

# Sleight of Hand

By [JadedEvie](#) <[evie.l.jade@gmail.com](mailto:evie.l.jade@gmail.com)>

Rated: PG-13

Submitted: August 2025

Summary: When Clark starts his day with a crime wave on the west side and terrible news at the Planet, he goes looking for answers and finds more than he bargained for. Going undercover leads him to work with an unexpected ally as he chases an insidious new threat to Metropolis and tries to protect what's most important to him. With a little whammy angst to start, a couple of non-whammy twists and a WAFFY thread running throughout, this ends in a hopeful place.

Story Size: 24,962 words (139 kB as text)

TL;DR summary: Clark makes spaghetti, then saves the day.

A/N: This story was originally written as part of the 2025 Guess the Author Summer Fic-a-Thon challenge. (Prompts are listed at the end.) It references "I've Got A Crush On You," but takes place immediately before "The Green, Green Glow of Home." Big thanks to the discord plot bunny sanctuary, particularly from Toomi and Darth Michael, which provided some of the pieces for this to come together. And extra special thanks to Verity, for organizing the whole fic-a-thon and being an amazing cheerleader to its authors!

---

Clark took a moment in the empty elevator to compose himself.

It had been a long night for Superman. He'd answered a call for help at just past four that morning, to aid two teenagers in trouble on the west side. One was panicked and screaming. The other was unconscious, with blood oozing disturbingly from his eyes. He'd gotten them both to the emergency room, but it had been an unsettling start to his day.

And it hadn't gotten any better from there. He'd been zipping from one rescue to the next until ten minutes ago, when he'd rushed home to trade his super suit for the grey charcoal one he was wearing now.

But even dressed as Clark, his mind was still on the people Superman had raced to help all morning, one after another. After the overdosed teen, who he wasn't even sure had survived, there'd been a brutal mugging not far from where he'd found the teenagers. Then a bike messenger had been struck by a car. After that, there was a shooting at the docks. And then he'd had to race back to the west side for another mugging that was perilously close to turning fatal. It had gone on and on like that, with more trips to Metro General than to all the precincts in the city put together.

In fact, it had been the grim type of morning where he wondered whether he'd done much good at all, whether he'd saved any of the fatally wounded victims he'd rushed to save.

The elevator creaked to a stop and he instinctively released the breath he'd been unconsciously holding in the space between his two personas. In a moment, the doors

would open, revealing his momentary private sanctuary to the staff of the Planet. In a room full of reporters, he couldn't risk being lost in Superman's memories.

He needed to be Clark Kent now.

And as tough and defeating as Superman's morning had been, Clark Kent was just seconds away from the best part of his day.

Lois Lane.

He breathed in the thought of her like he was soaking in the sun.

If anything would make him feel better after the morning he'd had, it was his fiery, brilliant partner. She constantly surprised him, which kept him on his toes and forced him to live in the present moment. Even meeting her the first time had caught him off guard. He hadn't ever expected to fall in love at first sight. He'd just begun settling into the fact that his feelings for her were intense, instinctive and as indestructible as the rest of him.

The elevator dinged as the doors slid open. He hustled into the newsroom, head down, hoping no one would notice that he was even later than usual.

His eyes slid toward Lois' desk as he passed, but she wasn't there. He felt disappointment mixed with a slight relief that at least she might not notice his tardiness this morning.

He had no idea what had gotten into Metropolis today, but he sincerely hoped that it would calm down. So far, none of the rescues were the type that could wait for emergency services to make it to the scene. He'd had to rush to all of

them or risk a life. Now, he'd need at least a short break from his other job or he'd be taking a different kind of risk—that someone at the Planet would wonder where he kept darting off to. While that was always a taut exercise in balance, today was already threatening to throw him dangerously out of sync.

Pulling the strap of his leather messenger bag over his head, he stashed it under the desk before sliding into his chair and booting up his computer. He surreptitiously adjusted his tie and pushed his glasses a little more comfortably upward on his nose as his monitor slowly brightened to life.

Still on edge from the morning's gauntlet of rescues, he allowed his hearing to gently extend outward, already anticipating the next cry for help.

"Listen up!" Perry bellowed from his office door.

Clark cringed, his ears nearly ringing from Perry's shout just behind him, when he'd been dialed into the sounds of the city for blocks outward.

"Uh, gather round, people. I, uh, well, I have to make an announcement this morning."

Perry sounded nervous. Clark turned toward his editor, seeing the crestfallen expression painted across his features. The newsroom around him slowed and paused.

"It's a solemn day for the Planet," he started, hands going into his pockets as his shoulders slumped down. "Last night, one of our reporters was out on a story on the west side. And, well, it looks like things went south. They aren't coming back."

The newsroom, already at a standstill, turned silent.

"Chief," Jimmy said into the airless room, "Who was it?"

Clark's stomach turned over as he calculated the one person who was missing from the bullpen this morning.

No.

His palms started sweating.

Perry swallowed, facing the newsroom.

"It was Lois."

Clark felt his heart drop out.

And his world went white.

\* \* \*

Perry watched Clark stagger to his feet suddenly, his face ashen.

"I'll let you all know about services later in the week," he said to the room. "For now, there's not much we can do. So,

let's get back to it..." he trailed off. Then he gruffly added, "Just, be careful out there."

He waved an arm toward the bullpen and it rustled back to life, as staffers balanced shock and emerging gossip.

Perry made his way over to Clark, who still hadn't moved since he'd stood. The junior reporter had obviously fallen off the precipice into deep shock. Even though he'd only been at the Planet a couple of months, Perry had watched his new writing team get closer. It hadn't taken long for him to get the idea that the kid would walk across fire if Lois asked him.

He'd been dreading this conversation since the moment he'd learned it was coming.

"Son?"

"But Chief, I—that *can't* be right," Clark stuttered, as if he were trying to catch his breath.

"I'm sorry, son," he said, meaning it.

Clark gestured blindly toward Lois' empty desk. "I just — she was just— I *just* talked to her *yesterday*. She wasn't even working on—"

"Bobby called her after you left last night. Aw, heck, it was a bad tip. She went down to the west side around midnight. She was chasing... Well, I don't know exactly what she found when she got there. But she was shot in an alley a few blocks from that club where you all wrote that story about the Toasters. Henderson got the call, found her early this morning, called me after talking to her parents."

He watched as Clark gripped the back of his chair, as if holding himself up.

"The Metro Club?"

"That's right," Perry said.

"But that's—that's on the west side," Clark stammered, sounding helpless. "That's not possible."

"Why don't you take a couple of days off, Kent? Maybe go home. See your folks?"

It would be a rough week without his two best reporters in the newsroom, but Clark was taking this even worse than he'd expected. It looked like he'd just been told he'd never see the sun again. Then again, thinking back to how Clark looked at Lois, maybe that wasn't far off.

But Clark was shaking his head at the idea of time away. "Are you *sure*, Chief? Did she even call for help?"

"What?"

"Where was Superman?" he spat, suddenly furious. "It *can't* have been Lois, Perry. Superman would have heard

her. She would have called for help and he would have been there," he insisted.

Perry felt badly that he had to be the messenger for this.

The poor kid was shaking.

And now he was grasping at straws.

"Look, son," Perry said, putting a hand bracingly on the young reporter's shoulder, "Superman can't be everywhere at once. Don't blame him. Sometimes these things happen. Take some time off. Head home for the week. Get some rest. Leave your Kansas number with Jimmy and I'll give you a call in a couple of days. Things will look a lot better then."

\* \* \*

In a blur, he'd raced straight to her apartment.

The window was unlocked, and he'd let himself right in, like he'd done half a dozen times before.

"Lois?" he called her name in a barely controlled panic.

No response came.

He listened for her heartbeat, and when he didn't hear it, he scanned through the walls.

She wasn't there.

He looked around frantically for anything that would disprove what Perry had said happened last night.

This couldn't happen to *Lois*.

Besides, he'd been on the west side for hours! He'd have seen something, heard something. Knowing his partner's penchant for peril, he always kept an ear out for her summons.

Unless it had happened in the few hours he'd been sleeping.

Would he have woken up if she'd called his name?

He was sure he would have.

But her apartment told a different story. Her purse was gone. Her keys weren't on their usual table. The clothes she'd worn yesterday weren't in her closet. No evidence of take-out from the night before, either. There was a barely there layer of dust on the floor that hadn't been disturbed yet today.

She really hadn't come home last night.

The lump that was in his chest rose into his throat.

*No, no*, his mind shrieked. *Not Lois! Somebody help me!*

The cry for help was the exact tabor of his own thoughts and for a moment he thought he'd cried out himself.

But the call came again.

*Help! Superman!*

He ran his hands through his hair in desperation.

Right now, he couldn't possibly go out there and—

*Help!*

But he had to.

Someone was in trouble.

Whoever it was probably meant to someone else what Lois meant to him, or, well, *had* meant to him. He couldn't let someone else feel like this, not if he could stop it.

Resigned to being the hero everyone needed today, he floated out through her window and carefully closed it behind him before launching himself upward and back toward the west side.

\* \* \*

*Help!*

From the air, he could see the young man pointing a gun at a woman. He dove down, intending to intervene. As he got closer, he analyzed the space between the two, the man's hand position on the gun, the potential collateral around them. He'd do best landing between the man and woman, he decided, where he had the easiest chance of catching the bullets if the mugger fired.

As he drew nearer, he glanced at the woman. Approaching from behind her, he couldn't see her face.

But her hair was a glossy brown bob.

His heart turned over.

She was slim and she was wearing a pantsuit.

Maybe Perry had been wrong!

He sped forward.

He landed hard enough to crack the sidewalk beneath him, hand coming up to crush the barrel of the gun.

The attempted mugger froze, looking stunned to see the hero materialize in front of him.

Clark glanced back at his victim.

Green eyes, his brain registered first, his shoulders dropping.

"Thank you, Superman," she said in a voice that was too high for the one he was hoping it would be.

He couldn't speak past the lump of disappointment in his throat.

Nodding at the woman, he looked back at the mugger, gun still in hand. Was this what had happened to Lois? Had she been as afraid as the green-eyed woman behind him,

whose heart was still racing? Had she known what was about to happen to her?

Detangling the crumpled metal from the man's hand, he lifted him easily in a fireman's carry.

"He'll be at the 4th precinct if you'd like to make a report," he told the still startled woman. He was desperate to get away from this scene, but his conscience tugged at him. "Will you be alright?"

"Uh, yeah."

She sounded unsure, at best, and, in spite of his growing need to get away from her, and the man over his shoulder, and, well, everyone else, he couldn't leave her.

"Were you injured?" he asked.

"Huh?" The green-eyed woman seemed to snap out of the light daze then. "No, nah, just shaken up. I'm ok. I'm good." She gave him a little wave.

She'd offered him a reprieve.

And he took it.

"4th precinct," he reminded her, and took off, criminal in tow.

\* \* \*

*Help!*

Someone was sobbing behind the apartment door, and people were scrambling around, speaking in wild, elevated voices.

He knocked politely over the din.

Something clattered to the floor and there was sudden shushing.

"It's Superman," he called into the new silence. "I can help."

There was a scuffle and the voices took over again, arguing whether to let him in. Finally there was a decisive, "Shut up!" and the door opened.

The place was a mess. There were three people, and they all looked edgy and strung out.

"She, she passed out—we can't wake her up," one of the young men said, gesturing to the couch, "And her eyes—"

Kneeling beside the woman lying face down on the couch, he tuned into her breathing. It was shallow. It sounded heavy, too, like she was having trouble catching her breath.

"Ma'am, I'm going to take you to the hospital," he told her, not expecting her to move.

She didn't.

He carefully rolled her over.

Lois' eyes stared back at him.

His heart stalled.

No, *No!*, not Lois' eyes.

Brown eyes.

Rounded eyes.

Eyes that were the same shape as hers.

But not *hers*, he told himself, willing himself to keep it together and focus on this woman, who he could still save, and not on Lois, who he hadn't sav—

The woman's eyes were open, though she was unconscious. And there was blood running down her cheeks. Another overdose.

"She'll be at Metro General," he told her friends as he carefully cradled her.

And then he shot out the door, racing the poison in her system to the emergency room.

\* \* \*

*Help! Help! Help!*

It was too many, all at once.

He couldn't take this anymore.

The thought came unbidden.

But he wasn't sure that he could take one more rescue, seeing Lois in the survivor's face, or worse, in the victim's face.

And he knew that his traitorous brain would try to fill her image in, no matter where he looked, constantly seeking her out since it would never find her again.

*Help!*

The new voice was near the others.

It caught his attention, breaking through the clamor.

Because it sounded like hers.

It wouldn't *be* hers.

Yet, he had no choice but to follow it anyway.

Still in the ambulance bay of Metro General, he smelled smoke on the wind. He felt his feet lift off the asphalt as he headed toward the smoke and screams.

\* \* \*

Ash still in his hair from the apartment fire, he hovered in the air above the Planet, grappling with what to do next.

He'd gotten through the last few rescues.

But he'd been distracted.

Every time he tried to help someone, a sharp reminder of Lois was there. It took a lot of mental stamina to constantly jump into terrible situations to try and salvage peoples' lives, he'd learned over the last few months. The reminders of Lois' absence were breaking down his endurance for it.

And he wasn't even sure she was really gone. He should be out looking for her, he chastised himself, not chasing down the next thing that went wrong in the city.

Lois had become his touchstone in Metropolis. He couldn't believe that her footsteps might not be a part of the pace of the city anymore. How could his world just overturn in a moment? How could he not have had the chance to save her?

His mind spiraled.

At every rescue, even when they went well, his lesser demons chipped away at him with one question.

What good was it being *Superman* if he couldn't save *Lois Lane*?

But the only person he turned to in moments like this was the one person he couldn't ask for help now.

He extended his hearing through the building beneath him one floor at a time, trying to pick out her heartbeat from the other staffers. He'd done it before so easily.

Today he couldn't find her at all.

He glanced down at the center of the city below, nearly expecting her to be storming up to the Planet's main doors, cursing the wild cab ride that had made her so late today and insulting Henderson for misidentifying her as the Jane Doe.

But she wasn't there either.

Something at the newsstand on the corner caught his eye and before he could think better of it, his muscles obeyed his impulse.

A millisecond later, he was standing on the pavement, holding that day's morning edition of the Daily Planet. In a single column on the front page was the Planet's staff photo of Lois. And below that, her obituary. The byline read 'Perry White.'

He blinked back his shock.

Perry had written her obituary.

He'd actually *published* it.

He'd published it on the *front page*.

All morning, he'd thought Perry had to have gotten it wrong. But there wasn't any mistake. Perry didn't publish

without incontrovertible facts. Perry wouldn't have published this...

Unless it were true.

It felt like the wind had been knocked out of him, but he couldn't gasp for breath.

He heard a camera flash somewhere off to his left, but couldn't drag his tortured eyes away from the Planet's front page.

"Hey, Superman," a voice came from just in front of him.

He shook himself and looked up.

The newsstand owner was leaning toward him. "Superman, you ok?"

No.

No, he wasn't.

"I—"

And he couldn't lie.

He gestured mutely with the paper.

"Keep it," the newsstand owner said at once, his voice sympathetic. Everyone in Metropolis knew that Superman went where Lois Lane went. Now she'd gone where he couldn't follow. "And my condolences."

It was too much.

Suddenly unable to stand there a second longer, he broke the sound barrier as he rocketed upward.

\* \* \*

The back door slammed hard enough that it made her feel like the whole farm house shook. Startled, she turned away from the tomatoes she was dicing, dropping the knife on her cutting board.

"Good grief, Clark!" she said when she saw him. "You just about scared me out of my wits!"

She turned back toward the counter and grabbed a kitchen towel to wipe her hands, her nerves calming.

"It's a little early, but if you want to stay for lunch, I bet we can get this chili into shape in no time! Especially with a little help," she hinted.

With Clark here, they could chop through these ingredients fast enough that she could even get a peach cobbler into the oven before Jonathan got back.

Dropping the now damp towel into the sink, Martha turned back to Clark. He was still and silent and she got her first really good look at him.

He looked lost.

His skin was pale and his eyes were bright, as if he had a fever.

“Clark, what is it?”

She watched as his mouth worked, but no sound came out. He hadn’t moved from the doorway since he’d arrived. His silence and stillness were starting to frighten her.

“Clark, honey,” she asked gently, crossing the kitchen toward him, “what’s happened?”

From somewhere under his cape, he pulled a folded newspaper. He held it out to her mechanically.

His hand was shaking.

She took the paper gingerly, scanning the headlines until she came to a single column all the way over on the right, just above the fold.

Her hand flew to her mouth.

“Oh, Clark…”

\* \* \*

Three days had passed since he’d landed at home, staggering in through the back door and nearly tearing it off its hinges as his heart collapsed in his chest.

For three days, he’d sulked around the farm, inadequately helping with chores, zoning out mid-conversation, and trying to tame his heart into believing a truth that was forcing it to break.

He’d stubbornly persevered in going back to patrol Metropolis each night, even though his parents both worriedly encouraged him to take a break.

But it was a good thing he had gone.

Because the west side had gone absolutely feral with violent crime. It seemed like you couldn’t walk through the district adjacent to the docks without the threat of being mugged. Three small businesses had burned down in as many days, all reeking of arson so badly that it was clear the perpetrators hadn’t even tried to cover their tracks. And suddenly there were sporadic shootings between gangs where there had been a tense but strict accord before.

Not to mention the meteoric rise in drug-related rescues. It was no secret that most of the drugs in Suicide Slum came from the west side, where the gangs had both easy access to the wharf and the resources to move their product. But something must have gone terribly wrong with the last shipment that had been smuggled through, because that night he’d picked up five more drug users who were nearly comatose, all with the same tell-tale blood oozing from their tear ducts.

When he brought the last victim to Metro General, he watched the doctors hurriedly wheel their patient into a triage room. Then he went straight to the charge nurse and asked about the previous overdose patients he’d brought in, hoping to hear that the teen he’d saved the same morning that Lois had died—

Pain welled within his chest as his train of thought abruptly halted.

...that the teen he’d saved three days ago had pulled through.

But the kid hadn’t survived.

In fact, none of them had made it.

He had brought in six patients with blood in their eyes, before the twenty-something blonde he’d just dropped off, and so far none had survived.

After thanking the nurse, he mentally wished the blonde kid well before leaving the hospital and heading west.

His flight brought him, as if on auto-pilot, to the alley behind the Metro Club.

Making contact with the pavement, he spun back into his tie-less charcoal suit from three days ago, which he’d thrown on haphazardly before coming back to the city. Choosing a random direction, he began a methodical stroll down one of Metropolis’ darkest and now most dangerous alleys. He lowered his glasses and scanned the crumbled asphalt as he walked, not knowing exactly what he was looking for, but searching nonetheless.

The first night after Lois had die—

The air left his lungs.

The first night after he’d gone home, he’d been so restless by dark that he’d announced his intent to patrol and then been off into the skies before his parents could protest.

He’d pulled a handful of people and the family dog from a house fire in the suburbs before extinguishing it and turning the scene over to the firefighters that had arrived.

Avoiding both the Planet in mid-town and Carter Avenue to the north had sent him patrolling south and west. And there had been plenty waiting for him there.

After four straight hours of wrestling handguns away from petty thieves, breaking up fights between groups of roving men, and even returning a hijacked ambulance, the west side finally fell quiet.

With the chaos of the city finally at bay, his mind stole away to the one topic he’d been fleeing since he’d left Kansas to patrol that night, since he’d rocketed away from

the Planet newsstand that morning, since Perry had indelibly shifted the tectonic plates of his world that day.

*Lois.*

Without conscious thought, he'd landed at the Metro Club. He'd walked around back, nearly grinning upon seeing the dumpster he'd unceremoniously dumped Lois into after he'd gotten her caught by Toni Taylor.

His smile had evaporated in a heartbeat.

He hadn't been able to protect her the last time she'd encountered one of the Taylors.

He'd scanned the ground around him for any clues. Perry had said she'd die—

His chest tightened, and he shoved down the panic he felt building there.

Perry had said she'd been sho—

He pinched the bridge of his nose, fighting for equilibrium.

That she'd been *found* a few blocks from this club.

Choosing a street at random at the next intersection, he'd scanned the ground as he walked. He still couldn't reconcile what Perry had told him. He'd had to see some evidence of it himself.

He'd known that he was in denial, probably dealing with a delayed case of shock.

But he couldn't accept that she was gone.

If she was gone, he'd never gotten to tell her that he—

*Help!*

With a sigh, he'd sped off deeper into west side territory. After stopping yet another violent assault, this time on an all-night liquor store clerk, he'd come back to haunt the alleyways around the Metro Club.

The next night he'd done the same, choosing another direction at random and examining it as he went.

And now he was spending a third night the same way.

Determined, he searched the ground for bullet casings. He scanned the brick wall beside him for blood, for hair, for anything that could lead him to what had happened to her. He tried to find a subtle remnant of her perfume in the air.

Nothing.

He wondered how long it would take him to get past her not being in his life. She'd only been a part of him for a few months, though it felt like both a flash and a lifetime. Would it take a few months for him to stop missing her? Twice that long? A hundred times that long? Longer?

It struck him that losing Lois Lane might not be something that he was capable of getting past.

Could he go back to his regular life after this? Could he go back to the Planet after this?

*Probably not*, he quietly admitted.

He felt the impulse to carry on their investigative work in her name. It would be the right thing to do. And Lois would never have stopped if their situations had been reversed, if he had been the one in the alley that night. But maybe Lois had been stronger than he was. Because the cost—working alone when he knew he was only a miserable half of something that should be whole—felt so overwhelmingly high. He couldn't work at the Planet *and* moonlight as Superman *and* hold it together, too.

Maybe he should leave Metropolis. His parents had made the suggestion last night. He'd taken them up on the offer, but more so to end the conversion than because he'd truly considered it.

Now he was considering it.

And it was becoming a more appealing idea with every step he took on the city streets without her. After all, what was Metropolis to him without Lois? He'd stayed here for her. The Planet had made it possible to stay, but it was Lois that had made Metropolis more than just any of the other cities he'd lived in. It was Lois that had made it home. And now she was—

*Help!*

Clark sighed, too weary to chastise himself for nearly rolling his eyes when someone called for him. The sound had come from very near, and he jogged a few feet up the alley until he found a thick door set into the crumbling brick wall.

He would move home for a while, just as he'd told his parents, he decided, approaching the door. He'd take a step back from Metropolis and take some time. Then he would see what was left of his life.

*Help!*

The call came from the other side of the door.

He tugged on it until the lock gave way, and let himself into a haphazard commercial kitchen. The trouble was immediately apparent. He moved toward the grease fire on the stove and took a deep breath before remembering that, consumed by thoughts of Lois, he hadn't changed into his spandex suit. But now he was already inside, with a bystander watching over his shoulder, and a fire climbing upward, licking the wall behind the stove. Nearly rolling his eyes again, this time at himself, he took off his jacket and threw it over the flames, surreptitiously taking in a

well-directed gasp of air. With no oxygen to feed it, the fire quickly surrendered to being smothered.

“Oh my gosh! Thanks!” came an exuberant and agonizingly familiar voice behind him.

He was paralyzed as hope bloomed viciously in his chest, but he’d been here before too many times already in the last 72 hours. The last drug victim he’d brought in today had used her shampoo. The third mugging victim yesterday had mannerisms just like hers, only not hers at all. The nurse at the hospital this morning had a no nonsense walk that he could have sworn he would have recognized anywhere.

He’d learned already that it was never her.

It would never be her again.

So he turned around, ready to quickly accept his thanks and beat a hasty retreat before the fire-starter could get a really good look at him.

Instead, when he turned around, he looked into a pair of endless chestnut eyes that he’d been longing for for days. He barely even noticed the auburn wig or the caked make-up that gave the effect of aging her.

She gasped.

His fractured heart suddenly surged back online.

“Lois,” he breathed.

“Anita!” bellowed a voice behind them.

The door between the kitchen and dining room was flung open and a man in a white button down shirt, black tie and slacks stormed in.

“What the hell is goin’ on back here?”

“Nothing! Everything’s under control!” Lois exclaimed, turning to the newcomer.

“Under control, huh?” The man crossed his arms over his chest. “Then why’s the wall behind the stove black?”

“It was just a grease fire,” Clark cut in. “It could happen to anyone.” The man’s attention swung over to him with intensity. “It’s out now,” he finished clumsily.

“Who’s this guy?” the man demanded.

“Nobody!” Lois said forcefully, stepping toward Clark and trying to herd him closer to the door. “He came in the back when I yelled for help.”

“Good Samaritan, huh?” The man didn’t sound convinced. “What were you doing in the alley, then?”

“Uh, actually,” Clark stumbled, thinking fast, “I was hoping to catch your chef on his next break. I’m looking for a job.”

“A job, huh? What do you do?”

Clark nodded to the wall behind the stove. “I can fix that up for you, to start.”

The man seemed to consider it.

He glanced over at Lois, who not-so-subtly shook her head.

Then he looked back at Clark.

“I’m looking for a new line cook,” he said.

“Hey!” Lois complained at once, all outrage.

“Oh, be quiet! You and I both know you haven’t cooked a day in your life before. That resume was a pack of lies!”

“I’ve cooked plenty!”

“You ever eat it after you cooked it?” he scoffed.

“What makes you think this guy can cook any better?!”

“Be quiet or that wall is coming out of your pay check!”

Lois huffed, but went silent.

“Can you cook?” The man directed his question to Clark.

“Yes. Mostly American and Asian food; Thai, Vietnamese, Mandarin.” He sniffed the air and caught the fragrance of basil. “But I’m pretty good with pasta.”

“Fine. Can you start tomorrow?”

Clark didn’t hesitate. “Yes!” He cast a glance at Lois’ furious face. “But I could use a dishwasher in here.”

The man pointed at Lois, “Anita, you’re dishwasher now.”

“But you can’t just do that!”

“I’m manager here,” the man threw back at her, chest puffed up. “It’s dishwasher or nothing.”

Lois dipped her head. The gesture looked submissive, but Clark’s eyebrows flew up at the insults she mumbled under her breath.

“That’s what I thought,” the manager said. “Now get this cleaned up.” Turning back to Clark, he put out his hand, introducing himself, “Aldo Bianchi.”

“Charlie King,” Clark said back, shaking his new manager’s hand.

Lois made a sound in the back of her throat and pulled Clark’s singed blazer from the stove.

“Don’t forget this, *Charlie*,” she said, as she chucked it at his head.

He dropped the handshake with Aldo just in time to catch the coat before it pelted him in the face, eliciting another disgusted sound from her.

“Alright,” said Aldo, with a quelling look at Lois, “Dinner service only tomorrow. But I’ll be in at 10am; you ought to get here then, too, and get started on that wall,” he instructed Clark.

“I’ll be here,” said Clark, making his way toward the door. “And thank you!” He turned back for one last glance at Lois, his eyes drinking her in. “Oh, and, it was nice to meet you, Anita.”

Her eyes flashed at him in deep ire before she turned back to the charred black stovetop.

He’d never felt happier in his life.

\* \* \*

“Yeah, I *got it*, Aldo!” Lois yelled over her shoulder. She stepped outside and slammed the restaurant door behind her resentfully.

She hadn’t taken more than two steps when she was absolutely enveloped in an unmoving hold, her face gently pressed into what felt like cloth over steel.

“Hey!”

For a nanosecond, she feared it was an attack.

For a millisecond, she thought it was Superman.

But in the second it took her to identify what turned out to be an embrace, she recognized her partner.

“You can’t be here,” she said roughly.

The hug only got tighter.

She felt him exhale.

Which wasn’t a response, as far as she was concerned.

“You’re going to blow my cover!” she said, starting to struggle out of what was becoming an intimate-feeling embrace. She refused to let herself sink into him just because he’d shown up as she was on her last nerve with this assignment, or because she hadn’t seen or spoken to anyone she knew in days and his familiarity was an unexpected balm.

“I thought you were gone forever,” he choked out in return.

She nearly rolled her eyes at the greenjeans junior partner who wore his heart on his sleeve, and tried to ignore the fact that he was tugging on *her* heart right now. She hadn’t seen Clark in three days, and it felt somehow soothing to be reunited with her partner now, especially in this very safe-feeling, gentle bear hug. She’d forgotten that Clark gave the best hugs.

“I will be if someone sees us together!” she warned.

He pulled back, then, but didn’t release her. “No. I will never let anyone hurt you.”

She hadn’t ever seen this fierce intensity in Clark’s eyes before.

“I’m not gone,” she found herself awkwardly reassuring him. “I’m fine.”

He nodded, swallowing, still looking at her like he’d stand between her and a natural disaster.

“Does Perry know?” he asked.

“Of course, Perry knows. I wouldn’t do something like this without telling Perry.”

He flinched. “You didn’t want to tell me?”

Lois felt a little badly about that, now that she was looking at him. Clark looked rough all over. His suit was crumpled enough that she guessed he’d slept in it. His coloring was paler than usual, and his eyes just looked, well, anguished.

She pieced together that he’d stood in this alley for over two hours waiting to give her a hug, and her resolve to keep him at bay crumbled.

“We needed your reaction to sell it,” she admitted, guilt plucking at her. “Everyone had to think I was really dead.”

He winced again.

“Sorry, Clark.”

How could she have known he’d take it this badly?

...But, well, she had known.

Or, at least, she’d had an inkling.

She’d just decided to sacrifice his feelings for the story.

He made eye contact with her then, and the emotion in his eyes completely arrested her.

“Please don’t ever do that to me again,” he said seriously.

He seemed so shaken. So defeated. So un-Clark.

“Ok,” she promised. “I won’t.” Then she looked around them again, finally forcing herself to pull out of his embrace. “Now, get out of here.”

“I’m not leaving you on the west side at this time of night.”

Sighing at his stubbornness, and stamping down the flicker of appreciation she felt for his concern for her, she compromised, “Let’s both get out of here, then.”

Without giving him a chance to respond, she moved down the alley toward the street. He caught up with her

immediately, falling into step at her side and threading her arm through his. They'd walked like this once or twice before, when they'd fallen into a silly conversation and an easy stride. But something about his manner now made her wonder if he ever intended to leave her side again.

She'd just promised him that she wouldn't lie to him again about going undercover. She'd meant it, too. That was unlike her. Usually she'd say whatever it took to get what she needed while chasing a story.

Briefly, she wondered if she was losing her edge.

But that wasn't it. Her partner, who she'd originally considered an annoyance and a liability, had somehow gotten under her skin. She didn't go in much for the overprotective act, but concern for her welfare was somehow endearing on her polite junior partner, who had shown up tonight looking like a lonely, battered puppy.

Plus, she was still mentally reeling from the look on his face when he'd first seen her in the kitchen, as if the sun had been set back into its rightful place on his horizon.

She bit her lip, and ruthlessly suppressed the mental image of awed ardor on his face.

On their very first assignment together, she'd warned him not to fall for her.

Now, she wasn't sure he'd listened.

The sight of his face lighting up when he first saw her tonight wrapped warmly around her mind, just like the hug he'd captured her in as she'd stepped out of the restaurant.

No, he hadn't listened.

She wasn't quite sure how she felt about his selective hearing.

\* \* \*

Clark recognized the Apollo instantly, unable to keep the concern out of his voice when he asked, "Is this where you're staying?"

"It makes sense with my cover."

But it didn't make sense for keeping her safe, which was, he'd easily decided on the wait for her shift to end, his purpose in life.

"Why don't you stay at my place?" he suggested. "You can have the bed; I'll take the sofa."

"Because it's one of the first places they'd look for me."

They didn't speak again until Lois had unlocked the deadbolt on her door and entered. Before they stepped over the threshold into the seedy room she was staying in, Lois watched a piece of grey thread fall from the doorjamb and

flutter to the ground. She picked it up and pocketed it before closing them inside.

Clark had seen that trick before. It was one way to tell if the door had been opened since you'd left last. If someone broke in, they'd likely miss the string falling. If they relocked the doors, the string would already be on the ground when you opened it, and you'd have a warning that someone else had been inside.

It made him nervous that Lois suspected someone was still after her, even though the world had proclaimed her dead.

"Who's 'they'?" he asked once they were inside. "Who's looking for you?"

Instead of answering, she asked accusingly, "What did you think you were doing coming into that restaurant tonight?"

"I thought someone called for help." He shrugged.

She narrowed her eyes. "You weren't looking for me? Trying to find me? Trying to get in on this story?"

He couldn't even fathom that line of questioning. He'd been mourning her, chasing her ghost. And then he'd been interrupted.

"I went in to help."

"That is just so like you, Clark!" she said irritably. "And now you're going to get in the way of my story!"

"I won't get in the way," he promised. He'd do whatever she told him to as long as she let him stay. "Just let me help."

"Oh no," she said in a threatening way, "You're *not* actually showing up tomorrow."

"Look, Lois..."

"Anita," she hissed.

"Right," he placated. "The manager is obviously overwhelmed with your skills in the kitchen. If I don't come tomorrow, he'll just hire someone else. And then you'll have to hide everything you're really doing from them, too," he reasoned. "At least I'm on your side."

"Ugh!"

Lois took her coat off and threw it down on the small kitchen table in frustration.

She was mad, but he knew a Lois Lane capitulation when he saw one.

"So, who's after you?" he asked again.

"Earlier this week, Bobby called me with a tip," she said grudgingly.

"That's what Perry said," Clark confirmed. "But he said it was a bad tip."

She gave him another exasperated look, but went on, "It was a *great* tip. Apparently the Metros are bringing a new designer drug into the city. The police don't have a handle on it. There's been no way to trace it."

"So you tried to trace it?" he guessed.

"I went down to the Metro Club."

"Perry said that, too. Did you find it?"

"I think I found some people who'd used it, but I didn't get much information. They weren't really up for talking. It was..." She cut herself off, looking repulsed. "I'd never seen anything like it."

"What did it look like?" he asked, feeling like he already knew.

She shook her head slowly, the uneasiness of the memory spreading across her face. "It looked like they'd been crying blood."

Seven faces flashed across Clark's mind from Superman's rescues on the west side this week.

"That stuff is dangerous!" he exclaimed.

"How do you know?"

"There were at least seven overdoses brought into Metro General this week. They all died. Don't go near that stuff if you see it."

She rolled her eyes at him. "The *point* is to get as close as I can to it, Clark."

"The point is to track it," he corrected her.

She barreled right past that. "Anyway, while I was there, I saw Johnny Taylor."

"Toni's brother? He's back in town?"

"I guess so."

"Is he the one bringing in the new drugs?"

"That's my guess."

"So why are you at the restaurant, and not at the Metro Club?"

She sighed. "I tried the Club. Johnny recognized me from when I was a singer there a few weeks back. Only I wasn't dressed like a dancer when he saw me. He pulled my press pass out of my bag. Let's just say he put two and two together."

"So, how did you get away?"

Lois fell uncharacteristically quiet.

"Lois?" he prodded.

"Anita," she corrected him primly.

"You know," he pondered, "It seems like you used a lot of truth in your cover story."

"Yeah," she said indifferently.

"Perry also said that you were shot."

She shrugged, and his gut turned over.

"Oh my god, Lois—"

"*Anita!*" she corrected again, tersely.

"Were you shot?"

"It's no big deal."

"You were *shot!*?"

"It barely grazed me."

"Why didn't you call for m— for help? Why didn't you call for Superman?"

"Johnny surprised me," she said defensively.

He backtracked immediately at her tone. "I'm not — I'm not blaming you. I just—" He ran one hand through his hair, reining his emotions in firmly. "Tell me what happened," he said more calmly.

"He asked me what I was doing there. I couldn't give him an answer he believed, so he—" She motioned with her hand, indicating that he'd fired his gun. "It kind of knocked me down. I guess I was stunned, and I just fell." She shuddered, staring into nothing for a second.

"Lois?" he gently tried to get her attention.

Her eyes met his and he saw a haunted look before she pulled her walls up to cover it. "Before I could get up, they were already getting out of there in a hurry. So I laid there until I was sure they were gone, and then I found a pay phone and called Perry," she finished in a rush.

"Why didn't you call Superman?"

"Because there wasn't a crime to stop!"

"But you had been SHOT!"

"Keep it down!" she shushed him. "Superman would have insisted on taking me to a hospital."

Undoubtedly.

Clark would have flown her there at the speed of light.

"Which is what should have happened!"

She looked at him like he was stupid. "You really believe Johnny wouldn't think to send his goons looking for me in hospitals if he'd thought I survived?"

Lois Lane was going to be the death of him, he knew now, feeling his stomach sink further into his gut.

“Please tell me someone looked at the bullet wound.”

“Of course!” she waved off. “Perry had a doctor meet us at his house. Then he brought me here to lay low. If Johnny Taylor shot me, it’s better that he thinks I’m dead.”

At least that explained the disguise and false identity. But there were a lot of things it didn’t explain.

“So, if you’re hiding from Johnny, why are you now tracking a story to find his drug suppliers?”

“Because he’ll never see me! He usually doesn’t go into the kitchen to retrieve the food himself. Like most restaurants, they bring the food right to your table,” she said sarcastically. “Or do they make you go out back and pick your own corn in the restaurants in Kansas?”

“Wait a minute,” Clark said, wrapping his mind around her words, “Johnny Taylor eats at that restaurant?”

“Two or three times a week,” she confirmed. “He owns the place.”

Clark put his palms to his temples, trying to control the total panic setting in at the way Lois was risking her life.

“That’s too dangerous,” he finally bit out.

“It’s not,” she argued forcefully. “And who are you to tell me it’s too dangerous?”

His patience, already rail-thin after three days without her, snapped.

“The guy who decided to quit his job and move home because he couldn’t stand the idea of having let his partner down *so badly* that she didn’t trust him enough to call him when she got a tip and THEN SHE WAS MURDERED.”

She looked shocked, and he immediately regretted raising his voice to her.

Before he could apologize, she spoke up.

“I didn’t realize you cared so much,” she said in a small voice.

“Lois,” he said, overwhelmed. “*Of course* I care about you. I felt so lost without you.”

She studied him with wide eyes for a moment.

He wondered if he’d pushed too far, revealed too much.

Then she recovered.

“Look, Bobby said Johnny meets with his distributors at the restaurant. They do business over dinner.”

“And that’s why you’re working there,” Clark pieced together.

She nodded.

He shoved his glasses up and rubbed at his eyes, trying to dispel the hopelessness and anxiety dueling in his head.

“Is there any way I can talk you out of this?”

She paused before she answered, either thinking it over or watching him, he wasn’t sure which.

“No,” she ruled.

He gritted his teeth and exhaled.

“We should find out if he has a regular table. Maybe we can hide one of Jimmy’s recording devices under it.”

She smiled. “I’ll tell Perry when I check in tomorrow morning.”

“Can you ask him for the Charlie King ID cards again? I’ll need them.”

“Sure,” she agreed.

“Who else knows you’re alive?”

“Perry, Henderson, the doctor who took the bullet out, and my parents.”

His heart stuttered. “The doctor *who took the bullet out*? That doesn’t sound like ‘just a graze.’”

“I said it was fine.”

“Where did it hit you?”

“What does it matter? It’s *fine*.”

“Show me.”

“No.”

He could just look. He *should* just look. But he knew he wouldn’t. Not without her consent.

“Please.” He hadn’t meant for his voice to crack.

He saw her hesitate. For a moment, he thought she wasn’t going to even humor him with a reply.

Then she looked away and pulled up the hem of her shirt on her left side.

He crossed to her, and stopped a breath away. He traced the edge of the bandage with a fingertip. It wrapped around her abdomen, but there was a big patch above her navel nearly wrapping around her left side. Looking over his glasses, he peeked at the wound with his special vision. She’d been lucky. Another inch in one direction and it might have missed her completely. But another inch in the opposite direction could have ruptured her intestine, even hit her kidney.

The harsh metal angles of the surgical staples looked discordant against her smooth skin. The wound was wide

and still an angry red, though it didn't look like it had any obvious signs of infection that he knew about.

"Does it hurt?" he asked gently.

"Only when I move," she joked, her voice a bit breathless.

He looked up at her to see a light pink glow splashed across her cheeks. He realized that he was standing mere inches from her, palm flat against her side as she held her shirt up above her navel.

Clearing his throat awkwardly, he moved back a step, and she let her shirt drop over her waist again.

"I should get going. I need to pull out clothes that make sense for Charlie King and get to the restaurant in the morning to get started on that wall."

"Yeah," she agreed.

He moved toward the door, reluctant to leave. Turning back to her, hand on the knob, he asked, "You didn't tell Lucy?"

"She doesn't read national news," Lois shrugged.

"I'm telling my parents."

She looked alarmed at that idea. "I only told *my* parents because Perry insisted. If anyone—"

"They won't tell anyone."

She looked earnestly confused. "But why do you need to tell your parents now?"

"Because they were worried about you."

"They don't even know me."

"They know *about* you," he said, hoping she wouldn't read too much into that.

She blinked.

"Plus, I need to tell them why I'm not moving home," he explained quietly.

Lois didn't seem to have a reply for that, either.

He nodded to her, and opened the door.

"Get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow, Anita."

"Goodnight, Charlie," she said, and watched him leave.

Clark made his way down to the front door of her building and walked two blocks before finding a dark alley. He was in the suit and in the sky back above her new apartment building less than two minutes after he'd left her.

\* \* \*

The next day at the restaurant felt uneventful in comparison to the painful haze of the three days he'd lived without

Lois. Anita had shown Charlie around the kitchen and walked him through the menu. The pasta was pre-made and frozen, he'd learned. They'd pulled it out to defrost during prep. The sauce and meats needed to be cooked fresh, but that was well within his wheelhouse.

He wondered how Lois had managed three days here on her own, before his eyes strayed to the newly painted back-splash behind the oven. Remembering Aldo's frustration when he'd come back to the kitchen last night, it must not have been the first accident she'd instigated.

Clark had managed to patch up the wall earlier that morning without incident. First he'd gone to his parents', to fill them in and relieve their worry after he hadn't come home that night.

He hadn't been able to bring himself to leave his guard post above the Apollo. After he left her, he'd tuned into Lois' heartbeat and its steady rhythm had lulled him into a light doze. It was the first snatch of peace he'd felt in days. He knew that he couldn't make a habit of watching over her like this, but after a narrow escape from the grief-ridden sinking ship that had been his last few days, he anchored himself to the one person that made him feel as if he weren't lost at sea.

Plus, with the west side going crazy, his worry for her felt passably justified. The restaurant was deep in Metro territory. The Apollo was at least on the far edge of the wharf neighborhood, but it was still too close for his comfort. Lois could take care of herself most of the time, but her taekwondo wasn't as useful with a wound like the one she had now.

With Lois safe at the Apollo, it had finally given him time to think about the sudden outbreak of crime. He'd started to theorize that the new drugs were the reason the west side had lost its mind this week. Pulled out of his twilight doze over and over last night, he'd stopped robberies, broken up street fights, put out a car fire and grimly dropped off one more young man at the hospital, blood seeping from his eyes.

Or maybe it had been Johnny's return that had sent this side of the city into a tailspin. Was it possible he was spurring the Metro gang on to more violent behavior, all to make a point about his homecoming? Was this part of a power move, to show he was in control?

Whatever the reason for the west side's descent into madness, Clark felt better returning to his watchtower position above Lois' place rather than to Kansas, or even to his own apartment. Only once she'd headed out of the Apollo toward the city center to check in with Perry, far away from the west side, did he head back to his apartment for a shower, shave, and change of clothes, followed by breakfast in Smallville.

Now he was mincing garlic, finishing his prep work for the dinner service that was starting soon.

And after just a couple of hours in the kitchen with Lois, he was debating whether she would actually be safer in the mobs roaming the west side. Because for Lois, touching anything in the kitchen was the equivalent of stepping into quicksand.

It wasn't that she was accident prone, exactly. It was just that she managed to combine a particularly large knowledge gap with a laissez-faire attitude for kitchen safety and a virtuosity of unrivaled timing.

She'd let a pot of neglected boiling water evaporate as she snooped through paperwork, hoping to find something linked to the sale of the new drug. He'd pulled it off the stove just as the bottom of the pot had begun to smoke. She never managed to use the correct door into the kitchen, leaving him to cover what would obviously have been a broken nose on anyone else. Somehow the knives never made it back into their blocks, but ended up hiding beneath things as she searched the kitchen for links to the Metros' business dealings. She'd cut her fingers twice, circling back unknowingly to a previously discarded knife, and he'd had to discreetly bend another back into place after unexpectedly running afoul of it.

He'd finally told her to just search the place as she'd wanted, leaving him to prep the ingredients for recipes that Aldo had impressed upon him were sacred family secrets.

As customers drifted in, though, Lois was corralled into the kitchen with him. That meant he was forced to either hide the more obvious instances of his super abilities, and run the risk of the kitchen falling behind, or put her to work.

He set up three large pots with water for the three types of pasta the restaurant served. He found 3 kitchen timers and taped notes to them with the amount of time each would need to cook. Then he cut and shaped oven mitts to the handles, taping them on. For good measure, he turned on the large fan in the hood above the stove, wiped away any excess grease that had splattered, and removed every other kitchen tool within reach.

Standing back, he admired his Lois-Lane-proofed kitchen set-up.

What could go wrong?

\* \* \*

*This has to be a record*, Clark thought in amazement, absentmindedly catching the cleaver that chose that exact moment to dislodge from its temporary hold in the ceiling.

He turned around and pulled the plug of the open blender next to him, halting the shower of pesto. Sticking the cleaver

to the magnetic holder above the countertop, he reached for the baking sheet of crisply burned cannoli shells and dumped them to the floor.

Stepping in front of a flour-covered Lois, Clark placed the oversized baking sheet over the foot-high flames on the range and flipped the knobs off.

He turned back to her, glasses already down his nose as he looked her over.

"You ok?" he asked, checking in aloud despite the evidence of his own eyes.

Lois, still holding the leaking piping bag of ricotta filling, looked a little shell-shocked as pesto dripped from her nose. "Uh, huh," she said, eyes on the divot in the ceiling where the cleaver had stuck.

Clark reached past her and patted the final flickering flame from the edge of a dishcloth. Folding it in half so that she wouldn't see its newly blackened edge, he gently wiped the congealing flour and pesto mix from her nose. And her cheek. And her neck.

He swallowed as she looked up at him through thick lashes.

"Thanks," she said breathily.

The kitchen was finally still after the tornado of chaos that had somehow blown through.

It was quiet enough to hear her heart skip the faintest of beats as his eyes flicked from hers to her mouth and back.

She still had a brush of flour across the side of her mouth. He dabbed at it with the edge of the dishcloth.

"No problem," he murmured, allowing the smile he'd been suppressing to emerge.

The kitchen door slammed open, starting them both, and they flew apart like shrapnel.

"One osso buco and two bolognese," called out Aldo.

He looked up and stopped in his tracks as he took in the pesto-covered kitchen, the charred cannoli crumbled on the floor, and the steam billowing from beneath the baking sheet on the stove.

*Don't look up*, Clark prayed, making a mental note to patch the cleaver-sized ceiling hole when he got in tomorrow.

Aldo's eyes shot to Lois.

"Anita!" he squawked, pointing an angry finger at her.

Lois, conspicuously covered in flour, turned to him with a chagrined expression.

"We talked about this! Dishes! You do dishes! You don't ever touch food again!

"Oh, no, Mr. Bianchi," Clark jumped in, "I just asked her to prep the ricotta filling for the cannoli." He leaned down and opened the oven door for the second batch of shells. Still underdone, he zapped them until they had a golden flake at the top of the shell. He folded the now pesto-covered dishcloth in half again and used it to pull the sheet of perfectly baked pastries from the oven.

He held it up for the boss' inspection.

"See?" he asked. "No actual cooking involved." Dropping the pastry sheet onto the metal counter top, he took the piping bag from Lois. "Thanks, Anita," he said brightly.

Aldo looked at him skeptically.

"And what about all this?" He gestured to the sticky green sauce glopped onto the counter, floor and wall, one eye still on Lois.

"My fault, Mr. Bianchi," Clark said quickly. "I'm, uh, still getting used to the kitchen. But it's nothing that can't be fixed. Anita, would you mind cleaning this up while I start on the osso buco?"

He tossed the dishtowel in her direction and she immediately started wiping down the cabinet doors. Meanwhile, Clark grabbed a fresh pan and turned on the stove burner, adding butter as he slid the pan onto the range.

"Anything else, Mr. Bianchi?" Clark asked, carefully measuring salt as the butter melted in the pan.

Aldo looked back and forth between them, Clark now heating a second pan with garlic to start the gremolata and Lois busily wiping down the countertop.

"Just get this place cleaned up," he said with a wave, heading back toward the dining room.

Releasing a breath, Lois got up and crossed to the sink on the opposite side of the kitchen.

It seemed like Aldo was more receptive to Lois' disasters if they were quickly remedied, Clark noted.

"And Anita," Aldo called, turning back over his shoulder, one hand on the kitchen door.

Clark winced, sure they were in trouble in spite of their save.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"Get a new apron out of the back. Yours is covered in bolognese."

Lois looked down, her face immediately paling.

She looked up and met Clark's eyes, fear pooling in her own.

Lois' apron was covered in blood.

Aldo left the kitchen, not seeing the horrified looks on his employee's faces.

The door swung closed and Lois immediately tugged at her apron strings.

Clark grabbed a clean towel from the pile and flashed across the kitchen faster than he necessarily should have. He held the cloth against her abdomen and pressed. She winced and pulled away.

"Let me take a look," he said.

"I can't get the apron off," she told him, panic edging her voice higher.

"It's ok, Lois," he said reassuringly. "Just take a deep breath."

"You take a deep breath, Clark! I'm not bleeding out for the likes of a thug like Johnny Taylor!"

Her pulse racing was not going to help slow the blood flow.

"Here," he said, handing her the already bloody cloth he'd been holding against her.

He put his hands around her and tore the knot to pieces behind her, then gently lifted the apron over her head, dropping it to the floor.

The blood has seeped through the bandages and her shirt.

"Just a second," he said.

Crossing back over to the stove, he turned off the burners, lest they invite Aldo into yet another kitchen fire, grabbed three more clean dishcloths and pocketed the kitchen shears. Then he raced back to her side.

"Lift your shirt," he instructed.

She pulled it upward without hesitation, and he gently pulled the soaked bandages away from her wound. They'd been wrapped around her abdomen to keep them in place, so he cut through them with the kitchen shears. Dropping them to the floor beside the apron, he nudged his glasses down his nose to take a better look at her wound.

The bottom two staples had pulled partway out, and the gap was bleeding steadily. He could see that the edges of the bottom staple were digging into unharmed skin at an odd angle. He'd never be able to put enough pressure on it to stop the bleeding with the staples like this.

Lois was distinctly *not* looking at the open wound, hands both still clutching the hem of her shirt, her face pale. A sheen of sweat had appeared on her brow.

“Lois, look at me.”

She did, and he could see that the panic in her eyes was brighter than it had been.

“There’s blood, but you’re going to be ok. Two of the staples came partway out.”

“It must have happened when I dodged out of the way of the cleaver,” she said.

“I’m going to take them all the way out for now so that we can stop the bleeding, ok?”

“Do you know how to do that?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I think so.”

“You *think* so?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t make it worse. Hold your shirt up.” He rolled one of the clean cloths. “Open your mouth.”

“Wha—Mmf! Lrk!”

Once she’d opened her mouth, he’d gently popped the rolled cloth into it.

“Bite down if it hurts, ok?”

She immediately put a hand to her mouth to remove it, and he stopped her, his larger hand covering hers.

“I’ll be as gentle as I can. But we can do this now before Aldo comes back in, or we can walk out the door now and find a cab to the hospital.”

Her brow furrowed and he knew she was about to argue with him.

“Or I can call Superman, and he’ll take you.”

Honestly, that was his preference at this point. Having Lois ensconced in a safe place uptown with medical care and lots of witnesses, with a known superhero watching over her sounded pretty good to him right about now.

But Lois rolled her eyes and stubbornly dropped her hand, pulling her shirt up again.

He took the kitchen shears and lightly grasped the first staple.

Lois made a little whimper and he looked up at her.

“Ready?”

She closed her eyes and nodded, bracing herself against the sink behind her.

“Ok,” he said, eyes moving back to the wound. “One, two, three,” he said. He bent the staple in the center with

the shears and then tugged smoothly. The staple popped out with little effort. It had mostly been out in the first place—that had been the whole problem.

He looked back up at Lois. “One down, one to go,” he said. “You ok?”

She nodded emphatically and kept her eyes closed.

He risked a peek through the doors and out into the dining room. Aldo was chatting up a table at the far end.

Moving the kitchen shears to the second staple, he told Lois, “Ok, I’m removing the second one now in one, two, three.” He bent the second staple in the center with the shears and then tugged again, but this time it caught against her skin.

Lois made a guttural sound in her throat and he paused. Looking through the tissue, he saw that the staple had bent at one edge bit. It would damage some new skin on its exit, but he’d have to do his best.

“It’s ok,” he told her. “This one is going to hurt a little, but we’re almost done.”

He got a better grip on the shears and tugged the staple again, twisting to try and guide it out with as little damage as possible.

Lois made another pained sound.

But then the staple was clear and blood was welling from the wound.

He quickly covered it with the spare cloth. He took the cloth from Lois’ mouth and piled that on top, pressing it tightly against her.

“That should do it,” he said, seeing the fear in her eyes. “It will bleed a little bit, but it will stop.”

He glanced back through the kitchen doors and saw Aldo wrapping up his conversation.

He replaced his hand against Lois’ abdomen with her own and said, “Hold this, ok? Tightly!” He turned her toward the sink and started the water, then threw her apron back over her head to hide her hand. Kicking her old bandages under the sink, he said, “Lean against the sink if you need to. Just... stay right here.”

He practically flew across the kitchen again.

Aldo would expect three meals to be nearly ready when he walked back in.

Checking to see that Lois was still facing the sink, he portioned pasta and sauce into two bowls and zapped them instantly warm. He flicked the burners on and threw lemon zest into the garlic he’d prepped when Aldo had last been in the room. Tossing the veal onto the second pan, he used his

heat vision to sear the meat and make up for the time they'd lost tending to Lois' wound.

Mere seconds later, he slid the veal onto the plate and started to spoon the sauce over just as Aldo opened the doors to the kitchen.

"Got that osso buco ready?" the manager prompted immediately.

Clark added a garnish to the plates and set them on the opposite counter.

"All ready!"

Aldo looked them over approvingly. "Nice!" he said. "Hopefully they're as good as they look!"

Clark smiled, trying not to look at Lois and draw Aldo's attention to her.

"Two more bolognese, one meatball, one without, a fettuccine and a chicken parm," Aldo instructed.

"Got it," replied Clark, turning back to the burners. He drew a new pan for the chicken and added oil, waiting for Aldo to leave so that he could rush back to Lois.

He measured butter and cream into a saucepan to start the alfredo, willing Aldo to collect the plates faster.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lois sag against the sink.

He popped into the walk-in fridge and retrieved a chicken breast and two eggs. Back at the counter, he added seasoning and the eggs to a bowl, wondering if he were still moving at superspeed, or if Aldo was just the slowest man to ever walk across a kitchen.

Aldo, all three plates stacked up his arm, finally stepped backwards out of the kitchen.

The door swung closed.

"Lois, you ok?" he called to her.

"Fine," she said, but her voice sounded weak.

Lois was worrying him. He desperately wanted to race across the kitchen to her. But she obviously wasn't going to let him take her to a hospital, and she'd already said he couldn't talk her out of this story.

That meant he was going to have to keep up with the chef charade, and keep her safe, if they were going to get through this. He thought he'd lost her once already. He was never going to let that happen again.

At superspeed, he dipped the chicken in the egg mixture and crumb-coated it, tossing it into the waiting pan. Dumping garlic, seasoning and a handful of Parmesan into the cream saucepan to finish off the alfredo, he boiled a pot of

water with his heat vision. Measuring out what he thought was three servings of pasta, he dropped it all into the boiling water. He set out four plates, three with cold bolognese and one with the fresh alfredo from the saucepan.

In less than three seconds, he was crossing the kitchen back to Lois with another handful of clean towels.

"Let me see it again," he said, once he'd gotten to her.

She slowly turned to him and he pulled aside the apron.

The towels she held against herself were both nearly soaked through.

But the bleeding had slowed.

Dropping the soaked towels to the floor, he pressed a new one against the wound and she winced.

"Sorry," he said apologetically. "Do you have more bandages with you?"

"In my bag," she said, motioning toward the little alcove by the back door.

She took over holding the cloth in place again and he trotted over to her bag and found a package with a long bandage. He grabbed it and ran back across the kitchen.

Kneeling down, he stacked three clean cloths against the wound.

"Can you hold these in place? I'll wrap the bandage around your waist."

Her hand took his place, and he pulled the rolled bandage from its package. He placed one end gently against the towel she was holding and unraveled it over her abdomen, hugging her to transfer it to his other hand, and winding it around her. The bandage made it around 3 times before it ran out and he clumsily tied it off.

"You have to see a doctor tonight," he said.

"Will this hold until then?"

"If you don't go diving after any more rogue cleavers," he joked.

She cracked her first smile since Aldo had pointed out her ruined apron.

But it didn't last long. He watched as her face morphed from a grin to curiosity.

"Where did you learn this?"

"Oh, you know," he stalled, not able to tell her about the amount of first responder situations he'd been in, even before he'd officially become Superman. "Growing up on a farm, sometimes it was hours away to the nearest hospital. We had to learn basic first aid." That was true enough, he supposed.

“Huh,” she said, looking back down at her bandaged middle. “Well, thanks.”

“Any time.”

He gathered the bloody remnants of her apron and dish-towels and threw them away. Then he went to the back of the kitchen to get her a new apron.

As he crossed past the stove, he flipped the sizzling chicken just before it burned.

Crossing back again with the fresh apron, he pulled the pasta from the water and dished it across the three waiting bowls.

Clark made his way back to Lois, bringing the dirty osso buco dishes with him. He set them in the sink.

“Don’t wash these. I’ll do it after Aldo takes out the next set of plates.”

“But you have to cook!” she protested.

He slipped the clean apron over her head. “I can do both,” he assured her, wrapping the apron strings around her and knotting them in the back. “But you need to try and rest. Don’t move around if you can help it. That wound can still open up again. We can’t risk that happening.”

He paused, worrying over what would happen if Aldo recognized the ‘bolognese’ as blood.

And then he realized that he’d gone still staring into her eyes, his arms wrapped around her.

Shaking himself out of the moment, he gently unentangled himself and headed back to the stove to pull the chicken from the pan.

Aldo walked in a moment later, just as he was adding a laser-cooked meatball to the bolognese.

“Two more chicken parms, and make sure you get these two right.”

Clark added the garnish to his current plates and looked up at his boss. “Something wrong with this one?”

Aldo spared it a glance, but waved it away. “The owner just came in. It’s his family’s recipe. He always orders the same thing, and he expects it to taste just like mama made it.”

“You got it,” Clark assured him, starting the process for two more plates of chicken parmesan.

Johnny Taylor had arrived.

He could feel Lois’ eyes on him as he added more oil to his chicken pan.

“Is mama eating the other one?” Clark asked casually.

“What?” Aldo asked, distracted by the plates he was stacking on his arm. “Nah. Business associate. Johnny always brings new partners around to impress them. So get it right.”

Clark set the pasta water to boiling again as Aldo made his way out the kitchen doors.

“Clark!” Lois hissed the moment the door swung closed.

“Don’t move,” Clark said, adding bolognese to two dishes, already anticipating that they’d need to be laser cooked instead of properly simmered.

“But Clark! He said a new business partner! The drugs are new! This could be it!”

Hands on the counter to steady her, she made her way across the kitchen.

“Lois, you can’t go out there!” he begged her. “Johnny already shot you once this week. If he sees you tonight, he’ll do it again!”

“Don’t be silly,” she said stubbornly. “That’s what the disguise is for!”

At the kitchen door, she peeked through.

“Clark, they’re at the table next to the bar! If I crouch behind it, I’ll be able to hear them!”

“Lois, you can’t crawl behind a bar! Your wound will open up again!”

Flustered, he stumbled over what to say to her. He needed to explain to her somehow that he could hear the conversation from here, that she didn’t need to take such a pointless risk in such a dangerous game.

He opened his mouth to tell her that he was Superman.

It wasn’t the right time.

But it was the right reason.

He’d rather have her know than have the man that had shot her catch her and hurt her again.

She threw him an icy look, forestalling his declaration. “It’s a chance I’ll have to take.”

And then she was through the door before he could stop her.

He groaned, immediately looking through the door.

Lois made it to the very short distance to the bar without anyone noticing her. She gingerly bent down, and he saw her wince, her hand moving over her wound to steady it. He looked closer. All her movement was irritating it, and it had started to ooze again.

The whole situation made him feel helpless. He wanted to go out there and carry her back to the safety of the kitchen. But that would undoubtedly attract even more attention than she would on her own. And he knew, from the last couple months of being partnered with her, that she would never forgive him putting her safety over her scoop.

Keeping one eye on Lois, he mechanically threw together the rest of the ingredients for the food Aldo would be expecting.

Aldo, who would be walking directly past Lois the next time he came into the kitchen.

Recovering the forgotten piping bag, he chilled it with his breath, and the ricotta filling stiffened. He swiftly filled the tray of cooled cannoli shells, dipping the ends into crushed pistachios as he set them down.

Meanwhile, Lois was edging slowly along the bar toward Johnny Taylor's table.

Toward the table of a known and dangerous gangster.

Toward the man who had shot her four days prior.

He felt his own pulse speed in anxiety as his feeling of helplessness multiplied.

He'd only just gotten her back.

He couldn't lose her again.

Which meant that he had to make sure their undercover work here was successful, he reminded himself.

So they could stop the new drugs from corrupting their city.

So the man who had shot Lois could be sent to trial for his crimes.

So they could go back to their lives together at the Planet, the first place he'd ever felt like he truly belonged.

The reminder of what was at stake focused him.

With Lois out of the kitchen, he collected the dirty dishes he'd created along with the stack of plates that had come back to the kitchen already. She wouldn't be able to do her job with a healing bullet wound, so he'd make sure it looked to Aldo like she was on top of it. He rolled up his sleeves at the sink and relied on superspeed to have everything stacked and sparking in seconds.

When he finished, Lois was still crouching behind the bar, and he flicked his glance around the dining room. Johnny was still at his table. But Aldo was just stepping away from another table of customers on his way back to the kitchen with their order.

Another dash across the kitchen.

Pulling the noodles from the boiling water, he compiled the components of the two chicken dishes for Johnny and his guest, topping them off with mozzarella and liberally applying his heat vision as he sprinkled parmesan.

Clark tensed as Aldo passed the bar, but, intent on getting back to the kitchen, their manager didn't even glance in Lois' direction. Breathing a sigh of relief, Clark reached for the garnish.

"Another osso buco and a pomodoro," Aldo announced as soon as he was through the doors.

Clark turned at once to add more pasta to the already boiling water.

"These ready?"

He turned back to see Aldo picking up the two plates of chicken for Johnny's table.

"All set," Clark confirmed, adding a generous pat of butter to the pan.

Aldo was halfway across the kitchen before he paused.

"Hey! Where's Anita?"

"Bathroom," Clark supplied. He glanced over at the empty sink, taking the opportunity to show off something that 'Anita' had done right. "I figured you wouldn't mind since her station was clear."

Aldo looked toward the sink in surprise.

Then he grunted. "Prob'ly better that menace is out of the kitchen instead of *in* it when the boss is here."

"She'd been pretty useful back here," Clark said, hoping to get Lois into Aldo's good graces again.

"You kiddin' me?" Aldo scoffed.

"She's a good partner," he said honestly.

"She's a disaster," Aldo said, incredulous that Clark seemed to think she was anything but.

"You know, it's only when you're around. I think you make her a little nervous," Clark said suggestively, faking a conspiratorial grin.

"She ain't my type," Aldo returned. "But I guess she gets some credit for knowing a good thing when she sees it." His voice was mollified and Clark crossed his fingers that his fib wouldn't get back to Lois. He could only imagine what she'd do to him for suggesting she was attracted to Aldo.

Clark held his breath as Aldo stepped backward through the swinging doors, a plate in each hand. When he turned, he faced the opposite direction from the bar, missing Lois completely.

He sighed again in relief, watching as Aldo dropped off his two steaming plates with Johnny and his guest.

Clark took a moment to study the other person at the table, the person they assumed was his dealer for the new drugs that left its users with bloody weeping eyes and no chances for recovery.

To his surprise, the business associate was a woman. With long raven hair and violet eyes, she wore a crisp white button-up shirt and a tailored black coat. Clark was sure he'd never seen her in Metropolis before.

Haphazardly throwing the next two dishes together, he decided to tune his hearing in to the table.

"...family recipe," Johnny was saying.

The woman took exactly one bite and replaced her fork. "It's delicious. Now, you said 'business over dinner.' Here's dinner. Tell me about the business." She crossed her legs and sat back, one arm languidly over the back of her chair.

"Thursday night," Johnny said.

"Another dinner date?" she asked coyly.

"I said 'dinner and *then* business,'" Johnny said. "This is dinner. Thursday night is business. Meet me at the club at midnight, and bring your—"

"What are *you* doing back there?"

Clark immediately shifted his gaze to Lois, who was kneeling behind the bar, just feet away from Johnny.

And Aldo was staring right at her, about to draw his boss' attention.

Clark flew across the kitchen.

"Well?" Aldo asked aggressively, starting to advance.

Clark popped his head around the kitchen door, forcing himself to move at a normal pace.

"Anita, did you find any?" he said, focusing on her.

"Find any?" she asked, trying to catch up. "No, no, not yet."

Clark pretended to sigh, "Mr. Bianchi, can you help? We need another bottle of white wine for the gremolata. I'm behind on the next osso buco."

"Yeah, but don't pull it from the bar. Use the cheap stuff. It's back in the pantry."

Clark shrugged, "I must have missed it." He shifted his gaze back to Lois. "Anita, can you find it? I have to finish the veal."

Lois, keeping her face directed away from Johnny's table, moved past them a little slower than her usual pace, and back into the refuge of the kitchen.

"Thanks, Mr. Bianchi," he said to Aldo, covering her exit. "It'll be a minute, but I'll get that right up."

Two cannoli while you're at it," Aldo directed.

"You got it," Clark said again, and followed Lois back into the kitchen.

She was standing against the counter, holding herself up. Moving more quickly than he should in public, he dashed to her side. She leaned into him, which made him feel a mixture of warmth and worry.

"Lois—"

"I'm fine," she bit out.

But he could hear the fatigue in her voice.

The adrenaline spike from Johnny's arrival was wearing off, and the blood loss was hitting her. She needed a doctor.

But first they had to make it out of here.

He gently lifted the hem of her shirt and saw that the bandages looked clean.

"Let's get you into the pantry," he said. "You can sit in there for a while."

She nodded, her head resting on his shoulder, and he helped her into the back.

Now they just had to make it through the rest of the night.

\* \* \*

Surprisingly, the rest of the evening went smoothly once they made it through Johnny's visit. The restaurant was slow, even for a Tuesday, and most of the customers had all trickled out before ten o'clock. Thankfully, Aldo spent more of the night shooting the breeze with the regulars than visiting the kitchen. In a bid to keep him out there even longer, Clark had eventually taken a decorated tray of the remaining cannoli to the bar, where Aldo could both serve dessert and hold court. That meant Lois could nap on a stack of enormous flour sacks in the pantry unobserved. And he could race around the kitchen at superspeed, ensuring that the place was cleaned and that they were ready to go by the time Aldo finally made it back to check up on them. Clark also made sure to cover their tracks by taking out the trash with Lois' bloodied apron and make-shift bandages.

After locking the door behind the last customer, Aldo had made his way back to the kitchen with the empty cannoli tray. He stood there, looking the place over.

"Seems like this'll work out," he finally said to Clark.

Clark nearly cheered in response. They'd done it! He'd played super-chef successfully enough tonight that they'd gotten a lead from Johnny and not made Aldo suspicious. Now he'd need Aldo to trust him for just a couple more days.

"Thank you, Mr. Bianchi," Clark smiled.

A freshly rested Lois took the cannoli tray from Aldo's hands, moving stiffly as she went to the sink to wash the last dish of the night.

"If this is what the kitchen looks like when I stay out of it, maybe I'll spend more time out front," Aldo snickered.

Clark laughed along with him, secretly hoping he'd do just that.

Lois finished washing the tray and turned expectantly toward them, her elbow tucked tightly against her side.

Her wound must be hurting her, Clark realized.

Aldo, perhaps thinking it wiser to not make the menace nervous in this sparkling clean kitchen, headed back to the front. "You're done for the night," he said, waving a casual hand over his shoulder.

As soon as he was back through the kitchen doors, Lois sighed in relief.

"I thought this shift would never end."

Clark grinned, "I agree with you completely. Now let's get you to that doctor."

"I'm not arguing," Lois said, moving slowly and allowing Clark to help her divest of the apron and shrug into her coat.

They moved out through the back door slowly, Clark's arm around her waist as he helped her to walk.

"I think we should risk just getting a cab together," he said.

The door slammed behind them.

And then he realized that they weren't alone.

A tall, slender figure in a long, tailored black overcoat and knee-high boots stood between them and the end of the alley.

Clark paused, instinctively putting himself slightly in front of Lois.

The figure took a few steps toward them, and slanted light from the moon illuminated her face.

It was the raven-haired woman that had met with Johnny.

"What do you want?" Lois challenged.

"She's with me," came a gritty voice from above him.

A dark figure crouched on a fire escape, and Clark immediately adjusted them again, putting himself between Lois and the more likely threat, whom he hadn't seen or heard approach.

There was absolutely no light hitting the fire escape where the second figure, a man by the voice, crouched, and Clark assumed that he'd planned it that way.

"The restaurant's closed," Clark said. "You'll have to come back tomorrow if you're looking for dessert."

"I'm working this case," the shadowed man said tersely.

Clark raised an eyebrow, but Lois retorted immediately.

"We're going to break this story," Lois informed him.

"Not this time. I can't risk you jeopardizing my investigation."

Lois scoffed in indignation. "I'm not taking orders from someone too afraid to show his face. Let's go, Clark."

But Clark didn't move. He was having trouble seeing the man in the darkness of the alley. And he *never* had trouble seeing in the dark.

"Who are you?" he asked the shadow.

The dark man didn't respond for so long that Clark became unsure that he was going to get an answer.

Then the man stepped forward and easily leapt down from the fire escape, gracefully landing mere feet from Clark.

At this distance, the cowl was unmistakable.

"Aren't you a little far from Gotham?" Lois inquired coolly, obviously not impressed no matter who it was, after he'd warned her off her story.

But Gotham's resident vigilante showing up in Metropolis complicated things.

"We should go somewhere else to talk about this," Clark said, glancing back at the kitchen door.

"No one will notice us here," offered the woman in the black coat—or was it a cloak? He peeked over his glasses. No, it was a coat. There was a lush red rose pinned to one lapel.

"Even if they did, there's probably not a safer alley in Metropolis tonight," Batman said, his eyes narrowing on Clark, who was nudging his glasses back up his nose.

Clark shifted his weight under the scrutinizing gaze, and tried to get back on track. "How do we even know we're investigating the same thing?"

"We're chasing down the drops."

“Drops?” interrupted Lois.

“The drugs.”

Lois and Clark exchanged a glance.

“Is this the new stuff that makes the users weep blood?” Clark asked.

“The narcotic is taken as an eyedrop. An overdose will collapse the capillaries in the tear duct.”

“...making it look like they’re crying blood,” Clark finished.

“We’ve never heard of drops,” Lois said. “Where did they come from?”

“The Maroni Organization manufactures them. They’ve been a scourge in Gotham for years. Every small-time criminal becomes addicted, has to find a source, and that means choosing a side. It’s how the leading crime families in Gotham fill their ranks. But now the Maronis are at war with another family in Gotham. They’re exporting to Metropolis to build capital from a new market.”

“Is that why the west side had been on fire all week?” Clark asked.

“The use of drops makes people paranoid, erratic,” Batman said in confirmation. “We’ve been trying to keep them in check tonight.”

That explained why Clark hadn’t heard any calls for help during dinner!

“Thank you,” he said in relief.

Batman tilted his head inscrutably.

It made Clark feel compelled to go on lamely, “Thank you for lending your services to Metropolis. I know you’re usually strictly in Gotham.”

“So this could become the permanent state of Metropolis if the drops trade establishes here,” Lois said, jumping ahead.

“We won’t let that happen,” Clark assured her.

Batman tilted his head again, looking at him.

It made him feel wrongfooted, somehow.

“Let us help you,” Clark said quickly.

“Us help them?” Lois interjected. “*They* should be helping *us*! It’s our story!”

“Lo—is,” Clark argued, making eye contact with her.

She rolled her eyes but didn’t put up more of a fight.

Her willingness to give in pricked his worry. He subtly tried to take more of her weight, since she was still leaning against him.

He looked back at the masked man. “So?”

Batman frowned. “This is Gotham’s problem, which is why I’m here to contain it. But if it’s landing on your doorstep,” he decided, “you should know what to look for.”

Clark blinked. It would definitely help him as Superman to know what the drops looked like and what their symptoms were, but Batman couldn’t know that. Why was it important for Clark to know what drops looked like? Presumably so he could report on it?

“Thanks,” Clark said slowly, still deciphering.

“Don’t thank me until we’re sure that we can control this.”

“Who is distributing drops in Metropolis now?”

“So far only the Metros,” the black-haired woman chimed in.

“And you are?” Lois asked pointedly.

“You can just call me Zee.”

“Zee?” Lois repeated, incredulous.

The woman flared her hands out, as if presenting herself. “Zee,” she said with a grin.

“So who’s supplying Johnny?” Clark asked, before Lois could reply to Zee again.

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” Batman answered him.

“Is that why she’s meeting Johnny on Thursday night?” Lois asked, hitching her thumb as Zee.

“That’s some trick,” Zee said. “Can you hear through walls?”

“She was listening from behind the bar,” Batman told his accomplice.

“Cute,” Zee judged.

“Cute!” Lois started, but petered off in a grumble, “I’ll show you cute.”

Clark dipped his glasses again and looked at her wound. It was bleeding again. He had to get her help, and soon. Should he try heading back into the restaurant for clean towels? He looked back through the door, but Aldo was sitting at the bar with a pile of receipts. Glancing around the alley, he didn’t see anything useful. But then a gleam of white caught his eye. Batman had a belt. And there was gauze in one of the pouches.

Clark pushed his glasses up hastily. "Um, do either of you have any bandages?"

"Clark," Lois hissed warningly.

He held her a little tighter to him and told her quietly, "You're about to pass out from blood loss."

Batman must have moved while he was looking at Lois, because the dark man was suddenly standing directly in front of her, holding a thick gauze pad.

"Thanks," said Clark.

Batman lifted the hem of Lois' shirt, and she thrust it down again, "Excuse me!"

Oddly, Batman instinctively looked to Clark for his reaction.

"Lois, I can't hold you up and swap the bandage at the same time," he said softly in her ear.

"Well, I don't want someone pawing at me," she said, throwing the vigilante a dirty look.

Zee walked up and offered an arm to Lois, "Lean on me."

Lois gave her a once over, and Zee said with a wink, "I'm stronger than I look."

Lois seemed to assent, and Zee slid up against her, taking her weight from Clark. Batman handed him the bandage, and he started to gently pull away the used towels.

"I'll take those," Zee said, holding out a hand. She must have pocketed them, because when he looked at her again a moment later, they seemed to have disappeared entirely.

He pressed the gauze firmly against Lois' abdomen, willing the blood flow to stop. Hoping to wrap up their impromptu tête-à-tête, he asked, "So what's the plan for Thursday?"

Batman summarized, "Johnny's drops contact is meeting him at the Metro Club at midnight. Zee will be there for an introduction and enough cash in traceable bills for a buy-in. I'll be there to pick up the Maronis' distributor once the exchange is made. If he bolts, you two get the drops. We need to stop them from getting into Metropolis. But we don't want to compromise Zee's cover, in case we need another shot at this."

"What about the money?" Lois asked, wincing as Clark tightened the ace bandage around her, securing the fresh gauze.

He gave her a look of apology.

"The money isn't a priority," said Batman.

Clark finished off the bandaging and went back to Lois' side to take her weight from Zee.

Once she was settled against him, he realized that Batman was giving him a considering look, almost as if he were studying him.

"We've got it," Clark said, over being examined for the night. "We'll get the bag with the drops."

"The Maronis use black backpacks to move their product in Gotham," Zee added. "We're hoping we'll have a bag that looks just like theirs. Even if the sale isn't made, it gives us a chance to walk away with the drops anyway."

"You're going to swap bags?" Lois asked her.

"Just a little sleight of hand," Zee said with a grin.

"That's not exactly a foolproof plan," Lois complained, leaning more heavily against Clark.

"It's just one way this could play out," Batman said. "We're prepared for more than one eventuality."

"Ok," Clark said, eager to get Lois to the medical care she needed. "We'll be in the club before midnight. We know our way around."

"See you there," said Batman.

"See you there," Clark agreed, holding out his hand to shake.

Batman looked at the proffered hand consideringly, then reached out and shook it.

Batman's eyes narrowed behind his cowl, and he opened his mouth to speak.

At just that moment, Lois sagged limply against Clark.

Dropping Batman's hand, Clark reacted quickly to brace Lois.

Maybe too quickly.

"Lois! Lois, can you hear me?"

"M'ok," she slurred.

"You are not ok," he said. "We're going to a hospital now."

"Perry," she pushed weakly.

"No, Lois," he argued back. "A hospital."

"Johnny'll find me. Perry."

Clark sighed, but relented. In a swift motion, he placed his arm beneath Lois' legs and gently, effortlessly, lifted her in his usual carry hold.

"Zee, go to the end of the block and hail a cab," said their masked associate.

Zee pivoted on her heel and sauntered down the alley.

Batman's eyes were narrowed again, looking at Clark in a way that made him wary.

"Unless you have another way of getting her there."

Clark kept his gaze steady.

"A cab would be great."

He heard Zee whistle, and both assuming that meant she'd found a cab and ready to get out from under Batman's stark scrutiny, he nodded goodbye to their new ally, and headed down the alley, Lois tucked into his arms.

\* \* \*

Her head had fallen onto his shoulder as she dozed, tucked securely into his side in the back of the cab. The bleeding had slowed to an ooze again, and he'd relaxed as she'd melted into him and fallen asleep. The city rushed past them in a blur of light as they headed uptown toward Perry's.

Clark was almost enjoying the ride, sinking into a moment of rare quiet with Lois at his side. He needed it after the rush of their undercover assignment, his fraught worry over her injury, and the ambushed meeting in the alley.

Closing his eyes against the chaos of the evening, he leaned his head against Lois, inhaling the scent of her hair.

"Sixteen fifty, bud," the cabbie said, as he pulled to a slow stop in front of a red brick house.

Clark pulled out a twenty and a ten. It had been a smooth ride, just like he'd asked for when he'd settled Lois into the cab. "Thanks for going easy on the pedal," Clark said, handing the cash through the little window to the front.

"You got it, pal," the driver said appreciatively.

Lois was stirring at his side.

"Clark?" Her voice was edged with sleep.

"We're at Perry's," he told her. He opened the door to the cab and got out.

She slid across the seat and followed him, wobbling as she stood.

He steadied her, then picked her up just as he'd done in the alley.

"Can walk," she murmured against his chest.

"I know," he said agreeably, not putting her down.

He kicked the cab door closed with his foot and walked up the path across Perry's lawn as the cab pulled away behind them.

Gunshots sounded several miles to the southwest and he tipped his ear to hear better.

Sirens were screaming across the west side again.

It sounded like they needed help.

Maybe more help than Batman could give them on his own.

He hurried to Perry's front door and rang the bell.

"Four times," Lois said.

He rang the bell three more times and waited, listening with increasing anxiety as the west side tore itself apart.

A low light illuminated just inside the door, and it swung open.

"Kent! Is she—"

"She's ok, Perry. Two of her staples came out, and she lost a lot of blood. She needs some rest."

"I'll call the Doctor back," Perry said as Clark set Lois on her feet.

"Thanks, partner," she said to Clark, yawning.

"You're welcome," he said.

He wanted to walk her into the house.

He wanted to stay by her side to make sure she didn't overdo it tonight.

He wanted to watch over her as she slept.

Instead, he handed her over to Perry.

"You're not coming in?" she asked, eyes bright in the darkness.

"No," he said regretfully. "I'm going to do some research on the Maronis. See if I can learn anything else about the drops."

He'd have plenty of time to research tomorrow morning, once he'd set the west side to rights.

"Drops?" Perry asked.

"Lois will fill you in," said Clark. "Feel better," he said to her, and then turned and jogged off, looking for a dark corner to spin into his suit.

\* \* \*

It had been two hours since he'd left Lois, and he was losing his internal battle to not run straight back to her.

And it had been a grueling two hours.

He'd brought six drops users into Metro General tonight. That was the same amount he'd brought in all week. And now there were that many in just one night!

Drops were already out of control in Metropolis.

And the west side was doing its best to rage out of control in turn.

He'd seen Batman out prowling the streets as he patrolled. He'd thought about stopping to introduce himself, but after the vigilante's close examination of him as Clark Kent, he wasn't eager to have another encounter right away. Batman's methods bordered on brutal, he discovered, as Clark kept up with him throughout the night. He'd looked away as Batman smashed a mugger's head into a wall. But he'd looked back just in time to see him pull two circular plastic eyedroppers out of the man's back pocket, and smash them under his boot. Batman obviously knew his business, so Superman had moved on to another street where a group of ravaging youths were setting cars on fire.

Between him, Batman and the MPD, who were out in force, the west side mayhem started to wind down.

His mind drifted back to the quiet peace of the cab ride, beside Lois, her soft breath on his shoulder lulling him into an ease he hadn't felt since the west side had gone crazy.

Without thinking about it, he found that he'd drifted north.

It wouldn't hurt to check on her.

A moment later, he was high above his editor's home, and he tuned in his hearing to try and pick Lois' heartbeat out of the other sounds in the home. To his surprise, he heard her voice, arguing with Perry. She was animated enough that he assumed the doctor had come and gone.

"...happens when I wake up here tomorrow? It was enough of a risk just coming here."

"Darlin', you're in no condition to traipse across the city! You can go back in the morning and—"

"And walk right past Johnny Taylor in the middle of the day, with no make-up left on my face and my wig askew? No way! It's much safer to go back to the Apollo tonight!"

"Now, honey, Alice already made up the spare room—" Perry started, sounding more like a dad than a boss.

But Clark already knew how this would end.

Most likely with Lois crawling out the window once Perry and Alice had gone back to sleep.

But he couldn't risk upsetting her injury again. Not to mention strolling right through the west side to get back to the Apollo.

He let gravity guide him down to Perry's door and rang the doorbell.

The conversation in the house immediately came to a tense halt.

"Were you expecting anyone else?" Lois asked.

He hadn't meant to frighten her, but now her heart rate was spiking.

He rang the doorbell four times in a row.

A moment later, it opened.

"Superman!" Perry sounded surprised.

"I spoke with Clark Kent," he said, hoping it would stave off most of the questions on why Superman had shown up to escort Lois home. "I was wondering if I can help in any way."

"Well," said Perry, "I think we're—"

Lois appeared behind him, cutting him off. "I could use a lift back to the Apollo boarding house."

"I'd be happy to take you there," he said politely.

Lois started to smile, but ended up having to force back a yawn.

"I'll check in tomorrow, Perry. Thanks for everything." She brushed past him with a kiss to his cheek.

Perry sighed and looked at Superman.

"I don't suppose you can lock her in once you get her there."

He wished.

"I'll make sure she gets home safely, Mr. White," he said, stifling a grin as Lois put her arm around his shoulders.

He took care lifting her, and they were airborne a second later.

Lois laid her head against his chest, and he glanced down, seeing her eyes flutter closed.

"Are you alright?"

"Mmm fine," she said liltily.

She was usually fairly casual with him, but she didn't often snuggle into his chest.

"Lois?"

"Yes, Superman?" Her voice was far away and dreamy.

"Does your side still hurt?"

"Nothing hurts," she said lightly.

She was drifting off so quickly that he wondered if the doctor had given her something to make her like this.

"Did the doctor give you any medicine when he patched you up?"

“Painkillers. Antibiotic. Perry had him give me a sleeping pill when he thought I wasn’t paying attention. I love Perry. But even he can’t pull one over on me.”

Her voice was loose, and a little emotional. It seemed like her walls were down.

“Why did you take it, if you knew he was giving it to you?”

“I wanted to see if it would make me sleep.”

“Have you not been able to sleep?”

“Bad dreams,” she mumbled sleepily.

*Oh, Lois*, he thought.

“You’re having bad dreams?”

“They wake me up. Why don’t you ever come?”

“What?”

“Back in the alley. He shoots me, but you never come.”

His heart twisted.

Her run-in with Johnny Taylor was giving her nightmares.

Truth be told, it had been giving him nightmares, too.

“Sometimes Clark comes, though.”

That surprised him.

“In your dream?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Curiosity was eating at him about showing up in her dreams as Clark.

“Does Clark save you?”

“Always.”

*Clark* always saved her in her dreams? Hope welled in him that it sounded like Lois’ subconscious was unexpectedly on his side.

“But then *he* gets shot. S’worse.”

*That* was worse? She thought it was worse that *Clark* got shot? Instead of herself? That was inconceivable to him. He’d take a bullet for her even if he wasn’t invulnerable.

“Why is that worse?”

“Because you don’t save Clark, either.”

“I’ll always be there to save you, Lois,” he promised.

“And Clark?” she asked sleepily.

He wasn’t going to field that one.

“Just call for me. Call my name and I’ll always come.”

“Mmk,” she agreed.

They were over the Apollo now, and having flown over the west side, he knew he’d have to head back there as soon as he could. As Superman, he couldn’t just take Lois in through the front door, though. It would attract too much attention. And even as loopy as she was, he wouldn’t be able to get away with changing back into Clark in front of her. He wished there was a door on the roof, but no luck there.

“Lois, I don’t suppose you left your window unlocked?”

“Always,” she murmured.

*Always.*

Did she always leave it open for *him*?

He navigated them through her smallish window, and floated them toward the twin bed. He guided her to sit. As soon as she did, her head tipped toward her chest, her whole body sagging forward. Kneeling beside her, he pulled off her shoes.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that sleeping pill working,” he told her. “You won’t have any bad dreams tonight.”

“You’re here?” she asked nonsensically.

“I’m here,” he assured her.

“You’ll stay?”

“I’ll be around,” he promised.

The answer must have satisfied her because she laid back then, rolling over to pull the comforter around her.

He ran his eye over her door, and it was still locked, grey string in place.

She was as safe as she could be tonight, he thought, and made his way toward the window.

But as he passed her tiny kitchen table, something caught his eye.

He changed course to extract a newspaper from the pile there.

It was a copy of the Metropolis Star.

It was four days old.

And it showed his face on the front page.

He was in the suit, standing just down the street from the Planet, holding a copy of that day’s paper. He remembered this. He’d been looking at Lois’ obituary.

Pain lanced his heart at the memory, and Clark snuck a glance at her, reassuring himself that she was still with him.

The Star's article was fairly sensationalized, but went on to describe Superman as heartbroken over the death of his favorite reporter.

For once, they'd gotten it right.

His face in the photo was a rictus of regret and anguish.

"Lois?"

"Hmm?"

"Why do you have this?"

She rolled over to face him, clearly only just clutching to consciousness.

"Huh?"

"Why do you have a copy of the Star?"

"Oh. Planet din't run it," she said, as if that explained it.

*Thank you, Perry*, he thought, before pressing, "But why did you keep it?"

"Reminded me to 'pologize."

"To me?"

She was fading into sleep.

"Lois, why did you want to apologize?"

"Shoulda told you about this before." She gestured halfheartedly to the paper he was holding, then tugged the comforter closer. "You looked sad. I know we— We've had this— Just..." She yawned. "Didn't realize you cared so much."

"Of course I care, Lois," he said, carefully holding onto his voice.

"I know."

She was smiling, but it melted almost instantly. "More worried 'bout Clark though."

He tried to follow her train of thought. "About Clark?"

"Mmmh," she yawned, her eyes fluttering shut. "I think he took it worse than you. Need to apologize to him, too. Eventually." Her face scrunched up. "I just hate it. Just doing my job."

"I'm sure he knows," Clark said, trying to alleviate her mind.

"Nuh-uh," she disagreed. "Think I broke him."

Her statement felt like a punch to his chest. Thinking back to the moment the photo was taken and the days that followed, he couldn't quite argue with her.

"I didn't know," she murmured into the pillow.

"What didn't you know?"

Her eyes were closed. Her breathing had leveled out. Her sleeping pill had finally kicked in.

He resisted the temptation to return to her side, to tuck the blanket around her, to kiss her temple and let the scent of her hair wash over him anew.

"Good night, Lois," he said instead.

He left through the window, closing it securely behind him.

As he took to the sky, he briefly wondered if Lois might suspect how he, Clark, really felt about her. He knew that he was terrible at concealing his feelings around her. And he'd given her ample opportunities to read him over the last few days. His face had been an open book when he'd first seen her resurrected in that restaurant, he was sure. He'd laid even more of his heart out there as he'd hugged her that night, after her shift had ended. And he'd been hovering over her protectively since then, rarely leaving her side.

She hadn't pushed him away, though.

That was saying something for Lois, whose boundaries were as wide as the Amazon river, which you could drown in while you were trying to cross it.

Was it possible she felt for him even a fraction of what he felt for her? Did she like him more than she was letting on, instead of just tolerating him? Or was she just forced to lean on her partner who'd blundered into her assignment while she was vulnerable?

He sighed.

If Lois wanted to see the truth about how he felt about her, she'd see it.

But he'd worry about that tomorrow.

Right now he could already hear the crackling of wood as flames overtook a building down by the wharf.

The west side was awake again.

And it was screaming.

\* \* \*

Luck finally turned toward their side, and the next two days passed quickly as Lois and Clark waited for Thursday's midnight meeting to roll around.

Without having to resort to crawling around on the floor, Lois was able to stay in one place in the kitchen, doing little and managing to keep her wound stable. That freed Clark up to keep the kitchen running.

Wednesday was half-off pasta night at the restaurant, which meant it was packed. But it also meant that everyone ordered the same few dishes, which was much easier to

handle. The evening passed in a blur, without any major incidents.

He wished he could say the same for the days or the late nights. Those stuck with him in laborious detail.

There had been twelve overdose cases scattered across his rescues on Wednesday, and a staggering twenty-seven on Thursday. The drops were becoming more popular. And those that didn't die from taking them were aggressively on edge. He'd broken up what seemed like an endless string of fistfights, dropping off anyone involved with the MPD just to get them off the streets and away from the drops for a day.

Taking a cue from Batman, he'd confiscated and destroyed drops from nearly every person he'd interacted with on the west side. Even, disappointingly, from some of the victims of the attacks he'd stopped.

It was taking a toll on him, but it was worse for the people becoming addicted to a drug they didn't understand, he knew. The consequences would be more dire if he didn't intervene. So he kept on.

While he was holding the city together on his own during the days, at night, he had help. Batman's ruthless reckonings on the west side allowed Clark to hold onto his undercover job at the restaurant, and even get a few hours of sleep in the early mornings once the west side finally wore itself out.

On his way to drop off a would-be mugger at the nearest precinct, he'd even caught sight of Zee once, saying something to an angry young man as she smoothly disarmed him. When he'd doubled back to her just a moment later, there was no sign of her. It was as if she'd disappeared into a puff of smoke.

Still, it was nice to know that he wasn't alone out there.

After two full days of brutal bedlam, he was looking forward to Thursday's dinner service and the end of their undercover gig. Directly following 'Pasta Night,' Thursday seemed easy in comparison. With mostly regulars in the house again, and no surprises, it was the second night that week where he and Lois were easily done by eleven, which left them plenty of time to get to their midnight meeting.

Since it was just a few blocks away, they stopped at a nearby coffee shop to kill some time. Once there, Clark had ducked into the bathroom twice, only to sneak out the back and interrupt drops-driven violence.

As the neon clock on the diner wall neared the stroke of twelve, they paid for their coffees and headed over to the Metro Club.

Being as late as it was, he'd expected the streets to be a little emptier. But this week should have prepared him for

the inevitable chaos that was ensuing across the west side. On their short walk, they passed by two separate groups of thugs, clearly looking to pick a fight. He and Lois kept their heads down, keeping to themselves to try and not attract attention.

Managing not to become victims themselves, they ducked down the alley that led behind the club. Stopping just before the intersection that would lead them to the stage door, Lois peeked around the corner.

"There's a guard," she whispered, pulling back.

"Any ideas to get around him?" he asked.

He could see her mind start working through options, but before she could reply, glass shattered at the end of the alley they'd just come from. Laughter followed.

"Oh, great," Lois grumbled.

Two burly men, one with an open bottle of liquor and one swinging a baseball bat, were headed toward them.

Clark pressed Lois against the wall they were hugging, trying to keep them in the shadows and out of sight for as long as possible.

"Why can't anything be simple?" she complained.

"Any ideas?" he asked again.

"Not any good ones without my being able to run. Or fight. Or basically move at all."

His eyes dipped down to her lips and then back to the men approaching. They'd pulled off this ploy previously, pretending to be amorous lovers during a tryst. It had taken heat off of them before, and masked their true intentions. Maybe using the ploy here would send out a signal to leave them be. But it had always been Lois' grudging idea to try this gambit.

"Oh, go ahead," he heard her say.

He looked back at her with surprise.

She didn't look as annoyed or begrudging as he'd expected. Or was that just wishful thinking?

Her eyes cut to his side, looking down the alley with anxiety.

The men must have noticed them.

"Clark—" his name came out urgently, and she tugged him forward by the front of his coat.

And then he was kissing Lois.

He forced himself to hold back, to make it look convincing without making it feel convincing. He didn't want to make her uncomfortable or to take advantage of the situation.

Unconsciously, his hand moved up into her hair, running his fingers along her temple and down the soft strands to her neck.

He tried to keep an ear out for the men passing by, but kissing her, even only for show, was dizzying.

And she was kissing him back.

He couldn't tell if she was faking it or not, just making it look realistic to sell the deception.

He fervently hoped that she wasn't.

But in the moment, he found that he didn't care.

His arm tightened around her.

A wolf whistle erupted behind him, along with more laughter. His ears tracked it as the two men passed by. Their ruse was working!

But his emotions were spilling over into the kiss. He couldn't help it. Cradling her cheek in his hand, he tilted his head, slanting his mouth tenderly against hers at a new, addicting angle.

She must not have been expecting it because she gasped, opening her mouth.

He instinctively opened his mouth to deepen the kiss, and froze.

Actually, they *both* froze, recognizing the line they were dangerously dancing over, knowing that the next move one of them made could take them past the point of mere deception and into electrifying but uncharted territory.

Every nerve in his body tingling at once, he didn't move, didn't breathe, didn't even contemplate that this could go further.

And then, as they dangled on a precipice, Lois leaned into it.

Surprise filtered through him, followed immediately by the white hot heat from the caress of her mouth.

*She wasn't faking it*, he thought elatedly. *She couldn't be if she were kissing him like this!*

It felt so *right*—like all the pieces of his world that had shattered the past few days aligned themselves, like his world made sense for the first time, like he was coming home—no, like he was *flying*. His pulse sprinted ahead. Lois had kissed him before, but only as a means to another end. This time, she *meant* it. Oh, god, *this* was what he'd been missing all his life.

Her hands threaded thickly through his hair, and his mind went blank, save for kissing her.

A glass shattered jarringly, just as he was about to shift them even further from their intended facade into this leap of faith.

Reluctantly, he tore himself away from her to look around.

The men had, indeed, passed them by.

"I'll see what's happening," he whispered, still slightly dizzy. Had he ever been dizzy before? He headed back to the corner, where the club's alley intersected with their own.

The guard stood over the two men, shaking his fist as if it hurt. Both men were on the ground, and it looked like they were out cold. The liquor bottle, lying in its own puddle, must have shattered when its owner had fallen.

The guard picked up their baseball bat and threw it in the dumpster a few feet away. Then he opened the back door and went into the club.

This was their chance.

"Come on!"

He held out his hand to Lois.

She took it immediately, and they rounded the corner together.

They moved toward the door as quickly as Lois was able. He saw that she had her other hand held against her side to keep her bandage firmly in place. Tipping his glasses down, he took a look inside the club as they moved quietly down the alley. The backstage area was clear, and he looked toward the stage. There was one singer and a piano player performing a slow set together. It was their good luck that the whole gaggle of chorus girls wasn't performing tonight. This meant far fewer people to run into.

Speaking of which, the guard was making his way back towards the door they were heading for. He had a second goon with him.

He didn't want to rush Lois beyond what her injury allowed, but at this pace, they weren't going to beat the guards back.

Tugging her along, he raced the guards to the door.

He and Lois had to be out of sight when it opened.

The guard was just a few feet away now.

This was going to be tight!

The guard was reaching for the doorknob—

They weren't going to make it!

He grasped Lois by the hips and swung her sideways, moving just a little faster than he should have.

The door opened, and, with Lois still in his arms, he took a super-sized step backward, just ahead of the path of the door.

They'd made it!

He swallowed his relief as the first guard stepped out, followed by the second.

As they made their way toward the two fallen drunkards, Clark leaned forward and grasped the knob before the door could close all the way. He opened it just a crack and hurriedly ushered Lois through. He followed her and controlled the door's slow close behind him. It silently snicked into place.

He let out a sigh of relief.

Turning to Lois in the dim light, he found her bent slightly forward, examining her bandages.

"Are you ok?"

"It doesn't look like it's bleeding again."

"Let's get out of sight," he said.

It felt natural for him to hold out his hand to her, and she took it again without comment. They made their way through the empty backstage area. There was a thick black curtain running floor to ceiling that separated them from the back of the seating area. The curtain folded over itself at the edge, and he stepped into its folds, drawing Lois close against him, and wrapping it around them. In the darkness of the backstage hall, it was good camouflage.

"How are we going to keep an eye on the supplier?" she asked.

He *already* had an eye on Johnny, and Zee, too, who was just sitting down at his table, black backpack slung over her shoulder. But he couldn't very well explain that to Lois.

Using his heat vision, he seared a tiny peep hole into the curtain.

A small glow spilled through, illuminating his face.

"There's a tear in the curtain," he said. "I can see the whole club from here."

She turned in his arms.

"Let me see."

Being exactly at his eye level, the hole was nearly a good six inches above her head. One hand steadying herself on his shoulder, she stood on her tiptoes to see through. He braced her with a hand on her hip.

"There's Johnny. And Zee, too. I wonder where Batman is."

That was a good question.

He instinctively scanned the ceiling, the catwalk above the stage, and the backstage area again.

Nothing.

He looked in the office and behind the bar.

No caped crusader.

He checked the roof and the fire escape.

No Batman.

"Maybe he's not here, yet," Clark suggested.

Lois dropped down to the flat of her feet again.

"I think you'd better keep watch," she said, pressing her palm against her bandage.

He looked back toward the hole, x-raying through the whole curtain to get a better view.

A server dropped off drinks at the table, which Johnny reached for immediately, but Zee didn't touch.

Onstage, the singer bowed as her song ended. The pianist announced a short break, and they made their way into the wings as music was piped in through the house speakers. Clark crossed his fingers that they wouldn't come back through this hall to the stage door that led to the alley. He tracked them back to the dressing room, where they both seemed inclined to stay, before turning back to Johnny.

Zee was alone at the table.

Clark swiftly looked around, zeroing in on Johnny now near the door. He was greeting a tall man in a grey suit with dark hair and deep set eyes. This must be the Maroni family's supplier.

"I think our guy just showed up," Clark said under his breath.

"What's happening?" whispered Lois.

"Johnny met him at the door. He's walking him over to the table with Zee."

"No sign of Batman, yet?"

Clark took another penetrating look around the club, even into the sewer below.

"Not yet," he said tightly. He'd gotten used to Batman having his back—well, Superman's back—this week, even if Superman and Batman hadn't technically met. He hoped the man hadn't run into anything he couldn't handle on the west side. Then again, remembering that Batman never seemed to pull his punches, he doubted that was what happened.

"Does he have the backpack?"

Clark pushed his glasses subtly down his nose again and decided to leave them that way.

Maroni *did* have a backpack with him.

And it looked exactly like Zee's.

The Gothamite's gamble had been a good one, even if Clark couldn't find hide nor hair of him now that it was time for that gamble to pay off.

He tracked the backpack with his eyes as the newcomer put it down next to his chair, sitting at the table.

He scanned the bag and looked inside.

It was filled to the brim with drops.

His brow furrowed as he replied to Lois, "Yeah, he's got it. He put it under the table."

Eyes still on the trio, he watched as Zee held out her hand for Maroni to shake, using the action to cover her motion of sliding her own backpack across the floor to land next to his.

"Ok, so if he's got the drops, let's go get them."

"I think we should wait," Clark said, glancing around again in the hopes he'd just missed Batman before.

"That's a good idea," Lois agreed. "Give them a chance to make the exchange. Then we'll get them."

But as he looked back to the table again, it was clear that they weren't making an exchange.

Something had gone wrong.

The supplier in the grey suit was gesturing angrily toward Zee while he spoke to Johnny. Johnny looked like he was placating the other man.

Clark tuned his hearing in to the table.

"...family doesn't do business with *women*."

Zee leaned forward. "I'd rethink that if I were you. I can make it worth your while."

But the man didn't acknowledge her. "Johnny, we know about your family. You come from Milan. We're from Bologna. Our families were competitors for a long time. Now we offer to be friends, and you bring us this new partner. Who is she? Where does she come from?" Incensed, the supplier stood, picking up his backpack. "No. No!"

"What's happening?" Lois pressed.

"Wait a minute," Johnny said, putting his hands up in an attempt to mollify the man. "We can still work something out."

"I'm not sure," Clark whispered to Lois. "I thought they weren't going to make a deal, but now..."

"This is not how my family does business," the man said.

"This is how *I* do business," Johnny said, flashing open his suit coat to reveal the gun there.

The grey suited man went rigid at the implied threat.

"Give me the bag," Johnny said with false civility.

"You'll regret this," the grey suited man said.

"Let's make sure I don't," said Johnny. He reached under the table and pulled out a briefcase. He set it on the table. "That's your payment. Give me my investment."

The grey suited man handed over the backpack, then leaned forward to take the briefcase.

"They made the exchange! Johnny's got the backpack, not Zee," Clark filled Lois in.

"Nice doing business with you," Johnny said to the man. "Sorry, sweetheart," he threw to Zee.

And then he took off, briskly moving toward the back door.

Johnny had made the exchange, blocking Zee out.

There were enough drops in his backpack to spur the west side into becoming a war zone.

And now he was going to get away!

"He's coming this way!" he warned Lois.

"Oh no, you don't," she said, breaking away from Clark and rushing through the curtain.

Johnny nearly stumbled, trying to stop in time not to run square into Lois.

"I'll take that bag," she said, standing directly between Johnny and the way out.

"You!" Johnny gasped out in surprise. "That's not possible!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm the Ghost of Christmas past," Lois said dryly. "Now hand over that backpack."

Johnny was still reeling, though. "But I shot you!"

"Yes, you did," Lois said with venom. "But even a gunshot won't stop the power of the press."

Clark had to admire her, as she faced down the man that had tried to kill her, on his own territory, in a room full of strangers. There hadn't been a single Metro that would have rattled on Johnny for having shot her. But she'd just gotten him to confess it in a room full of witnesses.

There was a loud bang, and Clark turned to see a squad of MPD officers break through the front door. Pandemonium

erupted in the club as the other customers bolted like they were in the middle of a raid at a speakeasy.

Looking toward the door, Johnny blanched. He seemed to realize all at once that he was standing there with a bag full of designer drugs and cops pouring in.

“Get out of my way!” he shouted at Lois.

“Give me the backpack!” she countered.

“I killed you once. I can do it again!” Johnny said, taking the safety off his gun.

That was enough for Clark. He hadn’t been there the last time Lois and Johnny had squared off. He wasn’t going to let this monster hurt her again.

Throwing aside the curtain that still hid him, he leapt forward to put himself between Lois and Johnny.

The gangster saw Clark coming and raised his gun up to meet the new threat.

He heard Lois gasp and call out his name.

And in a petrifying flash, he realized this might be the moment that Lois figured out he was Superman. It didn’t matter—nothing else mattered—as long as she was safe.

Johnny squeezed the trigger—

He prayed she’d forgive him.

—and a bat-shaped metal disk clanged against the pistol’s barrel, knocking Johnny’s hand sideways and sending the shot wide!

Johnny fell to the ground in a heap as Clark full-body tackled him.

He tried to break free, but nothing Johnny did could release him from Superman’s grip.

Two of the officers scrambled across the room and pulled Clark up, slapping a pair of cuffs on Johnny. One of the officers recognized Clark, patting him on the back before confiscating Johnny’s pistol.

Clark turned to find his partner.

“Lois?”

She triumphantly held up the backpack. “I got it!”

He grinned at her exuberance.

She’d taken the threat of the drops in Metropolis to heart, and they were both thrilled at having gotten the next wave away from its distributor.

Tomorrow, the west side would be a calmer, safer place.

Batman stalked over to them.

“Glad you made it,” Clark said. “For a minute, I didn’t think you’d get here in time.”

“I was here before you were,” the man in black said. “I watched you come in.”

Clark’s jaw dropped. He was sure he’d checked *everywhere*. “That’s impossible!” Clark exclaimed. “I didn’t see you in the building.”

Batman gave Clark a partial smirk and then turned toward Lois.

“I’ll take the bag.”

But Lois tightened her grip. “What are you planning to do with it?”

“Take it back to Gotham.”

Lois shook her head. “I think we should destroy it now, along with everything inside, while we have the chance.”

“I’d really prefer you didn’t, Miss Lane.”

“But what if the drops get out again? What if they’re sent back to Metropolis? If the police need evidence, they can have the empty eyedroppers.”

“The bag you’re holding contains the cash.”

“No, that bag has the drops,” Clark said. He’d looked inside while it was under the table. He’d had his eye on the bags the whole time.

“Take a look,” Batman challenged, watching him with veiled interest.

He adjusted his glasses higher on his nose and turned to Lois, who was already unzipping the bag. She reached in and pulled out a thick stack of bills rubber-banded together.

How had he possibly missed the trade?

“I’ve got the bag with the drugs,” Zee said confidently, joining them. She held it out as if presenting it. “Voila!”

“But I saw Johnny grab the supplier’s backpack,” Clark insisted, gesturing to the one Lois was holding.

“Almost like magic, isn’t it?” Zee asked, a wide grin pulling at her mouth.

“Zee,” Batman said her name as if he were warning her.

She chuckled, rolling her eyes. “Not *real* magic, obviously.”

Lois shot Clark an incredulous look.

“Like I said in the alley,” Zee continued with a wink, “just a little sleight of hand.” Looking at Lois, she said, “That was brave, going after an armed man like that.”

"I couldn't let him get away with the drops," Lois demurred.

But Clark couldn't help but be proud of her. She was the bravest woman he knew.

She caught his eyes again then.

The expression on his face must have been just as obviously lovelorn as it ever was around her, because her cheeks pinked lightly and she looked toward the floor, tucking her hair behind her ear.

No, he certainly hadn't kept it a secret how he felt about Lois Lane.

Though after that kiss in the alley, he dared to allow himself to hope that she'd kept it a secret how *she* felt about *him*. Was her blush now a sign that maybe she had?

"The backpack," Batman prompted, interrupting their silent drama.

"Oh, right, sorry!" she said, handing it over.

Clark recovered more quickly than she did.

"So was the distributor the Maroni family member you'd thought it would be?" he asked, gesturing to the man in the grey suit being led outside in handcuffs.

"No. That's a member of the Falcone family."

"The other crime family?" Lois clarified. "The one you said the Maronis were at war with?"

"Yes," Batman said brusquely.

"So what does this mean for you when you get back to Gotham?" Clark asked.

"It makes things more complicated," Batman admitted.

Batman had held together the whole of the west side while he and Lois had gone undercover. He'd been the only reason Clark has gotten any sleep this week. And he was the reason Lois hadn't just seen a bullet bounce inexplicably off of his chest. Wanting to help in return, he impulsively offered, "If there's anything I can ever do to help, just let me know."

Batman's eyes narrowed at him again, and the feeling that he was being deeply scrutinized returned.

"You know, if you, uh, need any help investigating," he stumbled lamely.

Batman tilted his head, as if considering his words.

"I just might take you up on that," he finally said.

And then, to Clark's surprise, the dark knight offered his hand.

With a smile, Clark shook it.

"Thanks for the offer," Batman said, then turned abruptly away and left them, heading after Falcone.

"Look me up if you're ever in Gotham," Zee said in parting. With a wave, she disappeared out the back door.

Lois and Clark were left to their own devices.

They seemed to realize it at the same time, and the air between them grew charged.

And a little awkward.

The unresolved tension from their fake-almost-becoming-real kiss hung between them.

Lois cleared her throat. "We should get this written up."

"Back to the Apollo?" he asked.

"Never again," she grimaced. "Let's head back to my place. Maybe there's a pizza shop around that's still open."

"I'll bet I can find one," he said with an easy smile.

"Let's go, partner," she said.

And to his surprise, she put her arm through his, linking them together.

Passing through the backstage area one last time, Clark opened the stage door for her, and they stepped out into the night.

\* \* \*

The next day, after her triumphant return as a living staffer at the Planet, Lois sat at her desk, scanning their article about the drug sting that had bumped everything else off the front page. They'd scooped every other paper in the city. And now, she hoped, the Gotham crime syndicates would think twice about sending drugs to Metropolis. They hadn't even needed to call in Superman for this one!

In fact, she had barely seen Superman at all in the last week, except for that one hazy flight, where she mostly remembered falling asleep on him. She'd gotten so used to him showing up in the nick of time that she'd almost expected him to appear at the club once Johnny had pointed the gun at her again in a paralyzing moment.

But she hadn't even had time to think of shouting for Superman.

Because it had been Clark who had come to her rescue.

It had been Clark who'd put himself between her vulnerable body and Johnny's fatal pistol.

It had been Clark showing up for her all week, she realized. He'd been the one to materialize in the nick of time in that kitchen on Monday, scant minutes before she was sure she was about to be fired and risk losing the angle on the story altogether. He'd been the one to cover their tracks

at the restaurant, to pull her from the bar when Aldo had caught her spying, to ferry her safely to Perry's in the middle of the night.

But he'd gone way beyond the bounds of a work partner.

The doctor's touch hadn't even been as gentle as Clark's as he'd examined her wound. He'd physically held her up when her mind was still fighting but her body was giving out on her. He'd listened to her, and let her keep making decisions, even when she couldn't follow through with them.

He'd earned her trust this week.

And something more.

Behind his feckless, bumbling facade was a clever, capable, and compassionate man. Little by little, she'd been seeing past the perception she'd formed within mere minutes of meeting him. This week had shattered the final illusion that the man she'd called an inexperienced hick was anything but competent. Their charade at the restaurant had also erased any concept that they were in competition. It was such a difference from her past attempts at partnership, both at work and at home. Her mind recalled Zee's sleight of hand trick with the backpacks. This deliverance of a worthwhile partner, whose looks were apparently deceiving, seemed like a cosmic sleight of hand. But it wasn't just a cheap stage trick, as Clark had proven. It was real. And *that* was magical.

She would never forget the look in his eyes when he saw her in that kitchen for the first time.

She'd never be able to forget the feeling of his all-encompassing, desperate embrace when he'd hugged her after discovering she was alive.

She'd never erase her own absolute, wrenching terror she'd felt when Johnny had leveled his gun at Clark.

And that kiss...

Her toes curled, just thinking about it.

It was yet another instance where he could have just seized an opportunity and steamrolled her. But he hadn't. He'd seen a tight spot and made a suggestion to get out of it. But the final say to use that plan had been hers. And then when the ruse had gone unexpectedly farther than they'd planned, he'd backed off. He'd given her space to make the choice.

And she'd surprised herself.

Well, she'd surprised both of them, she could tell.

A cup of coffee appeared in front of her, bringing her back to reality, and she looked up to find a soft smile.

"I figured I'd save you the trip," he said, gesturing vaguely to her still-bandaged abdomen. "And save you from a little extra movement."

"Thanks, Clark," she said.

He sat in the chair beside her desk, and gestured to the paper, chuckling. "Admiring your handiwork?"

"Admiring a job well done," she said, leaving just the smallest opening for him to have some credit, too.

He recognized the compliment, and his smile grew.

"And are you glad your other job is over?"

Her eyes still lingering on the inviting curve of his mouth, her brain stalled for a second.

Oh, right, the restaurant!

"Ugh," she groaned. "I am definitely not cut out for food service. Which reminds me..."

With a grin, she picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hi, Aldo? It's Anita."

Even without his special hearing, Clark could hear the voice on the other end drop in disappointment.

"I'm just calling to tell you that I won't be in tonight. I'm quitting."

There was a squawk at the other end of the line.

"Oh, he won't be in either."

With mischief in mind, she glanced at Clark.

"Actually, Charlie and I have decided to run away together. We fell passionately in love over a cannoli. We're leaving the restaurant business behind and starting a new life."

Clark's jaw dropped in surprise.

She grinned. His reaction didn't disappoint. She could get used to teasing him.

His eyes warmed at her smile.

Maybe she could get used to that, too.

"Anyway, just wanted to let you know, Aldo," she said breezily. "Think of us whenever you eat cannoli. Goodbye!"

She hung up, giddy to be rid of the undercover job.

"We're running away together?"

She tilted her head at her partner, hearing him play along, but glimpsing the ray of hope hidden behind his eyes.

She suddenly wanted to know what he'd say to a wild offer, if she made it.

“I’ve got some vacation saved up,” she said. She made it sound casual, like it was the next teasing rung on the conversational ladder they were climbing.

But the space between them was concentrating down again, as if they were the only two people in the room—just like it had in the alley behind the Metro Club.

“I’ll start packing,” he volleyed back. His tone was light, but his eyes had darkened.

Her heart beat a little faster.

Maybe they should talk about what had happened during that toe-curling kiss in the alleyway, instead of ignoring it and hoping he’d never bring it up, as she’d originally planned.

Maybe Clark was reliable enough not to disappoint her, like everyone else had, as he’d been steadfastly proving over the last few days.

Maybe she didn’t have to hold him beyond her usually impenetrable walls on the job—and off the job, too?

Clark Kent could be the one guy on earth she should take a chance on.

She leaned forward, not sure what she was about to say, but hoping he’d read her mind and pick up the baton, as he had so many times this week. “Clark, I—”

The phone on his desk rang.

His posture slumped as he looked over at it. She hadn’t noticed that he’d leaned in closer, too.

He looked back at her, clearly torn between doing his job and hearing the end of that sentence.

His phone rang again.

“I’d better get that,” he said reluctantly.

*They had the worst timing*, she thought with a sigh.

\* \* \*

They had the *worst* timing! Clark thought in exasperation, heading toward his desk to pick up his insistently ringing phone.

But, he consoled himself, it was a gift to even be contemplating their terrible timing. He considered it a miracle that Lois was back with him now, when just a few days ago he thought he’d irrevocably lost his partner and friend.

It was more than that, though.

Because Lois Lane was the love of his life.

Their undercover assignment this week had proven the connection he felt with her wasn’t just in his head. The electricity between them was becoming hard to deny, even

for Lois, he was certain. He just wished that one day she would also see that they were better together than they were apart. Because when he looked at her, he didn’t just see the prickly, tough as nails pretense that she put up every day. He saw someone trudging through the world on her own, who had given up on finding her other half. But he saw the potential of how they could change each other’s worlds. He saw them growing old together, building a home, even raising kids, creating a reality without any wall or artifice between them, where they spent a whole future side by side.

He looked back over his shoulder to see her still watching him, a wistful look on her face. She stirred at his glance and went back to admiring her front page.

Hope flickered in his chest.

Maybe that day was closer than he’d imagined.

Picking up his ringing phone, he greeted, “Clark Kent” into the receiver, still unable to keep the annoyance at its interruption wholly out of his voice.

“Clark, I think something’s going wrong over at the Irig place.”

He recognized his dad’s voice right away, and the tension it held.

“Wayne was over last night, and then this morning all these people from the EPA showed up and now we can’t find him. He’s not picking up his phone, and they’ve taken over most of his farm.”

“Dad, slow down. Did you say the EPA?”

“Well, that’s what they said,” Jonathan replied, his voice thick with concern. “But they look like they’re some kind of military.”

A military operation masking themselves as the EPA? In Smallville of all places? That sounded like a potential story for the Planet. And maybe even a job for Superman.

He glanced up at Lois, who was surreptitiously looking at him with a curious expression. He waved her over openly, and she came to carefully perch on his desk as he turned the phone’s receiver toward her. She bent to hear, her hand absently coming to rest on his shoulder. Even beneath layers of fabric, his skin tingled where her hand touched him.

Their eyes locked for a second, and he had to stop himself from floating before he remembered where he was.

“Uh, ok, Dad, just start from the beginning. Lois is here, and she’s going to listen in, too.”

It looked like their next story might be Smallville.

He silently cheered. Since leaving the Metro Club, he’d been trying to figure out a way to suggest that they take it

easy for a couple of weeks without Lois shutting down the idea point blank. Just enough time for her wound to heal. Just enough time for them to take a breath. Maybe even enough time to talk about what kind of partners they really were—what kind of partners they wanted to be.

And this could be perfect.

After all, how much trouble could Lois Lane get into in Smallville?

\* \* \*

**Fictathon Prompts:**

Want:

- Lois and Clark going undercover together
- A surprising appearance by another character (can be from LnC or not, surprise me!)
- A public confession of some sort

Don't want:

- A downer ending
- Either Lois or Clark to be married to other people besides each other
- Magic (Real magic; illusions don't count)