Dagger's Edge

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Summary: Clark loses his memory in the middle of a crisis, and Lois steps in to help track down the bad guys. A sequel to the author's "Dagger of the Mind."

Story Size: 12,642 words (70 kB as text)

Forward:

For anyone who hasn't read "Dagger of the Mind", I recommend that you read it first, or some parts of this story might not make much sense.

This story takes place a couple of days after Superman's duel with Lord Nor on the streets of Metropolis, and before Lois and Clark's wedding. The city is still in a shambles as a result of the destruction wrought by the New Kryptonians, but is trying to pull itself together and get on with its business — a perfect time for criminals to try to take advantage of the situation.

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Introduction:

On the bottom of Metropolis Harbor, a nondescript piece of rock lay anonymously amid the sand, weeds and debris. Inside the rock was a chunk of crystal, ominously green and speckled with tiny flecks of red. It lay there, timelessly, and the denizens of the ocean, plant and animal, lived their lives around it. It might lie there for a very long time. But it was still there.

And then, one day, something changed.

Tom shifted nervously for the third time in five minutes and glanced at his watch. Eight minutes to seven. The dew was still on the grass and the mist over the city was beginning to lift. The day promised to be a fine one. The New Kryptonians were gone after Superman had defeated their leader and then been gassed by the army. No one had seen the Man of Steel since, and the rumors floating around were that he was either seriously ill or dead. The city was beginning the long process of healing, although it would be weeks or months before all signs of the alien occupation were erased. But, for now, that was all to the good.

Tom glanced down the street, then around at his companions. Will lounged against a telephone pole, at ease, his lean frame showing no sign of the tension Tom was feeling, and Ed sat on the edge of a concrete planter, calmly reading the morning edition of the Daily Planet. As usual, he was the picture of confidence, muscular and athletic, always the pretty boy of the trio. Tom tried to copy his brothers, but only succeeded in increasing his nervousness. He looked at his watch again. Four minutes to seven.

Ed rose to his feet abruptly. "Two minute warning. Take your positions."

Will and Tom responded at once, as they had practiced. Now that the time for action had come, Tom found himself less uncomfortable. If they pulled this off they would be set for life, and there would never be a better chance. He glanced down the street. Here came their target.

* * *

"So, am I invited to your wedding?" Jimmy Olsen strode along beside Clark Kent and Lois Lane as they headed for the side entrance to the Daily Planet.

Jimmy was obviously feeling fine, and so was Clark. The main revolving doors had been shattered during Superman's battle with Lord Nor, which was creating something of a logjam for arriving employees, but even that couldn't destroy his good mood. It was going to be a beautiful day, Clark thought. The mist was burning off nicely, and, for the first time in his recent past, he had awakened feeling optimistic about the future. He wasn't being shanghaied off to New Krypton, Lord Nor wasn't threatening his world anymore, and he and Lois were going to be married this weekend. Things were definitely looking up.

"Sure, Jimmy," Lois said. "But it's nothing fancy this time. Clark and I are tired of all the trouble. It's just our

parents, Perry and you. And a date, if you want to bring one."

"That is," Clark said, "assuming that the three-headed snake-men from Andromeda don't land tomorrow, with the express purpose of breaking up our wedding."

Lois elbowed him in the ribs. "Don't even think it, buster."

Jimmy snorted. "It does seem like you've had more than your share of trouble." He pulled open the door for Lois. "But I … CK, what's wrong?"

A wave of dizziness swept over Clark. He staggered and fell against the door, his sense of balance completely gone. For an instant he had a blurry image of their faces above him, and a glimpse of blue sky behind them, then it all dissolved into nothing.

* * *

"Omigosh!" Jimmy Olsen grabbed Clark's arm as he lurched sideways. "CK, are you all right?"

There was no reply. Lois had him by the other arm, and together they lowered him to the sidewalk. Clark's head flopped limply backward; Lois put a hand under it to keep him from striking the pavement. "Clark? Clark, answer me!"

"I'll call the paramedics!" Jimmy started to get to his feet, but Lois's voice stopped him.

"No, Jimmy! Help me with him! Clark?"

Clark groaned faintly. Lois lifted his head very gently. "Clark? Sweetheart, answer me! What's wrong?"

Very slowly, Clark's brown eyes opened, glazed and unfocused. He looked blankly up at them for several seconds, then blinked a few times and began to frown. Lois brushed the hair gently back from his forehead. "Clark? Honey? Can you hear me? Say something!"

Clark didn't answer. He continued to frown as he slowly raised his head and looked around. After a moment he pushed himself up on one elbow, turning his head back and forth, a puzzled expression on his face.

Several other people had gathered around, curious passersby, as well as a few Planet employees. Someone asked, "Do you need the paramedics?"

"I don't think so." Jimmy got an arm under Clark's shoulders. "Can you sit up, CK?"

Clark obediently sat up. Lois and Jimmy steadied him between them as he got unsteadily to his feet. Jimmy dragged his friend's right arm across his shoulders. "Do you feel dizzy? You're not going to fall over, are you?"

He didn't reply, but Jimmy felt Clark lean more heavily against him, and braced himself to take the weight. Lois pulled the door open. "Let's get him inside."

"Okay." Jimmy helped guide Clark's wavering steps through the door. Someone behind them caught it to allow Lois to move to his other side, where she put her arm around her fiance.

Together they supported him across the room to the elevator, which opened obligingly for them. Once inside, Lois let him lean against the wall.

"What do you think happened?" Jimmy glanced anxiously at Clark's white face, then at Lois.

"Uh…" Lois was frowning, looking more worried than Jimmy had ever seen her. "I don't know, Jimmy. Let's get him to the newsroom where he can sit down. Then maybe we can figure this out."

* * *

Lois Lane was scared. It would have been upsetting enough if Clark had been an ordinary man, but this was *Superman*, for Pete's sake! And Superman didn't faint! Only he had, and she had no idea why, but it couldn't be good. She wished she could get him to a doctor, but calling the paramedics was out of the question. Outside of the fact that he wasn't human, which the doctors would figure out in short order, he was wearing the Suit under his clothing, which would be exceedingly difficult to explain. And he *would* have to decide to do this in front of Jimmy and half a dozen other people, at least, so there was no hope of keeping it quiet … and she was babbling to herself, which was *not* a good sign!

The elevator doors opened at last. She and Jimmy helped Clark out and Jimmy raised his voice to catch the attention of the other people down on the newsroom floor. "Hey! Could somebody give us a hand, here?"

When they had him seated in a chair at last, Jimmy rubbed a shoulder. Lois could understand that. Clark was heavy! Heavier than an ordinary man of his height and build would be; that was that dense Kryptonian molecular structure, she knew. She just hoped Jimmy wouldn't figure it out. Someone was handing Clark a paper cup of water, and Perry White was hurrying across the room from his office. "What in Elvis's name is goin' on here?"

"CK passed out cold, out on the sidewalk," Jimmy informed him. "Lois and I got him up here. I still think we ought to call the paramedics. He doesn't look so good, Lois."

He *didn't* look good. Lois could see that for herself, but she couldn't let them call anyone. All of her protective

instincts had kicked into high gear when Clark had been taken ill. If he couldn't help himself at the moment, she would have to do it for him.

"I think I ought to take him to the emergency room, Perry," she said. "I just remembered. One of the Kryptonians knocked him down a couple of days ago. He hit his head against the curb, but he seemed all right afterwards. If this is some sort of delayed reaction or something, it could be serious."

"Holy …" Jimmy's face whitened. "He didn't say anything about it!"

Perry put a hand on Clark's arm. "Clark? Son, look at me. Do you know where you are?"

Clark squinted up at him for several seconds, then around the room. He slowly shook his head.

"Do you know who I am?"

Again that puzzled stare. Clark frowned at him, obviously struggling to recall, but at last he shook his head again.

"This doesn't look good." Perry stated the obvious. "I think you'd better get him to the hospital, Lois."

Lois knelt in front of Clark and put her hands on either side of his face, forcing him to look at her. "Clark, try to focus. Do you know who *I* am?"

Clark stared at her, his face contorted with the effort. Slowly, his _expression changed. "Lois?" he said, very hesitantly.

Lois closed her eyes in relief. Whatever had happened, part of his brain was still functioning correctly. She glanced around at Perry. "Could I get some help to take him to the car?"

"Yeah. Jimmy, you and Ralph give her a hand. And Lois, call me as soon as you know anything. Got it?"

* * *

Once the two men had gotten Clark into the Jeep, she dismissed them. "Thanks, guys. I can handle it from here."

"Are you sure?" Jimmy glanced at Clark once more, still looking concerned. "If you need me to help you once you get there, Perry wouldn't mind if I went."

"No. If I need it, I'm sure the medical personnel there can help me. I'll call when I find out anything, okay?" She started the motor and backed out of the parking space before he could argue any more. She knew Jimmy was Clark's friend, but what needed to be done now she had to do alone.

The only person who really knew anything about Superman's physiology, and could possibly help her now, was Dr. Bernard Klein at STAR Labs, but she couldn't take Clark there. She would have to bring him in as Superman, and that meant getting him out of his business suit. She glanced at him sitting in the passenger seat. He was looking at her, still frowning, as if he was trying to recall something that he couldn't quite remember.

She stopped the Jeep at the exit of the parking lot, waited for a break in the stream of passing cars, and pulled out into traffic. Her apartment was the best spot for a little privacy, to get him changed into the Suit. He was acting more than a little bewildered. She hoped he would cooperate with her without too much difficulty. If necessary, she might have to tell Dr. Klein more than she wanted to, but that would be the last, possible resort.

"Lois …" His voice startled her. He was still watching her, and the dazed look was beginning to fade a bit. "What happened?"

"Don't you remember?"

"I…" His voice trailed off and he looked confused. "I don't know. Where are we?"

"Clark, we're in my Jeep. I'm taking you to my place so you can change. I've got to get you to Dr. Klein."

"Who?"

"Dr. Bernard Klein, at STAR Labs. He's the only person who knows enough about you that he might be able to help."

He shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

"Dr. Klein is the only expert on Superman around. We have to find out what happened. You collapsed outside the Daily Planet. Don't you remember?"

He rubbed his face. "I'm not sure. Superman?"

"Yes. You're Superman."

He stared at her for a long moment, then grimaced. "Man, my head aches. Superman. I think I … Yeah, I sort of remember. Lois …" There was almost a note of panic in his voice. "What's wrong with me?"

"I don't know," she said, trying to keep her own voice calm and level, "but we're going to find out. The first thing we're going to do is get you into your outfit. Dr. Klein doesn't know that Clark Kent and Superman are the same man. You mustn't tell him. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Again he rubbed his face. "It's … everything is mixed up. Who was that, talking to me? I almost knew, but I couldn't…"

"That was our boss, Perry White."

"Oh, Lord, Perry. Of course. And Jimmy. Jimmy was there." He laid his head back against the headrest. "My head's throbbing so much it's making me sick."

That scared her almost as much as his collapse. Superman didn't get headaches, or nausea, either. Something was very wrong with her fiancé. She hoped it had nothing to do with the Kryptonite gas the army had hit him with two days ago. He had admitted not feeling quite up to par last night, but had assured her that the effects would fade slowly away within a day or two. She glanced at him, biting her lower lip. His head was tilted back against the headrest, eyes closed, a faint frown line of pain between his brows. She resisted the urge to press harder on the gas pedal. The last thing she needed was to get stopped by one of Metropolis's Finest right now.

Once they got to her apartment building, getting him inside wasn't a problem. At least the dizziness seemed to have passed and he could walk steadily. Most of the tenants were at work, and the night workers sleeping. They passed no one in the hallway. When the door closed behind them, Lois breathed a sigh of relief. She hadn't wanted to be seen entering her apartment with Clark Kent and leaving it with Superman. An observer might not make the connection, but, then again they might, and since Clark wasn't in any shape to do much thinking right now, she had to do it for him. She gestured to an armchair.

"Sit down and take it easy, Clark. Would you like something to drink? I know that no Earth medicines affect you, so I won't offer you any aspirin for the headache."

"They don't?" He took the place she indicated with a sigh of relief.

"I'm afraid not. You're Kryptonian, remember?" She walked over behind him and began to rub his shoulders. The taut muscles were like steel under her fingers. "Put your head back and rest for a few minutes, then we have to get you out of your street clothes. You're wearing the Suit underneath."

"All right." He obeyed her without question. Within a few minutes his breathing told her he had fallen asleep. Lois sat, trying not to bite her fingernails, and thought. Then she stood up, went into the bedroom and picked up the phone.

Dr. Klein was in his lab, but when she told the assistant who answered that she was calling about Superman the woman didn't hesitate. "Just a moment, Miss Lane. I'll call him."

Lois waited, drumming her fingers. After a moment Dr. Klein answered. "Klein here."

"Hello, Dr. Klein. It's Lois Lane. I need your help. Something's happened to Superman."

"What do you mean?" Klein asked. "Not the Kryptonite gas? We heard about it, of course, but I assumed that his own people would treat him for the effects."

"I don't know what it is. He was fine this morning, then he just collapsed without any warning at all. Now he seems confused. May I bring him to see you?"

"Certainly." Dr. Klein's voice took on a tinge of worry. "Bring him here right away. I'll need to examine him."

"All right. He's sleeping right now. And, Dr. Klein — don't tell anyone about this."

"Of course not. Get him here as soon as possible. I'll be waiting."

* * *

The short nap appeared to have helped. Clark's color was better when Lois went to awaken him, but his memory wasn't. He removed his street clothes to reveal the Superman suit almost automatically. Lois still couldn't have said where the boots came from, but the question didn't seem important now. She was much too anxious to get him to Dr. Klein to find out what was wrong.

As they exited the building, one of the other tenants of the apartment house was ascending the steps, her arms full of groceries. Her eyes widened at the sight of the superhero accompanying Lois, and she stepped back involuntarily. The heel of her shoe missed the step. Groceries flew; she flailed her arms as she lost her balance, and found her wrist caught tightly in Superman's hand.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" he asked. Lois smiled at the question. Memory or no memory, her Clark's instincts were firmly ingrained.

"Oh, yes, Superman! Thank you!" Mrs. Delbert looked flustered. "I'd heard that you were … well, are *you* all right? After you fought that horrible Lord Nor, everyone was afraid you were … dead." Her voice dropped on the last word.

"Superman's fine," Lois said, intervening before Clark could answer. She bent to help him pick up the scattered food items. Mrs. Delbert helped, too, watching Superman with an awed expression. When he put the bag back into her arms, she smiled a little nervously.

"No one will believe me when I tell them Superman helped me pick up my groceries. Thank you." She looked shyly at him. "You saved all of us, Superman. I wanted to let you know how grateful we are … and how glad we are that you came back."

He smiled at her; Lois watched it have its inevitable effect. That charming grin had won more female hearts than she wanted to think about, and Mrs. Delbert's was only the latest in a long list. "Thank you, ma'am. I appreciate that."

"I hate to interrupt," Lois said firmly, "but you're going to be late, Superman. We need to go."

"Yes, of course." He glanced questioningly at her, but smiled again at Mrs. Delbert. "Nice to meet you, ma'am."

"Nice to meet *you*, Superman!" The woman watched as he followed Lois down the steps and slid into the passenger seat of the Jeep. Lois hoped it wouldn't occur to her to wonder why the Man of Steel was riding in a car rather than flying under his own power, but the thought faded quickly. She had more important worries at the moment.

Clark was frowning again. "What was she talking about, Lois? Who's Lord Nor?"

"You don't remember?"

He shook his head, the frown deepening. "It seems like I should know, but I can't quite …"

"Lord Nor was the leader of the New Kryptonian invaders who tried to take over Earth. You had to challenge him to a Kryptonian duel to defeat him. Then the army hit all of you with poison gas. Nor and several of his followers were killed; you just barely survived." She still felt a pang in the region of her stomach at the memory of that long moment when she thought she'd lost him. "That's what I'm afraid might be causing this problem. Dr. Klein wants to examine you. I just hope he can figure it out."

"So do I." He rubbed his face. "I feel a little better. At least the headache's gone."

Lois patted his knee lightly. "That has to be an improvement. You don't usually get headaches at all."

"You think it's related to this?"

"I'm pretty sure it has to be." She kept her eyes determinedly on the morning traffic. Rush hour was mostly over by now, but enough cars were on the streets that she couldn't afford to let her attention stray. "We'll be at STAR Labs in a few moments. Dr. Klein is as close to an expert on Superman as we're going to find, but remember, he doesn't know you have a secret identity — that you're Clark Kent. Nobody knows that except you, me, and your parents. It's the only way you have a chance at a private life. Be careful, understand?"

"Yeah … I realize that. Don't worry. I sort of remember …" He rubbed his face again. "I sort of remember a lot of things, but they're all jumbled up. Most of it doesn't make any sense."

"What do you remember?"

"Something about a floating palace. And a … concubine? That can't be right."

"Actually, it is. Kind of, anyway." She sighed, thinking that the whole truth would probably confuse him even more. "It's a long story. I'll tell you all about it later if it doesn't come back on its own. Okay?"

"Okay." He was silent, watching her. "We … we have a relationship, don't we." It was not a question. That part was reassuring, anyway, Lois thought. Somehow, in all his confusion, he remembered her. She nodded.

"Yes. We're engaged to be married."

He blew out a long breath. "Thank God. I was afraid I was imagining it."

She smiled slightly. "No, you weren't. There's STAR Labs, straight ahead. Just remember, you're Superman, not Clark. Got it?"

"Got it."

* * *

Dr. Klein tended to babble even more than she did, Lois thought, which, in its way, was a good thing, because it reminded her not to. The scientist had taken Superman into his examining room when they arrived and had been fussing over him for thirty minutes at least. Lois fidgeted and walked up and down in the hall, wishing that she'd brought something to read. Somehow "The Journal of North American Physicists", and a thick volume on "Physico-chemical Properties of Reactive Substances" failed to catch her interest; neither did the copy of "Modern Lab Tech: The Swimsuit Issue". Her imagination supplied her with a horrifying mental image of Dr. Klein in a bathing suit, and she finally settled in relief on the little television in one corner of the lab that opened off the end of the hall. She tuned in to LNN in the middle of a fascinating weather report and was about to switch stations when a news bulletin interrupted the antics of the strange little man with the weather map.

"We interrupt this program for a news bulletin. This is the latest update on the search for Bus 12, of the Metropolitan Unified School District…"

That caught her attention. It was almost enough to take her mind off Superman — at least partly. School Bus 12 had been scheduled to arrive at Mary P. Zeigler Elementary School at eight this morning, but never got there. It was now 9:45 and there was no sign of the bus. Police were tracing its route, trying to find where it had vanished. Twenty-six children, ranging in age from five to thirteen were on it, as well as the driver. So far there were no leads and the police spokesman had no further comment. If Superman heard this bulletin, he was requested to contact Inspector Henderson at Metropolis Police Headquarters …

Great, just great. And Superman wasn't exactly going to be a whole lot of use right now. Lois found herself pacing again.

It was another hour before Dr. Klein and Superman emerged from the examining room. The scientist was frowning at the chart he held in his hands and muttering under his breath.

Lois restrained herself from grasping his coat by the sleeve. "How is he, Dr. Klein?"

"Huh?" Klein looked up in surprise. "Oh, Lois! I'd forgotten you were here, but it's a good thing you stayed. I need to ask you a few questions. Superman hasn't been able to … well …" He glanced apologetically at his patient. "It's as if some of his memories have been erased, and the rest are somehow scrambled. He can't give me much to go on. I need you to tell me exactly what happened again, in as much detail as possible."

"All right." Lois patiently went over the event for the second time, leaving out only the information that he had been in his Clark Kent persona when it had occurred. Dr. Klein listened without interruption, then scowled unhappily at his chart.

"So, one second he was perfectly fine, and the next he'd collapsed. That suggests a sudden onset. And I'm definitely finding indications of physical trauma." Dr. Klein might have a tendency to babble and go off on tangents, but Lois was thanking every Divine power the universe might have watching over Clark at this moment for the scientist and his willingness to help them. "I doubt if this is the result of the Kryptonite gas, although it might have contributed to the problem. Tell me, Lois, has Superman ever had something like this happen to him before, that you know of?"

Lois bit her lip. Should she tell him? It couldn't do any harm, she decided, as long as she gave no clues about Clark's secret, and, for all she knew, it might help.

"Yes," she said. "Twice. But I don't see how it could be connected."

"Let me be the judge of that." Dr. Klein opened the door to his office. "Why don't you both come in here and sit down?"

They followed him into the small room and took the chairs he indicated. When he had closed the door and was seated behind the cluttered desk, he spoke again. "Now, tell me everything you know about it."

Lois hesitated again. "You aren't going to tell anyone else about this, are you? If the wrong people found out, it could be dangerous for Superman." She glanced anxiously at her fiance. "He, Clark and I figured out some things about it."

Dr. Klein shook his head. "I'm Superman's doctor, Lois. That means my oath applies to the situation, you know: doctor-patient confidentiality? Whatever you tell me goes no farther than this room." He surveyed her worried face for several seconds. "Trust me. Anything you say is perfectly safe with me." When she still hesitated, he cocked his head to the side and gave her a small grin. "Superman's my friend, for Heaven's sake! I wouldn't do anything to hurt him."

She took a deep breath and nodded. Trust had to begin somewhere. "All right. The first time was when he destroyed the Nightfall Asteroid."

The scientist leaned forward quickly. "That was why he was missing for two days?"

"Yes. He came back to Earth in that fireball that crashed in Suicide Slum. Jimmy Olsen found a fragment of his uniform, badly burned, in the crater. Two days later, his memory came back and he was in time to stop the second piece of asteroid."

"I see. And he had no idea where he was during that time?"

"Just wandering around, I guess. Anyway, the second time was a little over a year ago; there was a cargo ship that burned in Metropolis Harbor."

"I remember seeing it on television," Dr. Klein interjected. "Superman was taken to the hospital, but nothing was reported about amnesia."

"We kept it quiet. He was down in the hold, trying to put out the fire. He said he felt Kryptonite for just an instant before the ship blew up. It knocked him out and threw him halfway across the harbor, and when he woke up his memory was gone. It came back the next night, though."

"Hmmmph!" Dr. Klein gave his patient a long look. "That could be important. But it wasn't like this? No mixed memories?"

"No."

"Kryptonite, huh?" He looked at his notes. "And both times his memories came back quickly, within a day or two."

"Yes."

"Mmmm …" Dr. Klein was silent for a long time, obviously in deep thought. At last he focused on Superman again. "It might be …"

"Might be what?" Lois couldn't stand the suspense any longer. Dr. Klein smiled slightly.

"You know, there are two types of Kryptonite that we know of: green and red. The green can kill Superman — any Kryptonians, I guess," he added, apparently thinking of the events only a few days in the past. "The red type is more of a mystery, because different pieces seem to have different

effects. Of course, I only had a limited opportunity to study the piece in the laser you brought in a few months ago, but I was told about the first piece. Still, Kryptonite seems to be the only substance that affects Superman."

"You think the Kryptonite might have had something to do with the amnesia?"

"It's possible." He looked directly at the superhero. "It's even possible that you ran into some sort of Kryptonite when you destroyed Nightfall, although there's no chance that we'll ever know for sure. Still, it seems awfully coincidental that you encountered it on the cargo ship and were immediately stricken with amnesia, and that both times it seems to have worn off within a very short interval."

"We thought so, too," Lois said. "But how could Superman have encountered it on the street? The piece that was on the ship is probably at the bottom of Metropolis Harbor."

"Not necessarily." Dr. Klein set down the chart. "I ride past that area every day on the way to work. They dredged the Harbor two weeks ago."

* * *

Lois put down the phone with a sharp click. "I guess that settles it."

Bernard Klein and Superman both looked at her questioningly. Lois scowled darkly at the inoffensive device as if it were somehow at fault. "That was the Port Authority."

"We heard that much, Lois." Superman shifted in his seat and rubbed his forehead. "What did you find out?"

"I talked to a public relations officer. One of the dredging crew apparently has a little brother who's a high school whiz kid. He's interested in geology and has this huge rock collection. And he knows some of the people over at the Museum of Natural History. They've given him the run of the place, kind of like Teacher's Pet."

"And?"

"Evidently, last week the guy brought his little brother in to see this weird rock they dug out of the harbor."

"You're kidding, I hope."

"Don't I wish. The kid apparently said he thought it was a meteorite, and called in a couple of his buddies from the museum. He was right."

"Why wasn't it in the paper, though?" Dr. Klein threw in the obvious objection. "You'd think that it would at least be reported. That kind of thing is good public relations for them."

"It probably was," Lois said. "That was about the time Lord Nor put his force field over Smallville. I guess it sort of crowded less important news off the front page. I know I was pretty distracted at the time."

"I guess it's possible," the scientist admitted. "Where's the meteorite, now?"

Lois regarded the phone now as if it were a personal enemy. "At the museum. They picked it up this morning and transported it over there by truck. In case you don't know it, the best route from the Harbor to the Museum goes right past the Daily Planet … which was where Superman was when it happened. Of course, we don't *know* it was at the same time, but it had to be close. That sounds pretty … well … suspicious to me."

"What do you do?" Dr. Klein asked, curiously, "memorize maps?"

Lois didn't answer. She was watching Superman now.

Superman grimaced and rubbed his temples. "But, if that's what's behind this whole thing, why didn't it cause complete amnesia again? I mean, from what you say, that's what it did last time."

"My guess is that it was too far away," Dr. Klein said. "If you were almost at the limit of its range the effect might be partial. This is all supposition, but it makes sense." He sighed. "I'd say it somehow causes damage that repairs itself in a day or two, probably because of Superman's phenomenal rate of healing. That may be the cause of the headaches." He glanced sharply at his patient. "You've got one now, don't you?"

"Yeah." Superman grimaced. "Every time I start trying real hard to remember, it starts to hurt."

"Then don't," Klein said. "There's almost certainly been some damage done. Give it a chance to get well. If you leave it alone, the indications are that everything will come back in a few days."

Lois regarded her fiance with concern. "You mean he shouldn't try to remember anything?"

"No, of course not. Just don't work too hard at it. Take it as it comes." Dr. Klein rose to his feet and removed an instrument from his pocket. "Look straight ahead, Superman."

Superman obeyed, and Dr. Klein shined the light into one eye, then the other. "Try not to blink." He flicked the light away from his patient's eyes, then back in quick succession. "There's definitely indications of physical trauma, as I said before. Unfortunately, there's no way I can tell exactly what did happen. In some way it seems to suppress his memory, apparently temporarily. It's even possible that we're dealing with an entirely different type of Kryptonite here."

Lois closed her eyes. "A *third* kind?"

"Maybe. We need to examine that meteorite."

"*Without* letting anyone know why."

"That," Dr. Klein said, "goes without saying. In the meantime, Superman, you need to take it easy. Let yourself heal. Unfortunately, there isn't anything I can do to hasten the process, except give you advice. If you take it, you'll probably be over this in a day or so. If you don't, it's possible it could take a lot longer."

* * *

They were back in the Jeep, headed for Lois's apartment, when she realized that she had forgotten entirely to call her boss as she had promised to do. At a stoplight, she took out the phone and dialed the Planet's number. After a few rings, Jimmy's voice answered.

"Daily Planet."

"Jimmy, it's Lois."

"How's CK?" he asked. That told her all she needed to know about Jimmy's state of mind. It made her feel a little guilty that she hadn't thought of him since she had driven out of the parking lot over three hours ago, but obviously he'd been worrying about his friend.

"The doctors think he's going to be all right," she said. The light changed to green and she eased the Jeep forward.

There was a huge sigh at the other end of the phone. "What was the matter?"

"He has a concussion," she said. (Or at least the Kryptonian equivalent. But she wasn't going to say that aloud.)

"From that Kryptonian who knocked him down?"

"We don't know, but probably," she said. "They told him to take it easy for the next couple of days, but they didn't want him alone so I'm keeping him with me."

"Is he feeling any better?"

"Some. He's still a little mixed up and his head hurts, but it isn't as bad as it was."

"Whew! That's a relief. Look, Lois, the Chief wants to talk to you. I'm going to put you on hold for a minute."

"Tell him I'll call him back. I'm trying to talk and drive at the same time. Ten minutes?"

A short silence, then: "Okay, but hurry. Perry wants you to cover a story that broke a couple of hours ago."

"That business with the school bus? Is there any news?"

"Yeah, all bad. Don't take too long, okay?"

"Okay."

She called back from her apartment while Clark was changing clothes again. Perry came on the line at once. "Lois? I want you over at the Hobbs River. Did you hear the report about the missing school bus?"

"Yes. It was on LNN while they were examining Clark. What's going on?"

"The bus didn't show up at the school and seems to have disappeared completely. The police released a statement twenty minutes ago. They've received a ransom note for ten million dollars from someone who claimed that he hijacked the bus."

"What does the Hobbs River have to do with it?"

"The hijackers picked up the money and used a van reported stolen two days ago to escape in. No one was supposed to try to follow them or trace them any other way, or else, but the van went off the Silverman Memorial Bridge while they were makin' their escape. There was a hidden transmitter in the bag, but it quit when it hit the water. They've got a salvage team tryin' to bring it up. I want you on the story right now. Oh, and by the way, Henderson called. He wants Clark to get hold of Superman for him. Do you have any ideas how we're supposed to do that with Clark out of action?"

Great. They were clamoring for Superman, and Superman was going to be about as useful to them as Jimmy Olsen. Maybe less. She glanced in the direction of her bedroom and lowered her voice. "I know where he is, Chief, but I don't think he's going to be much help. He's still sick from the Kryptonite gas that Colonel Cash used on him the other day."

"Great Shades of Elvis! I hope they skin that Cash character alive! Get on over there, and at least let Superman know what's going on."

"He already knows, Chief. He wants to help, and he will as soon as he can."

Lois hung up, biting her lip. Clark emerged from the bedroom, dressed in his street clothes and wearing a worried _expression. "What's going on, Lois?"

She told him. When she had finished, he grimaced in frustration. "I need to get over there. I've got to help those kids."

"How can you help right now? You barely remember your own name! And you can't let them know you're having memory problems, at least not as Superman."

"But …"

Lois's mind was working fast. This business of being in on Superman's big secret was sure sharpening her thinking skills, she reflected. She was already much better at man-

ufacturing excuses than he was. She knew Clark needed to help; it was just part of what he was. So, how could they manage this without having him show up as an obviously partially incapacitated superhero? Both Clark and Superman with memory problems at the same time would be just a little too much to swallow. Dr. Klein could be trusted to keep quiet, and he wasn't likely to find out about Clark. Jimmy was the only other person at the Planet who saw Dr. Klein at all, and Lois intended to ask Jimmy not to violate Clark's privacy by discussing the incident with anyone. Jimmy might not think it was all that important, but he'd do as she asked. But let the word get out about Superman, and at least he and Perry — neither of whom were stupid — would make the connection.

"Look, Clark, Superman's got a ready-made excuse not to show up. This is what we'll do …"

* * *

The scene at the Silverman Bridge was one of mass confusion. There were police, heavy equipment and the men handling it, a crowd of rubbernecks, and a mob of press. It looked to Lois as if half the reporters in the city were there.

The van was being dragged ashore as she approached, a battered, light green vehicle with water pouring from the broken windshield and every window. The crowd of reporters surged forward and the shouts of the police and spectators were almost drowned out by the voices of the eager news hawks.

Clark looked a little worried. "How are we going to talk to this guy Henderson, with all that stuff going on?"

Lois glanced at him. "Give me a little credit. There's no way I'm getting anywhere near that. I've got a better idea." She grasped his hand and led the way around the mob of gawking humanity until she spotted one of Henderson's men on the edge of the crowd. "Officer!"

The man turned his head. "I'm sorry, ma'am, you can't get any closer."

Lois ignored his words. "I'm Lois Lane from the Daily Planet. Inspector Henderson needed us to get hold of Superman for him. I've got a message for Henderson. I need to talk to him when he has a minute."

The officer eyed her skeptically for a moment. "From Superman? Why didn't he just come, himself?"

"Because he can't!" she snapped. "Don't you read the papers? The army gassed him with Kryptonite, remember? I was there."

His face changed. "Sorry, Miss Lane. I'll get a message to the Inspector for you. Stay here." He moved a few steps away, and Lois saw him pull out a cellular phone.

Her own phone shrilled a few moments later. It was Henderson, sounding exasperated and harassed. "Lois? You have a message from Superman?"

"Yes, I do, Inspector. He still hasn't gotten over Cash's poison gas. His powers aren't working, and he's pretty much out of action right now. He'd like it if you could let Clark and me look over the van, after your people are finished with it, of course, and report back to him. He promised to be here just as soon as he can."

A long pause. "You're sure this isn't just a way to get an exclusive for the Planet, Lane?"

With her reputation as "Mad-dog, get-the-scoop-at-any-cost-Lane", she supposed that Henderson's doubts were justified. "Inspector, I might be a reporter, but I'm not about to risk the lives of a busload of children for a scoop. Clark and I are just going to be Superman's eyes until he can be here himself. He knows we're good observers. Trust us."

Another long pause. At last the Inspector spoke. "I'll meet you at Police Headquarters in an hour. And you'd better be telling the truth."

"I am."

She released her breath after he hung up. "Okay, we're in."

"Are you sure about this, Lois?" Clark sounded very doubtful.

She took his arm and pulled him away from the crowd. "Clark, it's the only way to get you in to look at the van without having you appear as Superman. We can't take the risk of that yet. With luck, we'll spot something the police missed. Are any of your powers working at all?"

"I'm not sure they're really gone. I think it's just because I don't quite remember how to use them. Every time I try, my head starts to pound."

"Okay, don't try for now. It will be awhile before they let us look the thing over, anyhow." She squeezed his hand. "Clark, we're going to do this, but to do it we've got to get you well. Promise me you're not going to try to use your powers, or even *think* too hard about anything until we're ready to look that van over. Maybe you can even try to take a nap. It seemed to help this morning." She looked him straight in the eyes. "Promise?"

He hesitated. "Okay. I promise."

"Good. I'm guessing, but the last time you ran into this you had a full night's sleep before we started trying to help you to remember, and you didn't have any headaches then. At least, you didn't act like it. It's only been a few hours, so far. Let's try it. It can't hurt, and it might help. Okay?"

He smiled ruefully. "You're the boss."

"I'm glad you remembered that. Let's get back to the Jeep."

* * *

Inspector Henderson was a slender, dark-haired man of middle height with a gloomy expression and, at the moment, an air of harassed frustration. As they entered his office he waved generally at seats and dropped into his own desk chair with a grimace. "Okay, let's hear it."

"Basically," Lois said, "Superman's still feeling pretty bad, and his powers aren't working right." She crossed one knee over the other and clasped her hands in her lap. Knowing Clark's passion for the truth, she knew she'd better stick as close to it as she could. It would be easier to lie, but her partner wouldn't like it. "He wants us to look at everything, and give him everything we and your people find, information-wise. He thinks he'll be recovered within a day or two, but he doesn't want to wait that long if he doesn't have to, and he said to tell you he'd be here just as soon as he possibly can."

A shadow of concern crossed Henderson's face. "Have you seen him?"

"Yes," Lois said. "He's going to be fine; all he needs is a little time."

"Well …" The man appeared to be thinking it over. "All right. You've always played it straight with me, and you give my boys a fair shake. I'll trust you. Don't let me down. As soon as my people have finished I'll let you have a look."

"Fair enough," Lois said. "What's the history on the van?"

Henderson flipped open a folder lying on his desk. "Just by an amazing coincidence I happen to have that report right here."

Lois was careful not to smile. Henderson must have decided before they'd walked into his office that he was going to give them what they wanted, but there was no way on Earth he'd ever admit it. "Perry said it was stolen?"

"Reported stolen two days ago. It belongs to a guy named Morrison. He's a basketball coach over at Metropolis High School. Apparently, it was taken right out of the school parking lot."

"Somebody had pretty cool nerves," Clark ventured.

"We figured it was teenagers until this morning," Henderson said. "The van isn't a common model, and it's eleven years old. Even the parts aren't popular with car thieves." The phone on his desk interrupted him. "Excuse me." He picked up the receiver. "Henderson." He listened for a moment. "Okay, go ahead."

He replaced the receiver. "The van's in the garage. Do you want to watch the search, or just read the report?"

"We'll watch," Clark said before Lois could speak.

"All right. Follow me."

* * *

It was a little after three by the time they were allowed into the van. Lois had to give them credit; the police investigators were thorough. They went over every inch of the vehicle, they dusted for prints, they searched every corner for any piece of information that might give them a clue. They found a jacket on the floor under one seat with a name printed on the inside in indelible ink: Edward Morrison, the van's owner. There had been various wrappers from several fast food places, all soaked through, wet paper napkins that had been shredded with the cleaning of hands and faces, two straws, a soda can, several smashed cups, and a broken, plastic spoon. There were also six maps, all very wet, and a flashlight. One of the men glanced at them as they gathered their equipment and prepared to depart. "Go ahead, it's all yours; but if you can find anything else, you're Superman."

Lois was careful not to let them see her expression. How right they were; of course, Superman wasn't firing on all cylinders right now, either. Still, you never knew. She looked at Clark. "Shall we?"

Her partner was squinting at the van. "They seemed to do a pretty complete job, Lois."

"Maybe. But maybe you'll be able to see something they didn't. Maybe I will. Let's just get to it."

He shrugged. "You're the boss."

The van was, as Henderson had said, an older model, painted a pale green. Scratches marred the paint job, some new and some not, judging by the rust marks on the underlying metal. The suspects had left no trace of their occupancy that Lois could see, unless the fast food remains had been theirs. Of course, that could have just as easily belonged to the owner.

"Lois," Clark said.

"What?" She stifled a discouraged sigh.

"Did you notice that this van is designed for a handicapped driver?"

She had. The controls were such that a person could control it using only his hands. There were no foot controls at all. "What of it?"

"The guy that owns it is a basketball coach. How likely is it that he'd be handicapped?"

Lois thought about that and shrugged. "I don't know. Lots of handicapped people do all kinds of jobs you might not expect."

"Maybe. But I'd like to check it out."

"Sure." It didn't really seem important; just one of those little details that needed resolution. "Do you see anything else?"

"Not yet." He was frowning, rubbing his forehead in the way that Lois had learned meant that he had a headache. She started to speak.

Clark pulled down his glasses and, with a pained grimace, squinted at the handicapped controls. "There it is. I thought it was worth checking out."

"What?"

He pushed the glasses back up and closed his eyes, knuckling his temples. "There's some sort of electronic device inside the steering column. It could be a remote control."

"A remote con —" She broke off. "For driving this thing from a distance?"

"Yes."

"You mean they weren't in the van? That they rigged this whole thing to —"

"Convince the authorities that they were dead, so law enforcement would stop hunting for them. Exactly."

The partners looked at each other for several seconds. This changed everything. "I think," Lois said finally, "that we found what we came for. It's time that Superman talked to Inspector Henderson; but make it short."

* * *

"I got the information you asked for," Jimmy said. He handed Lois a sheaf of papers. "All the stuff I could dig up on Morrison." He glanced past her into the apartment where her belongings lay stacked about, and cardboard boxes littered the floor. She and Clark had been packing her things yesterday in anticipation of their wedding this weekend. "Where's CK?"

"Asleep in the bedroom. I insisted that he take a nap. Why don't you come in, Jimmy? You can help me figure this stuff out."

"Sure." He followed Lois into her small kitchen where she set the papers down on the table, the only surface not covered with unsorted possessions. "Wow, I never realized you had so much stuff."

"Neither did I." Lois pulled out a chair. "I called Metropolis High. Morrison didn't come to work today. According to the woman I talked to, he has the flu."

Jimmy sat down and reached for the papers. After shuffling through them for several seconds, he extracted one. "Here's the information on the van. Morrison bought it at a police auction six months ago."

"Interesting."

"Yeah. And he's not handicapped, either. He climbs mountains and body surfs in his spare time."

"Is it possible he has a handicapped wife or relative?"

"Nope." Jimmy shook his head emphatically. "He lives alone in an apartment. He only has two relatives that I could track down. Here's the printout."

Lois took the paper he held out. "A brother, William, and a half- brother, Thomas Barnes. Anything on them?"

Jimmy grinned. "You didn't ask, but I figured you'd want it. William is an engineer. He works for an electronics firm in Gotham City. Lives there, too. Barnes works for a small construction company here in the city. He lives on a piece of land he inherited from his father, north of Metropolis. Way out in the boondocks."

"Jimmy, you're fantastic. That's just what I was looking for. You didn't happen to get the address, did you?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. Right there." He pointed to the sheet of paper Lois held. "When I do research, I'm thorough. Comes from working for Perry." He looked at her questioningly. "I don't suppose you're going to tell me why I was looking for all this, are you?"

Lois hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah. I'm working on a theory about the bus hijacking. I don't think the van was stolen at all. I think this Morrison guy was behind the whole thing."

Jimmy's eyes widened. "What makes you think that?"

"Superman spotted a remote control device in it. Henderson's people are looking it over now. But Clark and I think the hijackers used this whole stunt to make everyone think they're dead, and if they did plan it, they must have arranged for a place to hide the bus and passengers for awhile. Someplace where it wasn't likely to be spotted, like a barn, or a cave, or a mine—"

"I see what you're thinking. Someplace remote, where they couldn't get out. Maybe on someone's property, well out of town …"

"Exactly. Can you get me a map of the area?"

"Let me get onto your computer for a few minutes, and I think I can."

Ten minutes later, he had the map. Lois took it. "Thanks, Jimmy, you're a prince. Look, I'm sure Perry's got things he wants you to do, so I won't keep you any more."

Jimmy eyed her suspiciously. "You're going up there, aren't you?"

She laughed unconvincingly. "Of course not. I'm going to call Henderson, and …"

"You're not fooling me a bit, Lois." Jimmy wasn't budging. "I'm not going anywhere unless I know what you're going to do."

Lois tried to glare him down, but the young photographer stood his ground. Suddenly she laughed. "You've been around me too long. Okay, I'm going to go out there and look around. With luck, I'll find something that'll bring Henderson's guys out in a hurry."

"What about CK? Aren't you taking him?"

Lois shook her head. "He's sleeping and I don't want to wake him up. He needs it. I'll leave him a note."

Jimmy looked doubtful as she scribbled the short note to her partner, then appeared to come to a decision. "I'm coming with you."

For a moment she was inclined to argue, but, after all, it would be just as well to have a companion. "Okay, then, let's go."

* * *

The drive to Thomas Barnes's property took the better part of an hour. It was, as Jimmy had said, north of the city, situated well off the main road, just barely within the city limits. After several dead ends they finally followed a rutted track that came to a chain link fence and a gate with a sign that warned:

PRIVATE PROPERTY

NO TRESPASSING

"I think this is it," Jimmy said. "How do we get in?"

"How are you at climbing fences?" Lois asked.

"Not bad."

"Okay. Let's park your car somewhere out of sight and we're on our way."

They settled on a parking place behind a growth of scraggly bushes a short distance off the road. Lois surveyed the hiding place with the eye of an artist. "Well, nobody can see it from the road. No one should notice it unless they're really observant, or looking for it."

Jimmy nodded and approached the fence. "Shall I give you a boost?"

"Thanks." He held his cupped hands for her to step into and braced himself for her weight. Fortunately, Lois was both small and light. She placed one foot in his palms, swung a leg over the top of the fence and scrambled across. Jimmy followed a moment later.

"Now where?"

"Well, according to the aerial map, this road branches ahead. The left fork takes you to some kind of house. The other goes off into the hills, that way, and ends."

"Yeah, but what does it end at?"

Lois shrugged. "I vote we go to the house."

"You're the boss lady. Lead on."

* * *

"Okay." Ed Morrison was seated comfortably on his brother's sofa, a beer in one hand. "Phase two is completed without a hitch. On to phase three. You have the stuff ready, Tom?"

Tom Barnes nodded jerkily. "All here. But I don't see why we have to do it this way, Ed. I mean, it's a bunch of kids!"

"Kids who are witnesses." Will set down his own beer with a thunk. "If we want to get away with this clean, we don't leave any witnesses alive."

"They didn't see our faces," Tom protested. "How are they going to tell the police what we look like?"

"Police identify people by a lot of things besides their faces." Ed's handsome features were remote, detached, as if he had no feelings at all for the scared kids they had herded into the old mine several hours ago. He probably didn't, Tom reflected, bitterly. Ed had always been the one who planned things, and the consequences to others never appeared to bother him. As a matter of fact, it never seemed to bother him when his own brothers got hurt, either. "If we don't eliminate the witnesses there's a good chance someone will remember something they shouldn't. We don't risk it. Is that clear?"

Tom hesitated. Ed's _expression hardened. "Is that *clear*?"

Tom nodded, albeit reluctantly.

"All right," Ed continued, as if the small argument had never happened, "I want that mine entrance collapsed as soon as you can transport the explosives there. That should finish it. Then we go back to our own homes and do nothing

out of the ordinary. No trips to Las Vegas, no unusual purchases. Everybody got it?"

Both of the other men nodded. "All right, let's get to it. Take the pickup."

It was at that instant that all three men heard the clear crack of a twig outside the window. Will was there in an instant, pistol in hand. "Hold it!"

Ed strolled to the window and looked out as well. "Well, well. We seem to have a pair of eavesdroppers. Stand up, both of you."

After a second, Tom saw two heads come into view: a dark-haired woman and a young man. Ed eyed them for a long moment. "Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

* * *

Clark Kent woke slowly from his nap. The bedroom was dim, and he heard no sounds from the living room. He sat up cautiously, but the throbbing headache with which he had gone to sleep seemed to have departed. He ran a hand through his hair and carefully put his feet on the floor.

"Lois?" he called.

There was no answer. A glance at the alarm clock told him it was a few minutes before six. He had slept for over two hours. He stood up and padded to the door.

There was no sign of Lois. He made a quick tour through the apartment but the place was empty.

He stood for a moment, thinking. She had probably simply gone out for something, he told himself, a little uneasily. Surely she wouldn't have gone anywhere important without telling him.

Who do you think you're kidding? a small voice inside his head shouted. This was *Lois* he was talking about here. Somehow amid all the scrambled memories, that fact stood out clearly.

Well, where would she go?

He didn't have the slightest idea. After a moment, he went to the phone. One of the speed dial functions was labeled clearly: "Planet". He punched that one.

"Daily Planet," a voice answered after a few rings. "Editor's desk."

Clark didn't recognize the voice, although it seemed familiar. "This is Clark Kent," he said. "Is Lois there?"

"Just a minute." The voice became muffled. "It's Kent. He's asking for Lois."

Another voice. "Let me have it." Then: "Clark! How are you feeling, son?"

"Perry?"

"At least you remember my name." The editor sounded pleased. "How's the head? Lois said you had a concussion."

"Uh, yeah. I'm better. Listen, sir, I just woke up and there's no sign of Lois. Is she there?"

"No, she's not. She called here awhile ago and had Jimmy doin' some research for her. He left about forty-five minutes ago. Said he was takin' it to her."

"Neither of them are here."

"Well, they'll probably be back soon," Perry told him. "You take it easy. Concussions are nothin' to fool around with."

Well, that was no help. "Okay, sir. I'm sure you're right."

Sure, he was. After Clark hung up, he considered. Jimmy had been bringing some research over for her. It was probably the stuff on that van and its owner. She'd promised to call him when she found out anything, but obviously Lois was being protective again, and had decided that it was better for him to sleep. So, then, if she'd found out anything, she'd undoubtedly head right out and investigate on her own, no matter how dangerous it might be.

But she might leave whatever Jimmy had brought here in the apartment.

He looked around again, and this time found it almost at once, right on the kitchen table. He sat down and read through it quickly. What Jimmy had found out did seem to back up the theory they'd talked about on the way back to Lois's. Which meant Lois was probably headed out to this Thomas Barnes's place right now, and might have Jimmy with her. Now what should he do?

Lois's computer was on. It was possible she'd had Jimmy get her a map of the way. If his memories were right, Jimmy was into computers. It seemed logical.

He tapped a key on the computer and after a second the screen saver disappeared, and a map was displayed. Thank God they'd been in too much of a hurry to close the thing down! He studied it for a moment until he was sure he could find the place, then grabbed his shoes and headed down the stairs.

It wasn't until he'd gotten out on the sidewalk that he began to wonder how he was going to follow. Flying seemed a little problematical at the moment, but the difficulty was resolved a moment later. Lois's Jeep was parked across the street where they had left it a couple of hours ago.

For a moment he hesitated. Could his reasoning have been wrong? Surely Lois would have taken the Jeep if she were going to drive out of Metropolis. Then he backtracked.

If this place was as rural as they suspected, he couldn't see Lois risking her precious Jeep on possibly unpaved roads. Most likely they had taken Jimmy's car.

He reached into his pocket and removed the spare key. A moment later he had pulled out onto the street and was headed north.

* * *

Jimmy's car was parked behind a screen of bushes, virtually invisible from the road. If he hadn't been alert, he would have missed it. Clark pulled Lois's Jeep up behind the little vehicle and cut the engine. He was obviously on the right track. Lois and Jimmy had been here, and not too long ago, because the hood of the car was still warm. They had probably gone over the fence, he reasoned, and proceeded to climb the barrier. The activity seemed quite familiar to him, and a stray memory supplied the picture of a farmhouse, and his mother and father. That was right. He'd been a farm kid before he'd become Superman.

On the ground once more, he began to trot along the dirt road. If the aerial map he'd studied was correct, this road branched up ahead, one branch leading to a house, and the other off to the right, through a forested area and into the hills where it ended.

The inability to use his super powers was frustrating, especially now that he was in a hurry. Lois and Jimmy might very well be in trouble and here he was, grounded. The worst part was that he was sure he still had the powers; he just didn't remember how to use them, and every time he tried, it hurt.

Well, he'd used his x-ray vision on the van, and that had definitely hurt. But how about hearing? It wasn't really an active power; it just involved input of sound. Maybe, if he just listened hard, focused in, he could pick something up. Enough, anyway, to give him a clue about which way to go.

He stopped and listened, trying to breathe as quietly as he could. His breathing sounded loud in his ears, and at last he held his breath, trying to hear anything, Lois or Jimmy's voice, perhaps.

At first there was only the sound of the wind, the voices of the birds and the movement of small, unidentified creatures in the brush. But as he stood, trying to focus his hearing, other sounds began to make themselves heard.

Voices. Many voices. The voices of children, some crying, some talking, all strangely muffled. Then there was a deeper voice, trying to calm the others. That must be the bus driver. They were coming from his right, and were some distance away. He began to run.

* * *

Lois was once more regretting her impulsive nature. Why hadn't she wakened Clark before she and Jimmy had come tearing up here to save the day? Of course, if she hadn't stepped on that dry twig they might still be undetected, but that was water over the dam.

She tested the straps that held her to the wooden brace. She could feel Jimmy struggling with them as well, but the things weren't going to give. They were plastic ties, designed to take a lot of stress without breaking. The only thing that was going to get them off were cutters.

The three men were out of sight right now, but she knew what they were doing. Just beyond the spot where she and Jimmy were tied, several of the supports had been knocked down, resulting in the collapse of that part of the mine shaft, and beyond that was the school bus and its passengers.

Lois was facing outwards and she could barely see the nose of the battered, yellow pickup truck that had brought them here, parked just beyond the entrance. Beyond that the sky was brilliant with the pink and gold of sunset: probably the last one she would ever see, she reflected, ironically. Out there, the three men were preparing the explosives with which they intended to bring down the roof and bury the inconvenient witnesses, bus passengers and nosy reporters alike.

Why, oh why hadn't she brought Clark? He was certainly strong enough to break the bonds, and would have been able to smother the explosives as well.

Here they came now, arms full of the implements for their dirty work. They didn't speak, merely busied themselves with the setting up of the explosive device.

"You know," Lois said, "we're not the only ones who know about you. Superman found that remote control device in your van. Inspector Henderson is probably already on his way out here."

One man stopped, looking at her uncertainly. One of the other two gave him a push. "Hurry up, Tom. She's just blowing smoke."

"But she knew about the remote," the first man protested. "If the police know, they're going to get us for murder one."

"If the police knew, they'd be here in place of these two," the one called Ed replied. "They have no proof we put it there. Don't go all soft on me now."

The third man, Will, plodded past him. "Ed's right. Get a move on and don't listen to her."

"She's telling the truth," Jimmy said. "The police might take a little longer, but they'll be here. If you kill us…"

"Don't bother with it, kid," Will said. "I'm not listening."

Lois bit her lip. Clark would tell Inspector Henderson that they had come up here if he hadn't already, but it was going to be too late for Jimmy, the kids, and her. This was it. She would never marry the man who loved her and whom she loved. After all they had gone through, it was going to end here. She felt the sting of tears in her eyes for all that might have been and all that she had thrown away. She watched the three men as they walked from the mine, back to the truck.

* * *

Clark ran toward the voices. He was almost sure that he had heard Lois's voice, now mixed in with those of the children. Time was short and getting shorter. The men who had planned this crime were ruthless. They certainly wouldn't allow regard for life to stop them now. They would dispose of any witnesses without compunction. He had to get there before it was too late.

He pushed himself to run faster, faster. It was a strange sensation. It was as if he was moving at normal speed and everything around him was slowing down. The wind was a gale against his face. There was a lick of painless heat, and he realized in shock that his clothing was burning. He crossed the open space to the wooded land in half a second flat and then he was among the trees.

He was forced by the trees and underbrush to decrease his speed, somewhat, and the sonic boom created by his passage overtook him as he slowed. He took advantage of the lesser speed to divest himself of the remainder of this street clothing; thus it was Superman, not Clark, who burst from the forest a few seconds later and saw the rock wall and the mine shaft before him. A yellow truck was just pulling away, and for a second he was in two minds as whether to pursue.

Lois's voice stopped him. "Superman! There's a bomb!"

He forgot about the truck. In a flash he was in the mine shaft. Lois and Jimmy were tied to a support, and he could see the explosive packed tightly against another, just beyond them.

He moved forward like lightning, seized the thing and half flew from the mine, hugging the explosives tightly against his chest. As he reached the open space once more, he hurled it straight up.

The concussion rocked the ground. Little pieces of gravel pattered around Lois and Jimmy, and for a moment he was afraid the shaft would cave in anyway, but somehow it didn't. More slowly now, he approached and effortlessly snapped the straps that held the two of them prisoner.

Lois glared at him, rubbing her chafed wrists. "It took you long enough!"

"Sorry," he said. "The next time you decide to get into a life-threatening situation, do you think you could give me a little warning?" Without waiting for an answer, he strode up to the barrier of dirt, stone and collapsed timbers that concealed the school bus. "Can anyone hear me? This is Superman! Everyone move as far back as you can. I'm going to get you out of there."

* * *

"Yes, the meteorite." Dr. Wesley Abbott, Director of the Metropolis Museum of Natural History, steepled his fingers and rested his chin on them. "I reported it to the police, of course, but I'm a little surprised to see the press here so quickly."

"I beg your pardon?" Lois Lane felt slightly confused. Her question about the meteorite wasn't eliciting the kind of information she had asked for.

It was the following day. The police, acting on Lois, Jimmy and Superman's information, had picked up the three kidnapers, who were now in jail on charges too numerous to mention. Finally, they had the opportunity to visit the Museum of Natural History. Clark was waiting outside for her. Most of his memory was back to normal, and neither of them wanted to chance his getting within range of the meteorite again.

"About the robbery, of course." Abbott seemed a little irritated. "It's a tragedy. You naturally know the story of how it was found by the dredging crew, just before the arrival of that dreadful Lord Nor. We brought it here yesterday, and, during the night someone removed it from the storage room. It's been stolen before we even had time to examine it."

Lois tried to gather her thoughts. It was more than a tragedy. Just when it looked as if she and Clark were about to find out something about this mysterious substance that could wipe out his memory, it was stolen. Maybe Clark was right and the Fates *did* have it in for them.

"Do you have any records or information about it at all?" she asked. "If you were to have a photograph, for instance, we could publish it in the paper and make it that much harder for anyone to sell it to a collector."

Dr. Abbott looked surprised. "An excellent idea, Miss Lane. I hadn't thought of that. Yes, we did take several for the records. If you'll wait, I'll get you one."

Fifteen minutes later, Lois met Clark on the steps of the museum and imparted the news to him. He looked at the photograph.

"It doesn't look like Kryptonite."

"No, it doesn't," Lois admitted. "But it does seem like an awful coincidence."

"I know." He regarded it for several seconds. "Well, Dr. Klein said it might be a new kind. How can we know what it would look like? Besides, it might be something completely different that we've never heard of before. We don't *know* that Kryptonite is the only thing that affects Superman; we've only assumed it. We could be wrong."

"That's a frightening thought," she said.

"Yes, it is." They both looked at the photograph again.

"Of course," Lois said, "there's no way anyone could know what it does. The only other person who knows is Dr. Klein, and he'd never tell. If someone puts it in his private collection we may never see it again."

Clark nodded. "Let's hope so. We'll put the photo in the paper so people will know what it looks like, and hopefully whoever has it will never dare let it see the light of day. I don't want to go through something like that ever again."

"Neither do I," she said. "I prefer you with your memories. And speaking of memories, I hope you remember we still have a wedding coming up."

He grinned. "That's something I'd never forget, three-headed snake-men from Andromeda, notwithstanding." He put an arm around her waist, and together they walked slowly back to the Jeep.

* * *

The meteorite that had caused so much trouble for the Man of Steel sat quietly in a wooden crate in the back of a truck. The man driving it whistled tunelessly to himself as he drove the vehicle along the streets of Metropolis. The logo on the side read "Sam's Delicatessen".

He approached a red light and pulled to a stop. As the light changed to green, he waved cheerfully to the cop standing on the corner and pressed the accelerator. The truck rolled through the intersection and disappeared up the street.

THE END