

Aftershocks

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Summary: Set during 'House of Luthor,' just as the wedding is stopped/interrupted and Clark escapes the kryptonite cage, this story explores what might have happened had Clark not recovered so quickly.

Story Size: 55,819 words (313 kB as text)

A/N: I always thought Clark recovered awfully quickly from being inside the cage for so long. In GGOH, his parents had to help him inside after a short exposure, and when he grasps the Kryptonite to throw it, you can hear a 'sizzling' as though it's burning his skin. Those experiences fuelled this version of events.

The version of Ellen Lane that appears in this story is the character portrayed by Beverly Garland.

Disclaimer: I own nothing and am merely exercising my imagination.

He sat in the shadows, his whole body burning with exhaustion and agonising pain from the continuing Kryptonite exposure. It had taken what he hoped wasn't the last of his energy to crawl behind the wine barrels, and he'd found a place to hide in the dark, his back pushed up against the cellar wall. It hadn't been a moment too soon. He had still been trying to crawl further back when Luthor had barged in, wielding an axe, screaming about taking his pound of flesh, and upon finding the cage empty, Luthor had exploded in rage, destroying one of the many empty wine barrels stacked nearby.

Now, Clark held his breath as he pushed himself flush against the wall, desperate to keep himself hidden, and when Luthor ran out of the cellar a moment later, still frantic after his outburst, Clark heaved a sigh of relief. He needed to get out of there while he still could, as far away from the Kryptonite as possible. He crawled up the stairs, one painstaking step at a time, and once at the top, dragged himself through the door Luthor had left open when he had come down to kill him. There was a long tapestry covering the entrance of the door, and once Clark had crawled past that, he collapsed on the floor.

Waves of nausea hit him, partly from the Kryptonite, mostly from the realisation that he had been very close to an excruciating death. He lay in the middle of the corridor, exposed, nowhere to hide, trying to remember where he was, and his heart raced as he tried to push away the fear that Luthor would return to kill him.

When he'd responded to Luthor's request to see Superman the previous day, Mrs. Cox had met him at the main reception desk to escort him. They'd taken the elevator down several floors to the cellar, and out of habit, he'd scanned the area for exits if needed. Thankfully he had

taken that precautionary step, he tried to orient himself to where he was, and where the closest exit was, before anyone noticed he was gone. He had only seen Luthor visit him in the cage, but Mrs. Cox had brought him down to the cellar. Did anyone else know he was there?

Clark used a nearby door handle to pull himself to his feet, and leaning heavily on the wall, he began to make his way to the emergency exit stairwell.

Once in the stairwell, he sat back down, exhausted but already feeling a little reprieve from the distance he now had from the cage. His stomach lurched as he remembered the excruciating pain he'd had to endure. Thankfully, he hadn't eaten or drunk anything in at least twenty-four hours, but that unfamiliar feeling of his stomach rebelling made him pause for a few more moments.

Clark used that time to take stock of himself. His hands had burn marks on them from grasping the bars of the Kryptonite cage, as did his wrists and arms, and he had one particularly long burn down his right side from reaching for the key. With his powers gone, his Suit was no longer protected by his aura, so it too had scorch marks from the Kryptonite bars. He needed to escape and find a disguise so he could get back home without anyone recognizing him. It wasn't often he left home in the Suit without a change of clothes, but last night he had, never imagining the outcome. Escape first, he told himself. He could berate himself later, and then he could also figure out how Luthor had got his hands on Kryptonite.

The parkade!

He remembered there was one a floor or two above him. He could escape through one of the fire exits there that faced the rear or side of the building. Using the stair railing for assistance, he pulled himself up again and began climbing

the stairs as fast as his weak legs would take him, thankful he was finally out of the range of the Kryptonite.

Every floor would have video surveillance, Clark was sure of it, and he would have to deal with anyone witnessing Superman feebly making his way across their screen at a later time. When he reached a door labelled 'Employee parking,' he slowly pushed it open and cautiously poked his head through the gap, trying to see or hear if anyone was around, desperately hoping for the miraculous return of his super hearing or vision.

Before he closed the door to the stairwell, he heard voices and footsteps echoing down through the enclosed space.

"Oh, I can't imagine..." exclaimed one voice.

"...left at the altar..." said another.

"This way please," directed a male voice.

"I hope the police won't keep us long," the first voice commented.

"No ma'am, we just need a statement," a lone male responded.

"...wasn't going to hang around to wait for the elevator," someone grumbled, as other voices joined in, the comments becoming harder to distinguish individually.

Clark let the door close quietly behind him as he stepped out of the stairwell and heaved a sigh of relief that the police were here. Perry, Jimmy, and Jack must have made it to Henderson.

Lois! What had happened? The one voice had mentioned being left at the altar. Did that mean...? He'd heard some of the ceremony. As he'd tried to reach the key, his own screams of agony as he'd touched the bars had drowned out the sounds coming through the speaker. When he'd hidden behind the barrels, the sounds were of a room full of people talking; individual voices had been impossible for him to discern.

He shook his head as if trying to shake his memories out. Not now. First he had to get out of here. If Luthor found him, he wouldn't survive. If the police were here, Lois would be ok. Escape first, then find Lois, he told himself firmly.

He wrapped his arms in his cape to hide the burns and walked around the edge of the cars, trying to stay low and in the shadows as much as possible. The closest exit wasn't too far and would lead him to the alley, away from the front of the building. When he got to the door, he opened it cautiously, and not seeing or hearing anything, he stepped out. As he climbed slowly up the concrete steps to ground level, he was momentarily blinded by the sun, which was just clearing the top of the building, bathing him in warmth and light.

"Superman," a voice exclaimed as Clark stepped out of the stairwell, while a chorus of screams came from the front of the building. Clark forced himself to stand as straight as possible in his Superman pose, leaving his arms wrapped in his cape as if he was holding it down against the wind.

"Did you find him?" the young officer asked.

"Umm... No," Clark answered, unsure who they were asking about, though suspecting they meant Luthor. "Is Henderson here?"

"Yes, somewhere."

"Could you ask him to meet me here? It's important, but not urgent. I can wait."

"Sorry, Mr. Superman. We're supposed to stay here and guard this exit in case Mr. Luthor tries to escape." The second officer glanced towards the road where there had been an increase in pedestrians and noise, though the screaming from a few minutes ago had subsided.

"I'll stay here if one of you could go find Henderson." Clark didn't have the energy to run around and find the inspector himself, and he hoped that neither officer would question his strength at that moment. He was resisting the urge to sit, but the sun was now directly overhead the narrow alley they were in, and he was starting to feel stronger, his headache lessening, and his stomach feeling less queasy. Thankfully, one officer left, and the other officer was too busy trying to catch a glimpse of what was happening towards the street to pay Clark any attention.

Clark had no idea how long he waited with the officer, and he didn't really care. The warmth of the sun felt good, its light helping to chase away the shadows of the past day. Finally, however, he saw a familiar figure hurrying toward him.

"Superman!" Henderson called.

"Can I speak to you?" Clark asked. "In private?" he added, with a slight nod to the two officers, who seemed to be trying their hardest not to look like they were eavesdropping.

Henderson turned to the officers. "You can both join everyone else taking statements at the entrance."

"Yes, sir," the men replied in unison, and they turned and hurried off towards the action.

"Luthor?" questioned Clark.

"Dead," Henderson stated. "Took a swan dive off his penthouse balcony when we confronted him."

"Lois?"

If Henderson thought there was anything suspicious about Superman asking about Lois Lane, he didn't let on. "She's safe, she's fine. She's with Perry White. He'll take her home once she's given her statement."

Clark felt his legs weaken, this time from relief. Henderson turned his head in curiosity.

"What was so urgent, Superman?"

Clark paused. His desire to speak to Henderson was no longer relevant with Luthor dead. However, there was still the problem of the cage; it had to be destroyed somehow, and he couldn't go anywhere near it. As Superman, there was a very short list of people he could trust, and he would have to ask someone to remove and destroy the cage without the general public discovering the existence of an element that could hurt him. Henderson was a good man; he would understand the importance of it not becoming public knowledge.

"Luthor has a cage in his wine cellar, below the employee parkade. Go down one floor below the parkade, and there's a large tapestry hanging on the wall at the end of the corridor. Behind it is a door that opens to stairs to the cellar. There's another entrance into the cellar; Luthor used it, but I don't know where it leads to." Clark shuddered involuntarily as he remembered the cage. Henderson seemed to notice something wasn't quite right as he moved closer, reaching out as if to brace Superman, before thinking twice and moving his arm down.

Clark continued, his voice becoming quieter. "The cage, it may still be glowing green. There's a remote that turns it on and off, and it also retracts it into the ceiling." He took a deep breath and looked Henderson squarely in the eyes as he spoke, his voice now barely above a whisper. "I need you to destroy that cage."

Henderson looked startled, the first time Clark had seen emotion in him during this exchange.

"Can you tell me what it is?" Henderson asked.

Clark fought for control over his stomach as he answered. "The cage is made from a material that is dangerous to me." He knew he could trust Henderson but didn't want to reveal any more about Kryptonite. He could hear Henderson suck his breath in, either in surprise or shock. Clark couldn't look him in the face as he didn't want to see pity from Henderson. "I don't know how to destroy it; bury it, sink it, it just needs to be somewhere where no one can find it."

Henderson reached out as if to give Clark a reassuring pat on the arm. Clark flinched before he could, and he heard Henderson gasp as Clark's cape slipped, exposing his burn marks.

"How long?"

"Not quite a day" Clark guessed Henderson was asking how long he had been in the cage, and he tried to be vague. He'd arrived at LexCorp Tower shortly after sunset the night prior, and it was now late afternoon the following day.

"Do you require medical assistance?"

At this, Clark did look at Henderson, relieved to see compassion and not pity in his eyes. "No, I should be fine, I'll recover quickly," he said bravely, not really knowing what would happen next. "I need to get out of here before I'm noticed." Clark held up his cape. "I'm pretty conspicuous."

"Well, we'll get your statement and then..."

"No," Clark interrupted. "No, I can't risk it... Luthor, Nigel, maybe Mrs. Cox, they all know about this. I can't have this on record. You'll have every criminal wanting to kill me off, looking for it." He could see Henderson mulling over that last statement, considering the long-term effects of a written record of something that could hurt the city's hero.

"Come down to the station. We'll say you're giving your statement if anyone asks, and I'll help you slip out in disguise. Give me about thirty minutes, and I'll be back with a car." Henderson raised an eyebrow in lieu of a question. When Clark nodded his head in assent, Henderson headed towards the road, towards the action, leaving Clark alone.

* * *

By the time Henderson had returned, the sun had passed overhead and was now behind the neighbouring building, and Clark was beginning to feel a little chilly standing in the shadows. Clark got into the front seat, and they drove the short distance to the station in silence. Henderson parked in the staff parking lot behind the station, and they entered through the back exit. Thankfully, they didn't encounter many people on the way to Henderson's office. Clark pasted a smile on his face and tried to walk as though he wasn't exhausted. Once the door of the office was closed, Henderson sat and gestured for Clark to take a seat.

"Superman, I do have a few questions for you. Do you have any evidence or knowledge of the crimes Luthor has been accused of?"

Clark couldn't see any harm in giving Henderson Superman's insights, so he informed him of his suspicions from the last few months.

"Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"I had no evidence." Which was true, Clark reasoned. "It was his word against mine and my suspicions. I had nothing concrete against him and was hoping to gather evidence I could bring to you before making baseless accusations."

“Looks like Kent and company managed to get that evidence for you.”

“Yeah.” Clark shifted uncomfortably.

“Speaking of Kent, have you seen him? Perry White says he’s been missing for at least a day.”

Clark had no idea how to respond. “Do you need him for something?” He tried to stall.

“Yes. According to White, Kent was instrumental in gathering evidence against Luthor, which was then brought to us. We need to find him as we’ll require his statement.” Henderson paused, then continued in a quieter tone. “No one’s seen him for a day, he’s disappeared. That’s not Kent’s style. I want to be sure Luthor didn’t get to him first.”

Clark gulped back a surge of gratefulness that he had friends, coworkers, and one gruff inspector who cared about him. “He’s okay, Inspector.”

Henderson’s eyes narrowed as he stared at Superman. “Where was he? Why wasn’t he with White and Olsen? Did Luthor have him too?”

Clark held up his hands at Henderson’s questions, forgetting the burns on his palms. “I can’t say any more.” He hoped that would buy him enough time to recover a bit and come up with a reason for his absence. He noticed Henderson’s expression change to one of concern and quickly put his hands in his lap. “He will come down and talk to you when he can, I can promise that.”

Henderson made a sound that resembled a grunt. “What happened last night?”

Clark felt his heart race as he remembered, and as he began to speak, his voice cracked with emotion. “I was lured there. He trapped me and left me alone. Had I not escaped, I believe he would have killed me.” It was a vague description, without the details of the entrapment, the agonising pain he’d endured, or the desperate attempts to escape. “After I escaped, I hid. Luthor arrived, agitated, angry, and when he saw the open cage, he attacked a few barrels with an axe. He ran through the other entrance, and that’s the last time I saw him.”

Henderson didn’t respond immediately, and Clark couldn’t meet his eyes any longer, dropping his gaze to his hands, which rested palms down on his knees. He felt awkwardly self-conscious and tugged the cape so it covered his arms completely.

Henderson stood abruptly. “I’ll get you something to change into and arrange for a ride for you. I have to get back.”

“I don’t need a ride,” Clark said, swiftly declining the offer, as Henderson opened his office door. “A change of

clothes would be great, and if I could leave the same way we came in, I’d be grateful.” There was a subway station outside the precinct; he could easily slip away into the crowds and make his way home.

Henderson left, returning within a few minutes with a change of clothes and then leaving again to give Clark some privacy to change. Clark, after checking that the blinds were down completely and that no one could see in, painstakingly began to remove his cape. He hurt all over, feeling pain deep in his bones, his muscles wobbling like jelly, and the burns aching. As he reached around his shoulders to detach the cape and undo the clasp at the back of the Suit, he brushed against the long burn running down his neck and moaned in pain. Slowly, trying his best not to aggravate the raw wounds on his skin, he stripped down to his underwear and explored what Henderson had brought.

The dress pants were just long enough, but a bit big around the waist, and the long-sleeved shirt was the right length for his arms, but also too large around the midsection. Thankfully, he found a belt and added the sports coat. There was a pair of black slip-on shoes, which he managed to put on without too much fuss, and a ball cap, which he pulled low over his face. He folded the Suit and cape carefully, tucking his boots inside, and then paused for a moment as he wondered what to do with them. He couldn’t walk out of the station carrying a tattered Superman suit! He quickly undid the belt, untucked the shirt, and stuffed the Suit underneath, moving it around until it sat on his waist. He grinned as he forced the zipper of the coat closed. No one would suspect who he was with a large belly, but he would have to keep the hat low. His face was too recognizable to go without it, and when he’d left the previous day, he hadn’t taken any of Clark’s belongings with him, including his glasses.

A sharp knock interrupted Clark’s thoughts, and he called out that he was ready. Henderson stuck his head around the door and grinned wryly. “You don’t look like you. Keep that hat low, though. You’ll have to leave through the main entrance, as I can’t let you out of the staff entrance looking like that.”

Clark nodded, his heart pounding, as Henderson led him out of his office, towards the main desk, and into the lobby.

“Keep in touch,” Henderson implored as he escorted Clark through the front doors. “I’d like a call from Kent to confirm he’s okay, and let him know his friends are concerned.”

Clark nodded, and Henderson walked back inside, leaving Clark standing alone on the sidewalk. He looked up to the sun and sighed in relief as the warmth and light hit him. Then he almost chuckled at the thought of this new, third identity. He wasn’t Clark or Superman in that moment, just

some guy, needing to catch a ride home. He stuck his hand in the jacket pocket and held onto the few bills he had there, thankful he had, out of habit, stashed those in the Suit. At least he had money for the subway fare home.

* * *

Part 2

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No one could have survived that fall, Henderson knew instinctively. By the time he made it down to the ground floor and through the large glass entrance doors to LexCorp Tower, officers had already blocked off the gruesome scene from outside eyes. He spotted Lois in her wedding dress, being consoled by Perry. He and Perry briefly locked eyes, and Perry nodded in understanding. They wouldn't leave until Henderson could speak to them.

He ordered a few officers to assist the lead investigators with gathering evidence in Luthor's office, while others were collecting statements from the various wedding guests and employees. Ms. Cox had already been escorted to the precinct to be interviewed there. As he finished directing the team, one of the officers who had been assigned to guard a fire exit in the alley appeared.

"Sir, we've found Superman," the young officer said while trying to see what was being blocked from view.

"Where?"

"He's around the side, Inspector. At the fire exit."

Henderson followed the officer into the alley, immediately noticing how much quieter it was as they neared the fire exit.

"Superman!" he exclaimed. Why was Superman here? Why had he not saved Luthor?

"Can I speak to you?" Superman asked. "In private?"

Henderson turned to the officers, who were trying hard to look like they weren't eavesdropping. "You can both join everyone else taking statements at the entrance."

"Yes, sir," the two officers responded quickly, and they both turned away and jogged back the way he'd come a moment before.

"Luthor?" asked Superman.

"Dead," Henderson said. "Took a swan dive off his penthouse balcony when we confronted him."

"Lois?"

"She's safe, she's fine. She's with Perry White. He'll take her home once she's given her statement." Henderson

watched curiously as Superman seemed to wobble on his feet.

"What was so urgent, Superman?"

Henderson listened with growing concern as Superman described a glowing green cage in a cellar, watching as Superman's body language screamed at him that something wasn't right. At one point, he reached out, fearing the hero might crumple to the ground, but he pulled his hand back when Superman seemed to regain control of his balance. Whatever that cage was, Superman was terrified of it; Henderson could see it in his eyes.

"I need you to destroy that cage," Superman stated.

"Can you tell me what it is?" Henderson asked, startled at the idea that something had hurt the invulnerable Superman.

"The cage is made from a material that is dangerous to me."

Henderson sucked a breath in quickly. Hadn't Lane and Kent written an article about some ex-military psychopath who had claimed that some space rock could harm Superman?

Superman continued, "I don't know how to destroy it; bury it, sink it, it just needs to be somewhere where no one can find it."

Henderson noticed Superman wouldn't meet his eyes, and he reached out as if to give the superhero a reassuring pat on the arm. Superman flinched at the motion, and Henderson gasped as the cape slipped, exposing burns on Superman's arms and hands and one particularly long and painful-looking burn running up his neck.

"How long?" Had Luthor done this? How? Why? The thought of the torture the Man of Steel would have had to endure to feel such pain made Henderson's stomach roll.

"Not quite a day," was the toneless response.

"Do you require medical assistance?" The wounds looked bad, and from experience, Henderson knew that even if those were all of Superman's physical injuries, there would be mental stresses from being confined and tortured.

Superman finally met his eyes. "No, I should be fine, I'll recover quickly. I need to get out of here before I'm noticed." Superman held up his cape. "I'm pretty conspicuous."

"Well, we'll get your statement and then..."

"No," Superman interrupted. "No, I can't risk it... Luthor, Nigel, maybe Mrs. Cox, they all know about this. I can't have this on record. You'll have every criminal wanting to kill me off, looking for it."

Henderson paused as he mulled over the superhero's words. It was true that a written record of this mysterious substance might be a bad idea. All he needed was the next crime lord discovering Superman's Achilles heel.

"Come down to the station. We'll say you're giving your statement, if anyone asks, and I'll help you slip out in disguise. Give me about thirty minutes, and I'll be back with a car." Henderson understood what Superman was saying, but didn't like it. He'd rather have a record of every crime Luthor had committed, and most of the people who had crossed Luthor hadn't survived to become witnesses; he needed every voice he could get.

Mulling over what he'd just learned, he left Superman by the fire exit, alone, and headed back to the street, where the coroner had arrived to take Luthor's body away. Henderson sighed; Luthor was dead, he would never pay for his crimes in the justice system. Adding one more crime against him wouldn't change the outcome, and keeping the secret of Kryptonite away from public knowledge was more important.

He instructed an officer to bring Lois Lane down to the precinct as they needed her statement. White fought at first, until Henderson told him to go get Lois a change of clothes and meet him down there. They needed to ascertain how much she knew of Luthor's criminal activity. He prided himself on his judge of character, and while Lois was annoying at times, and incredibly persistent, he doubted she would have been willingly involved in anything criminal. He grinned wryly, unless it was for a story, he chuckled. Still, he wondered, how had she so badly misjudged Luthor's true character?

* * *

After helping a disguised Superman leave the precinct, with assurances that Kent would be contacting him shortly, Henderson entered the interview room where Lois and Perry waited. The ex-editor was agitated, and the almost-widow of Lex Luthor, no longer wearing her wedding dress, stared blankly ahead, seemingly unaware that he had just entered the room.

"I'm staying right here until her lawyer arrives," began Perry.

"She doesn't need a lawyer. We're not charging her with anything. Just have some questions to help tie things together." Henderson nodded his head to the door before lowering his voice. "Can I talk to you alone for a moment?"

Perry stood and followed Henderson out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"Is she ok?"

"Lois? Well, as well as can be expected after watching the man she was supposed to marry fall off a building."

"We both know he didn't slip and fall," Henderson stated bluntly. "He chose to not face justice."

"Aw, hell," Perry responded, rubbing a hand over his face. "She shouldn't have had to witness that. She claims she called off the wedding, right before..."

Henderson held up his hand to stop him disclosing anything else. "I need that information from her."

"Have you heard from Clark? He's still missing." Perry changed the topic quickly.

Henderson, not wanting to reveal his conversation with Superman or his suspicions as to Kent's whereabouts over the previous twenty-four hours, answered noncommittally. "We've been informed he's okay, but I'm waiting for confirmation." He watched as Perry relaxed a little. "Don't say anything to Lois yet," he cautioned. "Look, you can wait in there with her until the lawyer arrives. As I'm sure you were told when you arrived, there is video surveillance in the room, so no discussing the events from today, your investigation, or Luthor."

White nodded in agreement and headed back into the interview room alone. Henderson watched as Perry sat, gently pulled Lois towards him, and comforted her as she began to cry on his shoulder. What an end to an investigation! He would have preferred to have brought Luthor in alive, but it was over, for better or for worse. They'd be sifting through the evidence and the webs of Luthor's criminal activities for a while yet, trying to detangle it all and bring all those involved to justice.

He headed back to his office just in time to catch a phone call from one of the men he'd left in charge of dismantling the cage in the cellar. Henderson gave the go-ahead for the destruction of the cage, thankful that would be one item taken care of. Once the metal was cut into smaller pieces, it would be stored until Henderson could find a way to destroy it permanently.

He shuddered as he recollected his trip into the cellar earlier. Before giving Superman a ride back to the precinct, he'd chosen one of his senior officers, a guy he'd worked with for decades, a guy he knew would keep his mouth shut if needed, to check out the cellar with him. Just as Superman had described, they'd found a tapestry hiding another set of stairs that led to a lower level. The hair stood up on his arms as he remembered his first sight of the eerie green glow emitting from the cage. Wordlessly, he and the other officer had carefully entered the cellar, disturbed to see an axe sticking out of a partially destroyed wine barrel and a completely destroyed barrel next to it.

Although only two of them had been in the stone-walled room, Henderson could hear voices coming from the ceiling. A brief investigation showed a speaker embedded in the ceiling, the feed coming from, he guessed, a room where people were being interviewed, as he could hear the muffled questions being asked. Rummaging around, the officer found a series of switches near the second entrance and eventually was able to turn off the sound. Again, Henderson pondered, what had Luthor been doing? Had he set up sound surveillance for his own wedding, or had it existed before? And what did it have to do with Superman?

He'd found the remote on the ground in the debris of the damaged barrels and clicked the top button. When nothing happened, he'd tried the second button, and the glowing had ceased. Henderson had left with the remote, sending others down to the cellar to gather any evidence, and had then arranged for someone to come look at the cage, an unspoken agreement between himself and the officer to never mention the green glow again.

Now, sitting in his office, he took the remote from his coat pocket and placed it in his desk, locking the drawer. Superman's brief summary of what had happened to him, coupled with the visuals of the cage, the axe wedged into a partially destroyed barrel, and the painful-looking burns that Superman had been trying to hide, made Henderson shudder. Why had Luthor hated Superman to the point of drawing out his death? The timing of Superman's, and he presumed Kent's, captivity with Luthor's wedding to Lois suggested that Lois was somehow involved, unlikely willingly, or even to her knowledge. She hadn't known where Kent was and hadn't mentioned Superman's absence. Luthor's criminal activities demonstrated a desire for power, for control. Had it been mere jealousy of Lois's professional relationship and friendship with both Kent and Superman that had driven him to planning murder, or was it a desire to control his independent and strong-willed future wife?

With the cage turning to bits of scrap metal at that moment, no one else would know what secret it held; it would just be a cage. He would destroy the remote later. He hoped he'd have some more answers on the rest once Kent contacted him.

* * *

Arriving in the lobby of LexCorp Tower with Perry, Jack, and Jimmy, Lois sobbed, unable to hold back her tears any longer. She cried for the ruined wedding, the fear she had felt walking down the aisle, and the relief she'd had after telling Lex no, she couldn't marry him. Her tears fell from shock over the police's interruption and Lex's angry commands, shattering her illusion of a man who was always in charge of his emotions, consistently exhibiting a cool and

calm demeanour. Selfishly, she realised, she cried for her wounded pride, her confidence in being a good judge of character now severely shaken. Clark had been right, and she had been wrong, so very wrong. Little by little, odd bits of memories began to fit together, and a feeling of dread filled her as she began to realise Lex had been manipulating her, turning her against her friends.

"Where's Clark?" she asked again, as Perry gently guided her through the glass doors.

"Uh, honey..." Perry started, his voice faltering as he realised he wasn't sure what to say.

"We haven't seen him," Jimmy jumped in.

"What do you mean, you haven't seen him? Since when?" She was still crying, her words sounding like a whine as she spoke through the tears.

Around them, pedestrians, wedding guests, and police looked up, pointing, and several people screamed. Lois followed their gaze and spotted what looked like a person, falling from the top of the tower.

Lex.

She knew it before she could see him clearly. In horror, she watched as he continued to fall, and at the last moment she turned her head into Perry's shoulder. As the sickening sound of Lex's landing reached her ears, her legs faltered, her stomach lurched, and her bouquet dropped from her hands. Perry's firm grip around her waist kept her from collapsing, and she stayed with her head turned into her ex-editor's shoulder as Perry manoeuvred them away.

She wanted to leave, change out of this monstrous dress, but Perry wouldn't let her. He said something about talking to the police, so they waited, standing on the sidewalk, Lois staring blankly around. Her mother was somewhere upstairs, likely hitting the bar that had been set up for the reception. Her father hadn't bothered to show, and Lucy, well, she wasn't sure what had happened there. Lex had purchased a ticket for her to fly to Metropolis, but Lucy had missed the flight. At least, that's what her mother had muttered yesterday.

Where was Superman? Lex hadn't called for help, but she'd heard others in the crowd shout for him. What had happened to Clark? Had he been so angry with her he wasn't going to come anywhere near her?

Shortly, an officer drove her to the precinct, Perry joining her there soon after. He arrived with her bag, which contained the clothes she had worn that morning to get to her wedding. Thankfully, the police permitted her to change, though she had required some assistance from one of the

female officers to get the dress off. Then she sat, with Perry, in the quiet interview room, waiting.

She was aware that Henderson had arrived, but she didn't react as she listened to Perry insist that there be a lawyer present. She had no idea who this lawyer was. Ordinarily, it would have been one of the lawyers for the Planet, but that wasn't an option anymore. Yet when the lawyer finally arrived, Lois was relieved to see a woman she recognized from the Planet.

As she didn't know anything about Lex's criminal activities, Henderson's questions weren't hard to answer. The lawyer interjected a few times to get Henderson to reword a question, but had otherwise stayed quiet, taking notes as needed. Lois knew she wasn't being accused of anything; she had had no part in any of the crimes. However, she felt overwhelming guilt for not realizing sooner what Lex had been doing. Some of the things he may have been involved in were stories she had investigated. Had he intentionally led her down the wrong path on several occasions, and she had been blind to it all? Anger and humiliation burned within her, and as the interview dragged on, she grew more concerned for Clark's whereabouts. Had Lex discovered Clark was investigating him and done something to him?

The interview was interrupted once by an officer insisting that Henderson take a very important call. Henderson stepped out for a few minutes, and when he returned, Lois noted curiously that he looked relieved. The interview wrapped up fairly quickly after that, and Henderson disappeared again. Exiting the interview room and parting ways with the lawyer, she was led to the front desk and handed a bag containing her wedding dress. She numbly picked up the bag and scanned the area, spotting Henderson and Perry finishing a brief, yet intense, conversation.

"What was that about?" Lois asked Perry as he reached for the bag while Henderson walked away with a curt nod.

"Uh, honey, let's get you out of here. Do you have everything?" Perry was steering her through the waiting area and towards the main doors.

"Yes. What's going on? Is it about Clark?"

Perry didn't answer and instead gently pushed her through the open door and began walking them towards the parking lot.

"Perry!" Lois shouted, refusing to follow him. "Is Clark okay? What's going on?"

"He's...he's...he's okay." Perry wouldn't meet her eyes.

"Okay? What does that mean?"

Perry sighed heavily. "Henderson said he received a call from Clark, that's all I know."

Lois began to walk towards him. "Is he home? Can we stop and see him?"

"Lois, honey, I don't think that's a good idea right now. Look, I've got a rental car for the rest of the day. I've already dropped Jack and Jimmy off. Now, how about I take you home?" Without waiting for her answer, Perry wrapped an arm around her shoulders and guided her to the car.

* * *

Part 3

* * *

Exhausted and relieved to be home, Clark almost fell to the floor when he walked through his front door, the last of his energy spent. For most of last night and this morning, he never thought he'd see this place again. He had been sure he would die in that cage.

He'd made it without anyone recognizing him as either Clark or Superman, and without collapsing. There had been one moment on the subway when a woman with a large backpack had turned around abruptly, hitting him in the chest with the backpack, right on the large burn running down from his neck. He'd almost keeled over in pain, and after taking some deep breaths, he'd moved to avoid the curious stare he'd received from another passenger.

He staggered into the kitchen, removed a clean glass from the dish rack, filled it with water from the tap and guzzled it down thirstily. He was sure he was probably hungry too, an unfamiliar experience he hadn't had since the last time he'd been exposed to Kryptonite in Smallville, but he couldn't stomach the idea of eating at the moment. He noticed the clean dishes sitting in the rack by the sink and wondered how long Perry, Jack, and Jimmy had stayed. Glancing at the couches, he assumed they'd stayed the night, as there were blankets and pillows stacked up neatly. He needed to get changed before they came back, and he desperately needed sleep.

Once in the safety of his bathroom, the door closed and locked, he began the delicate task of removing his clothes. The shirt had stuck to his wounds and was incredibly painful to remove. He gingerly tried to clean the burns a little with cool water before changing into a pair of sleep shorts. Exiting the bathroom cautiously, unable to tell if anyone had arrived, he bundled together the clothes he had borrowed and the damaged Suit and stuffed them into the secret compartment behind his closet. After checking no one had arrived and double checking the locks on the front door, he crawled into bed and carefully pulled the sheets up. He had no burns on his back, and he hoped he could sleep without rolling over onto his side, as he was sure that would wake him up in a hurry. He contemplated calling his

parents, but as he doubted they would have heard of his brief disappearance, he didn't want to worry them. He knew it would only take one or two words out of his mouth before his mother would know something was wrong, and then they would both insist on flying to Metropolis.

Remembering he had to call Henderson, he picked up the phone on the bedside table and dialled the precinct, unsure how much to say over the phone, or even what to say. He had some time to come up with something as Henderson proved to be tough for the desk clerk to find, and when he eventually came to the phone, Clark briefly informed him that he was okay and would come down to the precinct later. Henderson pushed for more information, but Clark refused to answer, leaving Henderson to guess that Luthor had something to do with it. Clark didn't refute it and ended the conversation.

He needed sleep; he knew he'd feel better with some rest. Last time, it had only taken a day for his powers to return. Yes, his memory reminded him, it had, but that was a very brief exposure. Would his powers even return after being so completely drained?

Despite the worrying thoughts and the constant throbbing of his wounds, he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer, and he drifted into an exhausted sleep.

* * *

While Lois was being questioned at the precinct, Perry made a few phone calls. Jimmy was without an apartment, though hopefully they could get the landlord to accept a late rent payment so Jimmy could get his belongings back, at least. Jack, too, had nowhere to go. Perry knew people with real estate that owed him favours and managed to get a furnished apartment for the three of them for a week, near downtown. He'd taken Jimmy and Jack there in his rental car, left them with some money, and given them instructions to get some lunch, promising to return with their belongings that were still at Clark's.

He'd made it back to the precinct just as the interview with Lois finished, and Henderson had then pulled him aside. Henderson had only told him Clark had called, not giving any information away about where he had been or how he was, but his grim tone informed Perry that while Clark was apparently okay, something had happened to him. Perry feared Luthor had something to do with it.

Perry had taken Lois home, trying to deflect her questions about Clark and the investigation. It seemed the shock had worn off, and she was firing questions faster than he could attempt to answer them. He'd told her Clark was okay, not wanting to reveal his suspicions to her. She'd had a traumatic day; he wasn't going to add any more detail

about Lex's criminal activities or his possible role in Clark's disappearance.

He saw Lois into her apartment, finding her mother waiting in the living room. She assured Perry she could take care of Lois from there, and he left, heading towards Clark's apartment. He'd found, and kept, Clark's spare key that morning, and so he let himself in, calling out to Clark so he wouldn't startle him. When there was no response, he quietly walked into Clark's bedroom, and he was relieved to see Clark, sleeping deeply.

Perry frowned as he spotted a large angry red mark, which looked suspiciously like a burn, starting on Clark's neck and travelling below the bedclothes, which were pulled up to his shoulders. Just as he'd done with his boys, years ago now, Perry reached out and placed the back of his hand on Clark's forehead, checking for a fever, hoping that whatever injury Clark had wasn't infected or serious. Not finding a fever, Perry retreated to the living room, intending on waiting for Clark to wake so he could find out how Clark really was and what had happened to him.

Last night, he'd assumed Clark had been out chasing down a lead on the Boss, and he'd tried to stay awake until Clark had returned. He was furious at himself for not going to the police that evening; perhaps it would have saved Clark some of the trauma he'd been through. Instead, he'd nodded off on the couch like a useless old man and then woken up that morning to find Clark hadn't returned, fearing the Boss had caught up to him.

He wandered into the kitchen and started some coffee, anticipating he would be waiting for Clark to wake for several hours. While the coffee brewed, he called the borrowed apartment and left a message for Jimmy and Jack to let them know he'd be back a bit later. He then called Alice, knowing she would be worried and hoping to take his mind off the horrible thoughts of what had happened to Clark.

* * *

As the sun went down, Perry started to help himself to last night's leftovers, which were plentiful since Jack and Jimmy had refused to eat anything. However, before he could start eating, Lois arrived. She'd pushed past him as soon as he had opened the door.

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"Shh." Perry didn't want Lois to wake Clark. "Keep your voice down," he whispered gently. "He's been sleeping all afternoon."

"Why? What happened? There's something you aren't telling me?" Despite her voice being lower in volume, Lois still sounded a little on the shrill side, indicating how upset she was.

“Look, Lois, we don’t know the full story yet. He’s been asleep the whole time I’ve been here. Why don’t you head home, and I’ll call you the minute he wakes?” If his suspicions were right about Luthor’s part in Clark’s disappearance, Perry didn’t want Lois anywhere near Clark when he woke up. He didn’t think Clark would be too forthcoming about what had happened with Lois there, especially as their friendship had been rocky since she had accepted Luthor’s proposal.

Lois hesitated for a moment before darting past him, swiftly walking to the bedroom, and Perry quickly followed. He heard her gasp in shock before he was able to get to her, and he gently tried to pull her away. The sheets covering Clark had shifted slightly, revealing several nasty burns on his arms, shoulders, and chest. As she cried, he led her into the living room.

“What happened to him?” she sobbed.

A sharp knock prevented him from answering, and he almost growled in frustration. Pulling the door open sharply, about to send whomever it was away, he was silenced as he saw Henderson and another officer waiting.

“Perry!” Henderson exclaimed.

“Bill,” Perry responded, tilting his head in Lois’s direction, so Henderson could see she was there. “She just showed up, she’s had a bit of a shock,” Perry spoke quietly, hoping Lois couldn’t hear him.

“I’m just here to see Kent. Is he awake?”

“Let me check.” Perry hoped that Clark was still sleeping, then he wouldn’t have to deal with all the extra guests in his apartment. Leaving Henderson with Lois, he stuck his head around the wall separating Clark’s bedroom from the main apartment and met Clark’s sleepy, puzzled eyes.

“Perry?”

“Hi, son.” He noticed that Clark immediately pulled the sheet up to cover his wounds after hastily putting his glasses on. “Henderson is here, wants a few words. You up for it?”

“Uh, yeah,” Clark said as he tried to sit.

“Don’t get up,” Perry cautioned him. If Clark didn’t know there was a nearly hysterical Lois in the other room, there was no reason for him to find out. “I’ll bring Henderson in here.”

Stepping back into the living room, he saw Henderson waiting, but no sign of Lois or the other officer.

“We’ll get her home,” was all the information Perry received before Henderson walked into Clark’s bedroom. Henderson returned shortly and announced that Clark would be getting up.

Seeing as Clark was awake, Perry dished out some of the rice from the previous night’s dinner, minus the sauce, and set it in the microwave. Poor boy could probably use something simple in his stomach after all he had likely been through.

It was several minutes before Clark entered the room and sat at the kitchen table. “Here, son, eat something,” Perry said as he passed the plate and a glass of water to Clark. He returned shortly with a hot mug of tea.

“Now, I can stay here if you want me to, for the night. That couch of yours is pretty comfy, I had to put my foot down last night to stop Jimmy from stealing it from me.” Perry chuckled at the memory, trying to lighten the mood a little. At least Clark cracked a small smile.

“I think I’ll be okay. I just want to sleep some more.”

“Okay, but I’ll leave my number. You need anything, call, you hear?” Perry held up a piece of paper he had written his number down on, and Clark nodded in response. “I’ve still got the key from yesterday, so I’ll let myself out and put it back in its hiding spot. Call when you wake up.” Perry waited for another nod, then bid Henderson and Clark a good night. As he picked up his jacket and the bags belonging to Jimmy and Jack and then headed out, he couldn’t help wondering whether Lois was okay.

* * *

Part 4

* * *

Clark woke in a panic. He could hear voices, not loud enough to distinguish whose they were or what was being said, but he knew they were in his house. He tried to cover up his injuries, and at the same time, he reached for his glasses, jamming them onto his face just as Perry stuck his head around the bedroom wall.

“Perry?” he asked, while pulling the sheets up to his neck.

“Hi, son. Henderson is here, wants a few words. You up for it?” Perry asked quietly.

“Uh, yeah,” Clark said, trying to sit up without letting the sheets slip down and reveal his burns.

“Don’t get up. I’ll bring Henderson in here.” Perry disappeared, and Clark hurriedly tried to get himself into a sitting position while keeping the sheets over his wounds. He wished he had time to grab a shirt to cover himself properly, despite how painful it had been to peel the other one off.

“Clark,” Henderson announced as he entered. “You had us a little concerned for your whereabouts for a few hours there.”

“Uh, yeah.” Clark had no idea what he was going to say to Henderson. He’d hoped to have some more time, be a little more awake and a lot less exhausted, by the time he had to deal with the police.

“When you didn’t come see me, I thought I’d stop by. According to the others, you were the ringleader in collecting the evidence against Luthor. I do need to get a statement from you now.”

“Okay, why don’t I meet you in the main room,” Clark suggested. As Henderson left his bedside, Clark gingerly got out of bed. Standing, he found that although the crushing pain in his bones was gone, his muscles ached still. Changing in the bathroom, he was easily able to hide the burns on his arms and shoulders by wearing a hooded sweatshirt, which, when he placed the hood around his neck, hid the burn there a little too. He would have to remember not to show his palms, which had been burned when he’d grabbed the Kryptonite-coated bars.

Entering the living room, he noticed Perry cleaning up in the kitchen and Henderson sitting at the dining table. Clark headed for the table as Perry brought over a glass of water and a plate of rice, followed by a hot mug of tea.

“Now, Clark, I can stay here if you want me to, for the night. That couch of yours is pretty comfy, I had to put my foot down last night to stop Jimmy from stealing it from me,” Perry offered.

Clark smiled briefly at Perry’s attempt to lighten the mood. “I think I’ll be okay. I just want to sleep some more.”

“Okay, but I’ll leave my number. You need anything, call, you hear?” Clark nodded in response. “I’ve still got the key from yesterday, so I’ll let myself out and put it back in its hiding spot. Call when you wake up.” Perry waited for another nod before bidding both Henderson and Clark a good night, grabbing his jacket and several bags, and leaving.

“We just have to wait for Officer Kostiuik to join us, and then we can begin,” Henderson said to break the awkward silence that had fallen as Perry left.

Clark nodded in response, picking away at the plate of rice in front of him. He took a sip of the tea without thinking about how hot it might be, and then he hastily put it back down on the table as his hands complained about the contact with the hot mug. He’d have to remember to use the handle rather than grab the mug with his palms and only take another sip after letting it cool a bit. He managed to eat half of the rice before another knock at the door announced the return of Officer Kostiuik. Pushing the plate aside and pulling the mug of tea towards him, he prepared himself for the questions he didn’t know how to answer.

* * *

As an officer, then an investigator, Henderson had spent decades honing his ability to observe, and the moment Perry had opened Kent’s front door, Henderson had been fed information from his observations.

“Perry!” Henderson exclaimed, noting that the sharpness with which Perry had opened the door showed Perry’s frustration.

“Bill,” Perry responded, tilting his head in Lois’s direction. “She just showed up, she’s had a bit of a shock,” Perry said quietly. Henderson wondered if the frustration was from his interruption, Lois’s tears, or both. There was no sight, nor sound, of Kent.

“I’m just here to see Kent. Is he awake?”

“Let me check.” Perry disappeared, leaving a still-sniffling Lois standing alone, looking lost and distraught.

Henderson spoke softly to her. “Lois? Are you ok?”

“I just wanted to see Clark,” she sobbed. “What happened to him?”

Her question held less of a wail and more of an accusation towards Henderson. Something had happened to Kent, and Lois didn’t know what it was but was angry about it.

“I think it’s best if we get you home, Lois.” He turned to the officer who was with him. “Can you call for someone to escort Ms. Lane home?” he asked. Lois, thankfully, followed the officer out of the apartment willingly. No sooner had the door closed than Perry emerged from the other room. At Perry’s inquisitive glance around the now empty living area, he stated they’d get Lois home, and then he headed in to see Kent.

“Clark,” Henderson announced as he entered. “You had us a little concerned for your whereabouts for a few hours there.”

“Uh, yeah.” Kent seemed to be half awake still and was trying to keep himself completely cocooned in blankets, though he was not quite concealing a wound on his neck, which looked suspiciously like a burn mark, very similar to the injuries he’d seen on Superman earlier.

“When you didn’t come see me, I thought I’d stop by. According to the others, you were the ringleader in collecting the evidence against Luthor. I do need to get a statement from you now.”

“Okay, why don’t I meet you in the main room,” Kent suggested, and Henderson left the room.

Henderson watched as Perry fussed in the kitchen, heating a plate of plain rice in the microwave, making a cup of tea, and cleaning up the remaining dishes. Clearly, Perry

was also worried about Kent, otherwise he wouldn't be fretting like a mother hen. Kent was perfectly capable of preparing his own meals, and the fact that Perry was doing it for him was telling. He watched as Kent entered the room, wearing sweatpants and a hoodie but no socks, and walked slowly to the table. He wasn't limping and was keeping his facial expression neutral, but Henderson could see Kent was in pain and exhausted. As he sat, Perry delivered the plate of rice and beverages, then offered to stay if needed. When Clark refused, Perry departed.

"We just have to wait for Officer Kostiuik to join us, and then we can begin," Henderson explained, breaking the silence. He watched as Kent ate half-heartedly, barely finishing half of the rice before pushing the plate aside.

"It's taken care of," Officer Kostiuik stated to Henderson as he entered the apartment. He joined them both at the kitchen table and placed a voice recorder on the table, followed by a notebook and pen.

"Clark, this is Officer Kostiuik. He's going to take notes, and we'll get a signed statement from you. We'll also record this conversation." He waited as Kent verbally affirmed he understood and consented before continuing. Then, he stated the date, time, and location as the recording started.

The questioning began easily enough. He first asked Kent about the investigative work he'd done with Perry and the others to uncover what they'd found on Luthor. He watched as Kent functioned on autopilot, recounting the recent events with the purchase, then destruction, of the Daily Planet, their suspicions regarding the perpetrator, and the questionable claims from Luthor regarding the insurance, all with no tone inflection, barely more than a monotone. Kent told of how he, Perry, Jimmy, and Jack had worked together to cover different angles, revealing the truth about the bombing, exonerating Jack, and linking Luthor to the Boss.

Nothing in Kent's statement was new information to Henderson. He'd read through the evidence and witness statements from the others. However, through questioning him, Henderson discovered Kent was missing some of the final details. He had suspicions about John Black, and he thought that the former board members of the Planet had been bribed, but he didn't have knowledge of the evidence confirming his suspicions. According to Perry, Kent had failed to return the prior evening for dinner, when some of the final pieces of their investigation had been put together.

Throughout Kent's interview, he remained hunched over slightly, continually fiddling with his cup of tea, which by now had to be cold. His voice had remained even, almost devoid of emotion, and other than meeting his eyes while being asked a question, for most of Kent's statement, he

had fixed his gaze on the recorder sitting on the table. This was a far cry from the confident, self-assured young man Henderson had come to know. Something had shaken him in the last twenty-four hours, and so far, Kent had not hinted at where he had been.

"What happened to you last night?" Henderson asked bluntly.

Kent raised his eyes to meet Henderson's squarely, but remained mute. Slightly unnerved by his stare, Henderson rephrased the question a few times to try to get an answer. With no comments from Kent, he ended the recording, and Kostiuik gave Kent the written statement to look over. Once signed, Kostiuik stood and walked to the door.

"I'll be right down," Henderson instructed him. Once the door had closed behind the officer, he looked back at Kent, whose gaze had fallen to the cold mug of tea. "Yesterday, at some point in the late afternoon or early evening, something happened to you." When there was no forthcoming explanation, he continued.

"There were three guys in your apartment, expecting you to join them for dinner, but you never arrived. Perry stated he stayed up to wait for you but fell asleep. When you weren't here in the morning, they headed straight to the station with all the evidence you all had gathered, concerned for you, as we hadn't heard anything either. When we didn't find you at LexCorp Tower, I was wondering if we'd be fishing your body out of the river." Henderson paused, waiting for any reaction from across the table. There was the slightest flinch at the suggestion he'd be found dead, suggesting that Kent had faced that possibility. He waited a few more seconds before continuing.

"No one finds any trace of you at LexCorp Tower, and then I hear from Superman that you're fine, and you'll call, which you do. After a long day of witness statements, pouring over evidence, I've got a reasonably good picture of what happened today. Even Superman's story, while incomplete, I've got a fairly good grasp on. The only big hole right now is your disappearance and miraculous reappearance."

Henderson leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table, starting straight at Kent, who was still refusing to meet his eyes. "At some point yesterday, after you began to make the link between Luthor and the Boss, you were captured and spent the night somewhere courtesy of Luthor. Late this morning you either escaped, or were rescued, and came home. Superman knew you were safe and told you to get hold of me. Am I close?"

Kent showed no indication he had heard what was said, his body posture not changing. Henderson tried something different, taking a gamble. "Were you in the cage too?" he asked softly.

Henderson sucked back a gasp as Kent reacted, letting go of the mug, knocking it over, and putting his hands up in a gesture strikingly similar to Superman's reaction earlier. Kent quickly rescued the mug, then placed his hands on the table, palms down, but not before Henderson noticed that, just like Superman, Kent's hands had wounds stretching across his palms. The hood of his sweater had also shifted, revealing the wound on his neck. The wounds on his palms now out of view, Kent schooled his expression back to one of neutrality, not quite able to erase the fear from his eyes. At the same time, Clark seemed unaware that his hood had slipped, leaving one of his wounds visible. The unflappable Clark Kent, who despite finding himself in many life-threatening situations, usually with his partner leading the charge, always kept a cool head, was now afraid. Whatever had happened last night had shaken him, and Henderson wasn't going to push anymore tonight.

"Clark," Henderson continued to speak softly, "unless you want to tell me what happened, I'm not going to ask anymore tonight."

Kent shook his head, his eyes back on the mug, which his hands had returned to holding.

"Okay, Clark, I need you to listen to me." Henderson was relieved when Kent finally met his gaze. "Whatever happened to you, it wasn't your fault." He paused so that could sink in, knowing that whether or not Kent would listen, he needed to hear it. "Whether you want to make an official statement or have someone to talk to, I'm available, anytime. If you want to talk to someone else, that can easily be arranged, just call the precinct."

Again, Henderson paused and waited as Kent slowly nodded in acknowledgement, thankfully not dropping his gaze back to the table. "I think you should take Perry up on his offer to stay..."

"No, I'll be fine," Kent insisted. "I just need sleep, and I'll be fine."

"Okay," Henderson replied as he stood. Kent walked him to the front door and let him out. Then he heard the door lock behind him. As he walked down to the street where Officer Kostiuik was patiently waiting, he shook his head. Had they not stopped Luthor when they did, he would bet his badge that Kent and Superman would be dead.

* * *

Clark woke, gasping, and sat up, untangling his legs from the sheets. He couldn't remember exactly what he had been dreaming about, but the fear of being trapped was still overwhelming. His mouth was dry; he was desperately thirsty, and his throat was sore. Was that from his screaming earlier that morning, or had he been shouting in his sleep?

he wondered. As he felt his heart rate settle, he stood and wandered into the kitchen for a glass of water.

He'd left the living room lights on after Henderson had left, missing his super-vision and just not wanting to be in the dark, and as he guzzled a glass of water, he couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched. He filled his glass again from the kitchen tap and turned to face the rest of his apartment. When he saw her, he almost dropped his glass in fright.

"Lois?" Was he hallucinating?

"Clark?" she called as she got up from the couch and walked towards him. "What happened to you?" She stopped a few feet from him and reached out as if to touch him.

His arm snapped up, and he grasped her wrist, preventing her from touching him. She wasn't a hallucination, and he was in front of her, bare chested, bare faced, and exposing his injuries to her.

"Lois," he growled. "You shouldn't be here." He dropped her wrist quickly and walked into his room, where he pulled on a t-shirt and slid on his glasses, his heart pounding away. Was it from the fright she had given him, or because she was here, somewhere he never expected her to be again? He stepped back into the living room, hoping that she hadn't recognized his face minus the usual frames.

"What did Lex do to you?" she whispered, not approaching him this time.

In a flash, he heard the feral growl Luthor had made when he realised the cage was empty, and he relived the moment the wine barrels were smashed with the axe intended to end Superman's - his - life. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, trying to stop the onslaught of panic, calm his heart rate, and escape the recurring nightmare.

"Lois, you can't be here, not now. Go home," he said curtly. He couldn't face her at the moment; he needed her to leave. He watched her pale a little before she turned away abruptly. She placed a key on the coffee table and walked up the stairs to the door before turning back to face him.

"You shouldn't leave your spare key in such an obvious place. You never know who could let themselves in."

"I won't," he retorted as she closed the door firmly behind her. He went up the stairs, locked the door, and walked back down to the couch, sitting where she had been. The cushions were still warm from where she'd sat, and he didn't need his heightened sense of smell to breathe in the fragrance of her perfume. He grabbed one of the decorative cushions and pulled it towards his chest, sinking his chin into the top, miserable.

As he inhaled her scent, he was flooded with the memories of listening to her wedding ceremony proceed as he'd lain dying in a cage, listening to the vows of the happy couple as he'd made one last desperate attempt to escape. He could feel where his skin had touched the Kryptonite bars, searing as he'd reached for the key, his hands burning as he'd pushed open the door of the cage, his own screams of pain blocking out the final words of Lois's vows to her husband-to-be.

He stood abruptly, catching his knee on the coffee table, and shouted in frustration and pain. He threw the cushion that smelled of Lois across the room, watching as it sailed over the television and landed harmlessly on the floor. He'd never see her again now. She knew; somehow, she knew what Luthor had done. He couldn't see her again. That brief encounter had sent him spiralling into a panic, almost overwhelming him with painful memories. How long would they take to fade?

He glared at the cushion on the floor. Maybe he'd never regain his powers after the hours he'd spent in that cage. He would have to move on, find a new job, leave his memories of Metropolis and Lois behind.

Fighting tears, he headed back to bed, and he idly thought that if his powers never returned, perhaps he would never have to wear glasses again.

* * *

Part 5

* * *

When Perry dropped her off at her apartment after her interview at the precinct, he'd insisted on walking her up and carrying the bag that held her wedding dress, while she carried the other one she'd taken to her wedding that morning. In it were a few items of clothing, makeup, and some extra toiletries. Her other bags, full of clothes to last her a few days until she could officially move out of her apartment, had been taken to Lex's penthouse the day before and, to the best of her knowledge, were still there. She shuddered as she remembered what she'd packed: the lingerie for her honeymoon night, a few outfits fit for a beach vacation, several dresses that Lex had purchased for her over the months, items of clothing suited to his fine tastes in restaurants and private jets. Nothing she'd wear to work or out with friends. Right now, she never wanted to see the bags, or their contents, again.

She'd been surprised to see her mother waiting for her in her apartment, grateful that she appeared to be sober. A ruined wedding could have been enough to send her mother hunting for the familiar comfort of alcohol. Pleasantries between Ellen and Perry were exchanged, Perry set the

wedding dress down on the table, and he informed Lois of his new temporary number, should she need to get hold of him for anything. The moment Perry closed the door behind him, her mother began to fuss.

"Where have you been?" Ellen Lane demanded.

"Mother, not now," snapped Lois, noticing her mother starting to unpack the wedding dress.

"After you disappeared, I started trying to find out what had happened, where you and Lex had gone, but no one would tell me anything! Then that boss of yours returned, asking for your bag, and would divulge nothing other than you were being taken to the police station!"

"Mother..."

"Then I had to give my statement and answer questions in that room, with everyone else. Did I know my future son-in-law was a criminal? Would my daughter have played a role in his criminal activities? Do you have any idea how humiliating that was?"

"Mother," Lois shouted. "Don't. Not now."

"Well? Did you?"

Lois turned to her mother and responded coldly. "No. I had no idea until I found out during my wedding. Do I have any idea how humiliated you feel? How about how I feel? Why are you here? Just to tell me how awful you feel? Will you please leave that dress in its bag!"

Ellen had unzipped the bag and was beginning to gently remove the dress. "Lois, the dress will get wrinkled in the bag..."

Lois exploded. "Does it matter? What, do you think I'm going to wear it again? That dress is going in the garbage. A few more wrinkles won't hurt it."

Lois stomped to her bedroom and closed the door firmly, not wanting to deal with her mother and desperately needing to shower and get the hairspray out of her hair and the makeup off her face. Once under the hot water of the shower, washing the day away, she tried to calm down, forget how frustrating her mother could be at times — most of the time.

Her mother had been delighted at the prospect of a wealthy, well-connected, famous son-in-law. The few times Lex and her mother had met, Lex had been charming. Her mother had fallen for it, just as she had, she reminded herself bitterly. Her mother, her infuriating mother, who was now likely trying to salvage the wedding dress, had been there for the wedding, the only member of her family. Even her friends hadn't come, though she now knew they'd been busy.

It was startling to think her mother had saved her from what would have been the worst mistake of her life. Lois sighed at the memory as she finished dawdling in the shower. She was grateful her mother had spoken, told her to do what her heart told her to do, as she may have otherwise chalked her tears and fears up to pre-wedding jitters.

Leaving the bathroom, now calmer and dressed comfortably, she prepared to face her mother.

Thankfully, the dress was back in the bag, sitting on the floor by the front door.

"I'll take that when I leave," her mother announced, pointing at the bag, and she then poured a cup of fresh coffee for Lois, who heaved a sigh of relief.

"Thanks."

* * *

The sun was setting as she began the drive back to her apartment after giving her mother a ride home. The conversation over coffee had been short lived; her mother had asked a few idle questions and offered her a place to stay, as she'd assumed Lois would have no home to live in shortly. Lois had thanked her, hoping she could renew the lease instead and stay where she was. When the silence had become uncomfortable, Ellen had asked for a ride home, and Lois, grateful that the Jeep had been left in its parking space that morning, had obliged. Finally alone, she allowed her mind to ask the questions she hadn't wanted to earlier.

In all the commotion that had happened, there was one face she hadn't seen, the one person she desperately wanted to see, the one man she had been thinking of while she walked down the aisle to marry another man.

Clark.

He'd warned her, and she'd blithely ignored him, attributing his attitude to jealousy, and after his declaration in the park, she thought she'd been right.

"Oh, Clark," she moaned aloud. Where had he been? Had he been found? She needed to see him, make sure he was okay. Instead of taking the turn towards her home, she kept driving, heading to Clark's. After easily finding a parking space, she entered the building and took the stairs up to his floor. At his door, she stalled. Someone was home; the lights were on. She knocked quietly on the door and then listened as footsteps approached. When Perry opened the door, she became angry. He had refused to answer her questions earlier. What was he hiding?

"Where is he?" she demanded as she pushed past Perry, heading down the few steps into Clark's living room.

"Shh," Perry whispered. "Keep your voice down. He's been sleeping all afternoon."

"Why? What happened? There's something you aren't telling me?" She lowered her volume, and beneath the anger, she could feel fear.

"Look, Lois, we don't know the full story yet. He's been asleep the whole time I've been here. Why don't you head home, and I'll call you the minute he wakes?"

Lois hesitated for a moment before darting past him, swiftly walking to the bedroom, hoping to get there before Perry stopped her. As she slipped around the corner, she saw him and gasped. Clark was asleep, lying on his back, the sheets halfway covering his chest. His arms and shoulders were marked with injuries that looked like burn marks, and one long mark ran from his neck to below the sheet. Tears welled up in her eyes, spilling down her cheeks as she felt Perry gently guide her back into the living room.

"What happened to him?" she sobbed.

Before Perry could answer, there was a knock at the door. "Stay here," Perry ordered, and she stood numbly where he left her, barely aware that a conversation was happening mere feet away from her.

"Let me check," she heard Perry say as he headed into Clark's bedroom again.

"Lois? Are you ok?" Henderson asked softly.

"I just wanted to see Clark," she sobbed, not wondering why Henderson was in Clark's apartment. "What happened to him?" Had everyone let Clark down? She had, Superman had, and Perry had. How had he received those injuries? What had been done to him that necessitated the need to sleep a day away? She already guessed Lex had something to do with it. But how? And what had happened?

"I think it's best if we get you home, Lois," Henderson suggested as he turned to the officer with him. "Can you call for someone to escort Ms. Lane home?"

Lois, still in shock from seeing Clark's injuries, followed the officer out of the apartment. Once down on the main floor, she waited with Officer Kostiuik while he talked to her, calming her down. It wasn't long before Perry arrived and informed the officer he would make sure she got home okay. Once the officer headed back inside the building, Lois, no longer crying, assured Perry she could drive herself home. She promised to call as soon as she walked in the door, and Perry bid her a good night.

She arrived home to her empty apartment, and after leaving a message for Perry on his answering machine, she curled up on the couch and turned the television on. Right now, she needed her head to stop spinning from everything that had happened today.

* * *

The sound of gunshots from the black and white movie playing on the television woke her with a start. She had been having a nightmare, but now she was awake, what she could remember of the nightmare didn't make sense. It was a jumble of moments and memories, some of which she didn't even recognize. It culminated in Lex shooting Clark, probably a response to her hearing the gunshots in the movie. She turned the television off, stretched out her neck, stiff from the awkward sleeping position, and wandered into the kitchen.

The cupboards were almost bare. They usually didn't hold much anyways given her abhorrence of cooking, but there was usually a tin of soup or a frozen dinner somewhere. Since her acceptance of Lex's proposal and the demise of the Daily Planet, she hadn't spent much time eating at home. Instead, her evenings had been spent at the penthouse or various formal gatherings and charity events, with the occasional flight to somewhere for a quiet meal.

She opened the cupboard containing the coffee and gladly grabbed the tin of grounds, spotting a box of tea behind it. Putting the tin of coffee down, she gently took out the box of herbal tea that Clark had insisted she try one night. She sat down on the floor and cradled the box, wondering if he was okay and what had happened to him.

She remembered their last bitter conversation before the wedding. It had been their first conversation in weeks, and he had been angry with her. Initially, she had thought he was angry about her turning him down, but now she realized it was something deeper, not jealousy. He'd hated Lex, and Clark wouldn't hate someone without a reason. He'd told her then about the extra insurance on the Planet, told her to investigate, but there had been more Clark had discovered, she realized.

Jimmy had let it slip that Clark had not shown up at his apartment last night, and she knew he had mysteriously returned home, injured and exhausted, during the day. Given that he had been investigating Lex and Lex's criminal tendencies, it would be logical that Lex had discovered what Clark had been investigating and had decided to do something about it.

She needed to see him. She needed to tell him that he had been right all along and that she was sorry she hadn't believed him. She had to tell him that she'd stopped the wedding because of him, even though she didn't fully understand how she felt towards him.

She put the box of tea on the counter, grabbed her keys, and left.

* * *

There was a light on in Clark's apartment - the living room light, she guessed, as it wasn't very bright - but she couldn't hear sounds of him moving around or the sound of the television. Not knowing if he would bother answering the door, she checked under the mat for the spare key he always left there. Finding it, she gently opened the door and peeked inside, trying to see if he was awake.

"Clark," she whispered as she tiptoed down the stairs.

The living room light was on, but he wasn't sleeping on the couch. There were pillows and blankets stacked neatly, she assumed from Perry, Jimmy, and Jack staying there the night before. She cautiously walked towards the opening to his bedroom and listened. His breathing was not the peaceful rhythmic breathing of a person in deep sleep, but was instead heavier and erratic, as though he was having a bad dream. Unwilling to wake him, she quietly went back into the living room and sat on the couch.

"Stupid," she chastised herself. Just because he'd left a light on didn't mean he would be awake. Now what should she do? The easiest thing would be to leave, but she was worried about him. If whatever had happened to him to cause his injuries was now giving him nightmares, she wanted to be there for him, just like he'd been there for her so many times. Filled with indecision, she started as she heard him cry out. Should she go to him? She stood as she heard the bed sheets rustling, intending on going to wake him up, when she heard him get out of bed. She quickly sat back down, unsure what to do or how he would react.

She watched as he walked into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water, trying not to stare at his naked torso, as he was only wearing a pair of sleep shorts. He poured himself a second glass and turned to face her, visibly jumping in shock when he saw her.

"Lois?"

"Clark?" She instantly noticed the burns, worse than what she had seen initially, as she stood and approached him. "What happened to you?" She stopped a few feet from him and reached a hand out towards his chest.

She jumped as his hand snapped up and grasped her wrist, stopping her from touching him.

"Lois," he growled. "You shouldn't be here." He dropped her wrist quickly and walked into his room, returning moments later wearing a t-shirt and glasses. She'd been so focused on his injuries that she hadn't noticed his lack of eyewear.

"What did Lex do to you?" she whispered, not approaching him this time, watching as he closed his eyes briefly and took a few deep breaths.

“Lois, you can’t be here, not now. Go home,” he said tersely.

She felt her heart plummet as his tone was deadly calm, no warmth of friendship emanating through, even in his eyes. She was taken aback and stepped away from him. Then she removed the key from her pants pocket and placed it on the coffee table.

“You shouldn’t leave your spare key in such an obvious place. You never know who could let themselves in,” she remarked coldly, trying not to burst into tears.

“I won’t,” he retorted as she closed the door firmly behind her. She stepped into the shadows as she heard the door lock behind her and then quickly retreated back to the Jeep, her tears falling once again.

* * *

Part 6

* * *

It was very late when he arrived home. He tossed his keys on his coffee table, removed his jacket, and loosened his tie as he hung the jacket up. It was a good thing he wasn’t married anymore; the constant late nights had put an irreparable strain on his first marriage, and he wasn’t about to put someone else through that. However, it did mean there was no one to come home to after a challenging case or a rough day, and today, he wished there was someone.

He laughed to himself. Bill Henderson pining for love? He poured himself a glass of scotch and took a sip, settling down in his favourite reading chair, a soft leather chair that seemed to help him relax a little more. Picking up the book he had started yesterday, he found the place he had left off and began to read, trying to let the day’s events settle in his mind.

But he couldn’t. He wanted to go back to the precinct and keep fitting all the pieces of the Luthor puzzle together. The countless anonymous and unsolved crimes, which were now being solved thanks to Luthor’s meticulous records and to Mrs. Cox, who after hearing of Luthor’s death, had begun to sing loudly, knowing no one could protect her.

There was another thing nagging at his mind: the disappearances of Kent and Superman. Both had claimed suspicions into Luthor’s criminal activities, Superman’s suspicions dating back months. Superman stated Luthor had lured him into the cage, but how? Had he captured Kent first and used him as the bait? His intuition screamed that Lois had been the bait, though unaware, as she hadn’t known anything about Kent’s or Superman’s disappearance and wouldn’t have done anything willingly to hurt either man.

For Superman to be unavailable wasn’t something out of the ordinary as he couldn’t be everywhere at once, and there had been no serious crimes last night to warrant his appearance, so his disappearance hadn’t really been noticed. Luthor’s suicide and the lack of a superhero to rescue him shouldn’t raise too many eyebrows, he assumed, especially once the newspapers exposed Luthor for what he really was. There would, of course, be those who claimed Superman purposely wasn’t available to save Luthor, just as there would be those who would proclaim Luthor had been pushed from his penthouse, and the inevitable conspiracy theorists would crawl out of the woodwork and try to do their damage. The truth would be recorded and reported on, and some would choose to ignore it, instead willing to believe the wild theories that would emerge.

He poured himself another drink, musing on the demise of the Daily Planet. A shame that a fine, upstanding source of news was no longer, and the many reporters who had worked there were now scattered. The Star had snapped up Hays, the crime beat reporter, and Henderson thought that would be a good fit. Hays was a good guy, had worked at the Planet for over a decade, and had a great working relationship with many of the officers in his precinct. It would be good to have a familiar, trustworthy reporter at the Star. A few of the Planet’s other reporters had taken jobs in Metropolis, though it was unlikely he’d interact with them any more than he had before. Other than Hays and a few of the junior reporters, the only people he saw plenty of were Lane and Kent.

He’d miss the team of Lane and Kent, despite their habit of ending up in the story. They both had great instincts, were trustworthy, and were fantastic writers, easily the best investigative reporters he’d ever worked with. What would happen to them now? Would Kent stick around or move on? Would Lois continue to work at LNN?

He gently swirled the amber liquid in his glass as he pondered. How had Lane missed Luthor’s true character with those razor-sharp instincts of hers? Had she really been blindly in love? In the interview, she stated she’d stopped the wedding right before the police had entered, explaining that she realized she couldn’t go through with it. He hadn’t questioned that further when it had become obvious she wasn’t aware of Luthor’s criminal activities. Then, later that evening, she’d been a sobbing mess at Kent’s place. He’d guessed a while ago that Kent carried a flame for Lane, one she either ignored or was oblivious to. Perhaps she wasn’t so oblivious anymore. It would explain why she had been so insistent to see Kent that night and why she had stopped the wedding.

After he and Officer Kostiuik had finished the interview with Kent, Kostiuik had informed him Lane had seen Kent’s

injuries, assumed Luthor had had something to do with it, and had been pretty shaken, demanding to know what had happened. As Officer Kostiuk hadn't known anything about Kent being in Luthor's clutches, he had instead talked to her, asking her why she thought Luthor was involved. She'd had no proof, just suspicions, and so Kostiuk had small talked with her until Perry arrived.

Taking another sip of his drink, he mulled over the interview with Kent and remembered the haunted look in Kent's eyes at the mention of the cage. It had been startlingly similar to Superman's. In a flash, he remembered the way both men had reacted to his questions, raising their hands in a gesture of defense, exposing burn marks on their palms.

Identical burn marks.

The metal bars of the cage had been cold once he'd turned that eerie green glowing off. Whatever that substance was, it was obviously harmful to Superman. But was it also harmful to humans? If both Kent and Superman had been inside that cage when it was on and touched the bars, would they have identical burns?

As much as Superman had tried to hide it, Henderson had been able to see the wounds through the scorched holes in the Suit, and there had been several. Kent bore an identical mark on his neck; he'd seen it when Kent had woken up and then again when the hood of his sweater had slipped. As for the other wounds on Superman's arms and shoulders, he didn't know if Kent had similar injuries.

Henderson set his glass down on the coffee table and leaned forward in his chair, thinking furiously. Lane was almost a permanent fixture around Superman, but had he ever seen Kent with the superhero? They'd been at the same place, but never at the exact same time.

The fear of the cage, the expression in their eyes, their identical reactions.

Henderson rubbed his eyes and stood up. It was late, and he was clearly exhausted and imagining things. He walked over to the kitchen sink and poured the remainder of his drink down the drain as his mind refused to let go of the Kent/Superman train of thought.

Nightfall, he remembered with a start. Kent had been found with no memory of recent events, and at the same time, Superman had gone missing. When Kent had regained his memory, Superman had returned just in the nick of time to save Earth.

Could it be? Was the answer to Kent's mysterious disappearance last night that simple?

Superman never lied. If he had an alter ego, it would make sense that the alter ego would have the same standards

and morals, and Kent certainly had high morals. By not revealing where he was the previous night, Kent was keeping his other identity secret, without lying.

He remembered watching the press conference before Superman had left to attempt to destroy Nightfall, the adoration in Superman's eyes, directed at Lois, as Superman had prepared to leave. He remembered it because it had surprised him that the superhero had shown affection for someone so openly. There had been other times when Superman had shown his affection for Lois, but these other reactions had been brief and had always been masked quickly. It was no secret that Lois Lane had been infatuated with the Man of Steel when he had first arrived, and over time, a friendship had formed. But Kent often cast that same adoring glance at his partner. Was it just one man, in both guises, who had cared so much for Lane and had been trapped by Luthor, with Lane unaware? It would answer the question of what had lured Superman and Kent to the cage in the first place! Had Luthor been aware of Kent's true identity?

He needed to sleep on this, then look at it again tomorrow, with fresh eyes and a rested mind, otherwise he was going to start making crazier connections than he already was.

* * *

Part 7

* * *

The next morning, the cupboards were still bare, and the box of tea she'd neglected to put away last night still sat on the counter. She grabbed the tin of coffee and made herself a pot, finding a box of cereal and eating a bowlful of it dry. She would have to go out at some point or call for delivery.

Staring around her apartment, she realized how little she had packed for the move to the penthouse. Other than the bags of clothes for her honeymoon and one or two books, nothing had moved. There was a box in the living room with carefully wrapped knickknacks and one box in the bedroom full of books, and that was all. Prior to the wedding, packing up the apartment had been something she could do later, once Lex's renovations were complete. No point stuffing more useless items into a space that was being repainted and redone, she had thought. Now she was wondering if her subconscious had already been rejecting a marriage to Lex. She glanced around at the ornaments, keepsakes, knickknacks, and treasures scattered tastefully around her apartment, the case for her Kerth awards, her treasured books, even her furniture, which she had saved for months to buy once she had settled in as a reporter at the Planet. Would any of this have fit in with Lex's expensive tastes? Would he have permitted her to bring it? They hadn't had

any conversations discussing how they'd amalgamate their belongings. Why hadn't she questioned that at the time?

The ringing of the phone interrupted her thoughts, and she answered, surprised to hear her sister on the other end.

* * *

As his feet hit the floor by his bed, Clark knew he was recovering. The aches in his muscles were still there, but just barely; his muscles were more tired than anything else. He stretched, feeling the skin pull over his healing burns, and he looked down at his chest and palms, noticing the skin starting to harden over the raw red wounds. He pulled on a t-shirt, wandered into the kitchen, and opened the fridge. Again, he stared at the leftovers from the dinner he'd missed, milk, condiments, and not much else that wasn't junk food, as he'd almost emptied the fridge making breakfast for everyone two mornings prior, and Perry had used a few more items making dinner.

He closed the fridge and grabbed a mug and a tea bag. With a stab of sorrow, he filled up the kettle that Perry had found and used yesterday and stared glumly at it while it slowly boiled. How many times over his life had he longed to be normal? Yet, now that he was, he was miserable. The water boiled, the tea steeping, and he glanced around his apartment. He'd have to start packing soon, and for the first time, it wouldn't be a quick and easy task, though he knew as soon as his parents found out he'd decided to leave, they'd be there to help.

He should call and update them, but he didn't want a fuss. Deep down, he was hoping his powers would come back in a day so he wouldn't have to worry them needlessly. Besides, he reasoned, they'd be in town right now doing their weekly grocery and supplies shopping. He'd call in a few hours when they got home.

* * *

Writing for the Daily Planet and, she suspected, working with Lois had sharpened Clark's writing tremendously. She had always been proud of her son's writing abilities, but in the last few months, he'd excelled. After the bombing of the Daily Planet, she missed reading his work and looked forward to reading the book he said he wanted to write. While he claimed that was what he was doing now, she knew he was focused on other things.

In the privacy of the farmhouse, many of their conversations had revolved around Lex Luthor and his criminal activities. She and Jonathan had warned him over and over to be careful, which sounded ludicrous to say to their invulnerable boy. There was only one known substance that could hurt him, and it was gone. Clark's biggest challenge

with Mr. Luthor was obtaining evidence he could give to the police to back up what he'd known as Superman for a while.

Clark hadn't been to the farmhouse in a week, and the last time he'd called, he'd briefly explained that he, his former editor, and a few old co-workers were chasing a few leads. She'd watched the news most nights to see if there was anything that would indicate what they were investigating, but to no avail. Now, the day after Lois's wedding, she wasn't sure Clark would have the heart to continue.

She suspected Clark's sudden interest in exposing Mr. Luthor had everything to do with Lois's wedding, and she'd secretly hoped that Clark could stop it. Lois was a wonderful young woman, was feisty and witty, and would be a great match for her son, if only they would both see what was in front of them. She knew Clark cared for Lois much deeper than a coworker or even a friend, but he hadn't acted, and now Lois had moved on. Had there not been a super-powered secret between them, she wondered if Clark would have acted sooner.

She sighed heavily, eliciting a concerned look from Jonathan. He gently hugged her as they stood in line at the register, their cart full of groceries, and she allowed her gaze to wander. She gasped as she noticed a tabloid with a picture of Elvis and Lex Luthor on a beach. The next paper, *Wichita Today*, a more reputable paper, carried a large headline declaring Luthor's demise.

She grabbed the paper and showed Jonathan, reading the story on the first page for any mention of their son while Jonathan began to load the groceries onto the till. The story carried few pictures: a photograph of Lex Luthor at one of his charity events, another of Lois accompanying him, and a picture of the police outside LexCorp Tower. The story was split into several sections, and Martha skimmed them all. One reported on Luthor's death, another described his alleged criminal activity, and a final blurb told of the interrupted wedding.

They needed to get home and call Clark, find out what had happened.

* * *

She couldn't stay home any longer; it felt like the walls were closing in around her, the two half-packed boxes mocking her for ignoring her own subconscious. At the very least, she could head out and pick up some groceries, at least get some of her fat-free creamer so she could have a decent cup of coffee. After changing into a pair of jeans and a blouse, she grabbed her purse and left the apartment.

Opening the door to the main entrance of the building, she was blinded by flashing lights and startled by the cacophony of voices calling out to her.

“Mrs. Luthor,” called out one voice. “Were you aware of your husband’s criminal activities?”

“Lois! Over here!” shouted another voice.

She was halfway down the steps as the small crowd of journalists, television crews, and paparazzi closed in. Going back inside was an option, but it would leave her with nothing to eat and no possibility of getting out of her apartment. If she could get to her Jeep, she could escape, and maybe they’d be gone by the time she got home.

“Ms. Lane,” a familiar voice hissed nearby. “What are your plans now?”

Lois turned to stare at one of the reporters from LNN, a reporter that she’d butted heads with more than once during the short time she’d worked there. Claire was better suited for working at a tabloid than a reputable news outlet, with her callous style of questioning and tendency to bend the truth to create sensationalist headlines.

“I...”

“Don’t think you can come sauntering back,” the reporter said maliciously. “Your office was cleaned out the morning of your wedding.”

The glare on Claire’s face was unnerving, accusatory, and Lois pushed past the last of the crowd and ran towards her Jeep. Thankfully, once she put the Jeep in drive, the crowd moved, and she could leave.

She drove around until her rumbling stomach reminded her she needed a decent meal, and she pulled in front of a deli that she and Clark would frequent when they were on a story. Despite the coldness from Clark last night, she wanted to talk to him, apologise for letting herself in, and find out what he’d uncovered, as she didn’t have much solid information to go on. She wanted to start picking up the pieces of her life, and he was the first person she thought of going to.

She shouldn’t have stayed last night when she’d seen he was asleep. Scaring him after hearing him having a nightmare and seeing that he had been hurt wasn’t the best way to try to repair a friendship. But maybe showing up with a peace offering of food, they could have a conversation, and she’d see if she could bring some of the warmth back to his eyes.

* * *

Not hearing any sounds of movement within the apartment and resisting the urge to check under the mat for the key, in the event he had replaced it already, she knocked. She let out a breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding as she heard slow footsteps approaching.

“Hi,” she said shyly as he opened the door just enough so she could see his face.

“Hi,” was his soft response.

“Can I come in?” She held up the bags she was holding, hoping the aroma of soup and sandwiches would open doors, literally and figuratively.

Slowly, he opened the door, and she stepped in. “I didn’t know what to bring, so I ordered a little of everything. There’s soup, sandwiches, some of those pastries you like, and some coffee for us.” She made no move to step further into his apartment, and she could see uncertainty written on his face. He was still wary of her, and she wanted to know why.

“Don’t shut me out Clark, please don’t.” She awkwardly shuffled the bags she was holding, the one containing the soup was getting warm on her skin, and the other contained a drink tray with several coffees that she didn’t want to tip sideways.

“Lois, I...”

“Please, I need your help. I need to understand why I missed the obvious. How did I almost agree to spend my life with a murderer, a cold-hearted criminal?” She watched as he flinched, and then she continued. “I don’t know everything that happened, only bits and pieces from the police interview, and little tidbits that Jimmy and Jack let slip. Perry won’t tell me anything, and you won’t talk to me.”

Clark met her eyes, finally, and she tried not to stare at the red mark on his neck, stretching below the seam of his t-shirt. He didn’t say anything, but walked down to the kitchen and grabbed a few plates and some cutlery. Lois took that as a silent invitation and joined him at the dining table, setting the bags down and unloading the variety of meals onto the table. She selected half of a club sandwich and scooped some of the salad onto her plate, while Clark deliberated for a moment before choosing the soup. They ate in awkward silence until Lois could stand it no longer.

“Lucy called this morning,” she began as she set her fork down on her plate. Clark paused, his spoon of soup halfway to his mouth, waiting for her to continue, which she took as a sign he was listening, even if he wasn’t interested. “She was supposed to be here yesterday. Lex had purchased...”

She jumped as Clark dropped the spoon and it clanged loudly against the bowl, the broth on the spoon splattering on the table. He put his hands over his face, and she could hear him taking deep breaths.

“...he purchased a plane ticket,” Lois continued cautiously, watching Clark. “Once Lucy got to the airport, she was given an escort to her gate, and her luggage checked for

her. She was told she was flying on a first-class ticket, and since she'd never flown first class before, she didn't know what to expect, though she thought it was strange that she wasn't given a ticket."

Clark's hands still covered his face, his breathing returning to normal, and Lois continued as she stood to get a dish cloth to wipe up the spill, still talking. "An hour later, as they were boarding, she noticed the display at the gate indicating the flight was for Tallahassee. When she questioned it, explaining she was supposed to be flying to Metropolis, and they said they were sure she was at the right gate, she was detained for several hours, without explanation."

Clark's hands had settled into his lap while Lois cautiously wiped up the small spill on the table, not fully understanding Clark's behaviour, but not wanting to startle him. It had obviously been the mention of Lex that had caused his reaction. She suspected Lex had something to do with Clark's disappearance and likely his wounds too, and she kicked herself for mentioning his name. She wouldn't repeat that mistake.

"She said she was left alone in a room for several hours, no water, no food, no bathroom breaks, until someone returned with a script for her. She called mom and explained that she'd missed the flight and was released shortly after, her luggage landing in Tallahassee without her. She was warned not to contact me, but when she saw the news this morning, she called anyways."

The dish cloth rinsed out, Lois returned to her seat as Clark picked up his spoon and resumed eating.

"I haven't watched the news yet or read any of the papers, so I don't know what's being said, speculated, or reported, and right now, I don't want to know. I want to find out what happened, from those I trust."

She paused, giving Clark the opportunity to speak, hoping he would say something, anything. It was unnerving to sit across from him and not have him react or add anything to the conversation. They finished eating in silence, and when she had finished, she stood and collected the containers of uneaten food, placing them in his fridge, noting that it wasn't much more stocked than her own. Adding some hot water and soap to the sink, she washed the dishes she had used and turned to Clark, her soapy hands dripping on the kitchen floor.

"Clark, say something, anything."

"What do you want me to say?" he demanded, the curt tone sneaking back into his voice.

"Yell at me, tell me you were right, and I was wrong."

"What good would that do?" he shouted at her. "It won't change anything that's happened, and it's not going to suddenly fix everything either!"

The shrill ringing of the phone interrupted him, and Clark made no move to answer it, letting the machine pick it up.

"Clark, honey? We saw the newspapers this morning and wanted to..."

Clark pushed his chair back, darted to the phone, and picked it up, interrupting the message.

"Mom," he said, his tone softer, the anger gone in an instant. "Yes, I'm fine. Can I call you back? Lois is here..."

Lois rolled her eyes at Clark's excuse to his mother as he hung up the phone. "Clark, what's wrong?" she asked softly. "You're angry with me, and I'm sorry I didn't listen to you. You were right, and I'm still piecing together exactly how I was so wrong. I need your help for that, because I don't know the whole story, and there's no one else I trust more than you to tell me the truth, but there's something else going on. I'm not going to ask, but I'm a phone call away if you need anything."

Though he didn't answer, she was relieved the anger was gone from his face. "I have an errand to run, but I'll be back later. Call your mom back." She turned and walked up the stairs to the door, letting herself out without a backwards glance.

* * *

He felt remorse for shouting at Lois as soon as the door latched closed, fighting the urge to run after her. Despite everything that had happened in the last few days, he missed Lois Lane in his life. When she'd said Luthor's name, he'd panicked, the memory of the axe smashing through the wooden barrels immediately in his mind. He'd put his hands over his eyes, taking deep breaths, forcing himself to focus on what she was saying, trying to force the flashback from his mind.

Before she had arrived, he'd been sitting out on the small hidden balcony, resting in the late morning sun. He was feeling much better than he had twenty-four hours ago, but his legs were still a bit weak, his muscles were tired, and his skin, where the Kryptonite had burned him, hurt when it was touched or when his shirt brushed up against it. His hands were the worst, as he would reach for something, and the skin would crack, or he would pick something up and then be reminded of the injury the moment his hands closed around the object.

When he'd opened the door and caught a whiff of the delightful aroma of food coming from the bags Lois carried, his stomach had given off a loud growl, loud enough he'd

been worried she had heard. It was hunger, and some embarrassment at his loudly protesting stomach, that had caused him to open his door to Lois.

She had told him she wanted his help, though he hadn't given her any. She wanted to know why she'd almost married a murderer, a criminal, though she'd had no idea he'd almost been one more victim added to Luthor's tally. He could never tell her that. He couldn't answer any of her questions right now, and he had been grateful when she'd begun to talk about her sister. However, while he had listened to Lois's story, he hadn't processed it, and he began to do so now.

Luthor's reach had extended further than he had thought and, he was sure, further than the police were aware. Why had Luthor wanted to stop Lucy from attending Lois's wedding? Had Lois told the police about this latest bit of information? He should ask her the next time...

The next time, what? She came over? He hadn't welcomed her at all. Last night he'd been rude to her, never expecting her to return, and today, he'd sat in silence and eaten food she'd brought, without a word of thanks, instead almost having a panic attack at the mention of Luthor's name. She'd asked him not to shut her out, but hadn't he done just that?

She said she'd be back, and he was very confused how he felt about that. If his plan was to leave Metropolis, and Lois, behind, it would be easier on both of them if he told her sooner, rather than later.

Sleepy from lunch, he headed back to the balcony, the sun now obscured behind the clouds that had begun to develop but still bright enough that he felt better outside. He'd have a nap, then maybe he'd call his mom back.

* * *

Perry got into the rental car and sat there, staring at the wheel. That morning, he'd left a curious Jimmy and Jack behind at his apartment. A former Daily Planet lawyer was looking over the information he'd given him to try to determine what, if any, next steps could be taken to reopen the Planet now that the owner and perpetrator behind its demise was dead. Perry hoped that because Luthor had coerced and bribed the Board into selling, the sale could be voided. The lawyer sounded hopeful, as Luthor's criminal involvement in the destruction of the Planet would enable the Planet to be resold and reopened. Now he had to find a buyer.

After Mr. Stern's rejection of the proposal to buy and resurrect the Daily Planet before Luthor had died, Perry felt that all the wind had been knocked out of his sails. The following morning, he'd been running solely on adrenaline, after going to Henderson, exposing Luthor, and then help-

ing both Lois and Clark in the aftermath. That night, he'd gone back to the borrowed apartment, excused himself from the after-dinner chatter with Jack and Jimmy, and, after a brief call to Alice, fallen asleep. Now he felt a little more refreshed and not quite as deflated.

He started the car and backed out of the parking space, deep in thought. He wasn't ready for retirement yet. The last few weeks had been unbelievably boring, and he'd been delighted to return to Metropolis. Alice was loving the warmth and the quiet of their new home, but he knew he'd been annoying her, puttering around the small house they'd purchased. Would she want to come back to Metropolis?

In the weeks since the bombing of the Planet, they'd packed up their home, he'd attended his retirement party, and they'd moved, driving a full moving van down the coast to a warmer climate. The reason he'd agreed to the move without any real consideration was to get away from Luthor and the boarded-up shell of the paper he'd poured so much of his life into.

He hadn't been able to retire on his own terms, which had been a kick in the teeth, and his team was scattered and fractured. He didn't have the heart to try to find another job, as he knew he'd never find something so fulfilling as being the editor of the *Daily Planet*. There were a few old employees he'd wanted to keep in touch with, but other than the occasional call from Clark or Jimmy, there had been several reference calls and little else. He'd received his wedding invitation, but that was all from Lois.

Out of habit, he had navigated to his old home and driven past slowly, spotting a minivan in the driveway, kids playing on the lawn. He grinned, fondly remembering when his boys were young and they'd play outside. He and Alice had a lifetime of fond memories here, but it was time to let the old place go. If they did move back, a smaller apartment would be more suited to their life now. Not having to care and maintain a lawn, or a full house, would be easier on them both as they aged. Perhaps he could convince Alice they could live in the city and keep a small place by the sea? Being here in Metropolis for the last few days had proven that he wasn't ready for retirement, but what could he do? If his attempts to reopen the Planet failed, would he want to stay in the city?

He headed towards Clark's home, wanting to stop by and make sure Clark was okay and to check whether he needed any errands done. His fridge hadn't been terribly well stocked, but Clark could have taken care of that already. Perhaps Clark would be ready to talk today, and Perry wanted to fill him in on the investigation, unless Henderson had done that already.

As he pulled into a parking space on the street, he spotted a very familiar silver Jeep parked a few cars over. “‘Atta girl, Lois,” he muttered, grinning, as he rejoined the traffic on the road. He wasn’t going to stop and disrupt whatever conversation they were having, and he doubted either of them would have the strength and energy after the last few days to do any damage to each other. He’d head back to Jack and Jimmy, check in on Lois and Clark later.

* * *

Part 8

Lois strode confidently into the foyer of LNN and headed to the elevator, holding out her employee ID so the security scanner could read the barcode on the back and open the elevator doors. Instead, the scanner made an irritating squawk and flashed red, so Lois tried the scanner again. After several attempts, one of the security guards wandered over.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he said while taking her ID and inspecting it. He looked at the photo on the front and then Lois. “My apologies, Ms. Lane, let’s see if we can get this working for you.”

The guard tried several times before excusing himself and taking her ID up to the reception desk. Lois stayed at the elevator doors, resisting the urge to tap her foot in annoyance. When the guard returned, another woman was with him.

“Ms. Lane, if you will follow me?” she asked politely.

Feeling her stomach sink and remembering the words from Claire earlier, she followed meekly, dreading what she suspected was coming. The woman led her into an office behind the reception and left Lois alone. Lois could see some frantic phone calls being made from the desk but couldn’t make out anything that was said. Many long minutes passed before a face she recognized passed before the window, and she inwardly groaned as she recognized Tom.

When she had been offered the producer position, Lex had shown her around and introduced her to many of the senior staff, and after she had accepted the position, most of her new co-workers had been welcoming and eager to work with her.

Except Tom. Tom had been polite, sometimes polite bordering on rude, but never friendly. She had wondered if he had wanted the job she was handed, but at the time, she’d brushed his attitude off. While she wasn’t qualified as a television producer, she was one of the best reporters in New Troy and had the awards and accolades to back that claim up. Tom had no journalism awards and only a shred of integrity. He would be a nightmare to human resources

and LNN’s legal team if he was in any supervisory position. Her first few days on the job, using her connections and her skills as a reporter, she’d earned the respect of many of her new co-workers, but Tom had stayed aloof, barely behaving professionally towards her.

Tom sauntered into the office, took a seat, and leaned forward on the table, propping his hands up with his elbows.

“Ms. Lane, or is it Mrs. Luthor?” he asked coolly.

“Ms. Lane will do,” Lois responded.

“There were some changes made last week while you were using some vacation time to prepare for your wedding.”

“Oh?” She had last worked a shift the Friday prior, and at Lex’s insistence, she’d taken some time off before their nuptials. It had been a week and a day since she’d stepped inside LNN as she had used that time to attend various functions, and was supposed to have been packing up her apartment. She had been unaware of any changes at the network, and Lex hadn’t mentioned anything.

Before continuing, Tom unfolded a piece of paper and began to read what was typed on it. “Your employment with LNN was terminated at the request of senior management, and as you were within your probationary period, LNN is not obligated to give you a reason or any severance.”

Lois gaped at him. Fired? She’d never been fired in her life!

Tom folded the piece of paper back up and continued. “Your belongings were packed up and are waiting for you at the reception desk. All paperwork will be mailed to you this coming week.”

Tom abruptly stood, causing the chair to scrape across the tiled floor. Lois winced at the sound, unable to speak for a moment, trying to process what had just happened. Tom left the office without another word to her, letting the door close behind him. Lois stood, opened the door softly, and walked out of the office in a daze. The receptionist pointed to a box of her belongings sitting on the floor, and as Lois leaned down to pick it up, she spotted her LNN ID, cut into several pieces, in the garbage can. Choking back a sob, she picked up the box and turned towards the exit, as the security guard stood by, offering to help carry the box. She smiled weakly at him, refusing his help, and walked out of the building.

* * *

The clouds continued to gather, and eventually Clark gave up trying to rest outside as he was getting cold, another frustrating side effect of losing his powers. After eating some of the leftovers from Lois’s visit, feeling a little more energised, he grabbed the full garbage. Stepping into the

stairwell, his normal method of entering and leaving his apartment when he didn't fly in, he had a flashback of when he'd escaped LexCorp Tower, crawling his way into the stairwell there and then forcing himself to climb the stairs up to the parkade. He leaned on the railing, gasping, his legs shaking, the burns making their presence known. Turning around, he headed to the elevator, the grey concrete walls of the stairwell too much a part of the terrible memory at that moment.

Outside in the alley, he spotted folded-up cardboard boxes leaning against the building by the garbage bins. Inspecting them and finding them clean and dry, he gathered them up, as they would be useful if he was determined to pack up and leave. Again, he took the elevator upstairs, rationalising that he was still a little weak and shouldn't try to exert himself just yet.

Back in his apartment, his burst of energy and enthusiasm lasted long enough for him to assemble the boxes and start placing books in one box before he felt the need to sit for a bit. Holding a book he'd picked up in his travels in Egypt, he sank onto the couch and began to read.

One of the first talents he'd noticed as a youth was his ability to remember and soak up information. If this ability was one of his superpowers, it likely had been the first one to develop. His teachers had delighted in his intelligence, though he'd quickly discovered few of his classmates appreciated working alongside someone who excelled with little effort. Throughout middle school and high school, he'd tried to hide how easy it was to learn and memorise, walking a fine line between having great grades and being the smartest kid in the class.

His ability to learn languages hadn't been discovered in a small town in Kansas. He had discovered that talent when he started travelling, after university. It hadn't surprised him, given the last superpower to appear at that point was the ability to fly, and, along with flying, being a polyglot made travelling and working around the globe unbelievably easy.

The book he had selected was in Arabic, and he was relieved he could still read and understand the flowing script. Placing the book aside, he selected several others in a variety of languages - Italian, Mandarin, and Thai - and was relieved to find he could still comprehend and understand what he was reading.

He released a breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding. His ability with languages would help him get work, either as an international reporter or as a translator. If he had lost the rest of his superpowers, even if his ability to learn quickly was diminished, he retained the knowledge and practical skills he'd gained over the years.

He quickly packed most of his foreign language books into boxes, leaving the boxes on the floor rather than stacking them neatly. He'd get to that later once his body recovered a bit more. While his muscles didn't ache so much this afternoon, he still felt weak and didn't want to risk hurting himself trying to do too much.

The first time he'd been exposed to Kryptonite in Smallville, it had been a brief exposure and had stripped him of his powers for a day. After his dad had dragged him into the house, he'd felt awful, no longer in intense pain but still weak, and he'd only started to feel better after sleeping. The next day, spent in the bright sunshine with Lois, he'd felt fine, no aches or lingering pain, just without his powers. The second exposure, at the hands of Trask, had been a longer exposure, but nothing like what he'd just endured, and his powers had still taken a day to return.

The next encounter with Kryptonite had to have been at the false alarm at the bank a few days ago, though it had been very brief and from an unknown source. He'd been able to fly away after that encounter, his slight headache disappearing within minutes, the pain in his body a fleeting memory.

His stomach lurched as he thought about the cage. The exposure from it had been brutal to his body. While he felt better in some aspects, he knew his body wasn't healing at a rapid rate as the burns were still painful. He had no strength at all; just the effort of packing up his books had tired him out. He was tired, not something unfamiliar as he always needed rest, but being awake for a few hours and already wanting another nap was a new and frustrating experience.

For most of his teen years and into his early twenties, he'd wanted to be normal. However, when he'd been stripped of his abilities several months ago, he'd sworn to not take them for granted again. They were a part of him, a part of his Kryptonian heritage, and now that he had Superman as an outlet to use his powers to help others, they were no longer a burden, no longer just something that made him different, no longer something to keep hidden at all costs. He'd finally begun to be comfortable with who he was, and in one moment of cockiness, he'd lost it all, maybe this time for good.

He lay back on the couch, grabbing the throw that Lois usually wrapped herself in when watching a movie, and covered himself with it, being careful not to bump his wounds. Without his healing ability, they could take weeks to heal, and he couldn't hide in his apartment for that long. However, for now, he wanted a snooze and to not think about everything that had been taken from him. He set his glasses on the coffee table and quickly drifted off.

* * *

Part 9

After leaving LNN, Lois had gone home, frustrated and upset over what had just happened. She pushed past the few reporters that were hovering around, thankful there had been no representative from LNN, and had not left her apartment for the rest of the day. Without any new groceries, she was back to eating dry cereal, not willing to order delivery and give a less scrupulous reporter a chance to get up to her apartment.

The following morning, over another bowl of dry cereal, she emptied the box of her belongings that she had been given at LNN. Her name plate from the Planet was still there, as was her rolodex and her scrapbook of articles she'd written over the years. A few items were missing, including one plant, but they weren't important enough to warrant a trip to LNN to get them back.

She still wanted answers though. Digging through her rolodex, she found the number of one of the legal department members from LNN, a younger guy, who had introduced himself the first time she'd stopped a story going to air that had unsubstantiated claims. There had been a few incidents like that over the previous months, so Dave had come by her office to talk about it, and Lois thought, to express some relief that someone else was checking sources. Perhaps he would know what had happened to get her fired.

About to pick up the phone and dial, a sharp knock interrupted her. She cautiously peered through the peephole and opened her door, keeping the safety chain latched, when she spotted Mr. Tracewski, the building super.

"Ms. Lane."

"Morning, Mr. Tracewski." Ever since a criminal disguised as him had tried to kill her, she'd been a bit wary around him.

"Ms. Lane!" Mrs. Tracewski called loudly, entering the corridor. "These men, they say they are to pack up your things."

Lois peeked through the crack in the door and looked down the hallway, spotting two men in identical uniforms following Mrs. Tracewski.

"We heard about what happened, my dear. We are very sorry for your loss," Mrs. Tracewski said sympathetically as she pushed past her husband to face Lois at the door. "May I come in?"

Lois closed the door, released the safety chain, and opened the door, letting Mrs. and Mr. Tracewski in, while the movers stayed in the corridor.

"My dear, we knew you were moving but thought after what happened, you might stay?" Mrs. Tracewski asked.

"This morning my husband woke up to these men trying to gain access to the building. They say they were hired to move your belongings. With all the reporters outside, my husband wanted to be sure who they were before letting them in, and they have paperwork."

"Can I see the paperwork?" Lois asked the movers. The older of the two handed her a clipboard with various sheets of paper. The first had her address, directions, and instructions for packing. The next page had the destination address, and where she had expected to see Lex's penthouse address, there was an address within the industrial area of Metropolis. Confused, Lois flipped the page and saw an invoice. The movers had been paid for and the move authorised by Mrs. Cox.

But not Lois. She could not remember a conversation where Lex informed her there would be movers coming, and she would not have permitted strangers packing up all of her belongings while she was away on her honeymoon! Could he have neglected to mention such a thing in the run up to their wedding? They'd both been busy with the planning... She felt herself sway on her feet.

"Are you alright, dear?" Mrs. Tracewski asked, gently patting Lois's arm.

"Uh, yes, I think so," Lois said weakly as she reached for the couch for support. "I'm not ready to move just yet."

"Ok, ma'am," the older mover agreed. "Can I just get a signature from you, refusing the service?"

Lois signed the paper he handed her, and he gave her a copy before leaving with his partner.

"Are you sure you're okay, dear? You went very pale."

"Thanks, Mrs. Tracewski. I'm fine now. I wasn't expecting this."

"The apartment is paid until the end of the month, and there's no one moving in. Give the landlord a call, I'm sure he'll let you stay," Mr. Tracewski informed her as he left the apartment.

"I will, thank you."

"You know where I am if you need anything," Mrs. Tracewski stated before following her husband into the corridor. "If those reporters are still there tomorrow, we'll get the police to deal with them," she added before hurrying after her husband.

Lois closed the door, double checked all the locks, and sank onto her couch, her head falling into her hands, her thoughts jumbled, and spiralling out of control.

She had been making excuses for Lex, for his busy schedule, for organising her life without telling her, for weeks

now. He'd done it more and more frequently as the wedding approached, always apologising for not letting her know, reminding her she needed to talk to Mrs. Cox to arrange anything, as he was too busy for the finer details. She'd always taken his words at face value, as Lex was a busy man who was used to organising large corporations and multiple projects. She had reasoned that Lex, who liked to be aware of everything and always gave the impression he was in control of all aspects of his life and businesses, would on occasion forget something on his intense schedule.

Lex had organised most of the calendar in their relationship: theatre dates, fundraiser dinners, flights to exotic and wonderful places for dinner. It had felt wonderful to be catered to, pampered, and desired. Now, something had shifted in those memories, and she felt sick to her stomach as threads of thought began to connect. When her honeymoon had ended, she would have returned to Metropolis with all of her belongings moved, her apartment emptied, and no job. It seemed far too coincidental. She moved to the phone and called Dave. She had to find out what had happened at LNN.

* * *

He was cold when he woke, and he shivered under the covers, the remnants of a nightmare rapidly fading. Getting up, he dressed in a sweater and sweatpants, and leaving the bedroom, he discovered he'd left the windows open in the main room last night. It was now raining heavily. Thankfully, nothing had got wet inside the apartment, and he closed the windows before starting the kettle to make a hot drink.

After his second nap yesterday, assuming Lois wouldn't be returning, he'd had enough energy to walk the short distance to the local convenience store to pick up some basics. Now he had milk, eggs, and bread and could make himself breakfast. He would have to plan a time to go stock up on everything, which wouldn't be as easy as usual since he wouldn't be able to fly home and the weight of the loaded grocery bags might be too much. Though he wouldn't go today, not in this rain.

Feeling as glum as the weather, he made himself a jam sandwich, then sat on the couch, trying not to make crumbs as he ate and sipping the scalding tea carefully. It was Sunday, two days after he had escaped, and there had been no signs of any of his powers returning. His burns were drying and cracking, something he assumed was a normal part of the healing process. His minimal first-aid training hadn't covered healing times, just the basics of CPR, wound dressings, things he needed to know if he was on the scene of an incident. It certainly hadn't covered Kryptonians stripped of their powers and their expected healing times. He should call and ask his mom, as she would know how

best to treat the burns and what the normal human healing time frame would be.

He sighed heavily. He had called them back last night but had deliberately done so when he knew his parents would be out. He'd left a brief message saying he was sorry he'd missed them and would call back, but he was reluctant to have a conversation with either of them just yet. Primarily, he didn't want to worry his parents needlessly. As soon as his parents discovered he was powerless, they'd fly out to help him. What if his powers returned quickly? It would be a waste of money for them, and he didn't have an income to pay them back.

But, he thought darkly, what if his powers didn't come back? He gulped back a moment of panic as the memory of the cage flashed through his mind.

Powers or not, he either needed to find a job in Metropolis or give notice on his perfect apartment. He had savings, enough to keep him going for a few months, but he'd likely have to leave the city and take his belongings to the farm to store until he could find somewhere new to settle. The Daily Planet had been the epitome of newspaper journalism in Metropolis; any other paper wouldn't be the same. Plus, it would be strange to go into a new newsroom and find a few familiar faces, but no Perry, Cat, Jimmy, or Lois.

Lois. Working in any newsroom would never be the same without her, and he wondered what her plans would be now. Would she continue at LNN? Perhaps as Luthor's wife, she would inherit the company, though she doubted the will, or any change in the executive of Luthor's various companies, would have changed prior to the wedding.

That thought burned more than his injuries. Lois had chosen Luthor; Lois was Luthor's wife. So, the nagging voice in his head asked, why had she come over to see him? The night of her wedding, the night of Luthor's death, she'd been in his apartment in the middle of the night, sitting on his couch, and after seeing his injuries, she'd assumed, or knew, that Luthor had something to do with it.

The following day, she had arrived bearing food, full of questions and news about her sister's encounter at the airport. Lois hadn't come out and said that she believed Luthor was behind Lucy's strange experience, and even to Clark it seemed like a bit of overkill on Luthor's part. Why try to prevent his bride's sister from attending their wedding? But Lois had called Luthor a murderer. Which murder was she referring to? She had wanted his help to figure out why she had not seen Luthor's true character, and he had no idea how much, or what, to tell her.

Slowly, an idea began to dawn on him. What if the explosion at the Planet hadn't been about the insurance money? Luthor had enough insurance on the building to rebuild,

that had been discovered already, and his part in the explosion was assumed to be for the insurance payout. While helping the fire department as Superman on the day of the explosion, he had seen the damage to the printing floor and several floors above. The newsroom floor was intact, with some smoke damage, and the boardroom and main offices above the newsroom were largely unscathed.

Luthor had, with that one incendiary device, collected millions in insurance, acquired a prime piece of real estate in downtown Metropolis, and forced his fiancée out of a job she loved. Her new job as a producer at LNN had taken Lois away from the role of investigator, seeker and reporter of the truth, something she excelled at, and into a secondary role, behind the scenes, at a company her husband-to-be owned.

Clark gulped back the last of his rapidly cooling tea, barely noticing the tepid temperature as he thought furiously. Had everyone read Luthor's intentions wrong? He was manipulative and detail oriented and had always given the impression he was in control of every situation. Lois was not a woman to be controlled, but had Luthor found a way? Lois didn't have a large circle of friends, but a small group, mostly consisting of colleagues. Luthor had ripped her away from her work, and with it, her friends, and from what Lois had said yesterday, Luthor had succeeded in blocking some of her family from being with her too.

Frustrated, Clark wandered into the kitchen with the empty mug, and after setting it down in the sink, he began to pace in the small kitchen. Had jealousy and heartache clouded his deducing skills? He felt waves of guilt crash over him as he remembered the missed phone calls and messages from Lois that he'd ignored. In the weeks since he'd declared his love, the same amount of time since she had declared her love to Superman, he'd been investigating Luthor, waiting for something concrete to pin him to a crime. Instead, he'd played right into Luthor's plans, pushing Lois further away and into her fiancé's waiting arms.

He picked up the phone and dialed the familiar number, needing to tell her that she had been manipulated, that none of what had happened was her fault. Henderson had told him the same thing, and now Clark felt the need to repeat those words to Lois. Greeted with a busy signal, he tried a few more times before placing the receiver back in the cradle, disheartened. He returned to the couch, wrapping the blanket around his shoulders as he sat down, watching the rain trickle down the window panes leading the balcony. He had enough food in the house for the day and had nowhere to be. He'd wait and see if Lois would stop by. Clark shrugged the blanket off as he remembered the spare key was no longer in its usual place. He grabbed the key, still on the table where Lois had left it, opened his apartment door, and slipped the key under the mat, closing and locking the door

behind him when he was done. Now if she stopped by and he was asleep or didn't hear her, hopefully she'd check for the key.

* * *

Martha watched from the kitchen window as Jonathan tried to find something to fix on the tractor. He'd been like this since they'd gotten home from grocery shopping yesterday, puttering around, trying to fix anything, even things that likely didn't need fixing. She knew there was a portion of fence that needed replacing on the far end of their property, but Jonathan wasn't leaving the yard in case Clark called.

She looked at the table of sewing scraps, laughing at herself doing the same thing. These scraps of fabric had been sitting around for years in boxes, and she'd decided it was best to deal with them right now, especially as she would be in the kitchen, close to the phone.

Clark was okay; they'd talked to him, even though the conversation had been brief. He'd been with Lois, and she wasn't sure what to make of that. He had called back, the one time she'd left the kitchen for a brisk walk in the cooler evening air. Usually they would be at a friend's house, but they had cancelled their evening out in the event he'd called. She knew something wasn't right though; she knew her son well enough. Whatever it was, Clark hadn't been able to tell them since Lois had been at his apartment with him, and later, he hadn't wanted to leave anything detailed in a message.

What worried both her and Jonathan was Clark's absence. It would take him no time at all to stop by, give them a hug, update them on whatever he could, before flying back to Metropolis. But for now, they just had to trust their son and wait for him to contact them.

They had watched the news last night, with updates of Mr. Luthor's known and suspected crimes. There had been a press release by the police, which hadn't revealed any new information. There had been no reports of Superman, no rescues, nothing. It appeared he wasn't involved in Mr. Luthor's attempted arrest and hadn't been there to catch him when he jumped. Martha wondered if that was what was wrong with Clark. Perhaps Superman had been needed elsewhere, and he was blaming himself for Mr. Luthor's death.

There had been a brief mention of Lois, including a video clip of journalists all shouting questions at her as she'd exited the building, Martha assumed, where she lived. Martha had only met Lois a few times but felt as though she knew her fairly well through Clark's constant talking about her, and the Lois that the cameras had captured was not the self-assured woman she'd come to know. Lois had

looked ambushed by the journalists, and one in particular had seemed to startle her more than the others.

With a sigh, Martha returned to the kitchen table full of material. She would have to clear this all up so they had space to eat lunch, and then she and Jonathan would try calling Clark again.

* * *

“Hello?” Ellen Lane’s greeting was shouted down the phone as Lois heard lots of noise in the background.

“Mom?”

“Lois?” Ellen’s voice became muffled as she covered the receiver, and Lois could hear instructions being shouted to whomever was in the background.

“Mom, is everything okay?”

A heavy sigh was her answer.

“Who’s over there?” Lois was trying to remember if her mother had mentioned any redecorating happening.

“Lois, dear. I can’t chat long. I have a flight to catch.”

“Flight?”

“Yes. I need to get away. Are you aware there are reporters at my front door? They won’t leave. The doorman has tried to call the police, and the police aren’t doing anything about it. I can’t leave without being harassed.”

Lois’s stomach sank. She had hoped the press would leave her family and friends alone, especially as she and her mother were not close. Perhaps being seen at the wedding, and being heard complaining loudly, had increased the press’s awareness of her existence.

“So I’m flying out to a spa in Arizona that was recommended by a dear friend. She goes every other month, and it sounds like something I need.”

“Oh,” was all Lois could manage. “When will you be back?”

“At least two weeks, more if this doesn’t blow over by then.”

Lois wanted to laugh aloud. What had she expected? Her mother had always been the same woman, with few exceptions, the afternoon of her wedding being one of those few. Even then, Ellen Lane wasn’t a woman Lois could confide in, have a conversation with, not about something heartfelt, personal, and emotional.

“Okay, have a great flight.”

“What did you call for?”

“Um, I had a question about burns,” Lois fumbled.

“Well?”

“What can you do for them?”

“As long as it’s not a serious burn, put some aloe on it.” There was a voice calling in the background. “I’ve got to go, Lois. Was there anything else?”

Lois sighed. “No. Have a good holiday.”

Without a goodbye, the phone call ended as Ellen hung up, and Lois sank into the couch feeling alone. Lucy was back at work as her trip for the wedding should have ended yesterday, and she had heard nothing from her father other than a sum of money deposited in her bank account, she assumed as a wedding present.

She rested her head in her hands. Marriage. She would have been married by now, and it wouldn’t have been the happily ever after kind of marriage. She would have been far away, on a beach, presumably, as Lex had never told her where he planned on taking her. In the meantime, her job was no more, her office cleared out, and her apartment would have been packed up and emptied. Her sister would have been stranded halfway across the country, and Lois wouldn’t have known until she returned from her honeymoon. She would have come home to a completely different life; the Lois Lane she knew would not have existed, and instead a new Lois Luthor would have had to find her place in Lex’s world.

She felt sick at the thought. Thankfully, she’d said no. She couldn’t marry Lex. But what would have happened if the police hadn’t arrived? She’d watched in bewilderment as Lex had lost his ever-present charm and cool headedness, yelling orders and threatening Henderson. It was a side of him she hadn’t seen before, and it had scared her. She’d almost married that man, the man Clark had warned her about over and over. Had Lex lived, had the police not acquired evidence on his criminal activities, what would have happened to her after she had left him at the altar?

She shuddered at the dark thoughts that musing evoked. Lex wouldn’t have let her go, she was sure of it, and if he had found out where her thoughts had been as she walked down the aisle towards him, even Superman wouldn’t have been able to keep Clark safe.

So what had happened to Clark? She had little to no information on where he had been, other than he had been missing for twenty-four hours and had returned to his apartment, injured and exhausted. She knew, mostly based on reactions from Perry and Clark himself, that Lex had something to do with his disappearance and injuries, but how and why had eluded her. How had Clark escaped? Had Superman helped? Maybe she could find out what had happened to Clark through him.

She laughed aloud at that thought. After their last encounter, she doubted Superman would talk to her again, and she wasn't sure she wanted to see him either. His cruel comments still irked her, weeks later, and she had avoided analysing that conversation, focusing on her upcoming wedding and new job instead.

She stood, wiping away the few tears that had escaped. She'd made a mess of her life and now had no job, her latest relationship disaster was fodder for the press, and she'd pushed her best friend aside in favour of a man who likely hadn't loved her.

A memory surfaced, from months ago. She'd had a bad cold, and Perry, not wanting the entire newsroom coughing and sneezing, had insisted she spend the next few days at home, recovering. Several hours later, when she'd been feeling frustrated and ill, Clark had arrived at her apartment, bearing soup and research for the story they'd been working on, along with notes from an interview he had managed to snag. Despite how awful she had felt, they'd spent a pleasant afternoon together, barely doing any work, but hanging out, Clark keeping her mind off how sick she felt.

In the year she'd known Clark, he'd been sick once, on that trip to Smallville. He'd claimed allergies, but they didn't seem to affect him in Metropolis, and otherwise, he was a healthy guy. He wasn't ill right now, but hurt, the memory of his burns stretching down his neck and chest and the multiple marks on his arms and shoulders making Lois wince.

What had Lex done to him? Clark had acted strangely towards her, not unfriendly, but scared or wary. Was he afraid of her? And could she overcome this barrier?

She'd asked him not to shut her out, and while he had let her into his apartment, he hadn't opened up to her and had brushed his mother off. Lois was worried he was shutting everyone out. Whatever had happened to him, he needed a friend, someone to take care of him, just like he always took care of everyone else. She likely wasn't at the top of his list of confidants currently, but she knew him better than anyone else in the city. She quickly changed out of her warm pajamas, gathered her purse and keys, and then pushed her way through the remaining reporters gathered at the entrance of her apartment without a word.

* * *

Part 10

Once again, she stood at the door to Clark's apartment, her arms loaded with bags of food and, this time, a small bottle of aloe vera gel. She hesitated before knocking. Was he home? Would he welcome her showing up again unannounced? She took a deep breath and knocked quietly, the

motion tipping one of the paper grocery bags in her arms sideways and allowing several items to fall to the ground. Muttering to herself, she set the bags down and began to pick up the snacks that had escaped. Curious, she peeled back the mat and grinned as she spotted the key in its customary spot. Despite their curt words two nights ago, the key was back. But did that mean he had left it there for her to use, or someone else?

Hearing footsteps approach the door, she let the mat fold back to the ground, and started to pick up the second bag as the door opened.

"Lois?"

"Hi," she said softly as she stood. She couldn't help but stare at Clark, his unshaven shadow from yesterday now the most facial hair she had ever seen on him, his hair flat and sticking up slightly on one side as though he'd just woken up. "I, uh..." Her mouth had suddenly gone dry, and she stumbled over her words. She watched as Clark nervously fiddled with his glasses, and she tore her eyes away from him, down to the bags she was carrying. "I brought some food over. Thought we could have lunch?"

One of the bags tipped precariously as she spoke, and Clark reached for it, taking it out of her arms before it fell, and wordlessly walked into his apartment. She followed, closing the door with her free hand, then setting the other bag on the kitchen counter. Thankfully, it seemed Clark was okay with her visit.

"I was just about to have a shower. Can lunch wait a few minutes?"

"Sure." Lois watched as Clark retreated into his room, and within moments, she heard the shower turn on. This wasn't unusual; they frequently stopped at each other's apartment to clean up or freshen up. So why did she feel flustered? Forcing that thought aside, she earnestly emptied the various tins and packages of food out of the bags and began to put them in cupboards haphazardly. When she was done, Clark still wasn't out of the shower, so she wandered over to the bookcases and scowled as she noticed several empty shelves, the missing books in boxes on the floor. Was he organising or packing? she wondered.

The rain last night and this morning had cooled the city off after the beautiful warm weather they'd had over the last few weeks. Despite the cooler temperatures, it felt unusually warm inside Clark's apartment. Lois stepped around the boxes and peered out of the large window that Clark almost always left open, unless it was the dead of winter, but the window was closed and locked. She rested her head on the window frame and watched the grey clouds float by, almost hypnotised by their soothing, steady motion.

It was hard to believe that her life had changed, and hadn't, so quickly. Several weeks ago, waiting for Clark to get ready, browsing his bookcase, perusing his trinkets collected from his world travels, hadn't been out of the ordinary. Several days ago, she never thought she'd be back here, waiting for her best friend.

The best friend who had told her he loved her.

Clark's declaration of love had caught her off guard, and at that moment in the park, she'd been preoccupied with contacting Superman. After her disastrous encounter with the hero, followed by her agreement to marry Lex, she'd forced Clark's words from her mind, only to have them resurface the morning of her wedding. Walking down the aisle, she'd made a split-second decision that she couldn't marry Lex, and all the anxiety that had plagued her all morning had lifted. The only thing left to do had been to tell Lex, deal with his reaction first, and then she'd analyse her decision, try to find out if she'd missed something in her friendship with Clark.

Except everything had gone sideways. There had been no time for analysing; instead, she'd been thrust into an investigation and the media's spotlight. Her life had suddenly turned upside down, though had Lex lived, she knew it would still have been a media circus after she'd left the third wealthiest man in the world at the altar, and she doubted her job at LNN would have survived. Had Lex lived, would he have tried to woo her, or destroy her?

She shuddered at those thoughts, dropping her gaze from the mesmerising movement of the clouds, and moved towards the kitchen. What was taking Clark so long? As she heard the shower turn off, she opened the can of vegetable soup she'd left out on the counter for their lunch. Clark had eaten soup yesterday, but maybe he wouldn't mind it two days in a row. Splitting the tinned soup between two bowls, she put one bowl in the microwave and started it heating, then took a loaf of bread and glasses of water to the table. By the time Clark emerged from his room, two steaming bowls of soup sat waiting at the table, and Lois was starting the kettle.

"I thought you'd like some tea," she began while turning to smile at him. She stared at his still unshaven face, any more words she might have had dying on her lips.

"Thanks. Lunch smells good."

Flustered, she began to babble. "Well, it's just soup, from a tin. It doesn't require me to do more than heat it up, and in a microwave, so less chance of me burning the soup to the pot, and one less dish to clean after. It's vegetable soup too, so there's no chance of me undercooking it and making someone sick..."

"Lois, it looks great, thank you," Clark said softly as he sat at the table.

She smiled weakly at him and abandoned the kettle to join him at the table. This time, the silence that fell as they ate was not the uncomfortable silence of yesterday, but peaceful, and Lois felt no urge to talk through it. Instead, the soothing sound of rain hitting the windows as it began to pour again was all they needed. Clark finished first, and after clearing his dishes, he began to make them both a cup of tea, while Lois attempted to finish her soup.

It tasted awful, nothing like the soup she'd picked up yesterday from the bistro, which had been seasoned perfectly. This tasted like over-salted tomato broth with chunks of fake vegetables in it. Why would people eat this stuff? Trying not to grimace, she swallowed the last spoonful and took her bowl into the kitchen, aware that Clark was watching her for some reason, looking as though he was trying not to laugh. Something had amused him, and for now, she was more focused on accepting the offered cup of tea to help take the awful taste of soup out of her mouth than finding out what he thought was funny.

Returning to the table, she spotted the bottle of aloe gel that she'd set aside earlier. She grabbed it as she sat down, waiting for Clark. When he sat and placed his mug on the table, she slowly reached out for his hand. He immediately pulled his hands out of her reach and stared at her, eyes wide.

"Clark, it's okay," Lois reassured him. He placed his hands back onto the table and she gently touched his fingers, guiding him to turn his hands palm up. He flinched slightly, but left his hands within her grasp. His hands turned, she retrieved the bottle of aloe gel and opened it. She watched as his eyes narrowed suspiciously, and she turned the bottle so he could see the label before squeezing a few drops onto his right hand, on top of the burn. Carefully, not wanting to startle him, she tenderly began to rub the gel into his skin before moving to his left hand to repeat her ministrations.

Releasing his hands, she put the cap onto the bottle and set it down next to his tea. "It'll help with the healing process," she stated as she stood, heading to the kitchen to wash the remaining gel from her hands. "You should try it on the rest of your injuries," she said as she gestured at his chest. She watched as Clark picked up the bottle and read the directions and ingredients before heading to his bedroom.

Lois let out a heavy breath as she leaned against the kitchen counter. Lunch had been comfortable, despite the silence, but the last few minutes had felt charged, and she half expected a lightning bolt to slice through the kitchen. What had that been about?

She was startled by the sound of Clark's voice, his answer machine message indicating someone had called. He had to have turned the ringers off as she hadn't heard either phone ring.

"Clark? I missed your call yesterday and was hoping to catch you. Can you please call us when you get in and let us know how you are? We're worried..."

Lois, after a very brief moment of hesitation, picked up the phone.

"Hi, uh, Mrs. Kent. It's Lois."

"Lois, honey, you know you can call me Martha. Mrs. Kent was my mother-in-law! How are you doing, dear?"

"Yes, Mrs... Martha. Sorry, yes. I'm okay..." Lois fumbled awkwardly.

"Are you sure? I've seen those journalists swarming you every time you leave your apartment. Make sure you call the police if they're being too much of a nuisance."

"Oh, they're not too much of a nuisance," Lois tried to assure her, adopting a cheery tone while trying to stop the giant lump in her throat from growing. Martha was showing more concern for her wellbeing than her own mother had. "They'll give up soon."

"Oh, dear, I'm so sorry you've had to go through all of this. What a horrible thing to happen..."

Lois didn't want to discuss the death of her ex-fiance with Clark's mother. "Well, it was horrible..." she trailed off, needing to end Martha's path of concern. "I just stopped by to check on Clark and drop off some aloe. He should be out of the bathroom soon."

"Lois," Clark called sharply from across the living room, making her jump at his curt tone.

* * *

He stood in the bathroom waiting for the gel to soak into his skin, feeling some relief as the dry, sore skin became less itchy. He didn't want to head back to Lois and have the gel soaking into his shirt, which would give away just how many injuries he had. He picked up the bottle and read the information closely, wishing he would have known about it earlier. He'd spent most of the day trying not to scratch the healing burns, and every time he moved, it felt like he was pulling the new skin forming. This healing thing was a pain in many ways.

When Lois had reached for his hand, he'd pulled away, a brief flash of when the green Kryptonite bars had seared into his skin jumping to his mind. He'd heard her reassurances, pulled himself out of the memory, and placed his hands

back on the table. Trying not to let on that he'd just had a moment of panic, he hadn't been prepared for her to touch his fingers, then his palms. He'd forced himself to relax as much as he could, focus on who had his hand, before realising that the skin on his palms felt better, and at that point, he couldn't have said whether it was the goop Lois had put on his skin or her gentle caress.

What was happening between them? When he'd opened the door after hearing her quiet knock, she'd stared at him, fumbling over her words, and he'd instinctively reached for his glasses to be sure he was wearing them as the gaze she held was eerily similar to the way she stared at Superman.

Lunch had been peaceful, though it tasted awful. Lois had clearly not read the instructions to add water to the tin of condensed soup, and the resulting soup had been much too salty with a strong tomato flavour. He'd eaten it, not wanting to point out her mistake, but hadn't been able to hold back a grin as he watched her grimace over the last few spoonfuls of the awful concoction. It would have been so easy to try to slip back into their old friendship, make a joke about it, share a laugh, and ignore everything that had happened in the last few weeks, but he couldn't do that, not yet.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror, rubbing his fingers lightly over the stubble that was rapidly becoming a beard. He needed time and space to work through everything, from what he was going to do for employment to his relationship with Lois, if there was a friendship left to salvage. They had to talk, and he would need to answer her questions.

He grasped the bathroom counter, hearing the sound of the wedding march playing in his memory while he'd reached past the Kryptonite bars, screaming...

No! He was not going to panic, not now. Taking deep breaths, he left the bathroom and went to find a clean shirt.

"Hi, uh, Mrs. Kent. It's Lois."

He hadn't heard the phone ring, but he heard Lois talking and wanted to laugh. Lois had met his parents several times, and every time, his mom had reminded her not to call her Mrs. Kent. He didn't need his super hearing to know she was saying the same thing down the phone to Lois.

"Yes, Mrs... Martha. Sorry, yes. I'm okay..."

He slipped a long-sleeved t-shirt over his head, sliding the sleeves down to his wrists to ensure his wounds were covered, as Lois's voice continued.

"Oh, they're not too much of a nuisance," Lois said. "They'll give up soon."

He had no idea what she was talking about, but he heard the fake cheery tone she had adopted, and he knew she was lying to his mom.

“Well, it was horrible...” she said softly, as Clark saw her expression change and her shoulders slump. She hesitated before speaking again, the fake cheery tone returning. “I just stopped by to check on Clark and drop off some aloe. He should be out of the bathroom soon.”

“Lois,” Clark called across the living room, immediately concerned that she’d say too much to his mother. He winced as she jumped - he hadn’t intended to be so sharp with her - and then took the receiver from her.

“Mom,” he softened his tone, turning away from Lois, who was now glaring at him.

“Clark, honey, are you okay?”

“Mom, it’s okay.” He glared right back at Lois. “I’m fine.”

“Then why is Lois bringing you aloe?”

“It’s nothing. Lois is just overreacting.”

“Clark!” Lois exclaimed loudly. “I was not overreacting. You’re injured, I’m just being a friend...”

He tried to cradle the receiver against his shoulder, hoping it would muffle his words to Lois. “I’m fine, okay, I’m fine. I don’t need your help.”

“If you’re fine, then why are you jumping every time someone gets too close? Why do you have injuries all over your arms, and...”

“I have this under control,” he shouted back at her, his hand holding the phone dropping to his waist. He closed his eyes fighting the swell of panic beginning to grow as her words brought forth memories of his burns and how he had acquired them.

“Clark!” his mother yelled down the phone, startling both of them. “Clark, I have no idea what is going on right now, but either you’re coming down here, or your father and I are flying up there. I expect a call back within the hour with your decision, and if I don’t hear from you, your father and I will be on the next flight. Do you understand?”

“Yes, okay,” he said sullenly.

“We’ll talk soon,” was all she said before she abruptly hung up on him. Clark stared at the receiver, trying to remember the last time his mother had spoken to him like that, before putting the receiver in its cradle. He turned to face Lois, angry.

“Why did you have to butt in? Now they’re worried.” He knew he was speaking louder than necessary, but he didn’t care.

“You should have told your mom the truth. Why did you lie?”

“It’s none of your business.” Clark stepped backwards. Lois was within arm’s reach, and he felt crowded, stuck between the couch and the coffee table where the phone sat. “You should leave.” He could feel his heart rate increasing, the trapped sensation remaining despite the openness of his home.

“Fine.” Lois retreated to where she had left her purse when she had arrived. “Don’t you know how fortunate you are to have people in your life who are worried about your wellbeing?”

“Yeah, maybe you shouldn’t have married Luthor, maybe you’d still have friends and family to support you.” As soon as the words left his lips, he tried to stop them, but all he could do is watch in horror as Lois’s face turned white. Before he could say anything, the door opened.

“What in the Sam Hill is going on here?”

* * *

Part 11

He’d spent more time than he cared to remember talking to Jimmy’s landlord yesterday, trying to determine if Jimmy’s belongings were still in his old apartment and if the apartment had been let out again. They’d made arrangements to meet at 10 a.m. today so Jimmy could pack up his belongings, and once they’d arrived, the landlord had tried to get money out of him just to access the place. Perry hadn’t shouted at him but had instead mentioned his job as a well-respected editor who could write an op-ed in any newspaper in town about shady landlords who preyed on the downtrodden. The landlord had capitulated, let them into the apartment, and returned with a copy of the lease.

The apartment was very small, a simple bachelor pad, something Jimmy could afford, close to downtown, and wasn’t full of stuff. There had been a couch, coffee table, and a bed for furniture, plus Jimmy’s belongings, including clothes, books, and dishes. The landlord, returning with the signed copy of the lease, thrust it into Perry’s hands as Jimmy began demanding to know where his TV and something called a Sega had disappeared to. Turned out the landlord had sold both to help recoup the lost rent, which was why he had returned with the lease. It was stated in the document Jimmy had signed that items of value would be sold to compensate for any missing rent.

Perry left Jack and Jimmy there with instructions to pack everything they could into the boxes he'd brought and told them he'd be back in an hour. The landlord, somewhat placated that the apartment would be emptier, and cleaner, within a short time, left them alone, assured by Perry that nothing untoward would happen during his absence.

He needed something bigger than his rental car to move Jimmy's bed and couch, and he needed someone to drive it. Stopping to fuel up the car, he used a payphone and found a rental company with a small van he could get cheap for a few hours. He was close to Clark's apartment, and he hoped the boy would be feeling up to getting out of the house for a bit. It would do him some good to see friends, better than hiding at home with his nightmares. Perry called Clark to let him know he was on his way, and after getting a busy signal twice, decided to head over anyways.

In the hallway leading to Clark's apartment, he could hear Lois and Clark's raised voices, and he hurried to the door.

"It's none of your business," Perry heard Clark shout.

"Fine," Lois responded, matching his volume. "Don't you know how fortunate you are to have people in your life who are worried about your wellbeing?"

Perry knocked as Clark responded to Lois. "Yeah, maybe you shouldn't have married Luthor, maybe you'd still have friends and family to support you."

"Now, that's enough," Perry said aloud as he tried the door, relieved it wasn't locked, and let himself in.

"What in the Sam Hill is going on here?" he asked loudly, observing Lois's paler than normal complexion, her eyes glistening, and Clark's look of shock.

"I'm leaving," Lois announced, walking briskly towards him while Clark sank his head into his hands.

"Now, one moment here, Lois," Perry drawled, lowering his voice to a normal conversational level. "I just need to talk to you for one moment before you do. Clark, I'm going to need your help with something but you'll need to get changed. Put on some old jeans and something you don't mind getting a bit dusty. I'll be right here."

Perry watched as Clark obeyed the simple command, heading towards his bedroom. He figured he had only a few minutes before Clark emerged, and he wanted Lois gone by then.

"Now, Lois..."

"What do you need his help with? Why can't I help?" she demanded.

Perry cut her off before she started on a roll. "I don't think you'd like what I've got for Clark. He's going to be busy for

a few hours." At Lois's fierce glare, he elaborated. "I need help moving Jimmy's stuff out of his apartment."

"Perry," she hissed at him. "Clark's not in any condition to be moving stuff. I don't think he's left this apartment in days. He's still injured..." Lois stopped as she choked off a sob.

"Oh, honey," Perry mumbled as he pulled Lois into a hug. "Don't worry, I'll make sure he's okay, get him outside, seeing some familiar faces." He held her for the few seconds she took to compose herself, before she stepped back from his embrace.

"Do you need me to do anything?" she asked tearfully.

He paused, thinking. "Well, we'll need a place to put Jimmy's stuff. It's not much, mind you, but more than I can fit in the place I'm staying. Can you try to find something, a storage unit, that isn't going to cost too much?"

He watched as Lois frowned, then brightened. "I know just the place. Call me in an hour, I'll have it set up."

Perry watched as Lois rushed out of the apartment, and a few seconds later, Clark appeared, changed and looking wary. "Son, I need your help. Are you up for driving a rental van?"

* * *

He let out the breath he felt as though he'd been holding since the airplane's wheels had left the ground in Metropolis. Glancing around at his fellow passengers, he wondered how everyone else seemed so unconcerned, so nonchalant about the flight. He'd been on plenty of flights, and while they weren't his preferred method of travel, he hadn't minded too much. Before Friday, at the very least, if something had gone wrong, he would have been able to survive. Now, he was at the mercy of others to ensure he got to his destination alive.

As the plane taxied smoothly to the terminal, the captain's welcome and weather report playing overhead, Clark leaned back in his seat, tired.

After changing as Perry had requested and taking a few minutes to prepare an apology for Lois, he'd emerged from his room to find Perry waiting patiently, alone. Lois had gone home, was the only comment Perry, and then he'd explained what he needed. Before leaving the apartment, Clark had remembered to call his parents back while Perry had waited in the car for him.

His mother had been in no mood to negotiate, and he'd been given two options: either he flew to them or they flew to him. He capitulated, agreeing to fly out on the last flight that evening, thankfully a direct flight, and his father would pick him up.

He'd then spent several hours helping Jimmy and Jack load up the rental van Perry had acquired. It had been good to see them both, and they'd been delighted to see him, Jimmy more so than Jack. Jimmy accepted that Clark wouldn't talk about what had happened and was more wrapped up in his own drama of needing to pack up the belongings his landlord hadn't sold, bemoaning the task of finding a new place to live without any income, to notice Clark's lack of energy and enthusiasm.

Jack was a different character, Clark mused. Jack had remained fairly quiet, other than a few pointed questions about his well-being. He was inquisitive and very intelligent, but it was quietly hidden under a tough façade, and more than once Clark suspected Jack knew more about Superman than he let on. There had been that incident in the stairwell when they had been held hostage, the bullet that he had caught, and while Jack had never mentioned it again, Clark had noticed the curious stares and offhand comments made when no one else was around, such as the request to Clark to break him out of the detention centre. Despite Jack's silence, Clark knew his young friend had been worried about him and was glad to see him.

They'd driven Jimmy's belongings to a storage building in an industrial centre, and unloaded Jimmy's meagre belongings into a space that was much larger than necessary. Jimmy had fretted about the cost, but Perry had informed him it was all taken care of.

The plane stopped moving with a slight lurch, and the moment the seatbelt sign was no longer illuminated, everyone around him leapt to their feet and began gathering their belongings. Clark, startled out of his musings, stared at his hands which were starting to itch again. He'd packed the aloe, as an afterthought, into his checked luggage and wondered which would hurt more: memories of seared skin on Kryptonite bars or Lois's soothing caress.

* * *

Part 12

"Good morning, Clark," Martha called cheerfully as Clark sleepily entered the kitchen. "There's fresh coffee in the pot. As soon as your dad is finished up, we'll have breakfast."

"Mmph," was all Clark could manage. Martha turned and stared at her son as he wiped the sleep from his eyes, clearly still half asleep.

"Did you sleep okay?" she asked, worried. It was unlike Clark to have slept this late in the day, and she rarely, if ever, saw him look this tired, especially given the amount of sleep he had had last night.

"Yeah, I slept great, I think. I barely remember falling asleep, don't think I moved all night." Clark filled a mug with coffee and took a seat at the kitchen table. "You didn't have to wait for me to get up to eat. I know Dad is up quite early..."

"Don't worry, he had a bite before he started the chores," Martha laughed, the first light-hearted moment in several days.

She and Jonathan hadn't been worried about Clark at first. He'd avoided their calls, but they knew he was alive and had automatically assumed he was okay, at least physically. If anything, she'd suspected Clark was blaming himself for not saving Mr. Luthor and had been juggling dealing with Lois's sorrow and his own guilt. Until Lois let it slip that Clark had been hurt. At that point her stomach had fallen to her toes, and a deep feeling of dread had settled in. If Clark was injured and still had visible wounds to show several days later, something was horribly wrong with her son.

The argument that she'd heard between Lois and Clark while trying to find out what was going on had cemented her decision to fly to Metropolis. Clark had agreed to visit them instead, which Martha was relieved about. Visiting Metropolis for a few days was fairly easy with enough notice, as they'd ask someone to watch the farm and care for the few animals they had, but having to leave for an undetermined amount of time would be challenging. Plus, getting Clark away from the city for a few days would probably do him some good.

When he'd arrived last night, he'd been fast asleep in the truck when Jonathan had pulled up. After suggesting Clark shower and change, they'd shared a light, late dinner, and as the sun had set, they'd sat on the porch and talked.

He'd said a great deal, without saying much at all. Martha knew he was keeping much of what had happened to himself, and she wasn't sure if that was to preserve his own mental state or to spare them any grisly details. They now knew about the Kryptonite cage, his entrapment, and his escape. The burns, she knew, came from his attempts to escape, but they didn't explain why he was calling out in his sleep, as he had last night. Jonathan had panicked about the cage, had tried to suggest they drive to Metropolis to get it so it could be disposed of. Clark had tried to assure him it was in safe hands, that he trusted the Inspector to take care of it.

The question that hung in the air, the one none of them approached, was the concern over Clark's powers. Last time he'd encountered Kryptonite, he'd been stripped of his abilities for a short while, but they'd come back. Would they do the same after such a long exposure? Martha wondered,

cradling her cooling mug of coffee as she watched Jonathan stroll up the pathway from the barn. At least Clark was home, and safe, for the time being.

“Clark?” Martha turned and saw Clark scratching at his neck. “Don’t scratch the scabs, you’ll make them bleed.” She had only seen a few of the healing burns, the ones on his hands, forearms, and neck. He had refused to let her check him over further, except to let her look at the easily visible marks to be sure they weren’t infected and to be sure they were healing properly.

“Mom, it’s not that,” Clark protested as he moved to scratch his ankle. “Something’s making me itch.”

She walked around to Clark and peeked at his neck, fighting the urge to laugh and cry at the same time. “Clark, honey, it’s mosquito bites. They must have had a feast on you last night.”

“Oh,” Clark said as his face fell. “Guess it’s been a long time since I last had to deal with that.”

“Not to worry,” she said brightly, trying to cheer him up a little. “If you go upstairs into the medicine cabinet, you’ll find a bottle of calamine lotion. Bring that down with some cotton wool balls.”

As she heard the stairs creak under Clark’s ascending footsteps, Jonathan entered the house.

“Is he up?”

“Yes, he’s just gone upstairs to get the calamine lotion. The mosquitos took a fancy to him last night,” she said, trying to lighten Jonathan’s mood.

“Oh, Martha, our poor boy...”

She quickly cut off Jonathan before he began to lament. “Jonathan, don’t let him overhear you. He’s alive, and he’s still probably healthier than the average man. Let’s not take that for granted. For now, take him with you today, find something to do together. Maybe if he relaxes a bit, he’ll talk to you rather than hiding what’s bothering him.”

“Well, there is that section of fence that needs replacing,” Jonathan sighed.

“Perfect. Gets him far enough from the house he can’t hide in his room, and he’ll get some fresh air and sunshine.” Martha handed Jonathan a fresh cup of coffee just as Clark returned.

“Is this it? It’s bright pink!” Clark stated, holding out the bottle of calamine lotion.

Martha couldn’t stop the laughter bubbling at Clark’s disgusted expression.

He felt ridiculous. There were pink splotches all over him, indicating just how many mosquitoes had bitten him last night. At least there were only a few that were visible around his neck; the rest were on his back, covered by a t-shirt, and on his legs, covered in jeans. Still, how had they managed to bite him through his jeans? Though, he grudgingly admitted, they didn’t itch anymore.

It was already warm, but the light breeze coming in the open truck windows helped, especially given the old farm truck didn’t have air conditioning. His mom had packed them a hearty lunch and lots of water, as though she expected them to be gone all day, but it sounded like there was only a small section of fence that needed to be repaired, maybe a few posts, not a task for the whole day. He’d overheard the comment about getting him out of the house, and it looked like Mom was trying to ensure he’d be gone all day.

As his dad brought the truck to a stop, Clark gazed around at the crops in the fields. It was peaceful out here. He could hear the neighbour’s cows mooing, and the wheat, which looked almost ready for harvest, was rustling and swaying gently in the wind. He should ask his dad when he was planning to harvest, as this year he had all the time in the world to help.

Several hours later, Clark was sitting on the tailgate of the truck, finishing up the last of the packed sandwiches.

“Hungry?” his dad asked with a smirk, taking a leisurely bite out of his sandwich.

“Yeah, apparently I was. That was a lot of work.”

“I’ve been putting this off for months since the Keegans won’t be using this pasture until fall. It’s been much faster and easier with your help, son.” Jonathan watched as Clark stretched out his neck and arms. “How do you feel?”

“Tired, a bit sore, but not bad.”

“Clark, your mother isn’t here to fuss right now, and I think you’ll do yourself a favour admitting how you actually feel,” Jonathan said carefully.

Clark sighed, and reluctantly elaborated. “It’s been how many years since I had to do manual labour without relying on my super-strength? I don’t remember what it feels like.” Clark paused, thinking over his next words. “Lifting the Messenger into space was easy, but it took effort. At that point, it was the heaviest thing I’d ever lifted, but it wasn’t just a case of lifting something up. While I defy gravity by flying, the ship wanted to fall back to Earth, so I was fighting that and trying to keep it balanced. Coming back to Earth alone, I was tired but not sore as though I’d physically exerted myself.”

* * *

Clark looked at his dad, who nodded encouragingly at him. For the first time in days, he could actually explain to someone how he was feeling, and even though his dad couldn't understand exactly what he was feeling, at least Clark could be truthful about what was happening to him. He plunged ahead.

"Remember Nightfall?"

His dad chuckled. "I do. I'm glad you do too!"

Clark, lost in his memories, didn't hear his father's comment. "The first time, I just hit it, expecting it to veer off course, but it exploded around me. The second time, I had to catch it and force it away from Earth. It was tiring, and I almost couldn't do it, but it didn't take long for me to be at full strength again. This...this is different."

Clark hesitated, fighting the memories of the pain and exhaustion from the cage.

"Whenever you're ready, son. We've got all afternoon," Jonathan said as he offered Clark a bottle of water.

"Dad," Clark started, staring off at the horizon. "I've never been that exhausted or defeated, ever. I didn't think I'd..." He felt sick to his stomach, Luthor's scream echoing through his mind, along with the sound of the axe smashing into the wooden barrels. He gripped the side of the truck desperately and felt his dad's arm around his shoulders, a solid hand gently patting him on his back. He focused on the soothing sound of the breeze through the stalks of wheat, a gentle rushing sound, and feeling the sunshine warming him, and then he slowly let his grip on the truck relax, taking deep breaths. He wasn't in the cage anymore, he was outside, on the farm, safe.

"It's okay, Clark..."

"No, Dad, it isn't. I let my guard down; I got overconfident. I never thought Luthor would get his hands on Kryptonite." Clark stood and began to pace, agitated. "Remember that missing piece of Kryptonite that Wayne sent off to the lab? I never found it, and I let it go. Some investigative reporter, huh? Luthor got hold of it, and almost killed me. Lois..." Clark hesitated, running a hand through his hair. "He never loved Lois, even though he told me he did. Luthor said she was too independent, and he'd have to take care of that."

"What do you think he meant?"

"He'd already manipulated her right into his waiting arms," Clark spat bitterly. "The explosion at the Planet, that was him. She lost her job and her friends... Even I..." He couldn't continue, the lump in his throat threatened to spill over into tears.

"It wasn't your fault," Jonathan interjected, only to be interrupted.

"I should have been there," Clark continued, regaining his composure. "Instead, I pushed her away. In those last few weeks leading up to her wedding, we barely spoke. I told her I love her, and yet, when she told me she doesn't feel that way about me, I abandoned her. We had a few brief phone conversations, and one conversation where I yelled at her. How was that being a friend, supporting her? I practically shoved her into Luthor's arms."

Clark sank to the ground, his anger, pain, and frustration finally voiced in a cathartic release.

Several minutes passed before Jonathan's quiet question broke the silence. "Do you still love her?" he asked.

Clark sighed, suddenly fed up of talking. He stood, brushing the dry grass and dirt from his pants, and walked towards the truck. "How about we check the rest of the fence?"

* * *

After dinner, while his mother insisted on cleaning up alone, Clark sat out on the porch with a mug of tea. He was tired, but pleasantly so, not the body-aching exhaustion he had felt over the last few days, but a general tiredness after being outside all day, working. He and his father had gone over all the fencing on the property, finding a few more posts to replace along with a few sections to repair. He'd done most of the heavy labour and found himself enjoying the work. He'd never minded it as a kid and was thankful to find he still loved to work on the farm, despite lacking his super abilities.

He could hear the mosquitos buzzing around him but couldn't see them, and he assumed the bug repellent that his mom had liberally sprayed him with before sending him out here was doing its job. He took a sip of his tea and looked out onto the farm. The golden fields of wheat were still gently swaying in the barest of breezes as the sun, an hour from setting, began to cast rich, red hues across the landscape.

His dad was planning to harvest late next week, if this weather held. It was a good crop this year, and when Clark had expressed his desire to help, he'd seen a spark of thankfulness in his dad's eyes.

He loved the farm, always had, but had never seen himself settling down to be a farmer. For the last year of high school, as he'd applied to universities, he'd been afraid to tell his father, who was proud of his son's desire for further education, that he wanted to enroll in journalism courses, not agriculture. Even in the first years of university,

he'd held some guilt, despite his parent's blessing, that he wouldn't be returning to carry on the family legacy.

No matter what his future held for him now, he knew he could walk back onto the farm and his father would gladly pass the land down to him. But could he give up everything he'd worked for? Even without his superpowers, he could still write. In his time at the Daily Planet, he'd published several of the exclusives, both when he'd been partnered with Lois and from working on his own, and now he had a strong, solid portfolio. He could apply to any of the world-class newspapers in the country and be considered a candidate for employment; yet he didn't currently feel the drive to do so.

He leaned back in the old wicker chair as the squeaky screen door announced he had company.

"Tired?" his dad asked as he sat.

"Yeah, but not exhausted."

"Well, tomorrow I'd like to give the combine and tractor a good once over, be sure there'll be no surprises when we start harvesting."

Clark nodded in acknowledgement; he'd anticipated that would be next on the list. "When are we sowing this year?"

"Clark," Jonathan began, leaning forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "Are you planning to be here for a while?"

"I dunno, Dad."

"I'll never turn down your help, and you're always welcome here, but are you sure you're ready to give up on Metropolis? On your career?"

Clark groaned inwardly. He hadn't fooled his dad. "It's easier to think here, in the quiet. The hustle and bustle of the city is fun at times, but sometimes I need the peacefulness I find here."

His father nodded his understanding.

"It's not just about me not being super anymore. There's so much more to it than that."

"Oh?" Jonathan asked.

Clark knew his dad wouldn't be offended if he just left that comment where it was, but he needed to say the words out loud, so he could figure things out properly, and stop the circular arguments in his head. "There's no Daily Planet. I could get a job at one of the other papers, but it wouldn't be the same." He inwardly cringed at the idea of writing for the Star. "So where does that leave my options? Settle for something else in Metropolis, or try another paper, in another city? Start all over again? I don't know if I want to do that again."

He sighed and broke eye contact with his father, looking out at the setting sun. "Dad, did you ever want to do something different?"

Jonathan leaned back in the chair. "No, never. Sure, there are days, seasons, where it'd be easier to give up, but I can't see me doing anything else." His dad looked out towards the driveway, fondly. "This town, this farm, has been my life. I couldn't imagine growing up, living, raising you, anywhere else."

Clark sighed in envy. He'd loved Metropolis. It was so vibrant, eclectic, and full of possibilities. He'd had a good job opportunity, which turned into the career of his dreams, and he'd finally found a way to use his abilities for others while keeping a low profile. A week ago, he couldn't have imagined thinking about giving all of that up for the life of a farmer. Now, no superpowers, no job, was he contemplating it?

But what about Lois?

"Son, don't make any rash decisions. Give it a little longer for the dust to settle."

He hadn't answered his dad's question from lunch time, but it had plagued him all day. He still couldn't answer it. "Dad, she loved him," Clark said mournfully.

"Did she?" Jonathan asked. There was a lengthy pause before he continued. "I remember when I realised I'd fallen for your mother. She was all I thought about, and everyone around me knew I loved her before I did."

"Maybe love isn't always like that?"

"Maybe," Jonathan conceded. "Love is a powerful emotion, like fear and anger, and everyone reacts differently. All of those emotions will drive your decisions, make you act rashly, and when you calm, perhaps make you regret what's happened."

"Maybe." Clark stared off into the distance, thinking over his dad's words.

After another long pause, Jonathan stood and placed a reassuring pat on Clark's shoulder. "G'night, son."

Alone, Clark watched the sun set, the mosquitos' high-pitched buzzing around his ears the only sound he could hear. At least they weren't biting him anymore; the repellent must be working, but it stunk. Resisting the urge to scratch the few bites he had received yesterday, he headed indoors, his dad's words echoing through his mind.

* * *

Part 13

Perry dejectedly walked up to the apartment door and paused, his hand on the door handle. He couldn't believe that no one wanted to own the Daily Planet.

True, it had been a financial pit at the end, but that had been all Luthor's doing. With Luthor dead, his empire running on autopilot until all the legal processes and criminal investigations ran their courses, that wasn't a threat anymore.

The lawyer he'd asked to look into the resale had suggested on their last call that she believed a buyer could successfully sue Luthor's estate for the insurance payouts to rebuild. That money was more than enough to repair the building and equipment. Hell, it was enough to buy all new equipment!

So why was no one interested?

Perry sighed and opened the door, his stomach growling as he smelled what he hoped was dinner. Jack and Jimmy turned from their card game and looked at him hopefully. Perry shook his head.

"It's okay, Chief," remarked Jimmy. "Maybe tomorrow."

"What's for dinner?" Perry replied, changing the subject.

"Lasagna!"

Perry arched one eyebrow in surprise. "Really?"

"Well, it's frozen, or was. I didn't make it or anything. It'll feed us for tomorrow too, it's big enough."

"My idea," Jack interjected sullenly. "I was fed up with sandwiches too."

Perry laughed. Today, he'd instructed Jack and Jimmy to pound pavement, try to find a place to live, employment until he could get the Planet up and running, and something better to eat than the loaves of bread, sandwich meat, and mustard Jimmy had purchased on Sunday.

"Alright, let's eat!"

Jimmy opened the oven and pulled out the lasagna, while Jack cleared the cards and placed the table settings back. When Perry returned from the bathroom, dinner was served. The top layer of cheese was a bit hard, and Perry assumed it had sat in the oven for a while, but it was still tastier than sandwiches. He listened as Jimmy rambled on about their day, the apartments they'd looked at, and the resumes they'd dropped off and watched as Jack ate quickly but barely joined in the conversation.

When dinner was finished, Perry began to clean up the dishes and instructed Jimmy to take out the full garbage. The moment the door closed behind Jimmy, Perry turned to Jack. "Now, are you going to tell me what's wrong, or do I get to guess?" Perry asked Jack pointedly.

Instead of answering, Jack tossed the dish towel on the counter and retreated to the couch, turning the television on.

"Oh good, I do love to guess," remarked Perry sarcastically. "The lasagna was your suggestion, a great idea I'll add, and considering you wolfed it down and had seconds, I'll deduce it wasn't the cuisine that's upset you."

When Jack didn't answer, Perry took the remote from the couch and turned the television off. He knew Jack was prone to sulking, especially if things didn't go his way, but he was also terrible at hiding his emotions. Sulking was the way Jack generally reacted to anything that bothered him, and with the three of them sharing a small space for a few more days, Perry wanted to get to the bottom of it.

"You can tell me what's wrong now, or I can wait until Jimmy returns and you can listen to his questions, but either way, you're going to share what's on your mind."

"What does it matter? In a few days you'll be back at the beach, Jimmy will have a job, and I'll be stuck back where I was."

Jack reached for the remote that Perry had set down on the coffee table, but Perry snatched it back, thinking quickly. Clark had begged Perry to hire Jack on, and Perry had, reluctantly. Clark hadn't hidden any of Jack's past, which had made Perry wary, but he'd trusted Clark's judgment. In the last few months, after having a steady income, knowing his brother was well taken care of, and having a place to live with regular meals, Jack had finally let down his defences and had proven to be an intelligent and hard-working young man.

Yet here sat a young man, still underage by a few weeks, hiding his fear of the future behind a tough-guy smoke screen. From that surly reply, Perry now understood Jack's concerns.

"Now, Jack, I know it looks bleak right now, but it's early days yet. I've still got a few more tricks up my sleeve, and at the end of the week, we'll have something figured out for you and Jimmy, don't you worry."

"Yeah...well, some guy called for you earlier, wouldn't leave a name. Just said to stop trying to sell the Daily Planet to every business owner in the state."

"Oh?"

"He was real abrupt, just said to make sure you got the message. What do you think it is?"

Perry heard the genuine interest that was lurking in Jack's question.

"I bet it's someone from Lex Luthor's company," Jimmy stated, joining them in the living room after arriving in time to hear Jack's question.

“Was there anything else to the message?” asked Perry, giving Jimmy’s idea some thought.

“No. They asked for you, and when I said you weren’t back, they asked to make sure I gave you the message.” Jack reached for the remote again.

“We’re not done discussing,” said Perry as he held out the remote to Jack. “But that’s all for today.” As Jimmy noisily began to put the dishes away, Perry leaned towards Jack. “When Saturday morning arrives and we aren’t able to stay here anymore, we will have a plan. I’m not leaving either of you homeless and jobless, d’ya hear?”

Perry watched as Jack nodded slowly, his Adam’s apple bobbing as Jack swallowed his worry and frustration. Perry clapped a hand gently on the kid’s shoulder in a comforting gesture as Jack turned the television on. Perry then headed into the kitchen to make sure Jimmy was putting the dishes away, not breaking them, and his mind began to race as he tried to figure out how he could help both of them find jobs and homes.

* * *

With trembling hands, Lois placed the receiver back in its cradle. Dave had done some digging, and all he could tell her was that the orders to terminate her position within LNN had come from much higher up than management. There had been nothing in her file to indicate any performance issues or anything that would lead to such an abrupt ending to her job. The only thing he had found was a signature on the termination forms, a Mrs. Cox, dated the day she was supposed to be married.

She’d felt like throwing up. She’d suspected Lex had something to do with her sudden unemployment ever since the movers had shown up, but she had been hoping that wasn’t the case, as now there was no aspect of her life that he hadn’t infringed upon. Her family, friends, home, and job had all come under his scrutiny, and he had used aspects of each to further his own gains. By pushing the people in her life away, she’d had no one else to go to, only him. When she would have returned from her honeymoon, she would have had no apartment and no job.

But for what purpose? That, she hadn’t figured out. He had claimed to love her, had acted like he loved her. He’d said all the right things, showered her with gifts, made her feel desired, but, a part of her mind whispered, he hadn’t shared his life with her. She had inquired about his businesses, his interests, but other than a generic media-statement answer, Lex had never indulged, divulged, or shared in depth any part of his professional or personal life with her. His answers, while at the time she hadn’t noticed, had been slippery, before he’d distracted her with something else.

Over the last few days, she’d wondered what kind of wife Lex had been looking for. He had been surrounded by women who were infatuated with him, and Lois was sure he could have found a gorgeous trophy wife easily. Why had he chosen her? If he had wanted an obedient, characterless wife, she had not been the ideal candidate.

Only one person had seen through Lex’s suave façade, and she’d ignored him, pushed him away, and accused him of being jealous. Over the last few weeks, she’d tried to busy herself with her new job, wedding plans, and new home plans, but she’d still missed her best friend. Now, even though she’d seen him more in the last few days than she had in a month, she still had no idea where their friendship was.

Wanting to know how he was, she dialled Clark’s number, but when she got the answering machine, she remembered that he had gone to Kansas. Feeling utterly alone, she placed the phone back in the cradle and wandered into the kitchen to make some coffee, thinking.

Lex had something to do with Clark’s injuries, but she doubted she’d ever get Clark to tell her how or why. Had Superman rescued him? Maybe she could get some information from the superhero, but other than standing outside and screaming for help, she had no idea how to contact him.

When the wedding had stopped, it had been Perry, Jimmy, and Jack who had arrived with the police. Jimmy had let it slip that Clark had been missing since the night before, which would possibly explain Superman’s absence that morning. He must have been looking for and rescuing Clark.

Her coffee ready, she sat on the couch, flipping the television on to the news. The anchor was giving an update on an accident on the interstate, and Lois stared at the screen wanting to see Superman in action. But the anchor then ended the segment, switching to a conversation with a journalist who was reporting on a double homicide the night prior.

Where was Superman? Lois wondered. The day before her wedding, Superman had rescued a family from an apartment fire, which had been the last she had seen or heard of him. Albeit, she had refused to turn on the news, not wanting to see updates on Lex’s death or the criminal investigation or see images of the reporters camped out at the entrance to her apartment building. She had half expected him to fly by, stop in, ask how she was.

Lois snorted as she laughed at her daydreams. After their last encounter, she doubted Superman would ever feel comfortable enough to stop by like he once used to.

She'd stopped the wedding because she didn't love Lex, she couldn't see herself growing old with him, and he wasn't the first person she wanted to be around. There was someone else that she cared about, who was the first person she thought about, whose brilliant smile directed at her, always brightened her day. Someone who made her feel like she was the most important person in the room, not another appointment to be scheduled.

She had been astonished to realise that person wasn't Superman, that it was Clark, and was bewildered and puzzled as to how that had happened without her being aware of it. Until this moment, she had refused to think about it, and even at this moment, her feelings and thoughts were so chaotically entangled, she couldn't think of where to begin untangling them. The only thing she wanted to do was talk to Clark.

She moved towards the phone, wiping away the few tears that had collected. It wouldn't be hard to ask the operator to find the Kents' number and have her call connected.

As her hand closed around the receiver to pick it up, the phone suddenly rang, and she jumped, startled by the sound. She rolled her eyes at herself and then lifted the phone to answer it.

"Hello?"

* * *

"I'm trying to get hold of Clark; have you seen him?" Henderson asked.

"No, he took a flight to Kansas on Sunday evening. He's with his folks, though I'm hoping he'll be back in Metropolis tomorrow. I can ask him to stop by the precinct?"

"No, just ask him to give me a call?"

"Sure."

Henderson hung up the phone, unable to shake the uneasy feeling that had plagued him all week. He'd thrown himself into the Luthor investigation, trying to focus his mind and energy on anything but his conclusion that Clark Kent was Superman. Now, after putting it off for several days, he had to contact Kent. Another of the investigative team had offered to, but he'd needed to do this himself.

As the investigation had progressed, the team had begun to untangle the web of Luthor's interests. He knew it would be many months before they had the bigger picture with all the finer details, but enough was starting to emerge to put together the fragments, to reveal just how big the picture would be. He wanted to know what Kent had suspected about Luthor, find out how he had come to his suspicions, even though he'd claimed to have no evidence.

Henderson was relieved to hear that Kent had gone to his parents' home and was away from the city. The sensationalist headlines that were starting to emerge, along with the theories about Luthor's death, Superman's part in it, and Superman's recent lack of appearances, weren't something Kent should be dealing with. He'd wait until Kent chose to come back to Metropolis to talk to him rather than contacting him at his parents' home.

There was one other phone call he had to make before joining the investigative team at LexCorp Tower. He dialled Lois Lane's number and, while listening to the ring tone, idly reached for this morning's paper. With the demise of the Planet, there were now few options for a well-balanced, reliable, Metropolis-based newspaper. Someone had decided to have the *Star* delivered, but the *Star* was not his choice of a reputable news source, and he thought the quality of the *Star* had begun a downward slide now that they weren't competing with the *Planet* for readership. The headline today proclaimed Superman had been helping Luthor in his crimes. Henderson tossed the paper in the bin as she answered.

"Lois, Bill Henderson here."

"Bill!" Lois sounded surprised. "What can I help you with?"

He heard a twinge of something in her voice he hadn't heard before. Was it sorrow, or loneliness? "Lois, it's about the bags of personal belongings that were at Luthor's..."

"I told you, I don't need those back," she interrupted.

Henderson almost smiled as a bit of the famous Lane fire heated up her words. "That's fine, we can donate those for you, but I still need you to come down to the precinct to sign for them."

"Okay," she acquiesced, the fire in her voice extinguished now. "When do you need me down there?"

"Whenever you can. You don't need to see anyone, just let the officer at the desk know who you are, and they'll have the paperwork for you to sign."

He heard her sigh heavily. "Okay, Bill. I'll stop by this week sometime."

"Are those reporters still camped at your front door?" He'd already shooed them away once, and he'd been notified when the building super had called to request an officer to come and get them to move. He had hoped they would give up.

"I don't know; I haven't been outside yet."

Lane had refused to talk to the crisis counsellor on Friday and again when the crisis counsellor had called to follow up.

Henderson had no idea if she was talking to anyone, friends or family. “Lois, are you sure you’re okay?”

There was a long pause before she answered. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“You need anything, just call.”

As he hung up the phone, he wondered if Lane suspected, or knew, about Clark Kent’s double life. He dismissed that thought immediately as it flashed through his mind. There was no chance Lois Lane would have married Luthor if she had known Superman’s true identity.

With Kent out of the state, Perry and company busy organising their lives, and Lane not leaving her apartment, he made a note to the desk clerk to notify him when she stopped by. He wanted to have a conversation with her, make sure she was okay. If she wasn’t, well, he’d confront Kent, find out if Superman could stop by and check on her.

* * *

Part 14

Martha was surprised to hear Lois’s voice on the phone, just over twelve hours since her last call. “I’m sorry, Lois. Clark went with his father over to the neighbour’s. I don’t know when they’ll be back.”

“Oh,” Lois spoke softly down the line.

“I can ask Clark to call you back?” Martha asked, even though Lois had asked her yesterday not to tell Clark she had called.

“No, no, that’s okay,” was the quick response.

Martha hesitated. The phone call yesterday had been very brief. Lois hadn’t asked if Clark was there; instead she’d asked how he was doing. When Martha had offered to go get Clark, Lois had insisted she didn’t want to speak to him, and Martha hadn’t pushed the issue, remembering the argument she had overheard.

“Lois, honey, how are you doing?”

“Oh, you know. I’m fine, really.”

Martha sighed as she heard the fake cheery tone coming from a woman who had sounded as though she had just finished crying. “Don’t give me a media statement. I’ve seen the reporters on the news hounding you. Have you been able to leave your apartment, or are they still there?”

There was a lengthy pause, and Martha waited for a moment before hearing Lois snuffle on the other end. “Oh, dear. Lois, is there anyone that you can stay with, or anyone that can come over for a bit?”

As Lois informed Martha, through her sniffles, that there was no one she could ask, Martha wanted to pull the poor

girl into a hug and, at the same time, was also furious with her mother’s reaction. Even though Clark had hidden his injuries from them and still kept back some of what had happened, he had known they would be there for him. Poor Lois didn’t have that.

“Why don’t you come out here for a visit?” Martha asked. “I know it’s not your ideal vacation spot, but it gets you out of the city.” She’d deal with Clark; right now Lois needed a friend.

“Oh, no, that’s okay. Really, I couldn’t,” Lois objected, though it seemed the sniffles had stopped.

“Don’t worry about Clark, he’ll be happy you’re here,” Martha said confidently.

“I’ll think about it.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Martha spotted Clark casually strolling up the long driveway to the house, something in his hand. “Lois, I’m going to have to let you go. The door is always open for you, and call anytime.”

She barely heard Lois’s farewell as she hung up the phone before rushing to the door. Clark was there within seconds, holding what looked like a bent piece of metal.

“Mom!” he exclaimed, showing off the twisted pry bar in his hands. “Look what happened!”

* * *

Merely being at his childhood home, away from the hustle and bustle of the world, had always been tranquil, but the last few days, Clark felt his equilibrium returning. Each morning he’d been out at the farm, he’d woken feeling happier, more rested, and as each night passed, he’d slept more soundly. The nightmares were flickers, no longer the all-encompassing horror of reliving the experience, and during the day, the moments of panic had lessened. He suspected spending the last two days in the wide-open fields, in the bright sunshine, with no walls or enclosed rooms to confine him, had helped greatly.

Inspecting his wounds in the mirror before putting on a clean shirt, he was pleased to see that the scars were now new patches of pink skin, no scabs or signs that the skin had been broken or injured. He’d been a little self-conscious about the scar that ran down his neck as it was not easily hidden in the hot Kansas summer days, even though there hadn’t been anyone to see it.

After spending the day with his dad fixing the fencing around the property on Monday, they’d spent Tuesday doing some regular maintenance on the harvesting equipment, followed by some spot repairs on the silos. Nothing out of the ordinary, just regular repairs that Clark was glad to be able to help with. Over a hearty breakfast, his dad

had announced that today, they would be heading over to Wayne's to help him with his harvest preparations.

After brushing his teeth, he idly ran a hand over the stubble growing on his face. He'd always kept some disposable razors in his toiletries just in case anyone said or noticed anything, but with the loss of his powers, and his normal method of shaving unavailable, he'd been grateful for them. He would have to take his dad's advice and get a good quality razor, he thought as he tossed the disposable one in the garbage. These cheap ones barely lasted a few days, and the one he'd used yesterday had barely worked at all. Maybe it would be easier to just let his beard grow out?

He laughed at his reflection, idly wondering what Lois would think of a beard, before sighing heavily. Would he see her again? Where did they stand with each other?

When she'd shown up unexpectedly the night of Luthor's death, he'd not known how to react. Fear and anger had been the first emotions to surface. As Lois had continued to drop in at his apartment over the following days, she had not asked any further questions about his injuries or about what had happened and, other than the snippet of information about her sister, had not shared anything with him.

He missed her, plain and simple. He'd missed his friend and partner for weeks, and now that everything had changed again, would she want him back in her life? Over the last few days, as he'd finally slept well and his injuries had begun to heal, he'd realised he wanted to talk to her. Even if he decided not to return to Metropolis to live, he wanted the chance to say goodbye.

"Clark! Are you ready?" his dad shouted from downstairs.

Clark, shaken out of his musings, replied, "Yeah, I'll be right there." Quickly grabbing a shirt, he headed downstairs.

As they headed away from the farm in the old truck, Clark smelled something burning on the breeze. Not seeing any smoke, he said nothing until they drove up behind a tractor driving slowly in front of them.

"Dad, something's wrong," Clark stated, the smell of smoke much stronger now. "Can you smell that?"

"No," replied his father, but he slowed down instead of passing the tractor.

"I think it's coming from the tractor." No sooner had the words left Clark's mouth than he spotted flames licking upwards from underneath the cab. "Dad!" Clark shouted, pointing towards the flames.

His dad pulled the truck alongside the tractor, while Clark gestured to the driver to pull over. It was Eddie Keegan

Sr., their neighbour, who was well into his eighties. While he had all his wits about him and regularly helped his son on the farm, he couldn't walk well. The moment the truck stopped, Clark jumped out and raced around the piece of equipment looking for a fire extinguisher, as the flames grew and the smoke thickened. He found the extinguisher and watched his dad help Eddie Sr. down from the cab as he aimed the extinguisher towards the flames. The air around him turned white from the fine powder, and unsure if the fire was out, he paused.

"Clark?" He heard his dad call.

"Can you see any more smoke or flames?" Clark responded.

There was a moment before his dad responded as they waited for the white cloud to clear enough to see properly. As his dad answered the affirmative, Clark spotted the flames again. Knowing there wasn't much left in the extinguisher, he took a breath and blew gently on the area.

"Son, I think you've got it," he heard his dad call frantically. He stopped and stared at the rear of the tractor. It was encased in ice. As he walked around the tractor and back to the truck, dazed, he saw his dad helping Eddie into the passenger seat. Once Eddie was settled, his dad turned to him.

"He's pretty shaken up. I'm going to take him home." Clark heard the words, but couldn't tear his eyes away from the ice-covered tractor. "Clark," his father said sharply. "Listen to me."

Clark tore his eyes away and turned to meet his father's gaze as his dad grasped him by his arms.

"Clark, we can deal with all of this. I'm taking Eddie home. Go back to the farm and bring the tractor back, you can tow this one back to the Keegans'; it should be thawed by then. If not, take it home."

Clark nodded dumbly as his father patted his arm reassuringly before climbing into the driver's seat and driving away, kicking up dust from the gravel road behind him. Clark turned back towards home and started a comfortable jog. His dad was right, the tractor would thaw quickly in the growing warmth, and this road didn't go anywhere except to the surrounding farms. It could be hours before someone drove by.

As he ran, he started to think over what had happened. His icy breath had been a power that had developed early, shortly after his invulnerability, strength, and speed had made their appearances and around the same time as his vision and sense of smell had become enhanced. He almost laughed aloud at the memory of his parents' faces when he'd blown out the candles on his birthday cake and frozen the

cake solid. At first, it had just been very cold breath; it was a few years before his lungs developed their destructive force.

His light jog felt too easy, so he pushed a little faster, surprised when it felt no different. He was sprinting now and barely feeling the effort. With a surge of joy and hope, Clark pushed more and more until he skidded to a stop at the driveway to the farm less than a minute later. He stared in disbelief as the dust cloud he'd caused caught up to him and engulfed him. Quickly, before he could be seen, he darted towards the barn and picked up a pry bar. Grasping an end in each hand, he took a breath and exerted a little pressure. He laughed as the bar folded, the ends almost meeting. He left the barn and walked down the remainder of the driveway to the house. Spotting his mom through the kitchen window, he ran the rest of the way, arriving as she opened the door.

"Mom! Look what happened!"

* * *

Part 15

"So, what's next?"

"I don't know, Dad," Clark answered as he savoured his cup of coffee.

Yesterday, after he'd towed the thawed tractor back to the Keegans' farm, he and his father had returned home, where they'd proceeded to test his returning abilities. They'd discovered while most of his powers had returned, they were all at different strengths, and he had needed to work a little to control a few. He could zoom in with his sight on items far away, to some extent, but his X-ray vision was barely there. His heat vision was sporadic at best. He had almost succeeded in reheating a cup of tea when the strength of the heat flared, and the cup had exploded. He was fast, but not full speed, and while he could jump over the barn in one giant leap, he couldn't fly at all.

He'd gone to sleep elated that his powers were returning, that Luthor hadn't taken everything from him, yet frustrated that he had to relearn control. He'd woken this morning early, the loud sounds of his mom making breakfast in the kitchen informing him that his superhearing was returning and giving him a burst of hope that things would return to normal.

Naturally, the first thing he'd tried was floating over the bed. When that hadn't worked, he'd tried jumping out of his bedroom window. At that point, his mother had put a stop to his attempts to fly and ordered him inside for breakfast. Now, after some light morning conversation while they ate, his dad had asked him the question he'd been asking himself repeatedly over the last twenty-four hours.

"What do you guys think?" he asked as he observed his mother's anxious expression and his father's concerned one.

"Now, Clark, that's not our decision," his father began.

"I'm just looking for your input," Clark said defensively. "I don't know what to do. Part of me wants to go back, and part of me wants to stay."

Martha, topping up their coffee cups, asked the obvious question. "What would you do for work? Is there anyone hiring journalists in Metropolis?"

"That's the problem, Mom. I don't want to work for any of those papers, and I don't want anything to do with LNN, even if Lois is running it now." Clark noticed his mom's puzzled frown at the mention of Lois but didn't ask about it.

Jonathan picked up his black coffee and leaned back in his chair. "What about your apartment?"

"I didn't sign a lease but still have to give notice, so I've got at least a month with a place to live and a few days to decide if I want to move." Going back to Metropolis suddenly seemed like the right thing to do. As wonderful as it was to be back at the farm, with his powers starting to return, he wanted to go back to his place, sleep in his bed, and try to piece his life back together. "Maybe I'll book a flight for tonight, stay the weekend in Metropolis, and head back here in time for the harvest."

"How will you get back?" his dad asked.

"I'll call, get a flight out tonight. If I can fly under my own power by this evening, I'll just cancel the ticket." The more he spoke, the more confident he was becoming. Luthor was gone, and he suspected no one else knew anything about what had happened to Superman, other than Inspector Henderson. If he returned to Metropolis and Superman was still absent, it would just continue to put more distance between himself and his super alter ego. He'd be fine. "Dad, can you give me a ride to the airport?"

"Sure, son."

"Why don't you call Perry or Lois to pick you up at the airport? I'm sure..."

"No, Mom, not Lois. I'll just take a taxi." At the curious glances from his parents, he shrugged and tried to explain. "Lois was at my apartment every day after the wedding. It's a bit too much right now, for both of us. I was injured, and she'd just lost her husband," Clark stated bitterly. "We'll end up arguing again. It's best if we let our lives find their new normal before we try to figure things out." If he do, was his unspoken thought.

His mom stood abruptly, scraping her chair on the kitchen floor, the sound making Clark wince. She hurried out of

the kitchen, into the living room, and he could hear her rustling papers, before she returned, armed with several newspapers.

“I wasn’t sure if I should say anything. I thought you knew already.” Martha slid the first newspaper to Clark, folded over several pages. “She didn’t marry Luthor.”

Clark stared at the article in shock. The reporter claimed that the ceremony had not been completed before the police had entered. The article was accompanied by a series of photos showing the chaos that had erupted outside of LexCorp Tower. The last photo of the series showed Perry holding Lois, guiding her away from the entrance. He felt himself getting warm, his heart rate increasing, and tried to force his breathing to stay even and steady. He felt nauseous as he continued to read the article, describing when Luthor had escaped the police and run out of the room being used for the ceremony.

“Clark, what is it?”

He heard his dad ask the question as he pushed his chair back from the table and ran outside into the morning sunshine. He stood, leaning on the railing of the porch, his head between his hands. His parents joined him, his dad resting a hand on his shoulder.

“I heard them screaming, out on the street. That’s when... Luthor, he ran from the police at the ceremony, and they don’t know where he ran to.” Clark took a deep breath of the fresh morning air, conscious of how hard he exhaled, as always. “He was in the cellar. He’d run from the police, and instead of trying to escape, he came to kill me. But I wasn’t there, I was hiding.” He gulped a few more deep breaths of air, remembering hiding in the cramped space between the wall and the wine barrels, his skin burning, his limbs shaking from exhaustion. Breathing through the swell of panic he felt, he continued. “When he didn’t find me, he left. Once I escaped the building, I heard people screaming. I didn’t know... Inspector Henderson told me Luthor had died.”

As he spoke, a clearer picture of what had happened was forming. He’d remembered hearing the ceremony start, and the confused chatter after he’d hidden. His own screams of agony had drowned out the rest of the sound; he hadn’t been aware of what had occurred at the ceremony. Luthor had left the ceremony after the police had arrived, and when he hadn’t found Superman in the cellar, he’d left, knowing the police were looking for him. Then, rather than face his crimes, he’d jumped. “Luthor left when he found the cage empty. I hadn’t bothered to think about where he’d gone. After I’d escaped the cellar and was waiting for Henderson in the alley, I heard the people at the front of the building screaming. I didn’t really put it together until now.”

He felt his father’s hand pat him on the shoulder several times as his mom wrapped one arm around his waist to give him a half hug, and they stood there together for some time as he calmed himself down.

His dad broke the comfortable silence, patting his shoulder again before moving away. “You go get your flight booked, and then we’ll get the auger out to the silos. Head out to the barn when you’re ready.”

Clark straightened up and then followed his mom into the house, sinking into the couch as she handed him the cordless phone. “It’ll be okay, Clark,” she said with another reassuring hug, before leaving him alone. Pulling out the phone book, he found the number for the airline and dialed, hoping that trusting his gut this time wouldn’t land him in trouble again.

* * *

Perry placed the phone back in the receiver with a sigh. This entire week had come to naught, and he was flying out on Sunday. He had a full day tomorrow to find Jack and Jimmy a place to stay before they had to be out of Jimmy’s current apartment on Saturday morning. If it came to it, they could all find a hotel for Saturday night, but that didn’t help the boys in the long term. He’d called Clark at his folks’ place, hoping that with Clark gone, he wouldn’t object to them staying at Clark’s apartment since he’d generously let them stay there when they’d been investigating Luthor. It had been cramped, but with each of them busy chasing down leads, they hadn’t been together long enough to get on each other’s nerves.

After being informed by Martha Kent that Clark was on his way back to the city, he’d left a message on Clark’s machine, hoping he wouldn’t mind helping Jack and Jimmy out for a few days. At least, Perry hoped it would only be a few days.

He’d also invited Clark to meet him at the café a block away from the old Planet building. It had always been a popular spot with the staff, and Perry thought it would be a good chance to catch up with Clark, find out how he was doing, before he left the city. After lunch, he had a meeting scheduled with Mr. Stern and would be bringing along Jack and Jimmy. He hoped that when faced with the two young men, Mr. Stern would be able to find some employment for them at one of his many companies.

That just left Lois. He hadn’t heard from her in the last few days, and the last time he’d seen her was the night she and Clark had exchanged bitter words. He shook his head at the memory. When he’d spied the Jeep a few nights ago at Clark’s, he’d been hopeful they were starting to work through everything they’d been through over the last few months, but instead, they seemed to have hit a rocky spot.

Perry had been surprised at Clark's harsh tone and choice of words but was sure the young man regretted the exchange now.

Theirs was a friendship he never would have expected. Mad Dog Lane working with a partner, and thriving. As their friendship had blossomed, both of them had bloomed. Their work had improved, their investigations had been the best in the city by far, the best in the state, and a few had made national headlines. But more importantly, they themselves had changed. Lois had softened. Not that she'd gone soft, but she was all edges before: confrontational at best, terrifying at times. Now there was a gentleness that emerged every once in a while. Clark, well, Clark had learned to stand up for himself. It wasn't that he was a pushover, but Perry knew Clark had been smitten with Lois, and he'd been worried Lois would push him around too easily. As time progressed, the young man learned to rile her up, push all of her buttons, challenge her, and still show he cared about her, somehow breaking through the tough façade Lois showed to the world.

If only Lex hadn't barged into her life. Perry couldn't fix that, but he could help patch things up between Lois and Clark. Picking up the receiver, he dialled Lois's number, intending on inviting her to meet him for lunch tomorrow.

* * *

Part 16

He'd woken optimistic about the day as he was feeling more and more like his super self, despite the absence of flight. The sun was shining brightly, and there wasn't a cloud to be seen, which was quite different from the gloomy, overcast sky from the previous weekend. He spent the morning cleaning up his apartment as everything had been left as it was for the past week. The extra blankets and pillows from his sudden guests last week were neatly folded, but hadn't been put away. There was laundry to do, the kitchen to clean up, and, if he was going to stay for a few days, groceries to be purchased. He hesitated once when he approached the half-packed boxes of books. Leaving them where they were, not sure if he should unpack them or not, he made himself a cup of tea, wanting a moment to sit and think before meeting Perry.

At the airport last night, while waiting for his flight, he'd stopped at the bookstore and browsed the large selection of newspapers. A tabloid had caught his eye as he'd seen a picture of Lois plastered on the front page. In the picture, she was dressed comfortably in the same clothes she had been wearing last Saturday when she had been to his house. Noticing the date on the front page, Clark realised the tabloid was one of the weekly tabloids, dated Sunday, and from the series of pictures, it was obvious that there had

been many reporters waiting on Lois's front step. He'd put the tabloid back and picked up another, which had shown similar images but from a day later. Seething, he'd placed the tabloid back on the shelf and picked up several other newspapers to see if there was anything in them. The only Metropolis newspaper this stand had carried was the *Star*, and once the clerk had snarkily commented his store wasn't a library, Clark had reluctantly purchased it with the hope of finding out some of the truth behind the tabloid headlines.

There had been two small articles, buried within the pages of city news, which hadn't shone any light on why there were reporters harassing Lois. The one reporter had named Lois the 'elusive Ms. Lane,' and the other had interviewed an anonymous source at LNN who revealed Lois had been fired. Boarding for Clark's flight had been announced at that moment, and he'd stuffed the newspaper into the garbage, frustrated that he'd be stuck on the plane for the next few hours.

Once in Metropolis, he'd taken a taxi home, and as soon as he'd dropped his luggage off, he'd changed into jogging pants and a light sweater and headed outside. It had been almost midnight, so he'd run at a fast pace, hoping no one would notice the late-night jogger sprinting through Metropolis. It hadn't taken long to get to Lois's home, and he'd been relieved to see no one hanging around. He hadn't seen any lights on in Lois's apartment, so after a brief inspection of the surrounding area to be sure there was no one watching her apartment overnight, he had turned and run back home.

Back in his apartment, he'd checked the messages he'd been in too much of a hurry to check before. Perry had left a message asking to meet for lunch and had a favour to ask. The little bistro he had suggested was one Clark was familiar with, and Clark had called Perry back in the morning to confirm he would be there. He was curious about the favour Perry wanted, and he had been hoping to get some advice on what to do for employment.

Placing his empty cup on the kitchen counter, he went to his room to change. His initial clothing selection had been a suit, as though he was going to work. Deciding that was too formal for a friendly cup of coffee with his former boss, he tried jeans and a sweater, which now felt too casual to be asking his former boss for career advice. Compromising, he kept the jeans on, grabbed a shirt and added a blazer, but left the tie behind. Satisfied, Clark grabbed his wallet and keys and headed towards the door, hesitating as he opened it.

Even without his power of flight, it didn't feel right to be leaving the house underdressed as he was. It wasn't as though he always went out with the Suit on underneath his regular clothes, but getting home or getting to a Suit had never been an issue. Currently, without being able to fly

home to change, if he encountered a situation he could help with, coming home would take longer. But was he ready to return? Did he want to return?

Closing the door firmly, he made his decision. Quickly changing again, this time with the Suit underneath his clothes, he prepared to leave once more. There was no chance he would be able to sit by while someone got hurt, or worse. He knew if he could help, he would, and it was safer for everyone in his life if he continued to do that as Superman and not reveal who it really was behind the flashy Suit. Satisfied, he headed out into the sunshine, looking forward to the walk through the city.

When he arrived at the bistro, a server showed him to the booth Perry was occupying.

“Clark! Good to see you, son,” Perry exclaimed as he stood and enthusiastically shook Clark’s hand. “You look well. How are you doing?”

The question was asked quietly, and Clark remembered the last time he had seen Perry, after he and Lois had argued. He knew he looked much healthier now, the burns had healed, leaving no trace of a scar, and he knew he had looked haggard and exhausted from his continuous nightmare-interrupted sleep. Now, rested and feeling more like his normal self every day, he was able to smile at Perry and assure him he was doing great.

“That’s good to hear. Look, I’ve got to hit the gents. When the waitress comes back, get whatever you want, and order me another coffee.” Perry walked away quickly, leaving Clark to grin at the evidence of how many coffees Perry had already had.

In fact, based on the number of dishes already at the table, someone had been here with Perry before he had shown up. There were several cups and a few dirty plates with utensils. Clark briefly glanced around to see if he could spot anyone familiar, but one of the reasons the café was so popular with the Planet’s reporters was the high-backed booths to sit in. The seats were comfortable, the tables big enough to seat several people and not feel cramped, but the high-backed seats gave a level of privacy valued by reporters, especially when meeting a source or interviewing someone. Clark, facing away from the door, couldn’t take a good look around at the other patrons without either using his enhanced vision to look through the seats or standing up.

The server approached and cleaned up the dirty dishes. Clark placed his order for a large caramel latte and requested more coffee for Perry, smiling at the server. He remembered rescuing her from a serious car accident shortly after his debut in Metropolis. Clark was glad to see she looked well and healthy.

He found himself musing over how many people he’d helped in the last year and how few he saw again. That was one of the appeals to Metropolis; the likelihood of bumping into someone who’d met Superman was small. Except Lois. One of his few repeat rescues, and thankfully, she hadn’t figured out who was underneath the Suit. Admittedly, her attention had been on Luthor lately, even though she’d claimed to love Superman.

Clark forced his thoughts away from that never-ending bottomless pit. Their last conversation as Superman and Lois would continue to haunt him, and if Superman returned, he would apologise, preferably before she needed rescuing.

Where had Perry gone to? He could easily hear him but couldn’t see him. It sounded like he’d been stopped by an acquaintance, and his laughter carried over the high-backed seats. The server arrived with their drinks, and Clark took a sip as he heard the polite chime of the entrance, signalling a customer had either entered or exited. Clark closed his eyes and savoured the taste of the hot, sweet coffee, appreciating the hum of conversation buzzing around him in the rapidly filling café, even enjoying the polite clinking of cutlery and crockery. He sighed with contentment. He’d missed these sounds of the city a lot more than the sometimes-incessant honking of vehicles.

“Oh!”

Clark’s eyes shot open at the very familiar, very close, startled voice.

“Lois!”

“I’m sorry. I’m here to meet Perry. He’s over there chatting and said he’d be back here in a minute.” Lois still stood, fiddling awkwardly with her purse, looking towards Perry and not at Clark. “I didn’t mean to startle you or intrude. I’m sure I have the time right. Were you just finishing up?” Lois started digging in her purse, and Clark knew she was hunting for her planner. She meticulously wrote all of her appointments down, and while Clark had a sneaking suspicion Perry had arranged for them both to be here at the same time, he didn’t want to scare her away. If he was leaving Metropolis, he wanted to talk to Lois first.

While appreciating the sounds surrounding him, he had intentionally not listened to any of the conversations amid the hum of other noises. It had taken practice, especially when he had first moved to university, to learn what was overhearing a conversation in the normal sense and what was beyond. He’d been sitting there, with his eyes closed, and while he hadn’t jumped, she had startled him. “I just got here. Have a seat. The server is heading here now for your order.”

She hesitated, but stopped rummaging in her purse and took a seat across from him. The awkward silence was broken by the server taking Lois's order before the silence settled between them again. Clark found himself staring at his half-finished coffee, trying to find a way to start asking if she was okay. He wanted to know about the reporters, what had happened after the wedding, and how she was holding up, but he was wary. As much as he wanted to be a friend to Lois, listening to her mourn for her almost-husband wasn't something he was willing to endure at the moment. He was afraid of his reaction too. If she started talking about Luthor, would he panic and have moments of reliving his experience?

"So, how've you been?"

"How are you doing?" Lois asked at the same time.

"I'm okay," he replied.

"You look...well," she said as she dipped her head, tucking an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

Clark focused his hearing on her and was surprised to hear Lois's heartbeat thumping away, not fast enough to suggest that she was scared, but faster than usual. Was she nervous? About him? "Thanks, it's Mom's home cooking and the farm work," he tried to joke.

"Farm work!" Lois exclaimed. "But you were hurt? Why didn't you rest? How are your..." She trailed off, gesturing to his chest.

"Oh, I'm fine." The only topic other than Luthor he would prefer not to discuss: the injuries he had received courtesy of Luthor.

"That's good to hear. Your folks?"

"They're well. Gearing up for the harvest."

Lois nodded as the server arrived with her coffee. Clark took a large slurp while trying to think of what to say next. How did things get so awkward between them? Last week-end, every time she had stopped by, uninvited but welcome, it had felt strange, not awkward. True, he admitted, he hadn't done much chatting, still trying to come to terms with what had happened to him, and Lois had bustled in with the purpose of either feeding him or checking on him, before rushing off again. The last time he'd seen her before leaving for Kansas, they'd argued, and he felt himself blushing as he remembered his cruel words.

"Lois," he began, intending on apologising. At the same moment, she began to speak.

"Let me go first," Lois forged ahead, not giving him a chance to object. "I wanted to apologise for..."

"CK! Lois! What are you guys doing here?" Jimmy's voice rang out over the other sounds in the café as he gleefully walked over towards them. Clark peered around the side of the booth to wave at Jimmy, spotting Jack several paces behind him, and noticed Perry looked startled and annoyed that the two young men were approaching. Perry hastily excused himself from his conversation and hurried over as Jimmy scooted into the seat next to Lois.

"Jimmy! I thought I told you two to meet me in half an hour," Perry bellowed, approaching the table.

"We're done, we've got the place, so we thought we'd head down here early."

Perry responded with a grunt, and Clark could tell he was pleased but still annoyed. Perry had clearly arranged for he and Lois to meet and was not thrilled with the interruption. Neither was Clark, even though it was good to see Jimmy and Jack. As soon as he and Lois got a moment alone, he'd apologise, just as Lois had been trying to do, although he felt like he had more to apologise for. He'd been cruel the last time he'd seen her, and he couldn't shake the remorse over the way he'd spoken to her as Superman.

Jimmy was babbling on about the apartment they'd just rented and was now stressing about finding a job. He did not want to return to handing out flyers, and Jack joked that he could return to his former line of work of thievery. Clark glared at him, eliciting a grin from Jack, as Jimmy continued to talk about the apartment. Once outside the café, Lois started to pull away from the group.

"I should get going."

"You got somewhere to be?" inquired Perry.

Clark noticed that Lois was fiddling with her purse again. "No... I..."

"I've got another meeting in about a half hour. Jack and Jimmy are joining me. I was planning on walking over as the meeting is just past the old Planet building." Without waiting for an answer, Perry began walking, shouting at Jimmy and Jack to follow. Clark shrugged at Lois and followed, grinning when he heard her quickly walking behind to catch up.

"Perry, you said you had a favour to ask?" Clark asked, curious.

"Well, son, I think we're okay now. These two needed a place to live, but it sounds like they've got one..."

"Not for a few weeks, Chief," interrupted Jimmy. "The lady said we could move in at the end of the month, but we've got to prove employment first."

"Yeah, and that's not going so well," Jack added gloomily.

Clark knew where this was going before Perry opened his mouth. “Perry, it’s okay. They can stay with me for a few weeks. I’ll be in Kansas next week, and then I’ll have to figure out what I’m doing.”

“Kansas?” Lois asked. “Weren’t you just there?”

“Dad wants to harvest next week. I said I’d help,” Clark answered with a shrug. “It’s not as though I have something to do here.” He watched as Lois’s cheery expression fell. “Perry, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Get some career advice...”

“Sure, sure, son,” Perry said distractedly as he continued his brisk walk towards the old Planet building. It wasn’t until he arrived at the boarded-up entrance that he slowed his pace, the rest of the group pausing with him.

“I wish they’d just get it over with and tear this place down,” Jimmy stated.

“Yup, too many memories,” Perry said sorrowfully as Clark walked around the barricades, while the others walked up to the graffiti-covered boards that had been placed over what had once been windows and the main entrance.

“Most of them good,” interjected Lois.

“Well, you know, there’s a lesson to be learned in all of this,” Perry began.

Jack laughed and interrupted. “Why am I not surprised?”

Perry glared at Jack. “We should appreciate what we’ve got while we’ve got it.”

Clark sighed as he focused on the ground in front of him. He knew how true that was. Had he thoroughly appreciated his job, his friends, and his friendship with Lois?

“I know I’ve said this before, but I just hate it that Luthor got his way in this one thing,” Perry said as Clark glanced up, the sound of air brakes on a truck close by catching his attention.

“He didn’t! Look!”

Clark turned towards the voice, surprised to see Mr. Stern standing in front of the truck he had heard, and resisted the urge to peer over his glasses to see what was under the tarp on the trailer.

“What is that?” Jack asked as several workers began to detach the tarp.

“Great shades of Elvis,” Perry gasped as the tarp fell to the ground and revealed the large Daily Planet globe that had once hung over the entrance. Clark could hear applause from Lois and several people standing around watching. He

used a touch of his superhearing to catch what Mr. Stern was saying to Perry.

“We’ll start on the building next week, but first I thought we’d announce to the world we’re back in business. I reconsidered your proposal, and I agree with you Mr. White. Metropolis does need the Daily Planet. Besides, one more nail in Lex Luthor’s coffin will suit me fine. I do have some ideas about modernization...”

“Uh, modernization?” Perry queried. Clark chuckled as Perry chased after Mr. Stern, and he then stopped listening on their conversation. He gazed at Lois, who was smiling in delight, staring at the cargo of the trailer. As if she could feel him looking at her, she turned and glanced at him, smiled shyly, and turned away.

“I’ve never seen something so beautiful in my entire life,” Clark blurted out. Then, as he was trying to think of a way to make his statement less awkward, Lois turned, her arms crossed, and smiled at him.

“You never gave up. On the Planet, on your friends, on me.” Lois walked over towards him, still smiling.

He gulped a breath back. This was the closest they’d been since that day in the park, and while the last few weeks had been incredibly difficult, the future suddenly looked a lot brighter. “I couldn’t. You’ve just named probably everything in this world that’s precious to me.” He meant every word.

“I don’t think I’ve ever, will ever, meet anyone quite like you.”

She was so close to him now; he could easily smell her perfume. It was the scent she’d worn when he’d first been partnered with her, a light citrus scent. She’d switched to something heavier, spicier, once she’d become involved with Luthor. He paused, trying to determine exactly what was being said, beyond her words, attempting to shake off the distraction of her perfume and proximity to him. He needed to apologise for abandoning her, for not trying harder to be there for her when she needed someone.

“Lois,” he began, as once again she spoke at the same time.

“No, let me go first,” Lois tried to insist.

“No, no, not this time, Lois.” If this was a continuation from the bistro, he knew Lois would try to apologise. For what, he wasn’t sure, but most of the blame lay with him. “I’m sorry, about a lot of things. I wanted to bring Luthor down, but I never wanted to hurt you. I shouldn’t have said anything about the way I felt towards you. It put you in an incredibly awkward position.”

“No, Clark, I really...”

“No, Lois. Please, let me finish. Luthor was a criminal who needed to be exposed, but had I known how it was going to end...”

“Clark...”

“Lois, I’m sorry Luthor died. If I could have done anything to save him, I would have.” In the dark recesses of his mind, he could feel the memory of the cage starting to creep forth. What no one could realise was that the one person who could have rescued Luthor had almost died at Luthor’s hand minutes before. Clark realised, in that moment in the sunshine with Lois, even after being tortured by Luthor, had he been able to, he would have saved Luthor. The memory of the cage was forced back, and he continued. “I couldn’t say anything to you about what we discovered. I was afraid if he found out...” He couldn’t finish. There was no doubt in his mind that had Luthor suspected Lois knew anything about the investigation into his criminal dealings, she wouldn’t have been left alive.

Lois gently took his hand in hers and squeezed lightly before releasing. “I know, I understand. I want to say I’m sorry for not believing you all those months ago. So much of all of this could have been avoided if I’d have listened to you.”

“Lois, this wasn’t your fault. None of this was.”

“But how did I miss it? Clark, I’m an investigative reporter, and I almost married the biggest criminal in Metropolis! I need to understand...”

“It’s okay, Lois...”

“I haven’t read any of the papers or watched the news. There were reporters camping outside my apartment... I didn’t want to see what they were writing about me. Selfish, I know.”

Clark reached for her hand this time, giving her a comforting caress as she continued.

“The police interviewed me, but when it was obvious I had no idea what Lex was doing, they stopped asking. Jimmy told me some of what you had discovered, but Perry stopped him from saying too much.” She paused, looking down at their joined hands. “I need to know, Clark. Can you...?”

He realised what she was asking and couldn’t deny her. “If you’re sure,” he said warily. It wasn’t that he was reluctant to help her, share the investigation with her; he was glad she was asking him. Rather it was his own tangled relationship with Luthor he was concerned about untangling.

“I’m sure. I need someone who I can trust to explain the truth, without the sensational headlines.”

“Okay.” He would have to keep Superman separated, no idle comments from him about how Superman had discovered this or that, as he had no idea how his still-healing subconscious would react.

“Partner,” she said with a slight grin.

“Partner?” Clark let go of her hand, only just realising he’d continued to gently run his thumb over the back of her hand.

“Well, seeing as the Planet is going to be opening again, I assumed we’d be working together again.” Lois paused briefly, and Clark watched as her smile turned to disappointment. “Unless you have other plans. You had asked Perry for career advice, and I’m being presumptuous to assume you haven’t had other offers already...”

Clark laughed at Lois’s babbling. “Partners,” he interrupted.

“Friends?”

He smiled fully, the dark cloud that had been hanging over him after the memory of the cage dissipating immediately. “Friends.” Clark watched as Lois smiled briefly before she glanced down at the ground for a moment, tucked her hair behind her ear once more, and adjusted her purse strap. Curious, he listened to her heartbeat; its rapid pulse suggested she was still nervous about something.

“There’s something else we need to discuss...” she began.

“Isn’t this great, guys!” Jimmy walked up behind them, interrupting Lois and slinging an arm around Lois’s shoulder. “Hopefully we can all get our jobs back.”

“Yeah, it’s great,” Lois replied with a slight smile, looking at Clark.

Clark noticed the sudden lack of enthusiasm in Lois’s voice and wished Jimmy had waited a few more seconds before interrupting so he could have found out what she was so nervous about. As he tried quickly to think of a way to reassure Lois they’d have chance to talk privately once Jimmy and Jack left, he was distracted by a frantic cry for help. His heart jolted as he heard the panic in the woman’s voice. How could he not answer? Even though he couldn’t fly yet, he could still help. “Um, can you guys excuse me for a second? I have to go... Uh, I’ll be right back.”

As he dashed away, and the last thing he saw was Lois’s crestfallen expression.

* * *

Part 17

Clark jogged around the corner of the Planet building into the familiar alley, full of hope and thankfulness. The Planet

was returning; hopefully he could get his job back, and his friendship with Lois could be salvaged. As he tugged on his shirt buttons to begin the fast change into Superman, he felt an absolute sense of peace settle in him. A few days ago, he had decided to let Superman die; now, as he leapt up the side of the adjacent building, he was delighted to be back.

Thankfully, the victim was only a few blocks away, and he leapt between buildings, hoping his speed would hide his lack of flight from any security cameras on the roofs. Finding the woman, he jumped down into the narrow alley between two buildings.

At his noisy landing, the two men, one holding a woman, another rummaging through her purse, turned and tried to flee. Clark ran towards them, grabbing both of them by their shirts and preventing them from leaving.

“Are you hurt?” he asked the woman. She shook her head no, but he could see the terror in her eyes.

Now he was stuck. He couldn’t fly everyone away, and he didn’t want to announce that Superman’s ability to fly was currently unavailable. He could take the two men towards the street and find a police officer to handle them, but he wasn’t about to leave the woman behind. Spying the railing of an external fire escape, he quickly let the men go while he grabbed a piece of the metal, wrapping one man’s hands up before he had a chance to react to his brief release. He repeated the procedure with the other man, then used another piece of the railing to bind their legs together. Leaving them secured, he offered a hand to the woman, who hadn’t moved from her cowering position by the building’s wall.

A crowd had gathered at the mouth of the alley and Superman, after gathering her purse, escorted the woman into the sunlight. There was a smattering of applause, some hushed and awed whispers of “Superman”—something Clark heard regularly at any rescue that had an audience but still disliked.

An officer approached, and Clark recognized her as one of the regular downtown patrol officers. She called for an ambulance and an extra car once Clark explained there were two men tied up in the alley. When the ambulance arrived for the still-shaken woman, Clark gave his statement, and after cutting the two men free from their restraints so the police could take them to the station, he left, jumping onto the nearest building, the crowd having dispersed already.

Once on the roof, he heaved a sigh of relief, releasing fears he hadn’t realised fully that morning. As he’d landed in the alley a brief moment of fear had almost paralyzed him, imagining the man rummaging through the woman’s purse to pull out a chunk of glowing green Kryptonite. Until this morning, he hadn’t considered Superman’s return, so the idea of running into a criminal who possessed the one

thing that could kill him hadn’t crossed his mind. Despite that one moment of panic, he’d felt good, comfortable, his usual self. As he leapt to the next rooftop, he felt gravity shift below him, and without a conscious thought, he began soaring over the buildings. He picked up speed quickly and knew the sound of his flight was reverberating through downtown Metropolis. He laughed in delight as he sped high over the city, intending to head straight for Kansas.

He stopped suddenly as he remembered Lois’s expression as they’d been interrupted, and he cringed. He needed to go back; he’d stop by the farmhouse later today.

He returned quietly to the alley behind the Planet and quickly changed back into his normal clothes. As he turned the corner, he stopped and observed. Perry and Mr. Stern were talking, or more accurately, Mr. Stern was talking while Perry tried to interject, as they stood by the Planet’s boarded up entrance. Jack and Jimmy were standing at a safe distance from Perry, talking about the possibility of getting their old jobs back and discussing moving into their new apartment.

Clark sighed as he watched Lois. She was off to one side, staring absently at the graffiti on the boards, her arms crossed, her hands gently rubbing her elbows. It wasn’t a nervous habit—Clark knew those very well—but something she did when she was cold or contemplating something. In this fine weather, she couldn’t be cold, so what was she thinking about? She’d been trying to tell him something before they’d been interrupted, and then he’d disappeared, leaving her with that crestfallen and confused expression. One he’d caused far too often with his disappearances. Maybe someday he’d be able to tell her why, but as much as he wanted to now, he didn’t dare. Everything was still too fresh and raw: his declaration of love, her refusal, her almost marriage, their fights and disagreements over the last few months. Neither of them had brought up his admission of love, and part of him hoped she’d forgotten about it because he did not want to mess up their rekindled friendship so soon. Hopefully someday they would be solid enough to handle his secret, both of them, but right now was the time to build back their friendship. Determined to make things right, he stepped out of the shadows and walked towards Lois.

* * *

Perry’s head was beginning to spin. This was too much for one day! He’d set up an appointment with Mr. Stern the previous day, hoping to beg a favour and find jobs for Jack and Jimmy, never imagining this turn of events. The Planet was reopening! He would be the editor once more, and he was delighted, yet all this talk of modernization was just too much at the moment. He’d chased after Mr. Stern, trying to ask questions, but had received little clarification. Instead,

he now had a meeting scheduled for Monday morning with Mr. Stern and the various entities that would be involved in the physical rebuilding, as well as the rebuilding of the employees and board of directors. He'd also had a vague description of what exactly modernization meant, though he hadn't understood much more than the upgraded printing equipment and new computers.

"Look, uh, Mr. Stern, I appreciate what you're doing..."

"I'm not doing it for you. As I said, I rethought about what you said, and while it does irk me that Luthor killed the best newspaper Metropolis had to offer, there's more to it. It was a profitable business before Luthor started meddling. I've had words with several of the advertisers that abandoned the Daily Planet, and they're eager to return, thanks to yourself and those young men." Mr. Stern gestured towards Jimmy and Jack, as he took a rare break in his nonstop, one-sided conversation with Perry. "Where is the other journalist? Kent?"

"Uh, I'm sure he'll be right back..."

"As I was saying, the globe is here to announce to the world that we're back in business, but that's just a start. I need headlines. How fast can you get something together?"

"To print?" Perry asked.

"Yes. While it will take some time for the Daily Planet to be printing in-house, we can still print newspapers. We will start with a weekly edition and add more as you build up your staff again. They can write at home, submit their stories, and we can have them printed remotely."

Perry couldn't hide his delight, shaking Mr. Stern's hand enthusiastically. "Yes, of course. We'll get started right away! Is there someone I should be talking to about hiring the old staff back?"

"Yes, I'll give you her contact information. She will want to conduct interviews with anyone being hired, make sure we get off to a good start."

That startled Perry. There had been a few people in the newsroom that he wouldn't have hired back, but most of the journalists had worked hard to get where they were and were good employees. Those that used the Daily Planet as a stepping stone to the next step in their journalistic career never shirked, and while he was always sad to see those folks go, he never begrudged their drive. The idea of having to rehire his old team and sending them through an interview process bothered him. "Now, Mr. Stern, you aren't going to interview all the previous staff, are you? Some of these folks have worked for me, and the Planet, for most of, if not all of, their careers! They might not take too kindly to being asked back and then interviewed."

"Of course not. Submit a list of those that you want to rehire, and we'll take it from there." Mr. Stern looked down at his watch and then over to where Lois, Jimmy and Jack were standing. "I want the Daily Planet's first headline to be the exclusive on Luthor's part in the destruction of the Planet and of his downfall."

Perry glanced over, spotting Clark as he emerged from the alley and rejoined the others. "Of course, I'll get Clark Kent to..."

"Yes, yes, and make sure there's something in there from you. That young lad, the one that was falsely arrested for the bombing, I want a piece from him too. We'll have the story no one else does."

"Well, now, Mr. Stern. Jack there isn't a reporter..."

"Nonsense. If he can't write it and it can't be edited, then interview him for his story."

Perry began to rub his hands in excitement, already seeing the various headlines and different angles they could report on. "We can do a Lane and Kent investigation series," he gleefully proposed.

"Are you sure? Is she up to the task?"

Perry bristled at Mr. Stern's tone. "Lois is one of the best investigative reporters I have ever worked with..."

"I'm not denying her skill, I have read her work, but she was to marry Luthor. Could she be impartial and report on his demise?"

Perry hesitated, not because he doubted Lois's skills, but he wasn't sure how much to say to Mr. Stern. He was sure Lois had been blinded about Lex but was now seeing him for who, and what, he had been. He wouldn't ask her to write anything personal, of course, unless she wanted to, but for Lois to work on this series would be a great way for her to work out her questions and start to heal after her ordeal. Hopefully having Lois and Clark working together would repair their friendship and their working relationship, though as he glanced in their direction and spotted the shy looks they were giving each other when the other wasn't looking, he didn't think that would be something they'd have to work too hard on.

"Mr. Stern, Lois and Clark are two of the finest reporters I've ever worked with. How they come up with half of their stories is beyond me. Sometimes I'm not sure I want to know. Assigning them both to write a series on Luthor will guarantee this paper prints the exclusive no one else will be able to top. Trust me, Lois is ready to write this piece."

"Well, I'll leave it in your capable hands. Now if you'll excuse me, I have another meeting to attend."

"Uh, one more request, if I may," Perry asked.

* * *

Clark watched as Perry shook Mr. Stern's hand, and the two parted ways. He'd resisted the urge to eavesdrop on their conversation as he knew Perry would let them know about anything that pertained to them. Watching as Perry walked over to join them, wearing a huge grin, Clark trusted it was good news.

"Well, Chief, good news?" he asked.

"You got that right, son!"

Lois clapped her hands in delight. "What's the plan?"

"They're going to repair the building, update some old equipment, and we'll be back in business!"

"All right!" exclaimed Jimmy. "Uh, how long's that going to take? I mean, I'll be glad to be back, but I need to find some work soon."

Clark couldn't help but grin at Jack. While Jimmy's frequent bouts of exuberance and downheartedness abounded, Jack could be sullen when he was unhappy and even tempered, sometimes sarcastic, when he was in a good mood. Jimmy was almost walking on air with excitement, and Jack's body language and expression remained neutral. At Clark's grin, Jack broke into a brief, small smile, before commenting.

"Awesome, I can go back to errand boy. Thrilling. But he's right. We need an income now. A job in a few weeks won't feed us."

Perry frowned in Jack's direction at the initial sarcasm before breaking out into a smile. "Well, you are both going to be meeting your new foreman this afternoon." Clark laughed at Jack's and Jimmy's shocked expressions as Perry continued. "The construction crew that will be working on the building is hiring. Mr. Stern will contact the construction manager, and you'll be heading to their main office this afternoon to get all the paperwork and safety stuff taken care of."

"All right!" Jimmy hollered as he and Jack high-fived, Jack, Clark noted, less enthusiastically than Jimmy.

"I'll walk you two over there now, but I need a minute with Clark and Lois," Perry asked. Jack and Jimmy said their goodbyes and wandered towards the truck, still preparing to unload its cargo.

Clark was surprised and a little concerned to see Perry's expression turn serious. He glanced at Lois, who still wore a smile, but he could see her eyes reflect some concern also.

"What's going on, Perry?" she asked. "We're getting our jobs back, aren't we?"

It wasn't concern in her eyes, it was a bit of panic, Clark realised. What was she panicked for? She had been one of the best reporters there and had years of seniority on him. She would be the first one hired back, he was sure.

"Yes, Lane and Kent will continue their investigative reporting, starting immediately. Mr. Stern wants to publish a weekly paper, the first edition coming out a week from today. He wants the headline story to be the exclusive on Luthor's demise."

Clark nodded as he heard Lois gasp imperceptibly. Perry, not noticing Lois's reaction, continued. "This week's edition will include the investigation we did to uncover Luthor's involvement with the explosion at the Planet. We'll run a series, so I need you two to find out everything you can about any criminal activity that's linked to Luthor."

Lois had fallen quiet, arms crossed, and Clark watched as Perry gently set his hand on Lois's shoulder. "Lois, honey, this is a big ask, I know. If you want out, I understand. This edition will still need regular news stories as well..."

"No, Perry. It's fine."

"You sure?"

"Yes. I need to do this."

Clark understood that statement and was relieved that Lois would be doing this story with him. Luthor had controlled, manipulated, and hurt both of them, and working to expose him would hopefully answer questions and help them heal. As he started to think about the different stories and angles they could write, he groaned.

"Clark?" Asked Lois.

"I promised my parents..."

"You were going home to help them this week."

"Well, uh, I'll leave you two to figure it out. I need something by Thursday," Perry stated as he began to walk away, before stopping and turning back. "Run this by Henderson too; get some quotes, whatever information you can. If he clams up on you, remind him we practically gave him Luthor." With a wink, Perry walked towards Jack and Jimmy, and all three left.

"Well, partner, we've got all weekend."

Clark savoured the word "partner" as Lois spoke it, his heart skipping a beat or two in delight. He had his job back, he could fly again, and he was once again partnered with Lois Lane. The last few months, especially the last week, had been a horrible nightmare, but he'd survived, they'd survived. It was a chance to begin again, and he wasn't going to take it for granted.

* * *

She gasped when she saw Clark sitting in the booth. He'd looked so relaxed, his eyes closed, leaning back in the booth, his fingers tapping a beat on the side of the coffee cup he was holding the only indication he wasn't asleep.

"Lois," he exclaimed as his eyes opened.

"I'm sorry. I'm here to meet Perry. He's over there chatting and said he'd be back here in a minute." She hadn't seen him since their argument last weekend, and she began nervously fidgeting with her purse, looking for her planner, while trying to surreptitiously check to see how his burns were healing. "I didn't mean to startle you or intrude. I'm sure I have the time right. Were you just finishing up?"

"I just got here. Have a seat. The server is heading here now for your order."

For a moment, she hesitated. She was sure she had the time right for her meeting with Perry; he'd told her to take a seat while he finished up and hadn't mentioned the time being wrong. Perry had to have arranged for them both to be here together. Resigning herself to having a conversation with Clark now, she put her purse down and took a seat. Her coffee ordered, she fiddled with a napkin, wondering what to say, not wanting to mention that she'd talked to his mother a few times over the week or to discuss that she'd been fired from LNN.

"How are you doing?"

"So, how've you been?" Clark asked at the same time.

"I'm okay," he replied.

"You look...well," she said, immediately wondering how he would take that. Since the wedding, she'd shoved her realisation of her feelings for Clark deep down, trying to cope with everything else that had been happening. Now, faced with him in a relaxed environment for the first time in months, she felt her heart flutter a little as she allowed herself to appreciate the man in front of her.

"Thanks, it's Mom's home cooking and the farm work," he joked.

"Farm work!" Lois exclaimed. "But you were hurt? Why didn't you rest? How are your..." She gestured to his chest as her voice trailed off. Just because she couldn't see any injuries didn't mean he had healed completely.

"Oh, I'm fine."

Lois almost scowled at his brush off but managed to keep a neutral expression. "That's good to hear. Your folks?"

"They're well. Gearing up for the harvest."

Lois nodded as the server arrived with her coffee, and she then took a cautious sip while Clark slurped his own drink. The lack of easy conversation was awkward, and

Lois longed for their easy banter. All week, she'd had bouts of blaming herself for everything that had happened, from accepting Lex's proposal, to pushing her friends away and taking for granted everything she had had. Clark had tried to warn her more than once, subtly and not so subtly, about Lex, and she'd ignored him, which had resulted in all of this mess. It was her fault that Clark had been hurt, presumably by Lex.

"Lois," Clark began.

"Let me go first," Lois forged ahead, not wanting him to go first. "I wanted to apologise for..."

"CK! Lois! What are you guys doing here?" Lois groaned as she heard Jimmy's voice over the general hubbub in the bistro. He had an incredible knack of showing up at the worst possible time. She watched as Perry quickly ended his conversation with his acquaintance, confirming her suspicion that he had set this up so she and Clark could talk.

"Jimmy! I thought I told you two to meet me in half an hour," Perry bellowed as he approached them.

"We're done, we've got the place, so we thought we'd head down here early."

Lois watched Clark as Jack and Jimmy began to chat, not paying much attention to what they were talking about. He had been about to say something too, and she wanted to know what it was. As the group talked and ate, she was flooded with memories of that day in the park, as well as those that had come to mind as she'd realised she couldn't marry Lex. And as they finished up, paid the bill, and exited the cafe, she wondered whether Clark was going to try to make some excuse for what he'd said, retract his feelings for her, maybe. He'd tried to warn her about Lex; had that been his last-ditch attempt to stop her from marrying the man? Feeling her face heat up from embarrassment, Lois began to pull away from the group.

"I should get going," she said, turning her head in the opposite direction once they were outside the cafe.

"You got somewhere to be?" inquired Perry.

"No... I..." she stammered as she noticed Clark watching her.

"I've got another meeting in about a half hour. Jack and Jimmy are joining me. I was planning on walking over as the meeting is just past the old Planet building." Without waiting for an answer, Perry began walking, shouting at Jimmy and Jack to follow. Clark shrugged at Lois before following. Despite fearing the worst, she wanted to know what Clark had been about to say. Curiosity won, and she hurried to catch them.

"I'll be in Kansas next week, and then I'll have to figure out what I'm doing," she heard Clark say as she caught up to them.

"Kansas?" Lois asked. "Weren't you just there?"

"Dad wants to harvest next week. I said I'd help," Clark answered with a shrug. "It's not as though I have something to do here."

She felt her smile waver at the thought he'd be gone again so soon; hopefully they could talk in private before he left.

"Perry, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. Get some career advice..."

Again, another reminder that this reunion was only temporary, she thought. They all needed jobs, but where would that be? She had enough money saved to wait a few months, maybe do some freelance work, and work on her novel, but what about Clark? With the Planet gone, would he move to find work?

In no time, they'd arrived at the old Daily Planet building. Lois hadn't been down here since the explosion aftermath. At the time, it had been too painful, then she had been caught up in wedding plans and her new job.

"I wish they'd just get it over with and tear this place down," Jimmy stated gloomily.

"Yup, too many memories," Perry said sorrowfully.

"Most of them good," interjected Lois.

"Well, you know, there's a lesson to be learned in all of this," Perry began.

Jack laughed and interrupted. "Why am I not surprised?"

Perry glared at Jack. "We should appreciate what we've got while we've got it."

Yup, Lois agreed silently as she ran a hand over the concrete pillar at the entrance. She'd walked through these doors for years without ever truly appreciating what this building, and the people inside it, meant to her.

"I know I've said this before, but I just hate it that Luthor got his way in this one thing," Perry said with a touch of anger.

"He didn't! Look!"

Lois turned in surprise at the voice, recognizing Mr. Stern once she saw him, standing in front of a truck with something large on the trailer.

"What is that?" Jack asked as several workers began to detach the tarp.

"Great shades of Elvis," Perry gasped as the tarp fell to the ground and revealed the large Daily Planet globe that

had once hung over the entrance. Lois couldn't hide her delight, and she clapped along with several others.

"We'll start on the building next week, but first I thought we'd announce to the world we're back in business. I reconsidered your proposal, and I agree with you Mr. White. Metropolis does need the Daily Planet. Besides, one more nail in Lex Luthor's coffin will suit me fine. I do have some ideas about modernization..."

"Uh, modernization?" Perry queried, as he followed Mr. Stern. Lois, still smiling, turned to see Clark gazing at her.

"I've never seen something so beautiful in my entire life," Clark blurted out.

For a moment she wondered who, or what, he was talking about, before deciding it didn't matter. Meeting his eyes, she gently crossed her arms and walked towards him. "You never gave up. On the Planet, on your friends, on me."

"I couldn't. You've just named probably everything in this world that's precious to me."

Her heart leapt at his words, and she hoped he still meant every word he had said to her in the park. "I don't think I've ever, will ever, meet anyone quite like you." She was close enough to him she could reach for his hand if she wanted. Nervousness kept her from doing so.

"Lois," he began, as once again she spoke at the same time.

"No, let me go first," Lois tried to insist.

"No, no, not this time. Lois. I'm sorry, about a lot of things, I wanted to bring Luthor down, but I never wanted to hurt you. I shouldn't have said anything about the way I felt towards you. It put you in an incredibly awkward position."

"No, Clark, I really..."

"No, Lois. Please, let me finish. Luthor was a criminal who needed to be exposed, but had I known how it was going to end..."

"Clark..."

"Lois, I'm sorry Luthor died. If I could have done anything to save him, I would have." He paused before continuing. "I couldn't say anything to you about what we discovered. I was afraid if he found out..."

It took a moment before she fully understood what Clark was hinting at, and she realised how afraid he had been for her safety. She also realised he was right; Lex wouldn't have hesitated had he realised she knew about his criminal activities. She could see the fear in Clark's eyes, and she gently took his hand in hers, trying to reassure him she was okay, before releasing him. "I know, I understand. I want to

say I'm sorry for not believing you all those months ago. So much of all of this could have been avoided if I'd have listened to you."

"Lois, this wasn't your fault. None of this was."

"But how did I miss it? Clark, I'm an investigative reporter, and I almost married the biggest criminal in Metropolis! I need to understand..."

"It's okay, Lois..."

"I haven't read any of the papers or watched the news. There were reporters camping outside my apartment... I didn't want to see what they were writing about me. Selfish, I know." She'd been so afraid to read what others had written, knowing that this could ruin her reputation as a reporter. She felt Clark's hand enclose hers, giving her a comforting caress before she continued.

"The police interviewed me, but when it was obvious I had no idea what Lex was doing, they stopped asking. Jimmy told me some of what you had discovered, but Perry stopped him from saying too much." She paused, looking down at their joined hands. "I need to know, Clark. Can you...?" She trailed off, unsure how to ask, wondering if it would be too hard for him to tell her himself, especially as he'd been hurt in the process.

"If you're sure."

She could hear the wariness in his voice and hoped it wasn't reluctance. "I'm sure. I need someone who I can trust to explain the truth, without the sensational headlines."

"Okay."

"Partner," she said with a slight grin, trying to lighten the mood.

"Partner?"

She missed the warmth and comfort of his touch as he let go of her hand. "Well, seeing as the Planet is going to be opening again, I assumed we'd be working together again." Lois paused briefly, suddenly unsure. Maybe she had no right to assume he'd want to work with her again. "Unless you have other plans. You had asked Perry for career advice, and I'm being presumptuous to assume you haven't had other offers already..."

Clark laughed before agreeing. "Partners."

"Friends?" she asked hesitantly.

He smiled, one of his full smiles. "Friends."

She felt her heart skip again. "There's something else we need to discuss..."

"Isn't this great, guys!" Jimmy walked up behind them, interrupting Lois, and slung an arm around her shoulder. "Hopefully we can all get our jobs back."

"Yeah, it's great," Lois replied with a slight smile, looking at Clark, frustrated that she'd been interrupted again.

"Um, can you guys excuse me for a second? I have to go... Uh, I'll be right back."

As he dashed away, Lois' heart fell. He always did this, running off without an explanation or with a poor one. Had he known what she'd been about to say to him? There was only one subject they hadn't really talked about, and while standing in front of the Planet wasn't the ideal spot, it would have been nice to take a walk, find somewhere a little more private, and have that conversation. She sighed and listened as Jack asked her a question.

"Who's that guy?"

"Mr. Stern."

"You know him?"

"Not personally. I've met him several times, mostly large events, charity functions, and the like. I interviewed him once, almost two years ago now, for a story." She frowned as Jack merely nodded. While Jimmy's constant barging in on conversations and sometimes complete oblivious nature drove her nuts at times, Jack's sometimes sullen, keep-to-himself, flying-under-the-radar personality could be equally as annoying. "Why do you ask?"

She listened as Jack told her about a mysterious phone call he'd received, warning Perry to stop trying to sell the Planet to other possible buyers. After everything Jack had been through recently, she didn't blame him for being a little wary. She reassured Jack that Mr. Stern, while abrupt in nature, was a sincere and honest businessman, unlike their recent experience. Jack relaxed a little, content to let Jimmy babble about possibly getting their jobs back. In the distance, she heard the unmistakable sound of Superman in flight. Remembering their last awkward conversation and grimacing a bit, she looked up to see if she could spot the superhero. "I'm not done with you either," she muttered, wondering if he could hear her. She would need to contact him, sooner rather than when she found herself in trouble, and apologise.

Clark reappeared from the alley as Perry finished up with Mr. Stern. Once the group was together, Perry announced the Planet would be back in business as soon as repairs were completed. Lois was thrilled, especially as it would take several weeks to be up and running. By then another, or several other, scandals would have happened, and the story involving her almost marriage to Lex would have fallen from recent memory. Hopefully she could find a story that

had nothing to do with Lex to sink her investigative teeth into over the next few weeks, and the first paper would run with a solid story uncovering another crime in the city.

“What’s going on, Perry?” she asked as Perry essentially dismissed Jack and Jimmy, his tone turning serious. “We’re getting our jobs back, aren’t we?” There was a moment of panic as she wondered if Mr. Stern perhaps didn’t want her back on the reporting team.

“Yes, Lane and Kent will continue their investigative reporting, starting immediately. Mr. Stern wants to publish a weekly paper, the first edition coming out a week from today. He wants the headline story to be the exclusive on Luthor’s demise.”

At first, Lois felt a wave of relief that she would be rehired and that she and Clark would continue as partners. However, the idea of plunging straight in to do an investigation into Lex made her gasp involuntarily.

“This week’s edition will include the investigation we did to uncover Luthor’s involvement with the explosion at the Planet. We’ll run a series, so I need you two to find out everything you can about any criminal activity that’s linked to Luthor.”

She felt sick. She wanted to find out what happened, but privately, with a friend, not as a reporter, and not in a way that would, once more have her name linked with Lex. She felt Perry gently set his hand on her shoulder and forced herself to look at him.

“Lois, honey, this is a big ask, I know. If you want out, I understand. This edition will still need regular news stories as well...”

“No, Perry. It’s fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. I need to do this.” It wasn’t the first article she wanted printed with her byline, but she knew that working with Clark would be beneficial to both of them. Perhaps she could add some insight that didn’t include details on her relationship with Lex, and she could be there for Clark as he would have to face whatever he had been through last week.

“Clark?” asked Lois with concern as she heard him groan.

“I promised my parents...”

“You were going home to help them this week,” she finished for him, remembering what he’d said earlier.

“Well, uh, I’ll leave you two to figure it out. I need something by Thursday,” Perry stated as he began to walk away before stopping and turning back. “Run this by Henderson too; get some quotes, whatever information you can.

If he clams up on you, remind him we practically gave him Luthor.” With a wink, Perry walked towards Jack and Jimmy, and all three left.

“Well, partner, we’ve got all weekend,” she said as lightheartedly as she could, trying to lighten her mood. He grinned at her as they walked back the way they had come. “My Jeep is parked near the café.”

“Are you hungry?” Clark asked.

Lois was, but she wasn’t in the mood to return to the café. Perry had reminded her, with his comment about Henderson, that she needed to go to the precinct and claim her bags that had been at LexCorp Tower. She’d put it off all week, not wanting to deal with it, but now that they had to go to the precinct anyways, she may as well take care of it, with Clark there as moral support. “How about a hot dog?” she asked as she spotted the regular street vendor around the corner.

Back at the Jeep, hot dogs devoured, Lois proposed they go to the station. She explained to Clark that she had to go regardless but was reluctant to tell him why. She dug around in her purse for her keys and shakily put the key in the lock of the Jeep. She’d barely opened the door when she felt Clark’s arms engulf her, and she fell eagerly into his embrace. Neither of them said anything for several minutes, Lois trying to calm herself enough to not burst into tears, while at the same time pushing back the panic she had felt since Perry announced the line of their work for the next several weeks. Eventually, Clark loosened his hug, and she stepped out of his embrace.

“Are you okay?”

No, she wanted to say. “Here,” Lois said instead as she handed him the keys. “You drive, I’ll explain.” If they were writing this piece, she had to tell him what was going on. As Clark started the Jeep and reversed out of the parking space, Lois began telling him about the last week. She started with the reporters harassing her outside of her house, her fear that her reputation as a reporter would be ruined by what was being written and said in the media. Her experience of being fired from LNN came tumbling out next, the frustration that Lex had contrived the termination the morning of their wedding and that despite his death, the termination had stood. There was nothing her one ally in HR had been able to do, and she wasn’t eager enough to return to LNN to pursue legal action. Finally, she talked about the shock of watching Lex die. It was a topic she hadn’t broached with anyone, but had relived at least once every night in her nightmares. It haunted her that Lex had chosen to die rather than face the consequences of his criminal actions, most of which she was sure they hadn’t uncovered yet.

Clark hadn't interrupted her throughout her monologue, and by the end she was crying, not the sobbing or hysterics she had felt the night of her almost wedding, but hot, slow tears that cascaded down her face as she tried to wipe them away. In the midst of her tears, she had noticed Clark pull over and park, and now that she had stopped speaking, he handed her a tissue. She wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and hesitantly glanced at Clark. The compassion she saw in him almost started the waterworks again, but there was something else in his expression. Was it guilt?

"Thanks Clark, for listening. I've not told anyone most of this. I mean, Perry knows some, my mother knows some, and Mar... I've talked to one or two others..." She'd almost let it slip she'd been calling his mother. She wasn't sure how he'd take it that she'd been trying to find out how he was doing but at the same time had desperately wanted someone to talk to. Martha, even though the conversations had been brief, had been able to calm her, reassure her, especially when the reporters waiting to ambush her had made her feel like the walls of her apartment were closing in on her. "If you don't want to write this story with me, I understand. How can I be expected to write a story about a man who completely manipulated me and played me for a fool, and be taken seriously? I wouldn't want your name to be dragged down too."

"Lois," he began as he grabbed her hand. "I couldn't imagine writing this story with anyone else. Why don't we deal with your belongings at the precinct, find out if Henderson is around, and then take it from there."

She smiled weakly at him as he put the Jeep in gear, joining the building early afternoon traffic. As they drove, she inspected the damage to her makeup, carefully touching it up after digging in her purse for her mascara. Once they arrived at the precinct, the evidence of her tears was almost nonexistent, except her eyes were a little redder than usual. Parking was scarce, so she suggested Clark drop her off at the entrance, and she'd start dealing with her bags while he found a parking spot.

She stood in line somewhat patiently, waiting for her turn, trying to see if she recognized any of the officers wandering around. Once at the desk, she informed the officer who she was and why she was there. Another officer recognized her and explained she'd get the bags and would return right away. Lois tried to object, saying she didn't want the bags, she just wanted whatever paperwork she needed to so the contents could be donated or disposed of. Frustrated, she shifted from foot to foot as she waited, trying not to imagine that the eyes of the people in the waiting area were all watching her. Eventually, even though she rationalised it hadn't been that long of a wait, another familiar face emerged.

"Lois?"

"Henderson! Can you help me? I just want to sign whatever paperwork I need to so I can get rid of those bags. I don't want them; I don't want to see them. Then, Clark and I have some questions for you."

"Clark?" Henderson asked. "He's here?"

Lois became annoyed as Henderson started to look past her into the waiting area for Clark. "No, he's outside, parking my Jeep. Apparently there are no parking spaces out there... Hey!" She exclaimed, as without a word, Henderson took off through the entrance doors.

"Ms. Lane?" Lois turned and was faced with her bags. Letting out a growl of frustration, she decided not to follow Henderson to see what was so urgent, instead pasting a smile on her face as she faced the officer and asked for the release forms.

* * *

Part 18

"Inspector? She's here."

Henderson looked up from the pages of documents spread out on the tables at the officer who had interrupted them. "Who is?"

"Ms. Lane. You left instructions to be notified when she arrived."

Right, he remembered now, he had. His last conversation with her had left him concerned for her wellbeing and he'd left himself a reminder for this evening to stop by if she hadn't come in for her belongings. He excused himself from the rest of the team, still working on the Luthor case, and walked to the front desk. He spotted her, or at least the back of her, as she nervously shifted from one foot to another, looking at the waiting room full of people. Henderson sighed. The combination of Metropolis's possible biggest crime lord dead and Superman's disappearance had resulted in a slew of petty thieves crawling out of the woodwork. For now, he was thankful major crime hadn't quickly escalated, but he knew it wouldn't be long before the various gangs were competing to fill Luthor's void.

"Lois," he called loudly. As she turned to glare at him, he could see the fire had returned to her eyes, a good sign that she was recovering from her ordeal, and he was pleased and relieved to see she was looking well.

"Henderson! Can you help me? I just want to sign whatever paperwork I need to so I can get rid of those bags. I don't want them; I don't want to see them. Then, Clark and I have some questions for you."

“Clark? He’s here?” Henderson listened long enough to hear Lois complain about parking and that Kent was driving her Jeep before he raced through the precinct doors. He stopped, looking about, trying to spot Kent or the silver Jeep, hoping Lane hadn’t followed him outside. Henderson spotted Kent strolling towards him, smiling. Part of his mind recognized that Kent looked good, with no signs of the burns he had received, but he approached Kent with a sense of urgency rather than relief.

“Clark, what are you doing here?”

“I came with Lois, and then we were wondering if we could ask you some questions.”

“Not here. You can’t come inside.” Even as he spoke the words, he wondered how ridiculous he would sound if he was wrong.

Kent frowned. “Why?” he asked as he took another step forward.

Henderson reached his hand out and placed it on Kent’s chest, a motion he had done hundreds of times to discourage a person from moving forward, a motion that didn’t put any real pressure on the person but was instead a sign of warning. Kent stopped and looked down at Henderson’s hand, perplexed. Shocked at his own action, Henderson snatched his hand back. This was the most powerful being on the planet, his gentle warning wouldn’t discourage Kent from doing anything he didn’t want to. Instead, Henderson turned and began to walk away from the precinct, away from the people smoking, waiting for rides, and hanging around at the entrance, relieved as Kent followed.

“Look, Clark, you can’t go in there. You’ll have to trust me on this one.”

“Is it Lois? Is everything okay?”

“She’s fine.”

“What’s going on, Bill?”

When they were speaking in a professional capacity, Kent always called him Inspector or Henderson. At some point over the last year, Henderson had told Kent to use his name when they weren’t on the clock, but Kent rarely used it. Even when they ran into each other at various events, Kent continued to not use his first name. He was never offended by it; he understood habit and comfort levels. To hear it now was disconcerting, especially as he still wasn’t completely positive Kent was Superman. Henderson paused for a long moment. If Kent was Superman, he’d taken great pains to keep his alter ego secret, and Henderson had no desire to unearth that secret or have his suspicions confirmed, but he couldn’t risk Kent walking near whatever

that cage was made of and reacting in the precinct with hundreds of witnesses.

“It’s in there. You can’t go in there.”

At Kent’s look of utter confusion, Henderson knew he couldn’t be vague. He had to spit it out and hope he wasn’t wildly off in his suspicions.

Very quietly, he reluctantly whispered, “The cage.”

Instantly, Henderson received his answer as Kent went white, his eyes widened, and he staggered a step, before regaining control. He watched as Kent’s face reacted, he assumed in fear of the cage, not from his revelation, before being schooled back to a neutral position. As he’d done many times over the last week, Henderson wondered what Luthor had done to Superman, to Kent, to cause him injury and to elicit such strong reactions in a man who always seemed to have a firm hold on his composure.

Kent turned to face him, concern and worry etched into his expression, and Henderson could see he was struggling with what to say. “Do you know the old brick city hall building, the original? It was converted into apartments about twenty years ago. I live there. Tonight, say 1 a.m., could you ask Superman to meet me on the roof? I’ll explain everything.”

Bill watched as Kent nodded numbly while more colour returned to his face. “Go get the Jeep. I’ll let Lois know you are waiting for her.”

As Clark turned to walk away, he stopped and turned back. “Uh, we were wanting to talk to you about the Luthor case, get some quotes.”

“Quotes?”

“Yes. We’ll need something for the Planet’s headline next week.”

Henderson beamed at Kent’s words; he couldn’t help himself. “That’s good to hear, Clark. Give me about an hour or so and I’ll call. You’ll be...?”

“Home, just call my home number. We won’t be working out of the office for a while yet.”

Henderson nodded and returned to the precinct, slipping into through the rear entrance, the one he’d snuck Superman in one week ago. He shook his head as the events from that day began to fall into place. Kent hadn’t been missing, and Luthor had imprisoned Superman. He still didn’t know why Luthor had tried to kill Superman, but he doubted Luthor had known the truth. If he had, there was no doubt in Henderson’s mind that Kent wouldn’t be alive. Pushing his new knowledge aside, he informed an officer that he was unavailable to meet with Lane and to let her know

her partner was waiting in her vehicle, before rejoining his team.

* * *

“Great, we go down to the precinct to talk to Henderson, and he’s suddenly too busy to talk. Except to you. For you, he bolted out of the building, but he has no time for me.” Lois realised she was grumbling but had no urge to stop. Henderson running away from her and then suddenly being unavailable was frustrating. She’d claimed her bags, filled with clothes suitable for a honeymoon, signed them over for donation, and waited for Henderson and Clark to join her. Instead, she’d been informed that Henderson was unavailable and Clark was waiting for her in the Jeep. She’d left the precinct, spotted the Jeep immediately, and after climbing in the passenger seat, had given Clark the silent treatment long enough for them to get onto one of the main roads heading downtown.

“Lois, he said he’d call,” Clark said quietly.

“Oh? He’d call? Is that what he had to run and tell you? Is there some big nasty truth about Lex that you both don’t want me to know, because trust me, I’m ready for just about anything now. Well, what was so urgent that he had to tell you?”

“It’s... I can’t...”

“Was it about the investigation?” she prompted.

“Please, Lois...”

She stared at him as he broke off, realisation dawning on her. It had to have been about whatever happened between Clark and Lex, and he was clearly traumatised by the memory. She remembered seeing him that night, shocked at his injuries, frustrated because no one would tell her what had happened. In the days immediately following, she’d seen the fear, witnessed the panic attacks, and through their heated exchanges, heard his un-Clark-like frustration and anger slip out. She wouldn’t push any further now, but someday...

Someday? Would she want to hear someday how someone she had been willing to marry had treated her best friend? Trying to settle her restless stomach as her imagination began to run wild, she placed a hand on Clark’s knee, trying to be reassuring. “It’s okay, Clark. I understand.”

There was several minutes of silence, and Lois realised she had no idea where they were going. Clark was driving, and she had assumed he had a destination in mind. “Where are we going?” She laughed at his startled look. He clearly had just been driving and not paying attention either. “Why don’t we go to my place, start figuring out what we have and what we need to write this story?”

“Sure, that sounds good.” Clark turned the Jeep.

“We still need to talk to Henderson though,” Lois said cautiously, unsure how Clark would react. “I mean, we have enough for a good start, but we’ll have to come back and... Hey, where are we going?”

Clark had turned the Jeep sharply, exiting the main road. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “Henderson said he’d call, but he’s going to call my number. We’ll have to go to my place.”

“Oh, that’s fine.” Lois didn’t mind. She’d seen far too much of her apartment in the last week, and it would be nice to be somewhere else, especially Clark’s. It would be like the last few weeks hadn’t happened, working together in his living room.

Once at his apartment, Clark made some coffee, and Lois busied herself with her notepad, digging around in her purse for one of the half-dozen pencils she knew were in there somewhere. She could feel her heart hammering away in nervousness, and judging by the complete attention Clark was giving to making and serving the coffee, she suspected he was feeling a little unsure too.

They sat at the table, in the same spots as they had earlier that week. Lois remembered how Clark had flinched when she reached for his hand and how they’d ended up fighting. She knew they would be treading on some raw territory with their investigation and series of articles, which involved both of them being hurt, physically and emotionally. How did Clark want to proceed? Would it be business only, or would he want to talk first? He had been so reluctant to tell her anything about what had happened to him, she couldn’t see that changing. But how much did she want to tell him?

She jumped, startled, as Clark set a stack of papers on the table next to her.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“What’s all this?”

“Notes. Everything from Perry, Jack, Jimmy, and myself, as we investigated the Planet’s bombing.”

She stared at him in disbelief, reaching for the top file. “I thought you gave everything to Henderson?”

He shrugged, a ghost of a grin on his lips. “I made copies.”

“See! I knew you’d learn something from me!” she exclaimed gleefully while Clark laughed, and visibly relaxed. “Okay, where do we begin.”

* * *

Part 19

Today had completely changed his outlook; everything from this morning was now different. He had a job, the Planet was reopening, he could fly, and Lois was working with him on the Luthor story. Even the knowledge that Inspector Henderson knew who he was couldn't erase the skip from his step. He was desperately curious what Henderson wanted to talk to him about and how he had figured it all out but could hardly go barging into the precinct, especially with the remnants of the cage being stored there.

He wasn't sure if Henderson had been testing him, speaking so softly that he would need his superhearing to understand, or if he'd been reluctant to say the words, but as soon as he'd mentioned the cage, Clark had been overwhelmed with a flood of memories: the pain, the hopelessness, hearing his own screams echoing in the cellar, ringing through his ears. The memories had hit him like a physical force, making him stagger on his feet. If Henderson hadn't guessed who his alter ego was before, Clark assumed Henderson would be more concerned after he'd almost collapsed in front of him. Instead, Henderson had given him instructions to return to the Jeep and to meet him, as Superman, later that night. Clark had to resist glancing at the clock for the umpteenth time since he'd arrived home, despite it being early afternoon. Trying not to watch the minutes tick by, he observed Lois as she read through what he had on the bombing.

She lifted her head up after several minutes and met his eyes squarely before standing abruptly, the chair scraping on the floor. She took her half-empty coffee cup to the sink, dumped it out, and made herself a new cup from what was in the pot. Clark waited, knowing she was on the verge of a verbal tirade.

"Were you ever going to tell me this?" she demanded.

Clark couldn't answer her. Had the wedding continued, had Luthor survived, he doubted very much that he would have been alive to tell her. Even if he had escaped in time, the chances of him as either Clark or Superman being able to approach Lois Luthor would have been very slim. As he'd lain dying in the Kryptonite cage, he'd hoped that Henderson would act on all the information they'd unearthed. If he'd died, Lois hopefully would have been told the truth and could have sought protection from Luthor once he'd been arrested.

"If Luthor discovered what we were doing, we would have been eliminated," Clark said quietly as Lois glared at him. "I'm convinced if Luthor found out you had any knowledge of our investigation, or his criminal dealings, he would not have hesitated to dispose of you too."

"But that day, you told me to investigate. You already knew what he had done by then!"

"I was angry and frustrated, and I potentially put you in a very dangerous situation. If that car had been bugged, if he knew you were looking at him suspiciously..." Clark swallowed. He'd been stupid and had berated himself after for not checking the car first. As nothing had happened to Lois, he assumed it hadn't been bugged, and Lois was safe. "After that conversation, there was no way for me to talk to you without risking your safety, to warn you. I had to trust the police would use the information we had and arrest Luthor. It was the only way to keep you safe."

He watched as Lois's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Clark. I've been such an idiot."

Clark stood, approached Lois, and after removing the hot cup of coffee from her hands, enveloped her in a hug, holding her as she cried softly into his shirt. As the sniffing ceased and Lois began to pull away, Clark surreptitiously reheated her coffee with his heat vision before handing it back to her.

"Lois, don't blame yourself, it doesn't help. I've been doing the same thing for weeks now. If only I'd insisted more, and earlier, maybe you wouldn't have been hurt. If only I'd thought to look deeper into the Planet's bombing right away, if only I had..."

"Okay, I get your point. But still..."

They needed to stop this never-ending hamster wheel of guilt. The 'if only' scenarios would take over, and neither of them would be able to move on. Clark needed to write this series of articles just as much as he suspected Lois did, so they could both heal and move past the last few traumatic weeks. If they couldn't get past what they could have done to help themselves and each other, at the very least, their reporting wouldn't be as great, and at the worst, their friendship and partnership would never rebuild.

"We can't do this, Lois," he said, sinking into the couch. "We can't keep going around and around blaming ourselves for what happened..."

"I'm not blaming you," interjected Lois indignantly.

"I know you're not. But I blame myself. If I'd put the pieces together sooner, Jack wouldn't have been incarcerated as long, Jimmy wouldn't have lost his apartment, you... you..."

"Wouldn't have run off to LNN at the first job offer?" Lois stated quietly, joining Clark on the couch. "Clark, you know none of this is your fault. We were all redirected, distracted, and lost. I took a job offer, a job I never thought I'd see myself doing. Sure, it wasn't bad at first, but there were issues. Shady researching, shaky sources, manipulative reporters, and I felt more and more uncomfortable as each day went by. Finding out I'd been fired was a shock,

but with it, a huge sense of relief. Do you know where Jimmy's stuff is?"

Clark, momentarily confused by the sudden change in the discussion, frowned. His frown deepened as he listened to Lois describe her encounter with the movers, finding out that Lex had pre-arranged for her apartment to be cleaned out while she was on her honeymoon. He watched as Lois stood, then paced, as she detailed her termination from LNN, including her discussion with Dave, the HR guy.

"In both cases it was Mrs. Cox," Lois concluded. "I have a copy of the paperwork from the movers with her signature approving the expense, and Dave dug up the original paperwork for my termination. I don't have a copy of that, so it's my word against those at LNN, but she sent the instructions to end my job. Now, she didn't do that alone. She was told to and, like a good personal assistant, did whatever her boss wanted." Lois paused as she sank into a chair at the kitchen table.

"Clark, the blinders are off now. I know what he did to me, to my friends. There's no loyalty or compassion left for Lex. I just want to tell the story, expose him for what he was, and move on with my life."

Despite their working relationship and growing friendship over the last year, Lois had a carefully constructed wall around her that, on rare occasions, slipped. There had been a moment in front of the Planet where he had called her beautiful, and the look of complete surprise and delight from her had given him hope and surprised him. After this rollercoaster week for both of them, Clark suspected her wall was in a pile of rubble around her feet. She'd wanted to talk to him earlier, was this the moment to talk to her? He was sure it was about the same delicate subject, the one they really hadn't addressed yet: the conversation in the park. What should he say? Should he pretend that he'd only said it to stop her marrying Luthor? He cleared his throat as he hesitated and then jumped when the phone rang sharply in the quiet apartment. He watched in dismay as Lois blinked, broke eye contact with him, squared her shoulders, and stood.

"That will be Henderson," she said, in an abrupt tone. "If you answer it, I'll go grab the cordless in your room."

* * *

Henderson had been very forthcoming about details into the Luthor investigation; they'd been on the phone for well over an hour. Most of the information wasn't new to Clark, though Henderson had a few more details, some that he couldn't share yet, and promised to contact them as soon as any information could become available. After the phone call, he and Lois had easily made a great start on the first two articles that would appear in the new weekly edition

of the *Planet*. Once Lois left, Clark had taken to the skies over Metropolis, finding a few small emergencies to help with, to the obvious delight of the first responders. He knew his disappearance over the last week had caused concern, and he hoped that the few reporters who saw him in action tonight would help ease some minds.

Reluctant to go home, he'd flown around the US, helping wherever he could, before returning to Metropolis at 1 a.m. He'd hovered over the old city building, waiting nervously, and when Henderson arrived on the roof via the fire escape, he landed, raising an eyebrow as Henderson let the door close behind him.

"Aren't those usually alarmed?" Clark asked in his best, stern Superman voice.

Henderson shrugged. "Usually."

Clark peered through the door, surprised to find the door was latched properly from the inside. Henderson was now stuck on the roof with him.

"I hoped you could give me a ride back down," Henderson explained. "I know how to disable that door for a few minutes but thought we might be out here for a bit longer."

Clark nodded in acknowledgement, unwilling to say more. Normally, he'd begin the conversation with a remark that implied Clark had passed a message along. With Henderson, he now felt slightly foolish to try, given that they both knew who was in fact standing on the roof. Instead, he waited.

"Are we being watched?" Henderson mouthed.

Clark glanced around, scanning for cameras and bugs, before shaking his head. He moved a few steps closer as Henderson sat on some brick steps that had once led to a chimney.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know what to say earlier or how to get hold of you," Henderson began. "Once we got it out of there, I had the guys cut it up into small pieces, no more than a foot each, and it's in several boxes in the evidence lockup."

Clark nodded his understanding. He knew what 'it' was and was semi-relieved that Henderson had gotten straight to the point.

"What do you know about it?"

"It?" Clark queried, confused.

"The stuff it's made from."

"Very little. I've encountered it once before."

"I'm not sure what to do with it now," Henderson continued, holding something out to Clark.

Clark reached for it and almost dropped it, recognizing the remote to the cage instantly. He could feel his heart start to hammer away as he turned it over, noticing the back had been crushed. For good measure he gave it a few blasts of his heat vision, feeling the panic start to fade. As he stared at the melted remote in his hand, he remembered Luthor dropping the cage from the ceiling. It hadn't been until Luthor had powered up the cage that he'd felt the Kryptonite, suggesting the cage wasn't made of Kryptonite but had perhaps been painted or coated somehow.

"Lead," Clark blurted out.

"Excuse me?"

"Put the pieces in a lead box, then I can take it away." That first chunk of Kryptonite Wayne had given to his father for safekeeping had been in a lead box. Clark hadn't felt a thing until his dad had opened the box. Even if the bars were inert without a power source, he didn't want to take a chance.

"Okay, I'll let Clark know when it's ready?"

Relieved Henderson didn't ask any questions where the remnants of the cage would go, Clark nodded.

"Well, that's the pressing business taken care of. Why don't you have a seat?"

Clark smirked and floated into a sitting position. At Henderson's eye roll, he laughed, earning him a rare smile from the consistently stoic Inspector. It was a rare moment for Clark. Here he was, sitting on a roof in downtown Metropolis, laughing in a very un-Superman-like manner with the one person who knew who he truly was, other than his parents. Instead of fear, or the instinct to keep each of his identities separate, for the first time, he felt free to be himself.

"Are you done showing off?" Henderson drawled as Clark settled into his floating seated position. "I'm glad to see you're looking well. I was... concerned."

"I'm fine, I really..."

"I saw what was in that cellar, and I saw you immediately afterwards and later that day." There was a long pause, and Clark waited for Henderson to continue.

"My father was a Vet. The years he served he re-lived in his nightmares for the rest of his life. I've also watched too many good cops fight and lose." Clark watched as Henderson pulled a business card out of his pocket. "Here."

Clark accepted the card, glancing at it briefly before tucking it into the collar of his Suit.

"He's good. Not local, but that's not an issue for you. Deals with a lot of patients with hostage-related PTSD. Call

him up, tell him I sent you. Don't let this thing eat you up, make sure you talk to someone, even if it's not him. Don't bottle it up."

Clark nodded, unable to speak, touched by the concern.

Henderson stood, walked past Clark, and after patting him briefly on the shoulder, walked to the opposite edge of the building. Clark ceased floating and walked over towards him.

"This Luthor case..." Henderson paused, looking out over the city. "We're turning up connections to cases we thought were closed; people are in jail for their parts in some of these cases, and we're finding out now that Luthor was behind them. What did he have on these criminals that they kept their mouths shut when they were incarcerated, taking the fall for him?"

Clark shrugged. He'd wondered the same things himself but wasn't sure Henderson was looking for a conversation or just asking rhetorical questions.

"He gave millions to various charities all over the US, especially here in Metropolis. LexLabs does most of the lab work for the hospitals around here; there's emergency vehicles and helicopters that bear his name because he gave the city the money to buy them, not to mention the various medical facilities. You go see the orchestra or a play? You're at the LexCorp Concert Hall. How about the new wing of the Metropolis Museum, the LexWing, housing the visiting displays, currently an art display that I took in myself several weeks ago? It was great; I particularly enjoyed the Group of Seven exhibit."

Clark watched Henderson run his hand through his hair, more agitated than he could remember seeing the consistently unflappable Inspector. He kept quiet, giving Henderson space to air his frustrations, recognizing that this was likely the only time the Inspector would, to the only person he could.

"He almost killed you, and I have no idea why. You?"

Clark shrugged in lieu of a verbal response. It wasn't a topic he wanted to delve into at the moment, maybe ever.

"Every time I look over this skyline, I wonder what else he was involved in, where else his money corrupted." Henderson sighed, ran his hand through his hair again, and ceased pacing. "Of all the cases I've investigated, this one... this one... it hurts. This is my city, my home. I've spent my entire career here, trying to make this city a better place, and for what? For a power hungry, multi-millionaire, to run multiple illegal operations and commit all sorts of crimes under our noses."

Clark stayed silent, pondering Henderson's words. He'd been wrapped up in his own thoughts and emotions, as well as Lois's, not expanding his view to those whom Luthor had deceived: business associates, politicians, and so forth. It wasn't as though Luthor had a lengthy list of friends, but he did have beneficiaries, charities he supported, people who depended on him in one form or another.

"How do you do it?"

"Huh?" Clark was wondering if he'd missed something as Henderson asked his question.

"I heard you were out and about today. How do you do it? Some nutcase manages to obtain the only substance, not commonly known, to kill you, and as soon as you're recovered, you're back out there helping people."

"Same as you, Bill," Clark responded thoughtfully. "I could no more ignore a cry for help than you could."

This time, Henderson shrugged in response. "I do what I can."

Suspecting that Henderson needed some encouragement, Clark continued. "I'm just someone with a few extra abilities, using them as best I can to help people. You're the same. You've got skills that you use to help people too. As much as I get called a hero, I think you guys are the real heroes. The only difference is I can't get hurt."

"That and you can fly," Henderson remarked dryly, though Clark knew he was touched. "Speaking of which, it's getting a bit cool. Can you give me a lift down?"

Once at the entrance to the apartment building, Henderson extended his hand out to Clark. "Thanks. I think we both needed that," Henderson stated.

Clark nodded in agreement, shook the Inspector's hand, and after ensuring Henderson was safely inside, flew off into the night, thinking. For the first time in his life, he'd had a conversation with someone, a peer, perhaps a friend, who knew whom he was. Henderson hadn't asked any prying questions, and Clark hadn't felt the need to ask Henderson to keep his secret. It felt incredibly liberating and gave him hope that someday he could share his identity with a few select others. He grinned at his thoughts as he lazily flew once more around Metropolis before calling it a night and heading home.

* * *

Clark took his time flying to the farm on Sunday evening. The weekend had been full, and he was glad to have some time to think as he flew lazily around the summer storms that dotted the prairie skies. His parents were expecting him sometime this evening; he hadn't been too sure when he could get away as there had been several emergencies

earlier on, plus being able to get out of his house without Jack and Jimmy asking too many questions had been challenging. Thankfully, Jack had redirected Jimmy fairly efficiently, leading Clark to consider having a conversation with Jack sooner rather than later. The young man clearly could keep his mouth shut, and while Clark was convinced Jack knew his secret identity, perhaps confirming it would put his mind at ease... or not. He was undecided.

He and Lois had easily completed and submitted the first in their series of Luthor articles and had finished the second piece. She'd pushed to finish the second so he could enjoy his week in Kansas and not have to worry about flying back just so they could complete it. He'd wanted to tell her it wasn't an issue, but she had already insisted on driving him to the airport that evening, and he didn't want to risk having her question the cost of flying back and forth to Kansas every week.

The airport ride had been thwarted by Ellen Lane, to Clark's surprise. While Lois had been in the bathroom, the phone had rung, and Clark, expecting it to be Perry, had answered. He'd been on the end of a verbal tirade from Mrs. Lane, wanting to know where Lois's so-called friends had been during the wedding disaster, when Lois, returning from the bathroom, had wrestled the phone from his hands and calmed her mother down. With Ellen placated by informing Lois she'd be over shortly, the conversation had ended, and Clark had assured Lois he was fine for the evening. It turned out the spa Ellen had been staying at was in reality a rehab facility she had used before. Lois had explained that growing up, she and Lucy had frequently referred to their mother's trips to rehab as the spa, mostly to keep prying people out of their business when they were younger. During the wedding aftermath and the panic her mother had been in to get away from the snooping reporters, Lois hadn't been able to ascertain which kind of 'spa' her mother had gone to.

Clark was glad that Lois and her mother could clear the air this evening and relieved he wouldn't have to come up with a reason that he didn't have luggage at the airport.

As he approached Kansas, he reflected on the last harvest at the farm. He'd helped his dad with the wheat harvest, then packed a suitcase and relocated to Metropolis, never imagining how much his life would change. He'd hoped for a good job, new friends, and a place to call home. Never would he have dreamed of being partnered with the spitfire that was Lois, writing for the best newspaper in New Troy, and moonlighting in red and blue spandex.

It hadn't all been good, he remembered grimly. The cage continued to haunt his nights, though less frequently as the days passed. Henderson had been shockingly swift in arranging for the remnants to be secured and released to

him, and last night, he'd hurled the lead boxes through the Earth's atmosphere, watching as they burned brightly until completely disintegrating. As awful as the last few weeks had been, Luthor was no longer a threat to him, Lois, or the citizens of Metropolis.

Lois.

She was the best thing to happen to him in the last year, and he'd almost lost her. Now, with their friendship reviving, he promised himself he would treasure it for what it was, despite his longing for more. She had made her feelings known, and in the last week, they hadn't broached that subject. Clark was content to leave it that way and not dredge up unpleasant memories and invite awkward conversations just yet. However, he reluctantly remembered as he touched down on the farmhouse porch, Superman couldn't get off the hook that easily. He would have to apologise, preferably before he would inevitably have to rescue her.

Spinning into his comfortable clothes, he opened the door, content. He'd almost lost everything in that cellar. He wasn't going to take anything for granted anymore.

"Mom! Dad! I'm here," he announced as his parents rushed to embrace him.

* * *

THE END! (for now...)