

Lessons

By Nan Smith <hachiban@earthlink.net>

Rated: G

Submitted December 2008

Summary: In the sequel to the author's "Tsunami," Superman goes after Nightfall. But when he returns to Earth without his memory, Lois is faced with a problem. Should she tell him the truth about himself, or will such a revelation make things worse?

Story Size: 24,549 words (133Kb as text)

As always, the characters portrayed in this story are the property of D.C. Comics, Warner Bros. et al. and I am only borrowing them for a while. This story is based on the Lois and Clark episode All Shook Up, and any recognizable characters or scenes are the property of the show. Any changes to the story are mine.

"Impact in five...four...three... two..."

Lois held her breath.

The transmission from Superman vanished in a burst of static. Lois stared at the screen in dismay, while around her the murmur of voices from the Daily Planet's staffers who had been listening to the broadcast (which included just about everyone on the evening shift) swelled with alarm.

"This is EPRAD Control," a voice announced suddenly, as the static cleared. "We have lost contact with Superman."

Lois was aware of the dead silence suddenly engulfing the room, and the loud beat of blood in her own ears. She spoke more forcefully than necessary, as if the vehemence of her words would somehow make them true.

"His microphone went out. He's fine. He's got to be!"

But the minutes went by with no further word from Superman. Finally, Lois couldn't take the fruitless wait any longer and left the Planet. She had intended to visit the market before she went home, but now that plan was forgotten. She hailed a taxi and gave the address of her apartment. Even the cabbie was in a quiet mood, apparently, for he drove through the unnaturally quiet streets with the radio turned up. Lois couldn't help listening as well, hoping against hope to hear something that would give her a hint about Superman's fate, but nothing was forthcoming. At last, the taxi drew up in front of her apartment house. Lois paid the man in silence and turned to ascend the steps.

Where was Clark? What had happened to him out there in space? Was he even still alive?

The thoughts spun in endless circles in her mind. She had been watching him covertly now for several weeks, trying to determine why Superman would masquerade as an ordinary man, and finding no real answers.

In her experience, everyone had an agenda. The fact that Superman was hiding among the general run of humanity when he could have lived a completely different sort of life had left her puzzled in the beginning, and wondering why he would choose such a life. He could hold any position he wanted; he could live in luxury, he could have anything — and yet he chose to be an obscure reporter on a newspaper — an outstanding newspaper, of course, but still, just a newspaper. So what *was* his agenda?

She had found no answers so far. And then the Nightfall asteroid had appeared, threatening all of humanity, and Superman had answered the call of the President. He'd voluntarily agreed to

risk his life to save the Earth. Lois kept waiting for something to happen, for him to back out for some reason. But he hadn't.

And now he might very well be dead. What kind of agenda was that?

She had doubted and disbelieved, and he had proven her wrong by his own actions. She stared out her window into the black sky and felt the tears welling in her eyes. Clark was very probably dead, saving all of Earth. And she had never once believed that he might be simply a good man who had his own, very personal reasons to wish for his privacy.

Privacy. It all boiled down to that, she thought. If the world knew where Superman lived, what would happen to his privacy?

A few months ago, Jason Trask and Bureau 39 had hunted him and threatened his life and the lives of his mother and father in their mad quest to find and eliminate Superman. Wasn't that enough reason for Superman to remain anonymous?

Why had that never occurred to her before? It was obvious, now, that he masqueraded as Clark Kent because if he didn't his family and friends would probably be in danger from nuts like Trask and his crew — not to mention the media, and certainly fans and curiosity seekers. They would very probably make his life a shambles, and he would never have any kind of peace. Or privacy. He wouldn't be able to do anything without a crowd of obnoxious rubbernecks following him everywhere he went and intruding on him when he wished to be alone. How could he have any kind of life of his own under those circumstances?

The answer was, of course, that he couldn't. No one could. He and his family would be under constant siege. So given those facts, in his place, wouldn't she have done the same?

The thought caught her up.

His family! What about Jonathan and Martha Kent? If they were his parents, wouldn't they have super powers just like Clark? Wouldn't they be trying to find their son, to save him?

But during the short time she had spent in Smallville, she had personally watched Martha Kent fixing dinner, the evening of the day that had seen the death of Jason Trask, when she had managed to cut her hand with the paring knife. She had broken down in tears, mostly, Clark said later, from the stress of the whole day. Clark had taken over and finished the job.

So his mother didn't have Superman's powers, and most likely his father didn't, either. If he had, would he have allowed Trask to threaten the lives of his wife and Wayne Irig? She doubted it.

And what about Clark's allergies the first night they had been in Smallville? And hadn't he had a paper cut? He'd seemed shocked by it, far more so than he should have been. So something had happened in Smallville — something of which she obviously hadn't been aware. A lot of things didn't make sense here.

But Clark was probably out in space, dead. She would never see him again, never have the chance to get to learn more about him. Never get the chance to have him as her friend again.

A fireball streaked across the sky.

Riveted, she followed it with her eyes. The thing was huge, a brilliant ball of fire, trailing flames as it plunged toward the city. What could it possibly be? A piece of the Nightfall asteroid?

But that didn't make sense. The object was much too far away for the pieces left after Superman's collision with Nightfall to have reached them so quickly. Maybe it was just a freak meteor, but if so, it was sure the brightest shooting star she had ever seen.

And unlike other shooting stars, it didn't burn up, to vanish while still high in the atmosphere. The place where it hit was obvious. There was a brief flare of light and a clap of sound like thunder. It looked like it had struck somewhere in Suicide Slum.

A sudden wild hope seized her and she looked quickly at her watch. It had been about fifty-five minutes since Superman had

rammed Nightfall and destroyed it. Pieces of the huge asteroid couldn't have made it to Earth that fast — but Superman could have. If he had survived the collision and hung onto his air tanks, he could have made it back to Earth. What if that fireball was Clark, perhaps injured, but returning home in an out-of-control plunge through the atmosphere?

Without a second thought, or even a consideration that she might not be able to find the point of impact, Lois grabbed for her coat and shoulder bag. She barely paused to lock her door before she was hurrying toward the elevator. If Clark had indeed crashed in Suicide Slum, she was going to find him!

"You want to borrow my car?" Jimmy said.

Lois glared at him. "That's what I just said. I've got a hot lead and I need a car." She tried to curb her impatience. "Please, Jimmy, I'm really desperate. I can't hire a cab for this. I promise I'll take good care of it."

"I don't know..." Jimmy hesitated. "It's the only one I have and I've worked on it a lot. I don't want something to happen to it."

"I promise if I damage it, I'll pay for any repairs," she said recklessly. "It's really important."

"Well — all right," he said finally. He fished in his pocket. "Here's the keys. It's parked in the lot behind the apartment. You know which one it is."

Lois grabbed the keys. "Thanks a lot. I owe you." She left Jimmy staring after her as she spun and hurried down the narrow hallway toward the steps.

Jimmy's car was parked near the old brick building. Lois got behind the wheel and was surprised when the engine caught on the first try. She backed hurriedly out of the space and turned out onto the street.

According to the map of Metropolis that she found in Jimmy's glove compartment, and judging by what she had seen of the impact, whatever it was had to have crashed near the western boundary of Suicide Slum. Lois drove through the dark streets, slowly covering the area where she thought the fireball — or Superman — had come down. After an hour of cruising back and forth, she was almost ready to give up, but she turned carefully down the next street, her headlights on high for maximum visibility.

It was the billboard that caught her eye. The sign, advertising the Metro Liner, was marred by a huge hole with scorch marks around the edges where something had torn through the wood. And before her on the dirty street a deep hole gaped in the asphalt. Lois slammed on her brakes.

She craned her neck, trying to see what might be in the hole, but the angle was wrong. She shut off the motor and looked around.

No one was visible. Still, she hesitated.

In spite of the fact that she was known by her colleagues to be willing to take risks that bordered on the insane, she was not lost to all sense of caution. Still, if she was going to find out what was in that hole — if anything — it looked as if she was going to have to get out of her car.

She gave the area a second scrutiny and then a third. She could see no sign of life. Taking a deep breath, Lois thrust open the driver's door, her keys gripped in one hand, her penlight in the other, and scurried over to the hole.

There was something moving in the hole. She flashed her light over it and gasped.

The man stirred as her light flashed over him and began to push himself into a sitting position. Lois caught a glimpse of pale skin, rippling muscle and a few charred and tattered rags of cloth that covered nothing worthwhile. Then he looked up, raising a hand to shield his eyes from the glare of her flashlight.

It was Clark, all right. Clark, without his glasses, his hair

straggling across his soot-streaked face. She should have been embarrassed, but the only thought that crossed her mind at the moment was the fact that the mystery was solved. The suit did, indeed, come off.

"Who's there?" She had never heard Clark's voice sound so uncertain and, yes, scared.

Of course! What was she doing, standing here staring when he could very well be hurt? Quickly, she knelt at the edge of the hole. "It's Lois. Are you all right?"

He squinted up at her, shading his eyes. Lois kept the flashlight trained on his upper body while she removed her coat and tossed it down to him. "Here, put that on."

While he was squeezing his muscular body into the coat, she turned to survey the immediate area again. No one seemed to be nearby, but she thought she could see motion across the narrow, broken street. "Can you get out of there without help? We're in Suicide Slum. I'd like for us to get out of here as soon as we can."

He scrambled awkwardly out of the hole and straightened up, clutching the coat around him with one hand. Lois reached out to grasp his wrist. "This way. Quick."

It wasn't her imagination, she thought. There was motion in the darkness past the bright glare of her headlights. Some of the denizens of Suicide Slum had decided to take an interest in her and her companion. Quickly, she hustled Clark to her car. "Get in, quick!"

He slid into the front seat and scooted quickly over into the passenger seat. Lois got into the front seat, slammed the door and locked it.

Wasting no time, she started the engine, grateful that Jimmy had apparently put a great deal of time and effort into the maintenance of his car, backed and turned.

Two men were standing in the glare of the headlights. They were scruffy individuals, dressed haphazardly in mismatching, ragged garments. Dirty mufflers were wound around their necks and chins against the cold of the winter air, and one of them clutched a baseball bat in his right hand. The other seemed to be empty-handed, but, by the look on his face, Lois wasn't willing to stay around to inquire about his intentions.

She eased the clutch out just until the motor caught and let the car move forward too slowly to harm the men if they refused to move.

The bumper contacted the thigh of the man in the lead. He raised the baseball bat.

Lois gave the car a little more gas, pushing her opponent inexorably backward, and just as inexorably off balance. The second individual didn't attempt to block her. He moved quickly to the side of the street. She kept moving forward, pushing the bat-wielder steadily backward. He was forced to yield before her or fall in front of the car.

Lois stepped a little harder on the gas and the engine responded. The bat wielder flung out his arms for balance. She didn't dare stop. If she did, he would swing that bat, she thought, and then she would be stuck with the cost of repairing Jimmy's car. Nobody was going to cost her that much money. She glared at the man pressing against her bumper.

He must have seen something in her face, for he moved suddenly, throwing himself sideways, out of the vehicle's path. Lois stepped on the gas. The car's tires screeched as she burned rubber, and they roared away from the scene. She didn't look back.

"I thought we were in trouble for a minute there," Clark said. He looked down at himself and pulled her coat more closely around his body.

"So did I," Lois said. She glanced sideways at him and quickly returned her attention to the broken pavement in front of

the car. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

He rubbed his face. “I think so. I don’t seem to be hurt. Thanks for stepping in to help me.”

“No problem,” Lois said. She glanced at him again. “What happened?”

Silence answered her and she again looked quickly at him and back at the street. He was frowning, apparently at a loss for an answer. Lois hesitated an instant, a trickle of worry beginning to run along her nerves. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “I don’t know what happened.”

She didn’t answer at once, concentrating on her driving, while she mulled over the implications of that. “You don’t know how you lost your clothes?”

“No.” His voice shook slightly. “You said your name is Lois. Do you know me?”

If it were possible for one’s heart to really climb into one’s throat, hers would have choked her. “Don’t you know?”

“I can’t remember.” There was a trace of panic in his voice. “What’s wrong with me?”

Lois pulled out onto a main street, leaving Suicide Slum behind, much to her relief. The streets were only sparsely populated at the moment — probably due to the lateness of the hour, the nearly freezing temperature and the fact that people were probably still listening for news about Nightfall, Lois thought. But the man who had just smashed the huge asteroid was sitting in the car next to her, wrapped in her coat, and apparently he couldn’t remember what he had just done, or even who she was. What was she going to do?

Well, the first thing was to not panic, and to try to reassure him. She opened her mouth to speak and closed it again. Who was she supposed to be addressing — Clark or Superman? He didn’t know that she knew, and she didn’t want to tell him yet. As a matter of fact, that might be more of a problem than she had foreseen initially, but she would deal with that later. One thing at a time.

“You can’t remember how you got there?” she asked, stalling for a little more time. She needed to think, and her brain didn’t want to work.

“No.” His voice sounded more scared than ever. “I woke up in that hole and saw your light.”

This was just great. If he didn’t know how he’d gotten there, what else didn’t he remember? “Can you remember your name?”

A long silence followed, and she could almost see him struggling with his recalcitrant memory. “No.” Now his voice was really shaking. “Do you know me?”

“Your name is Clark Kent,” she said. “You’re my reporting partner at the Daily Planet. I’m going to take you back to your apartment so we can get you something to wear and then we’ll decide what to do next.”

He huddled into the seat, and another glance at him showed her that his fists were clenched in the material of the coat. “It’s all right,” she said. “You must have been in some kind of accident. That’s probably why you can’t remember. Maybe if you get some rest, your memory will come back.”

He didn’t answer, and Lois concentrated on her driving for the remainder of the trip back to his apartment. Superman was sitting beside her in her car, stark naked, except for her coat, and he didn’t remember a thing about himself. What was she going to do now?

“This is my place?” Clark asked. He looked around the cozy apartment that he had rented after his arrival in Metropolis. Lois closed and locked the door behind her and moved past him down the steps to the living area.

“Yes. Does it look familiar?”

He looked around again and then at her. “No.”

“Give it time,” Lois said. “I’ll find you some clothes.”

He was standing at the foot of the steps when she returned minutes later, but now he was holding a picture of himself with Martha and Jonathan Kent and frowning at the images. “Who are these people?”

“The tall guy in the middle is you,” Lois said. “Those are your parents.” She handed him the bundle of clothing that she had acquired from his bedroom, and a pair of his glasses. A look through them when she had discovered them in the drawer of his nightstand had informed her that the lenses were plain glass. “Here are your glasses. Why don’t you go in there and get dressed. I’ll wait for you out here.”

“Okay.” He turned and disappeared behind the partition. Lois stood uncertainly in the middle of his living room, trying to decide what she ought to do. Well, he probably should see a doctor to determine if he was hurt in any way, but a doctor might well find out that he was Superman, which might not be a good idea, especially if she introduced him as Clark Kent. Why the heck hadn’t she told him that he was Superman? If she told him now, when he remembered he would realize that she knew. On the other hand, Clark was the name that had come first to her mind when he had asked if she knew him. But if he got his memory as Clark back, he would probably remember the Superman part as well, wouldn’t he?

But probably the smart thing to do would be to call his parents. Didn’t he have an address book around here somewhere, maybe one with phone numbers?

Sure enough, it was in the drawer of one of the side tables, but when she attempted to call the number listed for Jonathan and Martha Kent, she discovered that the lines were still jammed, as they had been ever since the President had announced the Nightfall emergency. Now what was she going to do?

Well, probably she should see if she could get him to rest. Maybe that, all by itself, would help him recover his memory.

He emerged from his bedroom, dressed in the clothing that Lois had selected, his glasses in place and his hair neatly combed. He had washed the soot from his face and, if she had not known better, she would have assumed that nothing at all untoward had happened to him in the last few hours — which showed how deceptive appearances could be. Lois smiled at him in what she hoped was a reassuring way. “You look better.”

He smiled back with a trace of anxiety. “What should I do now?”

“Well, I think you should probably try to get some sleep, don’t you? Maybe if you do, you’ll start to remember things.”

“Maybe.” He hesitated. “Can you tell me about myself? You must know some things about me, if we’re partners. What do we do?”

“We’re reporters,” Lois said. “We report the news.”

“Okay.”

“I’m the senior partner,” she said.

“So I do what you tell me?”

She hesitated, and then shook her head. “I’ve worked there longer, but I’m not your boss or anything. But maybe you should follow my lead for now.”

A glimmer of a smile. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“You’re from Kansas,” she continued. “Your mom and dad are Martha and Jonathan Kent.” She nodded at the picture.

“Do I have any brothers or sisters?”

“No,” she said. “You’re an only child. I tried to call your parents while you were changing, but the lines are still jammed.”

“Why are they jammed?” he questioned. “Is there some kind of an emergency?”

“Kind of,” Lois said. Maybe now was the time to slip in some information about Superman. “Why don’t you sit down. I’ll make us some coffee and explain...”

When she had finished speaking, Clark was silent for several very long seconds. At last, he spoke. “But this asteroid, or meteor, was destroyed, right?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “Superman rammed it and broke it into pieces, but no one knows what happened to him after that.”

“Do you think he’s alive?”

Lois nodded vigorously. “I’m sure of it. Maybe he got knocked silly, or something. The collision had to have destroyed his radio. Wherever he is, I hope he shows up soon. People are worried.”

Clark was frowning. “Why? If he’s this invulnerable man, why worry about him?”

“Because we don’t know *how* invulnerable he is,” Lois said. “He can hold his breath for twenty minutes, but even he had to use an oxygen tank to breathe for a trip that far into space. It’s been —” she looked at her watch — “about three hours since he broke up Nightfall and so far there hasn’t been any sign of him.”

“I hope he’s okay,” Clark said. He ran a hand through his hair.

“So do I.” Lois got to her feet. “I need to go home and get some sleep. I’ll come by in the morning and take you to work. All right? Maybe by then you’ll remember more — or maybe seeing the newsroom will help jog some of your memory loose.”

“Do you have to leave?” he asked. The anxiety in his expression deepened. “I —”

She bit her lip. It went against the grain to let him come back to her place, but he was obviously pretty shaken up still. Would it be that terrible if she let him sleep on the couch? Or maybe the floor, she amended hastily. Her sofa wasn’t built to accommodate a man the size of Clark Kent. Uneasily, she recalled the sofa in the Honeymoon Suite. That one hadn’t really been meant for someone like him, either.

She brushed away the thought. “Well...I guess you could come back to my place,” she said, a little grudgingly. “But no funny stuff. Understand?”

His expression of shock was almost funny, and yet it was revealing, too. Somewhat reassured, she patted his shoulder. “I’m joking. Why don’t you grab some sweats and a toothbrush, and you can come along with me. At least you won’t be alone, tonight.”

Lois turned over and adjusted her pillow for the fiftieth time but it still seemed to have more lumps than she could ever recall it having before.

She squeezed her eyes closed and tried to will herself to sleep. She really needed rest, but all she could think of was Clark, stretched out on a bunch of blankets on the carpet in her living room.

What was she going to do? What if he didn’t regain his memory within a short time? Could Superman really have been injured by his collision with Nightfall? His radio transmission just before impact had indicated that the thing had been huge and even Superman must have his limits. He wasn’t all-powerful. Even he had admitted that.

Not long after Superman’s appearance, there had been an occasion when Clark had come into the newsroom pretty upset at something he’d encountered while reporting on a drive-by shooting — she thought that was what it had been, although she wasn’t sure. She’d been distracted and not listening much to him in her worry over Superman’s disappearance. He’d said something that caught her attention, however — something about if Superman couldn’t be everywhere, what good was he? He must have been pretty bothered about it, she thought, especially in the light of her new knowledge. She’d almost blown him off, but she’d told him that what Superman couldn’t do didn’t matter. It was right after that that he’d sent her to the Sewage Reclamation Facility, but while she had been there, Superman had reappeared,

so maybe he’d been going through more than she knew — something besides her theft of his story. Now, she allowed herself to hope that maybe what she had said might have helped him resolve whatever the problem had been. Maybe it made up, a little, anyway, for the enormity of her behavior. He’d apparently forgiven her outrageous conduct, anyway. At least she hoped he had.

But now, Superman was in trouble. She didn’t know if she could help him, but she had to try. It was just that she couldn’t let on that she knew more than she was admitting. But maybe if she took him to a psychologist or a psychiatrist or something, they wouldn’t do a physical exam. He was obviously physically okay — it was just his memory that was on the fritz. How did one tell if someone had a head injury? She hadn’t seen any bruises or anything during the rather thorough look she had gotten of him in the crater. The image of Clark, without a stitch on, looking like one of those anatomically correct Grecian statues that she’d seen in magazines — only better — was branded in her memory and wasn’t going to fade any time soon, if ever. His invulnerability must have protected him from any obvious physical injuries, she thought. It was only his memory that was faulty.

Still, if he didn’t remember anything by morning, maybe she should take him to see somebody. But maybe it wouldn’t matter. Maybe his memory would return and all this worrying would be for nothing.

Besides, what could have caused his memory loss? Hadn’t she read something about complete memory loss having some kind of psychological cause? — something about the mind forgetting because it didn’t *want* to remember something? What could possibly make Superman not want to remember?

She turned over again. She really needed to sleep. A look at her little bedside alarm clock told her that she was going to have to get up in a couple of hours. She was going to be dead on her feet at this rate.

She sat up. Maybe the hot chocolate cure would do some good, like it had done that night in the Honeymoon Suite.

On the thought, she snatched up her dressing gown and tiptoed to the door of her room. The faint light from the window gave her enough light to see, so that she wouldn’t trip over Clark, and she started toward the kitchen.

“Lois? What’s the matter?” Clark sat up. “Are you all right?”

She stopped. “Yeah. I can’t sleep. All the excitement this evening, I guess. Couldn’t you sleep, either?”

“Not really. I didn’t wake you up, did I?”

“No. I haven’t been to sleep. I thought I’d make some hot chocolate.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Clark said.

“Mind if I turn on a light?” Lois asked.

Immediately, one of the low table lamps blossomed to life. Clark had switched it on. Lois padded barefoot into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

As was normal, her refrigerator was sparsely supplied, but she’d picked up a half-gallon of milk and a couple of deli sandwiches last night on the way home, and the carton was still mostly full. She got out two mugs, poured milk into them and put them into the microwave. While they were heating, she located the chocolate syrup and a couple of teaspoons, and a few moments later they were seated at her kitchen table, each with a mug of hot chocolate in front of them.

Lois blew carefully on the surface of the steaming milk.

Clark tested his and took a big swallow. “That’s good,” he said.

Lois consciously refrained from staring. The stuff had to be scalding hot, judging by the steam rising from the cup, but it hadn’t bothered him at all, so Superman was still invulnerable, all right. Cautiously, she sipped her chocolate. “How do you feel?” she asked. “Any better?”

“I feel all right,” he said. “I just can’t remember anything

before you found me in that hole. How do you suppose I got there?"

"I don't know," she said, mentally crossing her fingers.

"What were you doing there, anyway?" he asked. "Don't tell me you were there by accident."

She had foreseen the question from him, sooner or later, and had the answer ready. "I was watching the sky, hoping Superman would show up, and I saw a fireball hit in that part of town," she said. "I came to see what it was. I hoped it was Superman, returning."

"A fireball?"

"Yeah. A really bright shooting star. It didn't burn up like most of them do. I saw it hit, and heard it, too. I expect it will be in the paper in the morning."

"Did you find anything?"

She shook her head. "I found you. I guess that was probably a good thing, though," she said. "That part of Suicide Slum is pretty bad."

"Judging by those two guys you pushed out of the way, I'd say you're right," Clark said. "You're pretty incredible. Did you know that?"

"Incredible isn't quite the way I'd describe myself," she said, a little dryly.

"I would," Clark said firmly. He took another swallow of chocolate. "How long have I worked with you?"

"A few months," Lois said. "Perry partnered us up a few weeks ago — on an investigation of a congressman who was selling out to a terrorist."

"What happened?" Clark asked.

"We caught the terrorist, but the congressman skated," Lois said. "At least nobody was hurt, and Superman saved the city."

"Superman again, huh," Clark said. "The guy must be pretty amazing."

"He is," Lois said. "Metropolis is lucky he decided to settle here. And, of course, he's been all over the news ever since he arrived."

"I guess he would be," Clark said. "I wonder why he decided to stay in Metropolis."

Lois wondered that, too. She took another sip of chocolate, mulling over the question. She had wondered that before but with her new knowledge of Superman's other identity the question took on more significance. Why *had* Superman decided to stay in Metropolis? If, as Clark had implied, he had traveled all over the world, what was the peculiar significance of Metropolis that made him choose it as his home base? "I guess Perry's our boss?" Clark said, breaking into her thoughts.

Lois nodded. "He's our editor."

"How did I get hired at the Planet?" Clark asked.

Naturally, he would want to know. "You came in a few months ago, peddling some story about the mating habits of the knob-tailed gecko," Lois said. "I guess you'd traveled a lot before you came to Metropolis. You told me one time that you'd learned ballroom dancing from a Nigerian princess."

"Me?"

"Yeah," Lois said. "Knowing you, I believe it. You're a pretty interesting person, yourself, you know. Anyway, Perry turned you down, but you'd overheard me discussing some mood-piece that Perry wanted me to write, and you came in the next day with it. Perry decided you had what it took after all, and hired you."

"And that was when we met?"

"That's right."

"Did we like each other right away?"

"Well, we didn't *not* like each other," Lois said. "You liked me, but I was a bit suspicious of you. I learned better before long."

"And we're friends, right?"

"Sure, we're friends."

"Are we more than friends?"

"Well, we're partners. We're close."

"How close?"

She was watching him with a trace of surprise. It was obvious that Clark hoped that she would say that they were very close. Suddenly and unexpectedly, she recalled the admiring, almost dazzled, expression on his face that first night they had worked late at the Planet. She'd warned him against getting a crush on her at the time, but maybe that crush hadn't gone away entirely, after all. Was it possible that Superman really was interested in her?

Now wasn't the time to bring that up but maybe it was something to keep in mind later, after his memory was back in place. "Not *close* close," she said, "but close. You're probably the best friend I have." She put a hand out and covered his larger one with it. "Clark, I haven't had many good relationships with other people, especially guys. But — well, that might change, someday. We haven't known each other that long, you know."

"Yeah." He smiled a little, looking down at his empty mug. "I guess so." He looked up again, meeting her eyes. "I just can't help wondering what it is you've done that makes me feel so good about you."

The simple remark nearly took her breath away, but she managed to hide the fact. "Well," she said, "I'm not anything special, but I guess friends don't have to be. I just want you to be all right. I've been thinking that maybe we should go see a doctor today, and see if he can help you figure out how to get your memory back."

"That's a good idea," he said quickly. "I guess we probably should."

"Then we will," Lois said. "When we go to the Planet, I'll tell Perry that I'm going to make an appointment for you and take you to it. All right?"

He nodded. "All right."

Lois finished the chocolate, and surprised herself by yawning. "I guess maybe the hot chocolate helped," she said. "Maybe I can get a little sleep before we have to head for work."

He nodded, and also yawned. "Me too," he said.

But once back in her bed again, her mind wouldn't lie down and relax. Too many things to think about battered each other in her brain, like driftwood in a whirlpool, and at last she gave up. Perhaps if she just rested and considered each problem she would at least get a little relaxation. She was going to be a walking zombie in the morning, but sometimes nights like this happened. Well, she amended, there had never been a night quite like this one, but the principle still applied.

Superman was attracted to her. More than just attracted. That part stood out clearly, just from Clark's attitude. She had tried, ever since he had appeared, to get Superman's attention, but he had kept himself at something of a distance. He was friendly with her, but had always maintained a slight formality. Now why? It was obvious that he really liked her a great deal — when his defenses weren't up. What was the problem?

She considered that, trying to put some journalistic objectivity into her ruminations. Why wouldn't Superman be willing to show his attraction to her?

And after considering for a moment, she realized that at least some of the answer wasn't difficult at all. Superman quite simply couldn't afford to let anyone see that he was interested in her.

What, after all, would the paparazzi do, if they thought Superman had a girlfriend? The same thing that they would do to him, if they knew who he really was. They would besiege her, harass her, follow her everywhere, intrude into the most private aspects of her life, and generally destroy any hope of privacy she might ever have. And not only that, she realized. Superman's fans would do the same, and, more importantly, it would bring her to

the notice of anyone who had reason to wish him harm. A girlfriend would be a target for every nut, every extortionist, gang lord or petty crook who wanted something from Superman. He couldn't afford to let anyone see that he regarded her differently than any other casual friend.

So part of the riddle was explained.

But why hadn't he made any attempt to approach her? It wasn't as if she had made any secret of her attraction to him.

Only he *had* tried, she realized abruptly. Clark Kent had shown her in the beginning that he was interested in her — and she had rebuffed him. Ever since, he had withdrawn a little, but only a little. He'd continued to treat her in a friendly way — except when he'd sent her, very deservedly, to the Sewage Reclamation Facility — and had tried to become her friend. He had been trying to get close to her another way, that sneaky...

Well, no, not really sneaky, she amended. But why hadn't he simply come to her and let her know that Superman was Clark and was interested in her? He must know that she wouldn't have rebuffed him once she knew.

Once she thought about that, the answer was obvious, too.

In college, there had been that computer nerd — what had his name been? Randall Loomis, that was it. Randall had had a major crush on her and followed her around, practically drooling over her. She'd hated it.

Of course, it wasn't quite the same for her and Superman, but the principle applied. She could feel the flush rising in her cheeks when she considered that. Randall had driven her nearly insane for several months with his star-struck adoration, and it wasn't as if he even knew her that well. Several of her friends had teased her about her "groupie," and it had been pretty annoying. Eventually, Randall graduated and transferred to MIT for his graduate work, and Lois had been glad to see him go; but looking back on it was an eye-opening experience.

She had treated Superman much like Randall had treated her, but she didn't treat Clark Kent that way. And there, she thought, was her answer.

Superman wanted her to like him for who he was, not what he was. He didn't want a groupie. He wanted a girlfriend.

Lois turned over and tried to knead her pillow into a more comfortable shape. No wonder she couldn't sleep. She was learning a number of things about herself tonight, and they weren't particularly gratifying things. But at least she could make some effort to correct them.

Getting to know Clark for who he was wouldn't be that difficult, after all. Clark was a pretty nice guy. In fact, he was one of the nicest guys she had ever known. Was that Superman's real personality?

She had speculated about that before, and now, facing some unpleasant facts about herself, she could see Clark with a new clarity.

She had looked upon Superman as the perfect love object, the perfect man, who possessed no flaws. But how realistic was that image? Like Randall's image of her, it couldn't possibly be real. No one was that perfect. Clark certainly wasn't, and if she thought about what she had known of Superman up until that night in the Honeymoon Suite, she really hadn't known very much. He was careful not to let anyone learn too much about him, and now she was beginning to understand why.

He had parents who didn't possess his abilities, who were as vulnerable as any other human being. He had friends that he cared about. If Superman was to be effective in what he did, the only safety for his friends and family was for no one to know who Superman really was. Which meant that Superman was actually Clark Kent, not the other way around. Superman was really the farmboy from Smallville, who somehow also possessed fantastic, super human abilities, who also had feelings, strengths and weaknesses like any other man. Superman wasn't perfect by

any standards. He was simply a good man who was trying to do the best he could. And for someone with Clark's abilities, that best was very good indeed.

Well, now that she had a pretty good idea of what he was really looking for, maybe she could make a few changes, she thought, a little drowsily. She couldn't change who she was, but she could certainly drop the starry-eyed cheerleader role. Now that the Nightfall crisis was past, once Clark regained his memory, maybe she could treat Superman differently, and maybe, once she got to know Clark better, something more than friendship could begin to grow. That was the last thought she had before dropping into sleep, and the sense of something settled carried through into her dreams.

Of course, Lois overslept. She awoke with the sun high in the sky. It was a ray of light through a chink in the blinds that woke her.

A glance at her bedside alarm clock told the story. She must have shut it off without consciously hearing it. The hour was so far advanced that she might as well take her time. Perry was going to be mad no matter what she did.

Clark was sound asleep on the floor. Well, *on* the floor wasn't exactly the right descriptor. He was hovering several inches above the carpet, and the sight was startling enough that she stared, riveted, for several seconds.

Quietly, she turned and retraced her steps into the bedroom. "Clark!" she called. "Are you awake?"

There was a soft thump in the living room and a moment later Clark's voice answered her, sounding a little ruffled. "Yeah."

"What was that crash? Are you okay?"

"Uh — yeah. I guess I must have knocked something over, but I don't see anything."

"Maybe you bumped against the coffee table." She stepped out into the living room to see Clark standing in the middle of the room in his sweats, his dark hair tousled.

"Maybe," Clark said doubtfully. "Did you feel an earthquake?"

"I don't think so," Lois said. "I just got out of bed. We overslept. Perry's going to kill us."

"We'd better hurry," Clark said.

Lois shook her head. "Get dressed," she told him. "It's not going to make any difference if we rush. I'm going to make a call and see if I can get an appointment for you with somebody. She's a psychotherapist that my sister saw a couple of years ago. Lucy said that she really helped her sort through a lot of issues. While you're talking to her, maybe I can do a few interviews with people about their reactions to the Nightfall situation. It'll make a good excuse for being late."

Clark eyed her thoughtfully but went past her toward the bathroom, carrying his clothing. Lois reached for the phone.

But the lines were still jammed. That seemed a little odd, but Lois put down the phone with a sense of resolution. If she couldn't get through any other way, she and Clark would just go over to Dr. Friskin's office and walk in. At the very least, maybe she could get an appointment for Clark later in the day. It was kind of an emergency, after all.

Breakfast was Pop Tarts and hard-boiled eggs, washed down with more hot chocolate. Clark didn't comment on the cuisine, either because he was too polite to do so or because he didn't know any better. Lois didn't ask. They left her apartment some time later, and rode the elevator to the ground floor. Jimmy's car was still parked across the street and she and Clark got into it.

"I'll have to fill Jimmy's tank for him before we go to the office," Lois remarked. "I should have taken it back last night, but it was past midnight when we got back here, so it probably wouldn't have mattered anyway."

"Who's Jimmy?" Clark asked.

"The office gofer and computer guy," Lois explained. "I borrowed his car last night. He's a good kid."

"Oh," Clark was looking around. "Look. There's some kind of demonstration." He pointed. Lois followed his pointing finger to where a number of persons with homemade signs were gathered at an intersection that they passed.

"The End is Near," one of the signs read. Another announced: "Judgment Day — Is Your Conscience Clear?"

"Huh," Lois said. "I saw a bunch like that yesterday evening, but it was because of Nightfall."

They passed the demonstrators and turned off of Carter Avenue onto Allegheny Boulevard. The traffic was oddly light, but another crowd of people was grouped on the next corner, sporting similar signs. A bearded man, wearing some kind of robes out of a Dungeons and Dragons game, as far as Lois could tell, had lit a brazier, and purple colored smoke was rising from it as he waved his hands over it. From the way his mouth moved, she guessed that he was chanting some sort of spell or something.

"That's strange," Clark said.

"You see all kinds in Metropolis," Lois said.

However, as they traveled, they saw more and more of the strange little gatherings. Lois glanced at Clark, unwilling to voice her uneasiness for her companion's sake. Clark didn't comment, either, but he was obviously paying attention to the unusual sight.

The building where Dr. Friskin had her office had a large parking lot in the rear, but there were only a few cars present. Lois found a spot close to the building and she and Clark got out. As they approached the entrance, a tall woman bearing a sign that advised them to repent approached. Lois shoved Clark hastily through the revolving door. "Dr. Friskin's office is on the second floor. Let's take the stairs. It's faster."

"Sure." Clark glanced back over his shoulder at the woman, frowning slightly, but he followed her up the stairs.

Considering the small number of cars in the lot, Lois half-expected the office to be closed, but it wasn't. A receptionist looked up from the task of filing her nails when they approached.

"We'd like to make an appointment," Lois said.

The woman laid down her nail file. "When would you like the appointment?" she inquired.

"As soon as possible," Lois said firmly. "It's an emergency."

The receptionist cocked her head, appearing to look Clark over, and then smiled. "Just a moment," she said. "We have an opening immediately, so if now is a good time —"

"Now is fine," Lois said quickly.

The woman thrust a clipboard with a sheet of paper and a pen dangling from it at Lois. "Fill this out," she said.

"Something's wrong," Clark said, as they moved to the sofa.

"You don't worry about it," Lois said. "I'll do some checking while you're talking to the doctor. Let's fill this thing out. Do you remember your Social Security number? No, what am I saying? Just fill out as much as you know. I'll help, but you can't expect to know a lot since you have amnesia."

They finished within a few minutes, and as they did so, a blond woman stepped into the room. She looked questioningly at Lois and Clark.

"I'm Dr. Friskin. Which of you is the patient?"

"He is," Lois said. "He's lost his memory."

Dr. Friskin's eyebrows went up. "Why don't you come back to my office, Mr. —?"

"Kent," Lois said. She gave Clark a light push and a reassuring smile. "I'll be right here waiting for you."

After Clark had followed Dr. Friskin into the other room, Lois approached the receptionist's station. The woman had resumed filing her nails, and was perusing a copy of the Daily Planet that lay open on her desk, but she looked up as Lois leaned on the counter. "Yes?"

"I was just wondering..." Lois hesitated. "Is something wrong? I haven't had any chance to listen to the news since last night, with my friend in this shape. Has Superman shown up yet — and what happened to Nightfall?"

"You didn't hear?" The receptionist closed the paper and turned it to face her. The headlines leaped out at her: "Nightfall Asteroid On Course." Lois stared at the headline, and a hot-ice surge of fright washed through her. But EPRAD had reported that Nightfall had been shattered! How could they possibly have made a mistake like that?

"What happened?" she asked.

"It looks like Superman broke up the asteroid," the woman said, "but there's a piece about three miles wide still coming at us. It's going to hit us in about a day and a half if they can't blast it with a missile. There was a news conference about it, this morning."

"Or if Superman doesn't show up," Lois murmured.

"Pretty much." The receptionist laid down her nail file. "I'm scared."

"Yeah," Lois said. "So am I."

So Clark's terrible risk had been for nothing. Or not for nothing, perhaps, but the danger to Earth was still real and coming closer every second. What was the whole world worth? If she didn't tell him what she knew, and the world died, it would be her fault. She had to tell him.

But she had already told him that he was Clark Kent and it hadn't changed anything. Would telling him that he was Superman be any different?

That was a good question, and she didn't know the answer.

Clark emerged from Dr. Friskin's office almost an hour later, and Dr. Friskin followed him out. She smiled at Clark. "Why don't you wait, and I'll speak with Ms. Lane."

Clark nodded and went to sit on the sofa. Lois got to her feet.

Dr. Friskin held the door for her. "Why don't you step into my office, Ms. Lane. Mr. Kent has given me permission to share his information with you."

Lois crossed the room quickly and turned as the doctor closed the door behind them. "Can you help him?"

"Please sit down, Ms. Lane," Dr. Friskin said. She went to sit in the room's only armchair. Lois glanced around and reluctantly took a seat on what was obviously the patient's couch.

Dr. Friskin smiled reassuringly. "Mr. Kent had an interesting story to tell me about how you found him, Ms. Lane."

"I'm not surprised," Lois said. "It was kind of tense for a bit."

"You found him in Suicide Slum, in a large hole in the street."

Lois nodded. "Yes, I did."

"With no clothing on."

"That's right. He told you that?"

"Yes, he did. Mr. Kent is anxious to regain his memory. He was very cooperative."

"That's Clark all over," Lois said. "Do you think you can help him?"

Dr. Friskin shrugged. "The human mind is a complicated thing, Ms. Lane. It's capable of amazing reasoning and an equally amazing capacity for deceiving itself."

Lois scowled at her. "That isn't much of an answer."

"Mr. Kent," Dr. Friskin said, "has a form of memory loss that we refer to as 'hysterical amnesia.' It frequently occurs when the subject wants or needs to forget some traumatic event in his life. Whether he regains his memory immediately depends on whether he can resolve the conflict that has produced the need to forget." The psychotherapist folded her hands in her lap. "It's my guess that anxiety about this asteroid may be a factor. In any case, he should be surrounded by familiar things and familiar people. It will require patience. He isn't doing this purposely."

"I know that," Lois said. "In other words, he has to decide which is more important — his memories, or his reason for forgetting."

"That's one way of putting it," the doctor said. "Once the crisis is past, he'll probably remember on his own, however."

"That," Lois said, "might be too late." She stood up, unwilling to explain to the obviously puzzled psychotherapist. "Thank you, Doctor. You've given me something to think about."

And so she had part of her answer, Lois thought as she joined Clark in the waiting room.

He had forgotten who and what he was, and there had to be a reason for it. She probably didn't need to look very far for the reason.

She glanced once more at the front page of the Daily Planet, with the screaming headlines. She was no psychologist, but plunging head first into a piece of rock the size of Nightfall, moving at the speed of thirty thousand miles per hour, had to be pretty scary, even for Superman. He had gone on his mission, in spite of his fear, and had broken the asteroid into pieces, but it was apparent to her that his action had not been without cost. He had made it back to Earth, but it had to have been a close thing. He had come in so fast that his uniform had been burned away. And how about his oxygen? Those tanks didn't have an infinite capacity, and he'd been out there for quite a while. He'd had a six-hour supply, but what if the tanks had been damaged by the collision, and his oxygen had been running out as well? What if he'd almost died? That might be a pretty good reason to be scared.

Clark would go back, she knew, unless he was literally unable to do so. If he couldn't remember that he was Superman, he wouldn't have to go back. What if his sense of self-preservation, whatever that might be, had forced him to forget? That very probably was the explanation for his amnesia — and simply telling him that he had the power to do the job wasn't very likely to help.

But if he didn't remember, they were in plenty of trouble. A strike by a meteor even three miles across was likely to have worldwide effects, beyond the actual direct physical damage of the impact. Didn't some scientists say that it might have been a huge meteor that caused the extinction of the dinosaurs? That sounded pretty drastic to her.

So what was she going to do? What was likely to get through to Clark if simply telling him the truth wouldn't do it?

She summoned up a smile for her partner, who was waiting patiently for her. Clearly, simply telling him that he was Superman and that, to save Earth, he had to go back after a chunk of Nightfall one more time wasn't likely to make much headway. If anything, Clark's defenses were likely to clamp down even harder on his errant memory. Somehow, she had to convince Clark that failing to regain his memory was worse for him than facing down Nightfall. Only how was she going to do that?

She was still mulling over the question when she pulled Jimmy's car into the parking lot of the Daily Planet, some fifteen minutes later.

The streets hadn't been exactly empty of traffic but the usual crush produced by afternoon rush hour was decidedly absent. The parking lot was also sparsely populated, and Lois found a parking spot with no trouble at all. They rode the elevator up to the third floor and disembarked at the newsroom, only to step out into an area that seemed almost alien to Lois. The news floor was usually bustling with activity, with phones ringing and people hurrying here and there as they attended to their job of reporting the news.

The floor was quiet. Only a few of the staff were anywhere evident, and those that were seemed to be rooted to their spots as they watched the televisions, set here and there about the office.

On each one, Lois could see graphic illustrations of the chunk of Nightfall and its position in relation to Earth. On each one commentators could be heard, speaking in voices that could not entirely conceal their shock and fear, and on each one she could see a superimposed countdown to the time of impact. The door to Perry's office was closed, and through the glass of the windows, she could see Jimmy speaking vehemently with their boss.

"Come on," she told Clark. "We might as well face the music."

Clark nodded and followed her down the steps that gave them a short cut to the main newsroom floor. Lois cut directly through the room, making only the barest needed detours to avoid desks, chairs, carts and so forth that appeared to have been abruptly abandoned by their users at some time, and not reclaimed. With only the briefest of knocks on the door, she thrust it open and gestured Clark through. Perry, visibly irritated, turned from whatever conversation that he was having with Jimmy to face her. "Geez Louise, Lois! This was a private conversation!"

"Sorry," Lois said briskly. "This is important."

"So was what we were talkin' about," Perry said. "Where've you been? The office tried to get hold of you this morning, but the lines were jammed."

"I had an emergency last night," Lois said. "Jimmy, your car is in the parking lot, and here are the keys." She extended them to him.

"Thanks." Jimmy took the proffered item. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Sort of, but not exactly," she said. "I saw that fireball hit and went looking for it."

"In Suicide Slum?" Perry got to his feet. "Lois, are you crazy?"

"No," Lois said. "I thought it might have been Superman coming in fast. I found where it hit, but whatever caused it was gone. The only person there was Clark. The only thing I can figure out is that he went looking for it, too — and got mugged. He'd been robbed and must have been hit on the head, because he can't remember anything before I arrived. I got him out of there."

"Great shades of Elvis!" Perry turned immediately to Clark. "Are you all right, son?"

"I think so," Clark said. "I don't seem to be hurt. I just can't remember anything."

"Nothing?" Jimmy asked, incredulously.

Clark shook his head.

"I took him to see a psychotherapist this morning," Lois continued determinedly. "She says Clark should be exposed to familiar people and places, so I figured the best thing I could do would be to bring him to work." She turned to her partner. "This is Perry White, our editor, and this is Jimmy Olsen, our resident computer expert and general gofer."

"Pleased to meet you," Clark said.

"Yeah," Jimmy said. "I just usually call you CK—CK."

Clark nodded. Jimmy turned back to Lois. "Where was the place you found him? What did you find?"

"There was a big hole in the street," Lois said, "I didn't really try to look very hard. It was dark and people were starting to get interested in Clark and me. I wanted to get out of there as fast as I could."

"Like I was saying, Chief," Jimmy said quickly, looking at his editor, "I don't see how it could possibly have been part of Nightfall. It wouldn't be able to get here ahead of the other pieces, but what if Superman made it back? We've got to go look!"

Perry appeared to be thinking, and then he got slowly to his feet. "It can't hurt," he said. "I'll get my coat. Where was this place, Lois?"

"It was over near the western border of Suicide Slum," Lois told him. "I'm not sure of the exact street but there's a billboard

there that advertises the Metro Liner. Whatever came down there crashed right through the sign.” She hesitated. “If you find — well, anything, let me know right away, would you? If Superman came back there’s still a chance.” She resolutely did not look at Clark.

“You’ll be the first to know,” Perry said. Lois thought he looked grim. “I just hope it really was him.”

“Me too,” Jimmy said. “I don’t want to rely on a rocket.”

“I don’t think anyone does,” Perry said. “Including EPRAD.” He pushed open the door. “Let’s go, Jimmy.”

“Everything I’ve read about this guy —” Clark waved generally at his computer, “he’s unreal! He says he isn’t from Earth, and has all these powers —” He looked at Lois. “Are you sure of all this?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I am. I’ve flown with him, remember. Superman is pretty amazing. He went to stop Nightfall and something happened to him. I just hope he’s all right.” She gave her partner a worried look.

“You sound like you care a lot about him,” Clark said.

“Everybody cares about Superman,” Lois told him. She frowned thoughtfully at him. “He’s a friend of yours, too. Did anything you read bring anything back?”

He grimaced faintly. “Not yet.”

“If the rocket doesn’t succeed,” Lois said, “he’s all we’ve got left. Everything we know could be destroyed. I hope Jimmy and Perry come up with something. If everyone is looking for him, maybe we’ll have a chance of finding him.”

He nodded, obviously not connecting what she was trying to say.

“You and he are good friends,” Lois repeated, watching him out of the corner of her eye.

Clark frowned, obviously making a heroic effort to recall. “I don’t remember.”

Lois sighed internally and tabled the subject for the moment. Perhaps she could try another angle. “I tried to contact your parents last night but the lines were jammed. I tried again a little while ago, but no luck. If you could talk to them, maybe they could help. They’re good people, and they love you.”

“Where do they live?” Clark questioned. “Maybe we could go to their place.”

“I’m afraid not. They live on a farm in Kansas. You were raised a farm kid.”

“I was?”

“Uh huh. Your hometown is called Smallville. I was there, once. It’s a nice little place. We went during the Corn Festival. You and I square danced. And we stopped a bunch of crazy government agents from trying to attack Superman with some kind of rock that the leader thought would hurt him.”

“A rock?” Clark said, mildly curious. “How could a rock hurt a guy as powerful as this Superman is supposed to be?”

“I don’t know,” Lois said, wondering seriously about it for the first time. “I never saw it, if it ever really existed. The head bad guy was named Jason Trask. He was going to kill both of us, but you managed to break out of the back of the van where they’d tied you up and tackled him.”

“I did?”

“Uh huh. He tried to shoot you in the back and the Sheriff — Rachel Harris — had to shoot him to save your life. Do you remember her?”

Clark shook his head. “No.”

“I think she had a crush on you,” Lois said, watching him closely. “She’s a very pretty girl.”

“I don’t remember,” Clark said, sounding a little frustrated. “To have the end of the world coming and not know what I’ve missed —”

“You’ve traveled the world,” Lois said. “You’ve been just

about everywhere. You speak several languages — but eventually you decided to settle down here in Metropolis and go to work for the Planet. You’re one of Perry’s best reporters — after me, of course.” She smiled at him.

“Can you tell me how I joined the Planet?” he asked. “You said something about a knob-tailed gecko?”

“Oh, that,” Lois said. “That was an article you wrote for the Borneo Gazette. It was the article about the old theater that got you the spot.” She got to her feet. “Come on. Let’s take a walk and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Outside, the traditional landscape of Metropolis in winter was very much evident. The sky was gray, with clouds beginning to creep across the sun. People passed by them, huddled in coats and hats against the damp, cold wind that gusted down the streets, but one thing was different. Here and there, groups of people stood about, looking up at the sky. Lois glanced up once, almost irresistibly drawn to it before she shook herself sharply. That was silly, she knew. The chunk of Nightfall was out there somewhere, but it was still much too far away to be seen. By the time it could be seen by the naked eye, no one was going to be looking. They would all be huddling in shelters somewhere, hoping to survive the impact.

She and Clark walked down the sidewalk, side by side. Lois pushed her hands into the pockets of her coat against the chill, noting that Clark’s coat wasn’t even buttoned, and her partner seemed oblivious to the temperature. What would it be like, she wondered, to be Superman, and be impervious to the daily discomforts that afflicted the human race? Had Clark ever known, or had he always had the powers that Superman had demonstrated when he arrived in Metropolis?

“Don’t you have family?” Clark asked her suddenly.

Her thoughts had been so far away that his voice nearly made her jump. “Huh?”

“Family,” Clark repeated. “I mean, don’t you have a mother and father, maybe brothers and sisters?”

“Kind of,” Lois said. “My parents are divorced. My sister is going to school all the way across the country. I tried to get hold of them, but the lines are still jammed. I’ll try again — later, I guess. My family isn’t close.”

“Why?” He was looking at her in some surprise. “I thought family was — well, family.”

“Not my family,” Lois said. “I ran as far from my family as I could. My mother and dad fought constantly while they were together. I just about single-handedly raised my sister after they broke up. Daddy never came around and Mother was always —” She broke off.

“Always what?” Clark asked.

Lois didn’t answer for a moment, and then she shrugged. “What does it matter? My mother is an alcoholic. After my dad left, she spent most of the time drunk. She dried out a few years ago, except for a couple of times when she backslid. At least if Nightfall hits, there won’t be much booze around for her to fall back on.”

“I shouldn’t have asked,” Clark said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Lois said. “It doesn’t matter, anymore. I just didn’t want to be like them. I guess that’s why I’m such a workaholic. I wanted to be successful, and prove to my dad —” She stopped suddenly.

Clark didn’t ask what she was going to say this time. “But you are successful,” he said slowly. “It’s not your fault that your mom and dad had problems.”

“I guess not,” she said. “You know how kids are, though — or maybe you don’t, now. Kids blame themselves for all kinds of things that they shouldn’t. For a long time, I thought I was the problem.”

“How could you have been?” he asked. “People don’t break

up over their kids. Not usually, anyway.”

Lois shrugged uncomfortably. “I don’t know. Put like that, it doesn’t really make much sense, does it?”

“Not really,” he said.

“Out of the mouths of —” She didn’t complete the sentence. Why the heck was she telling Clark all this stuff, anyway? It wasn’t any of his business, but somehow it didn’t seem to matter. Maybe, since he couldn’t remember anything about himself, it made him safe in a way. That didn’t make much sense either, of course, but for some reason she really didn’t seem to care anymore.

“It doesn’t matter what your parents were,” Clark said. “You don’t need to prove anything to anybody. I saw a bunch of your articles while I was reading about Superman. You’re a great reporter.”

She patted his arm. “Thanks.”

“No, I mean it,” Clark said. “If I were Superman, I’d be flattered and proud that someone like you thought so much of me.”

He probably wasn’t aware of the faintly wistful tone in his voice. Lois didn’t answer, but her mind was busy. It was obvious, when he wasn’t on his guard, that Clark thought a great deal of her. A lot more than he ever let on in day-to-day life. “I suppose a lot of people do,” she said. “Superman is worth it. He gives people something to build some hope around.”

“Yeah, I guess someone like that would,” Clark said.

“If the rocket fails,” Lois said, “a lot of people are going to die if Superman doesn’t show up. Can you imagine what it will do to the planet? The destruction will be beyond anything we can imagine, I suspect. We’re talking about the end of civilization.”

“They must think it’s going to work,” Clark said, sounding, Lois thought, a little worried. “Don’t they program satellites to orbit the Moon and Mars and stuff all the time?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “But they have accidents, too. They lose satellites that malfunction because of things they didn’t expect. Sometimes someone goofs up on the programming. This time everyone on Earth is depending on them. They have to try, but what if someone makes a mistake because of all the pressure? It’s happened before.”

Clark didn’t answer. Lois bit her lip. What was she going to do? If she told Clark that he was Superman, would it help him regain his memory, or would it scare him so much that he wouldn’t listen to her, maybe make him sink back into deeper denial? She had to keep trying, she knew. If he hadn’t recalled his identity by tomorrow, before the asteroid was supposed to hit, she would have to tell him and hope that Superman’s sense of responsibility would force him to remember, but it wasn’t a sure thing by any means. In the meantime, she had to keep working to find some way to recall his buried memories. What would be likely to get through to him? What mattered to him more than his fear of what had nearly happened to him?

The little that she remembered from the psychology class that she had been required to take in college wasn’t a lot of help, but now she dredged her memory for any scraps of information. What had her professor said? There were supposed to be three parts of the psyche, according to Freud: the id, the ego, and the superego. She was probably oversimplifying, but, if she remembered correctly, the ego was the thinking part, the id was the emotions, the wants and needs, and the superego was supposed to be the conscience. She’d always suspected that Freud had been making a lot of things up as he went along, but if he was even partly right, it meant that the part of Clark’s mind — assuming that a Kryptonian’s mind was anything like a human’s — that was suppressing his memory was the emotional part, the part that felt rather than the part that thought. So appealing to his rational mind wasn’t going to help a lot. Somehow, she had to appeal to his emotions in such a way that it was more important

for his memories to return than it was to suppress his memory of Superman. But how was she supposed to do that?

A check of her watch told her that it was near to quitting time. Where had the time gone? Looking around at the people simply standing in place, looking up at the sky, as if there were the slightest chance of seeing the destruction that was rushing toward them, made her shake her head. This was getting no one anywhere. “Let’s go back to the office,” she said. “Maybe Jimmy and Perry are back. Besides, I need to close up my desk for the night.”

Obediently, Clark followed her as they turned back toward the Daily Planet.

The sun was dropping behind the buildings to the west as they left the Daily Planet an hour later.

“Where are we going?” Clark asked.

“My place,” Lois said. “I don’t have a car, and I don’t see any taxis, so we’re going to have to walk. It isn’t that far, if we cut through the park.”

Clark looked dubiously around at the darkening city. The streetlights had not yet come on and the clouds that had been gathering since about two o’clock definitely obscured what was left of the waning sunlight. Lois struck out down the sidewalk with a determined stride.

“Come on. The quicker we get to my place, the better off we’ll be.”

Clark kept up with her easily, and she noted again that his coat wasn’t buttoned up. Clark obviously didn’t feel the bite of the wind that gusted intermittently down the streets. He would certainly survive the impact of the asteroid, but how would he feel if all his friends and his parents ended up dead? Not good, Lois was sure, but apparently that wasn’t getting through to the part of his mind that was blocking his memories. What, she wondered, striding vigorously along, would get through to it? If only Jonathan and Martha Kent were available, it might make a difference, but trying to get hold of them had so far proven futile. The traffic jam on the phone lines had been slowly clearing, but a call to Kansas apparently wasn’t in the cards.

It was growing darker by the minute, as the sun sank farther behind the buildings, and the streetlights began to glimmer. Lois kept up a brisk walk against the chill. The quicker they got back to her apartment, the quicker she could warm up. So far, the criminal element of Metropolis hadn’t made itself particularly evident during the crisis, but she had no doubts that some of Metropolis’s less upstanding citizens were doing their best to take advantage of the situation. She had no wish to be the target of a mugger.

Three blocks down, they approached Centennial Park and Lois unhesitatingly took her favorite shortcut. One of the lights along the walk was out, she noted. The bulb had been smashed, probably by some punk with a rock who had nothing better to do, but she knew her way perfectly even in the dusk. Besides, there were lights farther along the path, placed there some years ago as a crime-prevention measure.

Sure enough, a moment later the next light came into view, glowing warm and yellow against the backdrop of leafless trees. Here and there, big evergreens stood out, tall and black against the sky, tossing now in the growing breeze. Lois hurried along, Clark keeping up with her easily.

Another light was out some distance ahead. Lois kept to the center of the path, and the unbidden thought crossed her mind that the park might not be such a good place to be, tonight. The police were patrolling the streets in greater numbers because of the possibility of rioting, although there hadn’t been much trouble so far, at least in Metropolis. That, however, could change if people thought that there was no way to stop Nightfall. And the increased police presence on the streets meant that there were

fewer in places like the park.

Clark moved up beside her and in the dimness his large presence was unexpectedly reassuring. They moved ahead, through the dark patch, and Lois felt the knot in her middle relax as they approached the next light. Clark glanced back at the area they had just left. "There's somebody back there," he said.

Lois also glanced back, although she could see nothing. Still, if Clark said someone was there, she believed him. She speeded up her walk, one hand on Clark's elbow. Her partner kept pace with her, but she noticed him glancing over his shoulder more frequently.

"Is someone still there?" she asked.

"There's a couple of guys back there," Clark said. "I think they're following us."

Lois increased her speed, and behind them the sound of running footsteps became audible. They were literally within sight of the street when two figures appeared suddenly, one on either side of the walkway, and she saw the glint of a streetlight off of metal.

Lois came to a stop. Clark stopped beside her and for a short moment she and Clark looked at the two men who faced them.

The larger of the two held the knife. He was taller than Clark, and most of his face was concealed by a ragged muffler. A pair of shaggy eyebrows and a prominent forehead gave Lois the entirely unexpected vision of Lurch. The smaller man hung back, but she could see some kind of club gripped in his hands.

"Hand over the purse, lady," the taller man said, his voice distorted by the cloth.

Lois took a step back. A powerful hand gripped her wrist, pulling her farther back, and Clark stepped in front of her. "Leave the lady alone," he said.

The smaller man laughed. "How about you hand over your wallet?" he suggested. He moved to the left, apparently intending to come at them from the side. Lois bent her knees, balancing on the balls of her feet.

The bigger man stepped lightly forward, the knife darting out in a slash at Clark's midsection. Lois couldn't see what he did, as the smaller man stepped in, swinging his club at Clark's head.

The club bounced. Literally. And Clark ignored it completely as he stepped in to parry the knife thrust. There was a brief scuffle between Clark and the man with the knife. Lois moved, taking advantage of the smaller man's surprise, and seized the club with both hands. She drove her heel downward into his instep and twisted the club, and abruptly found herself in possession of the weapon.

And suddenly, the two assailants were fleeing back into the dimness of the park, leaving Clark and Lois in possession of the field. Lois dropped the club, and looked quickly at Clark. He had turned to look at her, and for a moment they stared at each other.

"I think," Lois said, after a long second, "that I'm not taking any more shortcuts for a while."

"Yeah," Clark said. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. Let's get out of here."

"Good idea," Clark said.

The street was literally only about twenty feet away. They emerged out onto the sidewalk and Lois set a quick pace toward her apartment, but as she hurried along, her mind was busy.

Clark hadn't known that he couldn't be hurt. He could have turned and run, but he hadn't. That erased any questions she might have been harboring about his courage. He had taken on a man with a knife and another with a club for her. That he had been protecting her she didn't doubt for an instant.

The realization left her somewhat at a loss. Clark had proven, in that short, violent encounter, something that she hadn't really internalized. He cared about her enough to risk his life for her. He had faced down a man with a knife to defend her.

Superman was in there, somewhere. The right sort of

motivation could probably bring him out. And it was beginning to dawn on her what that motivation might be.

As they hurried toward her apartment house, Lois's mind was busy. The events in the park had set up a new train of thought, and she wasn't sure how to deal with them.

Clark Kent obviously cared a lot about her. As a matter of fact, what had just happened had shoved reality into her face with unmerciful clarity.

Clark had been willing to sacrifice his life for her. That was a humbling and rather frightening thought. Her greenhorn partner — who was actually a darned good newspaperman in his own right, she acknowledged privately — hadn't hesitated an instant to step in the way when danger had threatened her, just as Superman had stepped forward at once when Nightfall threatened Earth. That was not the behavior of a selfish man. It was the behavior of a man who felt deeply, whether for the whole Earth, as Superman, or for her, as Clark.

Even after all her earlier reasoning, a few doubts about Superman's motivations had remained, although she couldn't logically think of any good reason for them. It was probably just her natural skepticism of anyone's apparently selfless motives about anything, she told herself cynically. She had initially suspended such feelings about Superman until she had discovered that he masqueraded as an ordinary human, and then they had surfaced. It hadn't been until she thought he was lost that she had revisited them and concluded that his real motives might be innocent and perhaps, indeed, a matter of survival. Trask, after all, had wanted to kill Superman, even with every evidence that the visitor from another world was not only harmless, but beneficial, to Earth. And Trask certainly wasn't the only nut out there. If she could doubt Superman's motives, considering that she knew him in both his guises, how much more could someone like Trask, or, for that matter, ordinary Joe Citizen, distrust him simply because he was different?

One would think, she thought, that the evidence would now be beyond question, but apparently the chronically suspicious could even find a way around that. She'd heard some pompous talking head, right after the discovery of Nightfall, pontificating on the possibility that Superman's home civilization had actually sent the meteor to destroy the Earth so that they could conquer it and loot it of its resources. And there were probably some people out there who believed it, too.

But she didn't. She hadn't, even at the time she heard it. The whole premise was ridiculous on the face of it. If Superman's species, as a whole, possessed his incredible powers, not to mention the technology to travel between star systems, such measures wouldn't even be necessary. They could simply move in and take what they wanted, and no force on Earth could stop them. Heck, no force on Earth could stop Superman now, if he were to suddenly decide to make himself the ruler of the planet. But instead, he had risked his life for them.

Besides, she just couldn't see Clark as an evil invader. That had seemed unlikely, even when she had first made her big discovery about him. A lot of questions had swirled about in her mind, but whatever his purpose was in being here, she hadn't even considered that he might want to harm the people of Earth. It just wasn't in the character of either of his personae.

She had wondered why he had chosen to stay in Metropolis. Now she was beginning to have an inkling of the reason.

Glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, she wondered if it could be that simple. She had guessed, last night, that Clark didn't want a starry-eyed groupie, but a girlfriend. He'd traveled the world before settling in Metropolis, if what she had picked up from casual conversation was at all accurate. What if the reason was *her*?

Now that was a really scary thought.

Ever since his first appearance, the incredible super man from Krypton had been somewhere on the plane of a rock star or an actor. Teenage girls had all kinds of fantasies about their idols, all the while knowing that the person in question was far beyond their reach. But Clark Kent was all too thoroughly within her reach, if all the indications were right. And that meant that Superman was, as well.

They hurried up the steps of her apartment house and Clark courteously opened the door for her. She gave him a nervous smile and entered ahead of him.

All this was conjecture, she knew. And besides, if Nightfall hit, tomorrow, none of it would matter. What she had to concentrate on was getting Clark to remember his other self. If that succeeded, then she could deal with the implications of Clark, and Superman, being available to her if she wanted him. It might be a dilemma, but it would be nothing in comparison to the problems that she and the rest of the world would be dealing with otherwise.

As they traversed the short hallway to the elevator, Mr. Tracewski emerged from the manager's apartment, his toolbox in hand, and followed them. Lois held the door for him, and he smiled mechanically at her. "Hello, Ms. Lane."

"Hello, Mr. Tracewski." She nodded to her partner. "This is my partner at the Planet — Clark Kent."

The manager nodded. "I see his name in the paper," he said. "I read your articles," he added, to Clark.

"Thanks," Clark said, glancing questioningly at Lois.

"Mr. Tracewski is the apartment manager," Lois explained.

The man lifted his toolbox. "You check your door lock," he told her. "Apartment 507 had a break-in. All this end of the world stuff, and people still steal."

"That's terrible!" Clark said.

"If that thing hits, it'll get worse," Lois said. "Anybody who thinks he can take something he wants from other people will be trying. Law enforcement will be overwhelmed."

"That's sure," Tracewski said. "I make sure I have plenty of shotgun shells." The elevator door opened on the fifth floor and he waved Lois and Clark ahead of him. "You be careful, Ms. Lane."

"You too," Lois said. "Nightfall hasn't hit yet. Maybe the Asgard rocket will solve this thing for us."

"Maybe," Mr. Tracewski said. "In the meantime, I put in better locks and my boys keep watch on back door."

That sounded like a good precaution to Lois. She fumbled in her purse for her apartment keys and unlocked the string of locks with which she had secured her door.

"You weren't taking any chances," Clark said, watching her.

"You heard Mr. Tracewski," Lois said. "Somebody broke into 507. It could just as easily have been my place, if I hadn't had extra locks."

"I guess so," Clark said. "Lois —"

"What?" She gestured him ahead of her and followed him in, pulling the door shut at once, and then spent several seconds re-locking the various locks.

"Do you think the rocket will work?"

"I hope so," she said. "If Nightfall hits, it's going to kill millions of people, even if it doesn't happen all at once. Professor Daich said it could plunge Earth into another ice age. If it does, people are going to start fighting each other for food, and warm places to live. It could mean the end of civilization."

"Do you think Superman could stop it? He failed once."

"He broke it up," Lois said. "It was just bad luck that one big piece is still coming at us. Maybe if he'd tried to change the course instead of smashing into it like that, it would have worked better, and he wouldn't have been hurt."

"Do you think he'd be willing to try?" Clark asked.

Lois nodded. "If he's able to, he will," she said positively.

"Superman is an incredible person. He told us when he first appeared that he was here to help, and I believe him. He won't stand by and let us die if he can do something about it." She turned her head as the apartment phone rang. "I wonder who's calling at this hour." She picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Lois, my dear!" Lex Luthor's voice said. "I've been trying to reach you for hours, but the phone service has been overwhelmed. I sent a message to your office, but they said you were out."

"Hello, Lex," Lois said. "I'm sorry — I've been awfully busy, with this emergency going on."

"I am aware of that," Lex's voice said. "I wanted to give you my perspective on the crisis. You can be certain that all of my resources will be devoted to assisting the people of Metropolis to cope if the worst happens. Would you have time to drop by my penthouse this evening?"

"Well —" She glanced at her watch. "I'm not sure I can get a taxi."

"I'll send a car," Lex's voice said warmly. "I'm informed the taxi services have been unreliable at best over the last day or two. Nigel will meet you in front of your apartment house in ten minutes."

"Well — all right." She glanced at Clark. "Will you be all right here for an hour or so?"

"I guess so," Clark looked worried.

"All right," Lois said into the receiver. "I'll be down there in ten minutes."

"Excellent," Lex said. "I'll look forward to seeing you."

When Lois stepped off the elevator in Lex Luthor's penthouse apartment at the very top of Lex Tower, Lex was waiting, looking as urbane and sophisticated as he always did. He took her hand and raised it to his lips. "My dear, I'm glad you've come."

"It's nice to see you, too, Lex," Lois said. "I wish it were under better circumstances."

"As do I." His expression became somber. "The Daily Planet has more information sources than I. Has there been any indication that Superman may have survived?"

That wasn't a question that she could answer directly.

Although Lex could probably be trusted with the truth about Clark's other identity, it wasn't her secret to tell, and he would certainly be upset if she allowed anyone else to know, so she shrugged. "No one knows."

"I thought you might have some information that hadn't been released to the general public. He hasn't contacted the government?"

She shook her head. "If he has, they haven't released the information."

"Then they probably don't have it," Lex said. "They would certainly wish to avoid a panic."

"Probably," Lois said. "You said you had a statement to make to the press, Lex?"

"Yes, certainly. I want the people of Metropolis to know that all my resources will be available to assist if this disaster comes to pass. I also wished to make you an offer."

"Oh?"

"Yes," he said with a smile. "As you know, I leave very little to chance. There will be survivors after the impact of Nightfall. Those survivors will need leaders, persons who can help to ensure that the human race continues on, even though not all members of it survive. I've taken steps to make sure that I am one of those survivors. I feel I owe it to the human race to be certain that I will be available in the aftermath to rally the survivors and help to build a new society."

"You want me to write about that?"

He shook his head. "No. I think that would be rather unkind.

My shelter has room for only two hundred people, and supplies to last for three years. It has tools and implements for farming and manufacture; everything that the survivors will need when we re-emerge. It was originally built as a shelter to withstand a nuclear attack. I'd like to offer you a place on my ark."

She frowned. "Why me?"

He smiled. "The aftermath will be a cruel and lonely time for me without the companionship of a superior woman. I couldn't think of one more worthy of that position than you."

"I —" Lois felt as if the world had begun to revolve in reverse. What Lex was offering was obvious.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I can't."

"Think carefully, Lois," Lex said. "Mob rule isn't a pretty sight. You don't have to see it."

Again she shook her head, more decisively. "No. I have a partner that needs me and friends at the Planet that are more like family to me than my real family. I can't desert them." She smiled shakily at him. "I'm a journalist. If Nightfall does destroy civilization, I have to be there to write the story — and see what takes its place. It could be the greatest comeback in history."

"Or the biggest knockout."

She turned to ring for the elevator. "Either way, I have to see for myself."

Lex inclined his head. "Very well, my dear. But if you change your mind, the offer is still open."

The trip down to the ground floor of Lex Tower seemed much longer than the ride up. Lex's offer had come as a shock, although it shouldn't have. Lex hadn't gained the power and position he had without being somewhat ruthless in his dealings with others, and it had been obvious since their first meeting that he found her to his taste. The offer of "dessert," at their first dinner, would certainly not have involved food of any sort, either, had she accepted. She doubted that Lex had met with many refusals from women during his career. She was probably one of the few.

But she couldn't take him up on this offer. Not only did it seem like a betrayal of all her friends; the whole arrangement inexplicably repelled her. She could pardon Lex for asking, and even for believing that he could be the person to lead civilization back from savagery if the worst came to worst. But to survive as Lex's "companion" at the expense of everyone she knew and cared about wasn't something that she could do. If Clark couldn't regain his memory in time to save them he would need her more than ever, and if her friends at the Planet made it through, then perhaps they could somehow help rally the survivors of the disaster. But she couldn't run. It simply wasn't in her nature.

The elevator slowed and stopped. She started to disembark, and then realized that she hadn't arrived at the ground floor. Another passenger was boarding — two of them, in fact. A pair of men in business suits entered and stepped to the rear of the car. The door closed and they moved downward.

A pair of hands seized her, pinning her arms to her sides, and a wet cloth, reeking with some chemical, was clapped across her mouth and nose.

Lois drove the spike heel of her shoe down hard into her attacker's instep, and the arms loosened. She wrenched her head sideways, managing to free her face from the rag, and inhaled a lungful of air, but her attacker grabbed her again, and the other man helped bear her to the floor of the elevator. She was pinned motionless, and the cloth covered her face again.

She held her breath as long as she could. Her head was swimming, and her lungs were starving for oxygen. At last, she couldn't hold out any longer. The urge to breathe was too great.

After that, she remembered nothing.

Lois Lane opened her eyes. The room was dimly illuminated

by the lighted face of her bedside alarm clock, and she looked up at the dark, familiar ceiling of her room. She was aware of an overwhelming feeling of nausea, and closed her eyes quickly again.

It was hard to think. Her head was muzzy, and the smell of some kind of chemical in the air around her made her gag. She lay still, fighting the urge to give in to the nausea.

What had happened?

She couldn't remember, and it was too much effort to think. Time passed. The nausea slowly cleared, and with it the foggy feeling in her head. Her muscles felt as if she had been run through a washing machine and hung out to dry. Even moving was almost too much effort. Her brain felt slow and stupid, and it was difficult to form a coherent thought.

For an undetermined time, she drifted between wakefulness and sleep, but very slowly her memory began to return.

She had been in the elevator at Lex Tower, and there had been two men. And now, she was here, in her bedroom, feeling as if she had been run over by a snowplow. What was going on?

But if she was back in her apartment, Clark should be here. The thought slowly drifted up from somewhere.

"Clark?" she called.

No answer. The whole apartment was completely silent.

"Clark?" she called again, more loudly.

Again, there was no answer. Slowly, fighting the sick feeling in her middle, Lois pushed herself into a sitting position and reached for the lamp on her nightstand.

The bulb blazed on and she shielded her eyes from the light.

It was her bedroom, all right, but how had she gotten here? Hadn't she been leaving Lex Tower, intending to return to her apartment and Clark, who had promised to wait for her?

She looked at her watch quickly. The readout said that it was almost two a.m. Nightfall was due to hit the Earth in about sixteen hours and Clark was nowhere to be found.

The mystery of what had happened to her would have to wait, she told herself. She had to find Clark. Maybe, she thought, he had given up waiting for her and gone home. She reached for the phone and punched in the number for Clark's apartment.

But no reassuring dial tone answered her. No sound at all came from the receiver.

Could the phone be unplugged? She leaned forward, checking the phone's wire where it connected to the wall. Well, that wasn't the problem. Then what was wrong?

She braced her arms on the bed and slid her feet to the floor. Her stomach heaved, but she fought back the nausea and lurched to her feet, bracing one hand on her nightstand to keep her balance. The curtains were drawn across her bedroom window, and she managed to stagger to them and pull them back.

The brightness of a sunny morning met her gaze. Confused, she checked her watch again. It now said two twelve.

Was it possible that her watch was wrong? But it hadn't stopped running.

Slowly, she made her way to the bathroom and turned the tap. Cold water gushed into the basin, and she leaned forward to splash the liquid onto her face.

Feeling weak but more clear-headed, Lois turned off the water and dried her face. She leaned over the basin and looked at her reflection. Her face was greenish-white, her hair mussed, and there were dark circles under her eyes. On one cheek she had somehow acquired a large, purplish bruise.

Her memories were becoming clearer now. She had been in the elevator, and two men had attacked her. They had held a rag, soaked with what was probably ether or chloroform, across her face, and she had woken up here in what seemed to be her apartment.

Again, she looked at her watch. The little numbers in the lower, left-hand corner of the face showed the date. This was

definitely the very early morning of the day that was scheduled for the end of the world. What the dickens was going on here?

Slowly, moving cautiously, in deference to her queasy stomach, she left the bathroom and moved into the living room.

It looked just like the living room of her apartment, and doubt shook her. Could everything that she recalled from the last couple of days possibly be a dream? No, she decided after a moment of disorientation. She was sure it wasn't but something was very strange, here. She seemed to be in her own apartment, but that bright, sunny day outside certainly conflicted with her watch, and she knew that the battery was good. She'd replaced it only last month.

Only she had left the blankets that Clark had used the night that she had found him in Suicide Slum folded up on one end of the sofa and they were nowhere to be seen. And the bowls that she and Clark had used the previous morning had been in the kitchen sink, and there was no sign of them. Of course, whoever had brought her here could have cleaned all of those things up, but she doubted it.

Her handbag sat on the kitchen table. Slowly, she made her way to it and opened the purse.

Nothing seemed to have been disturbed. After a moment, she fished the roll of antacids from the inner pocket and swallowed two of them. It probably wouldn't do any good, but she figured it couldn't hurt. And maybe there was some aspirin in the medicine cabinet. With an effort, she turned back toward the bathroom once more.

The thought of swallowing more pills on an empty stomach almost made her gag. She wished that she were thinking more clearly. Surely she could have managed this a bit more efficiently. Slowly, she returned to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

This was definitely wrong, she realized as soon as the door came open. An unopened carton of low fat milk occupied the top shelf, along with a bottle of orange juice, and a full carton of eggs on the next shelf down hadn't even been opened previously, as far as she could tell. A pound of butter sat innocently next to the eggs, and in the vegetable crisper she found a head of iceberg lettuce, a small bag of cherry tomatoes, a cucumber, and several other fresh vegetables.

After a moment, she shut the door of the appliance and turned to her cupboard.

The cupboard was well stocked with canned food and several bottles of her favorite mineral water. An unopened can of the best ground coffee in the supermarket sat innocently on an upper shelf, with an unopened box of sugar next to it.

She closed the cupboard door.

This was unquestionably not her apartment. So where the heck was she?

An hour later, Lois sat on the sofa in the replica of her living room, staring around at this place in which she had been imprisoned. There was no other word for it.

The phone didn't work. The windows didn't open. The television and radio worked, all right, but they offered no way to communicate to the outside world. The door was locked, and although she could unfasten the chain and the hand-operated bolts, neither the main door lock nor the deadbolt would respond to her keys. She had covered every inch of the place and investigated every possible exit. She was locked in.

She was feeling somewhat better physically, but the fact that she was a prisoner in this place was giving her the creeps, and a raging case of claustrophobia. She wasn't given to such things, at least in ordinary circumstances, but this circumstance wasn't a bit ordinary, and her skin was crawling.

Why someone had done this to her she couldn't quite understand. True, there were plenty of people who had reason to hate her, but they weren't likely to kidnap her and lock her into a

duplicate of her apartment. Plenty of them would certainly like to tie her hand and foot and throw her into the Hobs River, but that was a different story. This was totally outside her experience, and it definitely was freaking her out.

Well, the matter of who had done this was something she could figure out later. The thing to do now was to figure a way out.

Taking a deep breath, Lois got to her feet. The windows wouldn't open. She had nearly strained a back muscle while wrenching at them, and the glass wouldn't break no matter how she pounded on it, but how about the door? True, her keys wouldn't unlock the locks, but there had to be some way out, and the door looked like the best possibility. It was just the matter of finding a way to unlock them.

She went back into the kitchen.

Her purse was still sitting on the replica of her kitchen table, and, at least to all appearances, it hadn't been disturbed by anyone but her. True, whoever was behind this might have searched it, but no one besides herself knew all the secrets of her handbag. She retrieved her bag and returned to the living room.

Of course, there was the possibility that she might be under observation. True, she hadn't discovered any spying devices while she hunted for a way out, but she hadn't been searching for them. Leaving her purse on the sofa, she began to look carefully around the room.

Except for the two paintings that adorned the walls of her apartment and that had been carefully reproduced here, the walls were blank, but within fifteen minutes, she found the spy lenses.

There were five of them. One watched her bedroom, one her bathroom, one her kitchen, and two observed her living room. Of those, one of them covered the apartment door.

But, she guessed, they probably didn't function in the dark.

After several moments of thought, she went methodically through the place, snapping off the lights. Then, navigating by touch, and her knowledge of the apartment, she made her way back from the bedroom to the living room sofa and retrieved her purse.

And sure enough, under the inner lining of the bag, in the spot where she had carefully hidden it, she found her lock pick.

Whoever might be watching her was doubtless on the alert right now, she thought. But an hour from now he would probably be less so.

Without making any sound, she went over to the door and began to work on the lock. She was playing cat and mouse with an unknown opponent. She might as well get the preliminary work out of the way. And an hour from now, assuming that she could actually get the door open, she would begin her game in earnest.

Clark Kent strode back and forth in Lois Lane's apartment, looking frequently at his watch. Why this felt so familiar he didn't know, but it was. Lois should have been back hours ago but she hadn't returned. He'd looked up the number for the Daily Planet and found that she wasn't there, and now he was certain that something had gone wrong. Lois was in some kind of trouble, but he had no idea what it might be. The only clue he could think of was that she had been speaking to "Lex" before she had left, apparently intending to see him. Who "Lex" might be he wasn't sure, but the name somehow made his hackles rise.

He worried his lower lip between his teeth, trying to think of what he should do. There should be something, he was sure. Somewhere in the back of his mind the notion that there was something that he should be doing, some action he should take, was dancing elusively. Surely, this wasn't the first time that Lois had wound up in probable trouble. He had to do something, but *what*?

A glance at his watch for the tenth time in as many seconds

told him that it was a few minutes after four a.m. What was he going to do if she didn't come back? Calling the police didn't seem that useful. In the first place, the police were pretty busy with this asteroid thing. And besides, wasn't there some sort of rule that they didn't start a hunt for someone until the person had been gone for two days, or something like that? By the time two days was up, the Nightfall crisis would either be over or the thing would have hit and the police would have other things to do than worry about one missing woman. Besides, anything could happen to Lois in the meantime.

But what was he going to do?

Going to the window, he opened it, oblivious to the icy breeze that wafted through the open portal. Where *was* she? Frustrated and worried, without being consciously aware of it he strained outward with his senses, searching for any indication of the whereabouts of Lois Lane.

Lois glanced at the glowing dial of her wristwatch. It was just after four a.m.

Quietly, she sat up in her bed and slid her feet to the floor. Previously, she had turned the glowing dial of her alarm clock face down on the nightstand to make the room darker than before. It had been over an hour since she had lain down in the bed, and if anyone were watching now, perhaps he would be less alert than an hour earlier. There might not be anyone, of course. It was entirely possible that the cameras were simply recording her activities on videotape, or something, but she didn't want to count on it.

Moving slowly and silently, Lois crept across the floor, feeling her way, careful to make no unnecessary sound. The carpet under her bare feet absorbed any noise, and she moved with deliberate caution across her living room toward the door.

There was the couch. Quietly, she scooped her bag from the spot where she had left it, and her shoes, and circled the piece of furniture. A few more steps brought her to the door and she paused, listening. Her jacket hung on the coat rack, and she pulled it off. It wasn't heavy, but there was a good chance that she would need it.

She had made a number of preparations before she had gotten back into bed, all designed to make her escape more possible. She didn't know what might be beyond the door, of course, but a thin line of very dim light was leaking beneath it. It would be bound to show up on the spy cameras when she opened the door, if she didn't prevent it. That had brought the Doublemint gum that she habitually kept in her purse for the occasional use in breaking and entering into play. She had chewed a couple of sticks and, by touch, had carefully covered the tiny lenses with gum. As long as no one came in here and checked in person, that should cover her tracks for the short time she needed to make it out the door.

Both the regular door lock and the deadbolt were now unlocked. Pausing only a second to slip on her shoes, she grasped the doorknob. Cautiously, a millimeter at a time, Lois turned it. The latch came open with a tiny click that sounded like a gunshot to her straining ears, and then the door swung softly open.

Beyond the door, not to her surprise, the scene was nothing like the hallway of her apartment building.

It was a long, sterile hallway of white metal. Fluorescent tubes in the ceiling illuminated every surface in hard, cold light. The temperature was at a level that she would normally have considered comfortable, but now she shivered.

Quickly and quietly, she shut the door behind her and moved swiftly down the hallway toward the doors set in one wall. It looked like a bank of four elevators, and just possibly the door beside it might be an emergency stairwell. It would probably be wiser to take the stairs if she could, she thought. Operating an elevator in this place might alert someone to the fact that

someone was using it who shouldn't be.

On the wall beside the elevator doors was a schematic drawing of some sort. She squinted at it, trying to make sense of it, but decided that time was not on her side. As quietly as she could, she opened the door in the wall beside the elevator doors and slipped inside.

A set of metal stairs wound both up and down. From below, she could hear the faint hum of machinery and for a moment she paused, irresolute.

On the door, through which she had just entered, were the markings B-82. That sounded as if it were a basement level, but 82 levels? Still, this whole fantastic scenario was nearly impossible on the face of it, and a lot of her escape depended on luck. If there were noises below, then she would go the other way. She removed her shoes and began to climb.

Some half an hour later Lois paused for the fiftieth time, breathing hard. She hadn't realized just how much the chloroform, or whatever it had been, would affect her this long after she had awakened. Her stomach was still slightly queasy and her knees had a tendency to wobble. She had climbed nine flights of steps, and there were plenty to go. There had to be a better way than this, she thought. How much more time did she have before someone noticed that she wasn't in her apartment?

Cautiously, she leaned forward to peek through the tiny, but thick, glass window that broke the surface of the door.

Outside was another sterile white hallway, illuminated with cold fluorescent light. No one was visible.

With great caution, she shoved the door open. The white hallway stretched in both directions. Moving on tiptoe, Lois stepped into the hallway and peered first one way and then the other. No one. The row of elevators beside her beckoned invitingly. Were they likely to be watching for someone on this floor, nine stories above the place where her prison had been located? Well, maybe.

Another door opened some twenty feet down the hallway, and she hurried toward it. No sound broke the stillness except the faint swish of air through the vents located on the wall above her head. The silence was intimidating in its own right and she felt the skin between her shoulder blades crawling with nervousness.

She plastered her ear to the door, listening.

Nothing. Very cautiously, she turned the knob and eased the door open a crack.

The room was dim, and empty of human life. She pushed the door wider and stepped inside. Small, faint lights, placed at intervals along the walls at about the level of her knees, barely illuminated the room with completely inadequate lighting. The little penlight that she kept in her bag came into play now, and she flashed it around, trying to determine what sort of place this was.

It looked like some kind of storeroom. There were pieces of equipment on all sides, and huge wooden crates. Lois flashed her light over them.

The crate nearest her was labeled "Canned Tomatoes."

Canned tomatoes? What the dickens was a crate of canned tomatoes doing in this unlikely place? She flashed her light over another crate, to discover that this one apparently held canned spinach, and a third that purported to contain powdered milk. This whole, huge room was apparently some kind of food storage warehouse.

An idea that was too impossible to contemplate was floating around in the back of her mind. Lex had said he had some kind of bunker large enough for two hundred people, with supplies for three years. But surely, this couldn't have anything to do with Lex!

Slowly, flashing her little light before her, she moved farther into the room. A metal desk came into view, and on it a clipboard

held a sheaf of paper. Some kind of inventory, she thought. In the top left corner was the logo of LexCorp.

Lois felt as if she had been hit a sharp clip in the stomach.

Lex? Could this possibly be the place of which he had told her — his ark, intended to preserve humanity, even in the face of impact by Nightfall? A part of her mind wanted to deny it, but the facts and circumstances painted a picture that was mercilessly clear.

He had invited her onto his ark, and pretended to accept it when she had refused. But he had never intended that she really have a choice, she thought. When she had refused, he had taken steps to be sure that she joined his ark.

And, for him, it had probably been no more than a calculation. With Superman gone, she wasn't likely to be rescued. If Nightfall didn't hit, she could be freed as anonymously as she had been captured, but if it did, he would have time in three years of waiting, and in the aftermath of a destroyed civilization, to convince her that it had all been for the best. It made so much sense she didn't know why she hadn't realized it before.

And if he realized that she knew who was behind it, she was in trouble. The sudden knowledge hit her like the proverbial thunderbolt. If Lex Luthor would stoop to kidnapping, what else would he stoop to?

She had to get out of here in a hurry. Clark had to be made to remember, or Lex and his chosen ones would shape the future of man. Of course, Lex would have a good explanation for this, but she was just as sure that she didn't want to be part of any future where Lex Luthor led the survivors of Nightfall's impact. And she definitely didn't want him to catch her now, knowing what she knew.

The faint rattle of the door to her rear made her snap off her light and duck into the aisle between two rows of the huge crates. Peering around the edge of one crate, she saw the door open, and then the lights blazed on. She ducked quickly back out of sight.

"— Until the fugitive is captured," a voice was saying. "She mustn't get away. He'll be very upset if the target manages to find out too much. Stay alert."

"Yes, sir," a voice replied.

That first voice, Lois thought in dismay. That had been the voice of Nigel St. John. Any doubts that might have remained in her mind were vanquished at the sound of the all too familiar English accent. Quietly, she moved backwards, trying to conceal herself deeper among the crates. How was she supposed to get out of here now? Especially since they seemed to know that she had managed to get out of her so-called apartment.

The sound of the door closing put a period to that thought. Somehow she had to figure out how to escape this prison or she was going to wind up an involuntary member of Lex Luthor's ark.

The sound of whistling cut across her thoughts. The man left to guard this place was whistling softly between his teeth and the echo of the whistle had an eerie edge to it, at least to her jumping nerves. Clutching her shoes in one hand, so as not to make noise, Lois tip-toed toward the rear of the room.

How large was this place, anyway? The diagram she had seen in the hallway came to mind. It had been of a city, she thought. A city of two hundred people and storage places for the food and supplies that they would need to survive. And this was one of the storage units.

Only, there was no way they had been able to get these huge crates in here via that little tiny door through which she had entered this room. Which meant there was another way in and out. All she had to do was find it.

Moving as silently as she could on bare feet, Lois made her way between the rows of crates, working her way toward the back of the room. She had to move slowly and quietly because of the possibility that the guard, or whatever he was, would hear her,

and it took time. The sound of whistling echoed around her until she was sure that if she ever heard that tune again she would probably destroy the source. Through the sound of the little tune, she could hear the footsteps as the man made his way slowly about the huge, echoing space. He was moving around, making a circuit of the room. Once, it seemed that he was coming right toward her, and she flattened herself against one of the crates, hoping that the shadows in the places between the crates would conceal her presence as he passed by.

He was a small weedy man, dressed in a shapeless, white coverall. Lois remained frozen for over a minute after he passed, unable to force her muscles to respond to the urging of her brain. But at last she reached a place where the crates ended. Some ten feet of space separated the last crate from the rear wall.

For minutes, she crouched in the shelter of the nearest concealing crate as she took in the lay of the land. The sound of footsteps echoed off the walls, but she was certain by the sound of the whistled tune that the room's other occupant was some distance from her. A closed door broke the blandness of the wall, and hanging from a hook imbedded in its surface, she saw a coverall exactly like the one that the room's guard was wearing.

Without hesitation, she crossed the room in six long strides and appropriated it. It was too large, but that was all to the good. Two minutes later, she was zipping up the front over her clothing and jacket, and feeling slightly more secure. Looking down to survey her disguise as well as she could, she noted that she now appeared to be somewhat chubby, which could only help her disguise. She pulled up the white hood, drew the strings tightly around her face, covering her hair, and paused. Carrying a purse in this get-up was certainly out of character. The purse was a new one, and the thought of parting with it cost her a slight pang, but she had to get rid of it. She slipped her wallet and several articles that she was likely to need into the pocket of the coverall, tucked the purse between two of the crates and looked around.

In one corner was what she had reasoned must be here. She headed on tiptoe for the closed doors of a freight elevator.

The whistle of the guard told her that the man was probably near the front of the storeroom. Lois took a deep breath and punched the call button for the freight elevator.

And waited, her nerves thrumming with tension. One minute, two...and with the soft ding, the doors rumbled open. Lois jumped inside and punched the button for every floor. She was taking a big chance, of course, but they were going to guess pretty quickly that she had called the elevator.

The doors rumbled shut and the car began to rise. It slid to a stop on the next floor up and she stood to the side, out of the view of anyone who might be waiting outside.

But there was no one there. She exited into another storage unit, unlighted except for the tiny, dim lights low on the walls, and ducked into the shelter of more piled crates. The doors of the elevator closed again and the car rumbled upward. Lois listened, straining her ears for any sound, but there was none. On tiptoe, she hurried toward the front of the room.

A glance at her glowing watch dial told her that it was now nearly five in the morning. The sun would be up in another hour and Clark was probably wondering where she was. He had always fretted about her somewhat, she knew, back when he knew that he was Superman. Now, considering his present state of mind, he was bound to be worried sick, but there wasn't anything she could do about it. Here in this man-made rabbit warren, all she could do was to try to keep the searchers confused until she could manage to get to the surface. But she was dealing with a man who had been clever enough to thoroughly mislead her, she acknowledged with a good deal of chagrin. If the world survived, she was going to have to investigate him a lot more thoroughly than she had done before. Interviewing a handsome,

charming and philanthropic man who pandered to her ego was not an investigation. It was time that she looked more thoroughly into the real Lex Luthor. If he was truly behind what had been done to her, then finding out what lay behind that charming facade was even more urgent than her investigation into Clark Kent's masquerade as Superman had been. Clark, she acknowledged, had turned out to be a good guy. She doubted that she could say the same about a man who would kidnap and imprison her, even if he had convinced himself that it was for her own good. The very fact that he had apparently decided that his wishes were more important than hers raised every red flag in her arsenal.

As she approached the front door of the storage unit, someone rattled the panel. Lois mastered her instinct to hide. Misdirection might work better at this point. Without hesitation, she ran to the metal desk, seated herself before it, switched on the desk light and pulled one of the papers that lay on its surface toward her. As the door opened, she looked up questioningly.

A man stepped inside and paused, looking at her in some surprise.

Lois laid the paper down on the stack and pushed her chair back. "You're a little early, aren't you?" she inquired, yawning slightly in the middle of the sentence.

"What are you doing here?" the newcomer asked.

"They sent me here last night," Lois said. "What's going on?"

"Have you seen anyone in the last hour?" he inquired. "Has anyone tried to come in here?"

"I heard the freight elevator a couple of times, I think," Lois said. "You're the first person I've seen, though."

He nodded. "Good. I'm taking over for you. Lock the door when you leave."

Lois covered another yawn. "Sure. What's the matter?"

The man shrugged. "Some kind of alert. None of our business."

"All right." She rubbed her face. "These early hours are getting to me."

"Yeah. Me too." He slid into the chair. "Night."

"Yeah." Lois yawned again and ambled toward the door. "I'm going to get some breakfast."

As soon as the door closed behind her, however, she took a deep breath. That had been too close. Fortunately, the average occupant of this place didn't seem to really know what was happening. Two or three other persons in the white coveralls were moving here and there about the white, sterile corridor. Lois set her pace to match theirs, and made her way toward the regular bank of elevators.

The thing took some time to arrive and when the doors opened several men and two women emerged. Lois stood back as they exited and then entered the elevator to join three other persons. It moved downward again, and she stayed quiet. A couple of floors farther down, it came to another halt and two of the occupants exited, only to be replaced by four others. Lois moved to a rear corner and leaned against the safety rail, trying to look bored and sleepy. The doors closed and the car moved downward again. Four floors later, it came to a halt and all but two persons exited. Then there was a long drop. The car came to a halt on floor B-83. She was one floor farther down than when she had started.

The last two occupants got out. As the door closed, Lois moved forward and pressed the button for B-4 and held her breath.

After a pause that seemed hours to her straining nerves, the car moved upwards.

It took several more stops, together with the entrance and exit of numerous passengers, before the elevator reached B-4. Lois's heart was beating hard as the doors slid open and she stepped out into another sterile hallway.

A number of persons were present, several in the white coveralls and three in regular street clothes. Lois kept her face down as she moved slowly down the corridor toward the door to the steps. Walking deliberately, trying to avoid any hint of stealth, she opened the door and stepped through.

There was no one in the stairwell, although it was no longer silent. Over the hum of the machinery, she could hear the sounds of human occupation. Aware that the most dangerous part of her escape was now before her, Lois began to climb.

A light dusting of snow coated the streets and sidewalks of the city this morning as Clark Kent made his frantic way toward the Daily Planet. It was nearly six a.m. and he hadn't been able to stand the suspense of waiting another minute.

Perhaps Lois's editor would have some idea of what to do, he thought desperately. Lois still hadn't returned to her apartment. If she had been delayed she would have at least called, and evidently the lines had cleared up enough for that call last night to have gotten through. But she hadn't, and he was now absolutely convinced that she was in some kind of serious trouble.

It was as he approached the doors of the great metropolitan newspaper that he heard Lois's scream.

As she reached the landing of B-2, Lois glanced at her watch. It was quarter to six on the morning of the day scheduled for the destruction of civilization. She paused to rest for a moment in preparation for the last part of her climb, and the final and most dangerous part of her escape. The stairwell was a few degrees below her comfort level, and she had been exercising. The sweat on her skin felt dank and clammy in the chill.

She waited until her breathing grew less labored. The more normal she looked, the less she was likely to be noticed.

But they were bound to be on the watch for her. She needed to have some way of concealing herself, or a distraction, though what that might be she had no idea. If there were time, she would find a place to hide until they became convinced that she had managed to get away, but time was running out fast. Getting back to Clark was absolutely essential if he were to have a chance of remembering who he was in time to do any good. Taking a deep breath, she set her foot on the first step.

She reached the next landing, the one that gave onto the first basement level, more quickly than she would have believed and stopped to gather her courage, still searching her mind for a way to engineer some kind of diversion. There had to be some way to create enough confusion to give her a chance to get away. In the faint hope of thinking of something, she went to peer out the little glass window into B-1 level.

And there it was. And it was simple, too.

Quietly, Lois pushed open the door. It was a genuine basement level, not the sterile white corridors that she had previously seen in this fantastic structure. The basement of whatever building this was, was dimly lit and devoid of personnel, but it wasn't empty. Against one wall was a wine rack, and a number of barrels of some sort were placed here and there around the dusky and very large room. A wide flight of stone steps against one wall ran up to a door situated perhaps ten feet above her head and in the wall opposite to the door through which she had emerged, a single elevator was set into the wall. There was no sign of the elevator bank that had graced all the hallways on lower levels.

Well, this was different. Peering around in the gloom, various unlikely articles, such as the mounted head of a deer, a huge swordfish on a massive wooden plaque, a set of bamboo armor, a pair of marble arms, an enormous scimitar-like sword and what appeared to be a flintlock rifle of about the Revolutionary War era, met her startled gaze. There was undoubtedly a good deal in

here that she couldn't see, but she had no time to examine the contents of the place too closely. How long she might have before someone discovered her she didn't know, but it didn't seem to be a good idea to linger. Above her on the ceiling was an extinguisher for a fire control system. Now all she had to find was something flammable.

Well, that thing that looked like an ornate Egyptian sarcophagus would probably burn. And those crates seemed to be made of some kind of light wood. They would probably catch fire without much difficulty. Lois fished in the pocket of her coverall for the cigarette lighter that she carried in case the need to start a fire arose. A good fire alarm was probably as efficient a method as any for causing a lot of confusion in a big hurry.

But she couldn't allow it to be put out too quickly by the fire control system. She appropriated the flintlock and proceeded to strike the sprayer nozzle until it was bent sideways and leaking a thin stream of water. Quickly, she treated four more nearby sprayers in the same fashion. Then she went to the sarcophagus and examined it more closely.

It appeared to be made of wood, all right. And there seemed to be enough wooden items here and there that she should be able to kindle a decent fire. Determinedly, she set to work.

Shortly, she examined her pile of wood and kindling. That should do, she thought. She stuffed another piece of bamboo from the armor under the sarcophagus and struck her lighter.

The light wood of the crates caught quickly and blazed up, bright and hot in the dimness. Within a very few moments the flames were licking at the bamboo armor, and the wood of the sarcophagus was beginning to scorch. Lois retreated to the door of the basement steps, watching her bonfire to be sure it showed no sign of going out.

And, so suddenly that she nearly jumped, the fire alarm went off. Several sprayers came on, but none of them were in the area where she had set her fire. Avoiding the spray of water, Lois ducked back behind one of the barrels, which she now identified as wine kegs. If she were right, things in this room were about to become very lively.

It was less than five minutes before the doors to the elevator a short distance to her right opened and several men in fire-fighting gear rushed into the room. A second later, the door to the stairwell was shoved unceremoniously open and more men hurried through, dragging various fire extinguisher tanks and pieces of fire fighting equipment. From above, the door at the top of the stone steps opened and a third group of men charged down the flight of steps, dragging hoses. Rapidly, the room filled with mist and smoke, and men rushed here and there, beating at the flames. Lois stepped quietly from behind the barrel in back of the laboring men, picked up the nearest discarded fire extinguisher and ascended the stone steps.

The door at the top swung open easily and she stepped out into a thickly carpeted hallway. Someone yanked the door open as she stepped out, and several men, dragging more fire fighting equipment, dashed past her. Lois moved out of the way and dropped her exhausted fire extinguisher to the carpet.

In the confusion, no one appeared to be looking at her. She turned her back and walked away.

The building looked disturbingly familiar. In fact, this place looked very much like Lex Tower, although she didn't see many of the business-suited individuals that normally populated its premises. If it was, the nearest side door was almost certainly somewhere to her right. But first, it would probably be a good idea to ditch the coverall. There was a restroom a short distance ahead and she had no hesitation in entering and shedding the garment.

The fire had probably thrown off whoever was waiting for her, but she couldn't believe that someone hadn't been posted to watch for her, should she manage to make it as far as the surface.

She straightened her clothing and ran her fingers through her tousled hair, and then extracted the small comb that she had included with the other items from her purse. Quickly, she transferred the things to the jacket pocket, finished combing her hair and drew a breath. Now for the final dash.

She stepped from the restroom and continued down the carpeted hall. A glance at her watch surprised her. It wasn't quite six o'clock in the morning.

The side door that was her goal was some ten feet ahead of her, and here came one of the security men who patrolled the hallways of the great center for Metropolis's commerce and trade. She increased her pace slightly, just as the guard spotted her.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Stop!"

Lois hit the bar that opened the door. Somewhere an alarm shrilled, and the guard came towards her at a run. She burst into the cold morning air of pre-dawn Metropolis and ran for her life.

The heavy pound of footsteps behind her informed her the guard was in pursuit. Several other shouts told her that other men were converging on her as well. Nowhere around did she see any other signs of life.

The pursuing footsteps were gaining rapidly. Lois sucked in her breath and screamed at the top of her lungs, well-aware that the chances of help actually arriving were extremely small.

"Help! Superman!"

The whoosh of air heralding the arrival of Superman seemed almost unreal. She tripped over the curb and fell onto the street, tearing her slacks and skinning both knees. Then a pair of powerful arms scooped her up in a tight embrace, and she was aware that she was no longer on the ground.

"Lois," Clark's shaken voice said. "Are you all right?"

She nodded against the blue spandex that covered his chest, trying unsuccessfully to bring her shaking voice under control.

"Now I am."

The window of Lois's apartment was wide open when Superman flew her back through it moments later. He set her down on the carpet. "What happened?" he asked. "Why were you running from those men?"

"It's a long story," she said. She looked around, remembering, somewhat belatedly, that Clark was supposed to be here. "Where's Clark?"

"He was — looking for you." Was she imagining things, or was there the faintest trace of discomfort in his voice? She couldn't be sure. "I took him back to his place and told him I'd find you. Then I heard you scream."

"Oh," she said. "I'll tell you what happened to me later," she added. "Superman, I don't know where you've been, but there's still a piece of Nightfall coming at us. It's due to hit us later today, and —"

"I know," he said. "I'm going to take care of that now."

"Wait," she said. She laid a hand on his arm. "Thank you for saving me," she said lamely. "I found out something pretty scary, and I need to go over to the Planet to tell Perry about it. Could you take me there before you go?"

He hesitated. "I guess so."

"Thanks," she said. She took a breath and made up her mind. She had to say it, even though he had probably already figured it out for himself. "And would you do me one more favor?"

"Sure."

"I don't want to tell you how to do your job, but could you not ram Nightfall this time? I guessed that you'd gotten hurt, you know, when you disappeared. I think most people figured that out. Everyone was afraid you'd been killed. Is there any way you can — oh, push it out of the way instead of hitting it head on? I really don't want something to happen to you again."

He smiled ruefully. "You were right," he said. "I did get hurt, although that's off the record. And I think you're right this time,

too. I'll do my best — and I'll drop by with a quote for you when I get back. I owe you a little more than you realize."

"I think we all would appreciate that," she said. "Let me just change my slacks, and we can go. I'll give Clark a call after I get to the Planet. I want to be sure he's all right." She made a beeline for her bedroom. "This will only take a minute."

He didn't answer, but he took a seat on one of her sofas to wait.

Lois didn't waste time. She could put Band-Aids on her scratched knees later. She grabbed the first pair of slacks that came to hand, a pair of blue jeans, and pulled them on. Within minutes, she rejoined Superman in the living room. "I'm ready."

Superman rose from the sofa and held out his arms. "Let's go. I want to get this thing over with as soon as I can."

"Just be careful," Lois said.

He smiled faintly and scooped her up again. An instant later, they were on their way to the Daily Planet.

The newsroom staffers were gathered around the television set in Conference Room One, listening to the broadcast from EPRAD when the monotonous countdown changed. Perry grinned widely, and Lois clasped both hands over her head.

"Mission trackers are reporting an anomaly. Switching to back-up computers for corroboration." A pause. "Roger, confirmation. Asteroid velocity is decreasing. The asteroid appears to be changing course! Ladies and gentlemen, it's got to be Superman!"

The newsroom erupted in cheers.

"He did it!" Jimmy was crowing.

"Lois, you said he's going to contact you when he gets back. I want the story ready to go when he gives you his quote," Perry said.

"Already on it," Lois said.

Outside there was a sudden roar of voices, and Lois looked through the window in time to see Superman streak across the sky. Then he was gone. An instant later, the window of the conference room opened and the familiar figure in blue floated to a touchdown next to Lois. "Ms. Lane, I believe I promised you a quote."

"Yes, you did." She smiled at him. "Come on into the other conference room. This shouldn't take long." Lois was aware of Cat's gaze on her and on Clark as she led him toward the other room, but she didn't look back.

Seconds after Superman had flown away, the door to the stairs opened and Clark stepped through. Whistling softly, he descended the ramp to the newsroom floor. "Did I miss anything?"

"Just Superman saving the world," Lois said. "I'm writing it up now. How are you feeling?"

"All right," Clark said.

"I guess your memory is back?"

"It seems to be," Clark said. He didn't elaborate, but Superman's remark about him owing her something popped into her mind, and she wondered exactly what he had meant. Maybe, someday, when she let him know that she had guessed his secret, or, more ideally, when he told her, she could ask him.

"Good," she said. "I knew you'd bounce back pretty fast. But Clark, you and I need to talk about what happened to me last night. Remember how you've said a couple of times that you don't trust Lex? Well, I think you might have a point..."

THE END

(For now)