn't bother him, and Lois had yet to lose that pale tint to her cheeks, that touch of blue on her lips, that frozen quality about her.

Lois had stiffened when he shifted her in his arms, but the instant he settled his cape around her and brought her close to his chest, she relaxed. Yet still she was silent, giving nothing away, locking him outside her heart with chains neither Superman's strength nor Clark's persistence could break or bypass.

Several times, he opened his mouth to say something, to speak, but each time, he closed it again without letting out a single word. If he hadn't known better from personal experience, he'd have said this was what being hypnotized felt like, this great gulf gaping between his will and his body, making it impossible for him to put actions to any of his thoughts, separating his mind in two as if it had been split by a serrated blade.

The ocean passed below them, a vista of blue waves capped with reflected moonlight that glittered like fallen stars. Lois looked all about her with a searching gaze, the sea captured in the dark wells of her eyes... but she never once looked at him. And yet, he couldn't help but think, she was relaxed in his embrace, her own arms twined loosely around his neck. Obviously she still trusted him a little. And no matter that he ultimately wanted so much more, this unexpected trust was like a treasure of immense value handed to him for safekeeping — and Clark would die before letting her down.

But then, as she had repeatedly mentioned, he had already let her down, already disappointed her beyond compare, already broken what trust she had given him before. And now, when she looked at him... what did she see? Was whatever she saw when she turned her knowing gaze on him the reason she refused to

look at him now? Did he disgust her?

His relatively slow pace was a curse disguised in the allure of getting to hold her close. His parents had always told him he was too quick to believe the worst of himself — though how could he not when he had messed up so badly? — and these long, torturous moments traversing the Pacific gave him far too much time to realize all the reasons Lois had to never again speak to him, never again bestow one of her quick, intelligent, amazing smiles on him, never again throw herself so trustingly into his arms for a hug, never again want to partner with him. And all because he had dared to dream the impossible, try for the unthinkable, loose that unwelcome truth.

Bright daylight was just visible to his eyes past the curve of the earth when Clark spotted the lead rescue vessel making for the damaged cruise ship. He swooped low toward the waves, focusing his hearing on the waves lapping against the hull to guide him forward, tightening his hold on Lois so that he wouldn't be thrown temporarily off-balance if she shifted.

Superman, he reminded himself as he descended, and wondered at how hard it was to remember his disguise now that Lois knew it for what it was.

"Superman!" The murmur went through the people on deck, but none of them rushed forward to surround him, most of them falling back so whoever was in charge could step forward to speak to him.

Clark steadied Lois with a hand on her back when the ship pitched beneath them, his cape falling away from her. "Sir," he greeted the officer, then, noticing the curious gazes directed Lois's way, he added, "This is Lois Lane, a reporter for the —" A tremor of grief slithered its way through him, diluting the immediacy of the cries for help emanating from the misty sea behind him.

There wasn't a Daily Planet anymore, was there? It had been destroyed, snatched away from him, along with the pseudo-family he'd found, the team where he'd actually, for perhaps the first time in his life, felt he'd belonged. He still had to remind himself of that fact, still forgot it at odd times, and it still stabbed him to the core every time he remembered.

"She's a reporter," he tried to recover, wincing over the discernible stumble in his introduction.

The officer nodded a short greeting to Lois, but the bulk of his attention was on Clark. "Thanks for coming, Superman. It's a nasty situation we've got here. The fog's muddying up what intel we can get. We're relatively sure a fire's broken out in their engine room, but since we've lost all communication, we can't verify that."

"I'll go in immediately," Clark offered. "Is there anything I should look for specifically, any advice you can give me on how to handle this?"

Worry lines creased the older man's brow before he rubbed them away with gnarled fingers. "It's different than that ocean liner you pulled out of the Atlantic several months ago. From what we can tell, this ship won't stay in one piece so don't try to move it. Put the fire out, then pull us in so we can off-load the passengers and crew, then probably guide us out of this fogbank. Unless you'd prefer trying something —"

"Whatever you think is best, sir," Clark interrupted, hesitant to hear any deference, impatient to reach the people he could hear whimpering, crying, shouting for help, calling out frantic orders, murmuring farewell messages to each other. "However, instead of leaving the ship to come back for you, I might try to clear the fog so you can make your own way in."

"Sounds like a plan, Superman. Do what you have to do — there's well over a thousand people onboard that ship!"

"I'll do my best," Clark promised, inwardly shrinking away from the immensity of that number of helpless people depending on him. He was about to fling himself into the air when he felt a

palpable presence behind him, the tangible sensation of someone watching him. He was Superman right now, of course, and Superman attracted an audience everywhere he went, but this was different. More imperative, less impersonal, wholly intimate.

He turned to look behind him and met Lois's eyes, the contact so real and unexpected that it sent a tiny jolt through him. She was standing near the crew, separated from them by a tiny space, watching him with dark, unreadable eyes. Her hands were hanging at her sides, but they were clenched into tight fists, white with the damp cold pervading the air. Lines crimped her mouth, as if she fought to hold back what she was thinking as she regarded him so pensively.

Suddenly, Clark felt as if he were stripped naked before her, as if his every thought had been ripped from his head and placed on an examining table before her, as if his heart had been opened and dissected and set to be weighed on whatever scales she demanded. Superman had always been a refuge for him, the perfect opportunity to help all the people he heard suffering on a daily basis without giving up Clark, a chance to employ the powers he had, for whatever reason, been granted — and sometimes, Superman had been the chance for Clark to get away from the constrictions placed on him by his constant deceptions.

But now, for the first time, someone knew him for who and what he really was. Someone looked at him and knew he wasn't a hero, knew he wasn't infallible, knew he wasn't invulnerable — and conversely, knew he wasn't ordinary, wasn't normal, wasn't *human*.

And not just anyone — Lois Lane.

Lois Lane, reporter.

Lois Lane, his partner.

Lois Lane, his friend.

Lois Lane, the woman he loved.

Lois Lane.

Terror attacked his every cell, attached itself like slippery oil to every drop of blood in his veins, hazed every thought he had. He had never felt so exposed, never been so afraid of the future, never felt guiltier about his lies. Because no matter how much he tried to avoid speaking outright lies, just standing here in this Suit was a lie. Talking to the rescue crew the way he had, adopting the superhero pose, speaking in a deeper voice, holding himself so aloof — all of it a deception.

And she knew it. She was looking right at him, at this moment, and she knew just how much of a lie he lived in either guise, knew just how unqualified he was for both of his lives, knew just exactly who he was even if she wouldn't admit it.

And so he did what he always did when he was afraid, when he didn't know what to do, when anyone looked too closely at him.

He ran.

The sky enveloped him, embraced him in its silken, liquid atmosphere, offered him entrance as it did no one else — acceptance of a kind. The fog turned the dark night into a pitch black void filled with the moisture in the air, the slap of the waves, the echoes of people crying for help or in despair or with unadorned panic, the scent of acrid smoke merging with the mist that cloaked him in its pall and hid him from the sharp sight of a certain reporter.

The officer had been right — the cruise ship was on fire. Flames pierced the air, turning an already messy situation into pure chaos. People were in the water, hanging on the sides of the ship, spilling over the lifeboats — *everywhere*, crying and screaming and whimpering. The scent of saltwater and gasoline and fire and smoke and sweat blended together into such an astringent scent that Clark gasped and chose to hold his breath rather than breathe it in.

There was an uproar when the first few people saw the blur of his familiar colors and began calling out his name. Suddenly,

Clark was awash in a cacophony of voices raised to him, begging him for salvation, demanding his intervention, sobbing their relief, all of it drowning out any other noise. He waved to them all — and there were so *many* — in what he hoped was a reassuring manner but didn't stop, simply darted straight under the water to look at the ship from below, his vision stripping away all obstacles to search for weak points in the ship's hull and the origin of the fire, hoping it would be easily containable.

His heart sank at the sight of flames engulfing the entire engine room, stretching outward to encompass most of belowdecks, adding further stress to a hull that was already disintegrating. For a moment, he felt the familiar panic with his own frailties and limitations, the gaps in his knowledge and the very real knowledge of his own weakness, the things he couldn't do and the burden of all that depended on him. For a moment, he felt the familiar urge to curl up into a tight ball and shut out the jagged, harsh, painful pleas for his help, to go back to his apartment in Metropolis or his parents' farmhouse in Smallville and pretend, for just an hour, a day, a week, that he didn't hold such breathtaking, soul-crushing responsibility on his shoulders.

And then, as he always did, he fought off the cowardice, fought off the exhaustion, focused his every ounce of attention on the emergency before him — and he became Superman.

Time vanished, its importance diminished, swallowed up in the immediate urgency of the situation. Water and flame merged and fought and shimmered to meld together in one long flow of danger and pressure and the fear that he'd miss someone, that he'd be a second too slow, that he'd miscalculate. The wind helped him when he called for it, sent by his breath to wipe away fog, to quench flames, to calm waves. His strength didn't fail him, sufficient for the task of clearing away shattered corridors, righting life boats, carrying fragile, helpless bodies to the relative safety of the top deck and then to the arriving rescue boats. His heat-vision seared through water, stirred up bubbles, melted hull plates together, bypassed weak points. His speed carried him and his so-vulnerable, so-precious cargo out of the water, through the flames, over gaps.

Thought faded, submerged beneath the importance of what he did, the pathetic gratefulness in the eyes of those he saved, the panicked terror in the voices of those looking for missing loved ones, the wretched anguish apparent in the wounded he uncovered. The battle between Clark Kent and Superman, the exhaustion brought on by walking the line between honesty and lies, his heartache and terrible pain — all of it meaningless for this span of time, this collection of minutes and hours, this blurred, crystal-clear emergency.

And for just a while, drenched in flames, consumed by the waves, he could forget. He could forget his mistakes, forget his fears, forget his hurts, could forget everything he wasn't and couldn't do, and he could simply *be*, could *do*, could *succeed*.

And then it all came crashing down on him with the sound of a weak, stuttering heartbeat that slowed... and stopped.

Panic as he spun, everything turned instantly transparent before him.

Terror as he saw additional flames licking through the passenger lounges, the smoke contaminating his nose and mouth and eyes and heart.

Guilt as he realized there was a body hidden beneath the curve of a fallen door, a small, tiny body he had overlooked, broken and crumpled and still. So terribly, horribly still. So awfully, crushingly silent.

Then no time to categorize, no time to define, only time to react, only time to move, only time to hope and hope and *hope* that he wasn't really too late. Moving so quickly he was a blur as he sped to the victim's side, slowing with careful precision as he moved aside the debris, so cautious and tremulous as he lifted the body away from the danger and up into open air, flying him — a

boy, not much more than twelve or thirteen years old — to the deck of the rescue ship, laying him down as if he were made of spun glass, abstractly noticing that every medic was occupied.

A breath out to rid himself of extraneous oxygen — couldn't overfill the boy's lungs — then leaning over him, breathing into his mouth, tapping — so gently, so carefully, so prayerfully — on the boy's chest, once, twice, again, again, as many times as necessary, breathing into his lungs again, praying constantly, ceaselessly, afraid to breathe himself, taking in only enough oxygen to give back to the boy.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing save debilitating guilt and agonizing fear and familiar despair over the fragility of everyone around him and his own inability to ever, ever be *enough*.

And then... so quietly he would have feared he imagined it save he could intimately hear the respiratory system starting back up, could hear blood beginning to move so sluggishly through the tiny heart, the boy breathed, moved, tried to open fluttering eyes.

For an instant, Clark felt his every muscle turn as liquid as the waves around him... but he was still Superman, and so he straightened, and he shifted his shoulders to better settle the burden atop them and he hid all his pain and fear and overwhelming relief and he surveyed the orderly pandemonium filling this patch of ocean.

And once more, he found himself looking straight at Lois, who was straightening from the side of one of the wounded, her eyes unerringly finding his. Grime stained her cheek and hands, blood colored her sky-blue sweater, the track of tears showed clearly on her delicate features, saltwater overpowered her perfume and soaked her pants, she shivered in the clammy cold, and there was something in her eyes, something soft and new and melancholy.

It was too much, too much atop the burdens he already carried and the pain he already felt, so Clark turned hastily away.

He murmured an explanation to the officer in charge, received an acknowledgment and a distracted thanks, and then he lifted straight up into the air, managed a nod at Lois — carefully avoiding eye-contact — so she wouldn't think he was abandoning her, and then he was fleeing the empty and desolate cruise ship, the unconscious boy, the fleet of rescue boats. Headed for another ocean, another emergency, another catastrophe cloaked in water.

Fleeing, above all, the pity that had shown so apparent in Lois's gleaming, all-too-*knowing* eyes.

Chapter 3: Home Is Where the Truth Is

The tidal wave would have been catastrophic, would have struck Indonesia and washed across it like a marauding army, would have obliterated everything in its path. It would have sundered families, aborted lives, and carelessly ripped away futures. It would have destroyed landscapes as easily as turpentine erased oil paintings, would have gnawed its way through topography with all the force its momentum could lend it, would have sought to return the islands to the sea.

It would have.

But it didn't.

That boy, so young and precious with so much potential in his life, would have died, would have disappeared in a wet conflagration that would have left his family desolate and mourning. Hundreds more might have died, lost forever beneath a liquid veil that only he could safely traverse.

But they hadn't died. The boy was alive, the others were safe, and Indonesia was unharmed.

This time.

"Look at all the good you do," his mom had told him early on when she'd found him in his tree-house after an anonymous rescue gone bad, curled up tightly, rocking back and forth, staring

ahead blankly.

“If you save even one life, son, that’s reason enough to do what you do,” his dad, a callused hand resting on his shoulder, had told his teenage son the first time Clark had begged to go answer a plea for help.

“Whatever he *can* do, it’s enough,” Lois had said, her eyes hazy with adoration for her absent hero.

He tried to remember those words, really he did, but it was so hard when the cries for help never stopped drowning them out.

The ocean closed around Clark, dampening the sounds of a world in need, veiling him from the ire and disappointment and pity of Lois Lane, moving against his skin like a constant stream of silk as he darted through its shifting mass, washing him clean of sand and silt and sweat and whatever other liquid might possibly have touched his face as he dug out a deep, mile-long trench to suck away the danger and drain the catastrophe down into the bowels of the earth.

The tidal wave itself was like a baptism, like that dash of cold water he needed to wake himself from the insular nightmare he had fallen into. It sluiced over him, powerless to hurt him, its force and strength turned into a flood of sensations that proved cathartic, invigorating, calming. For a moment after the crisis was averted, Clark simply stayed there, wrapped in aquamarine and sapphire, hanging motionless in the midst of the vast ocean, his power of flight camouflaged as simply floating in the water, a task any normal human could do. For a moment, he looked upward at diffused light beams waving gently in the now-calm current, let himself relax for this instant when the immediacy and urgency of the world and his own thoughts could be ignored.

He had learned not to push away his guilt into the deep recesses of his mind, not to compress it into a cold, dark lump inside himself lest it wind tighter and tighter until it exploded outward from him — had learned that lesson while traveling the world, returning to Smallville for quick sips of family and love and acceptance and absolution, had been taught the valuable lesson by the embrace of his parents, their soft reassurances, their firm assertions, the overheard sound of their own tears and murmurs to each other when they left his side to draw strength from each other.

So now he didn’t try to push away his guilt and regret and terror and desperate desire to go back in time and fix all his mistakes; instead, he took them and placed them in a little box and left them where they touched everything he did but stayed close enough to the surface so that the feel of the ocean waves, the touch of the sun, the smile from a casual passerby, the gift of holding the door open for another, the kind word of a friend — anything and everything that could cause joy and inspire delight — left them where those tiny gestures would cause the raw emotions to soften and relax and eventually evaporate. It was a slow process, but it worked, and it had been what had always let him leave a terrible rescue and walk into work with a smile on his face and a greeting of his own for his friends and a coffee in his hand for Lois.

Only when he was sure that his volatile reaction to the night’s events was placed somewhere safe, when he was sure he was in control of himself again, did he return to the air, vibrate himself dry, shake away the residual effects of those draining emotions, and firm his resolve.

He had promised he’d return to Lois. He couldn’t take back his revelation, couldn’t take back his admission of love, couldn’t take back the lies he’d told while they were partners... so he had to live with it. He had to accept it, just as he had to accept that he couldn’t save everyone every time.

Look at the good — he now had a chance to convince Lois to stay away from Luthor, or better yet, see if there was any way he could get her to help him find the evidence he needed to convict the monster.

Save one life — he would be able to protect Lois now without having to worry about keeping his Secret, without having to hold himself back, without having to hide just how afraid he was of Luthor.

Whatever he did do — well, if only that really were enough to make her love him. But even if it wasn’t, he still had to be there for her. He’d promised he would be, hadn’t he? He wanted to be, didn’t he? After all, it wasn’t her fault she couldn’t love him, wasn’t her fault he’d had to split himself into two personas in order to live with himself, wasn’t her fault his life was so messed up that just a Park Bench, Window, and Fountain could completely overset him. He could be there for her. He could pretend whatever their relationship was now was enough for him. He could be there to help her and protect her and encourage her and yet step aside whenever she didn’t want him there. It was what he had been doing for eight months now, practice enough to ensure he could continue to do it the rest of his life.

And if he sometimes felt like sharp, jagged pieces of something resided inside his chest instead of a whole heart... well, that was no one’s business but his own. If he sometimes were to look at Lois with all the longing he truly felt... well, as long as he didn’t say anything about it, it could surely go unremarked. If he sometimes dreamed dreams of a future with someone who accepted him wholeheartedly and loved him unreservedly and smiled at him and held his hand and teased him with intelligent banter and looked a lot like Lois... well, no one could completely excise his own heart.

He just had to keep his priorities straight, just had to remember the reason he had told Lois the truth in the first place, just had to remind himself that lives were on the line and his window of opportunity for convincing Lois of Luthor’s crimes was rapidly closing.

Luthor, he reminded himself as he landed once more on the rescue ship and searched for a glimpse of Lois. Luthor was what was important right now, and Clark couldn’t afford to forget that again, not if the criminal mastermind had Kryptonite in his possession.

He heard her before he saw her, a not uncommon occurrence. She was simultaneously helping the stranded passengers settle in belowdecks and interviewing them with her customary incisive questions. It was exactly the sort of story they wrote best together, Clark reflected poignantly, her nailing down the technical parts of the story while he wove in the softer elements of the victims’ plight.

But they wouldn’t be writing this story together.

With a shake of his head to dislodge the depressing thought, Clark found the officer in charge and made sure there wasn’t anything else that required his specific services before heading belowdecks to retrieve Lois. Belatedly, it was occurring to him that it wouldn’t be good for news to get back to Luthor — or any other criminal with their eye on Superman — that the superhero was showing such favoritism to a single reporter. Of course, it wasn’t like he’d hidden it that well before, and with any luck, Luthor at least would be down for the count very soon.

Still, bringing her along had been a mistake, and Clark cursed himself for being so caught up in his own pain that he hadn’t argued harder with Lois to stay behind.

When he made his way belowdecks, he was unexpectedly moved by the sight of Lois kneeling before a woman sitting on a cot beside an adolescent child. Lois finished her question, listened intently to the woman’s reply, her face upturned to the woman, expression open and focused. At the sight of her dedication, her purpose, her complete inability to be thrown off-balance for long, Clark found himself amazed by her yet again.

Everyone else that crowded belowdecks fell silent when they noticed Superman striding through their midst. When the woman Lois was interviewing saw Clark headed toward them, she

quieted as well, and Lois looked over her shoulder to see what had drawn everyone's attention. Her movement revealed the face of the boy lying in the cot, and a jolt of recognition ran through Clark.

The boy who had so briefly died. The boy he had overlooked in the ship's debris. The boy who was now sleeping peacefully.

"Superman." The boy's mother spoke first, and Clark felt obligated to stride farther into the crowd of the wounded and rescued and allow the woman to take his hand.

At that signal, the others surged forward to completely engulf him, playing his cape through their fingers, reaching out to shake his hand, clamoring and calling out thanks and questions and names, an endless onslaught of noise that wasn't as jagged as cries for help but that nonetheless unsettled him. He had never felt comfortable being so openly fawned over, but he had grown better at dealing with it since first becoming Superman, had almost resigned himself to the fact that his alter ego was a celebrity, and he tried to be fair and polite to everyone who wanted to speak to him.

His discomfort with the situation, however, was made a hundred times worse by the knowledge that Lois was standing on the periphery of the crowd, watching him with an indecipherable expression, her arms folded over her chest. Usually, she was in the vanguard of any crowd surrounding Superman, and Clark admitted to himself — reluctantly and a bit shamefully — that he did miss that look of admiration she had always directed toward Superman.

As soon as politely possible, feeling a little claustrophobic in the close confines with so many people begging for attention from him, he began to drift toward the ladder leading to the deck, still nodding and smiling and shaking hands, not even daring to risk a glance back to make sure Lois was following him, afraid that if he did, he'd see her trying not to burst as she held back her denunciations of him in front of these people who saw only one side of him.

It took longer than he liked, but finally Superman was given a few feet of room under cloudy skies. Lois stepped up close to him, the others falling back to make room for her just because that was the kind of presence she had. She was so utterly confident, so single-mindedly relentless, so sure of herself and her goals and her path. Clark had always envied her that.

She looked up at him, her expression just as open and intent and focused as it had been when interviewing the boy's mother. "Are you okay?" she asked softly.

Clark almost imperceptibly flinched back from her hand reaching out to touch his arm. He hated that she had seen him during one of these kinds of rescues where so many things went wrong no matter what he did, where he made such a terrible, almost fatal mistake. He hated even more that she was still looking at him with that expression he couldn't read, that she was still trying to interview him, that she still wouldn't call him by name, though of course she couldn't, not in front of all these people.

"I'm fine," he said slowly, and spared a moment to wonder what she thought could possibly have happened to him. "Are you ready, Ms. Lane?"

She raised her eyebrow at his louder-than-strictly-necessary reply but matched his volume. "Yes, I am."

Not even for the benefit of others would she call him Superman, Clark noted, and wondered how he felt about that. Wondered what it meant.

With a last taut smile and short wave to the rescue crews and their battered passengers, Superman scooped Lois up and flung himself into the empty, open skies. A tiny sigh of relief escaped him once the noise level receded and cool air replaced the cloying heat of hundreds of bodies swarming him and he could smell wind and rain and sea again.

"Any trouble with the tidal wave?" Lois asked unexpectedly, startling him. Her gaze was a palpable force, a presence all its own, zeroed in on him. With an effort, he ignored it, pretended avid interest in his flying, though in reality, almost the whole of his attention was centered on her, every supersense automatically attuned to her.

"Um, no. No. Why?" He felt another frisson of fear tumble its way down his spine and desperately wished he knew what she was thinking.

She gave a tiny shrug, still studying him with that look she always got just before she pounced on whoever she was interviewing. The pit in the center of Clark's stomach gaped wider at this reminder that she considered him no more than a subject now. It was as he had always feared: once his secret was known, he instantly ceased being a person and became no more than an object for study.

"I was just wondering," she answered him after a short pause. "I remember the first time you turned back a tidal wave."

Clark remembered it too, his giddy relief to find Lois okay even if she had been tied up, his panic when he'd seen the wall of water heading toward his city, his hope that his frantic plan would work, the blur of water hitting him with a punch he'd actually felt, the wry thought that Superman needed to carry a shovel, his overwhelming relief when the floodwaters had receded and Metropolis had been saved.

"I dug a trench to stop this one too," he offered hesitantly. He really wasn't sure what else to say, couldn't figure out what her strategy was. She was leaning against his chest companionably, but she looked at him as if he were under a microscope. She was actually talking to him without accusation, but she refused to call him by name. She hadn't tried to argue with him since their flight to Kansas, but she was acting much too docile for him to believe that she wasn't still angry with him. He had once thought he knew her pretty well, but now he wondered how one person could be so confusing, so ambiguous, so perplexing.

"Was the Shockwave tsunami in Metropolis the first tidal wave you stopped?" she inquired pointedly, as if he should have picked up on what she was asking without her having to say it aloud.

"Yes," he answered. "I hadn't realized I could stop a tidal wave before I actually managed to turn back Shockwave." He frowned when she shivered and tightened her hold on him. "Are you cold?" he asked worriedly, ready to wrap his cape around her again.

She blinked. "What? Oh. No." She blinked again and stared even more closely at him. He had made the mistake of meeting her eyes, and now he couldn't tear himself away, and she was peering up at him as if he were a stranger that seemed familiar — or a friend who suddenly seemed a stranger — but that was what she thought of him now, wasn't it? Unfortunately, with her dark eyes so close to his, her hands on his neck and shoulders, her soft voice whispering past his ear, he was already beginning to forget his resolution to set aside his hope that she'd ever return his love.

"No wonder you didn't sweat during the heat-wave," she said, breaking the silence between them and looking away, allowing him to do the same. Her voice had an almost otherworldly calm. "And why you'd occasionally forget your coat at the Planet during the winter. Or why you were always so willing to lend me your jacket — it was hardly a sacrifice for you, was it?"

He didn't know what he could say that wouldn't make her angrier, didn't know how to say what he truly felt and thought, and so he said nothing because it was just so much easier to remain silent than to deal with the repercussions of whatever he ended up saying. So, carefully, he shoved his immediate response into that open-ended box, determined not to let it and the sting of his hurt out into the open. After all, the last time he had failed to

compartmentalize what he was feeling, he had told her he was Superman, and look where that had gotten him.

And yet, he couldn't help but visibly flinch away from her assertion that his being an alien made all his sacrifices null and void.

"Are you going to deny that temperature doesn't affect you?" she snapped after a moment, and Clark caged a sigh. Apparently, a non-answer wasn't the right course either.

"No," he said stiffly. "I can feel the changes in temperature, but they don't really bother me unless I'm emotionally disturbed."

And right now, he added silently, he felt chilled down to the very marrow in his bones.

She studied him again, and Clark inwardly shrank away from her constant scrutiny. He *hated* being the center of attention, hated it when people looked at him too closely, hated drawing focus his way, and his aversion to being noticed was made worse by the fact that Lois knew the truth about him.

Luthor, he reminded himself yet again. He had to make sure she understood how much danger she was in before he reached her apartment and left her side.

"Lois," he began, but she was already speaking.

"You lied about that pheromone affecting you, didn't you?"

He studiously locked his gaze on the leagues of water disappearing beneath them to be replaced by the West Coast. Embarrassment flooded through him, burning away his chill and leaving him feeling flushed. He had known it was wrong to tell her how he felt while pretending to be under the influence of Miranda's love perfume, but by then, his ability to resist temptation had been completely eroded.

"I —" he began, though he had no idea how he was hoping to talk himself out of this one, but Lois interrupted him again, her voice tinged with what sounded like — but couldn't have been — amusement.

"Never mind."

She stopped talking after that, her gaze on the scenery passing away below them, moving from deepest night to the barest beginnings of dawn. And strangely, no matter that he hadn't known how to answer her questions, he wished she would say something, wished she would talk to him, wished that, if he couldn't understand her, he could at least understand himself.

"I'll take you to your apartment," Clark blurted when her silence became too much for him to bear, when he felt his skin starting to crawl with everything she might be thinking about him. For once, he actually wished there was an emergency that demanded Superman's presence immediately, a crisis that only the superhero could avert, a cry for help that would echo his own and give him a graceful exit from Lois's too-quiet mood.

"No." Her tone was perfectly calm, her statement irrevocable, and that pit in his stomach twisted uncomfortably. "Not my apartment."

"No?" he repeated, as if he might possibly have misheard her. A dark insidious thought wriggled into the forefront of his mind. She couldn't possibly — no! She wouldn't ask him to drop her off at Luthor's. It was a ridiculous thought to even consider. No matter that she had asked Clark — her brotherly friend — to fetch Superman — her favored crush — she would never be so cruel as to ask him, after all she had learned this night, to bring her straight to Lex Luthor's greedy arms.

Would she?

He hated his doubt, hated his hesitation, hated the very idea... and yet still it persisted.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked her, proud when his voice emerged steady and low, not at all like the tremulous, stuttering gasp he felt like uttering.

"I want you to take me to Smallville."

"Smallville?" There was an echo in the air, but he couldn't

help that — it had leaped out before he could catch it. "Why do you want to go to Smallville?"

A trace of exasperation dusted Lois's expression, a tinge of impatience flavored her voice, a wealth of meaning littered her words. "I already told you — I want to understand you. You claim Smallville's your home, so I want to go there. So far, I've only seen Superman. I want to see Clark now."

Despite the fact that he'd been avoiding meeting her eyes for hours now, he stared levelly at her and wished she would look at him and see the real intensity behind his own words. "You want to see Clark? You want to understand me — *all* of me? Then we don't need to go to Smallville."

A crease marred Lois's dirt-smudged forehead and she cast a sidelong glance his way, suspecting a trick. "Really? Are you admitting that you lied about your home then?" Strangely, she didn't sound mad about that; instead, she sounded a little sad, or maybe just disillusioned.

"I didn't lie," Clark stated as Metropolis came into view on the distant horizon. "Smallville *was* my home. It's where I was raised, it fills my earliest memories, it's somewhere I visit often so I can see Mom and Dad — but it's not where you need to go if you want to know me."

Lois narrowed her eyes and looked at the countryside below as if she would be able to tell where he was heading. Clark had no doubt that she would figure it out soon enough; after all, it wasn't as if she hadn't been there a hundred times before, often late at night or early in the morning, coming and going from work or stakeouts or poker nights at the Planet or friendly outings.

Earlier, he had determined to show her Superman; now, he was just as determined to show her Clark. He wasn't sure *he* fully understood himself, but he wanted Lois to, wanted it almost more badly than he wanted her to love him. Or maybe they were equal desires; maybe they were inextricably linked; maybe there couldn't be one without the other.

He couldn't forget Luthor, he knew, or the Kryptonite. But showing Lois the place he called home, the place that most reflected who he was, wouldn't distract from his investigation into Luthor. In fact, it might even help, might finally break a tiny hole through Lois's walls, might loosen the tension coiling his every muscle into a knot so tight it would have hurt if he weren't invulnerable.

Clark snorted inwardly. After everything, it seemed he was still an optimist.

He carefully averted his eyes when he passed over Centennial Park, not eager to revisit the places of such pain, made certain he picked a route that bypassed Lois's window entirely. He was grateful when his flight over the city didn't reveal any crises he needed to answer, though nervousness rose up to assault him when he neared his destination.

Lois frowned when she recognized where he was going, and when he set her down on the balcony of his apartment, she put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "This is your apartment. I've been here hundreds of times."

"I know, Lois. I love having you here all the time." He stepped inside, giving a cursory glance to the interior of the apartment as he flipped on the lights. Lois followed behind, stumbling back a bit when he spun into his regular clothes, eager to be out of the grimy, soot-stained, blood-scented Suit. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Lois gaping at the Suit he casually tossed into the laundry hamper, would have grinned in other circumstances at the way she shook aside her shock and glared at him lest he admit he'd seen her discomfiture.

"So why did you bring me here?" Lois demanded when he moved to brew a pot of coffee. She crossed her arms over her chest, a firm gesture to prove she wouldn't be tricked. He'd seen her use it a hundred times before, but he knew she didn't need to

worry — he didn't plan on tricking her. He was done lying to her.

Clark allowed the habitual movements, the familiar monotony of preparing coffee, to settle his thoughts, calm his emotions, slow his desire to get out as much information as quickly as possible. This was his one chance to get through to Lois, and he couldn't mess it up.

"This is my home, Lois." He used an expansive hand to indicate the whole of the apartment. "This is who I am. I was so excited to finally risk coming to Metropolis and trying to settle down in one city; getting a place of my own, fixing it up, moving all my things in. . . it seemed to make it real to me. I painted this place, decorated it, and maybe it's not much, maybe it's ordinary and boring to everyone else, but to me, it's home."

Lois's arms fell back to her sides and she swept the apartment with a suddenly piercing gaze.

"Here." Clark left the coffee pot and moved to run a finger over a few figurines on a shelf. "These were given to me for helping a family with their pastry shop while I was in Spain. And these," he moved to gesture at the multitude of books filling every shelf he had, "are books I enjoy, either because they taught me something important or because they inspired my imagination. That laptop, it's been with me since my parents saved up enough money to buy it for me when I graduated college. I wrote my first freelance article on it. This furniture — I saved enough money from my paychecks at the Planet to buy it all, and it took me awhile because I wanted to pay Dad back what he had loaned me when I first moved here. And this quilt," he stepped into the bedroom to run a hand over the blanket on his bed. "My mom made this for me when I first left home. She said it would make my dorm room look brighter and more like home, and she was right."

Lois followed him, not interrupting, not saying a word, looking at each item he indicated as if she were actually, really listening to him. Which made him, simultaneously, almost insanely hopeful and suddenly incredibly self-conscious about what he was saying. How many times during his life had he wanted to tell someone the truth, thought about what it would be like to explain his life, tried to compose the perfect words to convey just how much of an ordinary person he really was even though, in reality, he wasn't? More times than he could count, and yet this starkly vivid moment was more important than all those sepia dreams. . . because this was Lois. The one person in the world he wanted above all to hear what he now had the chance to say.

"This is my home, Lois," he repeated. "And, yes, I don't always come in the front door, and a lot of times I leave by way of the balcony, and I can look through the walls, and here — " Feeling liberated, feeling as if he teetered on the edge of a precipice, Clark pulled open his closet. "These clothes, I bought most of them after I got the job at the Planet because I wanted to live up to Perry's faith in me, but this. . . " He opened the secret compartment and let her see the hanging Suits, the sapphire and crimson colors a startling, brilliant counterpoint to the earth tones of his regular clothes. "I got the idea of Superman when you told me I should bring a change of clothes to work, Lois. I'd always wanted to find a way to help people without constantly having to move on the minute anyone grew suspicious of me, and your comment gave me the idea of hiding in plain sight."

Delicately, tentatively, Lois reached out a hand to run her fingers over the dangling capes, trailed them across the bright ties hanging along the edge of the closet like splashes of color dripping down the wall. Clark watched her fearfully, hopefully, and had to remind himself to breathe so he could talk.

"This apartment is who I am, Lois, and yes, it has a secret closet that hides Superman Suits. But this closet is exactly how much of Superman I am." He stopped, shook his head, knowing he wasn't making sense, started over again. "This entire

apartment is Clark Kent's, and only one tiny compartment is Superman's. You say you don't know me, but that's not true at all. You've been in every room of this apartment except this one closet. And the truth is. . . the truth is, if you take away Superman, Clark Kent will still be here. More afraid, more constrained, maybe having to move on after too many anonymous rescues — but still *me*. But if you take Clark Kent away. . . there is no Superman. There's no one, nobody, nothing."

Daringly, breathlessly, he reached out his hand and slid his fingers through Lois's, met her eyes, hoped his own conveyed all his sincerity. "You know Clark, Lois. You know the ordinary man. And you know Superman, the alien. You do know me."

"Do I?" she whispered, her breath spilling from her lips to scent the air with uncertainty. But she didn't tug her hand free of his, didn't look away, didn't call him a liar.

"You do," he insisted, his own voice almost as quiet as hers. "This is just one secret, Lois, and I know it's big, but. . . but it's just like Claude."

She stiffened, her hand going still and cold in his. "Excuse me?"

"Don't you see, Lois? That's your secret. You hide that portion of your life, letting only a few people know about it. What he did to you shaped who you are now, it influences you, but you don't tell everyone about it. *You* hide that your heart was broken by a scumbag who didn't realize what he was throwing away; *I* hide that my parents put their baby in a spaceship and sent him to another world in the hopes that he'd escape the fate of their doomed planet." Her narrowed eyes didn't look promising, so he added, "I know it's not exactly the same, but — "

"No, let's go with that analogy." She pulled her hand out of his, and Clark felt a pang of doubt slice through him, let his empty hand fall back to his side. "I told you about Claude only days after first meeting you. It took you almost a year before you told me this secret — and if it weren't for Lex, I doubt you would have told me at all!"

"How long have you been keeping Claude a secret?" he asked with more calm than he felt. "Four years? Five? My parents and I have been hiding this secret my entire life! And the consequences of people finding out about Claude are nothing compared to what would happen if they all knew I was Superman!"

"But I'm your friend!" Lois snapped, and finally the anger she had been hiding burst through her façade to blind him with its vehemence, its strength, its anguish. "I championed Superman! I told Clark things I've never told anyone else! But you — you couldn't trust me with this?"

"You are my friend," he said, desperate to make her understand, stepping forward as if mere proximity could convince her, falling still when she retreated a step. "But so is Perry, so is Jimmy, so is Pete Ross, so is Henderson. Should I tell — "

"I thought I was your *best* friend!" she cried, and underneath her fury, there were tears shimmering in liquid eyes, turning Clark's insides to dandelion seeds that fluttered in the pull of the vacuum in the pit of his stomach, sending his rational thoughts spinning into oblivion. "I thought I meant something to you! I thought. . . I thought I was special to you. To both of you."

"You are, Lois." And forgetting for the moment that she didn't want him near her, Clark stepped forward and reached up a gentle hand to rest it on her cheek, wiping a thumb across her cheekbone as if to wipe away her tears before they could fall. His voice fell lower, his breath catching. "You are. You're infinitely special to me. I lo — I've never had a better friend than you, and I did want, so many times, to tell you. But this secret. . . it's huge, Lois. It takes over your entire life and it never goes away. It's a burden that's almost heavier than I can bear! It means you have to lie every day about even trivial things — have to do things like

remember to grab a coat even if you're not cold just so no one will look at you and start seeing a creature instead of a person. It means you can never let your guard down, never answer anyone honestly when they ask how your day went, never commit to a full evening with someone because you never know when an emergency will come up. It means your world is forever divided between those who know and those who don't and there will never be a time when the former equals the latter."

With an effort, Clark fell silent, his gaze locked on his thumb as it swished slowly back and forth over Lois's smooth, soft skin. She brought up one hand to his; for an instant, he was afraid she'd knock his hand aside, but instead she simply rested her cool, slender fingers on his, holding it closer to her cheek.

"It means," Clark added quietly, "that no matter how much you want to, you can't tell your best friend that the man she's dating, the man she might marry, the man she hopes will make her happy, is in fact a monster. Because if you told her that, you'd have to tell her how you know he's a monster. The secret isolates you and cuts you off from everyone else and turns you into the bad guy when you give your vague, watered-down warnings to her about her boyfriend and possible fiancé. Why..." He pulled in a ragged breath, slowly let it out. "Why would I wish that kind of burden on you, Lois?"

Lois's expression turned suddenly contemplative. "Possible fiancé? You still think I'm going back to Lex?"

His hand fell away from her, and he stared at her in the dim hope that if he looked at her long enough, he'd develop the ability to read her mind. "I don't know," he said, and Lois flinched at the ragged edge to his voice. "I don't know anymore, haven't known anything since you told me you were thinking about accepting his proposal." Clark squeezed his eyes shut against that memory and the power it still held to make him feel as if he'd been sucker-punched. "I hadn't thought he and you were so serious. I mean, you never talked about him — and I guess that's because you knew I didn't like him. But then, when those terrorists took us hostage at the Planet..." He trailed off, unable to put into words how helpless and disbelieving and lost he had felt to actually watch Lois and Luthor behaving like a couple. Seeing her lying across Luthor's lap and smiling up at him had made Clark feel as if he'd been stabbed with a Kryptonite blade.

"I just never thought it would be like this," he finally finished lamely. "I never thought it would go too far."

Lois drew herself up, her eyes flashing sparks. "Why not? You didn't think he could love me?"

He didn't, actually, not really, not when Luthor's first and only interest was himself, but he knew better than to say it aloud and couldn't bear to anyway, not when he knew how Lois would take it. Besides, this was probably his best and only chance to present his case against Luthor.

"No," he contradicted her gently. "I didn't think Luthor would let himself get too close to you because you're an award-winning journalist and he's playing with fire just being around you, almost daring you to find him out. Here, you asked for my proof — this is what I have." He bent down and retrieved the fireproof box he'd bought to hold what physical evidence against Luthor he'd been able to chase down. He knew it wasn't enough on its own — not without Superman — but he set it down on the bed anyway and opened it so Lois could look through it.

Lois ran her fingers over the files but didn't pull any of them out. "You keep it with the Suits?" Her tone was neutral, her manner once more unreadable, the sparks hidden beneath slowly burning coals. "That's somewhat ironic — hiding his skeletons in your closet. I mean, you're both hiding the two biggest secrets in Metropolis, maybe in the world. You're both daring the same reporter to find you out, both lying through your teeth with a charming smile. You've even both been the recipients for the key

to the city! I mean, on the outside, you're completely the same, and yet there's no —"

"What?" Clark stared at her, stricken, unable to breathe.

You're completely the same. Her words ran through his mind like a mantra, obliterating the noise of Metropolis, the sound of the waves in the harbor, the passage of the planes overhead. He had just called Luthor a monster, had given her proof — it had seemed she was listening to him, appeared that she believed him — and yet... yet she thought he was exactly like Luthor.

A liar. A con artist. A pretender.

You're just like the rest, she'd told him earlier that night, and now it seemed nothing he'd said had changed her mind in the slightest.

A monster. She thought he was a monster. Not an ordinary man, not a superhero, not even her friend. Just a liar. Someone who used her, taunted her, dared her to see the secret hiding right in front of her. She hadn't listened to a word he'd said, hadn't seen anything he'd tried so hard to show her... and it was all his fault.

He should never have told her.

He wished he could summon the anger that had been all-consuming and had lurked just below the surface earlier, wished he could retreat to that sphere of numbness that had protected him from her scorn and condemnation, wished he could wall off his love and hurt and anguish. But now, in the face of this cruelty, he was utterly defenseless.

"I..." He frantically looked about for an excuse to leave, to flee, to fling himself into the sky and burn his way through the atmosphere in an effort to cauterize the gaping wound in his chest. "I need to go."

"What?" Lois gaped at him incredulously. "But —"

"Please." He tried to walk around her, but she backed up a bit, the move keeping her in his path. "If you think I'm just like Luthor, then..." He choked on those words, kept talking anyway because if he was talking, if he was filling his apartment with words, it meant she couldn't say anything else to scar him. "If you think that, then clearly there's no reason for me to stay, nothing more for me to say."

"What?" Pure emotion flooded through Lois's large, dark eyes, and she reached out her hands to place on his chest, as if trying to hold him in place. "Stop! That's not what I was saying. I mean, it is what I said, but it's not what I meant! I was trying to say that you could be like him — you could be *just* like him — but instead you're —"

A sharp, imperative knock on the door interrupted both Lois's impassioned speech and Clark's attempts to step past her. Both of them froze, both looking toward the door, and it would have been almost comical if Clark hadn't slipped his glasses down, looked through the door, and seen Luthor on the other side.

He had been afraid all night, bouncing back and forth between anger and numbness but always somehow terrified that he'd lose Lois. But now, at the sight of Luthor on his doorstep, he was abruptly, coldly calm, emotion fading away, repelled by Luthor's mere presence.

"It's Luthor," he said mildly.

"Lex?" Lois frowned in puzzlement. "What is he doing *here*? I didn't think he ever paid much attention to you."

"Thankfully," Clark muttered before putting his hands on Lois's shoulders and spinning her toward the closet. "Quick, Lois, inside the secret compartment — I don't want him to know you're here."

"What? Why not? What are you doing?"

"Shh," he hissed, reminded of the long ago night when she'd followed him back from the Metro Club and then protested when he tried to hide her from Toni Taylor. "If you were supposed to meet Luthor earlier and then didn't, he might be suspicious of you."

“He doesn’t know I’m here,” Lois retorted, though at least she kept her voice low.

“Then why is he at Clark Kent’s apartment at five in the morning?” Clark asked her matter-of-factly. “Please, Lois, if it’s nothing, you can always come out later, but if it is about you, it’s better if he doesn’t know you’re here.”

Lois took a deep breath, gritted her teeth, then grimaced at him. “Fine!” she snapped. She swept his box of proof up in her arms and then ducked past his suit coats to clamber into the secret compartment. His Suits wrapped her in their smooth embrace, and Clark swallowed as he closed the door on her, the sight of her dark hair mingling with his capes threatening his icy composure.

Another knock sounded imperiously, echoing through the living room. Clark cast a quick glance around, noted the brewing coffee that proved he’d been awake, ran a hand through his hair to tousle it, and took a deep breath as he moved to the landing to open the door on his arch-nemesis.

Chapter 4: That Old Name of Mine

“Luthor!” Clark didn’t have to entirely fake the surprise in his voice. X-ray vision gave him warning, but it didn’t help him figure out why exactly the man he was pretty sure he hated was standing on his doorstep.

“Kent.” Luthor’s voice gave away nothing besides his seemingly inherent arrogance. The two thugs standing at either of his shoulders towered over both Clark and Luthor and seemed a fair indication of Luthor’s hostility.

Refusing to pretend to fear, and yet cautious not to give away his complete and utter calmness, Clark glanced back and forth between the thugs, then raised an eyebrow at Luthor. “I hope you’re not still upset about that article I wrote on Metropolis Electric.”

A slight tug at his lips was all the emotion Luthor revealed, yet it did nothing to counter the mercenary ruthlessness revealed in his obsidian eyes. “The absence of a newspaper to run your story has somewhat curbed my dissatisfaction with your opinion about necessary rate hikes.”

Clark was forced to step aside or risk revealing just how solid he was when Luthor pushed past him and down into the living room, his hired muscle shadowing him. Carefully, slowly, Clark closed his door and started down the steps, aware of just how precarious his position was at the moment. As Lois had said, Luthor had mainly ignored Clark up to a point, which would have been insulting — after all, Clark had investigated at least as many stories that had hampered Luthor’s criminal activities as Lois had — if it hadn’t also been useful, but this, coming to his apartment and confronting him... this didn’t fit any of Luthor’s normal behavior patterns. Luthor preferred to use subtlety, liked tricking people, loved smiling at them and pretending to comfort them with one hand while with the other he stole away everything that was good and precious.

So what was he doing here now?

“What do you want, Luthor?” Clark asked bluntly, and belatedly realized that his hands had curled into tight fists.

“Not one for basic hospitality, are we, Kent?” Luthor gestured toward the full pot of coffee Clark wasn’t about to offer to share. “But then, what else should one expect from someone such as yourself?”

Cold ice trickled down Clark’s spine, droplets trekking past individual vertebrae to coalesce into a frostbitten pit that weighted him down, tied him to the floor. “What do you mean?” he asked, wary, every muscle tensed. All it would take was one bullet, one blade, one misstep to destroy Clark Kent, to rip through the fragile cobweb of alter egos and half-truths that protected him and his parents and his friends. Clark eyed the distance between himself and Luthor’s thugs, inched back just a bit.

“You know, Kent, I admit that I, perhaps, made a mistake with you.” Carelessly, Luthor turned his back on Clark, took in a comprehensive glance of the apartment, faced Clark once again, eyeing him with cool disfavor. “The naïve, idealistic persona you assume with such ease made me underestimate you, dismiss you as a threat. I mean, of course I had Nigel look into your background when it became apparent Lois was fond of you, but there was nothing there to raise my interest — a country bumpkin with dreams of the big city come to realize his dreams and make his mark on the world he had traveled. And yet... obviously, there is something more to you. Something different.”

Clark narrowed his eyes. “Maybe it’s the fact that I don’t run background checks on everyone I meet.”

“There, you see.” Luthor pointed triumphantly at him, his brow quirked. “That. That’s exactly what I mean — you’re not intimidated. You’re not afraid of me. From the first time we met, in fact, when I placed the blade of Alexander the Great at your throat, you’ve been singularly... unimpressed. That’s quite a feat for anyone, let alone a... provincial... like yourself.”

Luthor’s two thugs closed in on Clark, boxing him in between them. He fought the urge to squirm away from them, or worse, to shrug his shoulders and send them flying outward. Their actions only underscored the menacing quality of Luthor’s tone.

“I’ve never been impressed by bullies,” Clark said, his voice rasping under the strain it took to speak somewhat civilly. “And no matter how much power and money you have, Luthor, that’s still all you are.”

“Nonsense.” The billionaire shrugged aside the insult with a coldly gracious smile. “Your naiveté isn’t entirely an act, I see, Kent. There’s a certain hierarchy that governs men. Most people instinctively recognize and bow to their social betters, but it appears you don’t have that survival instinct.”

“Is that a threat?” Clark wasn’t sure if Lois could hear Luthor’s voice from where she was hidden — it was so hard for him to judge how much everyone else could hear — but he hoped she could. And yet, contradictorily, he almost wished, for her sake, that she could not. Hard enough for her to be told that the man she had considered spending the rest of her life with was a criminal; it would be even more difficult for her to face that fact firsthand.

Of course, she thought Clark was no better than Luthor.

But that wasn’t something he could think about, not now, not when Luthor was standing in his apartment staring him down.

Clark was intimately aware of the men on either side of him, could hear without consciously trying the breath being pulled in and out of their lungs, the blood sliding through their veins, pumped through their heart, the shifting of their weight as they almost indiscernibly rocked back and forth on their heels, the sound of their jackets sliding against the guns they were each carrying. Beyond them, Luthor breathed and stepped, his soles grinding minuscule particles of dirt into the floor, his hands whistling through the air as he made his grandiose gestures. Even farther out came the familiar sounds of Metropolis, cars and planes and buses and people — walking, talking, laughing, crying, partying, sleeping, busy on their computers — and the ocean beyond them, shifting and stirring and rising and falling in tandem with the beat of Clark’s own heart.

All of it surrounded him in its comforting sameness, the melody he’d been listening to in some form or fashion for over a decade, reassuring him even as it reminded him that he couldn’t afford to provoke Luthor into ordering his thugs to attack him. He felt his entire future — his parents’ lives — teetering on a precipice, poised over a drop that could send Clark Kent spiraling into oblivion. At all costs, he had to make certain Clark wasn’t attacked, wasn’t found out, wasn’t unmasked as the superhero Luthor had made into his personal enemy.

“Not a threat,” Luthor corrected. “Merely an observation. For instance, if you had recognized the way the natural order of things worked, you would know that — how shall I phrase this? — inconsequential people such as yourself don’t end up with the girl. Or woman, as the case may be. Men like myself, or even Superman, are the ones who end up winning the hearts and hands of desirable women. Which leads me to the reason I’m here now.”

“I’m not following.” Out of habit, Clark started to cross his arms over his chest before quickly catching himself. Clark Kent slouched and stood in the background and kept his hands in his pockets; he didn’t stand tall and proud with confident or confrontational postures. So, noticing that his hands had once again formed into fists, he slipped them into his pockets.

“It doesn’t take an IQ as high as mine to realize that you possess quite a bit of attraction for your erstwhile partner,” Luthor intoned. “And it comes as no great surprise that your chances with her are as slim as the proverbial snowball’s. I had thought my greatest rival in securing the affections of my fiancée was the much-vaunted — yet overrated — Superman.” There was a sneer in his voice when he spoke Superman’s name, just as there always was. Clark was halfway convinced it was physically impossible for Luthor to speak his alter ego’s name without the sneer.

“I take it your ‘social hierarchy’ doesn’t take into account the fact that a woman has to say yes before you can marry her,” Clark interjected scathingly before silently cursing himself and hunching his shoulders in on himself as if he were afraid of a retaliatory blow from one of Luthor’s henchmen.

“Oh, she’ll say yes,” Luthor said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “It’s the timing of her answer that I’m concerned about at the moment. You see, I knew she had an odd fondness for her reporting partner, even going so far as to ask me to provide a job for you at LNN when she accepted my offer. But preferring to work with the partner you know is a far different matter than leaving Lex Tower before giving me her answer to my proposal, making her way to Centennial Park at midnight, and meeting up with that former partner of hers. And then, of course, there’s the fact that neither one of you were seen leaving the park, yet here you are, safe and sound in your apartment... while there’s still no sign of Lois. And since Superman’s been busy around the world with emergencies, that leaves out the possibility of him as your mode of conveyance. Quite a mystery for such an unassuming man from Kansas, don’t you think, Mr. Kent?”

“Not really,” Clark said carefully, his mind racing through every possible lie he could tell and evasion make. Deception wasn’t his strong suit, but right now, the lives of his parents and Lois and his friends were all depending on him. He remembered his thought from earlier in the night that he didn’t need to bother to hide his alter ego if he could bring down Luthor, and wondered once more if he had gone crazy.

“Oh?” Luthor arched his brows in mock-surprise. “Then why don’t you explain this puzzle to me?”

“Reporters don’t like being followed,” Clark told him calmly. “I knew there were men outside the park, so I avoided them. As to where Lois is, well, I’d guess that if she found out you were having her watched, she’d be none too happy about it.” Silently, he congratulated himself on the complete truthfulness of that answer; if anyone was adept at spotting lies, it’d be the master liar himself, and Clark felt a bit safer with truth as his shield.

“Is that so?” Luthor smiled, a cold, hard smile little more than the stretching of his lips beneath sheer obsidian eyes. At that imitation of a smile, the two thugs flanking Clark reached out and each roughly grabbed hold of one of his arms. Clark pretended to try to shrug them off, then subsided, blanking his expression.

“What are you doing, Luthor?” he asked, his eyes narrowing despite himself. His hands were balled into fists again, but he

didn’t bother trying to relax them. If he could have done it without drawing attention, he would have slid his glasses down and x-rayed Luthor and his henchmen for weapons. Every breath felt perilous; one gunshot and his secret was out.

“I underestimated you, Kent.” All trace of deceptive politeness had been stripped from Luthor’s voice so that only ambition and ruthlessness and calculating menace were left. “I admit that I thought Superman would be the greatest obstacle to winning Lois’s hand. But no matter — I’m flexible. And what is it they say about two birds with one stone? Well, I have a stone.”

Tension permeated Clark’s body when Luthor’s hand went inside his jacket, and if he had known what was coming, he would have jerked free of the thugs’ grip, would have thrown himself to the side, would never have answered the door. But prescience wasn’t one of Superman’s abilities, and so Clark simply stood there, as helpless as if he were truly an ordinary man, as guilelessly as if he had no Secret, as naively as if he had nothing to fear.

The dagger glowed green, but only for an instant, because in the next instant, Luthor had buried it deeply, agonizingly, astonishingly, in Clark’s stomach, its phosphorescent shine sheathed in his flesh. Lightning arced like molten silver through his veins while a storm as turbulent and large and encompassing as the skies rooted itself in the pit of his stomach, pain taking the place of the vacuum that had earlier carved its way through him.

He would have fallen, would have dropped to the floor like a marionette who had suddenly realized its strings had been cut, but the two thugs holding onto him supported his weight, little grunts escaping them as he sagged in their arms. Luthor smiled at Clark grimly, his smoky-sweet breath like a miasma in front of Clark’s white- and silver-hazed vision.

“I’m sure, being the farmboy that you are, that you’ve gone fishing before, Kent. Well, consider yourself the bait and Superman the fish. That makes you the worm, but some few people are always typecast, aren’t they. And Lois? Lois is the prize in this contest. Superman will come to save his good friend Clark Kent, just like always, only this time...” Luthor made a twisting motion with his hand, and Clark felt a cry wrung from him to stain the air and break through, temporarily, the miasma of Luthor’s despair-tinged breaths. Shards of glass were dipped in acid and transmuted into his insides, blanking out sight and touch and awareness of all but Luthor’s voice and the tiny snapping sound as he broke the dagger, leaving the Kryptonite blade ensconced inside Clark’s once-invulnerable flesh.

“This time, Superman won’t be able to save you, and Lois will be mine.”

The men dropped him, ridding themselves of an extraneous, useless burden, and Clark fell, fell, fell, and it was a new sensation, something he couldn’t understand or equate. He had never fallen before, not like this, so uncontrolled and helpless and vulnerable, utterly unable to catch himself, to float, to fly. He fell and when he landed, he was crushed and destroyed in a starburst of agony and white-hot torment, and dying was so much more painful than he had ever imagined it could be.

Luthor’s last words rang in his head, like a bell tolling his final moments, and suddenly he wasn’t lying on the floor of his apartment bleeding blood poisoned by radioactive pieces of a homeworld he would never know. Suddenly he was in a boat on a placid lake, floating through serene waters with a fishing rod at his side.

“It’s all about patience, son,” his father told him. His hand was on Clark’s shoulder, heavy and supportive and so unquestionably loving, and Clark basked in that feeling even more than he did in the watery, pale sunlight that felt so much colder against his skin than it looked. The air was honey and gold and sweetness, marked by the ripples their boat stirred on the lake, by the sound of water and wood and warmth, and yet he

was so very, very cold, frozen and trembling beneath the weight of his father's hand that was suddenly more like a shackle than an affectionate gesture.

"Patience and care." His father's voice was real, heavy and solid, as substantial as the feel of lead encasing his limbs in sluggish monotony, so Clark anchored himself to that voice and the words he'd so carefully stored away inside himself through the years to take out on dark and bright days alike and scatter outward like candies thrown to children lined up for parades.

He couldn't quite remember why his father was talking to him, though. The vague recollection of fishing ghosted past him, but it was quickly supplanted by green lightning crackling so brilliantly, so vividly, that it left sparks dancing behind his eyes. He wanted to move, wanted to open his eyes, wanted to shift away from the cold ice burrowing into his stomach, but the effort seemed so far beyond him that he wistfully let the desire go and contented himself with spiraling back toward the placid lake where his father waited to gird him with more words of wisdom and affection.

From somewhere came the explosive sound of a door crashing closed... and then there was silence. Total silence. Silence so complete that Clark found himself completely and terrifyingly unnerved. Because silence was something to be found only when he hung suspended between space and earth, and even then, there was the internal sound of his own heart beating and blood rushing through veins. But now... now there was nothing.

He was alone.

He was *alone* in a way he'd never been before, a way that cut him off from all life, and he wondered, almost curiously, if that meant he was dead. Or dying. One was just as bad as the other, he supposed, and really, what did it matter? His parents would grieve, of course they would, and in an odd, disjointed way, he felt sorrowful for what they would go through in his absence. He would miss them. But Superman had been a beacon for hope, and surely his legacy would live on, maybe even strengthened by martyrdom. And Clark Kent... well, Clark Kent had lived, and that might not sound like much of an achievement on its own, but it was all he had ever wanted to do, and so it seemed all right, then, to let himself float back out toward that lake where things were simpler and quieter — quieter in a way that wasn't frightening — and softer all around the edges.

Only, the lake disappeared and the green lightning came back and for an instant, he thought he was metamorphosing into lightning himself, transforming with the flicker of searing electricity into a bolt of solid energy and poignant quietness. Which might explain why things were so quiet, he thought — the *sound* of lightning always fell behind the actual lightning bolt.

So he held his breath and waited to hear the thunder, but all he heard, instead, was a soft, feminine voice whispering urgent words that tumbled and cartwheeled their way past him. It was sound, more sound than had been available to him only instants before, so he smiled and listened.

The smile quickly vanished when his leaden limbs were moved, his head lolling — not his fault; it was just so heavy and unresponsive — and that ice in his stomach flared abruptly hot as the sun. He might have screamed, but the sound was delayed, thunder falling behind, so he couldn't be sure. He only knew that there was pain and hurt and something terrible waiting for him if he let go of the lake rippling within him.

But then he felt something else, something besides the agony roiling like storm-clouds inside him, something soft and gentle and warm. It was strange, almost startling in its stark contrast to the phosphorescent pain, and he followed it, as if it were a string leading him from darkness to light. Only, that comparison was surely flawed because when his eyes fluttered open, he found himself in shadowed dimness so much darker than the sunlit lake

and cloudless sky.

The voice sounded again — or maybe *still* — and with a great effort, he was able to focus in on the blurry face above him. Lois.

Her hands were like blankets and butterflies on his face, flitting from one place to the next, warm and enveloping. She was close, so close that he could touch her, and he would have, but his limbs still wouldn't cooperate. And anyway, he reminded himself, she didn't want him touching her. Not anymore.

"I'm sorry, Lois." It took him a long moment to piece together the sound of those few words to his voice and the rumbling vibrations in his chest. More thunder, he thought dimly. Always just a bit behind, always too slow, always far too little to compete or fully complement the brilliant lightning. That seemed sad, suddenly, so sad that he wanted to cry, wanted to reach past the clogging, cloying pain to grab hold of the sea of anguish that rested so tremulously somewhere deep inside him.

"Shh." She tried to shush him, which amused him — lightning trying to shush the thunder it begot.

"It's my fault — I should have known we were being followed," he murmured. His eyes — the traitorous things — were trying to shut on him, and his head was lolling uselessly again, but he didn't mind that so much, not when it meant Lois put her hands on him to hold him in place. It was easier to concentrate on her touch — soothing, steady, and *there* — than the roaring pain that had spread to encompass his every nerve ending. The silence around him, almost untouched even by their voices, was still disconcerting. There had been cries for help and waves lapping against a shore and the general bustle of a city earlier; now there was only vast, drowning silence that threatened to conquer him all on its own. No one needed him, for the first time he could remember.

And if no one needed him, then what was his purpose here?

"This isn't your fault!" Lois said, the ferocity in her voice snapping outward and scaring off the encroaching shadows. She was enough to frighten anyone, so beautiful and brilliant and bold, and so frustratingly unattainable. "It's *his*!"

Hope rose, marched forward, battled anguish, merging and melding with the despair he hadn't remembered he was feeling until the passion in her voice roused it. Hope because she wasn't saying *Lex* anymore, and her dark eyes were gleaming with anger even while her fingers were gentle on his brow. Maybe... maybe she wasn't mad at him anymore. Maybe she could eventually forgive him.

It was the first time he'd thought it, the first time he'd realized that he might not have ruined everything, and it woke him more surely than anything else had.

Woke him to searing fire crackling along his veins, scorching outward from the blade embedded within his flesh. His hands scrabbled uselessly at his side, but his shirt was tangled up there, and his fingers glanced off the material and fell away.

"I should have heard them," he muttered even as he tried to muster up the strength to try again. "I should have —"

"You can't hear *everything*, Clark," Lois said — or he thought she said anyway, but he was aware, vaguely, that he hadn't really just been fishing with his dad either, so maybe this was simply another delirium-tinged dream. "You can't *be* everything. What you are — who you are — it's enough."

It was as if a lifeline had been tossed to him, an escape from the downward spiraling thoughts that had afflicted him since The Park Bench and The Window and The Fountain, so many points of pain, so many sharp edges, so many nightmarish memories contained within those angular, scrawled letters.

But the lifeline was snatched away as quickly and easily as it had been given when soft, cool hands reached inside him and pulled the green lightning from his flesh, exorcising him with an agony that sent him reeling and tumbling through blackness. He

let out a shuddering cry — heard it, rumbling through him, but this time connected to the lightning, so close and dangerous that no time passed at all between burst of *hurt* and scream of pain — and curled in on himself. It was a useless gesture, useless to protect him from Luthor and Kryptonite and Lois, but he made it anyway because there was nothing else for him to do and he had to do *something*.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Clark, stay awake, okay? Clark? Clark!”

Forgiveness was slathered over those words like butter and honey over hot toast. Acceptance was layered across them like... like... the analogy drifted away from him, and all he could hear was the name. The name that he cradled to himself like a precious treasure, the dream he hugged so close, the desire he couldn’t quite hide.

“Clark, don’t fall asleep. Clark! You have to tell me what to do. Clark!”

“I am Clark,” he whispered through rubbery lips.

“I know you are,” came the reply, all that he wanted to hear, all that he had hoped to hear. He knew, then, that this was a dream, but he didn’t *care*. It was safe and beautiful and hopeful, and that was what he needed, what he *craved*, right now. He just wanted to be warm and safe and happy, just for a moment, and then he could wake again and pull on his cape and be Superman, with all the responsibility and loneliness and joy that bestowed. But for now... for now, he wanted to be Clark. He wanted this dream.

So he lifted a hand, suddenly light and free, and ran his fingers through dark, silky hair. “I love you, Lois,” he told her.

“I know you do.” Her tremulous smile was so beautiful that he had to close his eyes.

“I wish...” He paused, then, because even in a dream, it wasn’t safe to admit too much, wasn’t wise to let go of long-held secrets and watch them emerge, frail and fragile and vulnerable, into the cold, harsh world where so much, so little, could destroy them. But the truth was precious and valuable and that lake was beckoning to him, and in the end, wasn’t truth what he was supposed to stand for? So he confessed.

“I wish I was someone you could love.”

“You are,” she replied, and that was such a fitting end — or perhaps beginning — to this dream, that he smiled and willingly gave himself over to it.

Great swathes of gold and carnelian and topaz lights fell like curtains over his eyes, heavy bundles of light and warmth that touched his flesh as if composed of alien elements, so foreign that he stirred and shook himself. When he opened his eyes, he had to pause and try to remember exactly what had happened to leave him lying on the floor with his head pillowed on Lois’s lap because this certainly wasn’t something he’d ever woken to before.

She was sleeping, her head leaning against the couch cushions behind her, and her hand was a solid point of warmth on his neck, so real and present that Clark had a hard time convincing himself he was actually awake and alive. The pain that had gaped wide and swallowed him whole was still nibbling away at him, holding him still and compliant and aching in its razor-toothed grip. And yet, for all that there were coals banked somewhere inside him, buried beneath the ash and soot of unfamiliarity and exhaustion and the strangeness of *normality*, all he could focus on was Lois’s hand on his skin, her legs beneath his head... the fact that she was there at all, still with him, still touching him even though he was just another Claude to her.

Clark. Claude. Too many similarities, but he had almost forgotten — almost wished he *had* forgotten — that she thought him worse than Claude.

She equated him with Luthor.

But those were bleak thoughts, too dark and dismal to contemplate while she was holding him so safe and protected and cherished. So he brushed them aside, anchored himself to the dull ache flaring up within him because that at least reminded him of where he was. With a hand that felt heavier than Nightfall, with fingers that shook more than the most cowardly of criminals confronted by Superman, he reached up and drew a careful finger down Lois’s cheek, a touch so light it was barely there. A touch just enough to convince himself that this had to be real. And yet...

“I’m dreaming,” he said aloud. It was always best to test out theories. The scientific process — submit theories to tests in order to advance them. He’d touched her and she hadn’t disappeared. Now he spoke, and though she stirred and woke to look at him with eyes that were dark and luminous, she also smiled at him, which meant he still couldn’t be sure whether he was actually awake or not. No dream of his had ever included the voracious pain threatening to eat him alive from the inside out, but they all included Lois looking at him with *that* look in her eyes.

“Am I dreaming?” he asked her, finally breaking down.

Because if this was a dream, he might as well give himself fully over to it and enjoy it — might as well sit up and take her into his arms and kiss her the way he had under the guise of newlyweds in the Lexor honeymoon suite. But if it wasn’t a dream... well, no need to embarrass himself more than he already had in the past couple of days.

“No,” she said, and wasn’t it just like her to crush his dream with a smile on her face? But she looked so happy that he couldn’t help but forgive her for everything. “You’re awake, finally!”

“I’m awake?” In that case, he thought regretfully, he couldn’t impose on her. With a slight grimace when his stomach muscles protested the action, he sat up as quickly as he was able, separating himself from her. He felt an almost tangible connection torn between them, as if their physical touch had been the last link that bound them together, and now that it was gone, there was nothing but distance and names to stand between them.

Carefully, needing the excuse to look away from her while he tried to tame his expression to something that wouldn’t frighten her away, he looked down at his stomach. His shirt was mostly unbuttoned, revealing a long, red scar that blazed in time with his pulse, slanted above and past his navel. With an almost morbid curiosity, he brushed his fingers over the angry wound, surprised by the texture of marred and mangled flesh. There was no blood on the wound itself, though dark crimson and dull rust stained his shirt like war-paint proclaiming a battle and a victory.

Or a defeat.

Because Clark had been the one who was stabbed. And Clark had bled. And Clark had fallen. All in front of other people, witnesses who would find it beyond strange — would find it darkly suspicious — should the normal mild-mannered reporter be seen walking the streets of Metropolis as if no mere mortal weapon could faze him.

“It’s getting better,” Lois observed, and for a moment, Clark could do nothing but gape at her in incredulous disbelief. But then he reminded himself that she was speaking of the physical wound, that it wouldn’t matter to her if Clark was gone, now that he had ruined his every chance with her, even the chance to be only her friend.

Downcast, he looked back down at the wound where Luthor had pierced the very core of Superman. Suddenly, so abruptly that it left him gasping, he felt compelled to stand, to move, to divorce himself from the spot of ground where Clark Kent had fallen so permanently. He tried to rise, straining with his arms to lift himself from the floor, but he was weak and shaky, and the tiny fist of pain moved and struck out inside his stomach, sewed

up behind the red, raw scar.

He let out a grunt, not so much from the pain as from the feel of Lois's hands on his arm and back, supporting him as he finally made it to his feet.

"I don't think you should do that," Lois said. He was glad that she helped him despite her words; he didn't think he'd have been able to withstand her had she tried to hold him down.

"I'm better," he reassured her, and wished so badly that he could believe that himself. For an instant, he was struck by the blinding desire for his parents, for the soothing, encompassing touch of his mom's life-giving hands and the gentle, quiet strength of his dad's presence. But it was a ridiculous wish, and he wouldn't endanger them by having them there even if he could have transported them to his side through sheer force of *wanting*. Of course, if he could have willed reality the way he wished it to be, he rather thought that his first wish would have more to do with the woman at his side than with his parents in Smallville.

Lois frowned at him when he stood, her hands hovering a millimeter away from his skin, constant temptation so close he could feel the heat, so far he could not bridge the gap between. "You're better? Really? So... you have your powers back?"

"No," he admitted. He eyed the couch, but decided that he'd better not try to sit down, not when his legs felt as limp as water funneled through worn straws. "The last time I was exposed to Kryptonite, they took a day or so to come back, and that was just a small exposure. But that was the first time I'd ever been exposed — I'm sure my body will adjust more quickly this time around."

There was fear wrapped up alongside the pain left by the Kryptonite blade that he didn't want to address. Fear that Kryptonite would have a different effect when it was actually embedded in his flesh. Fear that the pain pulsing in his side was caused by a sliver of Kryptonite left encased inside his own body, like the poisoned pit at the center of the peach. Fear that he would never get better, that Superman would be made vulnerable and powerless with the same stroke that had killed Clark Kent. The fears drifted in the air like the sunbeams falling in from the windows, abstract and wavering, and he did his best to ignore them. Lois looked worried and uncertain, and he needed to reassure her.

"So it was Kryptonite." Her eyes tightened and she looked away, hiding the thoughts darting like quicksilver through her mind as she spoke. "I thought that was what it had to be. I... I pulled the blade out and put it in the fireproof safe with the evidence against Lex. It's made of lead, and I remember you — Superman... well, *you* saying that you couldn't see through lead, so I thought that maybe that would be enough to —"

"It is," he interrupted, hating to see her so uncertain and tentative, almost lost.

This was his fault, he knew. He had lied to her and then told her the truth at the very worst time, in the worst way possible. And she had been right — he had been mad at her, so angry that she hadn't seen him and known him for who he was, that she had believed the lies he'd perpetuated. It was irrational and unfair, and he understood that now. Understanding it didn't entirely do away with his hurt and betrayal and loss, but it did calm that sea of disappointment within him.

The truth was that *he* was solely to blame for the mess he was in, including Luthor coming to Clark Kent's apartment and stabbing him with a Kryptonite blade. And for the hurt confusion in Lois's eyes. Everything she had thought and known to be true had turned out to be a lie, and she was right — he was as much responsible for that as Luthor was. So maybe there wasn't any difference between him and the man responsible for so many deaths and broken lives. Maybe they *were* the same. In which case, Clark Kent's life was probably the price of atonement, a life of Superman alone his penance.

Dimly, somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew that he was drained and still hurting and that his thoughts weren't quite right. But he had no time to rest, no time to stop and straighten out the wrongness from his thoughts to leave him with truth, stripped free of all its incorrect evasions and misguided notions. Vaguely, somewhere deep inside him, he was aware that there was still a bit of hope lodged firmly, stubbornly inside him. But he didn't have the strength to root it out, and anyway, life itself would surely do that for him.

"We've got to stop him," Lois stated, and her voice was shrouded in armor and girded with steel, so much so that Clark almost threw up an arm to ward off the danger. But her fury was, for a change, not directed at him. She was glaring toward the door of his apartment, where Luthor had strode in as an invader and exited as the victor in his never-ending war with Superman. "We can't let him get away with this! We need a plan."

"A plan," Clark repeated. "Yes, I guess so. But... first, I'm going to... change." He gestured awkwardly to his stained shirt.

"Oh." She blinked and took him in as if she had already forgotten that he was wounded and weak. "Right. Okay. Well... you do that, then, and I'll... I'll figure something out. I know he left men to watch the place."

"Of course he did," he said tonelessly. "He's watching for Superman's arrival — probably wants to make sure the Kryptonite affects him."

Lois gave him a strange look, enough all on its own to remind him that he was talking about Superman as if he were a separate entity rather than the only personality left to him. "We'll have to give him that, then. Clark Kent can't be alive, not after what Lex did to you — that wound was bad. He..." She swallowed and lifted her chin. "He snapped the blade off inside you. No human could have survived that, not after lying there like that all morning."

"Yes." The single word was the final death-knell for Clark Kent, and he mourned the son, the reporter, the *man*. There was a huge tearing sensation inside him as everything he had fought so long to protect was ripped away from him and shredded into fine pieces to be tossed into the air like confetti. Had it been only the night before that he had thought his fate would be to end up scattered to the wind? Well, he had been right after all.

"Yes," he said again, doing his best not to let Lois see the depths of his reaction. It wasn't her fault this had happened, not when he'd been the one delaying them all night in the hopes of getting her to understand the life of a man who hadn't survived to see the dawn. Not when he was the one who had gotten careless and forgotten how dangerous Luthor was. "We'll probably have to find a way for Superman to show up here for their benefit. But... in a while."

"Sure." She played with her fingers, twisting and tangling them together as she watched him. He wanted to reach out and take her hands, wanted to touch her, wanted to hug her — not for her, but for his own comfort; he longed for some form of reassurance, some sort of grounding — but he resisted the urge. When he turned away from her to walk to the bathroom, he almost cried out at the complete and utter disappearance of her from his senses — no heartbeat ticking in his ears, no perfumed scent in his nostrils, not even the feel of her hand on his shoulder or the sight of her standing there and watching him go.

He *hated* being without his powers. Funny, he supposed, since he'd thought for so long that all he wanted was to be normal. And yet... there was something so unnatural, so crippling, about being without the powers he often took for granted, as if he had woken to find that one each of his eyes and arms and legs were gone, leaving him only half-completed. It was disorienting and sickening, made worse by the dull ache flaring in the pit of his stomach.

It wasn't until he was standing in the shower, leaning against

the wall in his exhaustion after having wrestled with his clothing, that he realized his grief and loss were only a thin veneer over a surging, roiling river of fury. He was *angry*. Angry in a way he'd never been before. Angry with nothing to hold him back, nothing to keep him from relaxing the rigid control he kept over his temper — he was angry, and he no longer had anything left to lose.

The last hints of Clark Kent sloughed off his skin and were sent whirling down the drain, sucked away into nonexistence, and all that was left to him was a vulnerable Superman all too fragile and unprotected.

His bones were heavy and limp within his skin, his nerve endings aching and worn, his limbs disconnected from him, but he still managed to wrestle on a Suit when he emerged from the shower. He brushed his fingers once more over the scar — not quite so raw or red anymore — fascinated anew by the uneven feel of his own flesh, and then he shrugged on the top of the Suit, the crest adorning the front a poor shield to hide and protect the scar and the wounds and the broken heart beneath.

He breathed in deeply, the air flowing into his lungs, chasing down the tight shrinking knot of pain still resting within his abdomen. The breath was clean and cool and necessary, but it didn't help stiffen his resolve, didn't give him the strength he needed to step back into the living room, ready to unveil himself as Superman. He had already done this, already spun into Superman in front of Lois Lane, but that was when Superman was only a tiny, closeted portion of himself. Now, however... now Superman was all that was left.

He wondered if Lois would prefer it that way. Or had the superhero's lies erased her fondness for even this portion of himself? Would she ever smile at him again? Stare at him as if he were truly a hero and not just a freak in a garish costume? Or would she never again trust him, never think him admirable, never again make him feel as if simply being himself was *enough*?

"Oh," she said, a quiet word expelled with her breath, when he entered the room, his cape flaring behind him like some kind of banner declaring the birth of a new era. "Are you... are you feeling any better?"

"No powers yet," he said, and he was distantly glad that his voice emerged so cool and calm, confident in a way that fit Superman. Pointedly, he crossed his arms over his chest, a clumsy and inept attempt to protect his beleaguered heart. "But it doesn't matter. Luthor won't wait forever. We have to make a Superman entrance and get out the news that Clark is dead."

"Right." Lois nodded and straightened in her seat. "But I've been thinking about taking him down permanently, and I think what we need is for Superman to confront Lex, get him to admit to what he did, and then use the conversation — which we'll have taped — to get him arrested."

"Luthor still doesn't know where you are," Superman pointed out. He didn't want to think about the future, not yet, not while the present was still so very painful. "Is there a way you can sneak past the men he left to watch the apartment? If you can get to a public payphone and call here, as if you want to speak to Clark Kent, then we can let Luthor know that way that his Kryptonite blade worked."

"You think he'll overhear the conversation?" Lois asked. She didn't sound surprised. She sounded grim, determined, and it was everything Clark had hoped for and just enough to worry Superman for her safety.

"I'm sure," he said, watching her carefully. There was still something lost and indefinably broken about her, something in the downward slant of her eyes and the straight line of her mouth and the way she wasn't talking a mile a minute. But at least she no longer looked frightened or closed off or angry. He remembered holding her as they flew across the ocean,

remembered how stiffly she'd held herself, remembered the irritated disapproval in her voice as she interrogated him. None of that was evident now — did that mean she actually did think Luthor was worse news than Clark and Superman's own lies, or just that she was on the verge of a huge story?

"All right, then." Lois stood and began to pace, her hands gesticulating wildly as she spoke. "I'm sure I can sneak out past the fire escape, though I might need you to have Superman 'show up' then to distract them from me sneaking out of the alleyway. I'll get to a phone, call here, and then... what? Superman will answer?"

"Yes. I can dig out a fan and blow the curtains around noticeably enough that Luthor's hired muscle will think I've only just arrived. I'll answer the phone when you call, and tell you that Clark Kent is dead."

The entire moment — the entire situation — seemed surreal. A fear that had plagued him for so long that now that it actually took solid, unmistakable form to shackle him into this life, it seemed like a dream, an abstract moment that had lost the power to hurt him. He was Superman, aloof and invulnerable, standing in an apartment that had transformed, during the course of a single twist of a blade, into a shrine to a life that had been all too short. But Superman was used to seeing people die, losing the few he couldn't save, and though this life would haunt him more than most, he still had a crisis to see to.

"And then what?" Lois was asking, demanding his fragmented attention. "If Lex knows Superman is here — and thinks you're vulnerable — then won't he come to confront you?"

He looked at her and contemplated his reply. He could give her a sedate, careful plan, but the truth of the matter was that for all of Clark Kent's methodical caution, Superman was often reckless and impetuous. He was freed of the need to pretend to normality, unfettered by the desire to fade into obscurity, accepted and unafraid of being dissected or feared for his powers and therefore able to openly show what he could do and help in the way he constantly longed to do — and with that shocking, still-new liberty, he often forgot the need to stop and think and consider and plan.

So he could tell Lois that he would wait for her to return, and he knew it would be a safer and wiser choice to leave her out of this and keep her out of harm's way. But he was tired of lying, sick of holding back, and this was his last chance to partner with her — even if it was Superman and Lois Lane, not Lois Lane and Clark Kent — and... and... and all right, maybe a part of him did want to see Lois gunning for Luthor, to reassure himself that she wasn't going to believe excuses and lies, that she was actually believing and helping *him*. Perhaps that was wrong, but whether Clark was dead or not, Superman was still a man and vindictiveness wasn't solely a human response.

"Luthor wants Superman," he said finally, meeting Lois's eyes and dropping his hand from where he was unconsciously rubbing the scar on his stomach. "So I'm going to give him Superman."

"He has Kryptonite," she objected. "If he thinks it will affect Superman, you can bet he didn't leave it all with Clark!"

"I know," Superman said quietly. "But I've let this drag on too long already. He murdered a man in cold blood today, and if that's not enough to get him convicted, then nothing will be."

"There's no body," Lois said, and he wasn't so far gone that he didn't recognize the irony of her being the voice of rational reason while he advocated the reckless course of action.

"There's a blade, there's a witness, and there's Superman's word. That, added to the confession we'll hopefully get on tape and the evidence Clark collected, will have to be enough. It may not put him away permanently, but it'll give you time to dig up more on him."

“Give *me* time?” she repeated, her voice small and confused. He wondered if she was only now realizing that Clark Kent was gone forever. Had she not thought there was cause to be afraid just because he was Superman? Had she thought him invulnerable to the scorn and derision and furious accusations she had sent his way? He wished he could believe that because then it would mean that she hadn’t meant to hurt him — or was it worse to know that just as she’d done on The Park Bench, she discounted his pain completely?

He didn’t know, couldn’t tell, but he was exhausted and hurting and so very, unfamiliarly *angry* and none of this mattered anymore. Clark Kent was dead, Superman was flawed, and Lois was once more awake and afire, so perhaps things hadn’t turned out the way he so desperately, unrealistically wanted, but it was still better by far than things had looked the night before when he’d gone to meet Lois at The Fountain.

“It’ll be okay,” he told her, and hoped she believed his assurance. Hoped she believed *him*. There was great sorrow, knowing that the dream he’d chased his entire life was dead, but there was also a vague sense of relief. He didn’t have to watch every word he said anymore, didn’t have to worry about the right time to tell his secret, didn’t have to come up with excuses and lies. He had to discover who he was anew, now, had to learn all over again what his life consisted of, but he would help more people, save hundreds more, make a difference on a scope he hadn’t been able to countenance before. He wouldn’t write, wouldn’t be able to tell other people’s stories, and that hurt, of course it did, but *this* was his life now. He’d spent years coveting a life he should have known could never be his; now he could stop trying, stop pretending, and just *be*.

It was good, he told himself yet again. Or at least, it wasn’t all bad.

One day he’d believe that. When he wasn’t still stiff and aching and screaming silently. When Lois wasn’t staring at him with eyes so wide and dark and gleaming. When he wasn’t being suffocated by a vast vacuum sucking away everything he’d ever wanted and replacing it with loneliness and isolation and duty.

Later he would mourn Clark Kent and lay him reverently to rest. For now, though, Luthor had finally made a careless misstep, and Superman would be there to catch him.

No time for capitalized words anymore. Or rather, room for only one now.

Superman.

Chapter 5: In the Mirror, Darkly

Despite having been waiting for it, Clark — *Superman*, he reminded himself — started at the shrill ring of the phone slicing through the funereal silence of his — *Clark’s* — apartment. He’d had a moment of heart-stopping fear when Lois had slipped out of the alley beneath the noses of the men Luthor had left behind, but she had gotten away, surviving and thriving in situations that would have been impossible for anyone else, as dedicated and intent as always. She had told him it would take her twenty minutes or so to find a payphone far enough away from his apartment to allay suspicion, but Superman hadn’t noticed the passing of time at all, too busy staring at the pictures and tokens and souvenirs and belongings that didn’t fit at all with the Suit he now wore.

Earlier — hours or days, he wasn’t quite sure anymore — he’d lamented the circular wanderings of his own thoughts, had thought himself caught in some form of demented cyclone that ripped him from solid ground to spin him wildly. But now his thoughts weren’t going in circles at all; now they were set in straight lines that never wavered no matter how he searched frantically for some way to veer from the fate opening up before him. Clark Kent — ordinary man underneath the Suit — made things complicated and difficult and... and beautiful. But

Superman? Well, with Superman, there was only a single course of action, only one way of life, so little left to him, all simple and uncomplicated.

No parents, not until he waited and scanned the farm for any signs of other people coming closer, and even then only under the cover of darkness.

No friends, not unless he wished to sign their death warrants or signed up to become their 24/7 bodyguard service.

No Lois. Bad enough he’d already singled her out by taking her to the cruise ship — he didn’t fool himself that word wouldn’t eventually get out about that no matter what they made Luthor believe today — but for him to do anything but give her the interviews he’d given her before would be dangerous in the extreme. There would be no partnering up on investigations, no desks side by side in a newsroom, no lunches taken together, no late night stakeouts, and the Daily Planet hadn’t been gone so long that a life absent of those things seemed normal.

But worse, worse than anything else, there would be no hope. No hope of romance in the future, of soft looks and shy touches and wondrous kisses. No hope of more friends or Kerth awards or casual relationships formed with coworkers or people he interviewed or neighbors in an apartment complex.

There would only be victims, and the rescued, and emergency workers, and the press — not individual press members, just the press as a whole, a faceless mass of professional inquiries and dispassionate questions.

Nothing at all compared to what Clark Kent had to offer, and he could no longer pretend to himself that he would one day view this death as a good thing — or at least, not a bad thing — so while he’d waited for Lois to call him, while he’d watched the men outside hastily call their boss to tell him Superman had arrived at Clark Kent’s apartment, he’d tried to find a way to bring back the reporter, the friend, the son, the *man*.

Perhaps he could say Superman had arrived earlier than the snoops outside thought. Perhaps he could claim that Kryptonite was useless against him and that he’d cauterized Clark’s wound. Only, his scar was growing smaller and smaller, rubbed away by the constant touches he brushed across it, and soon there would be no evidence of a wound that would have either killed a human man or left him weak and sick for months. Perhaps he could say they had staged it all, a trap to prove Luthor’s criminal dealings, but then how would they explain away the testimony of Luthor and his two thugs? Even should Luthor not tell anyone, *he* would surely figure it out, and jailed or not, Superman was under no delusions that Luthor wouldn’t still have some influence among the criminal underworld outside the prison.

If he were only smarter, Superman thought, or faster, or *better*, then he wouldn’t even *be* in this situation. He’d have known to keep Clark unassuming and unremarkable. He would have realized that Luthor was following them absolutely everywhere. He would have taken Luthor’s obsession of Lois more seriously and realized that the billionaire wasn’t averse to striking out jealously, possessively, at whatever threatened what he saw as her place at his side. He would have pretended to fear and belief in Luthor’s lies. He would have... he would have done *anything*, just so long as Clark Kent wasn’t gone forever.

But the ring of the phone, the sight of the men listening in outside his apartment, the feel of the Suit chafing against the burning fist in his stomach and the ache in his limbs, the emptiness of Clark’s apartment despite the fact that he was standing within it — the bloodstains on the floor that he’d have to find a way to clean if he didn’t want the police wondering why Clark Kent had alien blood — all of it was enough to drive home the reality he hadn’t been able to avoid.

“Hello?” he said into the phone, barely remembering in time to speak in Superman’s deeper register.

“Clark?” Lois asked, and for a brief instant — before he

remembered that there was no secret identity anymore — he froze in horrified disbelief that she would give him away like that. “Clark, I hope you’re happy! That source you sent me after last night never even showed up.”

Superman’s lips curved up slightly in admiration at the deft way she’d misdirected any eavesdroppers. “Lois, this is Superman,” he interrupted softly, gently. This was a performance, no question of that, and like the most accomplished of thespians, he had to play this perfectly. No tremor in his voice, no sign of weakness, nothing to give away the fact that he was powerless and still hurting from his run-in with Kryptonite. If he could end this day having convinced Luthor that he was still invulnerable, it wouldn’t be a complete loss.

“Superman?” Lois was a master performer herself, the slightest tinge of dread mixed with palpable surprise and swirled all together with that adoration she’d held for Superman before The Window. “What’s going on? Where’s Clark?”

Oxygen, cold and clean and clear, flowed through his lungs, pulled in, *dragged* in as he sought the courage needed to say the words he’d never wanted to say, the truth he’d been fleeing every time he left a country after an observed rescue. He wanted to drop the phone, or hang it up, or better yet, just turn back time so he never told Lois the truth, never told her that he loved her. Or back even further. Wouldn’t it be better, after all, if he’d never met her? Never come to Metropolis, never fallen in love with a woman he’d lied to, a woman who hated him and thought him equal to a monster. Thought him to *be* a monster.

But he couldn’t make himself believe that any more than he could make himself believe that Superman was better than Clark Kent.

Luckily, he had pictures of his parents scattered all across his apartment. They smiled at him from a dozen different angles, and in their faces he saw pride and love and affection and so much sacrifice, all of it made for him. And what kind of son would he be if he ignored their mortality just so he could keep a name?

So he took another breath and imbued his voice with all the confidence of Superman — a man who needed no job, who had no friends, who flew away and disappeared once the crisis was over.

“Clark’s dead,” he said. “I’m sorry, Lois. I tried to save him, but it was too late. He’s gone.”

“No!” The denial was so immediate, so broken, so disbelieving that for a minute Superman seriously wondered if he’d hallucinated Lois being in on the Secret. But her perfume still danced in the air and the coffee still sat, cold and untouched, on the counter, and she had always been a good actress, able to twist him around her little finger at her slightest whim.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, and he was. He was sorry he’d misled her into thinking that he could ever be an ordinary man, sorry he’d tried to be a faultless hero for her, sorry that he’d lost both of those things in one night. Sorry that he’d lost *her*.

But there was no point in standing here and feeling sorry for himself. Luthor was still free, no doubt congratulating himself on his murder of Clark Kent, perhaps trying to decide just how weak Superman was thanks to the Kryptonite, and dangerous as ever. Still out there, considered a heroic patron by the city of Metropolis, touted as a philanthropist among the leading men of the eastern seaboard — he was still a hero, still had his alter ego, while Clark Kent lay dead and buried already and Superman was alone in the world.

It wasn’t fair, and that sea of anger, that terrible rage that felt so alien — felt so *empowering* — still surged and roiled within him, howling with tempestuous currents at the reminder that Luthor still possessed everything he’d just ripped away from Clark — no, from *Superman*.

For months, he had played Luthor’s game, scared away by threats to Metropolis’s citizens, to the secret he kept, and he’d

gotten nowhere. He’d watched as Luthor gained more ground, secured more and more of Metropolis, insinuated himself at Lois’s side, taken away the people that had accepted Clark as one of their own, a reporter known for his own skills rather than the abilities conferred by a sun alien to his own. He’d known Luthor’s game from the beginning, but all he’d done was lose ground. So no more playing that game. No more playing at all. It was time to do something.

Dimly, he was aware that he was becoming just as impetuous as Superman ever was — as Clark Kent had never been — and it made sense, because he *was* Superman and he didn’t have reasons — two capital letters that weren’t frightening, that were turned into an affectionate nickname by Jimmy — to be calm and methodical anymore.

The clock was racing, time sheering past him at a furious rate. Luthor knew Superman had arrived at Clark Kent’s apartment. He had confirmation that Clark Kent was dead. He now knew where Lois was and that she hadn’t — supposedly — been at Clark Kent’s apartment. Now, he would rid himself of the only obstacle remaining between him and the object of his obsessive affections.

He would come for Superman.

Superman had bought himself time by sounding strong over the phone — he had no doubt that would throw Luthor as the billionaire debated whether the Kryptonite had worked or not — but in order to make that deception count, he had to move quickly.

“I’m sorry,” he told Lois for the hundredth time. It seemed he was always apologizing to her, but this time, his apology wasn’t for the past. Clark Kent had hurt her, over and over again, but Superman still had a chance of obtaining her forgiveness, and even if that was as impossible as it seemed, he could still protect her.

So he hung up the phone. There was nothing more to say, no reason to stand there and eulogize Clark when they both knew how badly Clark had failed, when the apartment he stood in and the parents he’d left behind were eulogy enough. Maybe one day, years from now, he’d be able to tell the world what Clark Kent had contributed to Superman. Maybe one day he’d be able to publicly acknowledge his parents and let the whole world know just how much they’d done for him. Maybe one day he’d be able to thank Lois for the idea she’d given him, the ideals she’d set before him, the hero she’d helped him be.

One day. But not today.

Today was for Superman. A Superman who was hurt and raw and bereft. And powerless. A Superman who would have to rely on the tenuous strength of his symbol and his cape, his colors and his reputation, his voice and his stance, to convince his most dangerous foe that he was invulnerable, even though now as always, he was the very opposite. Today, he would make Luthor regret the only capitalized word that mattered anymore, the only name he had left to him.

Superman didn’t have to make plans. He was invulnerable, unstoppable, hemmed in only by the moral code he set himself, the polite courtesy he showed to the laws of a planet not his own. He could afford to be reckless because nothing could touch him. He could confront Luthor where Clark Kent hadn’t been able to because Superman was alone. Isolated. Set apart. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain and if his life was lost in the attempt, it would only serve to prove to the world Luthor’s corruption and evilness and make of Superman a martyr that might inspire the world even more than he did as a living beacon.

But without his powers, Superman had only the virtue of surprise on his side. It wasn’t hard, then, to know what he had to do. Bait, Luthor had called him, so he would bite because Clark was dead — and that was the fate that always claimed bait, wasn’t it? — and Superman was the fish. Once the bait was

taken, there was only one course for the fish to take — to fight or die.

Resolve turned his rage to slick, black ice, coursing like steel chips through veins, crystalline sharp but coldly numbing, dulling his vibrant pain from blaring colors to quiet grays.

When he opened his — *Clark's* — front door, stepped across the threshold, red boots vibrant — *alien* — against the mundane landing, he felt as if he'd stepped into a new world. Funny, he supposed, that the newspapers and the governments and the public had thought it a new world when Superman had first entered the picture, but he only felt it now when Clark Kent exited the scene. Perhaps this was what birth felt like, messy and terrifying and shockingly daunting. Perhaps this shooting pain in his chest was only the pain of labor and would soon pass.

He hoped it... but he didn't believe it.

Luthor's men watched him come with neutrality that melted into shocked disbelief before turning into cracked aloofness. The phone the driver was holding fell to his knee as his hand went slack; Superman imagined he could hear Luthor breathing on the other end of that call, scheming his schemes, plotting his plots, never knowing that no matter how these next few hours turned out, he'd already won.

"Your *boss* wanted to see me," Superman said in a deep tone, emphasizing the right word even if he didn't give it the capital. After everything else — the Park Bench, the Window, the Fountain, the Apartment — Luthor didn't deserve the upper case letter his hidden title usually claimed. He wondered, idly, if even his 'invulnerable' system would eventually develop a sore throat from the strain of the lower registers he would have to always speak in now, or if Superman could gradually switch to Clark's more normal voice now that there was no alter ego to give away.

"You..." The two men glanced at each other before the boldness of the two straightened in the driver's seat and met Superman's unblinking stare through the open window. "You got the message?"

"Oh, I got it loud and clear," he grated, jaw clenched, eyes tight. Black ice *poured* through his nerves system. "And I have one for him in return." He paused long enough for the two men to look nervous, to shift their weight as if to run, then said, slowly and distinctly, "So take me to him."

And he opened the back door and slid down into the seat. He had to gather his cape behind him, had to sweep it inside the car and make sure it didn't get caught in the door when he closed it behind him. An annoyance — trifling, but he suspected the trifling annoyances would keep building and building into an insurmountable wall between him and everyone else the longer he was Superman, the further from Clark and humanity he moved.

And how long would it be before he'd forgotten entirely what it was to be human? How long before he became truly alien?

The two thugs exchanged glances and whispered into the phone and nodded with faked bravery to whatever commands Luthor barked out, and in the end, they started the car and pulled out onto the street. Superman was glad for their silence. He had nothing to guide him through experiences such as these — through any experience save crises — no expertise, no frame of reference, only a river of black ice that sought out his every rational thought and encased it in crystalline snowflakes, simple and cold and stark, but so utterly complicated in design that he couldn't escape them. The cell-phone he'd hidden in the pocket of his cape made a dent against his back, squeezed between leather and spandex, but Superman scarcely noticed it. An annoyance. He'd catalog them and move on. Life on an alien planet was hard, but it was what it was and that was that.

His plan was simple, really, almost too easy. And it was all but doomed to failure without powers. Without Clark Kent. Without the hope he'd lived with his entire life.

But still. He was Superman now, and being the superhero was all about making the hard decisions. Luthor was insane, evil, and if Superman was gone, he would consider himself the victor, would smirk his smug grin and consider the world as his own personal playground. And Lois? She would be his prize — willingly or not — but after a while, when Luthor began to be bored with his victories, what would he do with her?

Superman's anger shifted dangerously close to fear, veered away from cold implacability, and he had to stiffen, had to clench his jaw and fold his hands into tight fists. He'd messed up, miscalculated a thousand times over and only made things worse the more he tried to fix them, but that was his fault, not Lois's, and he couldn't let her pay. Not for his mistakes. Not for Luthor's ambition.

No. This had to end. It had to end *now* before anything *worse* could happen. Because... because if Clark Kent could be killed so very easily, then so could Lois Lane, and the world could survive without an ordinary man from Kansas come to make his mark on the world, but it would not so easily survive the loss of a woman with Lois's passion for life, a reporter with her talent and her skills, a hero who lived every day without powers and still changed the world.

Anger returned, surged and boiled within him, and he relaxed a bit in relief, giving himself over in immolation to that sea of fury.

Superman didn't expect the thugs to drive him straight to LexTower in broad daylight — in fact, he didn't expect to visit LexTower at all — but he had, once again, underestimated Luthor's arrogance. He'd have to start thinking like the crime-lord, he told himself sternly, have to start anticipating him if he was going to defeat him. Clark would have shuddered at that thought and determined to find another way, but Superman didn't have the luxury. Superman could be ruthless when he had to be — after all, he didn't have any human empathy to soften him — and sometimes, only cold, quick decisions could save the day.

The thugs drove him into a back entrance to a parking garage beneath LexTower. It was dark, shadowed, cold, and with the cessation of the sunlight, the receding pain in Superman's abdomen squirmed and wakened and writhed. He took in a sharp intake of air, held it, held it, held it, until the nibbling rat inside calmed itself, became the normal, ordinary and accepted and thus banished to the background, and then he could breathe again, but slowly, steadily, giving nothing away. Superman wasn't a disguise anymore, so that meant he had to *be* disguised all the time. Constantly concealing, always misdirecting, never admitting to anything.

The car came to a halt — he strained his senses, tried to convince himself he could hear the heartbeats of Luthor's men without the engine sound muffling it, but he couldn't quite do it. Superman wasn't a liar, not even to himself.

He didn't wait for the two men, just swung the door open and stepped into the shadows of the vast, claustrophobic garage. It was empty, and his boots against the concrete echoed though long, endless expanses of gray and white and yellow. He didn't know where to go — Luthor was as adept at hiding as the viper he so often emulated — but he refused to show any hesitation. Superman had x-ray vision, supersenses, and a confidence no human could touch. He would know where to go without hesitation, and if he didn't, he would simply walk through every wall, tear down every floor, crumple whatever obstacles stood in his path until he reached his goal.

If he weren't suffering from the effects of a Kryptonite blade to his stomach. If he weren't powerless. If he hadn't just watched everything he'd ever wanted die in front of him with the strike of a single blade.

If he were truly the Superman the world thought him to be.

He set out toward the elevator. His footsteps were even, loud,

steady, everything that Superman was. His face was expressionless, distant and aloof because that was the image Superman cultivated. His cape fluttered at his ankles, his suit the only point of brightness in the otherwise dim surroundings, a beacon and a symbol and a hundred other abstract, empty things that meant so much to the masses but nothing to the individual he now was.

Behind him, the thugs paused and then raced to catch up to him. He'd intentionally chosen a pace that was slow enough they could easily flank him before he reached the elevator — he might be impetuous and impatient, but he didn't intend on giving away just how lost he was.

The elevator was a nightmare of close confines made closer by the thugs on either side of him, the lights not nearly bright enough to calm his distant panic. He shouldn't be claustrophobic, he thought, and then realized that it was Superman who was claustrophobic and Clark who had pretended he wasn't. And yet again, he realized that the wrong identity had survived. Clark could have made a new superhero to save Metropolis from its darker denizens, could have asked his mom to make a new suit with different bright colors, could have based himself in a new city if need be. But it was Clark who was gone, and Superman who was left, and if he thought anymore on it, he'd fall to his knees, crumple and shake and curl in on himself... and Luthor would get away.

So he stayed upright. He watched his reflection in the silver doors and schooled his features until they were a statue's, grim and chiseled into what they were by the perceptions and wishes of the designers rather than his own stone will.

They were in the elevator for a long time. Minutes ticking by, ticks and tocks he counted silently in his head because it was better to do that than to rage and strike out at the walls and tear through the elevator shaft until there was room to breathe and move and the sunlight could reach him and scare away the creatures clawing at his insides. Long minutes when the only things that moved were his guards' eyes, darting to him and away, and the red numbers showing the dozens of floors they were passing by far too slowly.

When they finally stopped, it was because they had gone as high as they could — as high as even Superman could until his powers came back — the penthouse suite as opulent and luxurious and over-the-top as both Clark Kent and Superman had noticed on their previous visits. Luthor was standing near the balcony, cigar in his mouth, one hand holding onto it, the other setting a delicate wineglass on a table set with linen and flowers. He turned, though, at the ding of the opening elevator doors and smiled — oh, how he *smiled* — at Superman.

Lex Luthor. He was a god surveying his domain, triumphing over his fallen enemies, a demigod accepting what was his due, a hero to the masses with his money and his charities and his entrepreneurial endeavors. He was the closest thing the world had had to a superhero until Superman came onto the scene, and Clark — *Superman*, he reminded himself viciously; there couldn't be any slips this close to Luthor — realized now that this could never have gone any other way. They were polar opposites, he and Luthor, so different that no matter the circumstances, no matter how smart Clark was or Superman could be, no matter what he had told Lois or not told her... they still would have ended up here. The same, she had called them, and what did magnets with the same charge do? They repelled each other, fought and grappled and struggled until one or the other was knocked aside.

A monster in the guise of a hero.

An alien in the guise of a man. Or perhaps it was a man in the guise of an alien.

And that was what it all came down to. Here he stood in a richly furnished penthouse — the only home Lex Luthor had, for

all his wealth, the top floor of his company's headquarters — in the suit his mom had made for him in a farmhouse in Kansas, and Luthor was no more a charitable philanthropist than Clark was an aloof alien. They were who they were and pretending otherwise wouldn't help, wouldn't save them, wouldn't keep the world from thinking what it would.

He was Clark Kent, son of two farmers who'd wanted a child more than anything and had taken in a baby boy who'd landed near their home in a spaceship. A reporter looking for a place to make a difference. A man searching for love and a place to belong.

And Luthor was... well, Clark didn't know *what* he was, a vortex of rage and greed and ambition that would never be satisfied because there'd always be another ladder to climb, another victory to achieve, another enemy to destroy. He'd always strive, always reach for what he thought was his due, and he would never be satisfied, and maybe Lois was right and Clark was more like him than he wanted to admit — reaching and straining and hoping for something that would never ever be his and that he should simply set aside as impossible.

Mirror reflections, face to face, and Clark wondered if this was what it would be like if his own reflection would ever defy him. Wondered if he would stare and gape and think that this, *this*, could not be him, could not be what everyone else saw when they looked at him or interacted with him. He'd felt it, a bit, with the ill-fated clone of his, but that had been different. Perverted. Flawed, because it hadn't taken any time at all to know that the clone, as much as he might have been a brother, was not Clark Kent at all. He had been only a shadowy, marred reflection of Superman in pond water — no Clark, no apartment, just a closet full of inverted Superman suits.

But Luthor... Luthor was closer, more similar, harder to recognize and harder to deny.

Clark felt feverish. He thought it was the black ice inside him at first, but there was sweat on his brow and his hands were trembling and his stomach was writhing in on itself in open rebellion, and the windows, as well as the open door to the balcony, were all tinted so that there wasn't enough sunlight. What little could make its way into Luthor's lair was obstructed and absorbed and devoured by the countless meaningless, priceless items cluttering the penthouse. More than anything at that moment, Clark wished he had his heat-vision so that he could obliterate everything standing between him and sunlight.

He stopped where he was, halfway into the suite, not wanting to give away the unsteadiness of his legs. Why, he wondered, was it so much worse now than it had been? Why wasn't he getting better? Why didn't the sunlight sneaking its way to him through the maze of Luthor's treasures and tools seem to matter at all?

But the answer, the reason, the danger was obvious, and his thoughts must be slowed as much as the sunlight for him not to have realized it earlier. Of course, he thought, chiding himself as if he were both recalcitrant schoolboy and remonstrative teacher. Of course. Lois had warned him, had told him that Luthor would have kept Kryptonite with him, would not have laid it all to rest with Clark Kent's body.

So here he was, facing the worst of himself, defenseless and powerless, and now weak and ill, and he couldn't quite remember why he had thought this was a good idea.

"Ah, Superman!" Luthor's jovial greeting was like fingers down a chalkboard to superhearing activated to its fullest. Clark wanted to flinch away, but Superman was stronger than that. He folded his arms over his chest — hiding the scar that felt too warm, so warm he was afraid it was bleeding out in Luthor's presence — and stared at Luthor impassively.

Luthor made a gesture, magnanimous, condescending, and his two thugs gratefully peeled off and shut themselves back into the coffin-like elevator. Clark didn't watch them go, didn't take

his eyes off Luthor himself. There was sludge circling his brain, corraling away all useful thoughts, but the one thing he did know was that the more confident Luthor was, the worse Superman's standing was, and a bluff was all he had on his side to begin with, so he couldn't let anything else delay the inevitable confrontation.

"Superman, I have to admit, you surprised me," Luthor said. He didn't share Clark's wariness, or perhaps was simply too arrogant to show it. He turned his back and poured more wine into his glass. He poured one for Clark, too, but at Clark's flat gaze, he shrugged and set it aside. "I didn't expect you to come straight to me. Bold — I like that. It makes me regret all over again that we couldn't come to an arrangement. With my... flair for intelligence, shall we say, and your powers — well, nothing could stop us."

"We both know you'd never trust me and I'd never obey you," Clark said sternly. He hoped those were the right words. It was getting increasingly hard to think, and he found himself shaking his head to rid himself of the ache clamping his temples in an iron clasp. It didn't work, and he belatedly realized it was a stupid move to have made. Now Luthor knew he was affected. Or maybe, he hoped — because even now, after everything, Clark couldn't completely exorcise himself of hope — Luthor would suspect that Superman was faking to lure him into a false sense of complacency. To bait *him*.

"Yes, well..." Luthor sighed and shook his own head, as if in regret, as if he weren't watching Clark closely from narrowed eyes as beady as a hawk's, predatory and merciless. "You sure you won't have a drink? There's no reason we can't be civilized, even if we never will work together."

A wave of dizziness assailed him as Luthor held out the wineglass toward him. A wineglass with a tint to it, greenish and glowing and all but concealed by the darkness of the red wine within. Green and glowing, and it grew larger and larger as Luthor walked forward. His footfalls were heavy, ponderous and slow and implacable, and Clark wished he could believe that was because his supersenses were back, but he knew better. He knew time was running out, and as if he were still in the elevator, he could feel the fateful *tick* switch to the dreaded *tock*.

His time had run out.

There was a whirl of color and movement, sudden and sharp, and the incongruous sound of glass shattering. Clark was on the floor, his cape wrapped around him like some bizarre form of armor, thicker than cloth, woven with love and belief and hope and a mother's laughter, a father's pride, red as the blood they didn't share, as the blood leaking out against the blue of his suit, sticky and hot next to his ribs, but the cape masked that too, masked it and his secret — The Secret, because if he was giving out capital letters then surely that deserved one too — from Luthor, who was also, it seemed, on the floor.

And the knuckles on Clark's right hand stung.

He'd hit Luthor. Clark almost laughed at his own audacity — at Superman's impulsiveness and Clark's human act — would have laughed except there was glass in a pile of shards between him and Luthor. A line drawn in the sand, emerald and jade and glowing with radioactive fire like shooting stars in his vision. A line he couldn't cross, but an imperfect one made of dozens of tiny bits, sharp and serrated and able to pierce impenetrable flesh as easily as Lois's touch.

Shooting stars laid out like flaming constellations, and Luthor stood and strolled among them, stooped and stood again with alien stars in his hand. Clark — Superman — the hybrid in between them both — was defenseless. He was invulnerable, but so very, very fragile. Unbelievably strong, but indescribably frail. Possessing powers no human did, but nothing at all without the human within.

He was a mass of contradictions, and yet... and yet the man

striding toward him in a nimbus of green was utterly simple. He was greed wrapped in silk. He was vice hidden beneath charm. He was ambition masked in philanthropy.

He was a monster, sprawling snarls of misguided intentions and misplaced arrogance and mistaken deeds, a singular knot that fouled up everything it touched.

And in the end, there wasn't anything similar about them at all.

"You're going to kill me?" Clark asked. His voice shook and wavered; it wasn't pitched low like Superman's; it was as thin and wavering as the armor between him and the revelation of his secrets, as the disguise he wore to differentiate between Clark and Superman. But it was there, and it said what he needed to, and it was the bait that hung in front of Luthor.

And Luthor, as greedy and shortsighted as any fish, bit.

"Kill you?" Luthor repeated. He knelt and reached out a hand, long and slender and merciless as he gripped Superman's hair and raised his head up so he could whisper in his ear. "I killed your reporter friend just because he was in my way. I lured you here because this is *my* city and we can't have you dividing loyalties. And now, yes, *Superman*, I am going to kill you." He drew a line down Clark's face, and it took a long, pain-hazed moment for Clark to realize that it was not his touch that hurt but the edge of the tinted glass he was using to paint blood along his cheekbone, along his wrist, along the exposed line of his neck, acts of war splashed over living surfaces.

"You won't get away with this," Superman warned him. He'd always liked to warn his enemies of what was coming, ever since the beginning, when Metropolis was new and Superman had just birthed himself from a thirst for justice and homespun spandex and years of staring at the stars, when Luthor was alien and unknown and this penthouse had been glimpsed only amid rain and lightning and party lies and the silver of a drawn sword at his throat.

Luthor laughed. Laughed out loud as if he were not trailing lines of fire and blood and destruction down Superman's tensed fingers. "That's why I have won, and you're on the floor beneath my feet — because you never realized what it is to be a man of power. You lived it, but you never *understood*. We make the rules — *I* make the rules, and I follow them, and I win, and no one will be there to gainsay me. It's *my* city, Superman, and you... you will be nothing more than a curious blip in the history of it, while my name will be stamped on every foundation, written on every tower, engraved on every enterprise. There are men and then there are gods, and you have never seen the difference. But now..." He laughed again, and Clark couldn't hold back the thunder rising inside him, building up from the pit of his stomach, molded in the shape of the vise on his head, exploding out from every gash and rip and tear Luthor made in his flesh, a cry wrung from him, pain given audible form.

"Now," Luthor said, "it's over."

"Yes," Clark said. "It's over."

And the doors burst open, and blue and gold and flesh colors burst into the room, a mass intrusion, the cavalry arrived, and Clark's eyes were cloaked in green, an aura that touched the whole world, but he knew Henderson was in the lead, a cell-phone in his hand where he'd heard every malicious, incriminating word Luthor had spewed at him. Clark was tangled in his cape, in the blood streaming from multiple rents, but he could feel behind him, against sensitive flesh, the ridges of the phone he'd hidden within his armor.

Luthor was shouting, and Henderson was saying something over him, and there was movement and noise and sensation, but Superman was stuck. Trapped in a cocoon of his own making. Everything hurt. No one was calling for help — they were, but he couldn't hear them, couldn't reach them, couldn't answer them — and there were other heroes on the scene, and there was a tiny,

sharp-toothed creature trying to escape from his stomach and join its brethren eating him up from the outside in, and the shards of Kryptonite were only a pace away.

But Clark didn't care.

All he cared about, all he could think about, was Lois. He didn't care, anymore, about fountains or windows or benches, didn't care about identities or crushes or lies. He just wanted to see her, wanted to touch her, wanted... well, it didn't matter, did it? She hadn't even come. He was lying on the ground, maybe dying, while Luthor's true colors were exposed before all, and she hadn't come.

His eyes slid closed against the blur of motion over by the balcony, the shouts that were as muffled as if he were still floating underwater, cleaning himself from the dirt and silt of a mile-long trench and trying to decide what he should do when he returned to Lois, trying to decide if there was a chance for them, a future where she could be his friend again rather than an enemy. Floating, peaceful, serene before the violence of the storm; he only wished the water was blue rather than that sickly, glowing green.

"Superman! *Superman!* Someone help me!"

He was dreaming again. He sank deeper, closed his eyes more firmly, a child tucked away beneath his blankets, hiding, *hiding* because the world was too big and noisy and demanding and *disappointing* to face anymore. But this was a good dream. Lois's voice, shouting for him, worried and concerned. Lois's warmth permeating his skin, penetrating past the armor of his cape as she knelt next to him. Lois's fingers gentle on his face, avoiding the slices in his flesh, whispers of coolness and grace painting a masterpiece between the ravages of war Luthor had left. Lois, here, with him, focused on *him* even though it was Luthor's penthouse and Luthor's downfall and Luthor's name that would be on every headline the next morning. Every headline except the Daily Planet's, because the Daily Planet didn't have headlines anymore, but that was as painful to contemplate as the green tears in his skin, so he frowned and focused instead on Lois.

There were more hands than hers on him, turning him, straightening him, and they would see the blood on his side, see the scar from where Luthor had stabbed Clark Kent and left him for dead. They would see and his parents would have to flee and he should have known better than to ever think anything would be simple.

But Lois was right there, her fingers working against his side, and suddenly his cape was blanketing him, red blood on red folds, hidden and discreet, and his parents were safe.

"Get a doctor!" she snapped, and the extra hands were gone.

Clark tried to open his eyes. He could lift weights that boggled the minds of anyone who knew the laws of natural science, but making his flimsy eyelids open was beyond him and so he wouldn't even get a last glimpse of Lois Lane. He tried to reach out, to touch her, to caress her cheek, but his hand no longer obeyed him, and it was easier to stop trying at all than to try and fail over and over and over again. Easier to flee to the darkness and the lake, restful and blue and full of cold sunlight, than to wake to the ruins that were left to him.

"Clark. Clark, please." A whisper in his ear, a breath against ruptured flesh. But it was *her* voice, and she was saying his name, and that was a miracle. "Clark, don't leave me. Please, please, don't leave me. You have to be okay."

A dream — a good one — but dreams didn't come true, heroes couldn't save everyone, and sometimes monsters and good men were the same thing.

"No more Clark," he breathed out through liquid bubbling in his throat, tickling his lips. "He's dead."

"No!" Lois snapped at him. But it wasn't her usual snap of command. It was fractured with doubt, broken with tears, made

ineffectual by regret. "No, Clark! Clark!"

But Clark was dead, and without Clark, Superman was only a blue suit and red cape now stained with so much blood it was too heavy to wear. The apartment was gone and so was the closet, and there was nothing left.

He slipped into an abyss with no end, and all dreams ceased.

Chapter 6: The Green, Green Glow of Fear

It was the sunlight that drew him back. Warm, silken, revitalizing, reaching into that dark abyss and hanging tendrils of pure, rejuvenating light to draw him back into the world of the living. He resisted for a while, but an abyss wasn't much of an escape when it was punctured by light and warmth, and anyway, hiding wasn't going to bring Clark back, wasn't going to make Superman enough for the rest of his life, wasn't going to take him back to a time before capital letters could destroy him. So he followed the sunlight, sparkling trails that led him to his battered, wounded body and abandoned him in hurt.

He'd been light, free, drifting like gossamer down, before the sunlight touched him, and instead of leading him to the open skies its seductive sensations had promised, it slammed him into a heavy, sluggish form and left him alone and aching, and he didn't know if he'd ever felt so betrayed. His feet were too warm, encased beneath blankets that were rough and coarse against sensitive skin, his hands were curled up and cramped, and it was almost as much of an effort to open his eyes now as it had been in Luthor's penthouse. But worse was the pervasive feeling of *lesser*, the sensation of being cut off, crippled, destroyed. All he could hear was the ticking of some sort of monitor beside him and the exhalations of his own breath — the rest of the world was still and silent. Dead. He was blind and deaf and helpless, and there were tiny lines of acid pain running along portions of his flesh, and the only thing he could feel inside was a terrible, crippling numbness.

Gently, slowly, his eyes still stubbornly closed, he lifted one of his hands, stretched his fingers to uncramp them, and then drew them up to touch the scar on his stomach. He found only a dim, trailing line evident through whatever fabric he wore, scarcely there at all. It didn't hurt, but his *fingers*, brushing against the scratchy covers over him, tremored with teetering pain. The slashes Luthor had made using the Kryptonite glass, Clark realized, the network of pain drawn against his skin, bright and vivid and *sharp*.

Grunting with the effort — *really* wishing his eyes would just cooperate and open already — he tore the covers away. Instantly, he felt less constrained. Sunlight hit him more fully, bathing him in solar energy, and the ache in the center of his bones eased a bit, allowing him to finally take a deep, full breath.

With gold limning his vision, he was able to convince his rebellious eyes to open, though only to mere slits, flinching away from the light that turned from gauzy curtains to slivers of too-bright pain.

He was alone in a tiny, white room, his form sprawling across a too-small hospital bed, with a myriad of wires trailing from various parts of his body. The window in the facing wall was small, a tiny square — enough to let in light but not nearly enough to let out a Kryptonian.

And the door was closed. A bright silver lock on the handle. No window in it to peer through to the outside. Shut up tight like a barred gate denying him entry to the world.

The numbness that had been cloaking Clark in some form or fashion for he didn't even know how long didn't just break — it *shattered*.

He rolled off the hospital bed with a clatter, lightning bolts of pain sparking from his hands, his face, his neck, as he tore at the wires, ignoring the way they ripped his unusually fragile skin as they came free. His feet wobbled and protested at bearing his

weight, but he convinced them to lift him upright, and then he was staggering to the door, scrabbling at it with white-scarred hands... and it didn't open.

Panting, almost hyperventilating, the air he could take in little more than tiny puffs of mist evaporating beneath the glare of desert sun, Clark crumpled to the white, sterile floor, one hand stubbornly holding onto the silver doorknob. Only dimly, belatedly, did he realize that he was still wearing the Superman suit, his boots tucked absurdly into a corner, their color like a Kool-Aid stain on the side of a child's mouth, embarrassing and exasperating to the parent trying to show them off to visiting relatives.

Not that he was being shown off, Clark told himself. Of course not. He was Superman. Governments all around the world welcomed him, *begged* him to come and visit their countries, give his support, aid in whatever catastrophes might afflict them. They wouldn't countenance taking him and locking him up in a white room and dissecting him like a frog. That was a fear from long ago, a childhood haunting that couldn't possibly be made real in his adult world, so it was surely just a misunderstanding. He only had to try the doorknob again. Calmly, this time, carefully, like a civilized being, not like a wild animal that had to be locked up for the good of everyone else.

Somewhere deep inside, tucked up next to that withering, shriveled-up hope he couldn't rid himself of, he wondered where Lois was. Wondered if she had left him to this. Abandoned him. But she wouldn't — she *wouldn't*. She admired Superman too much, and surely, *surely*, there was enough left of their friendship to ensure that she would fight for him. She would. He knew it with an undeniable certainty, a trust and a confidence he didn't dare question.

So if she wasn't here...

Clark tore at the door again, heedless of the monitor blaring out an alarm behind him or the pinpricks of pain stabbing all over his body as nerve endings complained at their rude awakening. He tried to cry out, to call for help, but his throat was hoarse and his voice emerged dry and quiet — and on second thought, that was probably a good thing. Clark could call for help, but he was in the Superman Suit, and the hero didn't call for help. He *answered* calls for help.

But he was weak. He was Superman, and it didn't matter, because the door was unbreachable. He could tear at it, he could pound his fists against it, he could twist the handle as much and as often as he liked, but it wouldn't open. It simply stood there.

Ordinary.

Solid.

Terrifying.

Clark closed his eyes. Took in a deep breath. Another. Another. Stood to his feet. Reached out a hand as steady as he could make it. Closed his fingers around the silver doorknob, warm from his frantic grip. Twisted.

Nothing. Nothing but a click and a halted movement as the lock caught and held.

The floor was cold against his bare feet as he took several steps backward, stumbling away from the door. He avoided the bed, instead backing himself into the corner most saturated with light, and planting himself there, a wounded, pliable tree choosing its spot with care and putting down tentative roots. Carefully, warily, he looked up to the window, examined its small frame for any escape. It was square and small, no more than ten inches or so, set high in the wall so that he'd be able to reach it only if he stretched up on his tiptoes — or if he could fly, but if he could do that, then he wouldn't have to worry about the window at all — and seemed good only for funneling sunlight through since it showed nothing more than a white wall outside it.

That monitor, glowing with green lights showing aborted

readings, still shrieked out its warnings, a high-pitched keening that tore at the insides of Clark's ears — a good sign, he couldn't help but think, because he might not know how well ordinary humans heard, but he was relatively certain they didn't hear on quite such high wavelengths. He fought and defeated the urge to pick up the irritating thing and throw it across the room until it *stopped* its shrill whine. No need to scare whoever was holding him here anymore than he might have already done, he told himself; no need to give them *reason* to keep him locked away. No need to do anything but remain calm and in control, to be *Superman* so that they would realize their mistake and let him *out*.

Luthor, he thought. It was the only answer.

Henderson had come — Clark remembered the door bursting open, the arrival of police officers with their weapons and their handcuffs and their Miranda rights. Henderson had heard Luthor's confession, heard that the businessman had killed Clark Kent, had conspired to kill Superman, had thought he could continue to grow his criminal empire. That should have been enough to ensure Luthor was put away, but... but Luthor was slippery and conniving, and now it was Superman who was locked up like a criminal. Like an alien.

Like a monster.

Which was exactly what Luthor did, Clark thought in despair. He twisted the truth until it was as poisonous as lies, turned lies into truths etched in sincere malice, made everything go upside down and inside out and *wrong*. It should be Luthor locked up, but it wasn't. It was Clark instead — no, it was *Superman*, the untouchable paragon, brought down to earth and shackled to the ground.

And now he stood in a beam of sunshine, a spotlight that would, he hoped, turn him from a vulnerable man — not ordinary, not human, not *Clark Kent* — into the superhero who could fly from this place without a second's hesitation, without questions or accusations or suspicion. Only... only his Suit was torn, stained with blood turned rust on blue, a cape drenched in more blood and dried to stiff shreds of itself. White scars spider-webbed whatever skin wasn't covered, and beneath the Suit, the scar where Luthor had left his blade in a reporter's flesh was neat and covered with tiny stitches — like lab animals, like frogs cut down the middle, their outsides peeled back to reveal the secrets hidden within. And Lois was gone, and he was alone, and if his rash plan had only succeeded in making everything worse, then he wasn't sure what he could possibly do now to fix everything that had gone so very, very wrong.

Everything he touched turned to dust, as if his very presence were a curse. He'd told Lois, and she'd hated him — *both* of him. He'd tried to expose Luthor, to Lois and to Metropolis, and Clark Kent had been murdered. He'd confronted Luthor, and now Superman was nothing more than a specimen in a lab.

His hands curled into fists, his muscles rippled, a seething, raging mass of fear and anguish and anger — dim anger, distant and unknowable, so much wearier than that black ice that Luthor had leeching him of with glass shards — stretching inside him, reaching out, testing their confines.

The door was locked. But it was only a door. Only a thin, thin slab of metal and plastic, a two-dimensional barrier he could strike down if need be. Clark wouldn't — he'd wait, he'd plan, he'd investigate — but Superman... Superman was less tamed, more feral, utterly direct.

He'd taken only one step toward that door when he heard, from beyond the closed and locked obstacle in his path to the skies and Lois, a symphony of footsteps coming toward his cell. Quick and sharp, heavy and hurried, tentative and lagging — a dozen sets of footsteps that burst into the room as easily as if *they* were the supermen and he alone were the ordinary, normal, not-enough man.

The door, heedless of its betrayal, swung lightly on its hinges, and in no more than the blink of an eye, his cell was filled by white, white, white, *white*, a vibrant white so thick and heavy and dense that it made him flinch away. White lab coats, white shirts, white badges, white faces, expressions with eyes so wide they showed the whites all the way around — so much white that Clark was abruptly aware of how vivid his Superman colors were, how starkly he stood out next to them, how very alien he looked, standing before them, staring back at them exactly like a lion in a cage, restless and wild and hungry for freedom.

He straightened, stiffened his spine, pretended he was not hurt and exhausted and confused, and faced them all as if he had nothing to fear. As if he were not an alien locked away in a padded white room. As if he were simply waiting politely for an escort to the exit. As if he were not terrified that it would be Luthor who strolled into the cell next, cigar in his mouth, triumph in his eyes, smugness in every line of his body. As if he were not frantically trying to figure out where Lois was, if he had only dreamed her in that penthouse, if she was alive and safe or lost and hurt somewhere, needing Superman.

The superhero — the alien — on one side of the room, the humans on the other, staring and staring and *staring* until he thought he would go mad, like the lion in his cage, coiled energy hidden beneath slanted eyes and lax muscles and rippling patience, watching its audience and waiting for its moment that might never come.

“Superman!” the lead man exclaimed, all tall angles and knobby elbows and balding head, so earnest and excited, so worried and almost afraid that the sheer force of his emotions nearly made Clark stagger back a step, stumble away from him, from them all, until his back was against the wall as literally as it was metaphorically.

“He’s awake!”

“Look at that, already standing!”

“I don’t believe it!”

So much astonishment, so much curiosity, so much unbounded, unhidden frank perusal, and Clark wanted to shrink into the floor — or better yet, explode into the air, burst through the white ceiling with its gleaming reflections of white shadows, flee into the skies where he’d always before felt so alone but that he now craved with all his soul.

“Superman!” said the first scientist again. “Are you sure you should be up? We *just* finished operating not even ten minutes ago!”

“Operating,” Clark repeated. He couldn’t fly, but he felt himself spiraling away from them all, could tangibly feel his grip on Earth and humanity slipping away from him, as ethereal and abstract as the wind itself, playing about him and promising him he could grasp it, then laughing and darting away, always out of reach, taunting and tempting and tormenting. Spiraling in twisting loops that left everything distant, twirling round and round in a cyclone he couldn’t control as he was funneled away from this earth as easily as he’d funneled away that tornado. As if it were nothing, as if it didn’t belong, as if it could bring only danger and so could not land anywhere near people. He tried to speak, had to stop and swallow, then tried again. “Where am I?”

“Well...” The scientist stopped, as if taken aback. His badge was half-hidden behind the fold of the collar, but Clark could read ‘Dr. Bernard Klein’ and the logo that answered his question even before Klein looked down at the badge himself, as if needing the reminder, and said, “STAR Labs. A hospital just isn’t equipped to deal with a Kryptonian, you understand. We’ve been given everything anyone knows about you and even we didn’t know what we were doing — xeno-biologists aren’t exactly something we’ve ever had to —”

“Wait!” The voice was so welcome, so longed for, that Clark thought he might be hallucinating, the sharp, sudden, *purposeful*

solo of footsteps pushing through the stillness as welcome to him as an unlocked exit door. “Wait, don’t — stop, get out of my way!”

And then there was a burst of color exploding before his hue-starved eyes, and Lois pushed her way through the mass of white until she stood in the middle of his cell, planted on the thin strip of floor that was all that stood between him and the intent, eager eyes of his audience, her expression fixed on him to the exclusion of all else. A lion-tamer, he found himself thinking, and felt only relief, because with her there, with her blue, blood-stained sweater, her grime-torn jeans, her dark, *dark* hair and eyes, the vitality sparking outward from her in every direction as if she carried her own personal storm with her wherever she went... well, with her there to dilute the white behind her, he didn’t feel quite so alien, so set apart, so hopeless.

And she was safe and alive and *here* — and maybe she was dirty and looked as tired as he felt, and maybe she had streaks of tears staining the paleness of her complexion, and maybe there was blood on her hands, but she was *here*. She wasn’t dead, wasn’t locked away, wasn’t in Luthor’s clutches. She was here, with *him*, looking at him as if there were so many things she wanted to say if only they were alone. Looking as if, maybe, none of those things would be cruel or harsh or scornful.

“Lois,” he said, and only when her name sprinkled the air, colored the white aura choking him, did he allow himself to believe that she was really there. His voice emerged hoarse and strained and not at all like himself, but that was probably a blessing in disguise because he didn’t think he would have sounded like the aloof superhero when he said her name, didn’t think he would have been able to hide the ghost of Clark Kent haunting the body of Superman.

“Superman,” she said, suddenly still, motionless... but her eyes still full of so much he was sure he was interpreting incorrectly because if she’d looked at him like *this* before, then he wouldn’t have delayed nearly so long in telling her he loved her.

Except.

“Superman,” she’d said, and she’d always looked at the superhero like that, hadn’t she, always set her ideal up on a pedestal that had no room for anyone or anything else, certainly didn’t give Clark Kent a chance, or Lane and Kent, Lois and Clark, him and her, *them*.

Once again, still, *always*, the name cut to the quick. It shouldn’t, of course, not with so many curious scientists in the cell with him, but... but it did. He’d done away with his own capital letters, set them aside in Luthor’s penthouse when it became clear how much there was left of life *outside* those places, but he’d forgotten, in his pain and his resolve and his desperation — and his terrible, overwhelming *grief* — that there was one capitalized word he still couldn’t get away from.

No escape from the alien inside him, and how ironic was that — he wanted to laugh — that the identity that *gave* him an escape was now his prison.

The sunlight filtering in through the too-small window seemed to be growing dimmer, less translucent, more gray than gold. Lois was still in the same clothes she’d been wearing when he’d spilled all his secrets out before her and watched her trample them. And he felt as if he’d been awake for days, as if he hadn’t slept since inanimate objects became debilitating weapons, or as if the duration of his unconsciousness hadn’t done anything for him at all. And he wondered, incongruously, if so little time had passed, after all. Was this still the same day that he’d flown Lois to that cruise ship? That he’d breathed life into a young boy’s lungs and dug a trench to stop a tidal wave? That he’d showed Lois his hidden closet and heard her denounce him as a monster. That he’d faced Luthor and lost everything.

How could so little time pass while he lived lifetimes? While

he watched lives destroyed and empires fall and eras end? How could he look at Lois and see her looking back at him, and be swept right back to the haunted, confused man he'd been since she told him Luthor had proposed?

"Lois," he said again, because he *was* still Clark, because even Superman needed something to hold onto when he was alone and frail and locked up. Because she was standing right in front of him.

Her eyes, dark points of light refracting the sunlight back at him, softened. There were tears shimmering in their depths, casting still more light toward him, but none of those tears fell, and he thought that she should probably be the one with the steel moniker. Lois Lane, woman of steel, he thought with a twist of bitter amusement, and Superman, the superhero turned mad dog, crazed and caged and condemned.

"Superman," she said, and he wished she wouldn't. Wished she would say nothing, only look at him like she was, or else start talking about anything and everything in that way only she could, countless words weaving a world, private and intimate, around the two of them, just as she'd done so many times before, usually while they sat at their respective desks or in her Jeep on a stake-out. He thought he might be willing to do anything to bring that time back, to turn back the clock and erase all the ticks and tocks that had led them here, to this place, standing so close and yet so far apart.

"I *really* don't think you should be up yet," Klein interrupted, pressing forward. He reached out toward Clark; his hands were empty, but Clark took a hasty step backward anyway, lifting his arms and crossing them tightly over his chest, a barrier at least as impenetrable as the door they'd opened so easily. Klein didn't seem to notice. "The Kryptonite affected you pretty badly, and we had to expose you to more of it in order to be able to operate. There might still be side-effects —"

"You have Kryptonite?" Clark demanded, his hidden hands forming into fists yet again. He clenched them tightly enough to feel his pulse threading between them, compressed between fear and alarm, hot and ready to explode so that he imagined he was combustible, one second away from a meltdown.

"We used the shards Luthor had," Lois interjected quickly. The entire room, tensed at his abrupt question, relaxed when his attention moved back to her, curious onlookers trusting to the lion-tamer to keep them safe. "There..." She swallowed hard, then canted her chin up, relying on that curious, entrancing inner strength of hers to keep going. "There was a shard left inside you, from the blade Luthor used on you. I'm... I'm sorry."

Klein nodded vigorously, sweat dotting his brow. "It was festering, but thanks to Ms. Lane, we managed to get it all out. Of course, seeing as how your physiology is so alien, we're not quite sure how different your body's healing process will be. You *seem* to be doing okay." He swept his gaze up and down Clark's body, from the top of his rumpled hair — probably looking far too much like Clark's — to his bare feet, sticking out so absurdly from the bottoms of the suit.

Clark blinked, tried not to flinch away from the open perusal, tried not to give away just how dirty he suddenly felt, how much he wanted to burst into flight, to employ so much speed he became only ribbons of color and everything extraneous, everything *not-him* was burned away by the friction, left far behind to the unchangeable past. "I see," he said slowly. Deeply. Carefully. Superman, confident and upright and unafraid and mildly curious about the things the people of this world did and thought and considered important. Trying, over all, *not* to be Clark Kent, boy from Kansas who couldn't imagine what it had been like to be surrounded by a team of scientists wielding Kryptonite and scalpels, laying him out on cold beds in white rooms and cutting and examining and probing and marveling over the *alienness* of their victim.

Patient, he reminded himself. *Patient*, not *victim*, but he couldn't quite make himself internalize the correction.

The scientists didn't seem to realize the fear turning Superman into stone, but Clark thought that Lois did. At least, she took a small step nearer him, one hand raised ever so slightly toward him, his lion-tamer preempting an attack from her lion. "Superman," she said quickly. "It's all right, really. They were just trying to help — Dr. Klein's the only one who seemed to think he could possibly save you, and I... I needed him to try. But they did get the shard out and they've agreed to do whatever you want with the leftover Kryptonite —"

"Oh, yes!" Klein shuddered, while around him, his colleagues exchanged nervous glances. "We don't want it! It's yours, Superman, whenever you like. We have it locked in our vault now, but you probably know of a safer place."

"Yes," Clark said softly. "I do."

The sun should be hot enough to burn it to nothing, and if it wasn't, then he would throw it toward the next nearest star. Or he hoped he would. Hoped that the multiple heartbeats pulsing in his ears and the cold against his feet growing less important and the fading white lines along his hands and neck and face meant that he would soon be able to fly and hurl objects toward nearby galaxies and leave this place behind in the feeble hope it wouldn't come back to torment him in late-night dreams.

"So..." Klein paused, looked back at his colleagues as if to give himself courage, and then looked back at Superman. He took a tentative step nearer — Clark would have flinched away, but Lois was there first, sliding effortlessly between them, as if she didn't even notice what she was doing. "Are you feeling all right? I could check the wound, make sure it's not —"

Clark didn't even have time to tense, to swell up under the depths of his instant and complete negation, before Lois was moving, holding out her arms, herding the scientists and doctors toward the door. She was talking too, lots of words falling from her mouth to help her herd the white mass away from him, her own personal army of indomitable syllables deployed in his defense, and Clark wanted to break down and tremble and try not to shudder into a thousand bits at this proof that she didn't completely hate him.

Or maybe he was about to shudder into pieces out of fear of whatever she planned to say to him. He didn't think he could bear to hear any more denunciations, to defend against any more accusations. He loved her and he still, even after everything, hoped for a future with her — as if it were still possible, as if she would ever forgive him or see him as less than a monster — but he was beginning to think the truest thing he'd told her at the fountain was that he couldn't bear to fight with her any longer. He didn't want to argue or defend, to accuse or explain. He just wanted... he wanted to be in the same room with her. He wanted to listen to her talk. He wanted to bring her a cup of coffee and watch her take a sip as if it were the first coffee she'd drunk in years.

He wanted her as a friend again. He wanted her as a partner again — not Superman and Lois Lane, taking down crime moguls and fooling scientists — but Lane and Kent. He wanted... he wanted his dreams back. Dreams of a not-so-far-off day when she looked at him and saw something special in the ordinary man, something worth noticing. Dreams of dinners over candlelight and kisses by moonlight and secretive smiles by daylight. Dreams of a Secret shared because he wasn't afraid anymore, or at least if he was, it was a fear dwarfed by his hope and his love and his belief that they'd come through it all right in the end.

Dreams that he could be enough. That she could love him. That Clark Kent could have it all, parents and world and home and job and Lois Lane... *and* Superman.

He wanted dreams, but all he had were vague, rootless hopes,

a tiny shard left buried in him after the blade itself had been drawn out and thrown away, festering inside him and tainting whatever coherency he could manage to grab hold of.

And then the door closed — only, this time he didn't mind because Lois was the one closing it and she was still here with him and so he didn't feel closed in, didn't feel locked up, just vaguely trapped — and he was alone with her, and she was turning back toward him, and when he gathered up enough courage to be able to meet her eyes, he found something astonishing.

It was *his* Lois. His friend and his partner, looking at him as if he were still Clark, as if he still could *be* Clark. It was the same expression in her eyes as he'd seen in Smallville, when the echoes of a gunshot were still ringing in his ears and water was dripping off him and bruises were forming on his skin, and she'd thrown herself into his arms and held him close to herself.

She was looking at him as if he weren't a monster.

Against his better judgment, that hope inside him grew and swelled, a wound that would never heal, a throbbing scar laid over his heart.

"Clark," she whispered, and then she threw herself forward exactly like an echo of her past self. Not a lion-tamer at all, was his vague thought as his arms dropped from in front of his chest and slipped — tentatively, hesitantly, *desperately* — around her slender, drooping form. Not a lion-tamer, but the lioness, fierce and wild and angry, succumbing to the pull of... of what? He didn't know, wasn't sure, the analogy slipping away from him as easily as Clark Kent had, and all he could do was hold onto her, cling to her as if she were the sole piece of reality left in a fading world.

Her voice was a comforting hum, as soft as sunbeams, as gentle as air cradling his body a thousand feet above the ground, as necessary for life as his parents and ordinary persona, so it took him a moment to claw through his urgent, almost panicked relief, and translate the hum vibrating across his collar bone and neck into individual words.

"I'm so sorry," she was saying, over and over again, her arms locked around him so tightly he thought her strength could surely rival Superman's. "I'm so sorry — I knew you wouldn't want to be here, but Superman's a target and we couldn't hide that you were weak and the hospital doesn't have any security, and... a-and you were bleeding and you wouldn't wake up and I thought you —" The comforting thrum of her voice was chewed up and devoured by a sob. He *thought* it was a sob anyway, and her slender, fragile frame was shaking in his already-trembling arms — and the realization that she was as near to falling apart as he was made him want to sweep her up and fly her to safety and make a dozen cups of coffee for her.

But he couldn't fly, and he wasn't normal enough for coffee, so all he could do was hold her.

"You needed a doctor," she began again. "STAR Labs helped equip you for Nightfall and I thought... I thought they might know enough now to help, and Dr. Klein said he would try, so here you are, but I didn't want you to wake up alone — I wanted to be here, to explain everything so you wouldn't have to wonder or be afraid, but we didn't think you'd wake up so soon or even... maybe at all. You were so *still*, so *pale*, and you didn't move at all, even when they brought the Kryptonite into the room."

"Here?" he asked, just to make her stop. He didn't like hearing her cry, didn't like feeling the sobs rippling through her — hated, above all, hearing the real, sheer *terror* in her voice. "That's why I'm here, in this room?" He drew back a bit, not wanting to let go of her but wanting — *needing* — to see her, to try to ease her suffering. But the sight of her, broken and desolate and so very confused — and all of it his fault — almost made him fall to his knees. It certainly compelled the truth from him.

"The door was locked," he admitted, not able any longer to meet her intent gaze. "And the window... everything was white." Which didn't make sense, he knew it didn't, but he didn't want to finish. Bad enough she knew how much of a liar he was, knew how weak and inept he was, had already seen him broken and bloody — why did she have to see his childhood fears too?

But she was silent, her words locked away as she stared up at him, waiting. For him to tell the truth. To trust her. To prove that he wasn't a liar by habit as well as by necessity.

"Dad was always afraid for me," he said quietly, looking to the window over her head. "He warned me not to let people know what I could do or they'd dissect me like a frog." He forced the semblance of a smile, but from Lois's sharp inhalation, he didn't think it had quite the effect he'd meant it to. "Stupid, I know, but —"

She shook her head, sharp and violent, and her hands tightened on his shoulders. They weren't hugging anymore, not really, but she wasn't letting her hands drop, wasn't stepping away, and he couldn't detect any signs of uneasiness at all concerning his proximity to her. So carefully, shyly, Clark let himself sustain his own touches, let his hands rest on her waist and his feet tilt him ever so slightly nearer her. An almost hug, hovering on the threshold of something more than it was.

"I'm sorry," she said again. Not the words Clark wanted to hear. Lois saying she was sorry was like Lois speaking a different language, and right now he didn't want new and unfamiliar — he wanted the ordinary, the normal, the comforting familiarity of *his* life. "I didn't... I didn't know that. It was the only room with security that had a window, but it... it locks from the outside." She was silent, as if waiting for some response, but he had nothing to say and so she added, almost hastily, "I made them keep the Suit on, though, as much as possible. I thought if you woke up without it, you'd... you'd wonder what they knew. And I wasn't sure if seeing Superman in a hospital gown would make you look too much like Clark."

Stung, hurt, so very wounded — and he *hated* it, hated that instant reaction, because she was right, she was helping, she was protecting him, so why did it matter that she sounded so distant and lost, and yet how could it *not* matter when he'd stripped her of all her defenses and left her alone and abandoned? — Clark stepped away from her. Their touch was severed, cut as abruptly as if with a scalpel revealing all their differences. "Thank you," he said, and finally, *finally*, he reclaimed his Superman voice, deep and confident and so utterly aloof. Enough to set up their boundaries again, to remind her of who he was now and who he wasn't. Enough to reassure her, to remind her that he was well and she could go back to normal.

Because as reassuring as her voice was to him, she sounded so desperate, so scared, so *unsure* of herself, and he couldn't stand that he'd been the one to bring her to her knees. Better for her to be mad at him again, for her to rant and shout and threaten him — for her to call him a monster — than to watch her shrink ever smaller and smaller, becoming *less*-Lois with every passing moment.

She watched him step away, her tears lending her face an opalescent sheen, as if she were a china doll, fragile and frozen and... and afraid.

And maybe it wasn't him.

Maybe it was Luthor.

"You brought me here to be safe," Clark said suddenly. "But Luthor... Henderson was there, I saw him. Luthor didn't get away. He's locked up... right? You're safe?"

The wrong question. Of course it was. It had to be. Ever since the Daily Planet had been ripped away from him, he couldn't seem to find the right words. Everything he said just made the damage worse — driving Lois away, confessing his love to her, threatening to use Superman's powers against her, revealing his

Secret, digging himself deeper when he tried to explain, and now... now he wasn't sure what he'd said wrong, but Lois was looking at him as if he'd died right in front of her. As if she still loved him — like a brother, like a friend, like anything but a lover, a husband — and he'd been stabbed and there was nothing she could do, no doctor to bully into helping him, no article she could write, nothing but watch him bleed out.

She took a single step toward him, reached out a careful hand and touched his arm, and there was something so haunted in her eyes that he had to cross his arms again, had to try so very uselessly to ward away whatever she was going to tell him.

"Clark," she said — and he felt limp and watery at the sound of his name, "Lex is... he jumped off the balcony."

The words didn't — *couldn't* — penetrate for a long, arrested moment.

Jumped off the balcony? No, of course not, he couldn't have. They'd been in the penthouse, countless floors up from the ground — Clark should know, he'd been in that coffin-like elevator far too long waiting for the floors to sludge past him — and Luthor was... well, he *was* an ordinary man. He couldn't fly, so why on earth would he have jumped off the balcony? He'd been jealous of Superman, had thought the hero superseded his rightful place, but even Luthor wouldn't have tried to fly on his own.

"I'm so sorry, Clark," Lois whispered, and the dam inside of him broke.

Numbness consumed him — not an aura, not a globe, not anything but complete and utter deadness. Apathy, so much of it that he finally, unknown hours after dying on the floor of his apartment, felt himself to be a new person, empty and blank, untouched by who he'd been before.

He backed up, his arms falling limp and helpless to his sides. The wall thudded painfully into his spine, and so he slid down, knees pressed up against his chest, his bare feet flat against the floor, so icy cold it sent shivers wracking through his body.

"I didn't mean for him to die," he said dazedly, staring straight ahead, at white walls bleached paler by twilight. "You have to believe me, Lois, I didn't mean to kill him."

She knelt in front of him, stared at him evenly, her expression impassive and her dark eyes sparkling with emotion he didn't dare look at too closely lest she call him something even worse than monster.

Murderer.

That was one word that didn't need a capital letter to turn it frightful and nightmarish.

No wonder they'd locked him up.

"You didn't kill him," Lois said firmly. "Lex made his own decisions. He couldn't bear to lose, so he went out his own way. That isn't your fault."

Clark shook his head and turned to stare at her dully. "I'm so sorry," he said. "He was your fiancé and you... you shouldn't have had to see that."

Finally, anger sparked in her, a passing shadow of irritation flashing across her features. "He *wasn't* my fiancé!"

"Right," he said, nodding, because what use was there in denying reality or wishing for things to be different or trying to make her see things the way he did? "But you cared about him and now he's gone, and I'm sorry."

Lois paused, the anger gone as quickly as it had come. Finally, she swallowed and met his eyes. "I care about you more," she whispered.

It was such a beautiful sentiment. Such a lovely dream. Such an impossible lie.

He sank deeper into his numbness, reached back and drew it around himself until it cloaked him, as if now that his cape was shredded and stained, the apathy could work in its stead, could become as much a symbol to him — to the new Superman he was

now, Superman without anything inside — as Superman's old cape and look was to the world. If he didn't care, if he didn't let anything touch him, then he couldn't be hurt. Couldn't look at Lois and realize just how much he'd hurt her, how much he'd stolen from her, how much he'd let be taken from her — the Daily Planet, the truth, Clark Kent, Superman, Luthor, *everything* she cared about.

He'd taken it all one way or another, and of course she couldn't care about him. Not anymore. He wasn't a monster — facing Luthor had shown him that at least, shown him what true monsters looked like, the seething complex simplicity of cunning void underlying their pretenses — but he was still a liar, still an alien, still a living dead man.

When he said nothing, Lois gave a short, disappointed nod, her eyes veiled, and stood. "Do you need anything?" she asked, and he could no more read her now than he'd been able to sitting on the edge of a fountain and looking up at her. "Is there anything that will help you recover from the Kryptonite faster?"

Clark hesitated, then shuddered and pulled his legs in closer, wrapped his arms and the tatters of his cape around himself. Looked away because he wanted to remember Lois as she'd been before he destroyed her more thoroughly than Luthor ever could have. "I want to go home," he uttered aloud.

He knew he couldn't. The door was locked, the window too small, the world too big. He couldn't leave — but he *wanted to*. He wanted to go back to that apartment that had been his, that contained all the things that made Clark real. He wanted to *be* real, even if only for one more night.

"I want to go home," he said, but he didn't have a home anymore.

Only... Lois didn't seem to remember that.

"Okay," she agreed. Easily. Simply. As if Clark weren't dead and Superman weren't locked away from the world that wasn't his. As if his apartment had anything left for him past the bloodstain on his carpet and the file of now-unnecessary evidence to condemn Luthor.

Clark blinked up at her. "What?"

"Okay," she said again. "You want to go home? You can go home."

And she offered him her hand.

Suddenly, all he could see was the hand he'd held out for her to shake that first day, in Perry's office, when she hadn't even cast him a glance. And the day when she'd stormed past him and reached out her own hand to tap him on the chest, marking him out as her own, letting him know he'd been assigned to her with that one, seemingly unimportant touch. She'd reached out hundreds of times after that, holding onto him when Nightfall had stolen his memories and his past from him — but not his dreams or his hopes, not his desires or his feelings — letting him comfort her during the story they'd done on her father's cyborgs, tucking her chilled fingers in the crook of his elbow when they walked together. A hundred days, a thousand moments, a lifetime compressed into eight months of friendship and partnership, of acceptance and understanding — because even when she hadn't understood *him* at all, she'd always understood what he wanted to do as Superman, understood that Clark was someone she could trust.

All that time, all those months, she'd been there. Yanking on his tie, rubbing his shoulders, hugging him, ruffling a hand through his hair.

Stroking his blue-clad arm, kissing him before he flew into the vastness of space, looping her arms around his neck when he caught her or saved her or just wanted to hold her.

She'd been his. Not his to love, of course, because this still wasn't a dream, wasn't an idyllic fantasy that he could twist to suit his own desires... but she'd been his friend, his advocate, his own ideal to strive for.

And now? Now she wasn't, not when she could only be a grieving friend for Clark and a casual acquaintance for Superman — but she held out her hand as if none of that mattered. As if for this one moment, this one night, they could both pretend together that things hadn't irrevocably changed.

He didn't care if it would hurt, later, if it would tear him to pieces to have this now and then lose it all over again. He didn't let himself care. He just took her hand — unfurled himself, let his tattered and insufficient cape slip away, stood on cold, bare feet, and wrapped his fingers around hers. She didn't let go either, not when he stopped to put on his boots, not when his entire body went rigid with tension as they waited for her knock to bring someone to open the door for them, not when they walked through endless corridors of white and silver. She just kept holding on, and Clark let her lead him blindly, not caring where she led him or where they ended up so long as she didn't let go. He wanted this moment to last, wanted to savor these last few moments of being the strange alien-human hybrid that Superman was with Clark Kent beating inside his heart, and so he stayed silent lest any stray noise shatter the illusion, stayed passive lest any sudden movement jar him from this dream, stayed numb lest he be turned to heavy, unresponsive lead beneath the burden settling ever deeper on his shoulders.

Lois didn't let go even when they passed Dr. Klein, stammering and bobbing in his haste to catch up with them. Clark saw the scientist coming and regretfully, but resignedly because he had known this couldn't last, opened his hand to let her touch fade away. But Lois didn't let go, only stepped slightly in front of Superman and let her hand dangle behind her, tangled up in the torn remnants of his cape — armor once more, hiding that which mattered most. Gratitude, like the warm homespun quilt on Clark's bed, settled across him, momentarily displacing that cloak of apathy.

"I just want you to know that I'm sorry, Superman," Dr. Klein said, sincerity transforming him from the bumbling approximation of a threat to a man who'd saved Clark's life, from the specter of his childhood nightmares to a living, breathing doctor who'd done more than anyone could have expected of him.

"Thank you," Superman said, surprised by his own sincerity.

Klein smiled faintly, as if he knew how much that statement cost Clark, but he reached out and offered him a small, gray box. "Here, it's all the Kryptonite we could find, but don't worry — it's in a lead box. I just wanted you to have it so that you didn't have to be afraid of where it was or who had it. And I'll make sure no one's watching when you leave. The cameras are already off."

Superman was turned mute. He was the one named a hero, the one who had articles written on him and cameras turned in his direction every time he made an appearance, the one made into a symbol of hope for the world — but he didn't know why. Didn't know why one brightly attired man with more-than-average strength was considered the hero when there were men like Dr. Klein, and Perry and Jimmy and Henderson and Jack, women like Lois and his mom. They called him hero, but Superman looked at the human in front of him and wished he could name his own heroes.

All he had to give in exchange were words — for now at least, until later, when the news of this day's events hit the streets, and then maybe the Superman Foundation could do something to show his appreciation and gratitude, his *respect*, for the man in front of him.

"Thank you," he said again. It wasn't nearly enough, but Klein straightened as if it was, and he smiled at Superman, almost shyly, and then he turned and headed back into the depths of STAR Labs, a place that didn't seem nearly as terrifying now as it had mere moments ago.

Clark turned back and was surprised to catch an almost wistful smile playing along the edges of Lois's mouth, her eyes fixed on him. It was unnerving, to see her so soft and worn down but smiling at him.

"What?" he asked, warily.

The smile disappeared as if it had never been, and all that was left was a bleak sort of sadness. "Nothing," she muttered.

Then she tugged on his hand and led him outside.

Chapter 7: Shadow of a Man

The sun was almost gone, falling away beyond the edge of the world, slipping out of reach and leaving Superman consigned to the shadows. He stared after its last fading sliver regretfully and wished he'd come to a bit earlier, just enough to recharge himself by way of that tiny window so he could fly — or at least run with superspeed — after that sun, chase it and catch it and beg it to return him to his ordinary strength. To make him Superman again so he'd be invulnerable when he faced the apartment where he'd died.

"We're almost there," Lois said, tightening her hold on his hand when he stumbled in the darkness. He didn't know where she was taking him — they certainly weren't anywhere near Clark's apartment — but he followed her without comment anyway, unable to even think about letting go of her or turning away from her. One more night, he promised himself, and then he would go. He'd make a place for himself somewhere else, somewhere distant, where no one around him would be connected to him lest they be hurt to control the superhero.

Inwardly, he snorted. Apparently he'd be living in the North Pole, because that was the only way he'd be able to ensure that no one around him was hurt when others like Luthor came after him. More white, there, snow and ice and glaciers, more white than even STAR Labs possessed, so maybe he wasn't free of his cell yet. Maybe he wouldn't ever be free again, because Clark Kent was the only escape he'd ever had and that key had been melted down and destroyed.

Lois stopped, making Clark stop too and look up. They were standing in front of her silver Jeep; it was so familiar, so much a thing that Clark and Lois had done, returning from their adventures to her vehicle and driving back to the Planet together or to his apartment or to hers, that Clark smiled, melancholy drifting over him like his own private raincloud.

"Here." Lois took a breath, and then, finally, she dropped his hand. He'd known it was coming, so it shouldn't have surprised him, but it did, a bit, to lose that contact between them, that last bridge connecting them no matter the events of the past day. She reached out to open the door for him, as if she thought he were too weak to do it himself — and maybe he was, he realized when a spasm arced through him as he climbed in. He tried to hide the shift in his breathing, the way he tightened his arm against his side in an effort to stifle it, but he wasn't sure how successful he was. He didn't usually *have* any pains to hide so he didn't exactly have practice doing it.

Lois frowned, worried and tense, her hands fluttering about him, before she shut the door and walked around to get into the driver's seat. Clark watched her the whole way, afraid to take his eyes off her lest she disappear. She'd already done so much for him, already helped and protected him, already lied for him, and he was afraid that if he looked away or blinked too long, he'd open his eyes and find that she was gone, dismissing him from her life with a last good riddance as farewell.

But she was there, sitting across from him, driving him to Clark Kent's apartment without a word of complaint. Saving him again and again even though he knew she was angry with him. Even though he'd ripped away her best friend, her hero, and her almost-fiancé all in one night. Still there, still helping, still as alive and vibrant as she'd been since the moment she tore into

Perry's office and his heart.

He was pretty sure he was falling in love with her all over again, as if his heart were afraid he'd gotten too used to the feelings he'd had for her already and needed to refresh them, to slather a new, revitalized coat of love atop all the other existing layers. He didn't mind; it built him up, layered him through with frame after frame after frame of different types of strength and cohesion, defined him and diffused the intensity of his emotions, gave him a point of focus, a goal, a purpose, allowed him to keep his little breadcrumbs of hope.

It was a long drive and he didn't want to say anything in case it would start them fighting again — didn't want to have to hear her call him Superman again — so Clark studied his surroundings with absorption. It might, after all, be the last time he got to drive with her, so he needed to memorize it, needed to etch it into his mind's eye so that he could take it out, in the lonely days when he was holed up in his lair in the North Pole, and see it all around him, pretend he was living it again.

Everything was as he remembered it — he'd already memorized moments like this, better ones, when he was Clark and she was his friend, laughing at him and teasing him, and the future was as bright as the hope in his heart. Everything the same... except the blood staining the backseat.

Splashes of blood, drip-dripping in dried, crusted form over gray upholstery. Blood matching that on his cape, on his Suit, on his skin. Blood sinking into everything around him until he thought that every color in the world was either the red of blood or the green of pain.

"Lois..." he began, but then stopped, because the answer was obvious. Blood, and he was sure these bloodstains would match the ones on Clark Kent's floor. She was always so careful of her Jeep, always certain to make sure Bobby Bigmouth didn't let any of his payments fall on the floorboard or stain the seats, but now... now Clark's blood was all around him, and the stench of it was suddenly enough to make Superman almost overwhelmingly nauseous.

He wanted to apologize for ruining even this, wanted to let her know how very sorry he was that he'd tainted absolutely everything in her life — wanted to thank her, as sincerely and deeply as he had Bernard Klein, for not giving up on him — but his voice had abandoned him. Which, in the grand scheme of things, probably didn't matter that much, he supposed. Superman didn't need to give speeches or make conversation; he just needed to be strong and fast and *there*.

But Lois's hands were clenched around the steering wheel so tightly that white was peeking out, white like in that tiny cell, so when they pulled to a stop outside his apartment, he gathered his courage and reached over and put his hand over hers. "Thank you, Lois." Weak, pitiful words for all he wanted to say, but at least he could say them. At least they didn't get stuck inside his throat, jumbled up and clogged like a traffic jam even Superman couldn't sort out.

She took in a sharp, shuddering breath, and for an instant he thought she was going to burst into tears, or maybe explode, disintegrate as he'd thought he might do at that fountain, shatter and come apart in a cyclone of her own, all brilliant violence and crackling intensity. But she didn't do either one of those things. Instead, she took in another breath, and another, until she steadied them through sheer force of will; then she met his gaze and gave him a smile so forced that he literally flinched away from it. "We're here," she said.

His hand dropped away from hers as if burned. He kept forgetting who he was now, *what* he was. Kept forgetting that there were lines drawn between them now and he couldn't cross them anymore.

Kept forgetting that hope was just another form of punishment, a method of torture more insidious and pervasive

than even Kryptonite.

Getting out of the Jeep was less painful than getting in had been, which made him breathe a quiet sigh of relief. But standing there, next to something so clearly Lois's, and looking up at the apartment that was so wholly Clark's, he felt a pain hit him anyway, a sharp, grinding *ache* that started somewhere beneath the pit of his stomach and worked its way up, twining around the last vestiges of Clark Kent's mortal wound and climbing, clawing upward until it found his heart and wrapped it up in a crushing hold, like vines blotting out the sun.

He'd wanted a night to remember, a night to pretend, but now he realized just how bad an idea that was. One night to pretend was only going to make it worse when the pretense was ripped away. One night to spend with Lois still being his friend was just going to remind him of everything he could never have again, and he wondered at his earlier self, at how sure he'd been that it was better to risk everything with a confession of love — and of alter egos — than to continue on as her friend without saying anything. Surely, *surely*, it would have been better to say nothing. To keep living his life as it was. There were other ways he could have tried, other things he could have said, and maybe none of them would have worked, but he would have still been Clark and he would have still had Lois as his friend, even if she was prickly and distant.

But then, if he'd done things differently, if he hadn't been there to draw Luthor's suspicion, who was to say that Luthor wouldn't have turned his fatal attention to Lois? Who was to say that things wouldn't be *worse* now? Clark Kent was dead and Superman wounded — his weakness now public knowledge — but Lois was safe, and she wasn't dating a monster, and Luthor couldn't hurt her anymore. So maybe, in the end, it had all worked out for the best. Clark was gone, but he'd died saving Lois, and that seemed a more than fair trade.

So, with that thought in mind, he was able to straighten and take firm, steady steps toward the door. Lois hurried to his side and slipped her hand around his arm, and even though he didn't physically need the support up the steps, he relaxed into her touch and savored the moment. She seemed unusually small, walking beside him, her head bowed down so that all he could see was her dark hair, tousled and knotted with blood and dirt and salt water from the ocean, and he wished he could put his arms around her and hold her close, shelter her from the entire world, from everything that had happened. He wished he could take all the pain bleeding out of her, dab it away and clean her wounds and stitch them tightly together, bandage them and tie those bandages with neat, precise knots, then kiss her until she was better.

Wished she would let him do all those things.

But Superman couldn't afford to have another weakness, and the last thing Lois needed was to have her name synonymous with Kryptonite, to have every criminal in the world suddenly decide to get their hands on either her or the deadly green stone to stop or control Superman. So he couldn't heal her, couldn't protect her from everything. But he could give her a pale smile when she looked up at him worriedly, could open Clark's front door for her and lead her into the apartment that, only hours earlier, he'd used to try to explain to her who he was.

It wasn't as painful to see the place he'd made his own as he'd halfway expected. Maybe the remnants of the Kryptonite exposure were making it easier for him to feel emotionally disconnected, or maybe he'd already mourned as much as he could bear to for now, but he looked over the living room with its comfortable couch and its eclectic decorations, and he didn't break down. Just looked, and was glad that he'd been able to live here as long as he had. He'd never known for sure whether he'd be able to have a normal life, whether he could make it in Metropolis as a reporter for the best newspaper in the world, but he had. For a while, anyway, and that was enough to make him

feel some measure of satisfaction, even if it was a satisfaction threaded through with regret that there couldn't have been more.

He was always wanting things he couldn't have, he reminded himself, and he worked harder at simply being grateful.

It was Lois, actually, who faltered at the sight of the bloodstains in the middle of the living room, splashed beside the coffee table as if he'd simply had an accident with a glass of red wine. But red wine only called up the memory of Luthor offering him a tainted glass, made that pain clutch his heart in a tighter hold, and Clark firmly shut the door on that line of thinking.

"It's all right," he murmured, much more content to focus on Lois than the ache inside him and the memories cluttering up his mind, shadows reaching out insidious fingers to poke and claw their way into every particle of his thoughts. From somewhere he found enough courage to reach out and wrap an arm around Lois's shoulders, supporting her, but the courage tremored and drew back a bit when she let out a tiny gasp — not quite a sob, not quite a word, not quite a plea for help, but utterly and wholly heartbreaking — and leaned almost her entire weight onto him.

He felt suddenly guilty for asking to come back here. It was here she'd first realized Luthor wasn't the man she thought he was, Clark reminded himself, and where she'd watched her former partner fall. Here where she'd pulled the poison out of Superman and swore her help to bring down Luthor.

The emotions, the memories, clashed and merged and conflicted until Clark could only sink tighter into that cloak of apathy, numbed to the enormity of his grief and his elation, his regret and his relief. He'd split himself in two, drawn a line between the halves of his whole, and he wondered why it should be a surprise that now he found himself being driven to madness by divergent thoughts and reactions.

Lois let him help her to the couch, where she sank down with a weary sigh. Clark set the box of Kryptonite down on the coffee table and sat with her, reluctant to pull away. He'd never seen her look so fragile; he was afraid that if he stopped holding on, if he dropped his arm from around her, she would simply sit there, lifeless and still and so *not*-Lois. She needed him, needed him in a way she hadn't since Trevino had threatened her life, since terrorists had taken over the Planet, since... since before he'd ruined everything by telling her he loved her and making her think her friendship wasn't enough.

"It's all right, Lois," he murmured again, and felt some tiny measure of peace slither through that cloak of apathy, struggling to reach him. The world was silent and removed, all cries for help muted, and he himself useless now — a dead human and a powerless superhero — but *Lois* needed him. She *needed* him, now, here where no one else could help save her. No one else could pull her closer and let her fall into his arms and cradle her close and rest his cheek against her hair and feel her body shake with the sobs she couldn't quite contain any longer.

Only him. His last few moments alone with her — not nearly enough to last a lifetime, but all he had. After this, there wouldn't be anything. After this, there was only Superman and a world in constant need of a superhero.

But for now, there was Lois, and he needed her just as much — *more* — than she needed him.

"I'm here," he whispered, smoothing a hand down her hair. "It's okay."

He lied, of course. He wasn't really there to stay, wasn't really himself, and nothing was okay at all. But these were the types of lies he could speak without sacrificing his conscience or becoming a monster, soft and tremulous lies, warm and comforting, like coats offered to partners who shivered in the chill of dark garages, like coffee heated by surreptitious glares. Lies that didn't hurt but helped. Lies that comforted. Lies that promised that one day things would be better and in the meantime they could endure.

"Clark," she sobbed into his shoulder, a whisper of breath past his neck, an echo shaped into a name that carried only a bittersweet pain. Nothing more, just his name. As if she'd finally realized that her partner was gone forever. "Clark!"

As if she mourned him.

"It's okay," he said again, once, firmly. He held her even tighter to himself for a moment, until her sobs retreated, until her breaths came — shuddering and quick and staccato — but softly. And then he pulled away, let his hand lingeringly part from her shoulder, and he stood. His tattered cape hung disconsolately about his form, armor no longer needed, battle-worn and war-stained, a remnant of a time he didn't want to remember. And yet... what use in changing? Even if he had the strength to shed the vestiges of this cocoon, even if he could remain upright and whole long enough to pull on another Suit — identical save in use and brightness — what good would it do? He'd still be Superman, scarred and haunted, and she would still be out of reach.

"Coffee," he said aloud, not quite able to look at Lois, staring back up at him. "You must be exhausted. I know I am and I was unconscious for part of it — you've been awake the whole time."

"Coffee." Lois said the word as if it were alien to her, as if she didn't consume enough of it on her own to keep whole plantations in business. Her smile was as unexpected as it was bitter. "Haven't we done this before?"

He wasn't sure if she meant that morning, before Luthor's visit, when he'd put on the pot of coffee now stone-cold on the counter, or if she referred to the precious mornings when he'd cajoled her into staying long enough to drink a cup of coffee here rather than picking one up on their way to the Daily Planet. He wasn't sure which he *wanted* her to mean.

Instead, he ducked his head and focused all his attention on the coffee pot and the sink. "One more time won't hurt," he said, but this was a lie that carried far too much hurt in it to be acceptable.

Because it already hurt.

Because it already made him inwardly bleed to think that this *was* their last time sharing a pot of coffee. Superman didn't drink coffee, certainly not with reporters who made a living interviewing him and writing stories about him. Superman didn't have an apartment to sweet-talk investigative journalists into staying in for a few extra minutes. Superman didn't... Superman didn't want to think about this any longer, about being only the shell of a man.

"No." Lois's whisper cut through the space between them, wistful, almost *longing*. "I guess not."

Only when the scent of coffee covered up the lingering stench of blood in his nostrils, when the sound of it percolating covered up the immense, deadening silence of the world, could Clark turn from the particulars of his kitchen and look back at Lois. He was almost taken aback, almost scared, to see that her eyes were fixed on him to the exclusion of all else. She stared as if she were seeing him anew — no, as if she were memorizing him much as he'd been memorizing her for so long. As if she knew these were the last few aftershocks of Clark Kent playing out in front of her.

He'd been running for so long. *Reacting* so long when what he wanted to be doing was *acting*. First he'd fallen prey to letting Luthor play his games, then he'd been shocked into a premature declaration of love by hearing of Luthor's proposal, and now he was slipping away, watching himself fade, because Luthor had stabbed him. Luthor had been the mover and shaker between them, Clark realized, and now that he was gone... well, now all Clark could do was make a pot of coffee and pour it in a mug and flavor it as Lois liked. All he could do was enact routines that had become habit.

Superman would be more proactive from now on, he decided,

though he wasn't quite sure how. Clark Kent could have written stories that addressed problems before they were unsolvable, while Superman could only respond to crises already in progress, reply to calls for help already winging their way through the skies to his ears. But somehow... somehow he had to do something. Something for himself. Something that changed the course his life seemed set into.

And in the end, of course he knew what that was. It was so obvious, so clear, that he thought he must have been building himself up toward it since first hearing those terrible, nightmarish words, thought he must have been formulating the words needed to combat the accusation, to state his case, make his plea, before leaving once and for all, all night long. It would be a fitting few last words to leave on.

But deciding to say something and actually *saying* it were two very different things.

He let himself delay by handing Lois her coffee — letting his fingers not-so-accidentally brush hers — by wrapping his hands around the aromatic heat of his own and settling himself — with a swallowed back sigh of relief — back on the couch. But once seated, he found himself staring at the black surface of his coffee and wishing he could inhale courage as easily as he did the wisps of steam rising to coat a sheen of sweat over his upper lip.

The coffee rippled, stirred beneath the force of his sigh, and he hastily looked elsewhere lest his hands shake even more and spill the coffee all over his lap.

Unfortunately, his gaze fell on the floor, then. On the bloodstains marring the perfection of his apartment.

Clark's blood.

Life-blood of a man who'd died to call forth a superhero he couldn't be anymore. Not fully. Not the way he needed to be. Not enough to take the place of the man who wasn't enough.

A man who might not have been enough for Lois to love, but who had nonetheless loved and lived.

"Lois," he said, surprising himself with the sound of his own voice. With the steadiness of that voice and the finality with which he set aside his coffee mug like the unneeded distraction it was. There was no point in delaying any longer. All he could do was move forward, and that clock was still ticking away, an endless counterpoint rumbling through his mind to hide the silence of the world. "Lois, I'm not a monster. I'm not like Luthor."

"Oh, Clark —" she began, shifting closer to him, her own coffee shaking in her hands.

"No, Lois," he interrupted. His voice was too loud in his ears, undiluted by the noise of a city, of a country, of a world. Just him, his words, falling between him and Lois like tiny, broken pleas. "Clark wasn't either. He... *I* did lie, but... I did it to protect, not to benefit from the lies themselves or the pain I caused. I hated lying, and I never meant to hurt you — I just wanted to protect my parents, and you and Perry and Jimmy and anyone who knew me. Knew Clark Kent," he amended before she could remind him that Clark was dead. "And I didn't lie about the important things, about the things that *really* mattered."

The breath he pulled in, like a runner gasping in a precious amount of oxygen before he reached the finish line dead last, seared its way through him, burning and twisting until he expelled it back out into the air around them, shaped into words. "Clark was just a man, and he made mistakes, but... he *tried* to do good, Lois. He wanted to be a good son, and a good reporter, and a good friend, and a..." But that way lay yet another reminder of the unrequited love he'd already spilled between them, already used to rupture the friendship they'd once shared, so he cut himself off, turned himself down a different path, the only one still open to him. "And Superman *was* a mask, but he was a mask for helping people, for saving as many as he could even when it wasn't enough. He was — *is* — a..."

But how could he finish that sentence either? It was already bad enough eulogizing himself — how much more conceited would it sound — how much like *Luthor* would he sound — if he called himself a hero?

He searched for the right words, reached out toward them desperately, forlornly, uselessly because they skipped away from him, too nimble and quick to be caught so easily.

Lois, though, wasn't waiting for him to catch them, and words were never fast enough to escape from her. "Oh, Clark, I'm so sorry," she said again.

It was the last straw. Or maybe it was hearing her apologize while using the name of the man he used to be — the man he'd do anything to be again — that broke his hard-won composure.

"Stop!" he exclaimed, scrubbing his hands over his face, missing the feel and the placement of his glasses, the weight of them to remind him of gravity and the constraints of humanity. "Just stop apologizing — this isn't your fault, you don't have to —"

"Yes, I do," she interrupted, so sure, so certain, so immovable that Clark was frozen, staring at her, wishing for the thousandth time that he could be half as self-assured as she was. "I do have to apologize, because what I said was wrong. I was trying to say something important, something else, but it came out all wrong."

His heart was stopped inside his chest, like a watch gone dead. It was going too fast, rabbiting off inside him so that he had to reach up a numb hand and place it over his own chest to make sure the panicking organ would stay in its place. It was lost, removed so far away from him he didn't know that he would ever find it again. "What came out wrong?" he managed to ask, distantly, wistfully.

Her face threatened to crumple, more tears glinting like moonlight over waves reflected in the bottom layer of misty clouds. "You're not a monster, Clark!" she exclaimed, as if it were obvious. As if she had never said it. As if he had not had to feel his whole self shiver from earthquakes to his soul at the thought that he might be as bad as his arch-nemesis. "Lex had power and he hid it and he lied, but you're nothing like that. You're right — you don't lie, Clark, not really. You show who you are every day, in every move you make, every word you say, everything you do. You have a closet, and you don't show it to everyone, but you *are* a hero, and you don't have to wear a cape to be one."

"Lois," Clark whispered. He wondered if he was dreaming. If he was still lying in STAR Labs, his skin ripped and torn, his injury sliced open to reveal the green rotting away inside, while scientists murmured and worked above him. If he was still slumped on the blood-stained floor now beneath his feet, bleeding out, hallucinating to escape the pain and pretend he hadn't made a mess of everything.

"You *could* have been just like Lex," Lois said, slowly, wonderingly, "and if you were, it wouldn't have been surprising at all. You could have used your powers for anything, Clark — could have gotten everything you could have ever wanted — money or fame or power or fear... or me." Her shame-faced chuckle made his schizophrenic heart writhe inside him.

"Lois," he began, turning toward her instinctively, but she was shaking her head, denying him the opportunity to help her, to save her from her obvious inner turmoil.

"But you *didn't*," she proclaimed, as if knighting him. As if proclaiming him to the world, just like she'd done before, the name *Superman* plastered over every Daily Planet paper for weeks, casting him in light and goodness so that all of the world had been eager to welcome him and had forgotten to be afraid of him. "Instead you use what you have, what you can do, to help people." Clark stared, caught between awe and concern, as she brought up her hand to impatiently brush away the tears leaking from her eyes. "Superman is the man I admired most and Clark is

the man I trusted most, but before last night, I didn't even know what all that meant — didn't know all the *reasons* I had for admiring you and trusting you. I still don't, not fully, but I do know that you're the best man I've ever met. You're strong with integrity and you have a truly good heart — a *pure* heart — and on top of that, knowing all that you do, all that you face..." Her breath was shattered into a thousand pieces, fractured in her throat and emerging pained and bleeding from her mouth. "You're not a monster. Not at all. You're a hero. A *super* hero."

His thoughts had each been given wings, tiny fireflies clattering up the inside of his mind and ricocheting from one side to the other, capricious and unknowable. But that was his problem, he thought — he'd been thinking too much for too long, letting his mind spiral farther and farther away from him until he was left stuck and abandoned in a mire that threatened to suck him under its cloying, suffocating hold. But he didn't *want* to think right now, didn't want to reach out and try to capture the thoughts glowing like heated fireflies, didn't want to analyze or consider or break down.

He just wanted to let Lois's words sink inside him so deeply that he could never be without them. Wanted to imagine them burrowing under his now-pervious skin, lining the interior of his skin with silken, gleaming armor, turning him to steel, bearing him up, protecting him. Her words — her belief, her faith, her *forgiveness* — were warm and vibrant, bursting with colors and scents, with textures and memories, so tangible that he knew they would be enough, all on their own, to turn the North Pole into something a bit more livable, to push back the white and bring in the earthier, more brilliant colors.

Gently, inexorably, he reached out and smoothed his fingers over hers. "Thank you, Lois," he said warmly, and from somewhere, he found a smile, hidden inside him like a treasure, one well worth uncovering and dusting off for Lois.

She stared at his words, gaped at his smile, frowned at his relief, which was so much like her that Clark's smile became just a bit more real. "For *what*?" she demanded, her voice as broken as his cohesiveness. "For breaking your heart? For making you think you could possibly be a monster? For treating you like —"

"For believing in me," he cut in quietly. It was easier to smile, this time, which only made sense. Practice made perfect — his coaches and his teachers and his parents had all told him that, over and over again so that he was surprised it didn't still ring in his ears every day. He was hoping the smile would calm her, would drive away her tears and maybe, if he was honest, get her to smile back at him so he could have that memory to add to his ever-growing collection.

She didn't smile, didn't do anything but bring up her hands and use the ends of her sleeves to ineffectually wipe at the tears rippling along her cheeks.

So he smiled again, leaned a bit closer, took in a quick, sharp breath when he caught a scent of her — not nearly as clear as when he wasn't suffering from the effects of Kryptonite, but *there*, making her suddenly more real to him now that she registered on so many senses at once. "You believed in Superman from the very beginning," he said. He'd wanted to tell her he wasn't a monster just so he could put it into words for himself — he hadn't expected her to say anything in response, certainly had not thought she would call him a hero, would separate him so firmly from Luthor and Claude and Paul and whoever else had hurt her — but this... this he wanted to say for *her*. So she would know what she had meant to him, what she had birthed in him. So she would know that maybe Luthor had fooled her, maybe Clark and Superman had hidden from her, but she... *she* was a hero, too.

"You believed in Superman," he said. "I was so afraid people would be terrified of me or mistrust me for being an alien, but you accepted me immediately, and you gave me an ideal to strive

for, a hero to emulate." His smile turned more wistful, his heart now a straining weight in his chest, seeming to grow more noticeable and present as the pain left over from the Kryptonite faded into the background. "And you let Clark be your partner, let him be your friend. That was a gift, Lois, and I want to say thank you."

He wasn't expecting her to start sobbing uncontrollably, bringing up her sweater-covered hands to try to stem the flow, hiding the haunted, *wounded* look painted over her face.

"Lois?" he asked, all traces of his burgeoning contentment scattering into a million pieces. He brought up his hands but couldn't decide where to touch her — couldn't remember how Superman had touched her when Clark wasn't prominent — so they fluttered uselessly from shoulders to hair to elbows. "Lois, what is it? What's wrong?"

"Why are you saying goodbye?" she cried. "I know you can't love me anymore, and I can't blame you if you hate me, but please... please don't leave!"

"I'm not," Clark promised her immediately, unable to keep the words back, and he forgot who he was and wasn't anymore, forgot about images and decorum — and why should he care, anyway, when this night was for pretending just for a bit longer? — and he gathered her into his arms, wrapped them tight around her as if they were still capable of protecting her. She clutched at him immediately, like she'd been waiting for him, pressing herself as close as possible, until she was nearly in his lap, and Clark felt more whole than he had in days. "I could never hate you, Lois," he whispered into her hair. "And I'm not leaving."

She quieted, stilled, pulled back enough to look up at him, so tremulous and hopeful. "You're not?"

"No," he said. "Superman will stay in Metropolis. It is, after all, where he was born."

And she burst into tears again, burying her face in his neck.

"Lois?" he asked uncertainly, frantically. He was holding onto her, trying to comfort her, but inside him there was only confusion. He'd thought he knew her so well, thought he could give her what she wanted, what she needed, but he had no idea at all why she was crying and wrapping herself so close to him. He had no idea what she wanted, what she was thinking, what she saw when she looked at him. She wanted him to stay and he was, and neither of them were in danger anymore, but still she was crying and... and oh how he wished she were crying for Clark Kent, but he was trying very hard not to strive for the unobtainable, so he ignored that longing.

"Superman will stay," she repeated, almost unintelligible through her tears. "But how will I tell Perry and Jimmy that I drove Clark out of Metropolis? How will I live without —" And she dissolved into tears again.

Clark stared ahead, at the walls where Clark's trophies hung. He sat on Clark's couch, in Clark's apartment, holding Clark's partner. And he couldn't feel, couldn't let himself realize what was trembling through him lest he crumple and fall. Lest he turn to stone and sit there, a monument to who he'd once been, to the hero he could have still been if his heart had only cooperated.

"Lois," he said, slowly, emotionlessly. If he could have wished for one thing in that moment — more even than wanting Lois to love him — it would have been to change the past, to make these words a lie. "Clark is dead."

Lois went motionless so fast he was afraid she had stopped breathing. He pulled back to peer down at her anxiously, curiously. She met his gaze through a sheen of tears, like a gauze curtain separating them. "What?"

"Clark's dead," he repeated, because maybe it would stop hurting if he said it often enough — practice made perfect, after all. "Luthor stabbed him in front of two witnesses. You yourself said no human could possibly have survived that wound."

After all the strange things he'd seen in Metropolis, after

discovering he himself was an alien sent from a destroyed planet, he supposed he could believe in nearly anything. And if so, then he was pretty certain the rapidity with which Lois's emotions changed should have convinced him shape-shifters were real and possible and one was sitting beside him. But she was Lois, the woman who meant everything to him, and he could smell her perfume, could all but hear her heartbeat, could see her — all her idiosyncrasies, the uneven pattern of her breathing, the exact shade of her dark eyes — so even though her expression metamorphosed from grief to astonishment in only a millisecond, he couldn't doubt that it was Lois Lane staring up at him so wide-eyed.

"Oh!" she gasped, her tears vanished as quickly as if they had stolen his superspeed for themselves. "*That's* why you're leaving?"

He must be feeling better, he decided, because he felt a stirring of offended frustration rip through his resigned calm, his cloaked numbness. Even now, after everything, she still didn't understand what Clark meant. He'd thought she was beginning to, thought her beautiful words etched into his mind were proof enough that she'd begun to see him as who he really was. But no. Of course not. Because Superman was staying, and she might be sad to see Clark go, but apparently that was only because she hadn't yet realized that he was dead — hadn't yet realized that he was leaving because there was no other choice, not because he'd decided to. As if it made it okay, now that she knew there was a *reason* for it, a reason beyond her or a desire to flee the consequences of his truth.

And that *hurt*. It hurt like tiny stinging shards of Kryptonite slashed through his exhausted heart.

"I told you," he said shortly, "Superman isn't leaving. But Clark doesn't even exist anymore. He —"

"No!" Lois's smile made him reel back, his hands falling away from her. She smiled, and she laughed — *laughed*, as if Clark Kent were only a joke, a prank that could be set aside when his purpose had been fulfilled. He went stiff and cold — as cold as he'd been flying her away from the hundreds of lifeboats following a rescue crew back to shore, so cold he all but saw frosty mist fall away from his mouth — when she hugged him, a tight, spontaneous hug that was over almost before it even began, her hands moving from his neck to his shoulders to his arms and back to his shoulders as she laughed up at him.

That rage he thought he'd quenched, the fury that had made him squeeze his eyes shut lest his heat-vision explode from him without warning, surged through him again. Good thing he didn't have his heat-vision back, he decided. Good thing he could fall back beneath the canopy of feeble protection offered by his cloak of apathy, because Lois laughing about the demise of Clark Kent was perhaps the worst moment of his entire life — both of them, all of them, the worst moment that either Clark Kent or Superman could bring, superseding any and all other capitalized events.

"This isn't funny," he stated stiffly. He stood, abruptly, his hands tingling, his arms and his legs and his *head*, everything tingling and burning with the amount of control it took not to say something — *do* something — he'd regret. After everything else, after all the bad moments with Luthor, Clark had never once thought that Lois would hurt him so badly. "Clark Kent may not have meant much to you, but he was all that let me be normal. He's *me* and now *I* can't —"

"No, no, please, don't! Let me — I'm sorry!" Lois jumped to her feet, placed herself in his path, her hands outstretched like an angel defying the forces of evil. "No, Clark, I'm sorry, that's not what I meant! Please stay long enough for me to ex —"

"I can't!" Clark cried, throwing his own hands up in a gesture of submission. Defeated even as he begged for leniency. "Look around you, Lois! This isn't real anymore, none of this! This apartment can't be mine — the job I loved can't be mine again —

it's all gone! You and... and my parents — how am I going to tell them they're going to have to publicly mourn me? I don't understand how you can laugh about this —"

"No, no, you don't understand! Clark's not dead!" Lois shouted over him, and he was struck as dumb as he was deaf. "He isn't dead," she said more softly. "He's in hiding!"

There was a ball of ice in his stomach — not that sharp-toothed creature that had been nibbling away at him. Not the sinking weight that had tried to drag him back down to earth when Lois had equated him with Claude. No, it was ice, cold and crystalline-sharp, emanating frost that reached to every one of his extremities. "Lois," he said softly, because he didn't know how to process this himself, didn't know how to even begin to plan how he was going to tell his mom and dad the terrible news — didn't know, above all, how to make her realize the truth about his identities and the tragedy inherent in the mortal blow Clark had taken.

So all he could say was her name, weighted in icicles, heavy and cold like a body buried beneath six feet of snow.

"Lois, there were witnesses —"

"No!" she said, almost petulantly, and he half-expected her to stamp her foot. She reached out and clasped his arms in her hands as if she meant to shake him. But her laughter was gone, her smiles chased away, and earnestness adorned her face like glitter, making her gleam with inner starlight. Her words spilled over themselves in their haste to be uttered, rapid and eager and unbelievable. "Clark, listen — Superman was hurt, stabbed in the stomach, and I couldn't let you die so that meant they had to know there was a wound to fix — but you had already told Henderson that Lex had stabbed Clark. So I told them all that Superman and Clark both knew Lex was going to come after you, and you arranged a meeting — Clark went to Centennial Park, and you both warned me, and Superman flew Clark to a safe location where Lex couldn't find him. Then Superman came here and he dressed in Clark's clothes and waited for Lex to come — and everything would have worked out, but you didn't know Lex had Kryptonite, so you were hurt, but you woke up and still went after him, and please, *please* believe me — Clark isn't dead, he's just in hiding until Superman can go get him from wherever you hid him. Hid *you*, I mean."

She stood there before him, holding onto his arms as if to keep him in place — as if she needed physical contact to ensure he stayed always near her — and she stared up at him beseechingly, breathless and waiting and watching. Hair almost black in the close, dim ambience of the apartment where they'd spent so many hours together. Eyes so dark and yet brilliant with that light inside that drew him as surely as the sun. Small and fragile and weary and broken and wounded — but so very strong, so incredibly fierce, so indelibly lovely.

She'd always been the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen — prettier than Lana, than Lori, than Cat, than *anyone*. Beautiful, but so much *more*, and in that moment, looking down at her and feeling as if he were about to come apart at the seams — as if he were only now taking his first breath since that Kryptonite blade had plunged inside him — he felt as if he could see all that *more* illuminated in her. As if she had flipped a switch to turn on the lights, and now everything she was, everything she hid away inside her so she couldn't be hurt, everything that captivated him and kept him hoping and hoping and *hoping* even when there seemed to be no reason, was now on display.

Unveiled before him.

Unmasked to him.

Vulnerable.

Trusting.

Afraid.

Just like him.

"It's okay," Lois said, and for the first time he believed her.

She wasn't telling him comforting lies, wasn't speaking out of a misunderstanding of who he was. She was telling the truth, and she was right... and she had saved him. Saved *Clark Kent*.

Not Superman.

Not Luthor.

Not Metropolis.

She'd saved *Clark Kent*. The hack from Nowheresville. Mr. Greenjeans. The lunkhead from a small town that wasn't on the map.

Him.

"It's okay, really, Clark," she assured him, and she wasn't using his name to make sure he listened to her. Wasn't using it just so he wouldn't get mad at her and fly off. She was using it because that was who he was, and she was talking to *him*. "They believed me, I promise. I know it was dangerous to let people know that Superman can pass for Clark, but... you were going to die and I... I couldn't let Clark go. And Lex was the only one who'd seen you both close up, but he's dead so that doesn't matter. His two henchmen had never seen Clark *and* Superman close up — they won't know enough to realize it was really you. So... you see, it's all right. You don't have to leave. You... you don't have to disappear, Clark. You can stay."

Words escaped him. Speech escaped him. And he didn't care — words weren't enough. No language in the world — none of the hundreds that he knew, or any of the rest of them for that matter — could possibly say what he felt. What he thought. What he *knew* when he looked at her.

She'd never needed physical contact to make him stay, but sometimes touching her was the only way *he'd* been able to remind himself of who he was. Sometimes a hand against the small of her back, the curve of her elbow, the angles of her fingers, had been all that kept him together when he returned from disasters that had gone wrong. Sometimes touching her was all that let him get behind her walls, make her stop and look at him and *see* him.

So he hugged her.

He leaned forward and he wrapped his arms, slowly, gingerly, around her waist, and he pulled her close, closer, so close that he felt as if he could dissolve his physical form and wrap her up in armor, in a red cape that would protect her and hide her and keep her whole and well and beautiful and unscarred by the cruelties of the world and the monsters it contained.

She came willingly, so soft and pliable that he thought, for an instant, that perhaps she was the one who would dissolve, a sheen, a mist, a private atmosphere he could carry with him everywhere.

"Thank you," he breathed. And he buried his head in her hair, in the crook of her neck, and felt eight months' worth of tension ease inside of him. Boneless and relaxed and so very loose as self-control and fear and decades' worth of repression slipped down from the tip of his head to pool at the soles of his feet, ashes drifting harmlessly away beneath the continued flow of Lois's breathing. "Thank you, Lois."

"Oh, Clark," she said, and he was.

He was Clark. That tension was gone, and with it the key to Clark Kent's prison. He felt himself released to flow back into every inch of his being, to reclaim the body Superman had haunted, the ghost of Clark Kent in corporeal form. He didn't have to reclaim Clark, didn't have to wrap him around him like a cape — that was for Superman, for the disguise taken from other's advice and opinions and ideals and used to fashion a paragon that could be draped over an ordinary man's frame. But Clark was *him*, written on every cell, layered into every joint, lined through every vein, coated on every inch of skin, a galaxy of molecules within him that found cohesiveness and form and being as Clark Kent.

Maybe the minutes were still ticking by, seconds tapping

their way into infinity, but Clark didn't hear them, didn't count them, didn't heed them. He had a lifetime now. More than enough. It didn't matter if he stood here for hours holding Lois and remembering everything he loved about being Clark, didn't matter if he stayed in this apartment until the sun came back 'round and found them — because it was all his, the apartment and the day and the future.

But finally Lois's breathing shifted, and Clark found that he could loosen his arms from around her, and he could take a deep breath and contemplate an existence more than an inch away from Lois Lane.

"You are Clark," Lois whispered, and she went up on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. A slow, lingering kiss infused with strength and delicacy, with her perfume and the scent of saltwater, with everything he wanted and everything he had. A kiss that made him shudder and hunch in on himself, trying to capture every nuance of it.

Because maybe... maybe he could have it all. Maybe all these signs Superman hadn't been able to read were spelling something out very clearly for Clark. Maybe... maybe Lois didn't care about Luthor — *he's dead*, she'd said, as if it didn't affect her at all — maybe she didn't want the superhero over all — *I couldn't let Clark go*, she'd told him, when Superman had been dying in front of her — and maybe, just maybe, he hadn't messed everything up after all. Maybe Clark was worth everything to someone besides just him and his parents.

Maybe...

He shuddered again, his hands tense against her back — a different kind of tension than the one that made invisible ashes at his feet, a *better* one.

He almost kissed her. He would have, would have been brave and foolhardy and reckless even though he was Clark instead of Superman, would have tipped his head so gently and pressed his lips against hers... except she moved.

Away.

She stepped back, her hands falling away from him, and her expression was neutral, disengaged, *numb*. "Well," she said neutrally, "I should go. Get cleaned up, you know. And you... you probably want to do the same." Her hand darted out, smoothed down the edge of his Superman crest — he leaned into the touch, ever so slightly, craving that instead of the weakness Kryptonite left him with — and then was gone, drifting back to her side, leaving him once more alone. Bereft. "I'll just go, then. Get changed. Maybe call Perry and give him a head's up."

Don't go.

The words hovered behind his lips, prisoners caged in flesh and blood and bone. Sincere words, ripping their way out of him and clamoring to be released into audible form. Desperate words, because she'd already left him once and he didn't think he could bear it again. Useless words, words that had been layered through everything he'd told her for weeks now and still she was walking away.

She backed away, nervous and edgy, refusing to meet his eyes. He took an impotent step forward, his hand raised halfway toward her, but she only backed up further.

"Lois," he said. It wasn't the plea he wanted to speak, but at the same time, it was. Her name. All he had to offer her — but she'd given him back *his* name and it was the greatest gift he'd ever been given.

The backs of her feet stumbled into the bottom stair leading to his front door. Her hands gestured anxiously between them. Still, she wouldn't look at him. "Maybe I... maybe I'll bring back some dinner?"

"Yes!" Clark grabbed at the lifeline — he didn't have Superman's superspeed, but he recognized a last chance when he saw one. "That... that sounds good."

"Okay." She was at the door, her back to him, and he felt like

he was falling again, falling without flight, spiraling away, when she turned back to him. “You’re... you’re okay. Aren’t you?”

She’d known his Secret for twenty-four hours. She’d seen him weak and exposed and at his lowest point. He’d stood before her unmasked, completely open, and told her exactly who he was. He’d admitted to every secret he kept — his alter ego, his origins, his love for her, his fears. She knew him better than even his parents, from the obvious to the surprising, from the worst to the best. He should have never had to lie to her again.

But he opened his mouth, and he lied, and it came out more easily than any lie he’d ever spoken before.

“Yes,” he said, with a smile to coat it, to make it go down easier, like honey surrounding a bitter pill. “I’m okay.”

Because he couldn’t chain her. He couldn’t bind her. He couldn’t force her to anything. He *wasn’t* a monster, but after all, he was a liar, and what better lie to tell her than one that would let her go free and be happy? In all the day’s catastrophes, he’d allowed himself to forget one thing — Lois Lane didn’t love Clark Kent, and though she admired him, she didn’t love Superman either, not anymore.

She’d asked him to stay, and he would — of course he would, this was his home and he’d promised her. So here he was, Clark Kent, Superman in his spare time, right where he’d been the entire time Lois had known him. She’d asked him to stay, but he had the feeling she had no idea what to do with him now that she had him.

And he... well, he had no idea what to do, period.

How ironic, he couldn’t help but think as the thud of the door closing on Lois Lane echoed through the apartment that was his once again. How ironic that the last twenty-four hours had begun with a capital letter and ended with a period.

Chapter 8: Ordinary Person

For a very long time, he simply stood at the bottom of the landing, his gaze locked on the dry, rust-colored stain on the floor. *His* floor, the one he’d clean not because the police would be by to dot their i’s and cross their t’s, but because it was his living room and his mom had taught him to keep a clean living place or so help her. His floor, marked with swirling constellations of pain, crimson and rust, galaxies of torment and grief — but it was red, and it proved he could bleed, and for now, with Clark so newly restored to him, released from his tiny, claustrophobic cage, he let himself believe that the blood only proved how very human he was.

Vulnerable and destructible, yes, and therefore *human*.

Not alien. Not completely isolated. Just... different.

Clark. What you see is what you get, and that meant red blood poured from a dangerous wound was nothing more than what happened to anyone and everyone when they were stabbed.

With a deep, cleansing breath, he finally moved from his statue-like position. He headed into the kitchen, ran the water until it was hot — and it took longer than he’d thought, without his heat-vision to speed things along — filled up a bucket with the water mixed with soap, and then he knelt before those bloodstains with a rag in hand, and he began to scrub.

It hurt. His muscles ached, his bones thrummed with exhausted echoes of pain, his skin felt ripped along the seams where the tiny white scars were still engraved, and crouching on his hands and knees scrubbing with all of an ordinary man’s might did nothing but aggravate his condition. But he didn’t stop. In fact, he scrubbed harder, pushed himself further, courted the feeling of exhaustion and toil and aches. It was unusual, it was *different* — it was perfect.

Clark Kent was human, and he had to scrub at stains on his living room floor, and he winced at the pain of standing upright, and he felt the satisfaction derived from a job well done as he stopped to look over the spot of floor he’d once thought had

become a memorial to Clark Kent’s premature ending.

Now it was just another bit of floor. Indistinguishable from the rest. Ordinary and boring... and beautiful. In fact, he was almost inclined to think it was his favorite bit of floor — but perhaps, he counseled himself with a smile, that was going a bit far. It was floor, it was clean, and now that he was Clark Kent again, he was realizing there were more important things to think about. Like the fact that he was still clothed in the torn and tattered remnants of a Superman Suit.

Time to stop obsessing over a patch of floor and change that.

Peeling off the tight Suit was a lesson in pain and frustration, but Clark savored it, the feeling of freeing himself of a trap, a disguise that granted him freedom but could also destroy him. The façade of Superman dropped to the floor, discarded, useless, the shed skin left behind when it was no longer needed, no longer *enough*. Its bright colors were dimmed, cast into shadow, all but turned to black when Clark kicked it away into a corner and turned to his closet. Not the secret closet, but the ordinary one. The one completely filled with variety and shades and textures, a mass of options and choices laid out for him, so much more freeing than a single outfit, a single course, a single mask.

He pulled on a long-sleeved shirt, hoping the loose cuffs would help hide the scars on his wrists and hands. The collar covered the ones on his neck and collar bone, but there was no way to hide the spider-webbing of white adorning his cheeks, chin, and brow. The scar on his stomach, a long jagged line that had only hours before seemed the end of the world was now no more than the merest indentation against his sensitive fingers, detectable only when he looked specifically for it.

Finally, Clark sat down on the edge of his bed and opened his bedside drawer. Inside, sitting there so innocently, was his extra pair of glasses. His hand trembled when he reached out to pick them up, as if his every molecule was straining with impatience to become what it was meant to be. *Who* he was meant to be.

It felt like coming home when he slid the glasses into place.

Felt like he was finally waking from the long nightmare that had taken him to the lowest depths he’d ever sunk to. Felt like he could survive after all, and the world would still be there when he walked outside his apartment, and the sun would shine again eventually to heal him of even the deepest of his scars.

The knock on the door, dull and distant, startled him; he was used to being able to hear the approaching footsteps long before they reached the door itself. He reached up, touched his glasses to reassure himself they were there — where they belonged — and then he stood and slowly made his way across the living room — a smile alighting on his lips as he trod on the spot of floor exactly the same as the rest of it — and up the stairs to pull open the door.

Lois stood there, the light behind her casting a halo along newly gleaming hair and the pale violet shirt she now wore. He wasn’t naïve enough to think Lois Lane angelic, but he couldn’t deny a certain awe that gripped him at the sight of her standing on his doorstep, an overflowing brown paper bag in one arm and a nervous smile almost hiding the tension tightening the corners of her mouth.

“Lois,” he breathed.

“Clark,” she said, almost in surprise, her eyes locked on his.

No, not on him — on his *glasses*. The glasses he’d never thought he’d get to wear again. She stared, and then she gave him a small smile — not nervous, not a mask over tension — but so shy and sweet that Clark felt his heart squeezed into a pliant, hopeful thing inside his chest, all hopeful eagerness and reserved wariness. “Clark,” she said again, as if locking him into that identity, and he felt, suddenly, as if he didn’t have to hold on so tightly to it anymore. He could relax, could breathe easier, could rest content knowing that she looked at him and saw Clark... and *made* him Clark. “Can I come in?”

“Of course,” he said, quickly stepping aside to let her through the door. He wondered that she even had to ask at all — or that she would, when so many times before she’d simply barged in without even a ‘hello.’ Of course, so much had changed thanks to his unwise confessions, he shouldn’t wonder that her brazen comfort with him was just another casualty of his ill-advised honesty.

As soon as she reached the bottom of the stairs, Lois spun to face him, holding up the large paper bag. “I brought breakfast. Or dinner, whichever it is. I mean, it’s the middle of the night, so I guess the proper definition would be midnight snack, but we’ve missed meals and I’m not really even sure what day it is right now so this would be...” She trailed off, then, as if even she had gotten lost on that one. “Anyway,” she said with a false brightness, shaking her head, “I know this twenty-four hour place and they’re pretty good — not great, but good — so I stopped by and picked us up something.”

“Thank you,” Clark said, touched and amused all at once. “I think I have some food in my fridge too, if we need it.” He said it more to remind himself that it was his fridge again, that it was food he could eat, or that he would need to clean out if he forgot about it — to remind himself that Clark Kent wasn’t dead anymore — but he regretted it instantly when Lois’s face fell, lowering the bag back to her side.

“Oh,” she said in a small voice. “Of course you do.”

“But your idea sounds better,” Clark interjected hastily. “I don’t exactly have a microwave for the leftovers.” He fingered his glasses yet again, surprised by the dejection in his own voice. He’d spent hours lamenting the fact that he was Superman — it seemed particularly hypocritical of him to be missing the superpowers already, so soon after reclaiming the man. But then, he’d never claimed to be logical, had he, or to be rational when it came to trying to figure out all the details of his separate personas.

Lois blinked at him, then looked to his kitchen before staring at him again. “Oh. You don’t, do you.” She paused, and Clark found himself holding his breath, afraid of another explosion or interrogation. But she only gave him the suggestion of a thoughtful smile and set the bag down on his table beside the coffee mugs still filled with the coffee from earlier.

“Oops.” Clark grimaced and reached for them. “Sorry, I didn’t have a chance to clean up yet.”

“Really?” Lois arched an eyebrow at him, then looked to the clean floor.

“Well,” Clark offered a grin, eager to take advantage of this glimmer of normality between them, “maybe just the important parts.”

“Hey —” Lois stared at her hand on his, stopping him from lifting the cups, stared as if she’d never touched him before, never seen what their hands looked like next to each other. Clark stared too, but it was mainly to memorize the moment, the sensation, the feel of her touching him of her own volition, of her skin against his own, slightly different — not dimmed, not dulled, but *different* — than what it felt like when he had his superpowers.

With a slight shake of her head, Lois’s hand fell away, and she looked up to meet his arrested gaze. “I’ll do it,” she asserted. “And I’ll set the table — after all, I know where you keep all your dishes, and *you* should probably be resting.”

“I feel better,” he said, partly because it was true — had been true since he opened his door and saw her standing on his doorstep as if she weren’t planning on leaving and putting him firmly behind her — and partly out of habit. But nonetheless, he was more than happy to sit at the table, his elbow warmed by the heat emanating from her large paper bag, and watch her bustle around his kitchen, all energetic purpose and determined focus. He’d learned, through all this, just how precious these little

moments were, how fragile happiness could be, how frail were those instances of complete perfection, and he was content to sit there and savor this one moment. Because he’d also learned not to reach for impossible things or to let dreams taint reality, learned to take what he could get, and this moment — Lois chattering away and saying nothing as she pulled out plates and forks and napkins and bottles of water — was mundane heaven. Paradise on earth.

She set everything before him, perfectly, positioning each utensil just so, as if afraid the stars would fall should she forget to put the fork *exactly* half an inch from the plate. Nervous and edgy, jumpy and tense, and Clark watched her, his moment of contentment trickling away like tiny particles of sand slipping through the middle of an hourglass, and hoped with all his might that her anxiety was not because of him. That she wasn’t afraid of *him*. Afraid he would be angry with her or blame her, or just afraid of him in general. He’d promised to stay, but if he frightened her, if she could no longer trust him to protect her and not hurt her, then he’d have to leave. He couldn’t stay and force her to be terrified all the time — he’d done everything he had to try to make certain she didn’t *have* to be afraid of anything.

But she kept talking, jumbles of words and sentences and questions tumbling from her mouth, a veritable storm of syllables that didn’t really mean anything but managed to clumsily, haphazardly weave a sort of cocoon around the two of them, scanty and pocked with holes but just enough to remind them of what they’d once been — partners and friends.

He wasn’t actually very hungry — Kryptonite made him sick and *lesser* and vulnerable, hungry only for sunlight — but Lois set the food out before him so earnestly, all the same kinds of Chinese dishes he’d brought her that first all-nighter they’d pulled at the Planet, when everything had seemed open and full of promise. When he’d looked at her and realized he had a chance... until she saw him looking and then shot him down.

She’d warned him. She’d warned him, and if he weren’t so used to wearing a mask himself, if he hadn’t so fully convinced himself that her warning was a mask too and he only needed time and patience to earn her trust so she could remove it around him, then he’d have listened to her. Listened to her and cautioned his heart to tread lightly, to act wisely, to not go giving itself out to the best investigative reporter in the world who’d expressly *told* him not to fall for her.

Reminders of those early days, the hopes and the bright futures and the beginning of dreams — that was what this meal was. So carefully chosen, so precisely placed, and Clark was both immensely grateful that she remembered — that she was so obviously bringing this for Clark Kent, reporter for the Daily Planet — and extremely daunted, wondering if she *meant* to remind him of her admonition.

The spasms in his side had passed when he’d put on the glasses, but Clark moved carefully, as if afraid of more pain, as if the slightest wrong movement would break the truce between them. He ate because Lois seemed to want him to and because his mom’s voice in his head warned him that he probably could use the food even if he didn’t feel hungry. Lois hardly ate a thing herself, her eyes never leaving his except to dart occasional glances to the bag that didn’t seem empty despite all the take-out cartons around them.

Finally, Clark set his fork down, hoping it wasn’t a sign that he was ready for her to leave. If it was, he’d pick it up and start eating again, would drag out their midnight dinner for hours just to keep her there — he had let her walk away once, but there was only so much strength even Superman could conjure for Lois Lane.

“No fortunes?” he asked with a forcibly light tone.

Rolling her eyes, Lois pushed her own plate away. “No. Theirs weren’t in Chinese, and I didn’t need to read for myself

how great horses are.”

Clark looked away, his smile almost painful, so full of grief. She was here and she was teasing him... but she wasn't, at the same time. She was distant, abstracted, focused on something besides him. He couldn't blame her, not after everything the day had held for her. But it was hard, being relegated to the background again; even if he'd have done anything to save Clark Kent, there were moments when he wished Clark Kent could be a bit more interesting, a bit more intriguing, a... a bit *more*.

But he wasn't. And really, what did it matter? Lois was here all the same, bringing him dinner and rummaging through his cabinets and watching him eat as if she were a mother hen fussing over her foundling chick. She was here — and he'd promised himself he'd be more proactive.

So he dusted off another smile for her and cautiously said, “I really appreciate this, Lois. Really. But... why are you doing this?”

“I can't bring dinner for a friend?” Lois huffed. But her eyes fell away from his and her hands moved to the table to fiddle with her napkin and there just wasn't enough spirit in her voice — all classic signs that Lois Lane wasn't being completely honest. Or that she was hiding something.

He smiled at her, because even if she had a secret — and *he* certainly couldn't cast stones if she did, now could he? — she'd referred to him as a friend. Not exactly what he'd hoped for at that infamous park bench, but more than he'd thought could be his at the equally infamous fountain. *Friend* had been a word he'd clung to, a word he'd hated, a word he'd fought *against*, a word he'd fought *for*... and now it was a word that seemed to be tangible forgiveness, a lifeline cast to him where he drifted in ever-widening circles, looping spirals away from her, an anchor to draw him back to earth. To her.

But Lois still wasn't looking at him, and so she didn't seem to notice the smile. Her fork made tiny, repetitive clinking noises as she nudged it against her plate once, again, again. “We... we *are* still friends, Clark. Aren't we?” she asked, her voice so small, so shrunken, so timid.

Before he could think better of it or second-guess himself, he reached out his hand and placed it over hers, silencing the fork and his own misgivings and hopefully her doubts. “Of course, Lois,” he promised. “I'll always be your friend.”

She sighed and nodded, her eyes falling closed, physical veils to hide whatever reaction she had to the promise. Or so he thought, but when they snapped open again, her brown eyes were filled to overflowing with resolve, as determined as anytime she believed in a story even despite Perry's objections. “Well then,” she said briskly, “seeing as we're friends and you just saved me from a fate worse than death — not that I ever would have actually said yes, you understand — and you're recovering from... well, recovering — I got you something. A present. Well, three presents, to be exact.”

“Lois,” Clark said, his heart reclaimed inside him and skipping about in his chest like a precocious child, uncontainable, finding playmates in his lungs, inflating them with air so light it was like cotton candy or spun sugar rather than oxygen. “You didn't have to do that.”

“I know.” She unfurled her smile like the slow unfurling of a white flag of surrender, sweet and conscious and stark against the darkness of night. “Just like you didn't have to befriend me, or give me any of the hundreds of things you've given me since you came to Metropolis.” She paused, then let out a chuckle. “But I want to.”

“Well...” Clark wasn't quite sure what to say, didn't know what the script for this moment was — didn't know what part he was playing: partner, friend, acquaintance, certainly not the enemy, but despite what the stars in Lois's eyes were telling him, he didn't think it was the lover either. But whichever part he was

cast in, he could tell this was important to Lois. This *mattered*, and so he didn't have to know everything — he just had to play along. “Thank you,” he accepted with a smile.

Lois's answering chuckle was a bit watery, gurgling low in her chest. “You haven't even seen what they are yet.”

“I'm sure I'll love them,” he whispered back, his throat gone dry as air just before the embrace of the atmosphere gave violent way to the void of space.

After a slight hesitation and a struggle played out on her face, as if she were giving herself a silent pep talk, arguing with herself, Lois pulled the paper bag toward her and drew out three bundles, all hastily wrapped in old editions of the Daily Planet. “What?” she said defensively when she noticed Clark's lips tug upward despite himself. “It's not like I carry gift wrap with me.”

“It's perfect,” he assured her, and when she gave him the hint of a smile, he didn't think he'd ever been so completely honest in his life.

“Then open it,” Lois challenged him. He'd never been able to resist her — not from that first challenge she'd given him after storming from Perry's office and sweeping him up into her personal orbit — so he grinned and pulled the first package toward himself.

His fingers were a bit clumsy against the paper — which smelled of ink and bore familiar names on bylines and sported the familiar, comforting logo of the Daily Planet — but he was encouraged to see that the white lines creating an extra trail of veins along his skin were fading. Not that he paid much attention to them when he pulled the paper away to reveal a VHS copy of ‘Beauty And The Beast.’

He stared at it for a moment, but it didn't miraculously reveal to him its secrets. “Well,” he said, puzzled, “that's —”

“Open the others,” Lois urged, scooting forward to the edge of her seat, her hands shoving aside their plates and take-out cartons so that she was almost too near, so close Clark found it difficult to turn his attention to the remaining two presents. But the one nearest him, nudged toward him by Lois's hands — shaking and pale, the nails thrown into sharp relief against the starkness of her flesh — bore *their* byline, which caught his eye and froze him in place. ‘Lois Lane and Clark Kent,’ it read, and Clark felt a lump in his throat, large and aching so that he couldn't breathe.

When he tore the paper open, he was careful not to rip their names, careful not to split them in two even in print. This time, he uncovered a book. “The Hunchback Of Notre Dame,” Clark read aloud, needing the sound of his own voice to cover the silence of the apartment. To help him ignore the smallness of the world now that the sounds of millions of people were muted.

“Not the most apt analogy,” Lois said hurriedly, as if afraid he'd misunderstand. She didn't have to be afraid of that — he was in no danger of *mis*understanding because he didn't understand at *all*. Though he thought he recognized this book; he'd seen it enough, sitting on Lois's pristine bookshelf.

“Lois...” He studied the two items laid out on the table before him. He tried for light-hearted, reaching for a smile and pretending he'd reached it despite the lengths by which it failed. “Do you think I'm going to have a lot of downtime? I know the wound looked bad, but I heal fast. And I know the Planet isn't up and running right now, but with Luthor out of the picture, surely we can find a way to rebuild. Start over again.”

“That... that would be amazing,” Lois said wonderingly. But then she blinked, her eyes large and fixed on his face, and shoved the last present toward him. “One more and then I'll explain,” she whispered.

Clark regarded her for a long moment, then he nodded and ripped open the last of her gifts, splitting a line down the double columns of one of Eduardo's articles. This was the most puzzling of all — a comic book, blaringly bright and graphic against the

muted colors of Clark Kent's surroundings. "Spider-Man?" he asked. This time he did catch a smile to send her way along with a sidelong glance. "I didn't know you were into comics."

"I'm not. It's... it's not that." She paused, and Clark almost felt the air temperature drop around them as she took in a deep breath. As if bracing herself for something. As if afraid of what his reaction would be to whatever she had to tell him.

And all three of her presents involved masks or monsters or misconceptions. And he was exhausted and hurting and tired, but he knew what he *wanted* this to mean. Knew what he wanted her to say. Knew, above all else, what he wanted her to *feel*. For him.

But he hadn't been right about anything she'd said for so long. Hadn't been able to guess her actions or thoughts even from the beginning, when she'd constantly surprised him by switching between entrancing strength and compelling vulnerability, and he didn't know if he could stand to be disappointed again.

So he just watched her. One hand caressing the glossy cover of the graphic novel, his eyes locked on Lois, afraid to miss even the slightest flicker of emotion that might help to build a bridge between them, that hope he couldn't rid himself of fluttering in his chest like a bird trapped between the slats of his ribcage, straining for freedom, for air. For Lois.

"Look," Lois said suddenly, straightening and nudging her hand a bit closer to his on the table, palm-up. "I know it's stupid, but they were all I could find on short notice, and obviously the analogies don't really work at *all* — I mean, Beauty and the Beast... well, I guess I'd be the Beast in that one — and that's not very flattering, is it. And the Hunchback... that's even worse, and the ending is awful, and they don't end up together, which is..." Her breaths came short and quick, as if she were terrified, but she was still so resolute, so *fierce*, so beautiful, and Clark could only gape at her.

And still that bird of hope flapped inside him, stealing the air from his head, leaving him dizzy, beating out a tattoo of desperate longing against the inside of his chest, making him yearn for things he'd already been told were impossible. Even now, even after everything. Apparently, not even Luthor, or Kryptonite, or disappointment, or the loss of his powers, could strip him of his greatest weakness.

"The point is," Lois said, seeming to regain her courage, "they all have to do with masks. People who wear masks or disguises, who aren't really what they seem or who are judged wrong. I mean, I've never read Spider-Man — I'm not into him, never have been, not when I had a real-life superhero around — but," she let out a cracked laugh, "but you don't want to hear about that. It's just... Jimmy loves him — the whole photographer thing, I think — and he told me that everyone in Spider-Man's city thinks he's the bad guy. Thinks he's a monster. But..." She looked up, met Clark's gaze, caught him so that he felt like a deer in the headlights, like a moth in the instant before it crashed and burned against the lantern. "But he's actually the hero."

There were no sirens going off. No tornado warnings. No cruise ships filling the ocean air with distress calls. No fire alarms. No people crying for help. Maybe for Superman there would have been — *certainly* there would have been — but he was Clark Kent now, wholly and always. So there were no distractions, no excuses, no exits, just him and Lois, and he sat at his table and stared at the woman he loved and felt three words burning like coals on his tongue. Curled up there, like eggs about to hatch — laid by that fluttering, shrieking hope — tapping and pecking at their shells, begging to be released.

I love you.

He wanted to say it. Wanted to let those three words out to caress Lois's skin, to wind through her thoughts until she could never again think that she was unloved or unwanted or unneeded.

But he'd already said them. Once, again, again, *again*, and

he'd dreamed that she could return them, maybe even that she *wanted* to give them back to him. Dreams, though, that was all they had been. They felt real, rang loud and resplendent in his memory, side by side with pictures of days gone by when they'd posed each other friendly bets and laughed at the same movies and perched on each other's desks. They all felt real, but he was deaf and powerless and mute, and if he said these three words — spoke them into existence again, let them enter the harshness of reality — and she *didn't* say them back... then he'd be wounded, too. Crippled and felled and destroyed so utterly that he didn't think there'd be a recovery.

I love you. The most beautiful, and the most damaging three words of any language he knew.

Worth everything — even taking risks, even high costs, even the possibility of being shot down yet again. He'd survived it before, he told himself; he could survive it again, surely. *Surely*.

"Lois," he said, his mouth barely moving, barely opening, afraid those three words would spring free of their protective shells and go winging out, fragile and premature and vulnerable, into the cold, lost world. "What are you saying?"

And he didn't breathe again. Breaths, caught up inside him, oxygen shaped into that declaration, locked away in the vault of his own flesh and bone. Patience, great and unwieldy and stern, encased Clark's limbs, his lungs, his heart, his entire being, so that he sat there, completely still, one hand on her presents and the other left halfway between them — so close to her own, still palm-up — waiting for her answer.

"What I'm trying to say," Lois whispered, "is that I... I... oh, wow, this is *hard*. I don't know how you did this, Clark!"

"Did what?" he asked, and wondered if he was about to wake in his bed, left hanging, waiting for an answer that would never come.

"Look," Lois said, so abruptly, so firmly, that Clark startled back. She leapt from her seat, began to pace before him, darted quick glances his way, her hands gesticulating wildly between them. Slowly, carefully, lest he frighten her away, Clark stood, too, earth-bound, the soles of his feet firmly entrenched on the clean, spotless apartment floor.

"Look, if you don't believe me, or if you think I'm only saying it because you're Superman — because Superman is *you* — then I... I understand. And if you can never love me again, then I don't blame you. I know I messed this up, and I pushed you away, and the odds of this working after everything that's happened between us are pretty astronomical. But if there's even the slightest chance — if there's even the *possibility* that there could be more between us — more than partnership or friendship... then I have to try, Clark. *I have to*. I can't let you slip away in the middle of the night without even saying goodbye or without thinking that it... without *knowing* that it would break my heart to not have you in my life."

I love you.

Clark tried to clench his jaw to keep back the words, but he couldn't. His mouth was fixed in the softest, most wistful of smiles, tiny and wan but there and *hopeful*, and so he couldn't tense up, couldn't hold himself aloof or draw back behind a shroud of numbness. "Try me," he dared her in little more than a whisper. "What do you want me to believe?"

Her hand half-rose toward him before dropping back to her side; Clark had to fight the urge to reach out and grab hold of that hand, wrap his longer fingers around hers and draw her into the circle of his arms. Instead, he let his hands hang at his sides, slack and empty. But waiting. Loose and open.

"I love you, Clark!" Lois blurted. "And it's not because of Superman — even though I *do* love him. But I love him a thousand times more because he's *you*." There were tears, like precious jewels, teetering on the edges of her eyes, falling over the precipice, tracing gilded lines along the curve of her

cheekbones. “I love *you*, Clark. The reason I told Lex I couldn’t give him my answer right away was because all I could think of was *you*. I didn’t know if you would still be my friend if I told him yes. I didn’t know if you would still look at me the same way — and I *want* you to look at me that way. I want —”

“Then look at me now,” Clark interrupted, and he stopped fighting himself. Stopped holding himself back. Stopped caging himself in the deadening numbness that made him feel more alien, more cut off, more isolated, than his powers ever had. Stopped denying who he was. Stopped compressing his heart into the tiniest, darkest of boxes to try to pretend it wasn’t the property of Lois Lane.

He stopped fighting, and he reached out and took her hands, drew her forward, encircled her in his arms — and how very fitting, how perfect, that she stopped him from going forever and ever in useless, purposeless circles, that she moved to the center of his circle and gave him cohesion and shape and form and purpose — and pressed the gentlest of kisses against her temple.

“I love you, Lois,” he freed those words, watched them hatch and fling themselves aloft, triumphant and beautiful and perfectly formed. Watched them turn Lois from the scared, trembling shadow left behind by — not Luthor’s betrayal, not his crimes, not his death — but by Clark’s death. Clark’s absence. Clark’s farewell.

Like a phoenix, Lois transformed in his arms from a frail shadow into a brilliant, burning angel — a superhero all on her own, given strength and power and color, as if his words were as much a joy to her as hers were to him.

“I love you,” he whispered against her brow, etching the words into her head, her heart, her soul. “And I believe you.”

“You do?” She sounded breathless — she was quivering, ever so slightly, against him — sounded awed, as if she trembled on the knife-edge of a chasm, teetering on barefeet over a leap into midair, a dive that would end the instant he caught her and flew her into the vast, endless skies. “How?”

“I do,” he answered, and dared lift one of his hands to paint his thumb over her cheek, chasing away the trails left by those diamond tears. Each tear seemed to hold the reflection of a memory, dreams he hadn’t even realized he’d been living. Moments when Lois had touched him. When she’d held him. When she’d made him laugh and smiled to hear it. When she’d looked at him, in either guise, and not turned away. When she’d loved him. “And I believe you,” he said, “because just like you can see behind my mask, I can see behind yours — and you’re not the beast, Lois. You’re the hero.”

Her smile turned the world back on. Brought back sound and light and life. Brought back every nerve ending, every emotion, so that he felt as if he were suddenly afire, all numbness, all apathy seared away in that single burst of white-hot sensation so sharp and stark that Clark felt as if he had never been more alive than in that instant. He was alive, and the scars were gone, evaporated like steam, and the world sprang back into existence around him — but for all the cries and burdens and sounds of that world, all he could hear was the steady, rhythmic beat of Lois’s heartbeat.

She smiled up at him, and suddenly she was winding her arms around his neck, holding him together, offering him her strength to bear up Superman, to make Clark even more real, and she was raising up on her tiptoes and her breath nudged his lips. “Clark,” she said, and she laughed. With relief. With joy. With hope.

And then, with his name on her lips, with her smile in his eyes, she kissed him. And there were no words — no capital letters, no periods, no beginnings or ends, not even names — just her and him.

Together.

Like magic, and hope, and light, and life, and everything he’d

ever wanted, encircled in his arms, her heartbeat echoing his.
And Clark Kent was reborn.

THE END