

If at First You Don't Succeed...

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Summary: Something very strange is happening in Metropolis, but Clark seems to be the only one who realizes it. But is he just experiencing some strange case of *deja vu*, or is it something more? Will he be able to solve the mystery on his own, or will he need to solicit the assistance of his often brilliant partner?

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A 2006 Fundraiser Story

This is a fanfic based on the television show, *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. No copyright infringement is intended. I'm borrowing these characters for a little fun and not for any profit. For complete disclaimer, go to: <http://www.thompsonlawoffice.ca/Disclaimer.htm>. Special thanks to the writers of *I'm Looking Through You* whose script I use extensively in this story. All further acknowledgments are at the end of this story to keep the reader from discovering the nature of the plot.

Clark liked happy endings. So it was with a feeling of satisfaction that he stood beside Lois talking to Alan and Helene Morris outside their home. Alan, feeling as if he had already become invisible to his friends, coworkers and wife had decided to do it for real. He had invented a suit that made him invisible and became an invisible Robin Hood — stealing from the corrupt rich to give to the poor. Unfortunately, his invention was stolen by Golden Boy Barnes, who, after breaking his gang out of prison, used the suits in an attempt to rob the Metropolis Gold Repository. But Barnes' plan was shattered when Superman, using phosphorous to make the suits visible, captured the gang while they were attempting to escape with the gold.

And so now Lois and Clark were at Alan's house, talking to the Morrises in order to put the finishing touches on their story. Clark glanced over at Lois who was looking pleased to see this couple reunited.

"I've destroyed the suits and all my notes," Alan was telling them.

"Are you going back to your job?" Clark asked.

"No. No. I got a new one. Something very exciting. Vice President, Research and Development for Luthor Technologies."

Clark bit back his bile at the name Luthor and stammered out, "Congratulations."

"We are so happy the two of you are back together," Lois said.

Clark smiled. Lois really was a romantic at heart — something he hadn't known about her. In fact, while they had been investigating the story, she had been the skeptic — making comments which had originally led him to think she didn't even believe in love. But looking at her face now, he suspected her attitude was a cover, a way of protecting herself from disappointment. After all, she was loving the reunification of this couple as much as he.

"He did?" Lois asked with a giggle after Helene whispered

something to her.

"Yes," Helene responded. "Alan's his old self again. Thank you for bringing him home to me."

Clark smiled again when Helene and Alan shared a kiss.

"Guess I don't have to be invisible to be visible anymore," said Alan.

"You never did, Alan. It was the man under the suit that Helene cared about," Clark told him, remembering the words his parents had said to him the previous morning when he had worried that he was losing himself to the man in the red, yellow and blue suit. He only wished Lois would care about the man beneath the Superman suit the way Helene obviously cared about the man who had been wearing the invisible suit.

Clark glanced up from his desk when Lois approached, a paper in her hands. She handed it to him.

"I think we should lead with this."

Clark glanced down, taking a moment to read the short paragraph. He looked up once he was finished. Lois had taken a seat on the edge of his desk, waiting for his response. "Nice work," he said, genuinely impressed.

She seemed to blush a little, act slightly coy, and almost giggle at his compliment. But then her expression changed. "You know, Clark," she said, "not that I'm one of those people that revel in saying, 'I told you so...'"

"Uh-huh," said Clark skeptically.

"...but I hope you learned your lesson. There is no such thing as an invisible man."

She got up and walked back to her desk, looking extremely pleased with herself. He watched, lost in thought. "Yes, there is, Lois," he whispered back. "Yes, there is."

Then Clark blinked, every muscle in his body tensing. The newsroom had vanished and he was suddenly standing on a platform, looking at hundreds of people gathered in the street in front of him. Superman posters covered the walls of the nearby buildings. There were Superman flags and Superman balloons. Superman placards, postcards and t-shirts were everywhere. He directed his attention to Luthor, who was speaking into a microphone on the platform.

"...let's really welcome Superman to our fair city."

The crowd in the streets answered with thunderous applause, hooting and cheering.

"He came to us a stranger, but his good deeds have not gone unnoticed. As last year's recipient of the key to the city, it is my honor to pass it on to our newfound friend."

The cheering erupted again.

"Madam Deputy Mayor, if you please?" Luthor said, moving to the side.

Clark was still trying to figure out what had happened to the newsroom when the mayor started to speak.

"We take pride in proclaiming this day Superman Day and offering you the key to the city."

He was about to object. They had already done this — only a few days ago. Hadn't they? Still, he stood there compliantly while the mayor hung the key around his neck.

"Welcome to Metropolis," she said. The crowd chanted his name. "It is wonderful to have you here." She reached out, shaking Superman's hand.

"Thank you," said Superman awkwardly.

"Come say a few words," Luthor added.

Superman opened his mouth to demand an explanation from Luthor when he suddenly became aware of the crowd. They were waiting for him to say something. He turned his attention to the microphone. Maybe it was better to play along until he could figure out what was happening.

"Thank you, Mr. Luthor."

Camera flashes went off. People began applauding. And just

as he had when he'd last done this, he suddenly felt overwhelmed. It was all too much. He was just a farmboy from Kansas. What great words of wisdom was he supposed to impart? "You've made me feel very welcome here." The Superman chant started up again. "Thank you," he finished awkwardly.

Clark spun into his Clark clothes and was straightening his tie as he stepped into the Daily Planet newsroom. He still felt slightly off balance. First, he was unable to remember how he had arrived at the ceremony in front of City Hall. Second, he thought he'd already received the key to the city a few days ago. So what was going on?

He had considered making a trip to Kansas to get his parents' thoughts on the subject. But if he missed any more time at work, he was going to draw attention to himself — and not positive attention. He'd only been working at the Daily Planet for such a short amount of time. It was bad enough when he had to sneak out of work for a Superman rescue. He couldn't afford to skip out to seek his parents' advice as well. Besides, the meeting with the mayor... maybe it had simply been... he wasn't sure. A weird episode of *deja vu*.

In any event, it was over now. He would worry about what exactly had transpired later. Spotting his colleagues beginning to gather around the conference room table, he joined them there.

Sinking into a chair, he began to relax. At least things seemed normal here. Lois was ignoring him, staring off into space — undoubtedly thinking about Superman. He really wished he could find a way to make her take notice of Clark. But that didn't seem likely — at least in the foreseeable future.

Hands suddenly grasped his chair, turning it around and, without warning, Cat Grant planted herself in his lap, took his face between her hands and kissed him solidly on the mouth. Not again! Before he could react, she had released him.

"Morning, hot cakes," she purred, rising from his lap and moving over to take a seat on the opposite side of the table.

He pulled out his hanky and began wiping her lipstick off his mouth. Wouldn't she ever learn? She'd tried that same tactic only a few days... His thoughts trailed off when he caught Lois' eyes. She was silently fuming.

"C.K., about that book you lent me on Robert Capra... C.K.?" Jimmy said.

"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" asked Lois sarcastically when he didn't respond.

Suddenly a new voice entered the mix.

"Okay, kids, let's get started. Clark?" Perry asked.

"Right here, sir."

"Oh, Kent, I didn't see you," Perry said, coming in and joining them at the table. "I take it you and Lois are on that 'Superman gets the Key to the City' story?"

Clark fumbled for words, not entirely sure what to say.

"Yeah, on it," Lois said, saving him from finding his voice.

"Great," Perry responded.

"What's the matter, Lois?" Clark asked, wondering why Lois sounded... almost disinterested.

"I was standing right in front of Superman. He didn't even notice."

Clark's eyebrows crinkled. He thought he'd managed to put Lois' fears to rest that Superman didn't know she existed when he'd told her, as Superman, that she'd always be special to him.

"What's to notice?" asked Cat.

Clark shot Cat a look that instantly silenced her. He'd spent too much time and effort trying to calm Lois' insecurities to let Cat get her all riled up again.

His hearing picked up a chugging sound, causing him to glance out the conference room window. A small, single-engine aircraft was trailing black smoke. And from the sound of that engine, the plane was in serious danger of stalling. Clark briefly

wondered why anyone would fly one of those death traps — considering how often they seemed to have problems. Still, he needed to deal with this now — which meant he had to find a way out of the newsroom that didn't attract attention.

Well, since nobody seemed to notice him anyway, maybe he'd use the same method he'd used the last time he'd had to get out of one of these meetings. He pushed his chair back slightly from the table and dropped his pen. "Oops," he said. "My lucky pen." He dropped to his knees as if in pursuit of his pen, and made his way through the crowd of legs under the table, out the door, through the storage room window and into the sky at superspeed.

Fixing the problem with the airplane didn't take long and he soon found himself back in the conference room, just as Lois seemed to notice he was missing. She gave him a strange look, as if surprised to see him standing on the far side of the room. He relaxed when she seemed to dismiss the question from her mind.

He heard Eduardo Fritz mention something to Perry about Golden Boy Barnes. But he didn't quite catch it. Since they had caught Barnes just yesterday, Clark was curious about the information Fritz had. But he didn't dare ask. After all, it would inform Perry that either Clark hadn't been listening or that Clark had been absent during most of the story meeting. Neither was a good scenario in Clark's opinion. Sometimes being Superman could be a real problem.

Clark had just returned to the newsroom with the research he'd done on past key-to-the-city recipients when he spotted Murray Brown talking to Lois. Yesterday... or at least he thought it was yesterday — his days had somehow gotten hopelessly mixed up — Murray Brown had convinced Superman to let Murray become his agent. Not for personal gain. Superman wanted a foundation set up so that charity would receive all the profits from the sale of Superman paraphernalia. So what was Murray discussing with Lois? Was he, for some reason, trying to contact Superman?

He was just about to join them when he heard Jimmy call to both him and Lois.

"Lois, C.K., check this out!"

Clark made his over to where the young man was standing in front of a television. Lois arrived before him.

"If you're not seeing what I'm seeing," began the anchorwoman, "then you may be witnessing a miracle. Captured earlier today on home video..."

An obviously amateur video began playing on the screen, showing a truck being hijacked by... no one. Wait a minute! This was old news. Clark Kent had seen this footage before. Why was it being rebroadcast?

"...a catering truck, loaded with fancy treats for a political fundraiser was hijacked by an invisible man. Yes. An invisible man. That truck ended up at the Forth Street shelter..."

"Excuse me, Miss Lane."

"One second," Lois responded.

Clark glanced over to see Helene Morris standing there. Obviously she must know something about why the station was rebroadcasting this. Still, they should probably listen to the whole thing, just to see if they added anything new or provided an explanation for playing the footage again.

"...where homeless families feasted on goose liver pate and cold lobster salad. Many thanks to the invisible man. No one as yet has any clue to this unexplained phenomenon. Is it real? Is it an illusion? We'll all just have to wait and see."

The newscast ended without explanation.

"Yes, can I help you?" Lois asked, turning towards Helene.

"You spoke at my women's group last October. 'The Weaker Sex. Fact Or Fiction?' It was a terrific speech," Helene said.

"Well, thank you. I'm really glad you liked it," Lois

responded before turning and heading towards her desk.

“Oh, I need to speak to you about my husband. He’s disappeared,” said Helene.

Now she had Clark’s full attention. What could possibly have happened to make Alan disappear again? He and Helene had been so happy when last Lois and Clark had seen them.

“First floor, try Missing Persons,” said Lois, not slowing her pace.

“No. No. He’s really disappeared. I’m the invisible man’s wife.”

Clark shook his head slightly. “We know all this, Helene,” he said.

“What do you mean, ‘we know’?” asked Lois.

“You know?” Helene said. Both women had spoken at the same time and both were now looking at him expectantly.

“Of course we know.” He gave Lois the look that clearly said he was expecting her to back him up. A joke was a joke. But this was taking things a bit far. “Alan Morris. The invisible Robin Hood. Golden Boy Barnes. The bad guy. Ring any bells?”

Helene and Lois both just stared at him.

“Would you wait over there, Helene?” Clark asked, taking the woman’s shoulders and directing her towards Jimmy.

“Okay, what’s going on, Clark?” Lois demanded when Helene was out of ear shot. “You’ve been acting strange all morning.”

“I’ve been acting strange?” asked Clark.

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“Lois, we’ve done this already.”

“Done what? Had a discussion about how strange you are? Yeah. I know. But let’s not dwell. Let’s hear the woman out and then find a way to get rid of her so that we can get to work at finding a real story to investigate. An invisible man. Please! What some people won’t do to get attention.”

Clark ran his hand through his hair in frustration. Realizing that the conference room was free, he took her arm and began leading her towards it when something on the television caught his attention.

“In more lighthearted news,” the anchorwoman was saying, “the Prime Minister of Canada was giving a news conference today when he suddenly realized he was completely naked.”

The picture on the screen showed Canada’s Prime Minister, his hands placed strategically, trying to back up the stairs in Canada’s Parliament Building, his aids rushing to cover him with their jackets.

“Are you even listening to me, Clark?”

“Huh?”

Lois let out a breath before grabbing his arm and pulling him the rest of the way into the conference room. She waited until the door was closed before turning towards him.

“What’s going on, Clark?”

He gave his head a shake to get his mind back on the Helene Morris mystery. “Lois, is this some huge ploy you and Helene plotted up to give me a hard time, because...”

“What are you talking about, Clark? Who’s Helene?”

“She is.” Clark pointed towards the woman to whom they’d just been talking. “Come on, Lois. If this is some joke, you got to let me know now because I’m starting to think I’m losing my mind.”

“Are you feeling okay?” Lois stepped up, placing her hand on his forehead as if to take his temperature. “Cause this is a little over the top — even for you.”

“Lois...” Clark let out a breath, dropping into a chair. “Okay, are you telling me you really don’t know her?”

“How many times do I have to say it, Clark? I really don’t know her.”

Clark stared at her blankly, a hundred thoughts struggling for supremacy in his mind.

“Okay, Clark,” Lois said, as if suddenly seriously struggling to understand what he was trying to say — and sounding slightly concerned about him. “Why don’t we start at the beginning? Why are you so convinced that I know... Helene?”

“I’m sorry, Lois,” Clark said, rising to his feet. “But there’s someone I really need to talk to right now.”

“Clark...”

Before she could say another word, he was gone, heading towards the elevator.

Clark paced in the living room of the old farmhouse, waiting for his parents to tell him that he’d lost his mind.

“I don’t know what to say, son,” said Jonathan after a moment.

“You can tell me if you think I’m crazy.”

“Oh, we don’t think you’re crazy, honey,” Martha said, rising to her feet and coming over to Clark’s side, wrapping her arms around his waist and thereby bringing his pacing to a halt.

“There’s got to be a logical explanation.”

“You’re sure they aren’t just playing a joke on you?” Jonathan asked. “You said they were acting like friends when you last saw them together.”

“They could be, Dad. But there’s still the whole Superman receiving the key to the city thing.”

“Oh, honey, I can’t tell you how proud your dad and I were watching you receive the key to Metropolis on LNN.”

“But that’s just it, Mom. I really believe I received it about four days ago.”

“But...” Martha looked at her husband.

“Is it possible you’re mixing it up with some other function?”

“I guess. But with what happened afterwards at the newsroom...”

“Honey, sometimes people experience *deja vu*. Could that be what’s happening with you?”

“I suppose.” Clark still didn’t seem satisfied.

“What about a dream?” added Jonathan.

Clark crinkled his eyebrows.

“Okay, bear with me here. Maybe you had a dream. A detailed dream that started with you receiving the key to Metropolis and ending shortly after the arrest of... Golden Boy Barnes?” he asked, not entirely certain he had the right name. He waited for Clark to nod before continuing. “Maybe the dream was a premonition — a glimpse into the future so to speak. Now I don’t know much about the paranormal, but I have heard that there are people in the world who have such dreams.”

“You think that’s it?”

“I suppose it’s possible. After all...” An impish grin appeared on Martha’s face. “...if there’s one thing we’ve learned about you, it’s to expect the unexpected. Maybe this is just another one of your powers.”

“But if this is one of my powers, why is it just showing up now?”

“Well, you haven’t been Superman for very long. And now that you are, you’ve been exercising your abilities more. Maybe your body just manifested this power now — when it thinks you need it.”

“So maybe I just dreamed the whole invisible man investigation,” Clark said slowly.

“And if that’s the case, you’ve got an incredible advantage in solving the case,” added Martha.

“But be careful, Clark,” warned Jonathan. “If this is another Superman power, you don’t want to tip people off that you have it too.”

“Okay, well, no one was killed during the investigation last time. And we did get the story. So maybe I’ll just follow along, see where it takes me.”

“Probably a good plan. That way if this happens in the future,

you'll know what's happening."

"Feeling better?"

Clark glanced at Lois when he heard her question. "Yeah. Much. So what happened with... the woman?"

"You mean Helene Morris? And how did you know her name, by the way?"

"Lucky guess," he said dismissively. "So what did she tell you?"

Lois didn't look as if she believed him, but much to Clark's relief, she didn't follow up on it. "It's really sad, Clark. Her husband walks out on her, probably has something going on the side, and she convinces herself that he's invisible."

"How do you know he's not?"

"Are you serious? We're talking about a figment of somebody's overactive imagination."

"Does everything in life have to have a reasonable explanation?"

"Everything."

"All grounded in clear, scientific reason?"

"Of course."

"No magic left in the universe?"

"Well, there's no werewolves or vampires loose in the city either."

"What about Superman?"

"Huh?"

"There's a man living somewhere in Metropolis who flies, Lois."

"It's not the same thing," Lois objected. "Superman is the exception. And as you well know, Clark, the exception proves the rule."

"So what happened with Helene Morris? Did you just interview her and send her away?"

"Of course. What did you expect me to do? Go to her house to check out her husband's lab?"

"Well..."

Lois rolled her eyes.

"Lois, C.K., you might want to see this."

Lois and Clark made their way back to the television. It seemed that Helene Morris was giving a press conference.

"He worked very hard to make himself invisible. And I guess he finally figured out how. He was in that laboratory day and night." She looked down at the microphones, as if trying to figure out which one she should be speaking into as she continued. "All I really want to say is, Alan, if you're listening, please come home."

"Well, I guess there goes your story," said Jimmy.

"It doesn't matter. There is no story, anyway. There is no such thing as an invisible man," Lois repeated, sounding frustrated that she was the only one being logical.

Clark watched her walk back to her desk. Well, if his dream held true... In five, four, three, two, one... He smiled when... "Lane, line two," called a voice across the newsroom.

Lois and Clark wandered through the broken glass and multitude of police officers. Lois' source in the MPD had called, just like he had in Clark's dream, to give Lois the heads up on this unusual robbery of a jewelry store.

"Well, that just about does it for me," said Henderson, munching on a donut. "No prints, no leads, no nothing."

"Witnesses?" asked Lois.

"To what? An invisible man? You'll forgive me if I don't call in our sketch artist," Henderson responded dryly. "We got a warrant out for this Morris guy. I don't know how we're gonna find him." Henderson walked away, taking another bite of his donut.

"Has everyone in this city lost their mind?" Lois asked.

"There is no such thing as an invisible man!"

Clark smiled. "Don't worry, Lois. You'll believe it soon enough."

"Oh, and what makes you so sure of that?"

Clark shrugged. "I guess it will happen when you don't see it with your own two eyes."

An officer handed Lois a slip of paper. A message for her to call Helene Morris, if he recalled correctly. Well, at least this time, given the robbery, she couldn't just ignore the woman. They'd need to talk to her. Even Lois had to recognize that now.

Clark knew, of course, what they were going to find. The lab in Helene Morris' basement had been trashed.

"Is it always like this?" asked Lois, stepping around the mess.

"No, no. Alan's always neat as a pin. This happened after the news vans left. I came downstairs and he hit me on the head. I haven't called the police yet."

"Has your husband ever been violent with you before?"

"You think it was Alan?" asked Helene, horrified at the mere allegation. "No, never, never, never. He wouldn't do this. Really. He wouldn't. I mean, he wouldn't even hurt a fly. If there's a fly in my kitchen, he'll catch it and spend a half-an-hour before he sets it free."

Clark spotted a torn piece of material caught in some of the rubbish. He knew from his dream that it had been torn from one of the invisible suits — and was crucial to their investigation. He quickly picked it up, sticking it in his pocket and reminding himself that he needed to take it to Star Labs.

"So what you're trying to say," said Lois slowly, "is that another invisible man..."

"...is impersonating my invisible man," Helene completed for her.

Night had fallen and the rain poured down on the Daily Planet staff car as Clark drove himself and Lois away from the Morris' house.

"She's still defending him," Lois said in disgust.

"She said it wasn't him."

"He bashes her on the head."

"Just because he's a little eccentric..."

"Eccentric? Try a taco short of a combo plate."

"But he doesn't sound like the guy who's been terrorizing the city. I want to emphasize that in the story."

"That's slanted."

"But there's no evidence to suggest that Alan Morris is an armed robber. The man was giving money away. Why is he now stealing it?"

"Fine. We'll write the story. But admit it, Helene could be wrong. After all, nobody really knows anybody."

"That's not true."

"We like to think we do, but we all wear disguises. Don't you?"

"Well..."

"I mean, in order to let someone really know you, you have to let them see you as you really are."

"So...?"

"So as soon as you let them see you as you really are, they wind up using it against you."

"But marriage is about sharing everything you have even if you don't feel like it."

"So's divorce. Ask my mother."

There was a moment of silence.

"So where're we off to?" Clark finally asked.

"Home. I have to get dressed."

"Hot date?" asked Clark, as the memory of his dream began to kick in, telling him where Lois had actually been going.

"Uh-huh," Lois responded smugly.

"With who?" he asked, although he knew quite well who she was planning to see tonight. That was, if his dream continued to hold true.

"Superman."

Yep. The dream was continuing right on schedule. His parents must have been right. This must be a new power. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about this one.

Clark looked at the opulent room as he floated outside. He really wasn't looking forward to this. He hadn't enjoyed it in his dream and he didn't think he'd like it much better now. A bachelor auction. It was for charity, of course. The Luthor Center for the Blind. Even if Luthor's name was on it—Did Luthor do anything without putting his name on it?—it was a good charity. That was why Superman had agreed in the first place. But that didn't mean he had to like it.

During his dream, he'd basically come to terms with the difference in the way people treated him as Clark and as Superman. But that still didn't make it easy for the country boy to be the center of attention. He always felt so exposed — especially in the suit.

He sighed. No point in worrying about that now. Taking a deep breath, he landed on the edge of the balcony, easily jumping to the floor and walking through the doors. The auction itself was mercifully brief — with Lois herself placing a couple of bids before the bidding got far too rich for her blood. As the auctioneer's hammer fell, Superman was sold for fifty thousand dollars. All Clark could feel was relief that the entire humiliating affair was over.

He was just about to disappear back into the night sky when...

"Superman, wait. It's Murray, Murray Brown."

Superman turned around. Right. He'd almost forgotten. The talent agent. Still, he really didn't want to deal with this at the moment. Murray would put in an appearance at the Barnes arrest anyway. He'd deal with him then. Besides, he needed to get inside and make sure Lois was alright. And he couldn't do that until Superman made his escape.

"Look, Mr. Brown..."

"Supe, you can call me Murray. Arnold does."

Superman floated back over. He had to admit, even though this man was a little over the top with his Hollywood style, Clark admired his persistence. Besides, maybe it was the fact that Superman had at least listened to this offer that had convinced Murray to try one last time. And Superman had liked that last offer. Quality control — if he didn't like it, they wouldn't do it.

So he listened with as much patience as he could manage to Murray Brown's pitch before telling Murray he wasn't interested and flying away.

Once he was high enough to be invisible in the night sky, he stopped. He was about to return, spin into his Clark clothes and go to Lex Towers to meet up with Lois when he hesitated. So far, he'd been doing everything the same way it had taken place in the dream. But could he change the dream? What would happen if he didn't go in and talk to Lois? Maybe it was important, since this was his first experience with this dream power, to see exactly what might happen if he tried to change things.

Floating over to a building that gave him a clear view of the front entrance to Lex Towers, he took a seat, dangling his feet over the edge of the roof. He'd make sure Lois got home all right. But since his appearance had done nothing to help Lois deal with her loss of the Superman date, this might be the perfect occasion for him to see to what extent his dream controlled him — and the consequences of departing from it.

He kept his eye on the room where the charity auction had taken place. Lois was seated at the bar, sipping on a glass of the complementary champagne. Cat came up and spoke to her

briefly. Clark didn't listen in. But if he hadn't known better, he might have suspected that Cat was actually commiserating with Lois. On the other hand, they had both lost the auction for a date with Superman, so he supposed it was possible they were both bitching about the woman who had, at the last minute, bid fifty thousand dollars.

Finally, after more than an hour, Lois rose to her feet. He cringed. Maybe this had been a mistake. Her movements told him that, whereas when he had rescued her in his dream, she had been tipsy, now she was downright drunk. Still, it wasn't as if he could do anything about his decision now. He watched as she collected her coat and made her way to the entrance, walking out into the rain and looking around as if slightly confused about what to do now.

He was just about to change into Clark to help her find a cab when he saw Luthor exit the building.

"Can I offer you a ride home, Lois?"

Clark didn't wait. He'd already messed up by letting Lois stay there alone. He was not about to risk further regrets. And letting a drunk Lois get into a limo with that... man... was a regret waiting to happen. Well, it was too late for Clark now. She'd never accept his assistance when all he could do was hail her a cab — not when she had a perfectly good limo at her beck-and-call. That left only one solution.

"That's not necessary, Luthor. I'm giving her a lift home," said Superman, floating slowly to the ground beside Lois.

Lois' face lit up even as a darkness fell over Luthor's.

Clark cringed slightly when he saw Lois making her way to her desk the next morning. She looked like death warmed over. He only hoped she didn't remember the flight home the previous night. That scene had definitely not been part of his dream. Taking a deep breath, he made his way over to her.

"Hey," he said, causing Lois to glare at him from her desk.

The expression mellowed only slightly when he set a cup of steaming coffee on the desk in front of her.

"So how did your date with Superman go last night?" he asked. After all, he wasn't supposed to know anything about the charity auction — or the events that transpired thereafter.

"Don't ask," she groaned, picking up the cup of coffee and taking a careful sip. "How do you always manage to get to the coffee when it's piping hot? When I go to the coffee machine, it's cold more often than not."

Clark shrugged, taking a seat on the side of her desk. She'd told him not to ask about her date with Superman. On the other hand, if she remembered what had happened when he flew her home, she undoubtedly needed to talk about it. So he sat there, patiently waiting for her to speak.

"Oh, Clark," she began. "I made a complete fool of myself."

"On your date?" he asked innocently.

"It wasn't a date. I went to the bachelor auction and bid for a date with Superman."

"Did you win?"

"Not even close. He went for fifty thousand dollars. I don't make fifty thousand dollars in a year."

"So you missed out. How is that making a fool of yourself?" "Come on, Lois, talk to me," he silently added.

"Well, it wasn't at the auction, it was... I guess I had a little too much champagne. Okay, so maybe I had a lot too much. It's just that champagne slips down so easily. And I wasn't really paying attention, and suddenly, I was drunk. I don't drink that much, Clark. Not since college. Not even then, really. Well, I mean there was that time when..."

"Lois," Clark said softly, heading off her threatening ramble.

"So then I start to head home and Superman shows up, offering to give me a lift."

"Doesn't sound so bad."

"That's because you're not the one who threw up all over him," Lois muttered, her head dropping to her desk in utter mortification.

"I'm sure he understood," said Clark sympathetically.

"Oh yeah. I'm sure he understood the entire time he was washing his suit out. Lois Lane. I remember her. She's the one who turned out to be a lush, just like her moth..." Her sentence abruptly ended.

Clark glanced down at his own coffee.

"Another robbery last night."

Jimmy's voice was like a welcome interruption.

"The invisible man?" asked Lois, suddenly seeming to perk up.

Clark made a mental note. When Lois is bothered about something, give her a story to think about.

"You got it," said Jimmy. "House of Rare Coins. Owner's in the hospital. Crushed windpipe."

Clark mentally swatted himself. He'd forgotten that in his dream the owner was injured. He made a mental note to make sure the man was all right. Not that Clark could have done much about it even if he had remembered. After all, if he recalled correctly from his dream, the robbery had taken place at about the same time as Luthor had been offering Lois a ride home. And he hated to think of the consequences of Lex Luthor having a drunk Lois Lane in his grasp.

"Gotta go," Jimmy added, having finished providing them with the latest information.

"Where you going?"

"I asked Jimmy to go to the Hall of Records to pick up some stuff," said Clark.

"I'll catch you later," Jimmy said, heading up the stairs.

"So have you managed to get anything else?" Clark asked after Jimmy left.

"Oh, yeah. I talked to Morris' boss. He knew what desk he worked at. That's about it."

"He worked there for almost twenty years!"

"You should've seen the place. A hundred lab techs in these tiny cubicles. It was so impersonal. When he didn't show up for work, they didn't even bother to call. They just replaced him. What did you find out at Star Labs?"

"Oh, it was incredible. The material we found in Alan's lab is a type of fiber optic. It's designed to reflect visible light as ultraviolet."

"Come again?" asked Lois, still nursing her coffee.

"Well, ultraviolet light is the invisible part of the spectrum."

"Are you saying that it's possible for someone to be invisible?"

Clark pulled out the small piece of cloth from inside his jacket. "Think of it as the next stage of stealth technology. If you wore a suit made of this material you could appear invisible."

Lois perked up. "Uh. Well, that makes sense. The appearance of invisibility is completely different from real invisibility."

"You know, Lois, it must be tough being right all the time."

"Yes," she said. "It is."

When she leaned back in her chair, a look of satisfaction on her face and a slight smile pulling at the corners of her mouth, Clark couldn't help but be amused.

The day was long — much longer than it had seemed in his dream. On the other hand, in his dream, he hadn't been laboring through piles of research, pretending to be looking for answers he already had. But he didn't dare skip ahead. Every stage was important. Still, it was hard to get excited. Especially when, since Lois still didn't believe that Alan wasn't involved in the invisible man robberies, they'd spent most the day trying to figure out where Alan might be hiding out.

The only thing of interest that had happened was that when

the President of the United States had entered the Oval Office that morning, it had been full of pigeons. The Secret Service claimed to be baffled. His dream must not have picked up on that little tidbit. But he supposed taking note of irrelevant stories like that happened when you had time to waste.

In their story — the one Clark had written up while Lois had gone to get ready for the charity auction — he had asked the invisible man to turn himself in to them. He knew that needed to be in there because if events followed true to his dream, Alan would turn up at Lois' sometime tonight. And that would likely never have happened if not for that request. The only down side was that they'd spent the day meeting with people claiming to be the invisible man. However, since none of them actually turned out to be invisible...

Clark saw Lois pick up her coat and head for the door, obviously as exhausted as he was.

"Goodnight, Lois," he called only to be met by silence. Some things never changed.

Clark was awoken from sleep by a ringing phone. Groggily reaching out, he grabbed it, raising it to his ear.

"Hello," he slurred.

"Clark, get over to my apartment now," Lois hissed.

"What... oh right," Clark said as he remembered his dream. Alan Morris, the invisible man must have shown up at her apartment.

"Right! Right what?"

"Nothing. What is it, Lois?"

"Alan Morris is here."

"I'll be right there."

Most of the night was spent listening to Alan explain why he had become the invisible Robin Hood, talking about how he had come up with the idea for the suit, and bringing Alan back to his apartment to spend the night. The man had no place to stay where he'd be safe while they found out who was using his disguise to commit crimes.

As Clark fell asleep again, his thoughts turned to Lois. One thing that remained consistent, much to Clark's disappointment, was that Lois had indeed been wearing a Superman sleep shirt under her robe. It was one of the moments in his dream he had really hoped wouldn't not turn out to be true. But it had. Why did she have to be so infatuated with Superman? Of all people, she should be able to see through the disguise. The disguise really wasn't that brilliant. He wondered if there were any way to get her to take a second look at Clark. He sighed. Probably not. And after what had happened when he'd asked her out a few weeks ago, he didn't have the nerve to ask her out again. There was only so much one man's ego could take.

"This is impossible," said Lois after another day of research. "Even after eliminating all the armed robbers still in jail or accounted for somewhere, there are still over a hundred suspects."

Clark glanced over at Lois. If she felt frustrated, it was nothing to what he felt. He knew who had done this. But if he was just following this dream through, he really couldn't say anything — not if he was going to follow his parents advice and use this dream to figure out exactly what this new power was and how it worked. Still, if he recalled correctly, now was finally the right time for the next piece of information.

"Well, let's go over it again. First of all, he robs a jewelry store, then he robs a rare coin store."

"Jewels, collector's items, precious metals."

"Yeah, but not all precious metals."

"Gold ring with an emerald stone..." Lois began reading the list of items that had been stolen during the jewelry store robbery. "...gold chains, gold brooch..."

"Gold! He steals gold."
Lois' expression changed as the pieces fell into place.
"Jimmy!" she yelled.

"Golden Boy Barnes and his gang all went down for the last job they pulled," Jimmy began.
Lois and Clark were both aware that Barnes himself had escaped from prison a few days ago. Eduardo Fria was covering the manhunt for the paper.
"Several of them were in the bust-out they had last night."
"We got them," Lois said with satisfaction.
"Yeah, but how do we find them?" Clark asked, knowing exactly how and where they were going to find them.
"Well, he's bound to strike again."
"But where?" Clark prodded.
"I know exactly where," Lois said, tossing an old copy of the Daily Planet onto the table in front of them. The forty two point headline read: 'Robbery At The Metropolis Gold Repository Foiled.'

Clark knew he should just send Lois home for the night. Barnes wouldn't be striking the Metropolis Gold Repository before tomorrow. Alan would be asleep when they got to Clark's apartment. Still, his favorite part of the dream had been the camaraderie he and Lois had shared on his balcony that evening. So he found himself, once again, asking Lois if she thought they should go by his apartment to tell Alan what they had discovered.

He opened the door to his apartment, gesturing Lois to be quiet when he spotted Alan asleep on the sofa.
"Poor guy — hasn't slept in a week."
"Well, let him be, then. We'll wait a while. I don't know if he can help anyway."
"I'll make some tea."

They were silent as he tended to the task of making the tea, Clark feeling content just to be in her presence. Once it was ready, he handed Lois her cup and gestured her through his bedroom and out onto his balcony.

"Nice," said Lois after taking a sip of her tea.
"Lapsang Suchang. My mother used to make me tea and raisin scones when I was feeling bad. Years later I had them for tea at the London Savoy, but they never tasted as good." He knew he was trying to impress her with his travels. He also knew that in his dream it had done no good. Still, he couldn't help but try.

"When I was a kid, Lucy and I used to play this game. We'd ask each other, 'What would you rather be able to do? Fly or be invisible?'"

She turned so that she was leaning her butt against the railing around his balcony. She was so close that it would take almost no effort for him to lean over and kiss her. He resisted, telling himself that was not how the dream had gone.

"And you chose?"
"Mmm... Invisible. I wished I could walk through all those closed doors. I guess I still do." She had turned once again, looking out at the view — such as it was.

"And what do you think you'd find there behind all those closed doors?"

"I don't know. Something... different. Wonderful. Something I don't have. Can't have. So what about you?"

"What?"
"Invisible or fly?"
"Fly," he said without hesitation.
"Really?"

"Yeah," he said, for a moment lost in thoughts of floating above the clouds, looking down at the Earth, allowing the wind to take him where it would.

"You know, I never thought I would say this, Clark... but you and I have something in common."

Just as it had in his dream, his heart skipped a couple beats as he waited for her next words. "What's that?"
"Superman."

And just like that the bubble, the illusion that something was happening between them, burst.
"You want to fly like him," she went on to explain. "And I want to fly with him."

He looked up into the skies, more tempted than he could say to show her that both things were possible. Still, he knew he couldn't. The consequences were just too great.

He sighed when she put her head on his shoulder as she stood beside him. He didn't move, didn't wrap his arm around her although it was screaming at him to do so. He didn't dare. In fact, he didn't want to do anything that might cause her to remove her head from his shoulder. Even if Superman was the one she was currently thinking about, Clark was the one who could feel the soft pressure of her cheek against his shoulder. And he would do nothing to lose that.

Clark sat up most of the night watching Lois sleep. When morning came, he made his way into his room and changed into the Superman suit. After all, she would need to talk to Superman in order to figure out a plan to capture Barnes.

"Superman?" she asked, coming awake to find Superman standing in the living room.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you," Superman said. "I ran into Clark at the courthouse and he said..."

"Clark. Did he leave? What's he doing at the courthouse?"
"The Hall of Records. He said something about researching the past activities of Barnes' gang. He said you could use my help."

"Oh... we can." She suddenly looked slightly sheepish.
"Look, about the other night..."

"It's okay. I do understand, you know." He stepped closer.
"You don't need to bid for my attention, Lois."

"You noticed," she said, still obviously quite self-conscious.
"I thought I was just another face in the crowd. I guess I sort of over-compensated with the champagne."

"I always notice you. Always. You're special to me, Lois." His hand came up and his large palm gently cupped her cheek.
"I am?"

"You're the first woman who ever..." His voice trailed off. He'd known it was coming, but he'd still walked right into the same trap. He couldn't tell her how he felt. He couldn't tell her that she was the first woman who had made him believe that he truly belonged to this Earth. He couldn't tell her that she was the first woman who had left him feeling weak in the knees. He couldn't tell her. Not as Superman. He'd merely wanted to reassure her of his esteem. But if he told her how he felt as Superman, Clark would never stand a chance. "...interviewed me," he completed lamely.

"I can't believe my eyes," said Alan, throwing back the blanket that had been covering him when he saw Lois talking to Superman. "Is that really Superman?"

Lois looked at Alan before looking back at Superman, a huge grin on her face.

"Good morning, Alan," Superman responded.

The next half hour saw Alan, Superman and Lois trying to come up with a plan to capture Barnes. Clark already knew the way it would happen. Barnes was going to raid the Metropolis Gold Repository. Superman would get phosphorous from Jackson Phosphorous and dust it over Barnes and his gang so that the police could catch them. Still, he had to go through the motions.

Clark leaned back in his chair. Barnes and his gang were safely back in prison. Alan and Helene had been reunited and were acting like a couple of newlyweds. It had been a good

conclusion to the story. Still, he had to admit, he was looking forward to seeing what tomorrow would bring. This dream power certainly had possible advantages. But there was a lot of down time, a lot of boredom associated with reliving every moment of four days more than once. Yes, he would be glad to get back to the unknown. Clark watched as Lois made her way over to his desk, a paper in her hands. She handed it to him.

"I think we should lead with this."

Clark glanced down, taking a moment to read the writing on the paper. He looked up once he was finished. Lois had taken a seat on the edge of his desk, waiting for his response. "Nice work," he said.

She seemed to blush a little, act slightly coy, and almost giggle at his complement. But then her expression changed. "You know, Clark," she said, "not that I'm once of those people that revel in saying, 'I told you so...'"

"Uh-huh," said Clark skeptically, enjoying to the fullest what he knew was the last line she would say to him that he had already heard once before.

"...but I hope you learned your lesson. There is no such thing as an invisible man."

She got up and walked back to her desk, looking extremely pleased with herself. He chuckled slightly, glancing at his watch as he silently began the countdown to the end of his dream. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

Clark blinked, every muscle in his body tensing. The newsroom had vanished and he was suddenly standing on a platform, looking at hundreds of people gathered in the street in front of him. Superman posters covered the walls of the nearby buildings. There were Superman flags and Superman balloons. Superman placards, postcards and t-shirts were everywhere. He directed his attention to Luthor, who was speaking into a microphone on the platform.

"...let's really welcome Superman to our fair city."

The crowd in the streets answered by cheering.

"He came to us a stranger, but his good deeds have not gone unnoticed. As last year's recipient of the key to the city, it is my honor to pass it on to our newfound friend."

"No! No! No! No!" Clark silently cried. It wasn't happening again. It couldn't be. The first time had been a dream. The second had been the real thing. This wasn't possible.

Clark paced in the living room of the old farmhouse, waiting for his parents to respond.

"Maybe what you experienced before was just a dream of some sort. I've heard that sometimes people have dreams, premonitions. I don't know much about the paranormal, but maybe this is just another one of your powers manifesting itself."

"You suggested that before, Dad. But this is the third time I've lived through this. So it can't be that I just dreamed it."

"Then I don't know what to say, son," Jonathan said after a moment.

"I feel like I'm going crazy," Clark said, running a hand through his hair in frustration.

"Oh, you're not crazy, honey," said Martha, rising to her feet and coming over to Clark's side, wrapping her arms around his waist and thereby bringing his pacing to a halt. "There's got to be a logical explanation. We just have to find it."

For a long moment no one said anything. "What about a time loop?" asked Martha.

"Time loop?" The two men looked at her, awaiting further explanation.

"I saw it in a movie."

Clark and Jonathan's reaction was the same. Their eyebrows rose.

"Now don't look at me like that," rebuked Martha.

Both Clark and Jonathan instantly looked away.

"So what's this 'time loop' thing, Mom?" Clark finally said.

"Okay, well I don't remember it well. But it had something to do with going faster than the speed of light."

"Nothing can go faster than the speed of light."

"No? How do we know that?"

"Well..." His voice trailed off. He wasn't sure where that thought came from. Clark looked over at his father who shrugged his shoulders.

"But, Mom, even if it is possible to go faster than the speed of light, nothing has to date. Not even Superman."

"Well, in this movie, a group of scientists found a way to send a subatomic particle faster than the speed of light. It caused a time loop. Only one man retained his memory."

"How?"

Martha shrugged. "Sorry. I really don't remember. All I do remember is that the man had to find a way to prevent the experiment in order to get the time loop to stop."

Clark let out a breath. "I don't know, Mom. It sounds a little farfetched."

"Any more farfetched than living the same four days over and over again?"

Clark and Jonathan shared another look. She had a point.

"So if that's the case, what do I do?"

"I'd suggest you start by talking to a scientist — see if this theory is even possible."

Clark nodded. It was probably the only thing he could do at this point. He had no other leads. "I guess I've got my work cut out for me."

After his conversation with his parents, Clark went to see the only scientist he knew in Metropolis. Of course, the good doctor didn't know Clark. Dr. Klein was the scientist who had analyzed... or would analyze the cloth Clark found... or would find in Alan Morris' lab.

"The theory you're referring to goes something like this:

Time is not constant. It is connected to speed and gravitational forces. The closer you get to the speed of light, the more time will slow down for you. Einstein claimed that travel beyond the speed of light would be impossible for this very reason. Now, if he was wrong, and it were possible to go faster than the speed of light, the theory is... or one of the theories is that the moment the speed of light was broken, the universe would be punched back in time to a starting point. Since no one would remember that this had happened, the world would progress as before until the speed of light was again broken, only to be punched back in time in an endless loop."

Clark gave his head a shake, trying to get the idea to settle in his mind. But no matter how hard he tried, it still made no sense to him. "Okay, but if that were to happen, would anyone be able to remember it?"

Klein shook his head. "No. That would be the tragedy. We wouldn't know we were trapped in the time loop. We'd be prisoners in our own minds. Condemned to repeat the same time period over and over and over again."

"So there is no way anyone could have a memory of previous days?"

"Well, you have to remember that this is all completely theoretical — and not even a commonly held theory. Most people still agree with Einstein that it's impossible to go faster than the speed of light."

"If it is all theoretical, then isn't it at least possible that someone could get 'stuck outside the loop' so to speak — at least in terms of his memory?"

Klein thought for a moment before his expression lit up.

"There is a little known theory that might allow for that."

"What is it?"

"It's that consciousness could exist separate from the loop."

But as to what would cause someone to remember, especially if the rest of the world didn't, I don't know."

Clark nodded slowly. Maybe it didn't matter how he remembered. After all, it didn't change what he had to do. "Dr. Klein, are you aware of anyone who is currently doing experiments... maybe something to do with a subatomic particle being propelled faster than the speed of light?"

"Well... It's not exactly what you're looking for, but there has been talk recently of building a Superconducting Super Collider."

"What's that?"

"A high-energy particle accelerator. The idea would be that it would help unlock the puzzle of the fundamental nature of matter."

"And it tries to send subatomic particles faster than the speed of light?"

"No. Essentially, it is an atom smasher. It accelerates subatomic particles to incredibly high velocities and rams them together at speeds that come close to — you note I said 'close to the speed of light. It's a lot like hitting one bullet with another."

Clark wasn't entirely sure how doing that would improve man's understanding of the 'fundamental nature of the universe,' but that really wasn't important here.

"What would this Superconductor Super Collider look like?"

"A huge, highly complex machine. But it would have to include an oval, underground tunnel about fifty-four miles long and about twelve feet in diameter."

"So where would I find this conductor?"

"It doesn't exist. Washington approved research into seeing if it could be done. But so far the collider has not been built. And it likely won't be built — given its supposed price tag of eleven billion dollars."

"Could someone have done it — some private funder?"

"I suppose, but..." The doctor's voice trailed off when a gust of wind marked the departure of the Man of Steel.

Clark landed on the balcony at the top of the highest building in Metropolis. The occupant of the office that lay beyond the balcony heard a small noise and turned in his chair.

"I'll have to get back to you," Luthor said before hanging up the phone. "Superman. To what do I owe this honor?"

"You know very well why I'm here." Superman marched across the room to where Luthor was stepping out from behind his desk.

Luthor crinkled his eyebrows. "Actually, no. I don't."

"This day... and the following three days are repeating themselves. And I know you have something to do with it."

"Excuse me?"

Superman stepped forward, grabbing onto Luthor's lapels and pulling him closer. "You've created a time loop! So tell me... Who is doing this experimentation on breaking the speed of light? Who built this Superconductor Super Collider?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"If you don't tell me what I want to know, you won't live to see the future," Clark said, pulling Luthor's face closer to his and scowling into it. After all, no one knew the truth of that statement better than Clark.

Clark was having second thoughts by the time he spun out of the Superman suit and entered the newsroom of the Daily Planet. Going to see Luthor had been a mistake. But when Dr. Klein had told him that there was some merit to his mother's theory, he'd been so sure that Luthor had to be behind it. But Luthor had been baffled — either that or Luthor was a much better actor than Clark had realized.

Still, even if Luthor was behind it, confronting him directly had not provided Clark with any answers. So he had returned to

the Daily Planet, hoping he could do some research into science labs that might be capable of such experimentation so that he could check them out himself. Maybe he'd even enlist Jimmy's help.

"Kent!"

Clark turned at the sound of his boss' voice to see the man heading towards him.

"Why weren't you here for the story meeting this morning?"

"I'm sorry, chief. But I got held up with... something personal."

"I know you're new here, son. But I can't keep someone on the payroll who isn't pulling his weight."

Clark flinched. If he wasn't careful, by the time he sorted this all out, he'd lose his job. Great! That was just what he didn't need. "Sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"Good," Perry responded. "Now find out what Lois is working on and see if she needs any help."

"Yes, sir," said Clark contritely, heading over to where Lois was standing in front of the television.

Helene's face could be seen on the screen in front of a sea of microphones. "He worked very hard to make himself invisible. And I guess he finally found out how. He was in that laboratory day and night. All I want to say is..." She leaned closer to the microphones. "...Alan, if your listening, please come home."

"Her nosy next-door neighbor sold the story to the wire services," Jimmy said.

"It doesn't matter," Lois said. "There's no story here, anyway. There is no such thing as an invisible man!" She turned, spotting Clark. "So where've you been?"

"Miss me?" Clark smiled.

Lois rolled her eyes.

Just then a call came across the newsroom. "Lane, line two."

"The jewelry store robbery. Right," Clark mumbled.

"What?" asked Lois, picking up the phone.

"Nothing."

Lois' eyebrows were crinkled in confusion when she hung up the phone. "What did you say before I answered the phone?" she asked.

"Umm..." Clark quickly searched his mind for something to say. "I was just saying..." He couldn't come up with anything.

"Hey, who was that?"

Lois narrowed her eyes as she observed him. "A cop I know. He said there was a robbery at Krinkleman's Jewelry. Did you say something about a jewelry store robbery?"

"Why would I say something about a jewelry store robbery?" he asked, removing her coat from the coatrack and holding it up for her to slip into. "So... are we going?"

Clark walked into Lex Towers after the bachelor charity auction had finished. He really didn't have time for this — any more than he'd had time for that stupid bachelor auction. But the reasons for attending to most tasks were surprisingly similar. He'd attended the auction because he had managed to raise fifty thousand dollars for The Luthor Center for the Blind. He'd come to Lex Towers afterwards to keep Lois away from Luthor. Both were important if he did find a way to stop this time loop. And so, spotting Lois sitting at the bar, Clark made his way over.

"Hot date, huh?" Clark asked, taking a seat beside Lois at the bar.

"What are you doing here?" Lois responded, not even bothering to turn to look at him. "Barn dance let out early?"

"I filed the Morris story. You're very welcome."

"Hmmm." She looked off into the distance. When she spoke again, her voice was wistful. "I was saving for Tahiti. But a date with Superman... that would have been a real adventure." She paused. "Oh, Clark. He doesn't even know I'm alive."

The amount of distress Clark could hear in her voice wrung at

his heart — even though he had heard it before.

“Maybe it was stupid of me to think that he... cared,” Lois concluded bitterly.

“Not so stupid, Lois,” he was once again compelled to respond. “Did you ever think that maybe Superman was afraid to reveal himself... his true feelings?”

She didn't respond. Didn't even look at him.

“Come on,” Clark said. “I'll put you in a cab.” Clark was suddenly tempted to accompany her home. Last time he'd done this, he'd simply put her in a cab by herself and given the cabdriver the address. Still, he knew he needed to use the night to do his research into science labs. But wouldn't it be wonderful to go with Lois, tell her everything and get her help? But how could he? If he told her what was happening as Clark, it was possible that Luthor might mention Superman's comments and then... No. It was simply too dangerous. Besides, there was something else he needed to do.

The old man stooped over his desk, carefully examining a gold coin. On the desk around him were piles of similar coins.

“Beautiful,” the man muttered.

Just then there was the sound of breaking glass. He looked up.

“Hello?” he called out nervously at the sound of someone unseen approaching. He gasped when he saw a coin flip in the air, all by itself.

“Call it, gramps,” an incorporeal voice said. “Heads I win. Tails you loose.”

“Please. Who's there?” His voice trembled.

Before he could say anything else, he felt invisible hands around his neck. His hands clawed at them, trying to prevent them from choking him. He gasped, struggling to pull air into his burning lungs, when suddenly the hands were pulled off his neck.

“Get out!”

The old man looked up, seeing Superman standing between him and... nobody. There was the sound of running feet. When the noise finally trailed off, Superman turned towards him.

“Are you okay?” asked Superman.

“Yes. Thanks to you.”

Clark wasn't entirely sure about his decision not to arrest an invisible Barnes at the rare coins store. But there was something inside him telling him that he should try to let things unfold as normally as possible. He simply hadn't been able to let the old man end up in the hospital when he could prevent it. Was it the right decision? He wasn't sure. But the decision had been made now. And in only two more days, Barnes and his gang would be safely back behind bars.

The next two days went by in a blur. Clark got only minutes of sleep as he investigated two stories — the invisible man and scientific research into accelerating subatomic particles faster than the speed of light. Of course, all this had to be accomplished while continuing his Superman rescues. Knowing when they would be coming was something of a help. Still, all of it took time. His regular life was hectic enough without adding to it an extra investigation.

In spite of his frantic efforts, by the time he had to go to stop Barnes at the Metropolis Gold Repository, he still hadn't found any institution doing the type of research that might have created a time loop.

He made his requisite trip to Jackson Phosphorous before heading to the Metropolis Gold Repository. Barnes' men, as expected, were trying to make their escape, shooting at the police from within their invisible suits. He sprinkled the phosphorous over Barnes' men, making them visible and subject to capture by police before busting into the Gold Repository's safe to catch Lois in his arms just before she passed out.

He carried her carefully out of the building.

“How did you know how to make them visible?” Lois asked.

“Flourescent light. With a flourescent light bulb, flourescent light becomes visible by passing it through a coating of phosphorous.” Reluctantly, he set her down.

“That's the second time you saved my life.”

“Glad to be of service.” Unable to resist, he found himself running a finger through her hair, pushing it over her ear. Realizing what he was doing, he quickly turned, intending to take off.

“Supe!” exclaimed Murray Brown, stepping out in front of him in an effort to stop his escape. “You were terrific. Haha. You want it in writing, right?” Murray held up a document. “Okay, here's the list...”

“Superman.”

A voice of authority from nearby turned the attention of all three people towards a distinguished looking man in a three piece suit. Behind him were two other men, both of whom wore distinctive frowns.

“Can I help you?” asked Superman.

“I'm afraid you're going to have to come with us, Superman,” the first man said, handing Superman an official looking paper.

Superman opened it, reading quickly, his eyebrows going up. “You think I'm insane — and that I threatened to kill Lex Luthor?” Superman gasped in surprise.

“This really isn't the place...”

“Give me that,” demanded Lois, snatching the paper from Superman and reading through it. “Don't you guys ever give up? You tried this before. Bureau 39. Jason Trask. Ring a bell? Why would Superman go anywhere with you?”

“I'm not sure what Bureau 39 is, or who Jason Trask is, but you are going to have to come with us, Superman.” He pulled a badge out of his pocket.

“Yeah right. I can get a badge like that in a box of crackerjacks. Besides, there is nothing wrong with Superman. I can attest to that.”

“And who are you?”

“Lois Lane, Daily Planet.” She pulled her notebook out of her pocket. “And you are?”

“Samuel Johnson. Superman, please. I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist you come with me.”

“Exactly what are you claiming Superman did? And on what evidence?” Lois demanded. “Where are you taking him? And why should he let you?”

“Curiosity is one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous mind.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It will be all right, Lois,” Clark said, touching her arm, in part to reassure her and in part because he was a little afraid that she would attack Johnson if he wasn't careful. “I'll go with them. I'll get this whole thing sorted out and be back later.”

“But...”

“It's fine, Lois,” Clark said, releasing her arm to accompany the officers.

As he crawled into the car, he glanced back. Lois was watching anxiously. Murray Brown was nowhere to be seen. Clark shook his head. Murray Brown seemed to have decided that Superman wasn't someone he wanted on his client list after all. He hoped that didn't mess things up too badly.

Superman stood in his padded room, looking out through the small window at a clock he could see at the nursing station. He knew he could get out any time. But there was something inside him as a result of his Kansas upbringing that kept him there.

He'd heard Lois come in a little while ago and had watched through the walls as she'd almost come to blows with one of the

orderlies. She'd been escorted bodily from the building, issued a trespass notice and told never to return. But Clark didn't believe it for a minute. He had no doubt that even now she was plotting some elaborate sting operation to get him out of there.

Not that he needed rescuing, of course. It was five twenty-three. At five twenty-four, he would again be back in time and able to play the last four days over again. And this time he would be damn sure not to tell Lex Luthor about the time loop. It had taken four days, but Luthor must have persuaded someone that Superman was crazy and, in his craziness, had threatened his life. Otherwise he'd never have been stuck there.

On the other hand, it was somewhat surprising that it had taken Luthor four days. After all, when Superman thought back on his conversation with Luthor, he supposed his words could have been interpreted as a threat. After all, he'd told Luthor that if he didn't tell him what he wanted to know, Luthor wouldn't live to see the future. Between that and talk of time loops, Luthor probably did have a case for saying that Superman was crazy and a danger to others.

Of course, that was assuming he wasn't crazy. Or that confronting Luthor had changed the future. If Luthor was responsible for the time loop, it was possible that his confrontation with Superman had changed his plans to go ahead with his experiments. His heart rate increased as he stared at the clock. "Come on, come on, come on," he muttered watching the second hand tick by as if it had all the time in the world. "You've got to let me..."

Clark blinked when he suddenly found himself standing on a platform in front of a crowd of cheering people.

"...let's really welcome Superman to our fair city," Luthor was saying. The crowd erupted in thunderous applause. "He came to us a stranger, but his good deeds have not gone unnoticed. As last year's recipient of the key to the city, it is my honor to pass it on to our newfound friend."

Clark sighed. He wasn't sure if he should be happy to have another chance to set things right or if he should be frustrated that he was still stuck in the loop.

As soon as the ceremony finished, Clark flew off. Standing on top of the Daily Planet, he waited not so patiently for Lois to get back to the newsroom. He hadn't been able to find any experiments attempting to propel a subatomic particle faster than the speed of light. And he had no idea what to do next. Well, except for one thing. Lois.

She had proven, in the short time that he had known her, to be a brilliant investigator. If anyone could help him figure this out, it was she. Not that he wasn't nervous about telling her what was going on.

He saw Lois enter the newsroom and head for her desk. Spinning out of the Superman suit, he rushed down the stairs and into the bullpen. He grabbed Lois' arm before she sat down, redirecting her towards the conference room.

"What are you doing, Kent?" she demanded when he closed the conference room door.

Clark knew he didn't have much time. Soon everyone would be gathering there for the morning story meeting. Still... it would have to do.

"Lois, this day... and the following three days... are repeating themselves."

"Excuse me?"

"Now, I'm not sure exactly how it's happening. At first my dad suggested it was some kind of dream. But I've lived through it three times now, so it can't be a dream. Although, last time I did end up in a rubber-room — did you know those places really do have rubber on the walls? Sorry. I guess that was a little off topic. Anyway, the reason I'm telling you this is that I need your help."

He really hadn't meant to meander on the way he had. But once he'd started he just couldn't seem to stop talking — afraid of her reaction when he finally did.

"So anyway..." he continued, pacing the conference room as he deliberately avoided looking at Lois' face. "I spoke to Dr. Klein at Star Labs about it last time. We talked about the possibility of the time loop, which is what I call this repetition thing, being caused by someone managing to accelerate a subatomic particle faster than the speed of light. After all, Einstein said that time will slow down the closer you get to the speed of light. Thus, if someone could break the speed of light, wouldn't it be logical to assume that one might actually be able to reverse time — or at least push it back?"

"Of course, that still doesn't explain why I seem to be the only one who remembers any of this. Dr. Klein did have a theory about that, too — assuming that this is a time loop caused by a subatomic particle going faster than light. But unfortunately, I really can't remember how that went. I mean, I might understand some science, but this stuff is so far over my head that..." He passed his hand over his head to emphasize his point.

"So anyway, I need your help to figure out, first why this is happening and then stopping it. Lois? Lois?"

She was staring at him blankly.

"Let me get this straight," she said slowly after a long pause. "You're telling me that you're living the same period of time over and over again."

"Right."

"And you're the only one who can remember it."

"Right."

"Then what happens next?"

Clark thought back. What had happened next? Suddenly, the door behind him opened. "Oh, right! People start arriving in the conference room for the story meeting."

Lois rolled her eyes. "Cute, Clark," she said sarcastically. "You really had me going there for a moment."

Clark grabbed her arm, pulling her out of the chair and moving her over to a still deserted corner of the conference room. "Lois, I'm serious. We're in a time loop."

She studied his eyes for a long moment. "You are serious," she finally said.

"Yes!"

"Lois, Clark, take your seats," said Perry, entering the room. "Let's get started here."

Clark released Lois' arm, and together they both made their way over to the conference room table. Suddenly, Clark spotted a plane trailing smoke outside the conference room window. He moved back from the desk. "Oops, my lucky pen," said Clark, deliberately dropping his pen on the floor and then, before anyone could question him on it, dropping to his knees, as if to pick it up, and disappearing on all fours out of the conference room.

Clark took a little longer than usual getting back to the newsroom. After all, he wanted to continue his conversation with Lois in private. And he knew nothing of significance, at least for him, had happened during the remainder of the story meeting. When he finally did arrive, Lois was in Perry's office. Before he could wonder what was going on, the door to the office opened and Perry stuck his head out.

"Kent, would you mind stepping in here for a moment?"

"Sure, chief," Clark responded, making his way towards his editor's office. He felt a little off balance. Normally, Perry simply demanded his reporters' attendance. So why was Perry suddenly being... almost differential?

"Lois?" he asked once he was inside and Perry had closed the door.

"Clark, I want you to see a therapist I know. Her name is Dr.

Friskin. And she did wonders for Lucy.”

“Lois, I don’t need...”

“Now Lois told me all about your breakdown this morning, son,” Perry jumped in. “She’s worried about you. So am I. I know the news business can be stressful. Hell, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen reporters go off the deep end.”

“But I’m not...”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of. We all have our breaking point. I really think you need to meet with Dr. Friskin. I’m sure she’ll have you fixed up as good as new in no time.”

“But, chief...”

“This isn’t a request, son.”

Clark’s eyes darted between Lois and Perry for a moment, taking in their concerned visages, before he dropped his chin to his chest and nodded in resignation.

Clark stood in his padded room, looking out through the small window at the same clock he’d watched during the previous time loop. The only difference was this time he stood there as Clark — well, that and the fact that he had voluntarily admitted himself this time. He hadn’t wanted to. He’d known he didn’t need to. But... He had known Lois could be persuasive. He had just never realized exactly how persuasive she could be.

Still, it was five twenty-three. At five twenty-four, he would be again back in time and able to play the last four days over again. “Come on,” he said to the clock as it slowly counted down the seconds. He had an idea about how to get Lois’ help in such a way as to keep them from locking him up in the funny farm.

Clark blinked when he suddenly found himself standing on a platform in front of a crowd of cheering people.

“...let’s really welcome Superman to our fair city,” Luthor was saying. The crowd erupted in thunderous applause. “He came to us a stranger, but his good deeds have not gone unnoticed. As last year’s recipient of the key to the city, it is my honor to pass it on to our newfound friend.”

Clark set his chin in determination. This time he would get this right.

Lois’ eyes got wide when Superman entered the newsroom. In fact, the entire place fell silent. Ignoring the stares, he made his way directly to Lois.

“Is there somewhere private we can talk?” he asked.

“Umm... Yeah... Sure,” gulped Lois, quickly leading him in the direction of the conference room.

Clark let out a slow breath when she closed the door to the conference room and gestured him to a chair. He remained standing. It hadn’t worked telling her about the time loop as Clark. But Superman... Surely she would believe if Superman told her about the time loop.

Okay, so maybe he was wrong, Superman thought as he stood in his padded room, looking out through the small window at the clock he could see at the nursing station. Lois had thought Superman was as crazy as Clark. Well, maybe she was right. Maybe he was crazy.

He stared at the clock indifferently. What did it matter if he went back in time or not? It wasn’t as if he could affect any permanent changes.

Clark almost laughed when he suddenly found himself standing on a platform in front of a crowd of cheering people.

“...let’s really welcome Superman to our fair city,” Luthor was saying. The crowd erupted in thunderous applause. “He came to us a stranger, but his good deeds have not gone unnoticed. As last year’s recipient of the key to the city, it is my honor to pass it on to our newfound friend.”

“Well,” Clark muttered under his breath, “here we go again.”

Clark made a quick trip to the airport to tell the pilot of a small single engine airplane that there was a problem with his fuselage. The man checked it quickly before pumping Superman’s hand profusely, thanking him over and over again for saving his life.

Clark tried to give him a smile but was unable to pull it off successfully. He had no idea what else to do. Maybe Lois was right. Maybe he was crazy. Sighing, he headed directly for Dr. Friskin’s office.

Clark blinked when he suddenly found himself standing on a platform in front of a crowd of cheering people.

“...let’s really welcome Superman to our fair city,” Luthor was saying. The crowd erupted in thunderous applause. “He came to us a stranger, but his good deeds have not gone unnoticed. As last year’s recipient of the key to the city, it is my honor to pass it on to our newfound friend.”

Therapy hadn’t helped. The only thing left was to resign himself to the fact that he would be living the same four days over and over and over again.

“Good morning, hot cakes.”

Clark’s head dropped to his chest when Cat crawled off his lap, making her way to the other side of the conference room table.

“C.K., about that book you lent me on Robert Capra... C.K.?”

“What’s the matter?” asked Lois. “Cat got your tongue?”

He didn’t move. Didn’t say anything. He simply sighed. It had been a smart remark the first time he heard it. But now...

“What’s wrong, Clark?” she asked, sounding concerned.

“Nothing, Lois. Nothing you can help with.”

“Okay, let’s get started...” Perry said entering the room. “Clark?”

“Right here, sir,” Clark replied obediently.

“Oh, Kent, I didn’t see you. I take it you and Lois are on that ‘Superman Gets the Key to the City’ story?”

“Yeah. We’re on it,” Lois responded.

Night had fallen and the rain poured down on the Daily Planet staff car as Clark drove himself and Lois away from the Morris’ house.”

“She’s still defending him,” Lois said in disgust.

“Of course she’s defending him,” replied Clark, no longer feeling the need to be diplomatic. “He didn’t do it.”

“How can you say that? He bashes her on the head...”

“Just because he’s a little eccentric...”

“Eccentric? Try a taco short of a combo plate.”

“But he doesn’t sound like the guy who’s been terrorizing the city. I want to emphasize that in the story.”

“That’s slanted.”

“Fine. We’ll just hang the guy without proof.”

“What’s gotten into you, Clark? I was just expressing an opinion. We’ll write the story your way. But admit it, Helene could be wrong. After all, nobody really knows anybody.”

“That’s not true.”

“We like to think we do, but we all wear disguises. Don’t you?”

“Yes...”

“I mean... What do you mean, yes?”

“Forget it, Lois. It’s not important.”

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Clark. But you’ve been acting strange all day.”

“Look, Lois, just forget it. I’m fine. What were you going to say?”

She looked at him for a long moment. “I was just going to say that in order to let someone really know you, you have to let

them see you as you really are.”

“So...?”

“So as soon as you let them see you as you really are, they wind up using it against you.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“What?”

“You’re right, Lois. What else do you want me to say? Don’t ever let anyone see you as you really are. Fine. What do I care?”

There was a moment of silence as if Lois was not quite able to believe he had spoken to her the way he had.

“So where’re we off to?” Clark finally asked.

“Home. I have to get dressed.”

“Hmph,” said Clark. Maybe tonight he wouldn’t bother going to that stupid charity auction. It was the worst part of these four days. And maybe if Superman showed himself to be irresponsible, Lois would give up her stupid crush on a cardboard caricature.

Clark walked into Lex Towers after the auction had finished. No one noticed when he entered the room. Clark made his way over to where Lois was seated at the bar.

“So anyone interesting show up to be sold like a piece of meat?”

“What are you doing here?” Lois responded, not even bothering to turn to look at him. “Barn dance let out early?”

“I filed the Morris story. You’re very welcome.” He wasn’t entirely sure why he had bothered. Maybe it was because he had nothing better to do.

“Hmmm.” She looked off into the distance. “He didn’t show up, Clark.”

Clark cringed at the disappointment he could hear in her voice. Still, for the sake of maintaining his cover he had to ask... “Who?”

“Superman. He was supposed to be here tonight. And he didn’t even bother showing up.”

“So what? Were you planning to bid for him?”

She glanced at him. “I did bid for him.”

“But I thought you said...”

“...he didn’t show up. I know. But the auctioneer said he had an emergency to attend to and that we should just go ahead without him.”

“Well, if he had an emergency to attend to, and the auction went ahead without him, why are you so upset?”

“I didn’t win the date. Some lady bid fifty thousand dollars. Fifty thousand dollars, Clark. I don’t make fifty thousand dollars in a year.”

“I don’t get it, Lois. Why would you bid for a date with Superman? You don’t even know him.”

“I know enough,” she responded defensively. “And what’s wrong with you anyway? I thought you liked Superman.”

He let out a breath. “Come on, Lois. I’ll put you in a cab.”

Clark sat up most of the night watching Lois sleep. That was the biggest problem with not having time pass. Until now, there had always been hope — hope that she would someday come to know him for who he really was — and even, perhaps, if he were very lucky, come to love him. Now that hope was gone. When morning came, he made his way into his room and changed into the Superman suit.

“Superman?” she asked, coming awake to see him standing near her in the living room.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you,” Superman said. “I ran into Clark at the courthouse and he said...”

“Clark. Did he leave? What’s he doing at the courthouse?”

“The Hall of Records. He said something about researching the past activities of Barnes’ gang. He said you could use my help.

“Oh... we can.” A crinkle suddenly crossed her forehead. “So you saw Clark?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Did he seem all right to you?”

He was caught off guard by the question. She actually sounded concerned about Clark. “He seemed fine. Why?” He hadn’t been able to help asking.

“He’s just been acting... I don’t know. I guess I’m just worried about him.”

Suddenly he wondered if he’d discounted an obvious way of getting her help without having her lock him up. “Well... If I tell you something, you can’t say anything.”

“I promise,” Lois instantly responded.

“He did say something to me.” This way if she suggested locking Clark up, Superman could talk her out of it.

“What?”

Superman took a deep breath before telling her that Clark believed he was living through a time loop.

“That’s crazy,” Lois said when he was done.

“He really believes it, Lois. He even told me the way to defeat Barnes.”

“What? Are you saying you believe him?”

Superman shrugged his shoulders.

“But... no. No, that’s crazy. You must have misunderstood him.”

“I didn’t misunderstand.”

“On the other hand,” Lois began, suddenly lost in thought, “being in a time loop certainly could be interesting.”

“Interesting?” he asked, startled by her choice of words.

“Didn’t you see Groundhog Day? Being in a time loop would allow a person to do anything they wanted without any consequences. When time loops, it sets everything back to the way it was. There would be no repercussions for your actions.”

Superman blinked.

“Well, don’t you think?” Lois asked.

She gasped when a moment later, Superman grabbed her, pulling her into his arms and kissing her as if there was no tomorrow — because in point of fact, there wasn’t.

“I can’t believe my eyes,” Alan said, throwing back the blanket covering him when he saw Superman kissing Lois. “Is that really Superman?”

“Hello, Alan,” Superman said, breaking the kiss. Lois was still in his arms, slightly wobbly and completely dazed.

Clark crashed into the safe at the Metropolis Gold Repository, catching Lois in his arms just as she was about to collapse from a lack of oxygen and waited while she caught her breath as air flowed in from the hole he had created.

Once she finally seemed somewhat coherent, and unable to wait a moment longer, he lowered his mouth to hers. He had wanted to do this every time he’d rescued her from this safe. Now, given Lois’ earlier comments, he finally had the nerve to do it. Her arms went around his neck as she returned the kiss.

“Let’s get out of here,” Superman said, picking her up in his arms.

When she nodded her consent, he carried her out of the building to where the police were putting Barnes and his gang into police cars.

“How did you make them visible?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter, Lois,” said Superman, taking off into the sky.

“Wait a minute,” Lois objected. “I still have to talk to the cops, find Clark, write the...”

Her voice was cut off by Superman’s lips again on hers as they headed through the skies towards her apartment.

Clark was licking his lips when he suddenly found himself

standing on a platform in front of hundreds of people.

"...let's really welcome Superman to our fair city," Luthor was saying. The crowd erupted in thunderous applause. "He came to us a stranger, but his good deeds have not gone unnoticed."

Clark searched the crowd. When his eyes met Lois', one corner of his mouth snaked up in a partial grin. He'd just spent the last several hours necking with Lois Lane. Her taste was in his mouth. The heat of her body was on his hands. Her scent still filled his nostrils. Her soft moans of encouragement rang in his ears. The suit suddenly felt slightly constricting. On the other hand, did it really matter? He was back in the loop — like a hamster on a wheel. But if he'd been able to hold her and kiss her when he'd only realized the potential on his last day, what might be accomplished if he started his pursuit of Lois Lane immediately?

She smiled at him, but then an expression of confusion crossed her features as if reading something behind his eyes that she didn't quite understand.

"As last year's recipient of the key to the city," Luthor continued, "it is my honor to pass it on to our newfound friend."

The cheers erupted again.

"Madam Deputy Mayor, if you please?" Luthor said, moving to the side.

"I'm sorry," said Superman. "There's something I need to attend to."

Walking deliberately from the platform, he stepped up to Lois, sweeping her up into his arms and taking off into the air before she could utter a single gasp of surprise. His lips landed on hers even before they were out of sight of the crowds below.

Clark's lips trailed up Lois' neck, savoring every inch of the sweet tasting skin. The small whimper that rose in the back of her throat sent his heart pounding. His hand slipped beneath her sweater to slide over the flat of her stomach.

"Superman."

Her softly spoken word intruded like a thief on the moment, reminding him all too clearly of who was currently lying with Lois Lane on the bed in her apartment. For the past three days, Superman had pursued Lois Lane to the exclusion of everything else. The only thing Clark had done was to appear at the Daily Planet briefly to hand in his resignation. Other than that, there had been only one thing on his mind. Lois. He'd ignored cries for help — what did it matter if they were only going to cry for help again in a few days? He'd ignored Helene and Alan and Barnes and his gang. He could always catch them on the next go 'round.

He'd distracted Lois from the story on more occasions than he could count. He'd taken her to the London Savoy for supper. He had flown her over the well-lit Egyptian pyramids at night. He'd floated with her, high above the clouds, so close that one could almost reach out and touch the stars. He'd stood with her, looking out over the snow-capped splendor of the Rocky Mountains. He'd taken her to places to eat that usually required six months notice — except for Superman, of course. He'd wined her and dined her as it had never been done by anyone before.

And it had worked. In only three days, he was lying in her bedroom, running his hands beneath her shirt as she moaned beneath him, her hands in his hair, every movement of her body silently urging him on. He shifted positions, sliding both hands under her sweater. She moved with him, sitting up so that he could pull it over her head. Throwing it to the side, he returned to the task, his lips moving lower to trace the lines of her bra as her breasts heaved with every gasped breath.

He was in heaven. He'd been dreaming about doing this ever since he'd first laid eyes on this saucy vixen. Of touching her. Of holding her. Of having her welcoming arms reaching for him, running through his hair and over his back as he got lost in her body. Of a future of exploring...

The thought trailed off. What future? This wasn't the beginning of anything. It was the end. Tomorrow he'd be back in the hamster-wheel, starting from square one with Lois. Was this really what he wanted? One night. Only one night, knowing that tomorrow she would know him again only as the illusive superhero of her dreams.

No! No! He was not going to think like that. Fate. Or God. Or the folly of man. Whatever. This was all they had left. Why should he not take advantage of it? They had no future. He had to accept that and find some comfort in the only thing left to him — to them.

His hands pulled her to him, rolling them over so that her body was pressing down on his as his hands began fumbling with the clasp on her bra.

"Wait. Wait. Wait," she gasped out, pulling away from him. She licked her lips between pants as she attempted to regain some semblance of control over the situation.

"I'm just not sure..."

"I am," he said, moving quickly so that he rolled her back on the bed beneath him.

"Oh god," she breathed when his teeth pulled at her earlobe.

What was he doing? The little voice in the back of his mind tore at him. He pushed it away, concentrating his efforts on swirling his tongue inside her ear, provoking a guttural groan in her. Still, the voice wouldn't be silent. It yelled at him. This wasn't right. Wasn't how he wanted it. He wanted a lot more than a one night stand with Lois.

'Well, that's no longer an option,' his mind argued back. 'And what's the harm? It's not as if she will even remember this in less than twenty-four hours.'

'But you will.' He knew that was true. Every fiber of his body would remember this. But wasn't that a good thing? 'Yeah, and how will you feel when you're standing on that platform at five twenty-four tomorrow, looking into Lois Lane's eyes, a virtual stranger to her?'

"Superman, please," Lois moaned.

Please? Please what? What did the 'please' mean?

"Wait, we've got to talk."

The words were like a bucket of ice water being poured over him. For the past three days, he'd pursued Lois shamelessly — all to get to this moment, knowing they had less than four days. On many occasions, she'd tried to tell him she had to work, or that she wanted to slow things down. Yet every time, he'd pushed past her objections, usually by kissing her until she could barely remember her own name, much less object.

He instinctively knew that if he pushed, just a little bit this time, she'd give him what he was seeking. But... He closed his eyes, his lips pulling away from her ear.

"Please, this is all going too fast for me." She sounded as if she were on the verge of tears.

He raised his head.

"I'm just not... I know I'll probably hate myself in the morning, but I'm not... I mean, I'm crazy about you. You have to know that. But there's someone... I'm just not ready yet."

Clark closed his eyes. 'There's someone... I'm just not ready.' Obviously she was in conflict between her feelings for him and someone else. An old boyfriend maybe? Probably. He'd only known Lois for about a month and for the most part, she tended to be very closed mouthed about her personal life. He'd made some inroads on that front. But obviously not enough. There must have been someone in her life before he came along.

What was he thinking? She was beautiful, bright, funny. She undoubtedly had dozens of men pursuing her. That didn't worry him — at least not as much as the one she'd almost told him about just now. The old boyfriend. She was still pining for him. And if that was the case, the chance that she would get past that relationship when time was looping was nonexistent.

"I'm sorry," Lois said softly.

As if recognizing the sudden change of mood, the music from the radio that had been playing in the background stopped, interrupted by the D.J.'s voice.

"You're not going to believe this, folks. But apparently vandals managed, in one night, to deface Mount Rushmore, changing the faces of our presidents to those of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy and Pluto."

"Well, it's good to know that there are people out there even more screwed up than me," Lois said with a self-deprecating chuckle, trying to break the tension between them.

"You're not screwed up, Lois," Clark responded, his hand coming up to cup Lois' cheek. "In fact, of the two of us, I have a feeling you're the sane one. You're right. We were moving too fast."

Lois' face finally seemed to relax into a real, obviously relieved smile.

Clark stood looking thoughtfully out over the crowd. But his mind wasn't on the crowd. It wasn't on Luthor's speech. It was on... His eyes wandered over to where Lois was standing in the crowd watching him.

After Lois had turned him away the previous night, he'd done a lot of reflecting. And he had to admit, he was slightly ashamed of himself. He'd pushed her beyond her comfort levels — merely to serve his needs. It hadn't been fair to her. How much of it had been his feelings for her? How much of it had been his own need to banish the despair he was beginning to feel? He only hoped if she were to ever find out about his actions, she would understand.

His mind was plagued by one thought, however. If she had not stopped them, how far would he have gone? Would he have stopped them? He thought he would. He certainly hoped he would. It wouldn't be fair to Lois to sleep with her when he knew they had no future. And to his credit, he hadn't tried to override her objections once they had finally penetrated his thick skull.

Still... He felt a thin sheen of moisture partially obscuring his vision. Given that they were stuck in this time loop, they didn't have a future. And as had been proven last night, they'd never even be able to have the present. After all, Superman had given it his best college try and still he'd failed. And since all they had was four days... There wasn't much else he could do.

The next few loops saw Clark merely going through the paces. He did his job — exactly as it had been done during the first loop. He conducted his Superman duties — just as he had done during the first loop. He said and did everything that was expected of him. But the heart had gone out of him. Without the passage of time, nothing was worth doing. People didn't really die in traffic accidents. Barnes' activities were of no account. Even reuniting Helene and Alan was pointless — because the moment the loop would happen, they'd be estranged again. Life had simply ceased to have a purpose.

Clark looked out into the sky. Normally he found solitude among the clouds. But tonight, he didn't even have enough energy to take to the stars.

"Nice," said Lois reminding Clark that she was standing beside him on the balcony, taking a sip of the tea he'd made her. He hadn't been in the mood for any tonight.

"Lapsang Suchang. My mother used to make me tea and raisin scones when I was feeling bad." He paused, wishing her tea and raisin scones had the power to make him feel better tonight. "I wish..."

"What?"

He suddenly wondered what would happen if... Without worrying about the consequences — after all, there were no consequences — he pulled Lois into his arms, seizing her lips with his. For a moment, there was no reaction. And then he felt it.

Her hands slipped up his chest and around his neck even as her lips softened under his. He followed the first kiss with a second, slipping his tongue into her slightly open mouth, desperate to connect with her as Clark. It was a good ten minutes before he pulled back.

Lois stumbled out of his arms, fighting to regain her balance.

"Lois, I..."

Her hand suddenly landed hard across his face.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

Clark looked out into the sky.

"Nice," said Lois reminding Clark that she was standing beside him on the balcony, taking a sip of the tea he'd made her.

"Lapsang Suchang. My mother used to make me tea and raisin scones when I was feeling bad. I wish..."

"What?"

He shook his head. What he wished was that he could take Lois in his arms and kiss her the way he wanted. But it was only the last loop when he'd learned the hard way that he couldn't do that. They stood together in silence for a long moment.

"When I was a kid, Lucy and I used to play this game. We'd ask each other, 'What would you rather be able to do? Fly or be invisible?'"

She turned so that she was leaning against the railing around his balcony.

"And you chose?"

"Mmm... Invisible. I wished I could walk through all those closed doors. I guess I still do."

"Hmmm."

"So what about you?"

"What?"

"Invisible or fly?"

"Fly," he said quietly.

"Really?"

"Yeah," he said. "Being up in the air, looking at the world passing peacefully by..."

"You know, I never thought I would say this, Clark, but you and I have something in common. Superman. You want to fly like him. And I want to fly with him."

His eyebrows crinkled for a moment in thought. And then he turned towards her. "Is that really what you want, Lois?"

"What?"

"To fly with Superman."

"Of course."

He narrowed his eyes and studied her as his brain processed this data. Well, why not? It wasn't as if anything was going to come of it anyway.

"What's up with you, Clark?"

He stepped back. "I just want to be sure you're really ready to fly with Superman."

"What are you..."

Her question died on her lips when he spun, a blur of brown quickly turning into bright colors and suddenly Superman stood in front of her. He held out his hand. "Wanta go flying?"

She stared at him for a moment before her eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed to the floor in a dead faint.

Clark cocked his head to the side. "A bit too abrupt, huh?" he asked dispassionately as he looked at Lois lying unconscious on the balcony.

Night had fallen and the rain poured down on the Daily Planet staff car as Clark drove himself and Lois away from the Morris' house.

"She's still defending him," Lois said in disgust.

"She said it wasn't him," Clark said distractedly.

"He bashes her on the head."

"Just because he's a little eccentric..."

"Eccentric? Try a taco short of a combo plate."

"But he doesn't sound like the guy who's been terrorizing the city. I want to emphasize that in the story."

"That's slanted."

"But there's no evidence to suggest that Alan Morris is an armed robber. The man was giving money away. Why is he now stealing it?"

"Fine. We'll write the story. But admit it, Helene could be wrong. After all, nobody really knows anybody."

"That's not true."

"We like to think we do, but we all wear disguises. Don't you?"

"Yes."

"I mean... What do you mean you wear disguises?"

"I just mean... Lois, I'm Superman."

"Don't be crazy, Clark," she said swatting his arm. "There is only one Superman. And trust me, and don't take this personally, but you are not him." She emphasized every word of the final phrase. "And what are you doing with your glasses off anyway? You're driving. Do you want to kill us?"

Sighing, Clark put his glasses back on. "So where to?"

"Home. I got to get dressed."

"Hot date?"

Clark ignored the funny looks and stares from the people in the lobby as he made his way to the elevators. But he noticed every one. He couldn't help but be amused. At least it was a change from the normal.

Stepping out of the elevator, he made his way to the conference room where the Daily Planet staff was beginning to gather for the morning story meeting. Acting as if everything was normal, he took his seat in a chair beside Lois. So far, she'd been too engrossed to even notice him. But as he sat down, she looked at him.

"What the... Clark, what are you doing wearing a Batman costume?"

Taking a seat beside Lois, Clark waited for her to glance over at him.

"What the... Clark, whatever possessed you to wear a Spiderman costume?"

Taking a seat beside Lois, Clark waited for her to glance over at him.

"What the... Clark, is that a Green Lantern costume? What are you doing wearing that?"

Clark glanced down at himself, taking in the outfit he'd chosen this time with an amused grin. He ran a hand through his ruffled hair and pushed his glasses further up on his nose before stepping into the conference room. Spotting Lois, he took a seat beside her, waiting for her to look up.

"Clark, what are you doing in a Superman suit?" Lois asked.

Clark looked down at himself, a confused look on his face. "I thought this was the type of outfit you liked."

Rolling her eyes, she looked back at the notepad in front of her.

Clark watched, fascinated. How was it that she could recognize him in all the outfits — including the Spiderman outfit which covered his entire face — and yet be fooled when he removed his glasses and slicked back his hair? He supposed it really was true that one only saw what he or she expected to see.

"...let's really welcome Superman to our fair city."

Clark looked around at the cheering crowd. Were they nuts? This Superman worship was out of control.

"He came to us a stranger, but his good deeds have not gone

unnoticed. As last year's recipient of the key to the city, it is my honor to pass it on to our newfound friend."

Clark shook his head again. What would they do if they knew the truth? He wasn't some superhero. He was just Clark Kent.

"Madam Deputy Mayor, if you please?" Luthor said, moving to the side.

"We take pride in proclaiming this day Superman Day and offering you the key to the city."

He watched in abstract fascination as she hung the key around his neck.

"Welcome to Metropolis," she said. The crowd agreed by cheering. "It is wonderful to have you here." She reached out, shaking Superman's hand.

"Thank you," said Superman awkwardly.

"Come say a few words," Luthor added.

Superman opened his mouth and then closed it again. Well, why not? "Thank you, Mr. Luthor," he said, stepping up to the microphone. He waited for the crowd to calm down again. "Are you people all nuts?" he asked, causing the crowd to go completely silent. "You look at me and all you see is some superhero." He looked directly at Lois. "You're so blind — never bothering to look at the man inside the suit. Superman kisses you and you practically melt in his arms. And yet when Clark kisses you... you slap him across the face." He looked back out at the crowd. "But I'm no one special. I'm just a farm boy from Kansas. I'm just..." He suddenly spun. "...Clark Kent," he finished when he was standing in front of the crowd again dressed in his suit and tie. "Clark Kent's the before? Superman's the way, way after?" he asked, looking back at Lois who was staring at him with her mouth hanging open.

"I'll have to call you back," Luthor said, rising to his feet as he hung up the phone. "Superman, to what do I owe this honor?"

"I'm just here to clean up a little dirt," said Superman, walking directly to Luthor. Grabbing him by the collar, he walked over to dangle Luthor over the edge of the balcony. "Someone should have done this a long time ago."

"Superman, please! You're not going to drop me. It's not the superheroish thing to do. So why don't you just put me down?" There was no fear in Luthor's voice as if he were absolutely confident that he was in no danger from Superman.

"You are a miserable excuse for a human being, Luthor. You're responsible for... who knows how many deaths. How many people have had their lives destroyed because of you? This world would be a better place without you in it."

"Probably. But you're not going to hurt me. It's not in your nature."

"And I don't like the way you look at Lois Lane. What are your intentions towards her?"

"She's a beautiful woman. I would have thought my 'intentions' were obvious. Now stop embarrassing yourself and let me go. If you don't let me go immediately, I'm going to... Aaaaaaaahhhhhh!"

Clark watched as Lex Luthor plummeted towards the street, flinching slightly when the sound of the 'splat' echoed back to him. "Well, he did tell me to let him go," Clark said with a shrug of his shoulders before floating off the balcony and back into the sky.

"...let's really welcome Superman to our fair city," Luthor said.

Clark sighed.

Clark was lying in bed when he heard a knock at the door. He was taking this loop off. Investigating the same story over and over again... He needed a break.

Rolling over, he looked through the wall and door to see Lois

standing outside. What was she doing here? For a moment, he was tempted to answer. Then he decided against it. What was the point? He didn't particularly want to talk to her.

"Clark, are you in there?"

Stubbornly, he rolled back over and closed his eyes. A minute or so later, he heard strange noises coming from outside the door. Unable to resist the curiosity, he glanced again at the door just in time to see Lois break in, carrying a brown paper bag.

"Hello? Anyone home?" she called from the living room, even as she commenced her descent towards his bedroom. He quickly put on his glasses.

"What are you doing here?" he asked when she appeared in the doorway to his room.

"Well, when you didn't come in today... I asked Perry. He said you didn't even call. Didn't you know you're supposed to call if you're sick?"

"Lois, what..."

She turned, and without letting him finish, headed towards his kitchen.

"I don't know much about cooking. But even I can heat up a can of chicken noodle soup."

He watched through the wall as she placed the grocery bag on the table. "And I got orange juice and apple juice, and since I didn't know if you had an upset stomach or not, I also got a bottle of ginger ale."

Confused, he crawled out of bed and slipped a pair of sweat pants and a sweatshirt on over his t-shirt and shorts. Once he'd pulled on a pair of socks, he headed for the kitchen.

"Where's your microwave?" she asked.

"I don't have a microwave."

"Well, why didn't you ever tell me that? How am I supposed to heat the soup?"

"Lois, it's not necessary to..."

"Of course it's necessary. Everyone knows that you're supposed to eat chicken noodle soup when you're sick."

He gave his head a shake, making his way to the cupboard to pull out a pot. "I can take it from here. I'm sure you must have somewhere you need to be."

"No."

Clark stopped in mid-motion, looking at Lois. The Superman auction was tonight. So what was she doing here? He glanced at the clock. Okay, well it was still early. He suspected she'd be on her way as soon as she was satisfied that he'd had his soup.

Picking up the can, he opened it, emptying it into the pot.

"You won't believe what happened today," Lois said, taking a step back as he took over the task of making the soup. "Everyone is claiming that there's an invisible man running around Metropolis committing crimes."

Clark climbed back into bed. It had been the only thing to do. After he... or, more accurately, they ate the soup, she insisted that he climb into bed while she cleaned up the dishes. He still felt slightly confused about why she was still there. She'd avoided the entire issue, talking the entire time about the invisible man investigation. And what was really surprising to him was that not once had she glanced at the clock — even though he was well aware that the Superman auction would begin soon.

Still, now that her act of charity was done, he expected that she would be on her way so that she could attend the auction. So he was more than a little surprised when she appeared in the doorway with a kitchen chair.

He watched curiously when she brought the chair over to the side of his bed.

"You know the worst part of being sick?" she asked as she took a seat. "The boredom. So anyway, I found these in your kitchen." She held up a deck of cards. "Want a game?"

He studied her for a long moment before sitting up. "Sure.

But... are you sure you don't have somewhere you need to be?"

"Nope," she said, shuffling the cards. "I was thinking maybe a game of poker."

His hand came out, covering hers, and thereby stopping the shuffling. "Lois, what exactly are you doing here?"

She looked down at their hands. "When you didn't come in... didn't even call..." She shrugged. "I was just worried that something had happened to you. I hoped you were sick... Well, no, that didn't come out right. I was just concerned that... Well, you're not really very city wise. I thought..." Her voice trailed off.

"You thought I'd been the victim of a crime?" Clark asked, genuinely touched. She'd been scared for him. Maybe she cared about him more than she let on. The realization left him feeling warm inside.

She nodded, still not looking at him.

"Why don't we make this interesting?" Lois asked in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well... we could play for cash."

"I've got no use for your money, but..." He hesitated. Did he dare? Well, why not? It wasn't as if anything would come of it anyway. "Well, how about a friendly little game of strip poker?"

"I'm not sure that's a good..."

"Think you're going to lose, huh?"

Lois' eyebrows shot up. "The day I can't beat you at poker, Kent, is the day I hand in my press pass."

"So then?"

She studied him for a moment before handing him the cards. "Deal," she said, just a hint of mischief in her eyes.

He took the cards and began shuffling, a roguish grin on his face.

"Just let me put on some music," she said, turning on his radio. "After all, I want the full effect when you have to remove another article of clothing."

"In your dreams, Lois. I'm the one who's going to be enjoying the strip show."

Clark shifted uncomfortably as he stared in concentration at his cards. He was now down to his shorts and glasses while Lois sat there, completely clothed. She'd won every single hand.

"Tick tock, Clark."

"Just give me a minute." Three eights. Surely she couldn't beat three of a kind. On the other hand, if he lost this hand, he would have to make a choice between his glasses and... the only other item of clothing he had on. He chewed on his lower lip. He supposed he could lose the glasses.

"Come on, Clark. Are you in?"

No repercussions. With a small grin, Clark glanced over his glasses at her cards. His smile widened. "I'll call."

"Are you sure? I mean, you don't have much more to lose."

"I'm sure, Lois. Show me your hand."

She put down her two kings.

"Three eights," Clark said in satisfaction.

"Okay, okay," said Lois, slipping off a sock.

"Oh be still my beating heart," said Clark dramatically.

She flung the sock at him. "Want to try again?"

Clark shook his head. "Something tells me that I should quit while I'm ahead." Now that he knew that if he cheated, he could probably win, he was having second thoughts. Time would reset, causing Lois to forget anything she might see. But the image of Lois naked... That would stay with him forever. Some lines just weren't meant to be crossed.

"Spoil sport. Okay, well, if you're sure..." She rose to her feet. "...I probably should let you get your sleep." She was at the doorway when the voice on the radio caught both their attention.

"In other news, Radio Italia has announced today that the

Leaning Tower of Pisa is no longer leaning. That's right, folks. No one knows how, but apparently someone came in and straightened it. Italian officials are..."

"Do you want me to turn that off?" asked Lois. When Clark nodded, she made her way to the radio and flicked it off. She turned towards the doorway before stopping again. "You will be at work tomorrow, won't you?"

He smiled. "Yes, Lois."

She looked relieved. "Good. You get your sleep."

Clark watched thoughtfully as she left. He was completely thrown. In the time he'd been at the Planet, she had never given him any reason to believe she cared. But she must. Otherwise, why would she have decided to take care of him instead of attending the Superman auction? He never would have expected to be the recipient of such a gesture by Lois.

But a question remained. Why had Lois come to his apartment in the first place? Shouldn't she have just continued on with her normal activities — given the fact that he wasn't around to change things? But then... the fact that he hadn't gone to work today had changed things. It had left Lois concerned about his safety. That single difference must have pushed Lois' intentions to attend the Superman auction out of her mind. He smiled. Maybe there was hope for them yet — or would be if not for the loop.

Clark blinked and looked around in resignation when he suddenly found himself standing on a platform in front of City Hall, a crowd gathered in front of him.

"...let's really welcome Superman to our fair city."

Clark sighed. The last loop had been... pleasant. He and Lois had become... almost friends. Of course, when Superman had shown up on the last day, it was obvious that Lois hadn't given up her Superman crush. It had brought Clark back to Earth with a vengeance. She cared about Clark. That much was obvious from her concern from him when she thought he was sick or injured. But she was in love with Superman.

"Earth to Clark."

"Huh?" Clark was brought back to the present when Lois' hand was suddenly waving in front of his face. They were currently driving away from Helene Morris' house after seeing the damage Golden Boy Barnes had done to it when he stole Alan's invisible suits. "Did you say something?" he asked.

"Only for the last five minutes."

"Sorry. So what were you saying?"

"I was just commenting on how I can't believe that Helene is still defending her husband."

Clark let out a breath. Right. They were supposed to be arguing about the story right now. But he really didn't feel much like arguing. "Yeah, well..."

"What does that mean? What's wrong with you today, anyway? You keep flaking out on me every five minutes."

"So where do you want to go?" he asked, instead of answering her question.

"Home. I have to get dressed."

"Oh, right. The bachelor auction for The Luthor Center for the Blind is on tonight. Trying to get a date with Superman, huh?"

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing. It's just..." He suddenly pulled the car over to the side of the road and turned towards her. "Lois, forget the auction. Come out with me tonight instead?"

"Have you lost your mind, Clark?"

"No. In fact, I think I've just found it. Come out for dinner with me."

"I told you before that I don't date people I work with."

"So then don't think of it as a date. Think of it as... A trial

date. Just to see if maybe I'm someone worth breaking your rule for."

"No. Why would you want to go out with me, anyway?"

"You've got to be kidding, Lois," Clark said in disbelief.

"I've been crazy about you since you bounded into my interview with Perry. You're brilliant, driven, funny... a little pigheaded at times..." When she shot him a look that said this was not the way to her heart, he continued. "...like now. And you're absolutely beautiful. I love spending time with you. Why wouldn't I want to go out with you?"

His eyes bore into Lois' and for a long breathless moment, he thought she might say yes. Suddenly, she broke eye contact.

"I can't tonight."

"The auction."

"Right."

He let out a breath. "Okay, think about this, Lois. Luthor is the one hosting this fund-raiser. That means that there are going to be a lot of very, very rich women there. Do you really think that you can afford to outbid them for a single date with Superman?"

"I've been saving for Tahiti. I have that money. I'll do fine."

"Lois, the Superman date is going to be sold for fifty thousand dollars. Do you really think you can top that?"

"How do you know?"

"Trust me. I know. Come on. Just one date. If you don't have a good time, I promise I'll never bring it up again."

She narrowed her eyes. "You promise?"

Clark's face broke into a smile. "For as long as you remember the promise."

"I've got a really long memory."

"I'm sure you do."

"Okay, so what aren't you telling me?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Nothing. Look, Lois, come out with me tonight. Call it a date. Call it a trial date. Call it... friends having dinner. Call it anything you like. But just agree to spend some time with me."

She continued to watch him for a moment, as if looking for the angle. "Okay," she finally said, her voice taking on a slightly shy tone.

His heart soared in a way it never had when he'd taken her out as Superman. "Really?"

"You ask me that and I just might change my mind," she warned.

"Sorry," Clark said, quickly shifting the vehicle into drive and pulling it back onto the street. "So where to?"

"I guess we should write up the story first. Then... I'm all yours."

When Clark's face lit up, she rushed to continue.

"For dinner. I meant, for dinner."

The restaurant he chose was a small establishment on the outskirts of Metropolis. El Tambo del Oro. The cream of Metropolis society had undoubtedly never crossed the threshold of this particular establishment. A person could drive past it every day and never even be tempted to step inside given the remarkable resemblance it bore to a run down warehouse. But when one did step across the threshold...

The way Lois' breath caught in her throat when they entered the restaurant told Clark that he'd chosen well. The ragged exterior gave way to a cosy little place. The main source of light came from a large stone fireplace that took up almost one entire wall. Wooden tables with perky red table clothes peppered the room in no discernable pattern. Candles were burning on every table.

There were a couple dozen patrons, but the place gave the impression of being deserted, so well did the walls absorb the noise. Each group was left to feel as if they were alone to enjoy

the fine food and service by themselves. The soft Spanish music playing in the background was romantic, calling to the patrons to get lost in its incomprehensible words.

Delicious aromas filled the room, causing Lois' stomach to rumble in anticipation.

"Where did you find this place, Clark? It's... charming."

"And the food is even better than the atmosphere," he responded.

"Clark!"

Clark glanced up to see an older Latino woman coming towards him. She wiped her hands on the edge of her stained apron as she approached.

"Mrs. Perez."

"How many times do I have to tell you, my name is Maria."

"Maria," Clark corrected.

"It's so good to see you again."

"Well, I couldn't stay away from your wonderful cooking."

Clark stepped forward and gave her a hug.

"And who is this with you?" Maria asked, stepping away from Clark to look at the woman accompanying him.

"This is Lois Lane," Clark informed her, standing up a little bit taller when he realized he was introducing his date. "Lois, this is Maria. My folks found this place when they were visiting Metropolis several years ago. When I moved here, they insisted I had to come. Mom has been writing to Maria ever since their trip here."

"Really?"

"Yeah. She's even managed to cajole Maria here into sending her a recipe or two."

"Well, enough of that," Maria said. "You don't want to bore your pretty date with stories of my friendship with Martha. You know the drill. Find yourself a table. There's one near the fire that's still available. Very romantic."

From the corner of his eye, he could tell that Lois was pushing a strand of hair behind her ear and he could swear she was blushing.

Even if nothing came of tonight, at least this was a change from the normal course of events. And it felt good — it felt really good. He showed Lois over to a table, pulling a chair out for her. She seemed almost shy when she sat down.

"Don't keep me in suspense," Clark demanded. "What did it say?"

Lois' eyes were teary as she fought past the laughter to reply. "A husband is God's idea of a joke," she said before dissolving into peals of laughter.

"And she was charged with bigamy?" asked Clark in disbelief.

Lois nodded. "The judge even read the saying on the t-shirt into the record — before sending her to jail, of course."

This time Clark's laughter matched hers.

"So you see," said Lois when the laughter finally calmed down, "even the court house can be an interesting beat at times."

"I can tell. How long did you work it?"

"About six months. But that was before..." Her voice trailed off and the spark in her eyes dimmed.

"Claude?"

She nodded, not meeting his eyes.

"I didn't tell anyone what you told me that night in the warehouse," he said softly.

She gave a small, cynical little laugh. "It wouldn't particularly matter if you did. After all, the whole newsroom was talking about it — from Claude's perspective, that is. I was too mortified to..."

Clark reached out, placing his hand over hers. "I'm sorry, Lois."

She shook her head, withdrawing her hand from under his.

"Can we talk about something else?"

"Sure."

An awkward silence settled over them as Clark searched his mind, desperate to think of some topic that might distract her. By the way the smile had disappeared from her face, Clark was certain that their recent conversation about Claude had reminded her how dangerous it was to get involved with a co-worker.

"So..." he finally said, "what do you think of the Met's chances of winning the Pennant this year?"

Her eyes shot up to his in disbelief before a small smile began to tug at the corner of her mouth. "Well, I guess that's a change of subject," she said as the laughter returned to her eyes.

"Clark, what are you doing?"

Clark turned towards her from where he'd stepped away from the protection of the building while they waited for their cab to stand, hands outstretched, looking up as the rain poured down around him. If there was one thing the time loop had taught him, it was to appreciate the moment. After all, that was all there was. He lowered his hands as the rain ran unheeded down his face. The door opened and two more patrons stepped outside, pulling up collars and taking out an umbrella before they dashed together towards a nearby car.

The door behind them slowly closed, allowing Lois and Clark hear the soft melody coming from inside. Clark suddenly smiled.

"Dance with me, Lois."

"Clark, are you nuts?"

"Yes." He moved towards her, offering her his hand. "Dance with me."

She chewed on her lower lip for a moment, coolly regarding his hand before an impish grin pulled at one corner of her mouth. Her hand came up to cautiously settle in his.

"Ah, hah," Clark said, taking her hand and pulling her out into the pouring rain.

She giggled. "This is crazy, Clark." Still, she didn't resist as he began moving her around to the music only Clark could hear.

Suddenly, the music got louder — allowing Lois to hear it, too. Lois and Clark both glanced towards the door to the restaurant where Maria, having realized they were outside dancing, was now propping the door open so that the music could fill their own private dance-floor in the street. Placing his cheek against her hair, ignoring the rain and the rest of the world, he allowed himself to get lost in the moment, relishing having her body tucked against his.

Clark looked down at Lois, the laughter dancing in her eyes, the rain soaking her hair and coat and shoes and every other part of her body as she smiled up at him and suddenly time stood still. Of one accord, their feet stopped and their smiles faded as they stared, lost in each other's eyes. Clark saw Lois sway closer and knew he was being invited to kiss her.

Unable to resist — as if there had ever been any doubt — Clark moved closer, as if in slow motion, savoring every moment of sweet anticipation until his lips settled over hers in a slow, gentle and very thorough exploration of her mouth. As her hand left his shoulder to play with the hair at the nape of his neck, the truth hit him with all the force of a speeding freight train. Sometime during the past four days, he'd fallen hopelessly in love with Lois Lane.

"Well," Clark said, hastily pulling back, "it's getting late. We should probably..."

"Uhh... yeah," she responded, sounding confused and even slightly hurt by his sudden withdrawal.

Clark followed as Lois led the way to her apartment. Things had been more than a little awkward between them since he'd pulled away from their kiss. Kissing Lois was one of the few moments of pleasure he'd had over the last few days. And kissing

her as Clark, especially when she had wanted it as much as he, had been remarkable.

But that was the problem. The evening had been perfect — everything he'd ever imagined or wanted from a date with Lois Lane. He'd ordered pollo con chocolate — chicken in chocolate sauce — and although Lois had originally questioned his choice, she'd spent the entire night stealing bites of food off his plate. Their conversation at the restaurant had been seamless. They had talked about everything and nothing. At times they had matched wits in a kind of verbal sword-play. At others, they'd laughed so hard they had barely been able to catch their breaths. The conversation had flowed from topic to topic, emotion to emotion without a thought or care. And except for one brief moment when Claude's name had come up, Lois had seemed as lost in him as he was in her.

If Clark had known it would be more than just a single evening together, he'd have been floating on cloud nine, sneaking out to do aerial cartwheels. But when his lips had been on hers, her hand in his hair, the rain pouring down around them, the anguish he'd felt had been almost unbearable. He'd known in that moment that he'd fallen head over heels in love with Lois. He'd known he

liked her, or was attracted to her. He'd even suspected he might love her. But at that moment, the realization had been more than he'd been able to bear. If there was a chance of seeing it develop into something... but there wasn't. He'd had no choice. He'd had to pull away while some small part of his heart might be spared the heartbreak of losing her when time bounced yet again.

"Well, here we are." Lois removed her keys and began unlocking her door. Once it was open, she turned towards him. "Would you like to come in? We could open a bottle of wine." Her voice trembled slightly as if she was unsure how her offer might be received.

"It's getting late, Lois. I really should..." He gestured in the direction of the stairs.

"Oh, of course," Lois said immediately, feigning an air of indifference. "Yeah, I shouldn't have even..." Her voice trailed off.

"Goodnight, Lois," Clark said, turning away before he could change his mind and walking towards the stairs. He knew she was watching him leave.

Once he was safely through the door to the stairway, Clark stopped, leaning against the door while he got the trembling in his legs under control. After a moment, he jogged down the stairs and out of the building before ducking into the alley and taking to the sky.

Still, he couldn't bring himself to leave her completely. Silently, he floated high above Lois' apartment for a long time, just listening to the quiet sounds of her going through her normal nighttime routine. She turned on the television, but he barely heard the news report about a polar bear that had been found in the home of a famous Hollywood producer in Los Angeles. Apparently, the producer's son had come home to find the animal swimming in their indoor pool. No one knew how the creature had gotten inside. But even the laughter in the reporter's voice did nothing to stop the ache in Clark's soul. Finally, sighing to himself, he flew off. He still had to stop Barnes from hurting the owner of the rare coins store tonight, after all.

Lois looked as if she'd had the heck scared out of her by the time Clark arrived at her apartment late the next evening. On the other hand, since Alan had snuck into her apartment while invisible, Clark supposed that was understandable. Still, she pulled herself together, assisting him in their interview of the invisible man and promising that they would do what they could to find out who was using Alan's invisible suits to commit a

series of robberies.

Once a plan of action had been agreed to, it was decided that Alan would spend the night with Clark. Lois walked them to the door to her apartment.

Lois. There had been a funny kind of tension between them all day. She was obviously confused about what had happened between them the previous night.

She'd made a tentative attempt to broach the subject with him that morning — telling him how much she had enjoyed their date. Her use of the word 'date' had certainly caught his attention — together with its implications. He'd given a non-committal answer and headed away. She'd been watching him carefully ever since. He could almost see the wheels turning in her mind as if she could tell that something was going on and was trying to work out the details. And knowing how her mind worked... He better be very careful or he was going to end up back in that rubber room.

"Well, I guess I'll be over in the morning," Lois said as Clark and Alan headed out the door.

Clark turned back around, knowing what he would see. Lois' robe would have come slightly open, revealing the Superman sleep shirt she was wearing. But when he turned towards her, his breath caught in his throat. Her robe had come open, as per normal, but this time it revealed a silky black nightgown.

"What happened to the Superman shirt?" The words were out of his mouth before he had a chance to stop them.

She glanced down at herself, not bothering to pull the robe tighter around her. "How did you know I even owned a Superman night shirt?"

"Umm... Just a guess," he said quickly. "Umm... I better..." He gestured towards the door before following his hand, trying to make his escape as quickly as possible.

She opened her mouth, but then whatever she'd been about to say died on her lips when she saw Alan standing in the doorway. Instead, she gave Clark a brief nod, allowing him the opportunity to flee the room.

Clark glanced over at Lois as they made their way up the steps to his apartment the next night, but she ignored his look. In previous loops, Clark had always been the one to suggest Lois come to his apartment so they could tell Alan what they'd found out about Golden Boy Barnes. Although he'd known Alan would be asleep and there was, thus, no point in Lois coming over before morning, he'd done it time and time again — just to be allowed the brief period of comradery with her. But this time, Lois had been the one to suggest it — insisting on coming with him even though he'd tried to persuade her that it was late — that Alan would likely be asleep.

It was somewhat strange how completely things seemed to have reversed themselves during this loop. He pulled out his key and slipped it in the lock.

He knew of course why she was there. She obviously was determined to talk to him. He'd spent most of the last two days avoiding her. So he knew she had insisted on accompanying him in hopes that they would have an opportunity to talk. As Clark saw it, only one problem existed in that plan. They had absolutely nothing to talk about — at least nothing that would make any difference.

"I told you he'd be asleep," Clark whispered as they stepped into his apartment to find Alan asleep on the couch.

"So you did," Lois said, stepping further into the apartment. "Why don't we let him sleep for a while?" She shrugged out of her coat. "Do you have any coffee or something?"

"Don't you think you'd rather go back to your apartment? You could always come by first thing in the morning when..."

"Clark."

Her voice was soft, compelling. He couldn't help but look

into her eyes — instantly realizing his mistake.

“Don’t you think it’s time we talked?”

He broke eye contact. After a moment, and without looking at her, he nodded.

Clark stood slightly behind Lois as she walked to the banister around his balcony, her tea in her hand. She looked out into the night sky before taking a sip of her tea.

“Nice,” she said softly.

“Lapsang Suchang. My mother used to make me tea and raisin scones when I was feeling bad. Years later, I had them at the London Savoy, but it never tasted as good.” He knew he was making small talk. But maybe if he did, he would be able to head off the serious discussion he feared was coming. Better to just make it through this loop. Then he’d avoid pursuing Lois as Clark in the future. Her infatuation with Superman was less painful. And if in the future he wanted to spend time with Lois, he’d do so in that guise. This just left a gaping hole in his soul. So close — with no possibility of closure.

In fact, maybe for the next few loops, he’d get away. Go to Europe or something. See something new. Meet some new people. Not forever, of course, but just long enough to allow the hole in his chest to heal.

“I guess we need to figure out how to stop Barnes,” Clark said. He knew this wasn’t the way their conversation was supposed to go. But he was determined to keep it away from anything personal. Maybe he could do that by getting her to talk about the story. “Being invisible is an incredible advantage.”

“When we were little, Lucy and I’d play a game...” Her voice trailed off. “No. Clark, no. I’m not going to let you distract me.” She turned and walked over to a lawn chair Clark had set up on the balcony, slowly sinking into it so that she could set her eyes on him.

Clark squirmed slightly under her gaze.

“Clark, what’s going on?”

“Nothing. I don’t know what...”

“Clark, please. I’m not a fool.” When Clark still said nothing, she continued. “Okay, here’s what I know. You ask me out. Why I accepted... Clark, it was the way you asked.”

“What about Superman?” He knew he shouldn’t ask. He knew he should just change the subject. But he had to know.

Lois let out a small breath. “Clark, every woman in the world is in love with Superman. And yes, I’m not saying I wouldn’t go out with him if he asked. I mean any woman would be a fool to... No. Look, this isn’t about Superman. This is about us. I realized you were attracted to me when we worked on our first story.” She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “And...” She stumbled slightly on the word but then seemed to find resolve from somewhere deep inside. “I realized I was attracted to you, too. But you were a colleague. And I don’t have the best of luck with colleagues so I put it out of my mind. But the other night, when you asked me out... There was just such an intensity in the way you asked that I couldn’t say no.

“And it was a good date. No. Scratch that. It was a great date. And I know you felt it as much as I did. Something just... clicked for us. It was the best date of my life. Then we kissed and you’ve been running away from me ever since. I don’t get it. Are you gay or something?”

“What?” Clark choked out. “No. Of course not.”

“Okay, so you’re married.”

“No.”

“Then what? I know you don’t have a rule against dating colleagues. So what is it?”

“I...” His voice trailed off. He made his way back to the balcony and stood silently staring out into the darkness.

He felt more than heard her get up and come to stand wordlessly beside him. And so they stood for a long moment,

both caught up in their own thoughts.

“And then there are the other things,” Lois finally said reflectively.

“What other things?” He silently cursed himself the second the words left his mouth. He knew he should just let this go. So why was he encouraging her to continue?

“You told me that Superman would be sold for fifty thousand dollars — that was why there was no point in going to the auction. And you sounded so certain. But... well, the next day I looked it up in the society pages of the paper — Cat was covering it for the Planet, which is how I found out about it in the first place. Anyway, Superman didn’t show up for the auction.”

“Maybe he had some emergency to attend to.”

“That was my first thought. So I looked for emergencies. Nada.”

“Well, I’m sure he must have a life.”

“No. That doesn’t work. He wouldn’t make a commitment to do something like that and then just decide not to go. Anyway, that’s not the point. They evidently decided that he must be gone on some emergency or other and conducted the auction in his absence.” She paused dramatically. “The date with him went for fifty thousand dollars.”

Clark fought ineffectively against shifting under her considering stare. Directing his eyes to his feet, he scuffed them against the floor almost as if he were a cowboy removing the cow dung from the bottom of his boots.

“How did you know, Clark?” When he didn’t answer, she continued. “But that’s not the only thing. You’ve been acting strange all week. Making little comments under your breath that made it seem as if you already knew about Barnes or... well, or what was coming next or what was supposed to happen. For example, your comment last night about my Superman sleep shirt...”

Damn. He knew that little outburst would come back to haunt him.

“Yes, I do have a Superman sleep shirt. And yes, I did consider wearing it last night. But then I decided it wasn’t appropriate.”

“Why?” He shouldn’t have asked. He shouldn’t be encouraging her to continue revealing herself to him. And considering what he now knew about Lois from her comments during so many of their loops about not letting people see her as she really was for fear of having them use it against her, he knew how hard this whole conversation must be for her.

“I think you know why.”

She held his eyes with hers. He looked away. She sighed.

“And then there’s the whole coming to your apartment thing tonight.”

“What?”

“When I first mentioned that we should talk to Alan again, you insisted that it was too late, that he’d be asleep. Clark, it’s eight o’clock! And yet...” She gestured towards the apartment. “...guess what? Alan’s asleep.” She was silent for a moment. “Clark, what’s going on?”

He turned, staring off into space for a long moment. Finally, he sighed, looking down at where his hands were resting on the railing. What did it matter if he told her everything? In less than twenty-four hours, he’d be back in the hamster-wheel and she wouldn’t remember anything about this conversation. And if she insisted in calling Dr. Friskin... well, what would it hurt to spend a few hours in the rubber room?

He turned towards her. “Okay, fine. You want to know what’s going on.” He led her back to the lawn chair, taking a seat beside her. “We’re in a time loop.”

“Excuse me?”

“You wanted to know how I knew Alan was going to be asleep or how Superman was going to be sold for fifty thousand

dollars... I've lived through the past three days... I don't know how many times now."

"Are you feeling all right, Clark?" She reached out her hand to touch his forehead.

He jerked away. "See? I knew you wouldn't believe me. Are you going to call Dr. Friskin again, have me locked up in a rubber room like you did before? I know she did wonders for your sister, but trust me on this, she's not going to be able to help me."

Lois opened her mouth and then closed it again.

"Look, just forget I said anything. Oh, hey, what am I saying? In less than twenty-four hours, you won't have a clue this conversation even happened." He got up and made his way back to the railing. "What does it matter anyway? What does anything matter?"

He had almost forgotten Lois was there when she finally got up, approaching him from behind. He tensed when he felt her hand come to rest on his back.

"Why did you ask me out?"

The question caught him off guard.

"I mean, if you knew there was no future..." Her voice trailed off. "Oh god," she suddenly groaned.

"What?" he asked, turning towards her.

"Clark, how could you?"

"What?"

"I don't know what happened during the other loops, but... Oh, god. You... we... Typical. You guys really are only after one thing, aren't you? So did you... did we... I mean, during the other loops, did we..."

"What?" All at once, he caught on to what she was saying. "No! No, Lois. It was nothing like that. I swear. I just..." Suddenly, another thought struck him. "You believe me?"

"I..." Her voice trailed off as she seemed to struggle to figure out if she really did believe him.

Given her reaction when they had first discussed the idea of an invisible man, he knew this concept would be difficult... beyond difficult for her. He searched his mind for some way to convince her. "Before I stopped you, you were about to tell me about a game you and Lucy used to play. You'd ask each other which you would rather be able to do: be invisible or fly."

"How did you..."

"You chose 'invisible.' You wanted to be able to walk through those doors that were always closed to you."

Lois stumbled back slightly, searching behind her blindly to find her chair before slowly sinking into it.

He rushed to her, sinking down beside her chair. "You believe me?" he asked hopefully. "Come on, Lois. Please tell me you believe me."

"I..." She stared into his eyes for a long moment, as if searching them for something intangible.

Then she looked away and Clark felt his heart sink. She didn't believe him. He hadn't realized just how much he wanted... needed her to believe him until this moment. He lowered his eyes. He had to admit, he felt so alone.

"Okay, what if, for the sake of argument, I admit that it is at least possible?"

His eyes snapped back to hers. "Yes?"

She let out a slow breath. "I don't even know where to start. Why don't you start by telling me..." Her voice trailed off.

"Why don't you let me start?" he asked.

She looked relieved. But then he saw her shiver.

"But first, why don't we..." He gestured towards his apartment.

"Alan's in there."

"He's in the living room. We can talk in the bedroom. Don't look at me like that. I just want to talk. Come on, Lois. You might think I'm crazy. But I'm not that crazy. I've seen you fight men twice my size."

She smiled.

"And," Clark continued, "if Alan does overhear us talking, it's not as if he'll have time to tell anyone before the loop begins again."

Lois looked slightly skeptical but still she rose to her feet.

"How's that?" Clark called through the door to the washroom. When they had sat down on the bed, it was obvious how uncomfortable Lois was trying to relax in her business suit on the soft surface. Every time she shifted, he watched her pulling at her skirt, trying to keep herself decent. So he'd offered her a sweatshirt he had accidentally shrunk and a pair of his sweat pants with a string that allowed one to pull the waist in. She'd taken them gratefully and headed into the washroom. He'd used the opportunity to change out of his suit as well.

Changing into something more comfortable. His mind immediately slipped back to being alone in a bedroom with Lois while in the Superman suit. His hands sliding over her body. His tongue tangling with hers. The rush of heat he'd felt. The desire that had almost overpowered his senses. Her soft, responsive...

He spun around from where his eyes had automatically focused on the bed when he heard the bathroom door open.

Lois glanced down at herself and then at him before shrugging. The clothes were way too big for her — even the sweatshirt. And... he felt an ache settle into his heart. She was so beautiful.

"I look silly, don't I." It was not a question.

"No! No. I mean... you look... good."

She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, walking past him to take in the room. When her eyes landed on the only place to sit — the bed — he could hear her swallow hard.

"Is Alan...?" She turned towards him, pointing at the doorway to the living room.

"Yeah. I checked on him before you came out. He's sound asleep."

She nodded slowly before turning towards his bed, crawling onto it and sitting with her back against the headboard. He took a seat on the foot of the bed. She was looking at him expectantly.

"Okay, well, where to begin?" he said slowly. "I guess I'll just lay it out for you and..." He gave a small shrug. He had no idea what she'd do then. "I've been repeating a period of almost four days over and over again. I start every loop by standing on a platform with the mayor who is about to give Superman the key to the city."

"What do you mean you're standing on a platform? Clark, I was at the ceremony for Superman in front of City Hall and you weren't on the platform."

"I mean in the crowd. Superman was standing on the platform."

She gave him a curious look but then gestured for him to continue.

"And I will disappear tomorrow, as we're at the Daily Planet writing up the story about the capture of Golden Boy Barnes."

"So we do get him? How? I mean, I've been thinking about this and I can't figure out how we're going to capture a band of invisible criminals."

"Is that important?" To her look, he continued. "Fine. I... Superman will get a bag of phosphorous and sprinkle it over the gang as they come out of the Metropolis Gold Repository — making them visible. The police will disarm them and take them into custody."

She studied him for a long moment. "Okay, so that solves the invisible man case. But if you've done this... How many times?"

"I've lost track."

"Then what do you think is causing it? And why are you the only one who remembers? And what are you doing to stop it?"

"I don't know what's causing it. I don't know why I'm the

only one who remembers, and since I don't know what's causing it, how exactly do you propose I go about stopping it?"

"Hey, don't snap at me. But if there really is some sort of time loop happening, you must have at least thought about these questions."

"Sorry. It's just... I'm just so tired of this — knowing everything that's going to happen, knowing what everyone is going to say, feeling things that I can..." He looked at her meaningfully. "...that I can never see develop because no one else is going to remember them after four days pass."

She glanced down at her hands.

"Okay, the second time I found myself living through the same four days, I thought I must have had a dream — you know, some sort of premonition about the invisible man investigation. But when it happened the third time, I knew that couldn't be it. There is a theory that has to do with time slowing down the closer one gets to the speed of light and some think that if someone or something were to break the speed of light, that it would bounce us back in time."

"Superman?"

Clark shook his head. "Even Superman can't go faster than the speed of light. In fact, according to Einstein nothing can break the speed of light. No. If something did, proving Einstein wrong, it would have to be a subatomic particle. But I've checked out every science facility in the world and no one is doing experiments that would account for this."

"You mean you've spoken to them on the phone. They could have lied."

"No, I checked them out."

"But that's..."

Her voice trailed off when he got off the bed and began to spin. When he stopped, her mouth was hanging open. She stared at him in shock for a moment and then suddenly looked away, getting up off the bed and beginning to pace. "Oh, god, we did it, didn't we? I know you indicated that we didn't, but... Omigod! I can't believe this. I knew the images meant something. I knew the look in your eyes when you asked me out was too... intense. But of course it was too intense. After all, we're..." She gestured from herself to him and back again.

"Lois, what are you talking about?"

She spun towards him. "You! How could you do that to me?"

"Do what to you?"

"I mean, I trusted you. Both of you. But especially him."

"Lois, come on. What are you talking about?" He stepped closer to her, placing a hand on her arm. "You're talking like I'm two different people here."

"Don't!" she exclaimed, snatching her arm away.

"What are you..."

"We slept together, didn't we! Or, well, didn't sleep exactly. My mother always said if people who say they slept together really 'slept,' there wouldn't be a problem. The problem is that they don't sleep."

"Lois, what makes you so convinced that we slept together?"

She turned to look at him. "True or false. You're attracted to me."

"True, but..."

"And true or false. When the time loop happens, everything goes back to the way it was before."

"Well, yes, but..."

"And you're telling me you never tried..." She made an erratic gesture with her hands.

He instantly broke eye contact.

"That's what I thought. You scored with me as Superman.

This loop you were going to see if you could score with me as Clark, too. Want to find out just how much of a slut I am? Is this some sort of weird payback for the way I threw myself at Superman while ignoring Clark."

"No. No. No. Lois, that's not..." He took a step towards her.

"Don't come near me." She backed up against the wall.

He spun back into Clark, hoping his change back would calm her down. Instead, she just continued to stare at him, the look of betrayal in her eyes tearing Clark's heart apart. "Okay, let's get this out in the open. Yes, on one loop I did pursue you as Superman. I just thought..."

"Keep talking, Clark."

"But, Lois, nothing... okay, well almost nothing happened. Some kissing and... stuff. But nothing too heavy. You told me things were going to fast."

Lois' eyes narrowed as she studied him. "Is that true?"

"Lois, if I was really trying to sleep with you as Clark, just to see if you'd react to Clark the way you did to Superman, do you really think I would have backed away from you after that kiss the other night?" Clark let out a breath. "Look, I'm not trying to justify anything here. And I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't said things were going too fast. I like to think I would have stopped it. But... I guess I'm just not sure."

"The reason I backed away after kissing you was that... well, after what happened with Superman I realized how much it hurt to go back to... nothing after being so close to you. That's why I backed away from you the other night. That's why I really didn't want you coming over here tonight." Clark swallowed hard. "The truth is that sometime during the past four days, I've fallen in love with you."

Her stance seemed to relax slightly.

"And so to find myself standing on that platform, time and time again..."

He closed his eyes and drew in a long slow breath. Her hand on his cheek caused him to look up. She'd left her position of safety against the wall to approach him and there were tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Clark," she said softly.

"It's not your fault, Lois. It's just the way things are." He looked away.

"No. No, Clark." Her hand went under his chin so that he was forced to look back at her. "I don't accept that this is the way things are. And I can't believe you would either. Together we will find a way to stop this bounce."

"How?"

"I don't know. But we'll think of something. And if we don't find a way this loop, then we will next time."

"But... Lois, the last time I told you about the loop, you called Dr. Friskin."

"But I'm not calling Dr. Friskin now. So what does that tell you?"

"That..." Clark suddenly smiled. "That it's all in the delivery."

Lois' smile met his. "Well, this loop you certainly did have good delivery. So..." She paused slightly. "...what do you say we get to work?"

"Doing what?"

"Well..." She pursed her lips as her mind started to work. "...you say everything is the same every day."

"Yes. Well, except things that my actions change."

"You're sure."

He nodded.

"In every loop absolutely everything remains constant."

He crinkled his eyebrows. "Well..."

"What?"

"It's probably nothing. I figured I must have just missed them during the other loops."

"What?" Lois demanded again, sounding slightly impatient.

"Well, there've been a few... odd incidents."

"Like what?"

"Like the Polar Bear getting into the house of that Hollywood

producer.”

“I heard about that, but...”

“But on other loops there have been other things.”

“For example?”

“Well, the Canadian Prime Minister gave a press conference in the nude. Pigeons were found in the Oval Office. Umm... Right. During one loop, I heard that someone straightened the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Oh, and once, Mount Rushmore was defaced. Instead of former Presidents, someone carved Disney characters.”

“How do you think that fits in?”

“I’m not sure it does.”

“Okay, then maybe it’s time we did some research. Maybe there is something on the internet about time loops. We explore every angle. Even if it’s from some hokey science fiction show, we take it seriously. Someone, somewhere must know what’s going on.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re incredible, Ms. Lane?”

Lois smiled. “Yeah, well, I might think you’re sort of okay, too.” Then her expression changed. “Just don’t let it get around, Kent.”

The next day went pretty much as planned. Superman stopped Barnes and his gang. Alan and Helene were reunited. And Lois and Clark were working to get the story written up for the paper.

On the other hand, there were a few startling differences. First, any time Lois and Clark were not working on the story, they spent searching the internet for ideas about the time loop. Whenever one would find something, some reference, no matter how crazy or obscure, they would share it and discuss it. For the first time since the loop had started, Clark felt as if he had a full partner. And he had to admit, it felt good. It felt really good.

They had also discovered that the odd occurrences that Clark had heard about during previous loops had not occurred during this loop — except the polar bear incident. And on that note, during this loop there had actually been a number of odd animal occurrences. For example, a woman’s locker room in Florida had suddenly been teaming with snakes. The women had fled, half dressed, searching for some means of covering themselves when snakes emerged from everywhere — from lockers, from under benches, from the showers. And just like the polar bear incident, no one knew where the snakes had come from. Some of them were not even native to the region.

Finally, there was the way Lois kept stealing shy looks at him. Every time he’d catch her watching him over the top of her coffee cup or from behind her computer monitor, his heart would race. It was not the look she normally gave Superman. Nor was it the way she had always looked at Clark. It was something new and although he wasn’t entirely sure how to interpret it and knew that shortly the look would be gone, for the first time in what felt like months, he had hope for the future.

Shortly after Alan and Helen were reunited, a report came in that Lois brought to Clark’s attention. Looking at the report, he instantly headed for the stairs.

“Where’s Clark going?” Clark heard Perry ask as he was on his way.

“He’s meeting with a source.”

Clark smiled. Lois was covering for him. And... it left him with a warm feeling in his chest. Still, he didn’t have time to dwell. He spun into the Superman suit in the stairwell and took off at superspeed towards Florida and Disney World. Apparently a roller coaster wouldn’t stop. The tourists were going round and round the track at increasingly fast speeds. He was certain this hadn’t happened during previous loops.

Spotting the roller coaster in question from the air, he dove down, bracing himself on the track as the train came at full speed

towards him, the hopes and eyes of the terrified passengers focused on him. Reaching out, he placed his hands on the front car, braking it with his feet. But... he was shocked when he couldn’t stop it.

His eyes met the eyes of the small child in the front car and then shifted to the plea in the father’s eyes. Realizing he had to think of a new solution quick, he focused on the passengers for only a moment before, at superspeed, one after another, he plucked the passengers from the train and set them down a safe distance from the roller coaster. Then, and much to his surprise, the train came to a stop.

“What the...?” Clark’s uncompleted question died on his lips.

He saw people approaching, but he didn’t have time to deal with this now. With a final look to ensure that all the passengers were being taken care of, he took to the sky, heading back to Metropolis, lost in thought. He really didn’t know what had happened at the roller coaster.

When he arrived back at the Planet, he shared everything about the latest incident to Lois — including the fact that he didn’t believe it had happened previously. And they had added it to their list of things to look into. Still, in spite of all their work, as time drew to an end, they had still been unable to figure out what was going on.

“So when does this loop thing happen?”

Clark looked up to find Lois perched on the corner of his desk, her foot slipping out of her shoe so that she could place it on his chair, just ever so lightly touching the outside of his leg. The small contact sent his blood pressure soaring.

“Five twenty-four,” he finally managed to get out.

She glanced up at the clock before looking back at him. “Just promise me one thing.”

“Anything.”

“That you won’t give up on finding a way to break the loop. ‘Cause if you give up...” She looked down, unable to express her thoughts.

“What chance will that leave us?” Clark completed for her.

She met his eyes and his heart caught in his throat at the depth of emotion he saw there. “Promise me, Clark.”

“I promise,” he whispered.

She smiled then, her hand coming up to run slowly over his cheek before she leaned closer and, ever so gently, touched her lips to his.

“Hey, you two...” Perry’s voice echoed across the newsroom. “...this is a newsroom not pick-up-night down at the Cadillac Ranch.”

Lois pulled back slightly. “You’re sure about this time loop thing, right? ‘Cause if you’re not, Perry’s going to...”

Clark blinked when he suddenly found himself standing, as he had so many times before, on the platform outside City Hall, a crowd of people surrounding him. His eyes instantly sought out Lois and when their eyes met, he smiled.

He gave his head a slight shake. Something was different — and not just that Lois had found a way to give him hope once again. Something had changed. Something so small, so insignificant that had he not been on this exact same platform at this exact same ceremony many, many times before, he might not have noticed it. But... he’d swear it felt as if someone was watching him.

Lois watched in awe as Superman floated down onto the platform in front of City Hall. He was magnificent. Handsome. Strong. Good. But more than that there was a modest quality about him that was irresistible, especially given the fact that he, more than anyone, had a right to be arrogant.

If only he would notice... Her thought trailed off when she saw him shake his head, as if trying to get his bearings, before looking in her direction. In her direction? Hell. He was looking

right at her. Her heart skipped a couple of beats when his expression softened into a smile. Superman had actually smiled at her!

Almost as if he just realized he was staring, he looked back to where Luthor was addressing the crowd.

"He came to us a stranger, but his good deeds have not gone unnoticed. As last year's recipient of the key to the city, it is my honor to pass it on to our newfound friend."

Lois had to force herself to concentrate on the ceremony. She wasn't entirely sure what the smile meant, but at this moment her imagination was running wild. Still, now was not the time for daydreams where he would walk off the platform, pick her up in his arms and, in front of everyone, kiss her as they took off into the sky. No. No, she couldn't think like that. Perry would be expecting her to write up the story on Superman getting the key to the city. She really had to think about what was taking place on that platform, not imagine how soft his kiss would be, or how it would leave her legs tingling, barely able to hold her weight. Being sprawled across her bed with Superman nibbling at her neck. No. That was not something she should be thinking about right now. Still, it felt so real. Almost like a memory instead of a fantasy.

Her eyes returned to Superman but he was no longer looking in her direction. In fact, he seemed to be carefully examining his surroundings, as if cognizant of some sort of danger. She turned slightly, trying to see what might be drawing his attention. But when she looked back at him, he seemed relaxed as if his search had turned up nothing.

"We take pride in proclaiming this day Superman Day and offering you the key to the city," the mayor said when she took the microphone from Lex.

Superman seemed somewhat subdued when the mayor hung the key around his neck.

"Welcome to Metropolis," she said. The crowd agreed by cheering. "It is wonderful to have you here." She reached out, shaking Superman's hand.

"Thank you," said Superman.

"Come say a few words," Lex added.

"Thank you, Mr. Luthor."

Camera flashes went off. People began cheering, chanting his name. He stepped up to the microphone and waited until the crowd quieted down. "You've made me feel very welcome here." The Superman chant started up again. "Thank you," he finished simply.

She watched as he began to greet the crowd, shaking hands and signing autographs — paying special attention to the children who were in awe whenever he as much as looked at him. She smiled. She understood the feeling.

"Are you coming?" asked Perry.

"Uhh... yeah," Lois responded, wishing she could wait around until the crowds thinned out, hoping to get her own moment with the Man of Steel. But given the number of people who seemed to want to meet with him, she doubted that would be happening any time soon. Giving herself one final minute, she followed Perry, Cat and Jimmy back to the Daily Planet van.

"Where's Clark?" Perry asked.

"He's getting reactions from the crowd. He'll meet us back at the Planet." Almost the instant the words left her mouth, Lois wanted to take them back. Clark had made some comment about getting crowd reaction before Superman arrived. But she'd not seen him since. So why was she covering for him? For all she knew, he was off flirting with some woman named Tiffani. Still, covering for him had felt... right somehow.

Clark quickly jotted some things on a piece of paper before going into the conference room. Lois had already taken her seat. He took a deep breath before walking over, handing the paper to

Lois and sitting down beside her.

She glanced at the paper and then back at him. "What's this?" "Just watch. Don't say anything."

"But..." She glanced at the first thing he had written on the paper. 'Enter Cat. Turns Chair. Sits on my lap. Kisses me. Calls me hot cakes. Takes seat on other side of table.' "Clark, what's..."

Before she could complete her slightly indignant question, and right on cue, Cat entered the room, turned Clark's chair around, sat down on his lap and planted a kiss directly on his lips.

"Morning, hot cakes," Cat purred, rising from Clark's lap and making her way to the other side of the table.

"How did you...?"

He interrupted her question by pointing to the second item on the list. 'Jimmy enters — comments about a book I lent him on Robert Capra.'

"C.K., about that book you lent me on Robert Capra... C.K.?"

This time Lois didn't look up. Instead she read the third item on the list. 'Perry enters. And asks for me. When I answer him, he says he didn't see me.'

"Okay, let's get started..." Perry said entering the room. "Clark?"

"Right here, sir," Clark responded obediently.

"Oh, Kent, I didn't see you. I take it you and Lois are on that 'Superman Gets the Key to the City' story?"

Clark waited a beat, expecting Lois to answer. When he realized she wasn't going to, he spoke. "Yeah. On it, sir."

"Great."

Clark glanced over at Lois who was looking understandably stunned.

"What the...?"

"I'll explain later," Clark whispered, pointing to the final item on the list.

She looked to read, 'plane with engine problems, trailing dark smoke outside Daily Planet window. Superman conducts mid-air repair.' When she turned to Clark, he gestured towards the window. She looked where instructed and instantly saw the problem.

"I gotta go," said Lois, rising to her feet and rushing from the room, ignoring Perry's indignant query about her sudden disappearance.

Clark smiled, also rising to his feet as if he would follow her. Instead, once he was out of the conference room, and with a final look at Lois who was standing beside the large windows in the Daily Planet watching the plane, disappeared into the storage room.

"It's all in the delivery," he said as he spun into the Superman suit and headed out the window.

As he flew up to the smoky plane, he got the same strange sensation he'd had at the ceremony in front of City Hall — the feeling of being watched. He shook off the feeling. Of course he was being watched. The pilot, air traffic control probably had him on radar, people from the ground to whom an appearance by Superman was not yet a common sight, even Lois. But... There was a crawling sensation on the back of his neck.

He quickly fixed the plane before turning around in mid-air, trying to locate the source of his discomfort. When he couldn't spot anything, he shook off the weird sensation and headed towards the window to the storage room.

He had just spun back into his Clark clothes when the strange feeling was back. The hair on the back of his neck seemed almost to stand on end. He heard an unexpected voice behind him.

"Uhh... Now that was worth the whole trip. Don't know why I didn't do this when I first arrived. But you know how it is, people to see, debts to settle, beer to drink. Have you ever had fifth dimension beer?" The man shuttered. "Don't. It's horrible."

"What..." Clark's voice trailed off when he saw a man sitting on the window ledge inside the room — the very window ledge he'd flown over only seconds before. Suddenly it hit him what the man had probably seen. "Now I don't know what you think you saw..."

"Oh, I don't know what you think I saw, but I know what I saw. Yep. Know all about the secret identity thing," the man said. "But don't worry. Doesn't matter to me."

"You're the one who's been following me..."

"You peeked."

Clark stared at the man, noticing for the first time that he wasn't exactly 'on' the window ledge. He was floating slightly above it.

"You're not human."

"Not even a little. I'm from out of town. The Fifth Dimension to be exact. Name's Mxyzptlk. Mister Mxyzptlk. It's spelled the usual way. Anyway, just thought I'd stop by. Get acquainted, so to speak. Nice work out there, by the way. Quite a show. Very entertaining. Fixing the plane in midair. Awesome. Should have done this as soon as I arrived. Well, got things to do. Places to see. Four days is not a lot of time to get all the things done you want to get done." He floated higher off the windowsill

"Wait!" Clark stepped closer when the comment of 'four days' sank in. "What's going on here?" He reached out, grabbing the intruder by the collar. "He vanished into thin air," Clark mumbled in disbelief when the man suddenly disappeared. They had been investigating an invisible man — but that one wore a suit. So where had this one come from?

"Now there's something I've never understood," said Mxyzptlk from behind him. "Why is it always 'thin air'? Why not 'thick air'? I would think disappearing into thick air would be easier."

Clark spun around and stared dumbly at where the man was now floating above the floor on the far side of the room.

"Now don't look like that. This is just a little courtesy call to meet the great man himself. But don't worry about me. Just thought I'd hang around for... oh, four days maybe. See what's happening and then... you won't even know I've been here. Well, TTFN. That's tah-tah for now."

"Wait. What..." Clark hesitated. The man, or whatever he was, obviously knew about the time loop. On the other hand, he didn't seem to realize Clark knew about it. Maybe it was best to keep it that way for the time being.

"What?" asked Mxyzptlk, leaning forward anxiously to catch Clark's next words.

"Well, if you're not human, do you mind telling me what you are?"

"Oh, certainly," Mxyzptlk said, stretching out his hand. "So rude of me. Too much time in the fifth dimension, I'm afraid. I'm an imp. It's been a while since I've been here. To your way of thinking a very long time. Fall of Rome ring any bells? Yep, that was me. Some of my best work."

Clark cautiously took the offered hand. "So then, what are you doing here?"

"Right now, I'm seeing Superman in action. I must admit, it's quite impressive. I'm looking forward to seeing what the next four days bring. Hope you don't mind if I tag along occasionally. And then I'll be out of your hair... so to speak. Not sure I'd really want to be in your hair considering the amount of gel Superman uses." He shuddered. "Well, as I said before, TTFN." And with that he vanished, leaving nothing more than a puff of smoke in his wake.

Clark was lost in thought as he stepped into the newsroom. So lost in thought, in fact, that he was taken by surprise when Lois grabbed his arm and began dragging him into the conference room. The morning story meeting was already over. His mind

was racing when she closed the door.

The imp's comments made it clear that he was somehow responsible for... or at least knew about the time loop. He had also made it clear that he wasn't aware that Clark was somehow outside the loop. Otherwise, the comment that Clark would forget him in four days made no sense.

"Okay, what's going on, Clark?"

"Lois, what's an imp?"

"Excuse me?"

"An imp."

"What is this? A vocabulary exam?"

Clark raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, fine. Don't tell me. An imp... A rascal. A prankster."

"No. I don't think that's it. I'm thinking of a mystical creature."

This time Lois' eyebrows rose. "I'm assuming you have a point."

Clark walked over to the conference room window, looking out into the bullpen. "This is going to sound crazy, Lois."

"Any more crazy than that list you gave me when you first got here this morning?"

Clark didn't respond. He'd fill her in on that aspect later. "Does the name Mxyzptlk mean anything to you?"

"Mxyz... what?"

"Obviously not. Okay, here it is. I saw a guy this morning who was... floating."

"Like Superman?"

Clark let out a breath. "Yes."

"So you're saying... what? That there is another man out there who is like Superman?"

Clark hesitated. He was going to have to tread gently. "I'm not entirely sure. When I asked him what he was, he told me he was an imp."

"An imp? And you believed him? Clark!"

"Look, I didn't believe him or not believe him. But, Lois, there was the floating thing. And I've got to tell you, I think he's up to no good."

"Now is that any way to talk about a new acquaintance?"

Lois and Clark both gasped and spun around at the sound of a new voice entering the conversation. Clark stepped in front of Lois which she instantly circumvented by stepping around him.

"Well, now. Forgive my manners," said Mxyzptlk, offering his hand to Lois. "You must be Lois Lane. The little woman. So tell me..." Mxyzptlk dropped his hand when she didn't touch him and leaned closer. "...is he really faster than a speeding bullet?" He inclined his head towards Clark.

"Excuse me?" asked Lois.

"Oh..." Mxyzptlk instantly clasped his hand across his mouth. "I forgot. I came into this dimension before she knows. Probably doesn't even exactly like you yet. Got to be more careful." His eyes suddenly lit up. "But, hey, maybe I can help with that."

"What..."

Clark's voice was cut off when he suddenly found himself in his own apartment, in bed with Lois. They were kissing. He pulled back immediately, looking at Lois who was just as stunned as he.

As if the same thought crossed their mind at the exact same moment, they both looked down at themselves to discover...

"What the hell kind of game are you playing, Clark?" Lois demanded, pulling the bedcovers more fully around her.

"I'm not responsible for... Hey! I need some of those, too!" Clark exclaimed when the sheets and blankets began disappearing as Lois wrapped them around herself. He snatched away the top blanket.

"Now, no fighting."

Lois and Clark's struggle for the blanket ended when they

heard Mxyzptlk's voice.

"This is such a romantic moment. Now, I know you two are famous for your fights. But there's a time and place for everything. And trust me on this, now is not the time for fighting. Not when..." He waved his hands, creating a soft romantic light in the room in spite of the sun that had been shining outside only moments before.

Lois and Clark both gasped and looked towards the living room when the soft strains of 'Some Enchanted Evening' from 'South Pacific' began wafting through the air.

"Still need a little inspiration?" asked Mxyzptlk. "Maybe a bit of serenading would help." And with that, Mxyzptlk joined in, singing off key. "Some enchanted evening..." A violin appeared in his hands which he played with the same skill as his singing. "...when you find your true love..."

Lois' struggled to hold the sheet in place while trying to place her hands over her ears.

"...when you hear her call you, across a crowded room. Then fly to her side..."

"Would you shut up?" Clark asked, his own sensitive ears hurting from the sound.

"...and make her your own. For all through your life you may dream all alone." Mxyzptlk took a deep breath to belt out his big finish. "Once you have found her, never let her go. Once you have found her, never let her go." He held the final note far longer than humanly possible.

Lois whimpered, her hands not sufficient to block out the noise. Clark's glasses shattered.

"What?" asked Mxyzptlk as the last strains of music faded.

"Could you just tell me what you did with our clothes?" Lois demanded.

"Hey, what happened to your glasses?" asked the imp.

"Get out!" Clark demanded.

"No need to be like that. I didn't mean to break the glasses. Sometimes I just get a little carried away with the singing. You could always just take them off. You don't need them anyway. Oh, wait, I forgot. Don't want her to see you without..."

"Get out!"

"Fine. No need to get your panties in a twist. Oh, wait. I forgot. You two aren't wearing panties."

"Get out!" Both Lois and Clark had spoken in unison that time.

"Okay, okay, I'm..." He vanished. "...gone."

Lois and Clark sat in the bed, staring at the place where Mxyzptlk had just been. The silence that hung between them was oppressive.

"Umm... would you have something for me to wear?" Lois finally asked sheepishly.

"Umm... yeah," said Clark, not looking in her direction as he carefully maneuvered the blanket around his body before rising to his feet. Making his way to the cupboard, he removed the sweater and sweats he had let her wear the previous night. "I didn't see anything," he said as he handed her the clothes. It wasn't strictly true, but she didn't need to know that.

"Neither did I," she responded.

He glanced at her but from the way she was avoiding his eyes, he suspected she was lying, too. Still, a small grin found its way to his face once Lois waddled, a sheet wrapped around her, into the washroom to get dressed. In spite of the circumstances, what he'd seen had been... He sucked a breath in through his teeth. Wow!

Lois stared absently at the tea Clark had made for her. She wasn't entirely sure she'd ever felt quite as mortified. She snuck a quick peek at Clark. He was pacing nervously on the other side of the room, looking as uncomfortable as she felt. At first she'd thought Clark had somehow drugged her... some date rape drug.

But his reactions since — not to mention that little imp showing up to serenade them — had convinced her otherwise. If she'd been drugged, so had Clark. But why? It made no sense. But then nothing had made sense, not since she'd attended the ceremony to present Superman with the key to the city.

Not that the weird thoughts she'd been having during the ceremony were quite the same thing. After all, it wasn't as if she'd never had fantasies about Superman. She did all the time. But this time the fantasies seemed so real, more like memories. She shook off the whimsical thought. She wasn't likely to forget being on her bed with Superman.

Of course, that didn't explain the odd moment in the washroom when she'd been getting dressed. Standing in the pouring rain, hearing the soft strains of Spanish music in the background, her hand playing with Clark's hair, kissing Clark of all people. Clark! She'd made a conscious effort since the day she'd seen Clark in a towel not to fantasize about Clark. After all, if one were Lois Lane, one did not fantasize about — or kiss — a colleague. Yet that image only minutes earlier, like the ones about Superman, had been... so real.

But that wasn't where the weird ended for Lois. As they had been leaving the ceremony outside City Hall, Perry had noticed that Clark was missing. When he'd commented on it, Lois had found herself covering for him, saying that he was out getting people's reactions to the ceremony. She wasn't entirely sure what had possessed her to do it. She owed nothing to Clark. He'd been at the Daily Planet for a month now. And it wasn't even as if he was her full time partner — although Perry had been hooking them up together a lot since Clark had been hired. But Lois didn't do partners.

Weird had become even weirder when Clark had given her a list of things that were going to happen. At first, she'd thought Clark had set up some sort of elaborate joke — until the airplane. How could he possibly have arranged that?

And then there was Mxy... Mxypetele or whatever and ending up with her and Clark in... She gave her head a quick shake to scatter the memory of the glimpse she'd caught of Clark when she'd stolen all the bedclothes to cover herself.

"Do you think he's really gone?" asked Lois.

"Who? Oh, the imp. Yeah. I think so. Whenever he's around, I get this weird, crawling sensation on the back of my neck."

"So... what do you think just happened? I mean, how did we end up...?" She gestured vaguely in the direction of the bedroom.

"Magic."

"I don't believe in magic."

"Then give me another explanation."

"Drugs."

"Oh, and how did he drug us? And how did he get us out of the newsroom? I have no memory of that. Do you?" He waited until she shook her head. "Then how did he get us here? He would have had to carry both of us out of the newsroom. Why didn't anyone stop him?"

"I don't know," said Lois in exasperation.

"Okay, well while you think about that, there's something else you need to know."

"Oh, and what's that?" Lois wasn't particularly interested at the moment in pursuing any subject that did not involve reeking vengeance on the perpetrator of today's humiliation.

"Well... don't you have some questions about how I knew what was going to happen when we first got back from the ceremony this morning?"

Lois cocked her eyebrows, suddenly interested in what Clark had to say.

"This is going to sound completely crazy."

"More crazy than some magical imp transporting us across the city and putting us..." Her voice trailed off as her arm gestured vaguely in the direction of the bedroom.

"Well, it's more or less along the same lines. Lois, we're in some sort of time loop. Okay, don't look at me like that. I haven't lost my mind." He took a deep breath before continuing. "This day, and the following three days have been repeating themselves. But for some reason, I'm the only one who remembers. That's how I knew all those little things that happened at the story meeting this morning. And that's also how I know that if you think I'm crazy, you'll suggest I call Dr. Friskin. After all, she worked wonders for your sister. Now I'm not sure how it all works, but I'm convinced that imp is somehow responsible. After all, look at what he did..."

Clark continued speaking, but Lois was no longer listening. Time loop. Clark was the only one remembering. The whole thing sounded crazy, but... Her mind flashed back to the... memory?... of Superman sweeping her up in his arms or kissing her on the bed in her apartment. Or of kissing Clark in the rain.

No. No, that couldn't be. If Clark was the only one who remembered, then didn't it follow that Superman would behave the same every loop — except those in which Clark changed something? Or did that mean that Superman would kiss her some time in the next four days? But if she was kissing Superman, what was she doing kissing Clark? Her head began to pound.

"Lois, are you even listening to me?"

"Huh?"

"I said..." He let out a breath. "So what do you think? I think that Mxyzptlk is somehow responsible."

"Did I hear my name?" The imp appeared instantly in the living room.

"You!" Lois exclaimed jumping to her feet. "What do you think you are doing — putting people in bed together? Do you have any idea how humiliating that is?"

"What?" asked Mxyzptlk innocently. "You still don't like him."

"It's not a matter of liking or not liking. You... you... gnome, elf. Whatever you are. Personally, I think you're a fraud. Trying to convince us that you've got this great magic. But really, you drugged us or something. You can't play with people that way."

"Sure I can. And for your information, calling an imp a gnome or an elf... That's really bad form. I'm an imp. I. M. P. Imp."

"What about fairy? What if we just call you a fairy?" Lois asked, finding it somewhat odd that he wasn't offended by her calling him a fraud but that he didn't want to be called a gnome or an elf.

"With all the implications of that word these days?" asked Mxyzptlk in horror. "Do you want to ruin my reputation? How am I going to get the girls to pay me any attention if you go spreading rumors about me being a fairy?"

"Look, just tell us what you want."

"Well, I've been thinking about your whole 'how to woo Lois Lane' problem," Mxyzptlk said, directing his comment to Clark.

Clark tensed. "I don't need your help."

"No? If I just let you do this your way, it will take three years before you get any..." He made an erratic gesture. "...you know what I mean."

"Hey!" It was Lois' turn to be outraged.

"Now don't get huffy," Mxyzptlk said. "You did call me a fairy, after all. No, I was just thinking. What exactly is it you don't like about our boy here?" This question was directed to Lois.

Mxyzptlk leaned forward, resting his chin on the palm of his hand even though his elbow was not propped up by anything but air — at least so far as Lois and Clark could see. "I mean, what if he was shorter?" He waved a hand towards Clark who was suddenly no more than four feet tall.

"What..."

"Not shorter, huh? Well, what about taller?"

A moment later, Clark's neck was bent as his head hit the ceiling.

"Or maybe... too many muscles?"

Suddenly Clark, although he was once again his normal height, looked like the man on the beach before he sent away for the Atlas program in the back of a comic book.

"Na... What about more muscles?"

And instantly, Clark looked more buff than Mr. Universe. He was even in the appropriate stance.

"Or maybe you're more into the brainy, muscle man." Clark's stance suddenly changed so that he was sitting, chin resting on fist in the form of The Thinker, all of his clothes having mysteriously vanished although, thankfully his position kept certain elements of his anatomy from Lois' view.

"Stop!" exclaimed Lois.

"What? This the one you like?" Mxyzptlk asked hopefully.

"No. Put him back to normal."

Clark let out a breath of relief to find himself back in his own body, once again dressed in the clothes he'd been wearing earlier in the day.

"So is it his clothes that you don't like?" asked Mxyzptlk.

"What about..."

He waved his hand at Clark who was suddenly standing in front of them dressed in a white suit with a pink shirt.

"Or is it that tie?"

Clark's clothes were normal — in point of fact, so was his new tie. Very mellow compared to the bright ties he normally wore.

"Or we could go for blue? I hear he looks great in blue?" He winked at Clark.

"No!" exclaimed Lois. "It's the tie! The tie makes all the difference. No need to change another thing."

"Lois..."

"Really? You like him now." Mxyzptlk looked very hopeful.

"Oh, yes. Very much. Thanks so much, Mxywhatever."

"Mxyzptlk. Mr. Mxyzptlk. Well, my work here seems to be done. See, pal. I knew I could help you out." He slapped Clark on the back. "Well, TTFN," he concluded before vanishing.

"Lois..."

"Shhh!"

"What?"

Lois held up her hand, looking around and listening carefully.

"What?"

"Is he gone?"

Clark looked around. "I don't feel that funny feeling on the back of my neck. So I assume he's gone."

Lois let out a breath. "Well, I guess it will have to do."

"About my ties..."

"Clark, do you really think I give a damn about your ties?"

You can wear all seven of the dwarfs on your tie for all I care. I just wanted to get rid of him. Well, and have him leave you relatively unscathed."

Clark looked down at his new tie, thinking about the one he'd chosen to wear to work that morning — or the morning before the time loop. "That was one of my favorites."

Lois let out a breath. "Come on. We've got to stop him before this gets really out of control. Afterwards, I'll buy you a new tie. Why do you think he's so obsessed about getting us together? And what do you think about... that three year thing?"

"Lois, the guy's a taco short of a combo platter. I wouldn't put any weight on anything he says. Although, I do agree with one thing."

"What's that?"

"He has to be stopped."

"Okay, so let me see if I have this straight," said Lois as she and Clark made their way up to the newsroom in the elevator.

"This Mxy..."

"Don't say his name."

"Why?"

"Well, I don't know for certain. But that's when he showed up last time."

"Fine. I probably can't say his name anyway. Did you notice it's all consonants?"

"Technically 'y' can be a vowel."

"Fine. One vowel and a whole mess of letters you don't want in scrabble."

"Unless you want those high letter scores."

"The point is, Clark, from what you're telling me, I get the impression that this... this... imp didn't show up on any of the previous time loops."

"No. But when he first approached me in the storage room..."

"That reminds me. What were you doing in the storage room?"

"It's not important. Anyway, when he approached me, he said something that leads me to believe that he knows about the loop."

"And until now you thought you were the only one who knew?"

Clark nodded. "But there were other things that happened during those loops... Tricks, I guess. ...that were... odd."

"For example?"

"Well, on one occasion, I heard a news report that the carvings on Mount Rushmore had been changed to Disney characters."

"That does sound like our guy all right."

"Anyway, when you and I discussed this during the last loop, you seemed to think that there might be a connection."

"So we've... God, this is just so strange. I mean, how many loops have there been anyway?"

"I've lost count."

"And... so if the imp just turned up now, what happened the rest of the time?"

Lois noticed that Clark seemed to shift uncomfortably and she flashed back to the image of kissing Clark in the rain. Suddenly, she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to know.

"Well, on a couple of occasions, you had me committed."

Lois was about to respond when the elevator doors opened. She felt more than a little unsettled as the two of them stepped out of the elevator. What was it Clark hadn't said?

"Lois. C.K." Jimmy's voice directed their attention to the young man standing in the bullpen. "Check this out!"

"Oh, right. The invisible man story," Clark muttered as they made their way into the bullpen to join Jimmy in front of a television set.

"If you're not seeing what I'm seeing," began the anchorwoman, "then you may be witnessing a miracle. Captured earlier today on home video..."

An obviously amateur video began playing on the screen, showing a truck being hijacked by... no one.

"Clark, this must be our guy," Lois muttered to him.

Clark looked as if he were going to respond, but then seemed to decide there were too many people around. Lois directed her attention back to the television.

"...a catering truck, loaded with fancy treats for a political fundraiser was hijacked by an invisible man. Yes. An invisible man. That truck ended up at the Forth Street shelter..."

"Excuse me, Miss Lane."

"One second," Lois responded.

"...where homeless families feasted on goose liver pate and cold lobster salad. Many thanks to the invisible man. No one as yet has any clue to this unexplained phenomenon. Is it real? Is it an illusion? We'll all just have to wait and see."

"Yes, can I help you?" Lois asked, turning towards Helene.

"You spoke at my women's group last October. 'The Weaker Sex. Fact Or Fiction?' It was a terrific speech," Helene said.

"Well, thank you. I'm really glad you liked it," Lois responded, before turning and heading towards her desk.

"Oh, I need to speak to you about my husband. He's disappeared," said Helene.

"First floor, try Missing Persons," said Lois, not slowing her pace.

"No. No. He's really disappeared. I'm the invisible man's wife."

Lois fully turned towards her. "You're the invisible man's wife?" she asked, glancing over at Clark.

"Would you wait over there, Helene?" Clark asked, taking the woman's shoulders and directing her towards Jimmy.

"What are you doing, Clark?" asked Lois the instant Helene was out of earshot. "She's that... person's wife. See I knew there were no such things asimps. We've got to talk to her."

"No, she's not... that thing's wife. She's the wife of Alan Morris — the invisible man."

"Are you trying to tell me that there is both an invisible man and a man who can disappear into thin air and one is not connected to the other?"

"Pretty much."

"I have a couple of questions," said Henderson as his men escorted a handcuffed Barnes who had been dusted with phosphorous into a police car.

"Shoot," said Lois.

"Well, how did you two know Barnes would try to rob the rare coin store tonight?"

"Umm..." Clark began, obviously struggling to find an answer.

"A source," Lois instantly piped in. "And come on, Henderson. You know better than to ask a reporter to reveal her source."

"Okay, then. How did you know he'd be wearing that suit... and more importantly how to make him visible? I thought the invisible man was supposed to be that Alan Morris character."

"It's... complicated," Clark responded. "Alan Morris is the one who invented the suits. Helene, his wife, said that someone broke into her house after the invisible man story first broke. We assume it was Barnes and that he stole the suit for both the jewelry store robbery and again tonight."

"So the original invisible man is still out there?"

"Yes," said Clark. "But we've asked him to turn himself into us."

"Well, if he does, I trust you'll bear in mind that we still need to talk to him."

"What for?"

"There are still a few incidents he needs to answer for — stealing from that slum lord and giving the money to his tenants; stealing the food meant for a political fund-raiser and giving it to the people at the fourth street shelter."

"You're not seriously going to punish him for those?" asked Lois.

"He'll probably just get a slap on the wrist. But we can't just let invisible Robin Hoods run around stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. It sort of undermines the whole... due process concept. But I think we can talk to the individuals involved and get them to..."

"You really think Sean 'The Fish' Myers, Metropolis' most notorious slum lord, is going to want to be lenient? From his reputation, I get the impression he still believes in using the rack... or chopping off a thief's hands."

"Trust me. The police can be very... persuasive."

"So you'll go to bat for Morris?" Clark asked.

"If he turns himself in, I'll see to it personally."

"Thanks, Henderson."

"Oh, and you'll keep the invisible man part out of your press release for two days?" asked Lois.

"Why so long?" asked Henderson. "I know you can't get the story in tomorrow's morning edition. But why not go to print in the afternoon edition?"

"Because we are still waiting for Morris to turn himself into us," Clark said.

"What makes you think he will?"

"I..."

"It's just a hunch," Lois said when Clark couldn't seem to find an answer.

"Uh-huh," said Henderson before turning and walking away. "Two days," he called back over his shoulder.

Lois and Clark watched until Henderson was out of earshot.

"So you're sure Morris will contact me?" Lois asked as she and Clark made their way towards the Daily Planet staff car.

"Yes."

"And why is this so important again?" Lois asked as she opened the driver's side door and climbed in.

"We need to reunite Helene and Alan." Clark responded, putting on his seatbelt.

"What?"

"Trust me, Lois. Once you see the two of them together, you'll know just how important that is."

"So... during the original loop, what actually happened with this story?" She started the car and pulled away from the curb. "I mean, we solved this story because of your insights. I assume we used... more traditional methods the first time."

"We did. I just thought if we solved the invisible man story early, it would free our time to work on the Mxyzptlk problem. Oh, shoot."

"Did you call for me?"

Lois practically spun off the road when the little imp was suddenly sitting on the hood of the car, his feet sticking through the front windshield to dangle over the dashboard. It took her a moment to get the car under control and pulled off to the side of the road.

"Hey, why'd ya stop? That was fun."

"Get out of my windshield!"

"It's not often you hear that," muttered Clark.

Lois glared at him.

"Oh, you're fighting," Mxyzptlk said. "Hope it wasn't anything I said. Things were looking so good this morning. I had high hopes for you two kids."

"Actually, the reason we're upset is that we were just on our way to Clark's to have wild and crazy sex," Lois responded.

"Really? Great! Can I come?"

"No!" exclaimed both Lois and Clark in unison.

"Oh, come on. I'd stay out of the way. You wouldn't even know I was there. I'd be as quiet as a mouse. I might even be able to give you some tips. When you've been around as long as me, you pick things up. I could tell you about this little trick I know where you..."

"I think we can handle it," said Lois. "And... sorry. We really don't want you there."

Mxyzptlk's face fell. "Isn't that just typical. You do what you can to help a couple of kids out and they don't want you there for the grand finale."

Lois glanced at Clark out of the corner of her eye. She hadn't been able to look directly at him since she'd claimed that they were heading to Clark's place for wild and crazy sex. She was relieved that he was looking as uncomfortable as she felt. She'd been wondering, at various points during the day, what had happened during the other loops. Those concerns had been amplified by the way Clark often seemed to look at her with a new confidence. But seeing him shift in his seat now made her

feel somewhat more reassured. That still didn't answer the question of what had happened with Superman, but it wasn't as if she could ask Clark about that.

"So have you told her your secret yet?" Mxyzptlk asked Clark.

This time Lois did look at Clark.

"You know, there's been a lot of talk over the years about whether or not you would do the wild and crazy with her without telling her about you-know-who. I've always been one of those who didn't think you would. But, hey, I'm just one person. And I'm not the brightest crayon in the box either. So I'm just wondering if... What?"

Clark was shaking his head slightly, as if trying to warn Mxyzptlk off.

"Oh! You haven't told her. Right. Of course. Sorry. I hope I didn't speak out of turn. Well... I mean, I didn't mean to... Maybe I should just... You probably could use some of these, though." Mxyzptlk suddenly vanished in a puff of smoke and now, between them, sat a box of condoms.

There was a long moment of silence, during which Lois tried not to focus on the implications of Mxyzptlk's gift given that she was the one who had first brought up the subject of sex as a means of getting rid of Mxyzptlk. Finally, however, the silence became more than a little oppressive. Mxyzptlk had made it very clear that Clark had a secret. So Lois broke the silence with a single word. "Clark?"

"What are you taking those for?" Lois felt a moment of panic when, once they stopped in front of Clark's place, he picked up the box of condoms before opening the door. Had Clark taken her comment meant to get rid of the imp seriously? What if he was expecting sex when they went inside?

"Would you rather that I leave them in the Daily Planet car?"

"Oh. Right," Lois said somewhat sheepishly. Stepping out of the car, she followed Clark up the steps to his apartment. She waited nervously while he opened the door. She wasn't entirely sure what she was so nervous about. This was just Clark after all. And, okay, so maybe she didn't know him all that well, but... well, if worse came to worse she was sure she could make sure he would come to regret any pass he might throw. She hadn't studied Tai Kwan Do all those years for nothing.

Still, her pulse rate was elevated, her hands were sweaty and her mouth was dry. The only good thing was that he was acting as nervous as she. On the other hand, it was raining. Now that wouldn't have been a big thing except when she kissed Clark in her fantasy, they had been standing in the pouring rain. But that was just a coincidence. It didn't mean there was anything to that annoying image. Gently playing with the hair at the nape of his neck. His arms pulling her close. Feeling the heat of his body. Seeing the look of love in his eyes. Her heart pounding erratically. Her chest aching with... she hardly knew what. The soft touch of his lips against hers. The bewitching taste of his mouth. Just a moment. Just a whisper of contact. Yet so sweet.

"I wasn't planning to tell you this loop," Clark said as he inserted the key in his door, snapping Lois back to reality. "I just thought... Well, there were too many other things for us to deal with. And one of these loops, we're going to figure this out. I promised you I wouldn't give up because otherwise... Well, anyway. I just figured it might be better to... keep this to myself for a little longer — you know just in case this is the time we break the loop. But..."

"Clark, I thought I was the one who babbled." Lois could suddenly see herself leaning over from where she was sitting on his desk so that she could touch her lips to his. Perry yelling in the background. She shook her head. That was a new one.

"Are you okay?"

"Huh? Oh, fine. Were you saying something?"

"I was asking if you were coming inside."

Run. She should get out of there now. She couldn't afford to get involved. Not with a colleague. Not again. It was one of the rules.

"Are you coming in?"

"Oh, right." She stepped past him into his apartment. Clark had a secret. A big one if the imp was right. And if there was one thing Lois couldn't resist, it was a secret. On the other hand, this was Clark. What secrets could he possibly have? After all, he was an open book. Small town boys always were. "So what is this big secret of yours, Clark?" she asked, almost bored now.

"Can I take your coat?"

She sighed. This surely wouldn't take long. The farm boy was going to reveal his deep, dark secret. Maybe she should just keep her coat, hear the secret and get out of there before those annoying thoughts she'd been having about Clark turned real.

She handed Clark her coat which he hung up in the closet along with his own.

"Why don't you have a seat? I'll see about making some coffee."

"Clark, just get to the point. What's this big secret?"

He stopped in mid-stride. Standing with his back to her, she saw his shoulders straighten, as if steeling his resolve before slowly turning towards her.

"I'm Superman."

"Clark, would you be serious?" she began, watching as he removed his glasses. It occurred to her that she'd never seen him without his glasses before. Still... "It's late. Why don't you just tell me whatever secret..."

Her voice trailed off when she realized that Clark was floating above the floor. She blinked, trying to bring the image back into focus and then, had to reach out to steady herself against the banister when Clark began to spin. "Omgod," she gasped, fighting against the lightheadedness which was threatening to overtake her.

The red and blue god who stood before her now was unmistakable. And as much as her mind fought against this unexpected discovery, she was unable to think of any other explanation. Clark was Superman. "Oh, god," she said, turning towards the closet to grab her coat from where Clark had hung it up only moments before.

"Lois, what..."

"Oh, god," she breathed, slipping on her coat. "I've got to go."

"We should talk about this."

Clark was stepping towards her. She held up her hand, and he silently acquiesced to her unspoken request that he not come closer.

"Well, good," she said, not quite looking at him as she did up her coat. "Okay, then. I guess I should..." She gestured vaguely behind her.

"But..."

"No. It's good, Clark. Yep. Right. Everything's fine. I'll just... Umm... Yep. Right. Okay, I'm just going to..." She fumbled with the door handle behind her. When he stepped closer to help, she shrunk from his touch. He quickly opened the door.

"Lois, do you really think you should be driving in your condition? I can give you a lift home — you know..." He made a wavy motion with his hand. "You can leave the car here. I'd be happy to pick you up in the car tomorrow morning for work. We could talk about this then — once you've had a chance to digest it."

"No! No!" She realized her horror that the thought of flying in Clark's arms... in Superman's arms... in whoever's arms right now had made the words sound somewhat desperate. She struggled to retain her calm. "I'm fine, Clark." At least the last phrase sounded almost normal. She began backing down the

stairs. "Really. In fact, we're fine. Everything's great. I'll see you tomorrow." She stopped when she bumped her butt against the car. "See. I'm here. Everything's great. Yep. Really great." She fumbled for a moment more before ducking into the driver's seat and as fast as possible, starting the vehicle and squealing tires as she pulled away from the curb.

'It's all in the delivery,' Clark thought as he floated in the sky watching protectively as the Daily Planet staff car made its way through the city streets. And obviously, he'd been a bit too abrupt in his delivery. He'd seen her angry — last time when she thought he'd slept with her as both Clark and Superman. He'd watched her pass out. He'd even dealt with the 'disbelieving Lois.' But this... Who understood what went on in the mind of Lois Lane? Every time she found out about Superman, her response was different.

He sighed when he saw her finally pull the car to a stop in front of her apartment building and go inside. She was safe. That was what mattered. They would worry about the implications of what he'd revealed to her tomorrow. Besides, there was a good chance they wouldn't find a way to correct the time loop and everything would reset. He'd handle things better, gentler next time.

Satisfied, he flew back to his apartment.

Lois stood under the hot water of the shower, her eyes closed. She hadn't slept at all the previous night. Things just kept going round and round in her mind. Superman was Clark. Clark was Superman. Whatever. She still didn't know which was which.

How could she have been so stupid? Clark had been working at the Daily Planet for almost a month. And yet she had never noticed that... Could she be any less observant? The only thing worse would be if it took her years to make the connection. A pair of glasses. A different hairstyle. A change of clothes. And suddenly she wasn't able to see what was in front of her nose. Of course, there was the flying thing. She hadn't seen Clark flying, had she? No. She was certain she hadn't. If she had, then dumb would become dumber.

Still, the hardest images to deal with were the ones with her spread across her bed, Superman nibbling on her neck. That combined with her... memories? ...of kissing Clark. She wasn't entirely certain she could feel more freaked out than she did at the moment.

How was she supposed to face him today? Oh, god. No. She couldn't do it. She would call in sick. She could use the sleep anyway. Okay, well maybe she wouldn't be able to sleep. But still... when was the last time she took a sick day? Yes. That was what she would do. Perry couldn't deny her one sick day.

And then at the end of the day, Clark would undoubtedly stop by to see if she was okay. It was that good Kansas upbringing. He'd want to be sure that she was all right after last night. No. Staying home wouldn't be a good idea. It would mean she'd be alone with Clark.

She stepped out of the shower just as the water was cooling off. She grabbed the towel and...

...gasped when she realized she was not alone.

"Eek!" Lois pulled the towel in front of her. "Mxysimpleton, what the hell do you think you're doing in my washroom?"

"Enjoying the view. Always wondered what kept Superman interested all those years. I think I understand now. Hubba hubba."

She wrapped the towel around her, pulling it up as high as she could without compromising the length. "Get out!"

"Spoil sport," Mxyzptlk pouted before disappearing.

Lois looked cautiously around before, very quickly, slipping into the robe on the back of the door. Readjusting the towel to wrap it around her head, she stepped out of the washroom. The

hackles on the back of her neck rose when she saw Mxyzptlk resting on the couch... or rather above it... flipping through a magazine. She narrowed her eyes and, after taking a moment to allow her fury to rise in her chest, stormed into the living room.

"Maybe you didn't understand. When I said get out, I meant get out of my washroom, my apartment, my life."

"Hey, don't get all prickly. I just stopped by to get all the juicy details about last night. Clark's such a boy scout I knew he wouldn't tell me anything. But... So? How was it? Everyone is going to want all the details. After all, it's not everyone who can tell us what he's like in bed. Actually, you're the only one. Although, I am a little surprised that he didn't spend the night. I always pictured him as a spend-the-night kind of guy. So... Don't keep me in suspense. Is he good?" He leaned forward like a little boy waiting for a Christmas present.

"Get out!"

"Party pooper," Mxyzptlk said. "At least tell me if he told you his secret." She didn't respond, but he must have read something in her expression. "He did, didn't he. I knew it! I knew he wouldn't sleep with you without telling you! I've got a bet of a thousand boxes on it! The guys are going to be so mad."

"Get out!"

"Okay, okay. Don't throw a hissy fit. I'll go," he said, disappearing in a puff of smoke.

Lois stormed into her bedroom, the lethargy she'd felt during her shower suddenly vanishing. She was going to work — if for no other reason than to get that pesky imp out of her life.

She was just walking out the door when something the imp had said finally sunk in. 'You're the only one.' She wasn't sure where the imp got his information. Nor was she certain if his information was accurate. Still... Nah. Superman might have only been around for a month, but Clark... He had gone to college. There was no way Mxy... whatever... was correct. On the other hand, he had known about Superman.

Of course, there were other comments that made even less sense. But what were they? She'd been so absorbed in dealing with her annoyance or trying to get the big picture that she suspected she was missing the small comments. So... what gems had he revealed that she had missed? And what did it all mean?

Lois chewed on the end of her pen as she sat at the conference room table staring at a blank piece of paper thinking about the first time she'd met Mxynumskull. She had been in the conference room talking to Clark about an imp he had apparently met in the storage room. Why had Clark been in the storage room anyway? He'd never answered that question.

The airplane! He'd left the Planet to fix that airplane. He probably used the storage room on a regular basis as a place to change into the Superman suit and then fly out the window. She pushed aside the immediate self-flagellation she was tempted to engage in at her failure to figure out the Clark/Superman connection. That was what had happened during many of the imp's appearances. The purpose to this exercise was to focus on those things that the imp might have revealed that she... and even Clark might have missed.

'The fifth dimension.' That was where the imp said he was from. But what that did that mean? He was from another dimension? Still, it was worth looking into.

'Imp — not gnome, elf or fairy.' Okay, so they should concentrate on looking up information onimps. She didn't like the idea of asking Jimmy to do it. After all, he might be a wiz with the computer, but she wasn't sure she wanted him to know exactly what they were working on. Hopefully Clark had some skill with the computer. Part of her was tempted just to do it herself. The idea of facing Clark today was not her favorite thought.

She pushed the thought out of her mind to concentrate on any

other tidbits of information the imp had given them. 'I came into this dimension before she knows.' So, according to him, even if he hadn't shown up, she would have eventually been let in on Clark's secret. 'You don't need them anyway.' The imp's comments about Clark's glasses. 'So have you told her your secret yet?' He had known Clark was Superman.

But that wasn't all he knew. He seemed to have some great insight into the future. Or at least he claimed to have such insights. 'Always wondered what kept Superman interested all those years.' She pushed away the obvious implications of that statement to focus on the concept that he might know about the future.

The only ways such a thing would be possible would be if he was from the future, had visited the future or was from a place outside of time. The fifth dimension. At least that was where he'd said he was from. So how did he come to be here? And how did one go about banishing him back to the fifth dimension?

"What you doing?"

Lois jumped, having been so wrapped up in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed Clark enter the room.

"Just trying to figure out where we start this investigation. Do you have any idea where the fifth dimension is?"

"Well, it isn't in Jersey, that's for sure."

"Very funny, Kent." She turned her attention back to her scribbles, trying to ignore the leap in her pulse rate.

"Look, about last night. Maybe I didn't handle the whole Superman thing..."

"It's fine, Clark. So what do you make of his dislike of being called an elf or a gnome or even a fairy? Do you think that's important?"

"I really don't know, Lois. But as far as the whole Superman thing goes, I just wanted to say..."

"I really think we should work on this, Clark. What did you say? There's only four days between time loops? That only gives us such a short amount of time. Do you think there is any significance to his name?"

Clark sighed, sinking into a chair across the table from Lois.

"I found these articles," Lois continued, not meeting his eyes. "Now I know they are mostly based on fairytales. But... well, there doesn't seem to be anything out there that handles this any more seriously than fairytales or myths. So I guess that's where we need to start."

And with that started a very long day of pouring over everything they could find about mythical creatures who come into the world to wreak havoc on Earth's poor, defenseless citizens. A day during which Lois made it clear that any mention of anything personal, particularly related to Superman, was not welcome — although not for one moment did she forget.

"Hey, here's something that might be helpful."

"What?" Lois asked, looking up from her reading.

"Well, it seems if we can find a way to send Mxyzptlk back to the fifth dimension, any tricks he's played will be broken."

"Really?" Lois asked, rising to her feet and coming around the table to look at the magazine. "So then... how do we send him back?" Lois sunk into the chair beside Clark.

"I knew it!"

Lois and Clark both started at the sound of the imp's voice.

"I just knew you two would try something like this. Why do you think I only allowed four days? Someone always gets this stupid idea into their heads."

"What stupid idea?"

"Of sending me back. Do you have any idea what it's like in the fifth dimension? And you want to send me back there? What type of superhero are you anyway?" he asked Clark. "Aren't you supposed to protect people from a fate worse than death? And yet you want to send me back. Or is it because you're a bigot —

thinking that imps aren't as worthy of your protection as humans. Well, newsflash, buddy. You're not human either." He crossed his arms protectively across his chest.

"So are you saying you've been here before and someone sent you back?"

"Give the man a cigar," the imp responded, a cigar instantly appearing in his hand. He handed the cigar to Clark.

"Thanks," said Clark, sniffing the cigar.

Lois jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. "So... what's this four day thing you're talking about?"

The imp's eyes lit up as he dropped into a chair, placed his elbows on the table and leaned closer to Lois as if to impart to her some great secret. "It's my greatest plan yet. Oh sure. I know the time loop thing I did before didn't work out. But that's because I planned the whole thing wrong."

"What? You did a time loop before?"

"Oh, yes. A Christmas eve time loop. Always Christmas eve and never Christmas. Hey, that's almost like Narnia. Always winter and never Christmas. But surely you remember... Oh, wait. You wouldn't remember. That's in the future. Anyway, I lengthened the time because I realized that by only having a matter of hours pass, the people of Earth lost hope."

"And you don't want people to lose hope?" asked Clark.

"No. People are a real drag when they lose hope. So by lengthening the time to four days, people don't lose hope as quickly. I guess they will eventually, but..."

"But why loop time at all?"

"So that no one has time to figure out how to send me back. I can have some fun and yet before anyone has time to figure out how to send me back... poof." He disappeared, only to reappear on the far side of the room. "They don't remember a thing. But you two... Well, I guess I'll just have to be a little more careful — keep my distance from you during the remainder of this loop — just in case you do figure it out. Well, TTFN."

And with that, he vanished, leaving Lois and Clark staring blankly at the far side of the room.

"So there is a way to send him back," Lois finally said.

"I guess that's the good news. The bad news is that he's planning to stay away from us."

"And tell me how that's bad news?"

"Well, if he's not around, even if we do figure out how to send him back, how are we supposed to put the plan into action?"

As Lois pulled the Daily Planet staff car out into traffic, she wondered when Perry would figure out that he hadn't taken the keys back when they'd used it last time. Maybe it was time she started thinking about getting a car of her own.

As she drove, her mind flitted from topic to topic — all of her thoughts rotating around the various revelations she'd had over the past two days.

That damn imp. He'd been messing with her life since the moment he'd first turned up. Making comments that made it obvious that he believed her destiny was irrevocably linked to Clark's. Or was that Superman's? She rebelled against the very idea. Clark seemed nice enough — when he wasn't being annoying. And she couldn't deny that she'd always felt... something for him — something she'd deliberately chosen to keep undefined. The idea that she had no choice, however, caused every fiber of Lois' being to rebel.

'Always wondered what kept Superman interested all those years.' She flinched, turning the wheel sharply to get the car back on her own side of the road when a car horn informed her that she'd drifted across the yellow line. 'I know you two are famous for your fights.' She'd grown up in a home famous for its fights — and she had no intention of being in a relationship like that herself.

Superman's hands running over the bare skin of her stomach.

His lips nibbling at her neck. Clark's arms pulling her close as they stood, kissing in the pouring rain. The taste of his mouth. The feel of his muscles under her fingers. The scent of his aftershave mingling with the heat of his skin. The strength of his arms as he pulled her on top of him. The low growl she could hear rising in the back of his throat. The look of love mingled with desire in his eyes. He was all man — making her aware, for the first time in years, that she was very much a woman. Sensation piled on sensation, all of it so startlingly real. A pool of fire began to form in the pit of her stomach.

She gave her head a sharp shake. No. She wasn't going there. Were it not for what she knew now about the time loop, she would have written those thoughts off as fragments of dreams or an overactive imagination. But given Mxy's comments earlier today about the time loop, she could no longer do that. The imp had claimed that too short a loop caused people to lose hope. That meant, whether they knew it or not, people retained some memory, no matter how fuzzy, of previous loops. Most were undoubtedly writing off those memories. But knowing what she knew now, she was no longer able to do so. Just one more way that damn imp was messing with her life.

On the other hand, how did she face Clark with these memories of past loops, wondering exactly how far things had gone? He retained his memory, fully intact, from those times. For all she knew, Clark now knew her in the biblical sense. It put her at a total disadvantage. And she hated that feeling of vulnerability.

In fact, there was a part of her that hated Clark for... well, whatever had happened between them. Of course, the part that hated him was at war with the part of her that felt... she wasn't entirely sure what it was. The tightness in her chest, almost an ache, when he'd been reading her computer screen over her shoulder this afternoon. The desire, which she'd successfully fought off, to lean back in her chair, bringing her back into contact with him. The way her pulse jumped when he as much as looked in her direction. It was all so confusing, so overwhelming. She wished she could just run away and hide until the time loop erased her memories — at least partially.

A car horn snapped her back to reality. She looked around. How had she ended up in this area of town? Spotting a restaurant up ahead, she pulled over to the side of the road. The sign out front informed her that it was called El Tambo del Oro. She wasn't sure what it was, but there was something about this place... She turned off the car and got out. She'd never been to this restaurant before — although, to be honest, she had noticed it when driving past. But she'd never had any desire to step inside the doors — until tonight.

She walked slowly over to the doors and grasped the door handle before suddenly snapping her hand away. No. She didn't want to do this. She wasn't entirely sure why. Turning, she rushed back to the car, climbed inside and drove away without looking back.

Lois had just drifted off into an unsettled sleep when someone knocking on the door woke her up. Clark. It had to be. Stubbornly, she rolled over, turning her back to the door and closing her eyes even tighter.

The knock was repeated. Growling, she got up, pulling her robe tightly around her, and stomped her way to the door.

"Clark!" she said, throwing the door open with a vengeance. "What do you think..." Her voice trailed off when she realized she was staring into an empty hallway. Stepping outside her door, she looked up and down the hall before making her way back inside and closing the door.

She was lost in thought as she made her way through the darkened apartment to the fridge, pulling out the milk and taking a sip from the carton.

“Lois Lane?”

Lois spun around, but couldn't see anyone. Cautiously, she set the milk down and grabbed the nearest thing she could find. “Who's there? I've got...” She looked at the spatula she was holding. “...a weapon.”

Reaching over, she flicked on the light. Still she couldn't see anyone. Suddenly, she realized what must be going on. “Jimmy... where are you? If this is your idea of a joke...”

“It's no joke. It's just me...”

Lois turned towards the sound of the voice to see the head of the man who she'd seen in a picture with Helene Morris.

“...the invisible man.”

“Eek!” Lois screamed before everything went black.

“Hi,” Lois said, opening the door to allow Clark to enter. She'd been so caught up in their little drama that she'd forgotten that she would be receiving a visit from the invisible man. Since she didn't know exactly what they were supposed to do now, she'd had no choice but to call Clark. Not that she was able to look him directly in the eye.

As Alan explained to them how he felt as if he had become invisible to the people around him, Lois caught a glimpse of Clark. He seemed to empathize with Alan, as if he too felt the pain Alan was talking about. She felt her heart clench to think that Clark could feel that way. On the other hand, she could sort of understand it — to always live in Superman's shadow.

She gave her head a slight shake. What had prompted her to think of Superman as a separate identity from Clark? She knew they were one person. Still... somehow the look on Clark's face spoke of a man who knew what it felt like to be overlooked. On the other hand, wasn't that what she'd been doing to him since they'd met — overlooking him while at the same time practically throwing herself at Superman? She pushed away the uncomfortable guilt that settled in her heart.

“Well, the police arrested Golden Boy Barnes last night,” Clark was explaining. “He broke into your lab and stole your suits.”

“Is Helene...”

“She's fine,” Lois assured him.

“You found the person who was doing these horrible things? So why haven't I heard about it on the news?”

“We wanted to talk to you before running the story,” Clark confessed. “We promised Helene we'd bring you home.”

“She wants me back?” asked Alan, looking hopefully between Lois and Clark.

“She never wanted you to leave,” said Lois. “She really loves you.”

“I guess I don't need to be invisible to be visible any more.”

“You never did, Alan,” said Clark. “It is the man beneath the suit that Helene cares about.”

Lois' gaze shifted to Clark. He was talking about himself. She had no doubt of that. That's probably what he thought she'd been doing this past month — not even noticing that he was alive, not being able to see beyond the flashy costume. If he only knew...

“There is one thing,” Clark said. “Even though the police know you aren't responsible for the jewelry store robbery, they still want to talk to you about your other little stunts.”

“They aren't seriously mad about those, are they?” asked Alan.

“I think we can get them straightened out. But you better spend the night at my house,” Clark continued. “We can go down the police station together tomorrow.” He glanced over at Lois as he rose to his feet.

“So I guess I'll see you guys in the morning,” said Lois as they all made their way to the door. When she saw Clark's eyes drift down her body, she followed suit, realizing that he was

getting a nice view of her Superman sleep-shirt. She did nothing to cover herself further up. But when he met her eyes in question... As if silently asking if her choice of nighttime attire meant that he had been forgiven. ...she broke eye contact.

She wasn't sure how she felt. A part of her was furious with him. Another part was furious with herself. But more than that, she was... confused. Too much information. Too fast. And no idea how she was supposed to deal with any of it. Part of her wished she could wake up tomorrow morning with no memory of any of it — time loops, imps, Superman, Clark, whatever had happened between them in previous loops, kissing Clark, kissing Superman, being the only one to know what it was like to make love to the Man of Steel, holding Superman's interest for years. No. It was too much. She simply refused to think about it — any of it.

“Good night,” she said as she closed the door on a relieved looking Alan and a concerned looking Clark.

The trip to the police station to meet with Henderson the next morning was mercifully short, as was the trip to drop Alan off on the doorstep of his relieved wife. When Lois saw the way Helene had greeted her husband, she'd understood why reuniting this couple had been so important to Clark. He really was a romantic at heart.

The drive back to the newsroom had, in contrast, seemed to take forever. She could tell Clark wanted to talk to her, probably about Superman, but she was still unwilling to do so. She was grateful that, in spite of his desire to talk, he was respecting her decision not to.

Still, she was hardly able to concentrate on her reading as they sat in the conference room, magazines, papers and books about imps, elves, fairies and gnomes spread all over the table. On several occasions, she practically growled in frustration. Work had always been her refuge from her personal life. When she couldn't concentrate on work, she knew things were bad.

“I think I found it.”

“What?” asked Lois, looking up from her latest disastrous reading attempt.

“Well, look at this.”

Lois took the open book Clark handed to her and began reading.

“And so the citizens of Dinaria tricked the imp into saying his name backwards, sending him back to the hell that waited for him.”

She looked up at Clark. “That's it? We just have to get him say his name backwards?”

“It seems — at least if you believe...” He gestured towards the book she was holding. ‘Mythological Origins of Dinaria.’ “But from reading some of the accounts... the tricks this particular imp seemed to have pulled... it sounds like our guy.”

“Don't they give his name?”

“They say it's bad luck to say his name.”

“Well, if he showed up every time they used it, I can see why they might think that. So how exactly do we get him to say his name backwards? Hell, I can't even say it forward.”

“Well, you don't have to say it — he does.”

“But who says...” She struggled to not only think of his name but to try to figure out how to say it backwards.

“Kltpzxm.”

“Right. How do you fit that into a conversation? Especially since we have no idea where he is? Have you seen sight or sound of him since yesterday morning?”

“No. But I also haven't said... Mxyzptlk? You there?”

Lois and Clark both held their breath waiting for the imp to show up. They looked at each other in frustration when he didn't.

“Where's my invisible man story?” demanded Perry, sticking his head in the conference room.

"We're on it, Perry," Lois said immediately, rising to her feet. It wasn't as if they could do much more here anyway — not without Mxy showing up. And even then... how on Earth did one go about getting someone to say a name like that backwards?

"That should be S.T.E.A.L. not S.T.E.E.L.," said Clark over Lois' shoulder. "You should know that, Lois. Man of Steel and all."

"Don't edit my copy, Clark. That's why we have editors. So I've been thinking about how to get that... whatever his name is to say his name backwards."

"Come up with anything?"

"Is it Golden Boy B.A.R.N.S. or B.A.R.N.E.S.?"

"The second."

"So I was thinking that if we wrote his name backwards on a piece of paper... Then the next time he shows up..."

"Assuming he shows up again. You missed a comma."

Lois rolled her eyes, but still she added the comma. "If he shows up, we pretend to get into an argument about how to pronounce the word — we don't tell him, of course, that it's his name backwards."

"So..." Clark began slowly as he started to see where she was going with this. "I say... it's pronounced Kiltgoten..."

"And I say... No. It's pronounced Kinderpiper."

"And the imp, given what we know of him so far, will jump in with both feet, insisting on seeing the word and telling us how to pronounce it. Of course, there is the chance that when he looks at the word, he'll realize it's his name backwards."

"True. But it's the best I can come up with."

"And I think it's worth a shot — assuming he shows up again, of course. That is a sentence fragment..." he concluded, pointing at the screen again.

"Lane! Kent! Where's that story?" Perry's voice bellowed across the newsroom.

"On its way, chief," said Lois, pushing the send button.

"But that sentence fragment..."

"Would you quit being so anal retentive?" said Lois, pushing her chair back from the desk. "Besides, it's gone now. Nothing we can do."

Clark stared at her for a moment before getting up from his chair. "Chief," he yelled as he headed towards Perry's office, "hold up on that story. There's a sentence fragment in it."

Lois rolled her eyes.

Lois wasn't entirely certain how she ended up sitting outside the same restaurant she had passed the previous night. El Tambo del Oro. But when she'd left work, the car had just seemed to drive itself there. Pulling off to the side of the road, she sat, staring at the front entrance for a long time, trying to figure out what it was about the place that seemed to call to her.

Finally, unable to stand not knowing what it was that felt so familiar about this place, what felt so good about this place, she got out of the car and walked across the street. She was surprised to discover that her pulse rate rose when she was again standing in front of the door. She reached out to take the door handle and hesitated. Her hands sweated and her mouth went dry. Finally, taking a deep breath, she opened the door and stepped inside.

She looked around the restaurant, surprised... and yet not surprised to discover that it was a cozy little place.

"Feel free to find yourself a seat."

Lois turned to see an older Latino woman approaching.

"Umm... can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Have I been here before?"

The older woman crinkled her eyebrows. "Well, you do sort of look familiar. But... I'm sorry. I don't think so. What's your name?"

"Lois Lane."

"The reporter?"

Lois nodded.

"That's probably why you look familiar. I've probably seen your picture. Anyway, please just find yourself a seat. Someone will be with you shortly."

Lois made her way over to a table near the fireplace. She circled it once before sitting down. Instantly, she realized she had made a mistake, but she wasn't sure what that mistake was. She got up and looked at the table again. Then she sat down in a different chair. Yes. That was better. Still... there was something missing.

Clark. There was something about this restaurant and Clark. She got up from the table and walked into the reception area again.

"Do you have a phone I can use?" she asked when a waitress made her way past. She had to know what it was about this restaurant. She had to know that she wasn't losing her mind.

Clark was completely confused as he made his way to El Tambo del Oro. He entered the restaurant to find Lois sitting at the same table they had used, sitting in the same seat. But... he hadn't mentioned the restaurant to Lois. Not in this loop. So what was going on?

"Lois?" he asked when he arrived at the table.

She looked up from the food in front of her. "This place has great food. Why don't you join me, Clark? I ordered something called pollo con chocolate. It's chicken with a chocolate sauce."

He slowly sat down.

"You've got to try this," she said, taking a bite of food on her fork and handing it to Clark. "I know it sounds gross. But it's great."

He shook his head.

She shrugged, taking the bite of food and putting it in her mouth.

"When you called, I thought you said you wanted to talk. But..." He glanced around. "Why here?"

She looked around. "Don't you like it? I thought it was... quaint."

"Lois?"

"And the food is excellent. Are you sure you don't want to try some?"

He let out a breath. "I'm not hungry. But I do agree that we need to talk — although I would have preferred somewhere a little more... private." Clark wasn't sure what was going on. Why had she chosen this place? As far as he knew, she didn't even know about this place.

"You're probably right," Lois said, surprising Clark. "I just figured we could meet here and then..." She took another bite of her food before laying down the fork. "... maybe go back to my place." She met his eyes dead on. "And then you are going to tell me everything."

"Lois, I've told you everything."

"No," she said thoughtfully. "No you haven't. But make no mistake, Clark. You will."

He swallowed hard. She knew something. Not that he'd done anything to be really ashamed of. Well, unless he counted the time when he'd pursued her as Superman. Still... No. There was something going on here. Not for the first time, he wished he understood how Lois Lane's mind worked.

Clark had tried on a few occasions to figure out exactly what was going on. But Lois had steadfastly turned the conversation to small talk, or talk about Mxyzptk, or talk about the invisible man, or talk about anything whenever he tried to broach the subject of why she had chosen to meet him at that particular restaurant.

Things got even more confusing when they stepped outside. Expecting her to head towards the car, he was surprised when she suddenly stopped, staring out into the street. He followed her gaze. The last time they had been there, it had been pouring rain. It wasn't raining now. In fact, it was a beautiful fall evening.

He said nothing when she stepped into the street before looking back at him.

"Dance with me, Clark."

"Did you see Mxy... the imp?" Clark asked.

She shook her head. "Not since this morning in the conference room. Come on. Where's your spirit of adventure? Dance with me."

"What's going on, Lois?" Clark suddenly asked, his suspicions growing by leaps and bounds.

"I just feel like dancing. Come on." She took his hand, pulling him into the street.

Unable to do anything else, he took her in his arms and began moving her slowly to unheard music.

She nodded against his shoulder, as if something she was putting to the test was suddenly understood.

"What's going on, Lois?" he asked somewhat nervously.

"This was where we kissed, isn't it?"

"What?" Clark gasped.

"It is."

"But... Lois, okay, yes. We came to El Tambo del Oro during one of the loops. And it was raining. We danced and then... yes, we kissed. But I swear, nothing more than that happened."

"And the time Superman was kissing me on my bed? Would you care to explain that?" She still hadn't stepped out his arms.

"Okay, yeah. On one of the loops, I pursued you as Superman. And things did get... a little carried away. But nothing happened."

"Nothing happened," she repeated slowly. "Except that apparently you were in my room, on my bed, doing..." She stepped out of his arms. "...whatever."

"How do you remember all this? You shouldn't be able to remember. You can't remember."

"Why? Does it matter?"

"It matters. Lois, I thought I was the only one who remembered things from other loops. You can't remember this place. You just can't."

"Why are you getting so freaked out?"

"I'm not freaked out."

"You are too freaked out. I don't think I've ever seen you sweat before. Oh, I get it. You took advantage of... the situation. Didn't you. Superman's squeaky clean image not quite so untarnished now?"

Clark could see the danger in her expression. She was starting to jump to conclusions — and if he was right, it was about what had happened between them on other loops. Probably figured he'd taken advantage of her. He had to talk now, or she was going to work herself into a full fledged fury.

"Lois, on one loop..." He glanced around to be sure that they were really alone, suddenly remembering that they were standing in the middle of a public street. And if what she was telling him was true, maybe there was a major flaw to the 'no ramifications' theory. "...I told the world that I'm... you-know-who."

Lois' eyes went wide. "Oh."

"I take it..." He looked around again. "...you don't remember that."

"Do you think I'd have been so..."

"Freaked out?"

"...taken by surprise when you told me about..." It was her turn to glance around. "...you-know-who if I had."

"Okay, so what do you remember?"

"First, I want to know exactly what happened in this restaurant. And I want a full accounting of what happened

between me and Superman."

Clark let out a slow breath before nodding. She was right. She had a right to know everything.

"I'm not sure where to start," Clark confessed as he took the cup of coffee Lois handed him and followed her into the living room.

"How about we start with Superman in my bedroom?" she suggested, the steel in her voice making it abundantly clear that she wasn't giving him a choice.

Clark flinched. "Okay," he said slowly. "But before I tell you that, you've got to understand the way things were."

"No, actually I don't have to understand. Do you have any idea how humiliating it is to think that you... that I... that we... and I have no memory of it? How could you have done that to me?"

"Lois, nothing happened between us. Or almost nothing," he added to her look of disbelief. "Some kissing. Really, not much more beyond that."

She studied him closely for a long moment before seeming to relax slightly.

"Lois, it was a number of loops ago. I couldn't figure out how to break the loop. I had tried to get your help, but you thought I was crazy. You even had me committed a couple of times — both as Clark and Superman."

"So you decided to get even? You decided to use my Superman crush against me? Of course, you only knew about my crush because I told Clark in confidence."

"Told me in confidence?" Clark asked in disbelief. "You mean you used your crush on Superman as an opportunity to put me down. I wasn't as good as Superman. And you rubbed that in every chance you got."

"So this was your chance to get even."

Clark ran his hand through his hair in frustration. He set down his coffee and rose to his feet. "That's not what happened."

"So then... why don't you tell me what happened?" Lois' tone told him that she wasn't exactly open to whatever he had to say.

"It was your idea, actually."

"Excuse me?"

"I came up with an idea for how to get your help with the whole time loop thing without having you commit me."

She cocked her head to the side as she listened.

"You noticed that Clark was... depressed or something. And you asked Superman about it."

"Do you always talk about yourself in the third person?"

"Occupational hazard. Anyway, I decided if I told you as Superman that Clark believed he was going through a time loop, I might be able to get your help. After all, if you wanted to have Clark committed, I, as Superman, could talk you out of it. It was then that you mentioned the movie Ground Hog Day and how being in a time loop would make it possible to do whatever you wanted without consequences. So..." He hesitated. "...I — or should I say, Superman — kissed you."

"I don't get it."

"Lois, from the moment you walked in on my interview at the Daily Planet, I've been crazy about you. But I knew I didn't stand a chance."

She looked down, studying her hands.

"But I still had hope. I thought... maybe some day you might come to see me the way I saw you. But I knew I would never stand a chance if Superman made a play for you."

"But you are Superman."

"No, Lois. I'm Clark. Superman... he's just a way for me to help without compromising my ability to have a life. So anyway... well, by the time the whole 'no consequences' thing was raised, the loop was almost over. So I went into the next loop

with a plan — to win you over. I figured that now that there was no possibility of a future, we could at least have the present. And for that, it didn't matter if you cared about Clark. It didn't matter, because for four days, I could be the Superman you seemed to want.

"But I swear, Lois, nothing happened." He shrugged. "We kissed. But beyond that... You told me you weren't ready. You even indicated that there was someone else. I figure it was an old boyfriend that you still have feelings for. And I knew there was no way you'd be able to get past it in four days, which was all the time we had, so I gave up trying to pursue you as Superman on other loops."

"I said there was someone else?"

"Sort of. Well, you started to and then you stopped and said things were just going too fast for you."

"Oh."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"So... Lois, that's it. It might not have been my finest hour, but I swear I never meant to hurt you."

She finally looked at him. "It's just..." She shook her head. "Never mind."

"What is it, Lois? Look, beyond everything else, you need to believe that I never meant to hurt you."

For a long moment, she remained silent, continuing to study her hands. Finally, she looked up. "I do believe you, Clark."

He let out a breath of relief.

"So... who's this guy who broke your heart?"

She shrugged. "How would I know?"

"What do you mean you don't..."

"So tell me what happened between me and Clark."

"You're changing the subject."

"I don't want to talk about it. I want to talk about what happened between Clark and me on the other loops." Her tone left no room for argument.

He took a deep breath. "Well, Clark was much later. I just... Maybe I should go back a bit. On one loop, I was sick of investigating the invisible man story so I decided to take the loop off. I didn't bother calling Perry. I guess I figured that it didn't particularly matter if Perry fired me."

He paused, not entirely comfortable with what he was going to tell her, but deciding he'd rather she know everything, he proceeded. "You showed up at my apartment with chicken noodle soup. I guess you were worried about me. I was touched. Anyway, we ended up spending the evening together. And it was great. We even... Okay, don't kill me here, but we ended up playing strip poker."

Lois' eyebrows shot into her hairline.

"Anyway," he continued, hoping to skip over that particular aspect as quickly as possible, "at the end of the loop, I realized that although you seemed to care about Clark, you were crazy about Superman. So I..."

"Wait, wait, wait," Lois said, causing Clark to fall silent.

"Let's go back to this whole strip poker thing."

"Yes?" asked Clark nervously.

"Well..." She hesitated, as if not entirely sure what to ask.

"Who won?"

Clark couldn't help it. He burst out laughing. "You did — of course."

"But that's not fair. I can't even remember it," she said in disbelief before she seemed to realize what she was saying.

"But... umm... well, with your x-ray vision thingy, I would think..." Her voice trailed off. "Are you telling me you didn't cheat?"

He shifted uncomfortably.

"You did cheat, didn't you?" she gasped. "Then how is it you still lost?"

"Lois, I did cheat — on one hand. But it was only after... Well, you were winning every hand. I had lost most of my clothes already. So... well, I looked to see your cards. And yes, I won a hand. You actually had to remove a sock. But that was when I ended the game. I realized just how easy it would be to..." His voice trailed off.

"So what happened next?"

Clark looked up. She wasn't holding the whole strip poker thing against him. He suddenly felt a whole lot better. "Well, in spite of how much fun we had, when Superman showed up at the end of the loop, it was obvious that you were still completely infatuated with him. So I went into the next loop sort of pouting.

"Anyway, at the end of the first day, it suddenly occurred to me that if I wanted you to see me as more than a friend, I'd have to take the first step. So I asked you out. And yes, we went to El Tambo del Oro. I ordered the pollo con chocolate — the same thing you were eating when I came in tonight. And you spent most of the evening stealing bites off my plate. And yes, we danced and even kissed in the rain."

"So what happened then?"

"Nothing. I took you home and said goodnight and that was it. Later in the loop, you confronted me, asking what was going on, and then, once I told you, you helped me investigate the whole 'breaking the loop' problem."

"And that's it?"

Clark knew from Lois' tone that she didn't believe him. "Lois, when we kissed... It was then that I realized that..." He let out a breath. "Lois, I realized I'd fallen in love with you. And knowing that there was no future... I knew I couldn't afford to let anything happen. I knew if anything did, I'd be completely heartbroken when the loop happened again. Having you crazy about my alter-ego was easier."

She chewed on her lower lip as she studied him. "Okay," she finally said, ignoring completely his confession of love. "Tell me about our investigation."

Clark let out a slow breath. The interrogation was over, and it seemed that he had passed — even if she hadn't said so directly. Turning his mind to her question, he proceeded to tell her about the various stages of the investigation, starting with his belief that this was a dream to the moment Mxyzptlk had shown up.

"It's just... images, feelings, mostly," Lois explained, taking a sip of her coffee as she and Clark sat together in her living room. He had told her everything. At least she was fairly sure that he had. And although she felt somewhat strange about the whole Superman pursuit loop, she could understand where he was coming from. He must have felt so alone. And give the fact that she hadn't been paying any attention to Clark, he must have figured that was the only way he had a chance to be with her.

"So do you think anyone else is having these images from other loops? Do you think anyone knows that I'm Superman?"

She shook her head. "I doubt it. If I hadn't known about the time loop, I'd be tempted to think that I was just remembering some bizarre dream or something. The images are fuzzy. Nothing that you can really get a handle on. But when the imp told us today that creating too short a loop would cause people to lose hope, I realized that people, even if they don't have a clear picture, must have some... memory of the past loops."

"Wow. That certainly does put a whole new perspective on things."

"Well, think about it, Clark. You say that when you told me about the loop the first time, I called Dr. Friskin. Now... I mean, I might have freaked out a little, but I accepted it. I didn't call Dr. Friskin."

"But that was because I delivered the message differently."

"Not entirely."

He cocked his head to the side. When he thought about it,

there had been other changes which couldn't be entirely written off to a different delivery of the message. Subtle changes perhaps. But they were there. At first, it had been a gradual transition in his relationship with Lois from colleagues to friends. And then during the last loop, she'd started to see him as more than a friend. So if the feelings remained from loop to loop... He suddenly smiled.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. So... you don't think anyone will remember that I'm Superman?"

"I doubt it. If anyone was going to, it would likely be me. And... I didn't have a clue."

"Good."

He reached in front of her to pick up her empty coffee cup. When she flinched away, as if afraid of his touch, his heart sank. For just a moment, he'd allowed himself to believe that she'd really forgiven him.

"Don't worry, Lois. I won't try anything," he said sadly as he began rising to his feet.

"No, Clark. That's not..." She reached for him, her hand landing on his arm. Both of them looked at the place of contact between them before Lois removed her hand. "Look, okay, I've put you on the spot a few times tonight. Maybe it's time I fessed up, too."

Clark sat back down. "About?"

"Clark, I've been a little..."

"Freaked out?"

She was about to object before she realized he was right.

"Yeah, okay. Freaked out. Anyway, it's not only... the images. It's... I'm just having a problem with some of the things that imp has been telling us."

"What things?"

"Oh, come on. You can't tell me that you haven't noticed that he seems convinced that you and I are destined to be together. I'm just not ready..." She let out a breath before trying again. "... I'm just being hit with too much, too fast. And I don't know how to handle it."

Clark nodded slowly. "Well, I think we have to take anything that the imp says with a grain of salt. Besides, even if he knows how one future goes, I don't think anything is 'destined.'"

"So we can change things?" She wasn't entirely sure why that didn't make her feel a whole lot better.

"I'd bet on it. After all, he wouldn't be spending so much time trying to get us together if everything was predestined."

"I suppose that's true."

Clark rose to his feet. "Anyway, I should get going. We only have one more day to send the imp back to the fifth dimension."

She rose to her feet as well. "Do you... you know, have to go?" she asked shyly.

A small smile settled on his face as his hand came up to cup her cheek. "Yeah. I don't want to have to explain tonight to you at some point in the future."

A grin spread across her face.

"So what do you think?" Lois asked when she had finished explaining her plan to Clark the next morning.

"I think... you're brilliant."

She smiled.

"Well, what are we sitting here for? I think we've got some arrangements to make."

"Wait. Wait. Wait," Lois said, gesturing him back to his seat.

"What?"

"I just think... Clark, that little... imp knows we're working on finding a way to send him back."

"What's your point?"

"I just think... I hate to say this, but I think we should wait until the next loop. Then you can put this plan into action."

"But, Lois, if we do that, you won't..."

"I know, Clark. And I hate it as much as you do — more probably. After all, we're talking about my brain being swiss-cheesed again. But if we try this and he suspects a trap, it will never work. If we wait until the next loop, he won't be expecting it. He expects both our memories to be reset after the loop. I just don't want to tip him off."

"But what about... us? I just don't know if I can handle losing..." His voice trailed off.

Her hand came up to stroke his cheek. "We'll be fine, Clark. I just know it. Besides, it wouldn't hurt if... the revelations came a little slower."

His hand captured hers. He hated the thought of starting over with her again — except, if he'd learned anything during this loop, it was that he wasn't exactly starting over. Besides, she was right. Mxyzptlk was more likely to fall for this plan if he wasn't expecting it. He nodded in resignation.

"You're right," he said softly.

Her sad smile told him that she felt the same way he did. But there really was no other choice. They couldn't risk tipping Mxyzptlk off. After all, this could be their only chance to stop him.

Lois' eyes deviated between Clark and the clock. It wasn't easy for her to give up what she now knew. But it was the best course of action. Still, that didn't keep her from feeling nervous. What if Clark decided that she'd been too high maintenance during this loop and didn't want to pursue a relationship with her during the next loop. The fantasies would eventually fade, and she could end up not even knowing what she had missed. "What time did you say the loop will start again?"

"Five twenty-four."

She glanced at the clock. "It's just..."

"What?"

"I just don't like the idea that I'm going to forget all this."

When he said nothing, she rose to her feet. "Come with me." She turned, leading him out of the bullpen.

"Lois, C.K.? Where you going?" asked Jimmy.

"I need Clark to help me get something from the top shelf of the storage room," said Lois.

A moment later, they disappeared behind the doors.

"So what did you need?" asked Clark.

"This." Lois turned him around and, cupping his face with her hands, pulled him down so that she could kiss him.

He stood, stunned, for the space of a heartbeat before pulling her into his arms so that he could deepen the kiss, slowly exploring her mouth as the seconds ticked past.

Finally, she broke the kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck so that she could bury her face in his neck, breathing in his scent, burning it into her memory.

"I love you, Lois," Clark whispered.

Her grip tightened as she placed her lips next to his ear. "The person who stopped me from making love to Superman was you."

Shocked, he pulled back to look in her eyes and saw...

...the crowd outside City Hall.

"...let's really welcome Superman to our fair city. He came to us a stranger, but his good deeds have not gone unnoticed. As last year's recipient of the key to the city, it is my honor to pass it on to our newfound friend."

Clark's eyes once again sought out Lois as he struggled to recover from his shock over her admission in the storage room. His immediate desire was to go to her, tell her he loved her, tell her everything. But he remained standing on the platform as Luthor's voice droned on in the background. Before he did anything to put her through what she'd experienced during the past loop, he had to stop Mxyzptlk. And, thanks to Lois, he had a

plan.

Mxyzptlk looked across the outdoor table at the beautiful, young assistant District Attorney — Mayson Drake. He knew that she was still wondering why she had come out for lunch with him. And he found it slightly amusing to know that he was hitting on a woman who, in a year or so, would start hitting on Superman. “So... why don't you come back to my place?”

Mxyzptlk asked. “I'll take you places you've never been before.” Mayson rolled her eyes, rising from the table. “And with that charming thought, I'll just be going,” she said sarcastically.

“No, wait. I want to show you my world. I want...” His voice trailed off when he spotted a banner in the sky.

“Mxyzptlk. Congratulations. You've won the grand prize. Call 555-1234. P.S. To claim your prize you must answer a skill testing question.”

“Hey, beautiful,” he asked, causing Mayson to look at him from where she was about to walk into the building. Almost as if she had no will of her own, she walked back to him.

He pointed up at the banner the plane was pulling across the sky. “What's this skill testing question thing? Is that usual? It seems strange to me.”

“They have a skill testing question on lots of contests.”

“Really? So what type of questions do they ask? I'd hate to lose my prize by getting the answer wrong. I mean, it is a grand prize and all. Do I need to study before I call?”

“Well, it's usually a math question.”

“Math. I can do math. Okay, let me see. Four plus seven equals ten.”

“Eleven,” said Mayson in exasperation.

“Right. Right. It's just been a long time. Okay, let me try another one. The square root of the quantity two x squared minus three x minus 10 is equal to x. Okay, I think I'm ready. Now... I need a phone.” He looked around. When he didn't see one, he waved his hand causing a phone booth to appear in the middle of the street. “Oh, I'm so excited,” he said, making his way to the phone booth. “I've never won anything before.” He giggled slightly. “I didn't even know about the skill testing question thing. But... you don't think it could be a different Mxyzptlk, do you?” he asked in sudden horror. “Oh, I'd be heartbroken if it's another Mxyzptlk. I so wanted to win.

“What do you think it is?” he continued. “Maybe it's a jetski. I'd love it to be a jetski. Do you think if it's something else, I could trade it for a jetski?”

“Why don't you just call and find out?”

“Right. Right. I almost forgot. I just have to call. Do I look all right?” he asked, straightening the tie that suddenly appeared around his neck.

“No one can see you on the phone.”

“Right. Right.”

“So are you going to call or not?”

“Oh, right.” He picked up the phone and dialed the number.

“Winamex Prize Corporation,” said Clark when he picked up the phone. He ignored the odd look Lois gave him from where she was seated at her desk.

“Yes. Yes. Oh, Winamex Prize Corporation. That even sounds official. I wouldn't want to win the grand prize from anyone but the Winamex Prize Corporation.”

“Can I help you, Mr...?”

“Mxyzptlk. Mr. Mxyzptlk. I saw the banner and have called to claim my prize. I do so hope I'm the right Mxyzptlk. Am I? Am I the right one?”

“Yes. Absolutely. Provided you can answer the skill testing question.”

“Oh, I'm sure I can. I've been practicing.”

“Good. Then if you can tell me the acronym for the following

sentence, you will win.”

“Not a math question? I was practicing for a math question.” He sounded distressed.

“Sorry. It's not a math question. I'm looking for an acronym here. Do you know what an acronym is?”

“Oh, yes. Acronym: a word made from the initial letters of a term or phrase. I can do acronyms.” He once again sounded hopeful. “Not as well as math. But I can do acronyms.”

“Okay, here's the question. Can you give me the acronym for the following sentence?” Clark glanced down at the sentence and shook his head. When he'd argued to Lois that this wasn't a sentence, she'd told him it was the best she could do, given the letters. Taking a deep breath, he read it. “Kindly Let The Public Zeal Yield Xenophobic Mobs.”

“Oh, that's easy. Kltpzyxm. Oops.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. “Mr. Mxyzptlk?” Clark asked. No response. “Mr. Mxyzptlk?”

“Hello.” It was a woman's voice.

“Are you with Mr. Mxyzptlk? I was talking to him when we were suddenly cut off or something. Do you know what happened to him?”

“Not really,” said the woman. “Except... well, he was talking to you when suddenly he got this terrified look on his face and disappeared. Did you do that?”

“I don't know what you're talking about. How would I make someone vanish?”

“I don't know. But I also still can't figure out why I agreed to have lunch with that jerk. It was almost as if I didn't have control over my limbs. And now... thanks.”

“You're welcome,” Clark responded, hanging up the phone with a feeling of satisfaction. He'd done it. He'd actually done it. At least, he hoped he'd done it. Only time would tell. He was struck by the irony of that statement.

Lois glanced over at Clark, lost in thought. She'd been having the oddest thoughts about him for the past few days. She wasn't entirely sure where they had come from — nor the feelings that accompanied them. Still, try as she might, she hadn't been able to shake the feelings. And on occasion, when Clark would look at her, she'd see the same longing in his eyes that she was feeling. Not that he'd acted on it. Still... Her mind flashed back to him asking her out shortly after he'd first arrived at the Daily Planet. She'd been pretty cruel to him. It was no wonder he wasn't acting on his feelings.

That meant... No. She couldn't make the first move. Besides, what about her rule? Had she learned nothing from Claude? Still, she couldn't quite shake the feeling that this was different. There was something between her and Clark, something real. And it wasn't her imagination. It wasn't! Maybe it was time for her to take a chance and risk her heart once again.

Working up her courage, she looked for an excuse to talk to him. The story! Right! She quickly printed out the paragraph she had written and got up, making her way to his desk, paper in hand.

“I think we should lead with this,” Lois said, handing the paper to Clark and taking a seat on the edge of his desk.

Clark glanced down, taking a moment to read the short paragraph. He looked up once he was finished. “Nice work,” he said, sounding genuinely impressed.

She unexpectedly felt slightly rattled. Still, she pushed on. This was important. For a reason she couldn't put into words, she was not willing to wait another day. “You know, Clark. I've been thinking. There's this Spanish restaurant I've been dying to try. And I was sort of wondering... Well, would you like to go with me?” She felt heat rise in her cheeks. Still, it was out there now. She waited nervously for his response.

“I'd love to, Lois,” Clark said.

She met his smile with her own, suddenly knowing in her gut that everything was going to work out.

Clark watched Lois retreat to her desk. He had no doubt what restaurant was suddenly on her mind. El Tambo del Oro. He hadn't told her about the loop yet. Nor had he decided how and when to tell her about Superman — among other things. But he had no doubt that time would be come — soon. She deserved to know the truth. All of it. And although some parts might be difficult for her to believe, he knew that somewhere deep inside her heart would bear witness to the truth of his words. Assuming, of course, that they had indeed stopped the loop.

Glancing over at the clock, he waited breathlessly as five twenty three clicked over to five twenty four. Still, he continued to stare at the clock until the second hand passed the twelve one more time, indicating that it was now five twenty five.

"Kent!" Perry growled from the direction of his office. "I don't pay you to daydream. Get that story on my desk."

"Yes, sir," Clark replied. He wasn't sure he'd ever been as happy to be yelled at in his entire life.

Mxyzptlk was lost in thought. What had he done wrong? He'd worked everything out perfectly. There was no way anyone should have had time to figure out what he was up to, let alone finding a way to send him back to the fifth dimension. Not even the big blue scout had...

His thought trailed off. He knew he'd recognized the voice on the other end of that phone conversation. Superman. But how... There was only one way he could possibly have figured it out. He had somehow been outside the loop. But that was impossible. Mxyzptlk had put everything of the Earth under his magic.

Mxyzptlk slapped his forehead. How could he have been so stupid? He'd put everything of the Earth under the time loop spell. But Superman wasn't of the Earth. Next time he'd get it right. Now... He took a sip of his fifth dimension beer before spewing it out. ...all he had to do was to figure out how to get back to the third dimension.

THE END

The website where I got my information about The Superconducting Super Collider is: <http://www.cato.org/pubs/briefs/bp-016.html> . I even used some of the wording contained in the article about this conductor and what it does (or would do if it were built) since I don't really understand the science involved — or what is important to the machine.

As for additional acknowledgments... I would like to thank the writers of 'Twas The Night Before Mxymas' for giving me both the idea and the solution to my story. And on the same note, I would like to thank the writers of the following movies/television shows: 12:01, Ground Hog Day, Quantum Leap and Stargate SG-1's Window Of Opportunity. I use bits and pieces from all those shows in this story. After watching Stargate SG-1's 'Window of Opportunity,' it occurred to me that by taking away hope, Mxyzptlk's time loop didn't allow the writers to have a little fun with the 'no consequences' premise. So I decided to try my hand at a different time loop story. This is the result. Hope you enjoyed it.

Thanks to everyone on the fanfic message boards for answering my math question. And as always, thanks to both Carol and Gerry for their Beta reading efforts. They caught many mistakes and gave me some really good ideas. Thanks, guys. And thanks to Erin for editing this story for the fundraiser.

'Curiosity is one of the permanent and certain characteristics of a vigorous mind.' — this quote really does belong to Samuel Johnson.