

A Triangle With Three Sides

By Anonpip <anonpip@gmail.com>

Rated: PG

Submitted: December 2008

Summary: An alt-world story: What if Clark decided not to become Superman?

Story Size: 186,869 words (1Mb as text)

Author's Note: All characters, some dialogue, and any A-plot contained herein are the property of Warner Bros, December 3rd Productions, ABC, and anyone else who may have a legal claim on them. The story, however, is mine.

This is an alt-world story, but as alt-worlds go, this one is pretty similar to the universe in LnC. As such, much of the happenings and dialogue may seem familiar and I owe a huge debt to the writers of LnC for that (see disclosure above). Particularly at first it may even seem like the differences between this world and the one we are all familiar with are fairly subtle, but it will soon become clear that there are some fairly big differences as well. I hope the early part is sufficiently interesting enough to keep you wanting to find out how things are different.

Lastly, but most importantly, a big thank you to Beth, Mary Beth, Carol, and Mark who provided a ton of comments and suggestions into this story. The story is much more interesting than it started out based on their input.

Also thanks to Caroline K. who was forced to GE this. Not a task I'd offer to do, so I'm incredibly thankful someone else is volunteering.

Just a note for ease of reading: "***" reflects a passage of time. "~#~#~#~#~#" reflects a flashback.

September 1993

Clark Kent got off the bus expecting this stop to be the same as all the others — a few months in Metropolis before he moved on. At some point, he had hoped it would be different. When he was in college, he had dreamed of moving to Metropolis, getting a staff job at the Daily Planet and settling down.

But now he knew that was nothing more than a dream. He had tried, really tried, to live in several places before now. While he had not wanted to settle down in any of those places, he had thought it would be fun to live in Tokyo for a year, or even six months in Paris. It had never worked. The longest he had lasted someplace before now was three months.

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Clark could hear the rush of water, but he ignored it. Instead he focused on the smaller sound. Somewhere down there Soyoung Chen and her baby were still in their home. He could hear the baby crying and over that the sound of

Soyoung's cries for help. He swooped down and grabbed Soyoung, little Hye Su in her arms.

Now Soyoung's cries were in his ear, drowning out the sound of the tidal wave coming closer. The time he was making now was not as good as he did not want to fly with Soyoung and Hye Su. He liked it here in Haje. He had been doing well; no one was suspicious, but then early this morning there had been a subaqueous landslide on the Chinese border which had caused a tidal wave in the Yellow Sea. News of it reached Haje before many of the local residents had gotten up for the day. Soyoung's husband left for work at four in the morning, but Soyoung and Hye Su had both been asleep until the tidal wave was too close for them to leave.

Clark glanced behind him and saw that the tidal wave was much closer than he had anticipated. Running, even at super speed, was not going to be enough to save them. Clark took a deep breath, praying that Soyoung was too upset to notice much, and lifted his feet off the ground. He kept his flying altitude low, but was making much better time now.

Within a few minutes, he had brought Soyoung and Hye Su to safety. He landed a few hundred feet away from the other locals who were gathered there, and ran the rest of the way, but he knew it did not matter. Someone was sure to be suspicious. His father was right. He should stick to big cities.

Clark did not join the others with Soyoung. He hung back and when attention was diverted, he flew up over the clouds, flying in circles over the South Korean coast. He would wait a few hours and then go back to gather up his stuff. He could be moved before anyone got back home.

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So, while the first thing Clark saw getting off the bus in Metropolis was the Daily Planet globe, he knew it would be best to turn away. He would not be happy just freelancing there as he generally did to make money. He wanted to be a staff reporter at the Planet, and freelancing would just give him a taste of something that he could never have. It would be better to contain his freelancing to the smaller papers.

Turning away from the Daily Planet, Clark came face to face with the very reason he could not work there. Coming straight toward him was an out of control bus. It was like it always was — almost like his higher brain function stopped. Without any thought, without checking to see if anyone was watching or not, Clark stepped in front of the bus and stopped it with his hand. With a quick glance of his x-ray vision, Clark determined that no one on the bus was hurt.

A woman a few feet away stood in the middle of the street, gaping and pointing at him. She was stuttering, trying to put into words what she had just seen. Clark ducked away in a crowd of people before she got the chance. Even if he could not settle here, he wanted to last in Metropolis for more than a day.

Emerging from the crowd, Clark found himself in front of the Daily Planet again. He spent a few more moments glancing up at the globe longingly. Shaking his head, he started to walk away. It was silly to think about that dream now. He would be happier if he would just realize that and

move on.

As he walked away though, the conversation he'd had with Professor Carlton ran through his head. "Clark, you're a brilliant writer. You need some training to be sure, but you have raw talent — the kind of thing that can't be learned. You deserve to be writing for a great paper like the Planet." Professor Carlton had insisted on calling up Perry White, the editor of the Daily Planet and an old college friend, to tell him about Clark. Clark tried to explain that he was not planning on staying in Metropolis, but Professor Carlton had shushed him. "Plans change, Clark. Give it a try. What do you have to lose?"

The words fed into his feelings of hope — hope of writing for the Planet, hope of meeting someone and settling down, hope of having a normal life.

Before he knew what he was doing, he was pushing through doors and getting into the elevator, pushing the button that would take him to the floor that housed the Daily Planet's editor.

Exiting the elevator, Clark took in the room below him. It was amazing — so many people, so much noise. It was nothing like the small newsrooms with three to four staff reporters he had worked in before. His eyes roamed over the area, taking in the corner with the coffee pots and the three people standing there chatting. Two men were talking about the baseball game last night — the Metropolis Meteors had won. The woman was looking at one of the men with interest — a predatory gleam in her eye. He took in the room in the corner where the copy machine was spitting out copies at a rapid pace, the conference room with the blinds open — two people sitting side by side, going over papers together, the desks on the floor below him, people talking into telephones, typing on computers.

And then to his surprise, he heard a heartbeat, loud and clear in his head. He tried to follow it, to see whose heartbeat it was. His eyes settled on a woman, her desk nearly right in the middle of the newsroom. Her dark hair swung in front of her, blocking her face from his view, but he could hear her voice as she spoke into the phone — she was loud and insistent. Aside from her take-charge attitude, he could find nothing remarkable about her and wondered why his hearing had focused on her heartbeat at all.

A young man, more like a boy actually, bumped into him as he stood there, and Clark apologized. "No problem. Can I help you?" the boy asked.

"I'm looking for Perry White," Clark explained.

The boy pointed in the direction of a door next to the conference room. Clark could make out the stenciled letters on the door from here even without his enhanced vision.

Perry White
Editor-in-Chief

"Thanks," he said, taking off down the ramp to the door.

Clark knocked on Mr. White's partly opened door and the man behind the desk looked up, a question in his eyes.

"Mr. White, I'm Clark Kent. Professor Carlton called you and mentioned I might stop by. Is this a good time?"

"Oh, yes," Perry said, somewhat distracted. "Come on in."

Clark took a seat in front of the desk, handing his resume and some examples of his work to Perry. He did not

say anything while Perry looked over the work, then hesitantly explained, "I'm not looking for a staff job, Mr. White. This is my first trip to Metropolis and I'm planning to stay for a few months. I'd like to do some freelancing for you while I'm here."

Perry looked up at him kindly, "Son, we don't have many freelancers here. Those we do have are generally ex-staff reporters for the Planet, or the New York Times or Washington Post. Not kids just starting out with limited experience on the..." Perry glanced down at the resume in his hand.

"The Borneo Gazette or the Smallville Press," Clark interjected, disheartened.

"Right," Perry affirmed. "Thanks for stopping by, Clark, and give my best to Professor Carlton," he said as if this finished the interview.

Clark got up and walked toward the door. Then turning back, he said, "Thank you for your time, Mr. White." He took another step outside, and then glanced in again, "Mr. White, do you think maybe I could just drop something by that I write while I'm here? You don't need to run it, I'd just give you first dibs on doing so."

Perry took a breath and Clark could tell he was about to tell him not to bother, but before he could, someone pushed past him into Perry's office. "Perry, we should do a story on the crazy man from this morning," she demanded. "I think there's something to him — he's an engineer at EPRAD."

"Lois," Perry said with clear warning in his voice. "I'm in the middle of something here."

Lois — so that was her name. It was the same woman that Clark had seen earlier, the one whose heartbeat he had heard so clearly in his head. She was as take-charge as he had gathered from the snippet of phone conversation he had heard earlier. Without her hair in front of her face, Clark could now see that she had bright brown eyes and pale, creamy skin that contrasted with her dark features. She was beautiful.

Without any regard for Perry's tone, Lois looked at Clark quickly. Nodding her head slightly, she mumbled, "Hi" before turning back to Perry as if Clark were not in the room.

"I really think there's something there," she insisted.

"What happened to the mood piece I asked you to do?" Perry asked, "About the theater."

Lois snorted, "I wasn't in the mood," and then as if that was the end of the conversation, she started to push past Clark on her way out the door.

"Nice to meet you," Clark mumbled, but Lois paid no attention to him.

Perry looked at the man in his doorway, smiling slightly. Lois had that effect on people. Then, with a smile, he called out, "Lois," and waited for her to turn around. "This man here is looking for us to run some of his freelance work before he heads back to his hometown of Smallville, Kansas." Perry ignored the smirk that came to Lois' face. "Since you have extra time on your hands what with skipping the mood piece, how about when he has something written, he brings it in to you and you can look it over to see if we should take it or not?"

"Perry, I don't have time for that. I'm a serious

reporter,” Lois insisted.

Perry just smiled, “I think you have plenty of time,” then turning to Clark, continued, “Feel free to bring something by, son, and Lois here will look it over for you.”

Clark smiled, way too brightly in Perry’s opinion, given his limited chance of success. “Thanks, Mr. White. I really appreciate it.” He strode back in the door to shake Perry’s hand, walking out with a confidence that his earlier gait had lacked.

“I’ll bring something by tomorrow,” he said to Lois. He ignored her growl of annoyance as he walked to the elevator.

His step faltered, but only slightly, when he caught the words Perry muttered under his breath, “That’ll never make its way to *my* desk.”

Clark paced within the small area of his room that the phone cord allowed. The Hotel Apollo was certainly not the lushest of accommodations, but at least until he sold a few freelance pieces, he could not afford an apartment. He was hoping that would change within the week and he could find someplace with a month to month lease.

“Are you being careful?” his mother asked on the other end of the phone.

“Yes,” Clark assured her. “Except for the bus...”

“What bus?” Jonathon asked. “Metropolis isn’t the Outback you know. People in the city are always looking to make a quick buck. If they find out about you, they’ll put you in a laboratory and...”

Clark piped up, speaking over his father, “And dissect me like a frog. I know, Dad. Believe me, I’m trying my best to be like everybody else.”

Jonathon grunted, but said nothing, and assuring his parents that he would be home on Friday for dinner, Clark hung up the phone.

The following morning Clark started walking the streets of Metropolis. He was hoping to get a few more interviews today, possibly line up something at the Metropolis Star since he doubted the Planet would really print anything he wrote. On the way to the Star, he passed a group of protesters outside a building, a wrecking ball in the middle of the group.

“Leave the theater on the spot. We don’t need no parking lot,” they chanted repeatedly.

Glancing at a nearby street sign, Clark noticed he was on 42nd Street. This was the theater Lois was supposed to write about.

After discreetly applying heat vision to the engine of the wrecking ball until he was certain there would be no destruction today, Clark wandered into the theater to watch an actress putting on a performance for the empty theater.

Three hours later, Clark once again walked into the Daily Planet’s offices. He had spent an hour at the theater talking to the actress as well as several of the protesters. Then he had spent most of the following two hours typing the story up before rushing to the Daily Planet.

Entering the office, he glanced around before spotting Lois at her desk. He walked up to her with a smile on his face. “Ms. Lane?” he asked as he approached.

Lois looked up, glancing his way, “Yes?” she asked.

“I wrote a story,” Clark started, but Lois cut him off before he could continue.

“Do I know you? Because I’m quite busy here and...”

Clark found the temptation too hard to resist and cut her off right back, “I’m Clark Kent. We met yesterday. I’d like to do some freelance writing for the paper and Mr. White asked me to bring you something to look over.”

Lois grunted, holding out her hand. Handing her the paper, Clark clarified, “I hope you don’t mind. I passed the Bernhardt Theater today and wrote a piece about the closing. I assumed you still weren’t intending to write it.”

“Look...” Lois glanced at the byline on the article Clark had just given her, “Clark... I have a real job and it’s not proofreading copy for someone just starting out and not even hopeful enough to get a real job. I’ll read this later today if I have a chance.”

With that, Lois looked back down at her desk, effectively dismissing Clark. Clark took a breath intending to argue with her, but then he realized that doing so just diminished the chance of his article ever being read, so he just walked away.

Perry White walked through the newsroom. He stopped to chat with Cat — the Planet’s gossip columnist, mostly to make sure she was doing her job and not flirting with one of the male reporters as she was wont to do. He tried talking to Ralph to determine what he was working on, but as usual, it was hard to see if there was any story at all in the web of lies the man spun. Perry would have fired him years ago if the Planet’s counsel had not warned him that compulsive lying was a disorder and Ralph could sue the paper for prejudice if he was fired for his all too frequent inability to bring in substantiated stories.

On his way back to his office, he passed by Lois’ desk. He had hoped to catch her to determine what she was working on, but she was out, which raised his suspicions even further that she was up to something she was not supposed to be. Lois’ ability to jump into situations feet first made her one of Perry’s star reporters, but as he saw the woman as a daughter, it also kept him up late at night. Glancing at her desk, he was surprised to see she had actually typed up a story on the Bernhardt Theater.

Picking up the paper he perused it quickly. It was not Lois’ usual style, but it was good, very good. He was about to read it again, more carefully this time, when the television monitors stationed around the newsroom floor caught his attention. An image of the Messenger was on screen with a voiceover explaining that the space transport had just blown up.

Perry was still staring at the TV in shock when Lois came up to him. “Perry, I need a task force,” she proclaimed.

Almost immediately, Perry replied, “Take Jimmy,” before realizing he did not even know why she needed a task force.

“Jimmy’s a kid. I need a real reporter,” Lois replied.

“This is great work, Lois. Different from your usual style — a bit softer, but really great work,” Perry said to her, holding out the theater story.

Lois took the paper from him, reading it to herself. Finishing, she laughed, "I can't believe you thought I wrote this drivel." Glancing down at the paper in her hand, she quoted with derision dripping from her voice, "'She came to say goodbye, as we all must, to the past, and to a life and a place that would soon exist only in a bittersweet memory.' Come on, Perry. I couldn't write mush like this if I tried." She handed the paper back to Perry, chuckling.

Perry glanced again at the page, this time noticing the byline at the top. "Clark Kent — the kid from yesterday? He brought this by?" he asked her.

Lois snorted, "As if I had time to read his pathetic attempt at copy. I told him I'd look at it when I had the time."

"What do you need a team for?" Perry asked.

Lois, used to the way Perry's thoughts moved from topic to topic and happy to have the discussion back on her story, explained, "The Messenger explosion. I think there might be something to Platt's story — he's the crazy guy who was in here yesterday. I went to see him today. He doesn't seem so crazy. He has a theory that it was sabotage — says he has a report that he can get me. I want to check into it."

Perry nodded for a moment while he thought. Kent's writing was strong and his style was vastly different than Lois' — more focused on the people in the story than the plotline itself. Together, Lois and Clark would easily write Kerth winning articles. "Call Kent," he told her as he wrote the phone number on the bottom of the theater article on a piece of paper and handed it to Lois.

"What for?" Lois demanded.

"He's your task force," Perry replied deadpan, knowing Lois would never go for it.

"Kent? He's not even a staff reporter. Kent is a hack from Smallville. I couldn't make that name up."

"Well," Perry drawled, "that hack from Smallville has an article in this evening's edition," he waved the theater article at Lois, "and unless you call Kent and get something on the Messenger explosion to me by deadline, you won't."

Without waiting for Lois' reply, Perry turned and walked to his office, shutting his door firmly behind him.

The payphone was ringing as Clark stepped into his room. He picked it up, surprised. His parents generally did not call in the middle of the day.

Before he even had a chance to say hello, a woman's voice came over the line. "Look, I did not work my butt off all these years to baby-sit some hack from Nowheresville."

"Excuse me?" Clark tried to determine if he had somehow gotten cut into someone else's call.

"I need you to meet me at EPRAD in half an hour. If you can't make it, that's fine. Just understand one thing — I didn't ask to work with you, Perry wouldn't give me anyone else as back-up, but this is my story, and I'm top banana. Got it?"

Clark smiled — it was Lois. The woman from the Daily Planet. If Perry was suggesting that he work with Lois, he and Lois must have liked his story. A slight laugh audible in his voice, Clark replied, "You like to be on top. Got it."

Jogging up to the entrance of EPRAD, Clark smiled. Lois was standing there glancing at her watch and tapping her foot. It seemed entirely possible that she had been doing that since the moment she arrived, just so he would feel badly about being late, but thanks to his enhanced abilities, there was no way he was late. She must have called him from her car phone or something. Lois could not have possibly made it to EPRAD from the Planet's office as quickly as he had gotten here.

Deciding this was just one way in which Lois was going to make it clear that she was in charge, Clark decided to humor her for the moment. "Sorry I took so long, Lois. Thanks for waiting for me."

Lois looked up and for an instant, it was clear she was surprised. She had just called Clark five minutes ago. Then she smiled — if he apologized that easily, he was going to be easy to control.

"Well, come on, we can't afford to wait any longer," and without looking back, Lois turned and walked through the door.

Clark stood back and let Lois take charge of their interview with Dr. Baines. It was clear she wanted to. Besides, Clark had spent part of the previous day reading old copies of the Daily Planet. There was no question that he could learn a lot from Lois. Her writing was clear and sharp, her stories were amazing — nearly all had been on the front page of the paper.

On the other hand, it was not Clark's first day as a reporter. So when Baines said that no press was allowed to see the Messenger remains, Clark smiled at her. He had seen her eyeing him earlier. "No exceptions?" he asked.

Lois rolled her eyes, and then immediately did so again, when Baines replied, "I'll see what I can do."

"Well, she was co-operative," Clark said, as they walked out. He smiled — he was sure Lois did not agree, but there was something so satisfying about seeing this woman all wound up.

When Lois just nodded her head, but did not say anything, Clark tried again. "She's attractive, too, and young for a woman in her position."

"Typical," Lois muttered.

"What?" Clark smiled. It was working.

Lois stopped her fast-paced walking to turn around and face Clark. "Nothing. It's just that's a typical male response."

Clark said nothing, wishing that he was actually a typical male.

Clark followed Lois into the newsroom, not completely sure what he should be doing. He stood next to her awkwardly while she made herself a cup of coffee and was just about to ask her what he was supposed to be doing when a tall woman with long auburn hair and not nearly enough clothing on walked right up to him, completely invading his personal space.

"Hi there," she said, her voice husky and low.

"Hi," Clark replied, trying to keep his voice even. He knew he had failed when he saw Lois grin.

"I'm Cat," the woman said, holding her hand out to him palm down as if she expected him to kiss it.

“Clark,” he replied, his voice more normal this time. He took her hand and turning it slightly, he shook it before stepping back slightly. Cat followed him.

“You must be new around here,” Cat said, “I’d love to show you around.” She wound an arm around his neck.

Clark looked around, trying to find a way out. Lois was rolling her eyes again and he knew she would not be any help. “Um... maybe when I get settled in?” Clark tried to state, but the question was clear in his voice.

Cat smiled, “Count on it, Clark.” She lowered the hand behind his neck to pinch his backside and then sashayed away.

Clark let out a breath he had not realized he had been holding. Looking around the newsroom, he realized that Lois had moved back to her desk.

He walked over to it, leaning on the edge. “So, now what do we do?”

Lois looked up at him, annoyed. He wondered if she practiced that look in front of a mirror. “*We* don’t do anything,” she told him, her tone acerbic. “I am going to start writing up the story. *You* go home. I’ll call you if Ms. Young and Attractive Scientist calls us back. I may need help there and she seems to like you.”

Clark, completely ignoring her tone, asked, “Aren’t I going to help you write the story?”

Lois looked surprised, but taking a deep breath replied, “I don’t need help writing a story, Farmboy. It’s my job.”

“But...” Clark trailed off, not sure what to say. Wasn’t that why he was there? “Aren’t I going to help you?”

“I don’t need your help,” Lois repeated.

“But I thought you called me because you liked my article about the theater,” Clark could nearly hear the whine creeping into his voice and took a deep breath. Behaving like a child was not the answer here.

“No, I did not,” Lois clarified. It was clear from her tone that it did not even occur to her that this may be hurtful. “I thought it was soft and mushy. I do not write soft and mushy pieces, Clark. I write the news. I called you as Perry insisted.”

Clark nodded, deciding that if he did not want to continue to hear a childish tone to his voice, he was best off not speaking. Turning around, he walked out of the newsroom.

Lois glanced down at her computer about to write. For some reason she looked up and caught sight of Clark standing by the elevator. His shoulders were slumped and for a moment she felt badly. She supposed she could have been kinder to him. ‘You were awful to him,’ a voice in her head whispered. She should apologize to him, she knew. His writing was not bad, really, even if it was not her style, and he had been helpful with Baines, pushing her when he saw that he was likely to get further than she could have with the woman.

And yet, even knowing she owed him an apology, Lois did nothing, just watched as Clark walked into the elevator and the doors closed between them.

Clark lay on his bed at the Apollo staring at the ceiling. Lois Lane infuriated him. She was so condescending and... well, just plain rude. He tried taking deep breaths to calm

down, but that did not help.

He knew why she was like this. Or at least part of it. She was angry at having to work with him, and that was partly his fault. She may not have been so angry if she respected him more. If he had been a staff reporter, she would have. Maybe she would not be all sunshine and roses, but Clark suspected she would have behaved better than she had; however, he could not get a job as a staff reporter. He had done that once before and then felt badly when he needed to leave so abruptly.

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He was on his way back to his room when he first noticed it. He smiled and waved at Shreela and Emmanuel. They were not close friends, but in the past they had always seemed happy to see him.

It was not exactly like Clark blended in with the locals in Arusha. His olive skin tones had made him look like a local in Greece and he had had even been able to pass in South America, but here he stood out among all the dark-skinned natives. Overall though, everyone here was very friendly and welcoming and people often stopped to talk to Clark when they passed. All were surprised to find this westerner among them, particularly one who knew Swahili, but today the smile on Shreela’s face did not reach her eyes and Emmanuel looked away when he took in Clark’s face.

He did not mean to listen in, but it happened almost without his thinking. “Do you think it’s true?” Emmanuel asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Shreela answered. “It can’t be, right?”

“But then how did it happen?” Emmanuel countered. “No normal person could have gotten to Priya that quickly.”

Clark could see Shreela nodding her head in thought, but then Clark realized what he was doing and stopped eavesdropping.

He sighed. He was hoping to stay here a little longer. It had only been a month, and he really liked it here. He had been helping Henry with his farm and working at the Arusha Times. It was his first staff job at a newspaper and he liked it. The Arusha Times was a pretty major newspaper by Tanzania standards, so there were about thirty people working on it, and since the paper was produced in English, there were other Americans working there besides himself. The paper had a very close community feel to it — so many of the people being so far away from the rest of their family. They had had a potluck two weeks ago to celebrate Thanksgiving. While it was hosted by David and Fannie, they had invited many of the people from the newsroom — including the small crew from England and several of the local Arushans. Overall, Clark felt like he belonged here. For a few days he had even fantasized about staying here longer term.

But that had been before Priya had gotten caught in the windstorm. Daytime disasters were always the problem. At night he could wear all black and if he was lucky, no one would see him, but during the day, he could not blend in. If he had not saved her, though, Priya would have died.

Clark sighed. He supposed Paris would make a good next stop.

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No, Clark knew well that working freelance was a better

idea for him.

Lois tapped a pen against her desk repeatedly. She could see Stan glaring at her out of the corner of her eye, but decided she did not care. She was not sure what her next move should be. She had considered going to see if Platt had gotten his report together yet, but he had promised to drop it off when he gathered all of it.

Without the report, she did not have a story. She had written the intro, but she needed more. Plus, she felt like even the intro was missing something, although she was not yet sure what.

“Why do I care?” Perry asked, leaning over her shoulder.

“What?” Lois looked at him confused.

“You say that if the answer to what caused the Messenger explosion isn’t found, Space Station Prometheus will not be launched. Why do I care?” Perry asked again.

“Why do you care? Why do you care?” Lois asked, exasperated. “It’s the space station!”

“And?”

“It’s the whole point of the space program. Learning about new frontiers and all that.”

“Yeah, I get that, and it seems a bit sad, but really, not a big deal. I’ll forget about it tomorrow. It doesn’t concern me, make me feel bad, or sad, or angry. Nothing about it is lasting.”

Lois looked at him blindly.

“I don’t run stories on the front page that I won’t remember tomorrow, Lois. Make me care.” Perry’s words were gentle.

“I hate it when you try to improve my writing,” Lois grumbled.

“Where’s Kent?” Perry asked.

“I sent him home,” Lois replied, deadpan. She did not mention that she was not exactly kind when she did so. She was still feeling a bit guilty — just a bit, though.

Perry shook his head, “Don’t push him away, Lois. You can learn from him, too.”

“I can learn from *him*?” Lois asked, clearly annoyed.

“He has no experience, doesn’t even want a real job. I’m a three time Kerth winner!” Lois crossed her arms in front of her chest, her entire body making her feelings about this clear.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t improve, Lois. Kent would find the angle to make me care.”

Lois did not say anything; she just stood there glaring at Perry.

Perry sighed and was about to walk away when he noticed Clark come in through the elevators. Something was off about his stance, Perry thought. For someone who had just been given the right to investigate a story without a staff job, he looked awfully down. Shaking his head, Perry sighed again. He was certain that some of the attitude Lois had just exhibited had come out while Clark was around.

“Lois?” Clark asked, his voice hesitant.

Lois turned to him, but did not say anything.

Clark held his hand out to Perry. “Thank you for giving me this chance, Mr. White.”

Perry smiled, “It’s Perry, and if you go to accounting

when you are finished talking to Lois, they’ll cut you a check for the Bernhardt Theater article. That was good writing, son. Very good.”

Clark smiled broadly, the smile reaching his eyes. “Thanks, Perry.”

“What did you want, Clark?” Lois asked sounding somewhat exasperated, but the sound was a bit flat — not nearly as cold as Perry would have expected.

“I went to see Platt,” Clark started and then rushed to explain before Lois could get upset. “You said you didn’t need help writing the story, but I felt like I should do something. So, I went to talk to him. He’s still working on the report, but he said something I thought you’d want to know.”

Lois was tempted to tell him off for cutting into her investigation, but decided to see what he had found out first. “So?” she prodded him.

“Platt has a young teenage daughter who is disabled. She is supposed to go live on Space Station Prometheus.”

“And I care, why?” Lois asked. She saw Perry smile out of the corner of her eye, but decided not to respond.

“Well, Platt thinks that the space station will enable us to find cures to certain conditions — and his daughter might be able to walk again...” Clark trailed off, and when he continued, he sounded less sure of himself. “I thought it might make a good human interest angle to the story about the Messenger explosion.”

Perry laughed, shaking his head, “Good work, Clark. I think you have the right idea.” With that, he walked away.

Lois tried hard not to get angry just because Clark brought in exactly what Perry wanted. She was still feeling a bit guilty about earlier and so decided to be somewhat nicer to Clark.

Pointing to an empty desk she said, “Sit there. I’ll send you what I wrote so far and you can weave your human interest angle into it.”

“I can write it?” Clark asked, hating the fact that he sounded like a four-year-old.

“You can write it. That doesn’t mean I’ll use it. This is my story, Farmboy.” She said she’d be nicer to him, not nice.

While he wrote, Clark tried not to hear Lois on the phone, but it was hard to ignore the resigned tone to her voice.

Hanging up, she walked over to the desk he was sitting at. “How’s it going?” she asked. It may have been the most civil thing she had said to him since they met.

“Good,” Clark replied, smiling at her warmly. “I’m hoping it won’t be clear where your writing leaves off and mine begins. Then maybe you’ll use my copy,” he teased her.

Lois smiled, “I’m sure I will. I lied earlier — the theater story was good. Not my style, but good writing.”

Clark’s smile was so wide and so genuine it almost felt better to Lois than when he thanked her, his voice quiet.

“Are you busy tonight?” she asked him.

Clark’s eyebrows raised slightly, then he remembered the phone conversation. Her date for Lex Luthor’s ball had cancelled as he had the sniffles. Trying not to smile, Clark replied, “I was planning to go to sleep early.”

informed them. “I must confess that I love the fact that everyone in the city has to look up in order to see me.”

Clark glanced at Lois, but somehow she missed the significance of this. She was smiling up at Lex in a way that made Clark’s chest feel tight.

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After that, Lex made his announcement about the space station. It seemed generous — to offer to fund a space station if Prometheus could not move forward, but something in the way Luthor presented it, or maybe just the name, Space Station Luthor, made Clark suspicious of Luthor’s motive. He was amazed at how impressed everyone seemed to be, how little notice they took of the note of smugness in Lex’s voice.

Clark was smiling as he approached the Daily Planet the following morning. He had decided to put thoughts of Lex Luthor behind him and focus on the fact that he was investigating a story for the Daily Planet with Lois Lane.

“Good morning, Lois,” Clark called as he saw her.

The two stopped at the crowd in front of the Daily Planet. “There’s a man caught,” a construction worker was calling, panic in his voice. Clark glanced around and saw a manhole cover right in front of him, then glanced around again and saw that everyone was busy staring at the area where the man was caught. He quickly removed the manhole cover, dashed down and freed the man, pushing him up through a different manhole. He was back on the street before Lois even noticed he had disappeared.

“That man...” the man who had been caught gasped, pointing at Clark, “that man saved me.”

Clark tried to school his features into a look of shock. “He’s confused,” Clark said quietly.

“Well, clearly,” Lois said with disdain. “What did you do?” she asked, turning around and taking him in. “You’re a mess.”

Clark glanced down and took in the dirt all over his suit. He was lucky Lois was not more suspicious. This is what always happened, and Clark wondered how much longer he would be able to stay in Metropolis.

Clark glanced at Lois surreptitiously. Jimmy had retrieved Platt’s report earlier today. He and Lois were now the only ones in the newsroom as they tried to make some sense out of it, but the report was more a pile of notes than an actual report. Clark was having very little luck getting anywhere, and wondered how Lois Lane tackled such things.

“This is impossible,” Lois declared and Clark gave a sigh of relief. Perhaps it was not any easier for her. “Nothing matches, no dates,” she clarified. “We’ll never get through this and I’m starving. I wish I knew a good Chinese take-out.”

Clark stood up. “I know a place. I’ll be right back.” Clark was not sure why he was so eager to impress this woman; she had barely been cordial to him the entire time they had known each other, but that did not seem to change the fact that he did want to impress her.

He was back moments later with steaming hot food directly from Shanghai. For a moment, he wondered what

he would say if she asked where it came from but then disregarded that concern. Lois did not seem to be the sort of person who thought much about details pertaining to things she did not care about, and it was crystal clear that Clark Kent was not a topic she cared about.

“Mm... Still hot. This is out of this world,” Lois said as she swallowed a dumpling. Clark tried not to look too happy that he had impressed her.

He continued to watch her facial expressions as they ate, storing information on what foods she seemed to enjoy most. By the time they had finished eating, Lois had relaxed somewhat. She had kicked off her shoes while he was out and her feet were now propped up on her desk.

The feeling of intimacy was broken, however, when Clark handed Lois a fortune cookie. “It’s in Chinese,” she informed him.

Despite the annoyance in her voice, Clark smiled — another chance to impress her. He held out his hand, but Lois’ voice dripped with derision when she said, “Don’t tell me you can speak Chinese?”

Clark answered by reading her fortune, “A good horse is like a member of the family.”

A look of annoyance crossed Lois’ lovely features, “I hate that. That is not a fortune.”

For reasons he could not define, Clark found this amusing and laughed, but Lois just looked at him oddly. “So, what’s the deal, Farmboy?” she asked him.

“The deal?” Clark nearly choked on his fortune cookie. He was not sure if the apprehension he was feeling was just the general unease he always felt when asked about his life or if it was from the predatory gleam Lois was currently sporting.

“Well, you know like what? Like a thousand languages. Clearly this is not the first time you’ve forgone a staff job. What’s with the hunger to travel the world?” she asked.

“It’s not like you’ve never left the US,” Clark replied in an effort to deflect attention off of him. Lois narrowed her eyes in response, and Clark immediately realized how that sounded. “I wasn’t checking up on you or anything. I was just reading some of your old articles and I saw the one on the Congo.” His voice was soft, leery of Lois’ response, but she nearly beamed in reply and Clark relaxed.

But as a sign as to why Lois was such a good reporter, she was not distracted. “Still, that was for a story. I don’t move to a new place every few... What is it? Weeks? Months?”

“Months,” Clark replied, but his voice was soft and sad.

Lois looked at him critically. “Why do you move so often if it doesn’t make you happy?”

Clark shook his head slightly. He was thinking of the places he’d been to before now. All the places where he had not fit in, where people started talking about him and the things going on that did not seem possible.

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Clark tried not to notice when the newsroom got quiet right as he entered. It made him wish he had used his enhanced hearing to listen in to the conversation they had been having before he entered.

“Hi, Clark,” Larissa said quietly, but the others looked away.

the sky,” Jonathan said.

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation and Clark suddenly remembered that he was supposed to be ready for Lois at nine.

“I have to go. Lois is here,” Clark told his parents.

“Lois again, huh?” Martha said.

Clark, ignoring her tone, replied, “I’ll talk to you later,” before hanging up the phone.

It was not until after he answered the door that Clark remembered that he was still wearing just a towel. He had to admit that he was not too sorry he did. While she tried to hide it, it was clear that the sight of his bare chest impressed Lois. Possibly more than his comment to the police officer last night.

“I said nine,” Lois said, her voice attempting to sound angry, but slightly off. “I thought you’d be naked... I mean ready.”

Clark hid a smile, “Sorry. I was on the phone. I’ll be ready in a second.”

While he grabbed his clothes and went to change in the bathroom, Lois decided a drink would be a good idea to solve the parching of her mouth that occurred at seeing Clark shirtless.

She opened the refrigerator to find it full of junk food. Grimacing, she found a container of orange juice and pulled it out. Then rifling through the cabinets in search of a glass, she saw even more junk food. Her facial expression changed from disgusted to curious as she uncovered even more junk food in another cabinet.

When Clark emerged from the bathroom, Lois took him in, making sure she had not imagined his well-defined chest earlier. While it was harder to tell now that he was clothed, there was nary a sign of extra fat on him.

Lois decided not to give Clark any more satisfaction by pointing out the fact that she had noticed how attractive he was, but she was going to watch him closely to uncover how he managed to eat like an eight year old and still maintain that body.

Lois and Clark started off the day by visiting Samuel Platt’s wife. It was a hard visit. Danielle Platt strongly believed that her husband was murdered. She pressed Lois and Clark to promise to prove that her husband did not commit suicide.

The meeting caused a subdued feeling in both Lois and Clark, and afterwards Lois could not seem to work up her usual stream of barbs. As a result, they were both quiet as they watched the news conference where the Congress of Nations announced their intention to move forward with the space program as planned.

Jimmy waited until after the news conference to announce his news. “So I gave STAR Labs Dr. Platt’s report.” Lois and Clark looked at him with interest and so he explained that by using a hologram one of the scientists there had proven Platt’s theory correct.

For a moment, neither Lois nor Clark said anything, comprehending Jimmy’s news. Then it hit them and they both exclaimed at the same time, “Platt was right!” The mood was suddenly jubilant and somehow in the midst of this, Lois ended up in Clark’s arms.

For a moment, neither of them said anything, and then they slowly pulled away from each other. However, they seemed reluctant to break contact and so they stood in each other’s arms with just enough space between them to stare into each other’s eyes.

“Why don’t we have dinner?” Clark asked, his voice a whisper.

Lois started to turn him down, but then changed her mind. This was too good a coup to go uncelebrated, even if her only option was Clark. “Okay.” Before Clark could fully comprehend that she had agreed, though, she added, “Wait. I can’t. I have plans tonight.”

She moved out of Clark’s arms and back into the newsroom. Clark followed her, confused, but somehow, his sluggish brain made the connection. “Luthor?” he asked her.

Lois answered in the affirmative and Clark started to challenge her on this. He had a bad feeling about Luthor, but he changed his mind. Lois did not respect him as her equal and really he had done little to change that. He knew she thought him weak for not applying for a staff job at the Planet, but he was at a loss for how to explain it without telling her far more than he wished Lois Lane to know.

So, instead he went for a softer approach. “Postpone your plans with Luthor, Lois. Just for tonight. Let’s celebrate this victory.”

“Look, Clark,” Lois said as they exited the Daily Planet building. “I live by three rules. Never get involved in your stories, never let anyone else get there first, and never sleep with anyone you work with. Canceling plans with Luthor tonight breaks two of those rules. It gives you hope that something will happen between us, which it won’t, and it gives time for someone else to get the first Lex Luthor interview.”

Before Clark could respond, Lois had turned around and headed off towards Luthor’s waiting limousine.

Clark lay in his bed at the Apollo, thinking about the brief moment in the newsroom earlier today when Lois had been in his arms. She had felt so right there, had fit so perfectly. It filled Clark with a longing he felt helpless to tamp down. It would be easier not to want, because he could not have. While he tried to dismiss his father’s concerns, he knew they were valid. At some point, someone was going to notice him doing something no normal man could do and he would need to leave.

It was foolish to think he would last long enough for Lois to want to come with him. It was not clear that she would ever feel anything but disdain for him, but what was the other option? He could stop helping, but how could he stand by and watch someone get hurt when he knew he could help them with no effect on himself at all? It was a dilemma he had been trying to determine his entire adult life, but he had yet to come to any conclusions.

Lois’ dinner with Lex was a bit frustrating. Lois was not kidding when she told Clark that from her perspective her dinner with Lex was purely to get an interview with the man, but Lex clearly had a different agenda in mind. Later, she was annoyed with herself for how easily he had

distracted her from her goal. He was charming and debonair and it was hard not to feel a little flattered at the fact that a man like Lex Luthor was interested in her.

"I sense things about you. Possibilities. Potentials. You have the intelligence, spirit, and vision to transcend the mundane," he had told her. She knew some pop psychiatrist would say that this only meant something to her as they were words she had wanted to hear from her father her entire life, but she did not care. No one had ever seen her this way, the way she secretly hoped she was seen, and so she had thought she was failing and tried harder, but now, Lex Luthor, the third richest man in the entire world, told her she had the ability to be something extraordinary. How could she be anything but flattered?

So, she let him kiss her good night. It was not the right way to end an evening that was supposed to be an interview, but she felt powerless to stop it.

Besides, it was not like anyone else had seemed eager to kiss her in months. For a moment that thought made her stop as she brushed her teeth. Well, except Mr. Greenjeans, himself, Clark Smallville Kent. She sensed his invitation to dinner tonight was not just to celebrate, and Clark was cute, no doubt about it, but he was no Lex Luthor.

"Come on, Lois," Clark pleaded. Even Jimmy gave her his best puppy dog look.

But Lois would not budge. "You have got to be kidding me," she said. "You don't even work here!"

"But," Clark started, but hearing the whine creeping into his voice he stopped. What was it about this woman that caused him to act like a child? Taking a deep breath, he started again, "Lois, I helped you with the investigation and the writing of the article. I deserve to go to the meeting with Perry to review it." There. He sounded like an adult now.

Lois shook her head, "No way. You want to be invited to meetings with Perry? Get yourself a real job. Given that you don't have one now, you should feel free to sit here and wait for us to tell you what he thinks," she said to Clark. Turning to Jimmy, she added, "Come on," in an impatient voice.

Jimmy followed Lois, turning to give Clark an apologetic look, but then he could not help but grin a little. Lois was letting him come in to the meeting!

Less than five minutes later, Clark was glad he had not gone in with them. He had watched the meeting from Lois' desk, blocking out sounds nearby in order to hear Perry's words, and they were not good. Clark felt himself blushing and hoped the telltale red cheeks would lighten before Lois came back. Basic journalism 101. They were being called on things the average fifth-grader knew about writing a newspaper story. They had no facts to substantiate their claim and their source was a man largely regarded as insane who had recently committed suicide. Just because they believed Platt and suspected he had been murdered did not mean Platt was a reliable witness. Others had a very different view of the man.

Clark had to smile at the look on Lois' face when she walked out of Perry's office. Whereas he felt embarrassed at making this rookie mistake, Lois looked angry. "What we

need is evidence," she said as she and Jimmy made their way back to her desk. "Pictures of those..."

"Ion particles," Clark finished her thought.

Lois looked surprised to see him there. "Right," she said distractedly. "So, let's go," she said to Jimmy.

"Me?" Jimmy asked, surprised at being included.

"I'm no good with a camera," she said as she grabbed her purse. Clark coughed to cover up his surprise. He did not realize Lois Lane admitted to any weaknesses.

When he followed Lois and Jimmy out of the building, though, Lois turned to look at him. "Where do you think you are going?" she asked.

Clark gaped at her a moment, surprised. Was she planning to leave him out of this? "With you," he finally said simply.

"Jimmy's coming to take pictures. What can you do that I can't do myself and probably better?" she asked.

Clark bristled. Her constant barbs were starting to grow tiresome. "I'm coming, Lois," he insisted.

Lois looked surprised at this, but then stood up straighter and for a moment Clark had the illusion that he was looking up at her even though he knew he was a good six inches taller than she was. "This is an investigation, Clark. An investigation being conducted by the Daily Planet, and you are not an employee of the Planet, are you?"

Clark took a deep breath. This time she was not going to beat him down. "Yes, Lois, I do work for the Daily Planet. I may not have a staff job, but Perry hired me to help you out with this investigation. So, I'm coming. You can argue, but I didn't actually ask your permission."

Lois said nothing, just turned on her heel, but Clark took her silence as a sign that she had respected his standing up to her. Jimmy stared at him in awe before the two men took off jogging to catch up with her. "Wow. I've never seen anyone but the Chief speak to Mad Dog Lane that way," Jimmy said.

Clark smiled. He really should think of staying in Metropolis.

That had not gone well. Clark had no idea how to get them out of this mess without letting Lois in on his secret. The transport shell had been a fake. The original one had been completely destroyed on the left side and the one in the hangar now was in perfect condition. The realization that they were about to bust the case wide open had given them a false sense of security, but then Jimmy had been felled with one whack to the neck and Lois and Clark succumbed to the waving of a gun. The result had all three of them tied together on the floor.

They had been left in that position for the past half hour, and Lois had filled that half hour with random barbs, complaints, and general babble. Clark was starting to get a headache, and to the best of his knowledge, he did not get headaches.

He had broken his padlock open at least ten minutes ago, but could not seem to find a way to get past Lois' constant rambling to let her know. Finally she took a break in her speech and Clark started to tell her, but then suddenly she spoke again with such sadness to her voice that Clark

was forced into silence once more. “Remember when I told you my three rules?” she asked. “I’ve broken every one of them. I seem to *always* get involved in my stories, and I got involved with a reporter right when I started at the Planet.”

She stopped for a moment, but Clark stayed silent. He could not help but feel flattered that she was opening up to him. “His name was Claude,” she finally continued. “He was French. I was in love with him. Or at least I thought I was. One night I told him about a story I was working on, and the next morning he was gone with my story. He won an award for it. Didn’t even thank me for my input.”

There was another pause, while Clark tried to think of the right thing to say, but it was Lois who spoke next. “I know I act rashly and jump into dangerous situations, like tonight, but it’s the only way I know how to get the job done. To be respected.”

“Lois,” Clark replied softly, “You don’t need to put yourself in danger to get respect. Everyone at the Planet already respects you. Perry told me that you were the best reporter he’s ever worked with.”

“He did?” she asked, her voice full of hope.

“Mmmhmmm,” Clark replied, his voice still soft. “And I know it doesn’t mean anything coming from someone who doesn’t even have a staff job, but I think you’re pretty terrific, too.”

“Clark, I’m sorry,” Lois said, but Baines came back in before she could explain what she was sorry for.

Things happened quickly after that. Baines spilled two chemicals on the ground, promised them the mixture would cause a nifty explosion and raced out of there. Clark got up, ignoring Lois’ questions about how he got free, and grabbing Jimmy and swinging the boy across his shoulder, he reached for Lois’ hand. She started to pull away, but Clark just tightened his grip and pulled her with him.

When the blast occurred, Clark allowed himself to rise slightly off the ground, flying Jimmy and Lois to safety. The blast seemed to have revived Jimmy and he was the one who pointed out the explosion of Baines’ helicopter.

The mood at the Daily Planet the next day was jubilant. Perry even broke out champagne for the occasion, and Clark could not help but feel proud of the headline. Lois got the lead of course, but he and Jimmy were listed as contributing authors — on a front page story of the Daily Planet. For the moment, Clark decided to ignore the fact that this could not last forever and just live in the moment. *Carpe diem!*

Lois’ mood was soon brought down by Perry’s telling her that she would not be allowed on the habitation module the following day to interview the colonists and Clark wondered if part of her greatness stemmed from the fact that she was always thinking about her next big story.

But while Clark thought there were definitely traits of Lois’ he should emulate to become a better journalist, this was not one of them. He allowed himself to bask in the happiness that this accomplishment gave him and put out of his mind his next story until tomorrow.

Lois cornered him, as he had suspected she would, before he left. “If you ever breathe one word of what I told you yesterday, I’ll deny it and have you begging to do

freelance for the Borneo Star or whatever two bit newspaper you worked for before.”

“You can trust me,” he said.

Lois snorted and walked away.

Clark was quiet during dinner. His head was full of thoughts, but he was not sure how to verbalize them. “Mom, Dad,” he finally started.

His parents, who had also been uncharacteristically quiet during dinner, looked up.

“I think... I think I want to stay in Metropolis,” Clark said.

Martha smiled broadly, “That’s great, Clark.”

“No, it’s not!” Clark insisted, standing up. “It’s not great at all. I can’t stay in anyplace more than a few months, Mom, you know that.”

“That’s not true, Clark,” Jonathan said, his voice soft in an effort to calm his son. “You can stay in one place.”

“I just have to stand by and let others get hurt when I know I can help them,” Clark replied, his voice bitter.

“Clark,” his mother cut in, “If you were to leave Metropolis, those people would still be hurt. I know this is hard for you, but you can’t keep moving from place to place like this.”

Clark sat back down, dejectedly, looking down at the table. “I know,” he said, his voice soft.

Then he stood up and took his plate to the kitchen sink, washing it with super speed. “I’m going back to Metropolis,” he told his parents as he bent to kiss his mother’s cheek. “I’m going to ask Perry White for a job. I’ll figure something out.”

Lois held her breath as she lined up to board the habitation module. So far no one had noticed her. She moved forward and almost laughed in relief when no one stopped her. Moving off from the rest of the colonists she found a small room and strapped herself in for the launch.

Just as the countdown started, she noticed something on the wall. Removing the straps, she moved over to it and within moments recognized it. “It’s a bomb,” she yelled, but the countdown continued heedlessly over the intercom.

She moved over to the door, but it was now locked closed. “It’s a bomb!” she screamed again, but no one heard her.

“Clark,” Perry said in greeting when the boy entered his office. The Planet’s offices were busy for the evening with many of the reporters having stayed to watch the colonist launch.

“Mr. White,” Clark started, but then remembered, “Perry. I was wondering...” Clark floundered, the bravado he had felt at the farm escaping him. “I was hoping...” he started again. “Perry, I’d like a staff job,” he finally said in a rush.

Perry smiled. He had hoped that the front page story would make Clark want to stay. He was a good reporter, and Perry suspected that he was good for Lois.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he said. Then holding out his hand, he smiled, “Welcome to the Daily Planet, son.” The smile that lit up Clark’s face nearly made Perry’s day.

“Chief,” Jimmy called from the newsroom. “Chief, you’ve got to come see this.”

“What is it?” Perry asked as he exited his office, Clark following him.

“Something went wrong with the launch. They decided to scrub it.” Perry and Clark glanced at the television in confusion, oblivious to the sound of excitement in Jimmy’s voice or the noise of an endless stream of messages coming out of the fax machine. “But then this man, he pushed it right up and it went off anyway.”

“What do you mean a man pushed up the habitation module?” Perry asked, laughter in his voice.

“These just came over the wire, Chief,” one of the copy boys told Perry, handing him the pile of faxes.

“This man, he flew,” Jimmy said, but Clark cut him off.

“A man who can fly?” he asked, a strangled quality to his voice.

“Yes,” Jimmy said.

“This is ridiculous,” Perry said glancing through the faxes.

Thinking the comment was directed at him, Jimmy replied, “I saw it on the TV, Chief.”

“Don’t believe everything you see on TV, Jimmy,” Perry said. “Or read in faxes apparently,” he added under his breath.

But just then there was silence in the newsroom aside from their little group. The sudden quiet drew Jimmy, Perry, and Clark’s attention to the window. Lois floated inside, in the arms of a man who was indeed flying.

“Great shades of Elvis,” Perry exclaimed.

Clark reached for a chair, sitting down heavily. The flying man was wearing the crest that was on the blanket he was wrapped in when his parents had found him.

As soon as he could, Clark snuck away from the newsroom and flew back to Smallville. He felt this strange mix of emotions that he was having trouble dealing with. On the one hand, this man could fly, like him, and they looked alike as well, and he was wearing his family’s crest. It could be a relative, and that was exciting — to maybe learn something about where he came from and how he came to have these strange abilities. On the other hand, this man had seemed so different than Clark. So sure of himself, so... well, so out there. Clark was always cautious, always hiding who he was. It was hard to imagine an existence where he did not do that.

So maybe he was not really like this man at all. Maybe even if they were related, they would never be able to understand each other.

And then there was Lois. Lois, who looked at him with disdain and looked at the flying man with awe. She called him a hack from Nowheresville and had named the flying man Superman. It was childish and stupid, but Clark was jealous. Lois had fallen for this Superman as quickly as Clark had fallen for her, and he had thought that if he stayed in Metropolis, maybe, given time, Lois would get to know him enough to move past scorn and onto friendship and maybe even love, but that did not seem at all possible with Superman around. She did not seem to have eyes for anyone else when he was in the room. It made Clark a little

sick to his stomach. It was worse than seeing the way she looked at Luthor.

He landed in the cornfield with a thump, but his parents did not come out to greet him. He could tell from the lights in the living room that they were still up, though.

He entered the farmhouse to find them both glued to the television. His mother looked up at him as he came in, her eyes wide. “He’s wearing your family’s crest,” she said simply.

Clark nodded and sat down on the couch beside her. Absently, she leaned over to take his hand in hers. “Lois is star struck,” he said and neither of his parents could miss the bitterness in his voice.

“Well,” Martha said, “he does fly. That does tend to take most women’s breath away. Just give her time for the effect to wear off,” she said.

They were all startled by a sound outside and Clark got up to look out the window. “He’s here,” he said, sounding both excited and a bit afraid.

“Who’s here?” Jonathan asked.

“Superman,” Clark answered back.

Martha and Jonathan exchanged a puzzled glance, and watched their son go to answer the door.

“Hi,” Superman said, his voice quiet. “Can I come in?”

“Why are you here?” Clark answered, and Martha winced at the slightly hostile sound to her son’s voice.

“I really feel like I should explain inside,” Superman answered, and although he looked somewhat suspicious, Clark moved aside to let him in.

Superman came into the living room with a warm, engaging smile. “Mom... I mean, Martha,” he said as he held his hand out.

Martha gasped. She looked back and forth from Superman to her son. “He looks like you,” she finally said to her son.

Superman dropped his arm. “Maybe I should explain without the introductions. I know who you all are anyway.”

“How?” Jonathan asked, and like his son, he sounded suspicious.

Superman took a deep breath. “My name is Clark Kent,” he explained and stopped for a moment when the three occupants of the room all gasped. “I wish I could say I was a relative or something. I’m sure that’s sort of what you are hoping for, and it would be a lot easier to understand, but I’m not. I’m you, or sort of,” he said, directing the last comment to Clark.

Clark finally entered the room fully and sank back down the couch. He motioned to the remaining chair in the room and Superman sat down.

“I’m from a parallel universe,” Superman said. Jonathan gave him a hard stare and Martha giggled a bit. “I know it’s hard to believe,” Superman continued, “but considering the fact that your son can fly, I would think you’d be more open minded than others.”

This did the trick and the Kents all looked on with interest.

“I think if I gave you my life story, it would sound pretty similar to yours,” he said to Clark. “At least that’s what I’ve been told. I landed in a spaceship in Shuster’s Field, and the Kents found me and raised me. I went to

MidWest U on an academic scholarship where I studied journalism. After college, I traveled the world selling freelance articles and then I landed in Metropolis. I'm told that's where our stories differ. While apparently we have both always dreamed of living in Metropolis and writing for the Planet, I moved to Metropolis intent on finding a way to stay there and got a staff job immediately. I'm told you thought you'd leave and just got a permanent job there tonight after the Prometheus story."

"Told by whom?" Clark asked.

"In my universe, Lois and I are the founders of a utopian society," Superman started.

"You and Lois?" Clark asked.

"Utopian?" Martha asked at the same time.

"Well, it's not utopian yet, Mo... I mean, Martha. Apparently our descendants go on to create Utopia, and yes, I know it's hard to believe right now, Clark, but I am currently married to Lois Lane." Superman paused for a moment, his face suddenly awash in happiness. "It will be thirteen years in a month."

"Anyway," he cleared his head, "some members of this society are tasked with protecting it at all costs, and they have taken to doing this in other universes as well when they can, and that's where you come in. In my world, I decided to become this," he said, gesturing down at his costume, "and arrived on the scene at the same time I did here tonight, but you did not, and according to calculations from the Guardians, even if you did, it would be too difficult for you."

"What do you mean 'too difficult'?" Clark asked, feeling slightly insulted.

Superman sighed, "I don't really know. All I can tell you is that I know you are struggling with what to do about helping others and staying in one place, and I'm going to help with that. For now, you can leave the helping others thing to me and just concentrate on developing a life in Metropolis."

"Why would you do this?" Clark asked.

Superman looked a bit sad, "It hasn't been all easy going in my world either, and at some point a Clark from another universe came to help me out. This is sort of my way of returning the favor. Besides, Herb promises me that when I'm no longer needed here, he'll return me to my home before he actually took me, so neither Lois nor I nor our children will have any memory of being apart."

"So," Clark tried to understand all of what was being said. "You are going to stay here and help people while I build a life in Metropolis, and then one day I'll decide I want to become..." he gestured at the spandex suit, "that, and you'll leave?"

"Basically," Superman said.

"But where will you live?" Martha asked.

Superman smiled warmly, touched that this woman had considered him, although he suspected she was very much like his own mother, but then his smile faltered. "Well, that's a bit tricky. I was hoping..." he paused to look at Clark, but then looked away embarrassed. "I was hoping I could stay with you."

"With me?" Clark asked. "Have you seen where I'm staying?"

"Well, no, but if things are supposed to be similar to my life, you're staying at that seedy hotel... I can't recall the name, but it's in Hobbs Bay?" Superman said. "What I remember best was the phone. Who puts a payphone in a hotel?"

Clark could not help but smile. He had wondered the same thing. "Yes, the Apollo. So you can see..."

"But you can't be staying there," Superman interjected. "Now that you are staying in Metropolis, you'll need someplace permanent to stay."

Clark nodded. "I was going to start looking for someplace tomorrow," he admitted. "I guess I can find something with an extra bedroom."

"And a balcony that does not have a view," Superman added, softly. "Sorry, but it would be best if I could take off from there without too much notice."

"A balcony that doesn't have a view?" Clark asked, wondering where he would find that.

Superman nodded. "If our worlds are really that much alike, I can help you find one. I stayed in a place on Clinton Street for a couple of years. It was a one bedroom place with a balcony without a view, but the apartment across from mine had the same layout with a second bedroom."

Clark nodded in thought. "How much would this be?" he asked. "Perry didn't offer me much to start given my limited background in journalism."

Superman shrugged. "We'll figure something out. My place was a disaster area so I got it really cheap. Hopefully the place across the way will be similar here."

The Kents and Superman sat in silence for a few moments, trying to sort out all of the thoughts running through their heads. Finally, his voice hesitant and soft, Clark asked, "So you're married to Lois?"

Superman smiled broadly. "I'm a bit older than you," he said. "I'd guess about ten to twelve years. I'm forty-one?"

Clark nodded, "Close. I'm twenty-eight."

"In my universe," Superman continued, "I met Lois when we were both twenty-six. It took us two years, but Lois and I did get together, but, of course, I'm not sure how different this universe is."

"So, Lois and I may never get together," Clark noted bitterly.

"I doubt it," Superman said. "If that was the case, there'd be no reason for me to be here."

"You said there are other universes?" Jonathan finally spoke.

"Lots of them, I've been told," Superman said. "But I only know of one other. That one is very different from either of ours."

"How?" Clark asked.

"That Clark's parents died when he was ten," Superman said and smiled softly when Clark reached out to grab his mother's hand. "He still moved to Metropolis and he got engaged to Lana Lang."

"Lana?" Jonathan asked, the dislike clear in his voice. "The Lana here was never good enough for my boy."

Clark reached over to place a hand on his dad's arm in appreciation.

Superman smiled, "I think that Clark's father would have said the same thing about that Lana. According to

Lois, my Lois has spent a fair amount of time with that Clark,” he explained, “Lana never really accepted Clark for who he was and never let him do anything to help others.”

“Sounds like Lana,” Clark said.

Superman grimaced, “Mine, too. Although she wasn’t that bad. Just scared of what she didn’t understand.”

“So what happened to that Clark?” Jonathan asked.

“Did he live his life in secrecy?”

Superman chuckled, “No, my tornado of a wife happened. She told Clark about me, about Superman, and that Clark decided to do it. One day he met my wife, the next he was Superman.”

“What happened to Lana?” Clark asked.

“She left him,” Superman said sadly. “And it got out that Superman was Clark Kent. I haven’t seen him in a while and Lois knows him better than me, but he has a rather sad existence.”

“What about his Lois?” Martha asked.

“Before we showed up in Metropolis, all of our Lois’s did a story undercover in the Congo. His Lois never came back.”

“So he has no Lois?” Clark asked, sounding sad.

“Well, Herb, that’s the guy who brought me here,”

Superman explained, deciding there was no need to tell Clark that Herb was actually H.G. Wells, “Herb said that since Lois was not found dead, they may still find her, but when I asked him when I saw him now if she was found yet, he wouldn’t tell me. We’re not supposed to know too much about the other universes.”

“That poor boy,” Martha said.

Clark nodded in agreement. “It makes my life seem pretty good. Even if Lois can’t decide between Lex Luthor and you and doesn’t even know I’m alive.”

Superman laughed. “Give it time, Clark. I’m certain that the Guardians would not have asked me to come here if it would not help lead this world to a utopian society, and that can only happen with you and Lois together. So, I suspect she’ll notice you eventually.”

Martha smiled, “It’s only been a few days, Clark.”

Clark blushed, remembering that he had not wanted his parents to know how much he already cared for this woman, but then today had not gone at all the way he might have planned.

“So you can’t tell me where I come from then?” Clark asked Superman.

Superman nodded his head, looking like he understood Clark’s frustration completely. “I can’t, but I can tell you that if your world is as similar to mine as I’ve been told, you won’t need to wait too long to find out.”

“There are answers then?” Jonathan asked, sounding as eager as Clark felt.

“Yes, there are,” Superman said softly. “And while I only know how I felt, I can tell you that I found them very satisfying.”

There was silence for a moment before Superman got up. “Well, I’m sure you want some time alone,” he said.

Clark got up as well. “I’ll start looking for a place tomorrow,” he said.

“No... well, if you have time. No rush, and start at that place on Clinton Street. It was a nice place to live and

convenient if the place across the way is available.”

“Where will you stay before that?” Martha asked.

Noting Superman shrugged, she glanced at Jonathan. “Why don’t you stay here until Clark has room for you?”

Clark was torn between feeling worried that he was going to lose all the women in his life to this larger than life superhero and feeling grateful that his mother was the woman that she was. He looked up when he felt Superman’s gaze on him and knew that the other man was trying to determine how he felt.

He plastered a smile to his face to show he was fine with this development and looked Superman in the eye. He felt good about this decision when Superman smiled. “I’ll come back in a couple of hours, though. Give you a chance to talk first.”

Clark smiled genuinely in response. He just needed to remember that this man was here to help him. He did seem legitimately kind and helpful.

Superman was not lying. It only took two more days before something happened that started to give Clark answers to whom he was and where he came from. Clark sort of wished Superman had warned him it was going to be so confrontational, though.

When those men had come out of the elevator, it had felt like the Planet was under attack, and the way they had manhandled Lois... Clark was not sure what he would have done if things had not calmed down slightly after that. That was Perry’s doing really. He had come out and fought with the government agents, sending Lois and Clark to his office. There was only so much he had been able to do, but Clark could not help but feel grateful for Perry’s willingness to support them, particularly Perry’s support of him, given that he had just joined the staff two days ago.

It had been a busy two days. Clark had fully intended to come back to Metropolis and try to find a place to live immediately. He was eager to get Superman out of his parents’ house. He was not sure why, but he felt uneasy with the current living arrangements. Superman was a stranger to them even if he claimed to have lived a life pretty similar to Clark’s. Additionally, it just made Clark feel guilty. Superman was supposed to be there to help him. His parents should not have to be inconvenienced for that.

He knew his parents did not see it as an inconvenience; they just were not built that way. Still, he was eager to find a new place for Superman. Besides, moving out of the Apollo was not exactly a sacrifice.

But he had made little headway in finding a place. Just getting settled at the Planet had taken most of his time, and in the small amount of time he had to look at classified ads, he had seen nothing.

And then this... He was not even sure why the men who had stormed the Planet were interested in him. Lois had talked to Superman — everyone knew that. It had made the news. The Daily Planet had gotten the major headline with Lois’ firsthand account, of course, but Superman was big news and other news stations had picked it up. Lois’ name had been mentioned in many of the articles as the first person to speak to him.

But no one knew that Clark had talked to Superman. So,

it was unclear why these men wanted to talk to him as well. There were two possibilities. One was that they knew Superman was staying with his parents — a thought that made his stomach clench. The other was that it was nothing more than a reaction to Clark's behavior. When they had first entered, they had approached Lois. In what Clark could already tell was typical Lois style, Lois had refused when one of the men had asked to see all her files on her encounter with Superman. In response, the man had grabbed Lois' arm roughly.

Clark, who had been watching the interchange from his desk, had gotten up. "Hey!" he said loudly, causing several pairs of eyes to move to him. "Let go of her!"

Lois had rolled her eyes at him, and with the benefit of superhearing, Clark had heard her say, "Midwestern chivalry, no doubt!" But despite the sound of sarcasm in her voice, she had smiled at him gratefully when the man had let go of her arm.

So maybe the only reason they wanted to talk to him was because he had gotten their attention by speaking up.

Lois had found the whole thing with the invasion, as she called it, rather annoying and she made no attempt to hide it. Her answers to the polygraph were sarcastic and biting, but the men were looking for anything they could use.

"During the time you two were alone, did Superman discuss his mission here on Earth?" one of the men asked Lois.

"Mission?" Lois asked, the laughter clear in her voice. "We flew. We didn't talk. We didn't have to."

Clark, who was shamelessly eavesdropping, knew exactly what she meant. Even if her words were not clear, the wrenching feeling in his gut would have let him in on it, but her interrogator somehow missed the lovesick sound to Lois' voice and instead saw this as an admission that Superman had telepathic powers.

"Have you had any romantic attachments to this Superman?" he asked her. Lois said nothing, although a slight sigh escaped her lips. The interrogator and the polygraph operator conferred over the fluctuations on Lois' test, but she did not seem to notice.

Clark had spent the entire time Lois was in there worried about his parents. These were government agents, and from the way they burst in here and took over the newsroom, they meant business. They seemed hell-bent on finding Superman. If they were somehow successful, what would happen to his parents? Superman could take care of himself, but his parents had no defense against men coming onto the farm with guns.

And what if the way Superman was found was through him? What if when he was hooked up to the polygraph it did not read correctly? Who knew how much his differences might lead to his reacting strangely to the test? So he was relieved when at the start, things went smoothly.

As it had with Lois, the test started with, "You will answer 'yes' to these first two questions. We use this to calibrate the machine. Is your name Clark Kent?"

Clark took a deep breath in an attempt to remain calm. "Yes."

"Are you also Superman?"

"Yes." Clark glanced at the machine. Just as it should,

the needle spiked as he told the lie.

"Well, Mister Kent, let's proceed," the man said, and Clark could feel his pulse racing. "Have you ever met Superman?"

"Yes," Clark considered lying in an effort to keep the search as far away from himself and thus his parents as possible, but then he was worried the test would show the lie and that might make them more suspicious.

"Is he from this Earth?"

"I don't know," Clark answered.

"Can you take us to Superman right now?"

Clark tried to remain calm, but he could not help but think of his parents once again. His dad was probably in the field and his mother likely in the barn, unless they were in the living room having a nice chat with Superman.

"No," Clark finally responded, knowing that this time he had to lie, and he saw the operator looking at his test with interest.

"Perimeters been penetrated," an agent came in to announce.

The man who had been interrogating him moved closer to Clark, their faces inches apart. "Mister Kent, I don't need a polygraph to tell me when I'm being lied to. I can see it in the eyes. We're not finished."

Then backing away, he left the room.

When Perry sent Lois and Clark out of the newsroom telling them to avoid being anywhere they could easily be served, Clark went straight to Smallville. To Superman, Clark almost seemed to be a force of nature the way he stormed into the small farm house. "You need to leave," he announced as soon as he entered, looking right at Superman.

A moment before that, Superman had been having a really nice lunch with his mother. Martha. It was hard to remember to call her that, but it was just odd to call her Mom. She looked like his mother and acted a lot like her, but there were minor differences. This woman was a bit less even tempered with her husband. No one who had not met his mother would even notice, and they would think he was crazy for even saying something that could be perceived as saying she was not even-tempered. Still, she had rolled her eyes when Jonathan had come in for lunch complaining about the turkey sandwich she had offered him.

And even stranger, she had offered Jonathan egg salad instead in response. While Superman had trouble picturing his mother ever rolling her eyes at his father, she would have made some snappy comment about how lucky he was to have lunch made for him if his father ever dare complain. She never would have offered him something else.

Still, despite the small differences, Martha was a lot like his mother and Jonathan was a lot like his father. It had only been a couple of days and already he was feeling a bit homesick. Sitting and chatting with Martha had felt comfortable and enough like spending time with his own mother to help ease the homesickness.

As a result, his response to Clark's order to leave had been a bit sharper than he intended. "What?"

"The military stormed the Planet today looking for information about you. They want to know where you are.

Lois was a bit more overbearing and even less likely to listen to his suggestions now than when he had been freelancing.

"Maybe we should just go on home," Lois said at a quarter to one.

Clark yawned, "But we haven't gotten anywhere yet."

"I know," Lois said. "But it's not clear we are going to. Why don't we head out?" Lois got up and shut off her light.

With another yawn, Clark followed her lead. Lois caught a cab when they got downstairs, but Clark decided to walk. He was halfway home before he realized that he had forgotten his hotel key. Laughing at himself, he turned around to go back to the Planet.

He was surprised at first to see a light on when he entered the newsroom. Even the night crew had left before they had. Then he realized the light was coming from Lois' desk.

He made no attempt to hide the sounds of his footsteps and Lois looked up guiltily when she saw him. "I had a thought," she started, but stopped at the look on Clark's face.

"What's up, Lois?" he asked.

Lois looked at him, challenging him with her eyes, "I told you, I had a thought, so I decided to come back."

Clark nodded his head as he pulled his chair next to her desk.

"It was lucky that you had this thought before you even got home," Clark said, the annoyance in his voice clear.

"Look, Kent," Lois said, her temper now rising to meet his. "I'm not sure where you got the idea that we're partners. We're not. If I have an idea for what's going on, I don't need to share it with you."

"I must have been mistaken," Clark retorted. "I was under the impression they were using both of us to get to Superman."

"They are, although why they involved you, I have no idea. You've never even met Superman," Lois said with contempt.

Clark sighed, not knowing what to say. He had no desire to tell Lois that he had met Superman when the man had decided to stop by his parents' farm. On the other hand, if he and Superman were supposed to share an apartment at some point in the near future, it would make sense that they were friends. "I'm not sure how they know this, but I do know Superman. We're friends."

Lois' entire countenance changed at this announcement. "You're friends with Superman?" Her voice was full of wonder.

Clark nodded, already hating himself for this. He figured he had about a half hour of Lois eagerly questioning him about his life as it related to the superhero. A minute ago, she could not have cared less about Clark Kent, but suddenly he was the most interesting person she knew. Aside from his spandex clad look-a-like, that was.

"How did you meet?" Lois asked.

Clark thought quickly. "It was just coincidence. I bumped into him randomly and we discovered that we've traveled to many of the same places. We just sort of hit it off."

"You just bumped into each other?" Lois asked

incredulously. "How do you bump into Superman? Do you use the same dry cleaner? Shop at the same supermarket?"

Clark sighed, not sure how to get Lois onto a new topic of conversation. "I don't remember," he finally said.

Lois gave him a look that made it perfectly clear she did not believe him. "You've been in Metropolis all of a week, Clark. Superman has been around for what, two days, and even then no one has really seen much of him since the space station. So, presumably you met him recently. How could you not remember how you met?"

Clark flushed. Being interviewed by the star investigative reporter at the Planet was not a good idea when you had something to hide. Finally, he shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry."

"Sorry!" Lois fumed. "Sorry for what? That you have a memory like a sieve? What kind of reporter can you be if you can't even remember something like meeting a man who can fly just a day or two after it happens?"

Clark shrugged again and this time Lois, livid, let it drop.

It was five in the morning before Lois finally got home and crawled into bed. She was feeling increasingly frustrated. While she had not wanted to admit it to Clark, she had not had any great ideas that had driven her back to the office. She just thought that perhaps she would have one if she worked alone. She was not used to working with a partner and she was only moderately impressed with Clark's skills as a reporter, so she thought that perhaps working alone would allow her to have the types of randomly brilliant thoughts she was used to.

But then Clark had shown up shortly after she had gotten settled. Of course, that would not have been so bad if he had been able to give her any information on Superman. The news that the two knew each other had been a complete surprise, and the fact that they were friends was even more surprising. She could not think of any two people more different than Smallville Kent and out-of-this world Superman.

But while Lois could not fathom what it was that Superman saw in Clark Kent, she considered their friendship serendipitous if it allowed her to learn more about Superman. However, Clark had been surprisingly closed lipped and vague in answering her questions. Lois was not sure she had ever met a more infuriating person.

She rolled over in bed again. Despite the late, or really early, hour, she could not fall asleep. Clark's announcement had stirred multiple questions she wanted answers to about Superman.

With a sigh, she finally gave up and, reaching over, pulled her laptop into bed with her. The dial-up connection was slow, but it would be okay for checking her email. Five minutes later, she was finally connected with the Daily Planet server. She should really consider getting a high speed connection.

She had known it was a long shot that she would have a new email since she left the Planet offices at four and so was surprised to find an email from someone she did not know.

Reading the email, she smiled. It would be worth it to

let Kent in on this interview just for the pleasure of waking him up now to tell him about it. She sorted through her emails to the one Clark had sent her earlier in the day with the number at his hotel.

Lois thought she would regret the decision to involve Clark later, but the interview went so poorly, she was unable even to focus on that. The man had contacted her and told her he had information on the men who had stormed into the Planet. He had presented himself as a source, but it was all a lie. He had not intended to give her any information at all. He wanted to interview them!

She had ushered Clark out of there as soon as she realized that, and then what happened? The hack decided he did not feel well and should go home. He had been on the job what? Like three minutes and he was already heading for home. Still, Lois had not let on how she felt about this. It allowed her time to investigate on her own. So instead, she had tried to sound sympathetic as she had said, "Sometimes you have to put yourself above the story." She had even offered him a ride, although she was glad when he had turned her down.

Moments later, she was following Thompson.

Filled with an irrational fear, Clark had fled to his parents' farm. Thompson had a file on Smallville, Kansas. It was hard to understand why, but it filled Clark with a strong desire to make sure his parents were safe.

His parents were safe, of course. Superman was staying with them. How could they not be safe? And yet something about the man's presence there had bothered Clark. When he came into the farmhouse, Superman had been there alone, his parents in the barn. Superman was watching a ballgame on television. While he knew it was unfair, some part of Clark was angry at this. His life was in turmoil. Thompson had a file on Smallville. He likely knew something about Clark. Something about how he came to Kansas perhaps — where he came from and what he was. Someone Clark was not sure he could trust knew more about him than he did. The whole world seemed tilted on its axis, and somehow, in the midst of this, Superman was watching a ballgame?

Clark tried to remember that Superman was here to help him, but he found himself suspicious. Superman claimed he was here to help, but so far, aside from the space station incident, he had spent his days in Clark's parents' house, his nights sleeping in Clark's old room, and on top of this cushy life he appeared to be living, he had gained Lois' affections. It just did not seem fair.

Still, in an effort to behave in a way of which his mother would approve, Clark tried to keep his voice calm when he took in the form of Superman lounging in his father's recliner. "Are Mom and Dad in the barn?" he asked.

Superman looked up in surprise. "Yeah, what's up?" His tone was casual and Clark wondered at the fact that they were supposed to be the same person, but they were feeling so completely differently right now.

"Nothing," he said, "I just need to talk to them."

Superman peered at Clark more closely. Then suddenly he nodded his head. "The file?" he asked. Clark just looked

at him quizzically. "The file in Thompson's briefcase on Smallville, right? I know it seems scary, but I promise, it's not so bad. I'll go get them."

"What's in it?" Clark asked before Superman could go.

But Superman just shook his head, "I'm so sorry, but I really can't tell you."

He looked sincere and Clark immediately felt guilty for his earlier thoughts.

"I'll go get your parents," Superman repeated. "And then I'll go for a little while, leave you some time alone." Superman decided a flight over Metropolis would not be a bad idea. He was pretty sure he had not really started doing patrols over Metropolis until after Trask had left the first time, but decided there was no reason not to start now.

Clark looked at his parents earnestly when they came in. "I want to hear everything you remember about how you found me," he told them. "Everything."

His parents explained how they had seen something in the sky and found him in Shuster's Field and taken him home. Then his dad mentioned that a few days later, some government men came by claiming to be looking for debris from a Russian satellite. Clark bristled at the thought that he was a Russian experiment, although he was not sure why.

But then he forgot about that when his parents told him that they had decided they had to destroy the spaceship to erase any evidence of how Clark had reached them.

Recalling the incident seemed upsetting and Clark felt a bit badly for putting his parents through it. Reaching out to place a hand on his father's, Clark tried to reassure him. "It's okay, Dad. Destroying it was probably the right thing to do."

Jonathan looked up at him with tears in his eyes. "Probably, but I didn't. I couldn't. It was part of you, son. I just couldn't."

Clark stood to move over and engulf his father in a hug. Part of him was eager to go find the ship, but part of him just wanted to thank this man for caring so much for a baby that landed out of the sky and he had no responsibility for. It was hard to imagine what his life would have been like if it had not been his parents who had found him.

Still, within a few moments, Clark let go and wordlessly the three moved outside. As Clark watched his father pace from the wagon wheel, trying to uncover the spot where he had buried the space ship, his mother grabbed for his hand. "Are you okay?" she asked. "I know this must be hard on you."

The pain was clear in her voice, though, and Clark rushed to reassure her. "You and Dad are my parents. You know that. Nobody will ever replace you."

His mother's smile in response was clear even in the darkness. "You wouldn't be human if you didn't have questions," she said.

With a deep breath, Clark voiced his other concern. "Mom. What if I'm *not* human?"

Moving to wrap an arm around him, his mother sighed in his ear. "Maybe we shouldn't have told you about being adopted."

Clark laughed slightly in response. "That would have been hard after I started bench pressing cars." His mother laughed as well and the two watched as his father walked

the last few paces.

“Six feet down,” his dad announced.

Moving over to the spot, Clark took a deep breath. This was it. He was about to see the space ship he had arrived in. He closed his eyes tightly, and when he opened them again, he used his x-ray vision to scan the area his father was pointing to. There was nothing there.

“Dad, are you sure about this? I don’t see anything.”

“I’m completely sure, Clark. You don’t forget something like this,” Jonathan assured him.

With a sigh, Clark decided to go for a different approach. With a deep breath, he started to spin like a top. Three feet down. Four feet down. Five feet down. Five and a half feet. Clark paused, then with a sigh, spun again, finishing the remaining half a foot. Nothing. There was nothing there at all. Spinning around again, Clark went down another foot. Still nothing.

“Dad, there’s nothing here,” he called up to his father.

“It’s there, Clark,” his dad assured him, although fear was creeping into his voice.

Shaking his head, Clark levitated out of the hole.

“There’s nothing there,” he told his father.

Looking over the edge of the hole, Jonathan exclaimed, “It was here!”

Using his x-ray vision to look over the area one more time, he told his parents, “Not anymore.”

No one said anything as the three moved back to the farmhouse. No one wanted to voice their fear over where the ship had gone.

Superman said nothing when he came back in later. Taking in the somber faces around the living room, he made his way upstairs to Clark’s boyhood room. He felt sad in a way that was hard to explain. He wanted to help this Clark deal with the realizations he was coming to about himself, but he had promised Herb he would stay out of this.

It was hard, though, to come in and see the looks on the faces of the Kents and not to go down there and tell them everything he knew about his origins. He was better off ignoring them for now.

Then he realized he could not ignore them completely. He had to at least warn Clark about the cries for help he would soon be hearing. He came down the stairs somewhat noisily so that he would not surprise them.

“Clark,” he said, his voice soft, and tried not to react at the look of sadness in the eyes that looked back at him. “I... well, in my world, I did patrols of Metropolis at night to make sure things were okay. I just wanted you to know I started those tonight. Probably tomorrow or the day after, people will start to realize that I’m sticking around. So, you may hear cries for help, but you can just ignore them all. I’ll take care of them.”

It was hard not to notice that Clark was still too wrapped up in the events of earlier this evening to comprehend what he was being told.

“Clark,” Superman called again.

Clark looked up at him with blank eyes. “I know that things seem pretty awful right about now, but they will get better,” Superman assured him. Then, before Clark could ask any questions he was not comfortable answering, he

turned around and went back upstairs.

Clark arrived at the Planet early the next morning, even beating Lois for the first time. While he suspected it was not going to pan out, he decided to start looking through old files on government investigations into extraterrestrials. The men had asked Lois if Superman had told her his mission here on Earth. Clark assumed this meant that they thought Superman was an alien. It was a slim connection, but then, he had no other ideas.

He was just about to give up when Lois came up behind him. “Project Blue Book?” she asked. “Clark, the Air Force got out of the UFO business in 1969. This is old news. Way old.”

“It was just a hunch. It didn’t pan out,” Clark said, wishing Lois had not witnessed this failure.

Her understanding response just made him feel worse. “It’s okay, Clark,” she said, patting his shoulder. “It takes experience to understand what is worthwhile to investigate and what’s not.” It was subtle, but there was definitely an undercurrent to her words that was patronizing.

Just as she started to walk away, though, Clark saw it. Taking his glasses off, he looked closer at the photograph. The man in the photograph looked like the guy who had stormed in here the other day. Clark almost said nothing to Lois; he did not want her to be suspicious of his excellent eyesight, but then he realized there was no reason for her to be suspicious. Clearly, she thought Clark was a normal guy. Really, there was no reason not to, and he thought that perhaps this was something someone normal with keen eye sight would see anyway. “Wait a minute,” he called to Lois as he put his glasses back on. “Isn’t this the guy who was here? This Jason Trask guy?”

Lois came back over and looked over his shoulder at the picture. Squinting at it, she nodded her head. “I think you’re right. Good work, Farmboy!”

Despite the fact that Clark found the nickname degrading, he could not help but smile.

The two of them headed directly for Perry’s office where the three hashed out the consequences of this find.

Looking through her notes, Lois began speaking. “This other guy in the photo? General Burton Newcomb? He’s retired and lives right here in Metropolis.”

She and Clark immediately got up to go interview him, but when Lois got to her desk she found a note. There was pain in her eyes when she looked at Clark. “It’s Thompson,” she told him. “He’s been found in Metropolis Harbor. The coroner’s got him.”

Clark looked up somberly. Another death he could have prevented, even if he was not sure how.

“It’s not like he was much help, anyway,” Lois said, but Clark could hear the tone to her voice. While she may be trying to downplay her feelings, it was clear she was just as affected as he was by the death of someone they knew.

“It’s a sign, though,” Clark said, as the realization hit him. “A sign of how serious these people are.”

Lois nodded in agreement. “Well, then, that just means we need to step up our efforts.”

It appeared as if his teammates had not noticed, and obviously Coach Willis had not either as he seemed surprised when Clark quit the team the following day.

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"I grew up in Smallville, Lois," he said. "What sort of secrets do you think I have?"

"Good point," Lois conceded and she dropped the subject.

The card Newcomb had given them easily let them get through security at the warehouse entrance, but the room they were in was empty and there was another locked door in front of them, this one using a combination lock rather than the key card. Next to the lock was a timer and with a gasp, Lois exclaimed, "I think we need to guess the combination in 60 seconds, well 50 seconds now, or an alarm is going to go off."

Without a word, Clark stepped forward and concentrated his hearing on the lock. As he heard the tumblers fall into place, he stopped and spun the dial in the other direction until he had opened the door.

"Don't tell me. Safecracker?" Lois asked, and Clark thought he heard a tiny bit of awe in her voice, but he did not want to give her any clue as to his special abilities, so he explained, "The general said they all took the oath on August 2, 1947. The combination was 8-2-47."

To his delight, Lois still looked impressed.

Curiously, they entered the room. It was vast and filled with files and objects covered with tarps. Lois moved immediately to the files and began pulling folder after folder. Smirking, Lois laughed, "Give me a break. I've seen this movie," she said as she took in the image on one of the photos.

"I don't know," Clark replied. "These look like the genuine article to me."

Lois shook her head and Clark could tell she was back to thinking he was a hack. "Clark, when something looks this good, it's never real." Her tone was patronizing, but Clark did not want to give up hope that this was real, that perhaps somewhere in here was an explanation of who and what he was.

"What if it's not?" he asked her. "What if people actually traveled in these?" But he did not hear her answer. Going through the files he had seen one labeled "Smallville Incident, 1966." Clark tried to calm his immediate panic. It was becoming clear that these people knew more about him than he did. He could not panic each time he saw something about Smallville. Still, he grabbed Lois' arm and led her to the tarped area.

"What are you doing?" Lois asked, her voice sharp.

Thinking quickly, Clark replied, "You didn't like their pictures. So let's see what else they have."

Lois randomly began pulling tarps off of objects, but discarded each thing she found as junk. Clark, however, did not hear the endless litany of complaints from Lois about what she was seeing. He felt drawn in a way that he could not explain to a particular ship. On it he found the crest — the one on the blanket he was found in and the one Superman had taken to wearing on his suit.

Taking in the entire ship, Clark saw a bag next to it containing a small ball the size of a golf ball. Removing it

from the bag, Clark held it in his hand for a moment just looking at it. Almost as soon as he touched it, the ball began to glow and Clark could see clearly that it was a globe of Earth. However, in front of him, the image on the globe changed. It finally settled down again, this time with a reddish tinge and completely different topography. Without thought, Clark whispered, "Krypton."

Lois' voice cut through the fog in Clark's brain and all at once he realized he knew something about himself. He was not a Russian science experiment. Trask was right. He was an alien. An alien from the planet Krypton.

"Clark!" Lois called again and Clark realized her voice was close. In a rush, he pulled the tarp back over the ship and placed the globe in his pocket before she could see them.

"Someone's coming," she said. The two of them looked around but this place had only one entrance and exit. There was no escaping. Within moments they were surrounded by Trask and his men, guns pointing at them from every angle.

"How did you get in?" Trask asked, his voice as cold as ice.

Lois, to Clark's surprise, did not seem the least bit alarmed at the situation and when she answered Trask, she matched his tone. "That's your problem."

Clark could feel himself start to panic. If she angered them and someone shot at Lois, he would not have a choice. He would have to save her, but exposing himself in front of this group of people seemed like just about the worst idea ever. He could easily envisage Trask above him with a scalpel, his father's fears of him being dissected like a frog coming true.

Trask, however, seemed surprisingly unfettered by Lois' tone. "That's correct," he agreed with her. "Getting out, however, is your problem."

His voice shaking slightly, Clark told Trask that people knew where they were, and Lois immediately added to this that Superman was coming for them.

Trask's response chilled Clark and did nothing to calm his panic. "Oh, I hope so. In fact, I'm counting on it."

Then, guns still drawn, he and his men guided them to a military jet. Trask and three of the men from the warehouse got in after them, their guns still trained on them.

Superman walked around the farm feeling bored. He had never realized how hard it would be to be Superman full time, particularly now when he was not really fully out there. He hoped that later he would be busier, but Herb had counseled him about doing too much. If he was really Superman full time, when Clark was ready to take over, it would seem like he was less helpful. So he needed to leave time for a real life. Only he did not have a real life here. The Kents were being good and kind to him, and they seemed to appreciate having him around to help with chores and to talk to, but it was not the same. He missed Clark Kent. Heck, forget Clark. Who he really missed was Lois. It was hard to believe he had only been here for a few days. Maybe it was knowing that he would not be seeing her soon, but Superman longed for Lois in a way he had not since before they were dating.

When he closed his eyes, he could smell her shampoo

and feel the pressure of her hand in his, but that was not enough. He wanted to hold her in his arms when he fell asleep at night and wake up to find her sprawled across the bed, her knee unconsciously trying to push him out of bed.

And he missed the kids. They were so young still, not quite teenagers, and while he knew Herb said he would return him to a time just after he left, he still felt like he was missing out on their lives. Emily had been going to her first boy-girl party the night that he left and he had no idea how it had gone.

With a sudden realization, Superman took to the sky. Lois and Clark were likely caught by Trask and his men by now, and Clark did not have a Superman costume to change into if this Lois decided to go skydiving.

Clark glanced at Lois out of the corner of his eye. Despite her calm outward appearance he could hear her heart beating faster than normal. When he peered at her now, he could see a slight layer of sheen on her forehead. He wanted to reach over and take her hand, but doubted she would appreciate the gesture.

“It’s a romance novel,” Lois said.

No one said anything for a moment before Clark realized she was probably speaking to him. “What?” he asked, wondering if this was some sort of strange diversionary tactic.

“My novel,” Lois explained and while Clark doubted Trask or his men could hear it, he could detect the faint sound of panic in her voice. “It’s about a woman who dies without ever finding her true love.”

This time Clark decided to chance it. Reaching out, he took her hand in his. “That’s not going to happen to you,” he told her.

To Clark’s surprise, Lois tightened her grip on his hand. “Yeah? Check it out, Clark. These guys look serious. So, I told you, now you tell me.”

“Tell you what?” Clark asked.

“Your biggest secret.”

“The topic of your novel is your biggest secret?” Clark asked.

Lois yanked her hand free of his. “No,” she said, the typical disdain back in her voice. “But I can’t imagine you have any secrets good enough to be worth my best.”

Clark sighed. Of course she thought that. He wondered what she would say if he told her Superman was sleeping in his childhood bed. Then he remembered. They had discussed this earlier. “I don’t have any secrets. We talked about this earlier, remember?”

Before Lois voiced a reply, though, two of the men with Trask unlatched the door to the airplane and Trask came over.

He smirked at them, “I assume the two of you are familiar with the scientific method?”

Clark was the one who responded, “Advance a theory. Submit it to a test.”

Trask smiled at him like he was a pupil getting a test question correct. “My theory is that at least one of you knows how to contact this alien creature Superman, probably telepathically.”

“And how do you plan to test this?” Lois asked, her

voice wavering ever so slightly.

“Oh, I’m thinking if I throw you out of this plane without a parachute, you’ll find a way contact him pretty quickly.”

“What if this theory of yours is wrong?” Clark asked, although he suspected he knew the answer.

“Pushing back the frontiers of science is not without risk.”

His soldiers opened the door.

“Leave Lois alone. Just use me,” Clark said, his voice surprisingly strong.

“No, I’ll go,” Lois said in response.

Clark inwardly groaned. He wished he had a way to tell her right now that he could fly, just so she would not argue with him, but knew that was not wise. “Lois! You don’t understand!” he said instead.

Lois gave him a withering look. “Stop trying to be a martyr, Clark. I’m going.” Then turning to Trask she demanded, “I get a last request.”

“Within reason,” Trask agreed.

“I want to kiss Clark goodbye,” Lois informed him.

Clark was shocked. Had she been attracted to him after all?

Before he had time to process the thought, though, Lois’ lips were on his and almost immediately, Clark was lost in her kiss. As she pulled away, Lois leaned toward his ear and whispered, “Take the one on the left.”

Clark just had time to process that no, she had not found him attractive, the kiss was simply a diversionary tactic, when Lois kicked Trask. Clark immediately got up and pinned one of Trask’s men against the wall of the plane, but the second immediately trained his gun on Clark in response.

Clark looked at the man, trying to decide his best move when suddenly Lois cried out, “Clark!” just as she fell out the door.

Calling out her name, Clark jumped after her. He could see her below him, but he decided to wait to rescue her until he was out of range of sight of the men above. He could hear her calling to Superman as she fell, but she must have fallen for Trask’s suggestion that she could speak to him telepathically, as she was muttering rather than yelling.

Clark saw a cloud bank up ahead and aimed for it, hoping that once he was below it, the men in the plane would not be able to see him anymore. When he came out the other side, he saw Lois up ahead and rushed towards her.

Then, from his left side, he saw him. Superman was headed straight for Lois. Clark could not decide if he was happy Superman arrived, as this relieved him of having to share his secret with Lois, or annoyed that Superman got to be the hero again, an act that was certain to fuel Lois’ fantasies about the man.

Before he could process what was happening, Superman was beside him with Lois in his arms. “Clark, grab onto my arm,” he said. With a sign, Clark did as Superman asked and the superhero brought the two of them down on the rooftop of the Daily Planet.

When they landed, Lois did not speak and both Superman and Clark looked at her with concern. Without a word, Lois pointed upward and the two men turned around

to see a missile coming straight toward them.

Superman took off towards it and intercepted it. He threw it skyward but a moment later it exploded, the sound and light blocking out everything for a moment. When things cleared, Superman was nowhere to be found.

Lois searched the sky for him and when she did not see him, she turned to Clark. "Do you think he's all right?" Lois asked him.

Clark said nothing for a moment, trying to come to grips with his own emotions. Superman was here supposedly to help him. What if he was killed by that explosion? Clark was not really sure what the limits of his abilities were. What if somewhere in a parallel universe a different Lois had just been widowed? Children just orphaned? And how would they ever know?

Looking dejected, Clark turned to Lois, "I hope so, Lois. I really hope so."

Lois and Clark made their way downstairs to the newsroom without speaking. Lois kept glancing at Clark out of the corner of her eye. She was surprised to see that Clark really did look upset. Based on his unwillingness to answer her questions the other night, she had not been 100% convinced that he was telling the truth about his friendship with Superman, but looking at him now, it was hard not to believe that the two men were friends. Clark looked sincerely worried.

It made her feel a little silly. She, too, was worried about Superman, and she knew that her feelings were in more than just a "someone who had the potential to do great things for the world may be dead" kind of way. She cared about the man, but in the face of Clark's emotions, her emotions seemed a bit superficial. Clark had had an actual conversation with Superman. She had exchanged no more than half a dozen words with him and one, actually now it was two, wonderful flights across the sky.

Even with Clark's presence there on the flight a few moments ago, Lois had felt special. Superman went to her first, and he held her in his arms, while he just asked Clark to hold on. She knew it was silly to think she was something special to him, but she wanted to believe it anyway.

And now he might be gone. She had just met him and already he might be gone. It just was not fair.

"Lois, Clark," Perry called as they entered the newsroom. "What happened?"

"Before or after we were thrown out of the plane?" Lois asked sarcastically.

"Is Superman all right?" Clark asked, and again Lois felt a little badly about her own emotions in the face of Clark's.

"We don't know," Perry admitted. "We're running down some witnesses." But Perry's voice was calm. For him, this was a news story, not a story about a friend.

Lois leaned over to grab Clark's arm and pulled him towards the conference room. Clark followed without comment.

When they got inside, Lois closed the door. "Clark, are you all right?" she asked him. She felt herself flush when Clark looked at her in surprise. She had not really been very

kind to him since he had been hired. Heck, she had not been very kind to him before that, either. It was not too surprising that he was wary of her show of concern now.

After a moment, though, he nodded his head. "I'm just worried about him," he admitted.

Lois smiled slightly. "Me, too."

"Maybe we should go look for him?" Clark asked.

"But he could be anywhere, Clark. How will we ever find him?" Lois asked.

Lois' question made Clark realize he should not have invited her to help him anyway. He could cover much more ground flying than walking. He placed a warm hand on her shoulder, hoping to appear generous rather than like he was trying to keep her out of this. "You're right. But I have to do something. Maybe I should go look for him while you work on the story?"

"No," Lois said. "If you need to go find him, I'll help you."

Clark smiled brightly at her, deciding it was worth it to walk rather than fly if it meant that he would have Lois with him. For her part, Lois felt a bit guilty. She knew she was going at least as much to find Superman as to be there for Clark.

Still, when Clark placed a hand on the small of her back as they left the newsroom, in an effort to be kind, she did not brush him off as quickly as she normally would have.

"Do you think he's right?" Lois asked Clark once they made their way outside.

"Who's right about what?" Clark asked her.

"Trask. He clearly thinks Superman is an alien. Do you think he is? He seems so... human. Like you and me."

Clark felt a fondness for Lois in that moment that was unlike even his earlier affection for her. Since he had started to develop powers, all he had really wanted was to be like everyone else. While Lois' comment was about Superman, it so clearly labeled Clark as "normal" that it made his day.

"I don't think so," Clark said, hesitant to tell Lois about his newfound knowledge about coming from Krypton as he was not ready for it to be in the papers yet. "I don't know how different he is, though. I imagine he's still a man who has feelings, even if he's not from this world."

To his surprise, Lois placed a hand in his. "That's sweet, Clark. Really sweet."

They had covered much of the area around the Daily Planet and now had nearly finished covering Centennial Park, but still they had not seen any sign of Superman. Clark was starting to get eager to cover more ground by taking flight but did not want to lose Lois' company. He was glancing at the sky longingly when he saw it. "Lois," he said, his voice a whisper. "Is that him?"

Lois looked up, "I think so!" she said excitedly. "Superman!" she called.

The figure flying far above them stopped suddenly, then glancing down, flew down to land beside them. "You were looking for me?" Superman asked.

"*Everybody's* looking for you," Lois said.

"You're all right," Clark said, his voice soft.

Superman turned to him with a warm smile, "You'll

soon learn that very little can hurt me, Clark.”

“Very little?” Clark asked, and Superman cursed himself for his choice of words. Of course, Clark picked up on that. He was eagerly trying to learn as much about himself as he could, and if he had missed it, as shrewd as she was, Lois would have caught it.

Finally deciding that lying to Clark did not make sense, he answered, “Very little, but that’s all I’m going to say about that.”

Clark nodded his head in understanding.

“I’m going to find Trask and stop him,” he told Lois and Clark, although he knew that if things continued to follow the path of his world, Trask was really going to be the one to find him.

“There’s a warehouse,” Lois started, but Superman cut her off.

“It’s gone, Lois,” he said, although his eyes were on Clark’s.

“You know my name!” Lois said, her voice awed. “But I don’t know yours.”

“Superman seems to have caught on,” he smiled at her.

“What do you mean ‘it’s gone’?” Clark asked, more interested in the warehouse than Superman’s name. Of course, that was a bit unfair. He knew Superman’s real name. The thought almost brought a smile to his face. How would Lois react if Superman replied with, “My name’s Clark Kent.”? But the smile could not break through the worry about what Superman had said about the warehouse.

Superman looked at him kindly. “Trask has somehow managed to empty it out. All of the things he had in there that you found yesterday — the files, the ships, all of it is gone.”

“Gone? But then we have no proof for our story!” Lois wailed. “Do you know what this means, Clark?”

Clark just looked at her sadly. She was the one who had no idea what it meant. That warehouse was his only link to finding out more about himself except for the man in front of him who was clearly committed to not telling him much of anything. With a sigh, he finally replied, “Yeah, I know.”

But Lois was not beaten down for long. With renewed vigor in her voice, she turned to Superman. “Where are you from?” she asked him. “I mean, even if you are friends, it’s clear you’re not from Smallville.”

Superman smiled at her in a way that made her heart beat a bit faster. “I’m from another planet,” he said. “It’s called Krypton.”

Lois took out her notepad, but Clark placed a hand on her arm. “He’s a person, Lois. Not a story.”

Lois looked at him incredulously. “What do you mean, Clark? Of course, he’s a person. That doesn’t mean that information about him isn’t a story. He’s a man who can fly.”

“Lois,” Clark started, but Superman placed a hand on his arm.

“It’s okay, Clark. Really. I’ll let you know if there’s something I don’t want to share.”

Lois smiled at him, glancing at Clark quickly, trying not to gloat because she won, but losing the battle. Clark could not help it. Her expression was so cute that he laughed. “Yes, Lois, you won,” he said.

For a moment, Lois was surprised that he had read her that easily. Then she remembered that she was about to get the interview of a lifetime — better even than interviewing Lex Luthor. She could deal with the fact that Kent was more perceptive than she had expected later. “You seem to have all the... parts... of a man,” she said to Superman.

Superman blushed, just slightly. “I am a man, Lois. Just like Clark.” Superman felt badly about that. This interview was one of the moments he remembered quite well from his own life. What he had said then was, “Just like you’re a woman.” The line had nearly sent his wife swooning, but he figured changes in what he said were okay. Herb could not expect him to say things word for word. Plus, Clark was here, which of course was not the case in his world.

And while it might be a bit selfish, the truth was that the less he fueled Lois’ crush on him, the sooner Clark would be ready to be Superman and he could go home.

“Why are you here?” Clark asked, deciding that he might as well participate in the interview.

“To help,” Superman said simply.

“Could you give us more of a quote?” Lois asked.

“Like what,” Superman replied.

“Like ‘I have not yet begun to fight.’ Or ‘Damn the torpedoes.’”

Clark laughed. “Those don’t even make sense here, Lois, do they?” he asked. “More like, ‘I am here to fight for truth or justice,’” he said to Superman.

“Hey, that’s good!” Lois admitted, surprised.

Superman smiled, “Yeah, it is. You can use that.”

He noticed Clark’s reaction before he heard it. Clark’s head shot up in surprise and alarm crossed his features. It was as Superman was processing this strange change from Clark that he heard it, “Help, Superman!”

He took a deep breath. “I have to go,” he told them.

“Oh,” Lois looked disappointed. Clark just looked edgy. Superman felt a bit badly for him. It would be hard to hear all these cries for help and not respond.

Against his better judgment, he leaned down to kiss Lois on the cheek. “Thank you for caring enough to look for me,” he said.

Then while Lois placed a hand to her cheek in wonder, he moved to engulf Clark in a hug. “You, too, Clark,” he said. Then he added in a whisper so soft only someone with super hearing would hear it, “It’s going to be okay. I’ll be there in a second. Don’t worry.”

Then he took off.

Lois looked at Clark with a large smile on her face.

“He’s...” she floundered for a word to describe him and finally laughing lightly, she finished with “super, isn’t he?”

Clark smiled at her. When he saw Superman kiss Lois on the cheek, he had felt his resentment toward the man build. It was becoming a nasty habit to resent Superman and assume the worst about him, but then it had become clear that the kiss was just a cover so it would not seem strange for Superman to give him a hug, and Clark appreciated the message more than Superman could know. Whoever had been calling sounded desperate. Clark was not sure how he would deal with these cries going forward. They were so heart wrenching.

But Superman had said he would take care of them, and

publisher, people. I assured him that everyone in this room would not rest until we had secured the story. Is everyone clear on this?"

For a moment, there was silence in the newsroom, then Lois remembered — she was not afraid of Perry. "That's not fair, Perry. Superman is mine."

"Life isn't fair," Clark, still smarting from Lois' comments earlier, mumbled beside her and she shot him a dirty look.

"Sorry, Lois," Perry said, not unkindly. "Standard rules don't apply on this. It's too big." The phone rang and Perry took it, dismissing the staff with a wave of his hand.

Clark made his way to his desk. He could head straight to Smallville and scoop the story, but he was not sure Superman would be cooperative. Plus, this was more than a story for him. Everything the Daily Planet found out about Superman was one more thing the world learned about Clark Kent. It was hard to separate himself from that.

"So, partner, where do we start?" Lois asked as she leaned on the corner of Clark's desk. She schooled her features into the picture of pure innocence. The idea of sharing this byline with Clark was not that appealing to her. On the other hand, Clark was clearly friends with Superman and a byline on a Superman article that did not include her at all was even harder to stomach.

"We?" Clark asked.

"Of course," Lois replied.

"Lois, as you have told me on more than one occasion, there is no 'we'. We work alone." Clark said, his voice soft. He knew he should be jumping at this opportunity to work with Lois, but he could not get past her words from this morning. 'Clark is the before.' Besides, he suspected she was only offering to work together for fear that otherwise he would get the exclusive.

"Don't be silly, Clark," Lois said, placing a hand on his arm in an effort to convince him. "We're partners."

Clark glanced down at his arm and then shook it, breaking free of Lois' grip. "No, we're not. You've made that perfectly clear. We can't be partners whenever it suits you and not when it doesn't, Lois."

"But, Clark," Lois started, feeling desperate, but was cut off by the sound of Perry joining them.

"Well said, Clark," he said and Lois could feel herself start to scowl. "But you will be partners when I say and I think this is a good time for that." Without looking at their reactions, he turned and walked away.

Lois smiled broadly. She won. Clark lost. All was right with the world.

"So," she smiled at Clark. "Where do we start, partner?"

Clark frowned at her. "I don't know. You're the senior partner. Why don't you tell me?"

"Well, it seems like you'd know where to start. You're the one who's friends with the man," Lois said.

Clark sighed. He knew that was why she wanted to work with him. "I won't use my friendship with Superman to get this story," he told her.

"Why not?" she asked, exasperated.

"Because. I don't use my friends that way, Lois."

"Clark, if you're going to be a reporter, you're going to need to learn how to use all you have at your disposal. You

can't go picking and choosing when to use your advantages."

"Oh, so you think it's worth going against your morals to get a good story?" Clark challenged her.

"Using your friendship with Superman is not unethical, Clark. You're making too much of this."

"Sorry, I won't do it."

Lois sighed. Why was he being deliberately difficult? She had thought her offer to work with him would make him happy and act as an apology of sorts for her comments this morning. It was not as if Clark knew why she wanted to work with him. He didn't, did he?

Finally, with a sigh, she got up and walked away. She waited for a minute, certain Clark would call her back, especially now that Perry had ordered them to work together, but he said nothing.

Clark tried to think of a way to move past his anger and hurt at Lois. He needed to be able to work with her on the Superman exclusive according to Perry. The problem was he neither wanted to write this story nor deal with Lois at the moment. He was thrilled when his phone rang, distracting him from his unpleasant thoughts.

"Mr. Kent?" the person on the other end said when he answered the phone.

"Speaking," Clark replied.

"This is Abigail from Whitehouse Real Estate. You called about the apartment on Clinton Street?"

"Yes," Clark said, holding his breath. The apartment Superman had mentioned had looked empty when he went by a few days ago, but he had yet to reach a person who would let him see it.

"Floyd, the landlord, is at the apartment now if you'd like to go take a look," Abigail informed him.

"Really? He's there now. That's great. Tell him I'll be right there. Don't let him leave."

Clark hung up the phone and got up, grabbing his jacket as he went.

"Where are you going?" Lois asked as he passed her desk, her tone accusatory.

"What?" Clark asked, pulled out of his thoughts.

"Where are you going? Perry said we need to work together."

Clark laughed, "Relax, Lois. I'm going to look at an apartment. You're free to come along if you'd like." He only offered as he knew she would never say yes. If he really wanted her to come, he would tell her now that the apartment was for both him and Superman. He was pretty sure if he said that, she would get there before he did.

Lois looked disappointed and almost instantly bored. "Oh, no, thanks."

Clark smiled. She was so predictable.

Clark groaned when he saw the inside of the apartment. Maybe the one bedroom Superman said he had lived in would be better and one of them could live in the living room. Lowering his glasses, Clark glanced at the one bedroom across the street, but found that it was already occupied. "What happened here?" he asked Floyd.

"What do you mean?" Floyd asked as he stepped over a

“Was I really that bad?” she asked, her voice even softer. Clark tightened his grip on her.

“Honestly, sometimes, but only sometimes,” he whispered. He hated to make her feel badly, but he had promised himself that once he came clean about Superman, he would never lie to Lois again.

Lois looked up at him, “Like when?” she asked, and he could tell from her open expression that she really wanted to know.

“Well, like when I first started. You sometimes made comparisons between me and Superman that could have been kinder.” Off her quizzical look, he expanded, “Once you said that Superman and Clark were examples of evolution.”

“With Clark as the before and Superman as the way, way after,” Lois whispered, remembering. “Clark, I’m sorry.”

Clark smiled, “I know. Besides, once I got over being hurt, I thought it was pretty funny. I mean in the same conversation you said that Superman’s eyes were nicer than mine, which clearly is not the case.”

Lois looked down at the bed, picking absently at some lint on the bedspread. “And I stole your story,” she said with a pout.

“Hey, I got back at you for that,” Clark laughed.

Lois smirked. “I guess, but I felt so badly about it anyway. I couldn’t believe I’d been able to do something like that. I knew how awful it felt to have shared a story with someone you cared about and have them take credit for it. I don’t even know why I did it.”

“Oh, Lois. It really is okay now,” Clark said, hating the self-recrimination he heard in her voice.

When she picked up her head, there were tears streaming down her cheeks. “It was still a really rotten thing to do.”

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Superman knew that right about now, Clark was pretty darn angry at Lois. He even considered going to see him, to see how apartment hunting was going and let him know that working with Lois would get better, but he was much more obsessed with the way his wife’s eyes had looked that night. The way she had looked up at him like she was the worst person in the world. That conversation had only occurred last year sometime. So over a decade had passed since the incident in question and clearly, while he had moved on, Lois had never forgiven herself for it.

He knew this was a bad idea. If he was going to change his behavior at all, it should be to keep his distance from this Lois so she could fall for Clark, Clark could tell her the truth, and he could go home, but he could not do it. The thought of how this Lois must feel if she had even half the guilt his wife did made him feel awful.

With a whoosh, he flew away from Smallville and headed for Metropolis.

Lois could not seem to stop crying. How could she have been so awful? It was incomprehensible, and yet somehow she had done it, and on top of stealing the story, she had lied to Perry when he asked why Clark’s name was not on a story he had ordered them to write together. She had told

him that Clark had not wanted to come with her when she heard about the jumpers. She did not bother to tell him that she had not invited Clark, that she had not even let Clark know she was going, and, of course, she did not let Perry know that she had seen Clark there. That somehow Clark had gotten there before her and the story she was submitting was his.

She had always been competitive, but this was a bit much, even for her. This was an awful, selfish thing to do. She knew she should call Clark and apologize. She should call Perry and tell him what she had done, but she also knew she would not do either of those things. She just couldn’t.

So instead, she was spending the evening crying on her couch.

The tapping sound startled her and she looked up, trying to determine where the sound had come from. Glancing around quickly, she finally saw the source and gasped. Superman was hovering right outside her window.

Hastily wiping the tears off her face, she moved to open the window for him and he floated inside. “Hi,” he said, his voice soft, and it was clear that he had seen her crying.

“Hi,” Lois said in reply and grimaced at the nasally sound to her voice. “I’ll be right back,” she said. Hurrying over to her small bathroom, Lois washed her face and blew her nose.

She took in her appearance in the mirror, and flushed when she realized there was little she could do to improve it. Her eyes were bloodshot and her nose red. With a sigh, she moved back out into the living room.

“Bad day?” Superman asked her as she entered.

Lois nodded. “But you don’t want to hear about that. Would you like some coffee?”

“Tea,” he said, “but I’ll get it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lois said. “You don’t know where anything is.”

Superman smiled at her. “I’ll figure it out quickly.” He pointed to his eyes, “x-ray vision.”

“You can see through things?” Lois asked in awe.

“Most things,” he said as he moved past her into the kitchen.

“So, what else can you do?” she asked.

“Not tonight, Lois,” he said as he pulled two mugs down from the cabinet.

“Not tonight what?”

“Let’s not work on your story tonight. I want to hear about your day, why you were so upset earlier.”

Lois flushed. She could not tell Superman what she had done. She could not bear the thought of him knowing.

“It’s not a big deal,” she said, but Superman just turned to her with a knowing look. Then deciding that lying was the best answer here, she said, “It’s really not. It’s just that time of the month.”

Superman had the good grace to blush at that even while he whispered, “Please don’t lie to me, Lois. I know what happened today.”

Lois sat down heavily. “You do?” she asked, her voice small.

“I saw you show up at the scene after I had caught Monique and I heard Clark telling you what happened, and

I saw that only your name was on the story in the Planet about the rescue.”

His tone was matter of fact, rather than accusatory, but Lois felt her face redden anyway.

She said nothing for a moment, caught between surprise and mortification. He knew. He knew what an awful person she was.

Then in a rush, she started speaking, “I know it was awful. I don’t know why I did it. I mean, I’m competitive, I’m always competitive, but I’ve never done anything like this before and I never would have thought I could do something like this and…” She ran out of steam in the middle of her speech and to her horror, she began crying again. “You must think I’m a horrible person,” she cried.

Superman moved over to where she was sitting at the table and slid his arms under her legs. Picking her up gently, he carried her to the couch and placed her on his lap. He wrapped his arms around her, bringing her head to his shoulder.

Some small part of Lois’ brain recognized that this was her dream come true, but she could not focus on that. She was back to crying uncontrollably and could not seem to make herself stop.

Lois and Superman sat on her sofa for several more minutes with Superman running his hand softly along her back. Finally, with a deep breath, Lois pulled back from his shoulder. “I think I’m done now,” she said, and finished with a hiccup.

Superman smiled at her tenderly. “Do you feel better?” he asked, his voice quiet.

Lois shook her head, “No, not really.”

“I don’t think you are a horrible person, Lois,” he told her. “I think you made a mistake. An error in judgment. Everyone does that from time to time.”

Lois shook her head at him, “No, an error in judgment is buying ice cream when I’m trying to lose five pounds. This was much worse than that.”

Superman laughed, “It’s hard to imagine you ever have had five pounds to lose, Lois, but you are right, this is much more serious than that. That doesn’t mean it isn’t fixable.”

“It is?” Lois asked, her voice small and hopeful.

“Of course,” he said, his voice soft to match hers. “For starters, you can apologize to Clark. Maybe even let his name lead on your next joint byline. Something to show him that you know what you did was wrong and that you are sorry.”

Lois got up off of Superman’s lap and started pacing. “I can’t do that,” she said firmly.

“You can’t apologize to Clark?” Superman asked, clearly confused.

“Right,” Lois affirmed. “I mean it’s Clark and I don’t want…”

“You’d rather Clark think you are the type of person so hell-bent on success that you’d steal his story than someone with enough strength of character to recognize her mistakes and attempt to make amends?” he asked, clearly amazed at her decision.

Lois looked at the floor, “Well, when you put it that way, no, but I can’t apologize to him. He’ll lord it over me, I’ll owe him forever.”

Superman got up, annoyed now. “If you think that, you clearly don’t know Clark at all, and I clearly don’t know you at all. I thought you were a better person than this, Lois.”

With that, he strode to the window and flew out.

He took his time flying back to Smallville. That had not gone according to plan. None of it. Clearly, he had had no intention of holding her while she cried. He barely knew this woman for goodness sake! But she looked so much like his wife, he found himself as helpless to watch her cry as his Lois, and even scarier, he found himself wanting to respond to her in ways that felt familiar, but were built on the life he shared with his Lois.

And she was not his Lois. That was clear. He could not believe that his Lois would have been this stubborn. His Lois would have apologized to him if someone had told her to, he was sure of it.

But then he remembered, that night, the one he had remembered earlier, Lois had told him that Lucy had told her to apologize to him, but she had not. She said she was not sure why and it had felt awful knowing that her little sister was disappointed in her, but she had not done it.

The newsroom was quiet when Lois entered. It was late and even most of the night shift had gone home, but she could see the light on over his desk and made her way there slowly. She wished there were not so many butterflies moving around her stomach. This should not be this hard.

He looked up as she approached and surprisingly, registered no surprise that she was there. “Hi,” she said softly.

“Hi,” he replied, but he did not offer anything else.

“Listen, Clark,” she said as she sat down on the edge of his desk. “I…” she floundered, at a loss of words, but Clark just watched her quietly. “I’m sorry,” she finally said, staring resolutely at the desk. “I’m not sure why I did it or how I even managed to do it, but I am sorry, Clark. Really sorry.”

She looked up at him, but he said nothing for a moment and she added in a pleading voice, “Please, Clark. You have to believe me. I’ve never done anything like this before and…”

“Whether you’ve done it before is less important than whether you would do it again,” he said, his tone flat, but not cold.

“No!” Lois said, vehemently. “No, I could never do it again. It’s just so awful. So selfish. Clark, I’m not a nice person. I know that, but really, I don’t think I’m normally so bad.”

Clark nodded his head softly. “Why?” he asked, and now his voice was soft and sad. “I would have shared it with you if you’d asked and you weren’t even there. Why did you need to steal it?”

“I don’t know,” Lois said, her voice forlorn.

“You were angry at Perry for not allowing you to have all the follow-ups,” Clark said, trying to understand how she could have done this. He needed to understand or he would be forced to admit that he was wrong about her.

Lois nodded, “I was, and I was angry at you.” Her voice

sedated she kept mentioning something about a test. I'm not sure what kind of test, but I wondered if Jules was part of it, too."

Clark noted "test" on his notepad while he asked the doctor, "Was Monique all right?"

"Oh, she was quite fine. As with Jules, Superman seemed to save both of them with no ill effect. She was just hysterical as she was afraid, well petrified, really, of heights."

"She was afraid of heights and yet she jumped off a thirty-story building?" Clark asked, glaring at Lois as she pulled away from pinching his arm.

"Yes, it is a bit unusual, Mr. Kent. Unfortunately, I can't explain why she would do this."

Clark glanced at Lois and, seeing that she had no more questions, he thanked the doctor for his time and hung up.

"Ow!" he said in annoyance at Lois, rubbing his arm where she had pinched it.

"Oh, quit being a baby," Lois said. "I just wanted you..."

"You just wanted me to ask a question I was already asking. Why not try waiting before you inflict bodily injury?" he asked her.

Not surprisingly, Lois did not seem the least bit embarrassed. "Waiting is not my forte," she explained.

"Nice apology, Lois," Clark could not help but smile.

Lois smiled beatifically. "Thanks!"

Just then a messenger came by and dumped a stack of papers on Clark's desk. "Thanks," Clark said to the boy as he turned away, but he received no response.

"What's that?" Lois asked.

"Employment records for the jumpers," Clark explained and Lois moved closer in interest.

"They both worked for LexCorp," Clark said.

"Right, them and half of Metropolis," Lois replied. "What's the connection?"

"Lex Luthor," Clark explained.

"Lex?" Lois asked in confusion. "What would Lex have to do with all of this? He's the city's biggest benefactor. Why would he have anything against Superman?"

Clark sighed, not sure it was even worth it to have this conversation given his lack of proof, but Lois just kept looking at him in confusion, so finally he replied. "I just don't trust him, that's all."

Lois laughed lightly, placing a hand on his arm, "Well, you're new in town, Clark. Trust my instincts on this. Lex Luthor has nothing to do with this."

Somehow, Clark did not feel reassured.

Superman landed on the balcony of Lex's penthouse somewhat loudly. He was looking forward to this. He had enjoyed it the first time, and somehow he thought he might enjoy it even more now.

"Come on in, Superman," Luthor said, his voice dripping with fake hospitality.

"You want to know how strong I am, Luthor?"

Superman asked as he picked up a sword from Luthor's desk. He bent it until it formed a loop. Then as he started to put it down, he thought better of it. There was no reason not to have even more fun with it this time around. He pulled

the two ends of the sword further and tied them into a bow.

Happy with the result, he asked, "You want to know how fast I am?" This was definitely his favorite part. He picked up the gun from Luthor's desk and aimed it at the man. He stood where he was for a millisecond, relishing the look of fear crossing Luthor's face. Then he moved over and caught the bullet just before it hit Luthor.

"Does that conclude the demonstration?" Luthor asked. Superman bristled slightly. Even knowing how this was going to go, it was annoying how composed Luthor managed to be.

"The tests stop now," he said in reply.

"That would be nice," Luthor replied, "but what if they don't? You can't be everywhere at once, Superman. As long as you stay in Metropolis, people will die. Are you willing to accept that responsibility? If I were you, I'd think about it."

Superman looked at Luthor, quietly seething. In his universe, Lex Luthor had made his life a living hell. He had tormented him, tried to kill him, then tormented his wife and tried to take her from him, and the Luthor in front of him did not appear to be any different. He looked at the gun, weighing the options. It would make life so much easier to shoot him now.

But that was not what Superman was about, and doing so would not only irrevocably change history, but given Luthor's current public image, it would likely turn the public against Superman.

With a last glare at Luthor, Superman walked to the balcony and took off.

With a sigh, he entered the farmhouse. "Superman?" Martha called from the living room.

"Hi," Superman said as he came into the room.

"What's wrong, son?" Jonathan asked, taking in the slope of Superman's shoulders.

Superman smiled slightly. It was nice to have Clark's parents around. They treated him like one of their own and it not only gave him someone to talk to here, it made him feel less alone.

"It's nothing," he said to the Kents.

"Pish posh," Martha replied. "We can tell there is, Superman. You wear your sadness on your sleeve, just like our Clark."

Superman smiled again. Yes, it was definitely nice to have them here.

"It's just... I made a mistake in my universe and I feel compelled to repeat it here so it does not change history, but I'm not sure it's the right thing to do."

"What is it?" Jonathan asked.

"I'm disappearing for a few days," he explained.

"Where are you going?" Martha asked in concern.

"Oh, well, nowhere," Superman clarified. "I just won't be appearing as Superman."

"Why ever not?" she asked.

"Because Lex Luthor threatened me."

"Lex Luthor?" Martha asked, surprised.

"Well, Martha, no one ever got to be that wealthy without having questionable ethics," Jonathan said.

"Well, I know that, silly," Martha said. "I just didn't

think he'd want to be so obvious about it as to threaten Superman."

Superman smiled. He would have to remember to ask his parents if they had also suspected Luthor of being a criminal before his first dealings with the man.

"Yes, well, he's behind the tests that have been set out for me, and when I went to him today to tell him to stop, he promised that he would keep doing them, and start doing some simultaneously so that people will die if I don't disappear."

"Wow. You're right, Martha. I never thought he'd be that obvious," Jonathan said in reply.

Martha leaned forward to place a hand on Superman's arm. "So, what are you going to do?" she asked. "Or rather, what did you do and why was it a mistake?"

"Well, in my universe, I disappeared for a few days. Then in a conversation with Lois, she made me see that that was silly, so I came back. The truth is that people are going to get hurt regardless, and people did while I was gone. While Luthor is vile, he is not the only criminal in all of Metropolis, and even if he was, he is not going to change his ways and stop all crime just because I disappear."

"So why even bother giving in to his threat this time around?" Jonathan asked. "Just to avoid changes to the timeline?"

"Well, that's part of it," Superman said. "But it's also that the thing Lois said about Superman she said to Clark. There are several things like that in my life — where Lois talked to me as Clark about Superman and said things that gave me a new perspective on Superman. I think those things both guided me and encouraged me at later times, just remembering what she said. I imagine that here, those things will be useful to Clark when he's ready to become Superman himself."

"Help, Superman!" came the cry that was keeping Clark from sleeping. He rolled over in his bed, placing the pillow on top of his head. "Help!"

Where was Superman? Just then Clark remembered that Superman had said he was going away for a few days. Where was he? What was Clark supposed to do while he was away?

With a sigh, he got up. He could not deal with the agony in those cries. He moved toward the larger bedroom and moved over to the closet. He had helped Superman build the secret compartment, so he had no trouble opening it.

He wondered if this was a mistake. He pulled one of the suits out and using the spinning thing that Superman had showed him earlier that day, he spun into it.

He looked in the mirror. Not quite right. He took his glasses off and pushed his hair back. There. He did not look exactly like Superman since he was younger, but he doubted anyone would notice the subtle differences.

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The idea had come to him slowly. He had just mastered flying. After the night he found himself floating in his room, he had worked on it off and on. At sixteen, it was the last of his powers to develop and he had found it scary at first, but then when he learned to use it, it was liberating.

He had already come to terms with the fact that he was different, that he was not like his classmates. Learning to fly gave him the ability to get away from the pain of it, and to experience something wonderful.

His first long distance trip had been to the Great Wall. He had wanted to get as far away from his classmates as possible. It was weird as he was well liked, but there was an undercurrent of not belonging. Clark suspected that it was all in his head, because he knew he was different even if they did not, but it did not matter.

Shortly after his trip to the Wall, though, an idea started to take root in his mind. He could do so much with all of the abilities he now had. He thought he could use them, really use them, to help. He was not sure how, but he knew he wanted to do it in some way.

For a few weeks, Clark did nothing, but the idea began to fester in his own mind. Then one night he heard the news report on television. There was an earthquake in eastern China. He waited until his parents were asleep. He wanted to try this, but he was not ready to discuss it yet. So, after they had gone to sleep, he flew over to China. He did not bother with camouflage as who would know him in China?

It was exhilarating. It was amazing how much he could do. He had never tested his limits quite this way before. He had helped several families get to safety and all had been incredibly grateful.

The experience was not without its drawbacks — while he typically needed less sleep than others, he felt tired the next morning from the combination of lack of sleep and physical exhaustion. Plus there were the families he did not save, the little boy who he had carried away and brought to his family, already dead.

Still, overall, the experience was more positive than negative and Clark felt pleased with his results.

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When Clark landed on the Smallville farm, it was four in the morning, so he was not surprised to see that the only light on was in the kitchen where his mother was up making breakfast.

She took one look at her son as he stepped into the backdoor and abandoned the eggs she had been making to move over and engulf him in her arms. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"It was awful," Clark said, going with the emotion that was at the fore of everything he was feeling. "I don't know how he does it. I don't see how I'll ever be able to do it."

"Martha, are my eggs burning?" Jonathan asked as he entered the kitchen. "Superman, what are you doing up?" he asked, taking notice of the other person in the room.

"Oh, shoot!" Martha said, moving back to the eggs which were indeed burning. As she moved away, Jonathan got a closer look at Superman and realized he was mistaken.

"Clark? What are you doing, son?"

"Clark?" came the sleepy voice of Superman from the doorway. If she had not been so worried about her son, Martha would have giggled. Clark was wearing the suit and Superman was wearing Clark's pajamas.

"How do you do it?" Clark asked, despondently.

“Isn’t that the site of the new elementary school?” Clark asked as he and Lois jogged to the elevator.

“Yes,” Lois said, remembering. “The one that was supposed to have been built with all state-of-the-art equipment. Today was their first day open.”

Standing by the elevator, Lois glanced at Clark. He looked weird. Twitchy. What was with him?

“Lois, I just remembered, I forgot my... my thing. I’ll meet you there,” Clark said, moving back to the newsroom.

“Your thing?” Lois called after him, but Clark did not respond.

As soon as Clark heard the elevator, he raced for the stairs and ran to the roof. A quick flight home to change and he could get to the fire in just a few moments.

Again, he checked the mirror and adjusted his hair, dropped his glasses on the dresser, and decided he looked close enough to the ‘real thing’.

He was at the school just a few minutes after Lois had left the newsroom, although she beat him there and he spotted her red blazer as he flew in. Onlookers cheered for him as he landed, but he paid them no heed, racing into the school.

A firefighter came up to him, “On the third floor, Superman. There’s a classroom of children who are stuck.”

Clark ran up the stairs and using his x-ray vision, quickly found the classroom. Smoke had already made its way in and some of the children were already unconscious, others looking sleepy.

Clark made quick work of moving the children, carrying them two at a time. Moving away from the ambulance, he moved back to the firefighters. “I think we have it under control now, Superman, but thanks for the help.”

Clark smiled despite the fact that he was feeling more than a little discouraged at the sad shape of the children. He imagined it was not always like this — sometimes Superman managed to get there in time, but this was still much harder than it had been when he would help at opportune moments during his travels.

With a last glance at the ambulance, he flew home. Once he landed, he moved quickly, knowing that he did not have time to feel sorry about getting to the school later than he would have liked. He showered quickly, changing his clothes, and flew back towards the school. Half way there, though, he realized he had forgotten his glasses.

By the time he made it back, Lois was gone.

“Look, Kent,” Lois said as he walked past her desk. “You want to be my partner? Act like it. You can’t go disappearing like that for no reason. Where the heck where you?”

In the face of her anger, Clark found it hard to speak. “I’m sorry?” he said, but for some reason it came out as a question.

“You’re sorry?” Lois parroted back. “You’re sorry? No, Kent. Sorry doesn’t cut it. You can’t really expect me to put your name on this story. You never even showed up at the school.”

Clark sighed. “I am sorry, Lois,” he said, sounding sincere this time.

“I don’t care,” Lois said, turning her back on him. “This type of behavior is not acceptable.”

“Where is he?” Lois asked, “It’s been three days.”

“Maybe whoever was after him scared him off,” Jimmy suggested.

Lois, who had been doodling, put her pencil down with force. “I refuse to believe that. Superman is no coward!”

No one said anything in response, but then Lois turned to Clark, “Clark, you’re friends with him. Where did he go? Why did he go?”

Clark looked at her, his eyes sad and tired. It had been difficult trying to sleep through the cries for help the last few days, but he just could not go out again. He felt like both times he had tried to be Superman he had failed, both times he had not managed to help everyone. Plus, each time, he had this feeling... of foreboding almost. He was not sure what it was, but it felt easier to stay home. “I’m not sure, Lois,” he said, hating the fact that he had to lie. Especially as he was getting increasingly frustrated with Superman for hiding out. Superman clearly did not have a problem being Superman, so what was he doing? Did he really have to repeat everything that he had done in his timeline? Things here were not exactly the same — if they were, Clark Kent would be Superman.

“Kent, Third and Walnut. Drive by shooting,” Perry said, sticking his head into the conference room.

“I’ll come with you,” Lois said as Clark got up.

“Like heck you will,” Perry replied. “I’m still waiting for the piece I assigned you yesterday on the revitalization of Centennial Park.”

“It’s not going to happen, Chief,” Lois said. “They can’t agree on any plans.”

“I don’t care,” Perry insisted. “It’s news. Now git.”

With a sigh, Lois followed Clark out of the newsroom and glanced at him longingly as he got his jacket on. “Want to switch?” she asked, hopefully.

Clark cracked a smile. “No, thanks.”

Clark wished he had taken Lois up on her offer. He had heard the screams from the shooting before Perry mentioned it, but he never would have believed it was this bad. That family was completely destroyed.

Lois was one of the few people in the newsroom when Clark came back. “You okay?” she asked, taking in the slump of his shoulders.

“A fifteen year old boy is in critical condition, his mother is in shock, his brother can’t stop crying. No one’s talking, although there were witnesses, and the police said they’ve had half a dozen like this in the past week.”

“Sounds like a job for Superman,” Lois said sadly.

“You think he would have been able to stop this?” Clark asked.

“Not necessarily. He can’t be everywhere at once,” Lois said.

“Then what good is he?” Clark said, hating the anger he felt, but Superman had probably been watching television when that boy was shot. What good was it to preserve the timeline when it led to children being killed?

“What he can’t do doesn’t matter, Clark,” Lois said.

“It’s the idea of Superman that’s important. Someone to believe in. Someone to build a few hopes around. Whatever he can do, it’s enough.”

Lois got up, “Good night, Clark,” she said as she walked out of the newsroom.

Clark thought about what Lois had said for a few moments. What Lois said made sense. Even if Superman was not there every time, just knowing he might be there when you needed him was enough. Maybe? No, not yet. It felt so hard, and maybe it would not have if he did not have Superman to fall back on, but he did. However, while Clark was not sure he was ready to don the suit full time yet, he got it now, in a way he had not before. It was not just about helping people. It was about giving them hope. Deciding he could write up the story later, he followed Lois out of the newsroom and headed straight for Smallville.

“A fifteen year old boy died today because you wanted to preserve the timeline,” Clark said as he entered the farmhouse. The Kents and Superman, who were eating dinner, looked up at him in surprise. “And Lois said something interesting that I thought you’d want to hear. She said that it doesn’t matter what you can do, it’s that you’re there that’s important. It gives people something to hope for.”

Superman smiled. “She’s right, and I’m sorry about the boy, Clark. I really am. I know it must seem like it was silly to listen to Luthor, but I really do need to keep things as consistent as possible.”

He got up and washed his plate. “Let’s go home, Clark.”

After saving the little girl from the falling billboard, Superman flew over to Lois’ apartment. He knew he should not, but he felt like she should hear his appreciation of her words from him directly. He ignored the fact that he had not gone to see his wife after this event. The truth was that he missed his Lois, so much, and seeing this Lois lessened that a little. They were so similar in some ways.

Lois looked up with delight when she saw him floating outside her apartment. “Superman!” she exclaimed. “Come in.”

“No, thanks,” Superman said, deciding at the last minute that a brief stay might cause less disruption in the timeline. “I just wanted to say thank you.”

“For what?” Lois asked.

“I talked to Clark. He told me what you said. It made sense and so I’ve decided to return to Metropolis.”

“You did?” Lois said, her joy apparent.

“Yes,” Superman said. “Good night.”

“Wait, Superman!” Lois cried. When he turned around, she continued, “You’re returning. It’s big news. Can we talk about it for a few minutes?”

Superman smiled at her. Lois, always the consummate reporter. “I’ve already talked to Clark, Lois,” he said gently. “He’s written up the story.”

“Oh,” Lois replied, dejectedly. “I guess that’s fair,” she conceded.

“Yeah, I think it is,” Superman said. “But I’ll be seeing you.”

Lois smiled at him slightly, “Yes. Good night,

Superman.”

“Good night, Lois.”

“You okay?” Clark asked, taking in Superman’s slumped shoulders. It had been weird at first getting used to Superman out of his “Superman” uniform, but after a few weeks it had stopped feeling so odd.

There was a pause while Superman swallowed his oatmeal. “Yeah, I’m just not looking forward to today,” he admitted.

“Really?” Clark was surprised. “But isn’t this a huge honor?”

Superman smiled, “Yes, and in that way, it’s always fun. Metropolis is very friendly to Superman and that always feels good, but Luthor is the one who is bestowing the key to the city on me.”

“Oh,” Clark said, suddenly understanding completely. “So, I guess that means you don’t like Lex Luthor any more than I do.”

Superman laughed, “No, it’s hard to believe anyone dislikes Lex Luthor more than me.”

“Does that mean that he is as bad as I fear?” Clark asked, “His threat to you last week isn’t an isolated incident?”

Superman stared off into space for a moment, “I can’t really say,” he finally replied. “What I can say is that you should definitely follow your instincts where Lex Luthor is concerned.”

The next few days, Superman hardly saw Clark. Clark was busy working on a story about an invisible man with Lois and Superman was trying to stay out of his way. It was weird, but with all the trouble he was having reliving his life as Superman, he found it equally hard to watch Clark relive his life as Clark. He was tempted to give Clark clues as to how things were going to turn out for some reason. So, sometimes it was easier to minimize contact.

Randomly, however, they both ended up home at a reasonable hour on Tuesday. Clark came in while Superman was getting ready to go out and was clearly in a bad mood. “Everything okay?” Superman asked him as Clark downed a glass of juice.

Clark shrugged, “Fine,” he replied listlessly.

“Clark?” Superman prodded, feeling a bit more concerned.

Clark sighed, “It’s nothing. It’s just the auction tonight. Lois is going and she’s planning to bid on you. I know it’s not your fault, but I feel like Lois can’t even see me with you around. It’s like she has blinders on and they only allow visions of Superman through.”

Superman said nothing for a moment. He had never thought it through really — how things would be with him here. He had thought a lot about what would be different, but had not for some reason really thought about what would be the same. He had competed with himself as Superman for Lois’ affection. How would a separate Superman really make that better? He wished he could reach Herb and ask him about this. Make sure that this was really the right thing to do.

But since he could not do that now, he did the only thing

he could do. “I’m sorry, Clark. I know it feels like we’re competing, and honestly, we probably are in some ways, but I really won’t encourage Lois in any way and I’m sure in the end, it’s going to be Clark Kent that she wants.”

Clark smiled slightly at him to show his appreciation, but the smile did not reach his eyes. Superman supposed he would have felt the same way at that point in his life. Even if someone had told him that one day he would marry Lois, it would have felt hard to believe at the moment. At least he knew that at the auction, he did not need to worry about paying attention to Lois.

But clearly, his memories of the auction were poor. What he remembered was that Lois had lost the bid for him and instead he had gone on a date with a woman who clearly had means but no brains. That date had been the longest three hours of his life.

What he had not recalled was how Lois looked at the auction. Actually, Superman thought this Lois must have worn something different than his wife had as it was hard to imagine he had forgotten this dress. It was red and hung to her ankles but had a slit on the side that exposed her left leg up to mid thigh when she turned just so. The top of the dress was simple — two pieces of material that came up from the waist to cover her breasts and tie behind her neck. It gave a tantalizing view of her from the side and left her back completely bare.

Just seeing her in this dress reminded him in a painful and very real way how long it had been since he had seen his wife. His only saving grace was that he had seen Lois before he had entered the room and was able to slip out to take a dip in the Arctic before making his entrance. When he returned, he kept his eyes off of Lois as much as possible. Thank goodness for small favors, he thought as he realized it was easy to recognize Lois from the corner of his eye in her red dress.

He kept his eyes off of her during the bidding as well, but was unable to do so when the bidding ended. The same boring blond did not win the bid here, but at least Lois did not either. The brunette he would be taking for a picnic seemed a bit more intelligent than his date from his universe, and he hoped that would continue to be the case during their date.

Still, while he talked to her, his eyes found Lois and he could not decide who he felt worse for — Lois or Clark. Lois looked heart broken. She looked like she had lost her best friend, and it brought home more strongly Clark’s point from earlier. Looking at her, Superman vowed to himself to make more effort to place bounds on his relationship with Lois so that Clark would hopefully be more visible. He promised himself that while he knew in his world he had gone to tell Lois that she did not need to bid for him, that she would always be special to him, he would not do that here. He would keep his distance.

After they had finished the story on the invisible man, Perry had made Lois and Clark permanent partners. Lois had been tempted to argue with him, but she decided not to waste her breath. She had no chance of winning the fight and truthfully, she had been thinking of Clark in those terms

already. Even if she did not want a partner and did not feel she needed one, Clark just always seemed to be around.

Still, it was hard not to feel annoyed when the first story they worked on as partners was about boxing. She knew she was mostly annoyed about Perry’s assigning the story to them because of her connections, but that did not stop her from taking her frustration out on Clark.

Still after a few minutes of razzing him about his knowledge of boxing, which was good, just not as good as hers, she mellowed out. Seeing Allie, the manager of the gym, always did that for her.

“You’ve got four fighters going for titles this Saturday. Maybe the biggest night in the history of boxing, and we can’t get to the fighters. They won’t talk to us. I don’t get it,” Lois explained to him.

Before Allie could respond, though, Tommy Garrison, the boxer who had been practicing in the ring when they entered, reacted. “You want to talk to me?” he asked, throwing his towel down towards them where it hit Clark in the head. “Okay, but you can’t learn anything from down there. Come up here, see what it feels like.”

When Clark hesitated, Lois pushed him. “Go on!”

Clark grimaced and Lois knew he was not happy, but she said nothing else and as she knew he would, Clark gave in a moment later.

The boxer looked Clark up and down. Even from the ground, Lois was starting to regret the decision to send Clark up there. Garrison had a predatory gleam in his eye that made her a bit uneasy.

“Ever been in a fight?” he asked Clark.

“I try to avoid them when I can,” Clark said back, sounding more sure of himself than Lois would have expected.

“How can you write about boxing when you don’t know what it’s about?” Garrison asked Clark. “Ever seen a punch like this?” He jabbed his fist into the air centimeters from the left side of Clark’s face. No more than a second later, he did the same thing on the other side.

Lois was holding her breath, but to her surprise, Clark did not even flinch.

Garrison also looked surprised and started taunting Clark, “Come on, give it back to me. Come on, pretty boy.”

Clark resolutely stood there with his hands by his sides.

“Fine,” Garrison said huffily, “then try to avoid me.”

Lois watched the action up in the ring with trepidation. “What’s he doing?” she asked Allie.

When she looked at her old friend, he was shaking his head. “He gets this way sometimes. Super aggressive or something, and he won’t listen to anyone but Menken. I’ve tried talking to him. Almost got my ear ripped off.”

Clark continued to stand there while Garrison started throwing punches in the air around his head, so close Lois was sure Clark could feel them, but Clark never responded. The only sign that he may have been even the slightest bit upset was the fact that his hands started to curl into fists at his side.

“Come on, aren’t you going to try to block me, honey?” Garrison asked. “A little closer and I might throw you through the ropes. What would you do then, sweetheart?”

Finally, Lois had had enough. “Clark, get down from

there.” She could feel the tension in her body. If he did not come down, there was a good chance Clark could get hurt. This was not why she had sent him up there. She had thought going up there would enable Clark to get a couple of good quotes from the boxer, but now it appeared he would be lucky to leave the ring as just one big bruise.

Clark did not move at all. “You sent me up here!” he reminded her and in the retort, Lois could hear some of his frustration come through.

“Allie,” Lois turned to her friend. “He’s just playing, right? You didn’t mean what you said earlier.”

Allie did not respond and a second later, Garrison had Clark pushed up against the ropes, trapped by the boxer’s body. “What now, Princess?” he asked.

Clark had finally reached his limit. At first he had not backed down as he did not want Lois to think he was weak, but he had played this game long enough. He gave Garrison a light push. It was enough to send Garrison stumbling backwards, though, and once the boxer recovered, it is clear he was livid.

Before Garrison could deliver a blow, though, another voice called out. “Garrison!”

Almost at once, the boxer backed off, throwing Clark a contemptuous look rather than the punch he wanted.

“Hit the showers!” the other man commanded him.

Garrison left the ring, throwing a kiss and a “See you later, Princess,” Clark’s way.

Clark took a moment to compose himself and to his surprise, Lois seemed concerned for him when he joined her. “Are you all right, Clark?” she asked him, looking him over carefully to make sure he was okay.

“Fine,” he said before the man from earlier came over to join them.

“Menken. Max Menken,” he announced to them. “No press allowed in the gym, but come on Saturday and see the Ultimate Street Fight. The winner’s gonna fight Superman.”

Lois and Clark exited the gym a few moments later, nearly bumping into a middle aged man. He began to apologize to them when he looked up.

“Lois!” he said, excitedly.

“Hi, Dad,” Lois replied, less enthusiastically. The two shared a brief kiss on the cheek before Lois pulled away. There was an awkward pause before Lois remembered the man beside her. “Sorry. Sam Lane. Clark Kent.”

The two men shook hands, Clark trying to understand what was going on. He would not have expected Lois to be so cold to her father. “Nice to meet you, Dr. Lane. I work with Lois at the Planet.”

“Nice to meet you,” Sam replied. “Lois, you think you might have some time? We could get some dinner?” he asked her.

Lois’ response was almost immediate. “Maybe. In a few weeks? I’m really busy right now.”

“Right,” Sam nodded his head. “Well, when you have some free time. . . ”

“Yeah,” Lois replied.

The three stood in silence for another minute before Clark spoke up. “Well, it was nice to meet you, Dr. Lane.”

Lois, recognizing the opening, took Clark’s arm. “Yeah,

we better go. Good seeing you, Dad.”

The next few days were awkward. Clark tried to get Lois to open up about her father, but she resented him for it. Then when Allie was killed, it was the same thing. Lois was clearly shaken by the murder, but was unwilling to show her emotions.

In fact, she turned into something of a workaholic, and after a night where she convinced Clark that they should break into her father’s office, she wrote a story exposing the whole thing. Clark was worried about her. That story could get her father killed. Whoever had hired Sam Lane to create those super-powered limbs would not be happy to have the secret exposed, and that would put Sam at risk.

Clark tried to suggest that this was one time when Lois should not report what she knew, but she was stalwart in her decision. “So, he’ll lose his license. Big deal!” she said in reply to Clark’s suggestion. “He deserves it.”

“Lois, Allie was killed. Whoever killed him will want your father out of the way, too,” Clark said.

“Get used to it, Clark. We write the news. Sometimes that means making tough choices.”

Clark pinched the bridge of his nose trying to determine what he could say to make her see that this time reporting the news was not the right way to go. “Okay,” he finally said. “But at least sleep on it for one night? Send the story to Perry tomorrow if you still want to print it?” he asked.

With a sigh to show her annoyance, Lois agreed.

“Oh, good. You’re here,” Clark said at seeing Superman in the apartment when he returned.

Superman looked at him with a smile. Over the last couple of weeks things between them seemed to be getting better. He had kept his promise, keeping his distance from Lois, and Clark seemed to really appreciate it.

“Something you need?” Superman asked.

“Yes, actually, a favor,” Clark laughed a bit self-depreciatingly. “Well, on top of the one you are already doing for me.”

Superman smiled in response. “What is it you’d like?” he asked.

Clark sighed, “Could you pay Lois a visit tonight? Talk to her?”

Superman sat up a little straight. “But. . . why?” he asked confused.

Clark sighed again. “I know. I was the one that asked you to keep your distance, but she won’t listen to me and she’s about to make a big mistake. I’m afraid that she won’t listen to anyone but you.”

Superman thought, trying to determine what mistake Clark could be talking about, but could not. Finally, Clark explained. “It’s her father. He’s been developing limbs for boxers. Super limbs. Lois wants to write an article exposing him, but I’m afraid.”

“That whoever killed. . . ” Superman tried to remember the man’s name. “Allie? Will kill Sam, too?”

Clark nodded. “I tried explaining this to her, but she wouldn’t listen to me.”

Superman stood up in surprise. “She wouldn’t listen to you? You told her it could get her father killed and she still

wants to go ahead with it?"

Clark looked up. This time he was the one who was surprised. "Well... yeah. I figured Superman needed to talk to her. Didn't you do that in your universe?"

Superman nodded his head, "No. In my universe, Lois listened to Clark. That's weird. You and Lois are so much closer than my Lois and I were at this time. I wonder why she won't listen to you."

"I don't know," Clark said, running his hand roughly through his hair. "But I'm afraid she won't listen to me and then when her dad is killed she's going to fall apart."

Now it was Superman's turn to sigh. "Okay, I'll go talk to her. I'm not at all sure what I should say, but I'll go talk to her."

"Thanks, Superman," Clark said, his voice warm.

"Not a problem, Clark. You know that."

Superman took his time flying to Lois', lost in thought. Just the thought of going over to talk to her had made his heartbeat speed up. He did not want this to be the case, but it was. This Lois intrigued him.

He could suddenly understand the tones Lois, his Lois, used when she talked about the Clark from the other universe. Her words were always deliberate, as if she was trying to shield him from knowing what she really thought, and she spoke softly, in hushed tones, a voice she typically reserved for when she spoke about Chad — the only boyfriend she had had before Clark who had not behaved appallingly and broken her heart.

Clark had always understood the subtext of this — Lois had cared about the other Clark, possibly more than she thought was appropriate, and she did not want him to know, for him to feel threatened.

He was afraid that he was falling down the same path with this Lois. Even though their encounters to date had been brief, she reminded him so strongly of his wife, he craved her attention, and when she behaved in ways that did not mesh with his memories of his Lois, rather than be turned off, he was intrigued. He wanted to understand why she behaved differently. What made this Lois different?

But he was also clear on what he was doing here in this world. What his mission was. He was just here until this Clark was ready to take over the superhero persona. He was not supposed to get in the way, and it should not have been difficult to do this. Despite the allure this Lois held for him, there was something about her, some underlying essence that was not his wife. He just did not have the same feelings for her. He was in love with his wife and would give anything to be with her right now. His feelings for this woman, no matter how much she intrigued him, did not even compare.

More than that, he really liked this Clark, and not just in a We're-people-who-share-a-common-background sort of way. This Clark was just a really nice guy, and Superman could see himself making the same life choices Clark had made. In some ways, it was surprising they had not. What had made him so sure he could make a life, a permanent life, work in Metropolis when he had failed so many times before?

Whatever it was, it was a subtle difference between

them, and it made Superman feel a bit badly for this Clark that his world seemed a scarier place for him — he was less sure he could survive in Metropolis, less ready to take on the larger than life superhero, and, surprisingly, given the difference in how their relationship was progressing, less willing to take on Lois Lane.

Given that he liked Clark, though, he really wanted to make his life easier. He remembered this time in his own life, the conflicting emotions that always seemed to be present — the exhilaration at spending so much of his time with Lois, the pain of feeling like she did not really know him and worse yet, did not really care, and even worse, watching her idolize first Lex, then Superman and then move back and forth between them, sometimes seeming to idolize them both at the same time.

'I'm sorry. I don't think about you in that way... romantically... Clark, you're my best friend.' It was a speech that had killed him. At the time, he was not sure how he could possibly recover. If he could do something to prevent this Clark from hearing that speech, he wanted to do it; regardless of the way he felt about this woman.

She was sitting on the couch when he reached her window. He floated outside for close to a minute before she noticed him. Superman tried not to think about why he had not knocked, why he had wanted to just watch her.

"Superman," she said as she came to the window, her voice a bit breathless. "How are you?"

"I'm okay," he replied. "You?"

"Good. Clark and I cracked open a big case today," Lois replied.

"I know," Superman sighed. "I wanted to talk to you about that."

Lois' eyes darkened just the slightest bit. "You talked to Clark." It was a statement.

Superman just nodded.

"I told him I would think about it."

"And?" Superman prodded.

"And, I'm still thinking," Lois said firmly. "But how about you? Are you liking Metropolis?"

"Lois," Superman replied, hating the pleading sound he heard in his voice. It was weird. It was less like the voice he used when he talked to his wife than the one he used to use when he first met her. He had reverted to old patterns, ones he had thought were long since dead, and worse yet, he was acting like Clark and not Superman around her.

"Oh, come on, Superman," Lois smiled at him. "Your life is much more interesting than mine."

"Oh, I doubt that," he replied. "I think my life is much more boring than you'd ever think."

"Really?" Lois asked, clearly interested. "Tell me about it."

"Lois, I came over here to talk about you. Your father." The annoying pleading sound was there again.

"And we did," Lois said smoothly. "We've covered it. Now let's move on to something else."

"I..." Superman floundered. He should leave now. If she was unwilling to talk to him about her father, he should leave. He knew he should.

"So, tell me," Lois said, edging slightly closer to him.

nothing about her, and yet they felt free to dissect her life?

"It's not like that, Lois," Clark said, his voice soft and repentant.

"Oh, it isn't?" Lois rounded on him. "Than what is it like, Clark? Huh? Tell me what it's really like."

"Maybe we should sit down," Superman suggested. "I'll make us some tea while Clark explains."

"I don't want tea," Lois insisted. "I don't want to talk to either one of you right now," she said as she spun around and headed for the door.

Clark ran over to her, placing a hand lightly on her arm. "Please, don't go, Lois. Let me explain."

Lois looked at his hand on her arm, then looked at him with fire in her eyes, "Let go of my arm, Clark," she said, her words filled with ice.

Clark dropped his hand immediately. "Please, Lois. It's not what you think."

Without even responding, Lois headed out the door. Clark followed her out, catching up with her as she threw her car door open.

"Lois, he wasn't coming to talk about you. He lives here," Clark said.

Lois slammed her car door in his face. Clark stood there watching her, willing her to look back at him, see that they were not conspiring against her. Lois turned the engine on, staring ahead stone-faced.

For a moment, neither she nor Clark moved and then she whipped her head around to meet Clark's eyes, lowering her window as she did so. "Superman lives here?" she hissed.

"Yes?" Clark answered meekly, wondering why this knowledge did not make things better.

"You think you know me well enough to pass judgment on my life even though you haven't even bothered to tell me you have a roommate, let alone a roommate who is a superhero?"

Clark did not say anything for a moment, not sure how to respond.

"Screw you, Clark!" With that, Lois closed her window and drove away.

Clark walked in dejectedly.

"Everything okay?" Superman, who had changed back into casual clothes, asked carefully. Taking in Clark's form, he added, "I guess not."

"So," Clark said, drawing out the word. "You're the one who's married to someone like her. Is it better to give her time to cool off or to try to make her talk?"

"When she's this worked up? It's usually better to wait for her to calm down a little," Superman said. "Although, to be honest, Lois doesn't calm down well."

Clark hung his head. "I don't know what to do."

"I really would leave it alone for now," Superman told him. "Right now she can't even hear you through her anger."

Clark sank onto the couch, "Okay," he said, his voice soft and sad.

Superman looked at Clark, feeling badly for him. He was sorry Lois was angry at them, but imagined it was harder for Clark. "Hey," he said softly. "Why don't we do

something?"

"Like what?" Clark asked, sounding uninterested.

"We could play some hoops?" Superman suggested.

"Yeah," Clark agreed, sounding only vaguely enthusiastic.

Superman smiled, "It will be fun to play against someone I can play with using all my speed."

Clark smiled in response. "I hadn't thought about that. This will be interesting, but where should we play? We can hardly play a game of pick-up in Centennial Park if we want to be ourselves."

"Good point," Superman admitted. "I have an idea. Grab a ball and meet me on the balcony."

A minute later the two men were in the air, high above the clouds, on their way to Smallville.

They landed in the corn field a few minutes after that and walked to the farm house. Martha came out as she heard them approach.

"Hi, boys! What are you doing here?" she asked as she wrapped Clark in a hug.

"We just came to shoot some hoops," Superman said, moving over to hug her as well. "Is that all right?"

"Of course it is," Martha said, "but I'm not sure where Clark's old basketball hoop is."

"It's in the barn, Martha," Jonathan said, coming up behind her. "I'll help you set it up," he offered them, his eyes twinkling. "This should be fun to watch."

"What?" Martha asked as she followed the men into the barn.

"Don't you remember watching Clark play when he'd come home from college? Zipping around the yard, throwing from out in the cornfield?" Jonathan asked.

Martha giggled, "And now there'll be two of them," she realized.

Once it was set up, Clark made sure the hoop was set up as high as it could go. "Ready?" he asked Superman.

"Anytime," came the reply.

Clark started slowly, bouncing the ball at normal speed, but almost immediately the game went into super-mode. Clark went left and Superman shot out to block him, then Clark feigned left and almost before Jonathan and Martha could blink, Superman was blocking Clark on his right.

After a few minutes, Martha and Jonathan went inside. Clark and Superman were moving so fast it was hard to follow what was going on. From where they were sitting in the living room, though, they could hear signs of the game — the ball bouncing outside, the sound of one of them yelling from the cornfield, and more often than in any normal game, the whoosh of the ball going through the basket.

After about an hour, Martha decided to come out and see if they wanted some dessert. In surprise, she realized that neither of them was there. She looked out at the cornfield, but could not see them. They had both arrived in t-shirts and shorts and in dark colors, so she stood there a moment longer, peering into the darkness, hoping to spot them.

"Hey, Mom!" Clark called, nearly right into her ear as he seemed to come out of nowhere to fly right past her and drop the ball through the hoop.

It took less than twenty four hours for him to realize how wrong he was, how very vulnerable he could be.

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Clark almost fell in mid-air as the memory came flooding back. He had been remembering bit and pieces of things that had happened before this, but until now, he had stayed away from this memory. And he vowed not to think of it anymore now. He would not think about it. He just would not.

“I just didn’t,” Clark said, his voice tense.

He could see Superman flinch a bit at the tone, knew he was ruining the mood of comradeship they had built with their basketball game, but he would not discuss this. He could not do it.

“Just go away,” Lois shouted through the door. “I’m not done being angry at you.”

Clark felt his spirits lift slightly at this. “So, you will be finished at some point?” he asked.

The door in front of him flew open.

“I don’t know,” Lois said, her tone indignant as she glared up at him. Beneath the anger though, Clark could see the tell-tale signs of tears. Her eyes, clear now, were red rimmed. Her cheeks had a few random tear tracks that she had not successfully washed away. The sight made his gut clench.

“I’m sorry, Lois. I’m so sorry. I just... I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Superman. I should have. I know. But I’m not sorry about butting into the thing with your dad. I’m worried about you.”

Lois’ expression softened, but just slightly. “It’s my decision,” she said.

“I know,” Clark said, his tone contrite. “And I’ll support you no matter what.”

“And from now on, we’re on equal footing. If you are going to butt your nose into my life, you’re going to have to let me in on yours,” Lois demanded.

“You want in on mine?” Clark asked, surprised.

Lois rolled her eyes at him and Clark knew he had sounded too needy.

“Forget it, Farmboy. I’ll see you tomorrow. At the office.”

With that, the door was closed.

“An ordinary hit and run?” Perry asked them, his tone and stance making it clear he did not believe them.

“The police think so,” Lois stated carefully, her eyes avoiding Perry’s.

“Yesterday, you told me it was murder,” Perry stated.

“I was wrong,” Lois said hoping that Clark would stay silent. She knew he would support this, knew this was the decision he had wanted her to make, but he was still green. She was not sure he would not do something stupid. She was still angry at him and so had chosen not to discuss this with him this morning, but now she was regretting this decision. She should have briefed him on what she was doing and what she expected from him.

“You agree with her take on this?” Perry asked Clark.

“Of course,” Clark said and Lois felt better. He had sounded firm and sure of himself.

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She heard the door slam behind him and slowly let the breath she was holding out. Lucy was out spending the night with Erica, and Lois was torn between feeling glad that Lucy had missed this argument and sorry that she was alone for the fight tonight. It had been bad, really bad.

Lois was not sure where things could go from here. This time it sounded permanent, like this time he was not coming back.

The house was quiet now, but eerily so. Mom would come back; she always did, although the chance that she would be able to make dinner or even stand was unlikely. But Lois doubted Dad would come back.

He did not say anything before he left. Lois had seen him packing, had peered into the bedroom, had seen the open suitcase. It was bigger than the one he packed when he fought with Mom and he took off to visit his lady friends. This one was much bigger, and he packed all his ties. He usually only took one or two.

But he said almost nothing to Lois. Even on his way out. Lois had not moved away from the bedroom door fast enough, and when he started to leave the bedroom, she was not able to make it back to her room. So she sat on the couch and quickly turned on the television. But all he said on his way to the door was, “Lois, turn that racket down!”

How could he leave and not say a word to her? Not even say goodbye?

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“Dad?” Lois called as she entered the office.

“Lois!” her father looked happy to see her. Lois was not sure when their relationship had taken on this hue. Her memories of her father were always of him walking out, of her missing him, wishing he would spend more time with her.

Somewhere along the way, though, that had changed. Now she was the one who kept her distance and her father seemed to crave a relationship with her. It was too late for that, though. If he wanted a relationship with her, he should have built it years ago. Now, too much had happened.

“Dad, I know what’s going on with the fighters,” Lois said softly.

She could see her father’s shoulders slump and for just a second, she felt badly for him. Her father had always seemed so strong — aloof, but strong. Now, though, he was showing his age and he did not look the slightest bit strong.

“Don’t worry about me, Lois. I’ll be okay,” her father said softly.

“I didn’t write it,” she said, her voice nearly a whisper.

“Didn’t write what?” Sam asked, clearly confused.

“I... The story,” Lois qualified. “I was supposed to write a story about Allie’s murder. I didn’t write it.”

“But... why?”

“Because...” Lois broke off, at a loss for words. “If I wrote it, if I had reported the truth... They may have come after you, Dad. They might have killed you.” Lois was horrified to find herself crying again, and even more horrified when a second later she felt comforted by the feel of her father’s arms around her.

"You didn't need to do that, Lois," he whispered into her hair. "I would have understood. It's your career."

Lois pulled away, feeling annoyed now. "That's not the most important thing in my life, Dad!" she said, hearing herself parroting back Clark's words but not caring. "There are more important things than getting ahead at work."

Sam looked at the ground, chastened. "Thank you, Lois," he said, his voice soft. "You're right. There are more important things in life. I wish I had realized that sooner."

"Are you okay?" Clark asked Lois as they packed up at the end of the day. His tone was soft, contrite. He was worried about her. She had been quiet all day. He knew some of that was residual anger at him, but suspected much more of it had to do with her father.

This had been a trying story for her and he could see that. He wished she had let him in, let him help her work through things, but that was wishful thinking. They were not that close. No matter how strong Clark's feelings for Lois were, they were not that close.

Superman had said that he and Lois were closer now than Superman had ever been to his Lois in the first year, and it felt sort of good to have that benchmark. In reality, though, it did not matter. He was not as close as he wanted to be, and even if they were closer than Superman had been to his Lois, this Lois was still half in love with Superman and showed signs of attraction to Luthor. It was clear that Clark came in third (assuming there were not others he was not aware of). Even now, when Lois was still annoyed at Superman for what she perceived as gossiping about her, he was fully aware that Superman was still ahead.

Lois nodded, still distracted by the conversation with her father. "I'm okay," she said. Then she seemed to remember where she was and looked at Clark more clearly. "Thanks for backing me up with Perry this morning."

Clark smiled, "That's what partners are for."

"So, we're partners now?" Lois asked.

"That's what Perry said," Clark said, trying to keep his tone even.

"I know, but I mean, we're accepting that?" Lois asked.

Clark looked at the ceiling, trying to find the right words and the right tone to use. He neither wanted to come off as too desperate nor too cold. He wanted Lois to know how much he wanted to work with her, but without sounding like a pathetic little boy.

Finally, he sighed. "I accepted it a long time ago, Lois. Happily. I want to work with you. I want to learn from you."

Lois' smile hardened slightly, "But partners..."

"I know," Clark interjected softly. "Partners do not keep big news from each other. I should have told you about Superman. I know."

"I wouldn't have written about it anyway," Lois said, her tone still a bit sour.

"You wouldn't?" Clark asked, not a hundred percent sure he believed her.

Lois sighed. "I guess I deserve that. But I wouldn't sell just anyone out. I know that if the press knew where Superman lived, he would never have any peace."

Clark nodded. "Thanks, Lois. I'm sure he appreciates

your willingness to keep it a secret."

Lois nodded. "It's the right thing to do," she said, trying to diminish the meaning behind her actions.

Clark placed a hand on her arm. "Yes, but that doesn't mean it isn't a kind and very thoughtful thing to do. Not everyone would do that. Some people, and I don't mean you, think that nothing is more important than their careers."

Lois blushed, but then changed the topic. "Thanks for the help with this latest story, Clark," she said, her voice soft.

Understanding that Lois was trying to change the mood, he teased, "You're welcome. I know you would never have written a piece as great without me."

"Very funny!" she said, as she poked him. "I meant for the lecture about my dad. I was not happy that you told Superman about it, but I know I wouldn't have listened otherwise."

"Do you think maybe things are different with your father now?" Clark asked her, his tone soft and quiet, hoping that it was okay that they had fallen so quickly back into a serious conversation.

Lois shrugged. "I don't know. I think our relationship is ingrained. It's built on too much. I doubt we're going to win Father-Daughter relationship of the year contests. But... I don't know. I was proud of him for doing the right thing and helping us put an end to what was going on."

Clark smiled but Lois was staring at the ground.

"And... I'm proud of myself," Lois admitted quietly. "I'm proud that I didn't write the story regardless of what it would have meant for my dad." Lois looked up, looking directly at Clark. "And for keeping the news of Superman's home private. I'm proud of myself for being more like you, Clark."

Clark, trying desperately to temper his reaction, reached out to place his arms around her. "That was... a really nice thing to say, Lois."

Lois gave him a hug before backing away quickly. "Well, it's true. But don't expect me to say things like that all the time," she smirked.

"Oh, I've known you long enough to know what to expect," Clark smiled. "So," he asked after a beat, "it all ended well, even if it doesn't cause a lifelong change in your relationship with your dad."

"Yeah, and can you believe Lex? How he came in the middle of everything and saved my life?" Lois asked, the adoration clear in her voice.

'Two steps forward for every step back,' Clark thought. For a moment there, he had felt close to Lois, like they were moving somewhere, but then, BAM, sucker punch, and adoration for Luthor crept in.

"Hi," Lois said quietly when he opened the door. "Is Superman here?"

Clark nodded, trying to hide the effect her question had on him. Was this what it was going to be like living with Superman? Every time he heard Lois' heartbeat as she walked up the walkway, his pulse would speed up, his palms would start to sweat, and then when he opened the door he would learn that she was there to see his

roommate? If so, he was not sure he could do this.

He moved aside calling over his shoulder, "Superman?"

The call was unnecessary, though. Superman had heard the knock on the door and had used his vision gizmo (as his wife liked to refer to it) to determine it was Lois at the door. He had waited in his room, intending to give Lois and Clark some privacy, but had heard her ask for him instead.

Now, walking out to meet Lois, he took in the look in Clark's eyes and he felt awful. Things were not going the way he had hoped. He could not believe that this is what Wells had been planning. Despite his best intentions, he was still competing with Clark.

The only solace was that he was not nearly as sure as Clark was as to who was leading the race. Certainly Superman was not doing as well here as he had done in his own universe. This Lois and Clark were much closer. If he had any say, they would only get closer still until Superman faded completely into the background.

When he turned to Lois, though, he found himself forgetting those words. She looked so sad. He hated the look on her face and found himself responding to it almost on an instinctual level. "Hi," he said and was astonished to hear the soft, caring tone to his voice.

He cleared his throat, taking in Clark's look of surprise at his tone out of the corner of his eye. "Hi, Lois," he said again, this time making sure his voice was neutral.

"Hi," Lois said, her tone also soft. "I just came by to give you something," she said as she held a piece of paper out to him. "I wrote this this morning. Or last night. I'm not sure which. But I never submitted it and I deleted it from my hard drive. This is the only copy."

Curious, Superman opened up the paper and nearly gasped at what he saw. The headline, which Lois had put in sixteen point font, said "Superman Living in Metropolis Apartment." A fast perusal of the article showed that she had spelled out his address and the fact that he was living with Clark. Even which bedroom she thought he had, so it would be easy to spot which window was his from the outside.

"Lois," he asked, confused and hurt. "Why would you..." he trailed off, at a loss for words.

"I didn't," she reminded him. "Last night, I was so angry at you, though, and... But it doesn't matter now. I wouldn't tell anyone your secret. I wouldn't hurt either you or Clark like that. I just thought you should know."

"Thank you," Superman said, his voice soft now and more Clark-like than it had ever been with this woman before. "Thank you," he repeated.

"No problem," Lois said before clearing her throat and then turning to Clark who was watching the scene with his mouth open, she said, "I'll see you tomorrow, Clark," and walked out the door.

"Um... hi," Lois said, feeling extremely flustered.

"I hope you don't mind my stopping by unannounced," Lex replied. "I was in the neighborhood and saw your light on."

"You know where I live?" Lois asked, failing at her attempt to hide her pleasure at that fact.

Lex looked appropriately chagrined. "Okay, so I was in

the neighborhood specifically to see you."

"You were?" Lois asked, even more pleased.

"It's been awhile since we've seen each other, Miss Lane," he said with a wide smile.

"But I saw you earlier. At the press conference." Lois suddenly realized that they were still in her doorway. "Do you want to come in?" she asked him.

He smiled as he followed her inside. "This is just how I pictured your apartment."

"It is?" Lois asked, more than a little surprised to hear he had pictured her apartment at all.

Lex looked around approvingly rather than respond. "It's very nice, Lois."

Lois was not sure what to say. Finally, she settled on, "Would you like something to drink? Coffee?"

Lex sat down on her couch. "No, that's all right. I can't stay long, unfortunately."

"Okay," Lois said, sitting down across from him.

He spied the half eaten Double Fudge Crunch Bar on the table and smiled at her. "Can I have a piece?"

Lois nodded her head, not understanding at all what was going on. Lex took a part of the chocolate bar, and then handed it to Lois.

"So, why did you stop by again?" Lois asked as she bit off a piece of chocolate.

"I just wanted to say hello," Lex said. "Really."

"But we did that. At the press conference," Lois said again.

"That was business, Lois," Lex said.

"Oh," Lois said simply.

Lex glanced at his watch and sighed. "I'm really sorry, Lois. I wish I could stay longer, but I need to leave, but maybe we could go to dinner again?"

Lois smiled. "I'd like that, Lex."

"Good. Mrs. Cox will call you tomorrow to set up the details."

Clark tossed and turned in bed, afraid to fall asleep. The memories had been coming so frequently lately and he did not want to remember any more. True, they had not actually been coming while he was asleep, but he felt nervous about letting himself relax.

Finally, tired of lying in bed, he got up and put on dark clothes. Walking quietly through the apartment so as not to wake Superman, he made his way to the balcony and took flight.

Superman lay in bed, listening to the sounds of the apartment. He had trained himself to be a light sleeper so that he could easily hear calls for help at night. He had heard Clark moving around in his room, but then all had gone quiet in the apartment. He considered going to make sure Clark was all right, but was not sure their relationship permitted that yet.

So, he had lain in bed listening until he heard Clark take off from the balcony. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he made his way to the kitchen. He wondered what was going on with Clark. Clark's reaction on the way home from Smallville to his question about becoming Superman had surprised him. Clark had fallen at least five feet before

off, you don't need to beat yourself up about the fact that you don't always adhere to the timeline. Things don't need to be exactly the same as they were in your universe."

Superman stood up, looking angry. "Why didn't you tell me that before?" he demanded. "I would have... people died because I was trying to play things the same way. I gave in to Luthor's demand because I thought..."

"Clark," Herb demanded, cutting him off. "I didn't say that you shouldn't try to keep things as they were. There should not be big differences. But it's okay if things are not exact. I'm not a big proponent of the butterfly effect."

Superman looked at him incredulously. "What do you mean?"

"You know," Herb smiled. "The butterfly effect. The belief that small changes in initial conditions can cause large fluctuations in the end result. People often relate it to time travel..."

"I know what the butterfly effect is," Superman interrupted him. "I'm just wondering how you could not believe in it."

"Do you really want to get into a philosophical discussion right now?" a third voice entered the conversation from the doorway.

Superman looked over towards the voice slowly, almost afraid to see his mistake. He was not mistaken, though.

"Lois?" he asked, his voice nearly a whisper.

"Good to see you, too, Farmboy," she said teasingly as she entered the room more fully, closing the door behind her.

Superman wasted no time moving over to engulf his wife in his arms. "Lois," he breathed into her hair. "I've missed you so much."

Lois leaned back slightly, just enough to let her lips touch his softly. "I imagine you have. I've missed you, too, and it's only been a few minutes for me."

"What?" Superman asked, feeling like his thought processes had slowed down, almost like he was intoxicated on his wife.

"You've barely been gone. Herb said that since he was going to return you to a time just after you left, there was no need to wait for several months to come visit. So he came and picked me up right after you left."

"Has Emily left for her party?" he asked her.

Lois laughed. "It's been what? Two, three months for you, and you still remember that Emily's on her way to a party tonight?"

"It's her first with boys," Superman said, sounding sad.

"She hasn't left yet. Your mother is still helping her with her hair. At least the best she can with your father and Jory weaving that silly remote control truck around the house."

Superman smiled. His father had just bought the truck and while Jory claimed to be too old for it, he had not been able to put it away.

"I'll give you a few moments alone," Herb said, reminding them that they were not actually alone yet.

Superman's lips were on Lois' before Herb had made his way to Superman's bedroom. "Have I mentioned how much I miss you?" he whispered between kisses.

Lois smiled. "Herb said you are doing great."

"He's lying. I am... messing everything up. Lois already

has a crush on me and Luthor... I can't even tell you how hard it is to deal with him all over again."

Lois pulled him to her. "I'm sorry. I'm sure you're not messing everything up, though, honey."

"I am," Superman whispered into her hair sounding terribly depressed.

Lois pulled back to run her hand through his hair. "This is a hard thing you're doing, Clark. It's a real favor to everyone here. Don't be so hard on yourself."

"But Lois is..."

"You wear spandex!" Lois exclaimed. "And you fly. You're surprised that this Lois has a bit of a crush on you? Really? Come on, Clark. There's nothing that you or Herb can do to stop Lois from having a crush on Superman except prevent him from appearing until after she falls in love with Clark. This isn't about stopping her crush. It's about giving Lois more of a chance to get to know Clark. And giving Clark a chance to come to terms with being Superman. That's really all you can do."

Superman nodded, more because he did not want to argue than because he really agreed.

"How do you feel?" Lois asked, hesitantly. "About... about her?"

Superman smiled. "She's beautiful and passionate. I like spending time with her." He smiled wider at Lois' look of apprehension. "She reminds me of you. Like a watered down version."

Lois smiled at him, reaching out to swat his arm affectionately. "Very funny," she said as she leaned in to kiss him.

The noise was distant, as everything always was when he was kissing his wife. On the other hand, it was not going away. Superman backed away from Lois reluctantly and turned towards the sound.

"Superman?" Clark repeated, looking pale and shook up. "Lois?"

Neither Superman nor Lois said anything for a moment until Clark asked, "Lois? Did you cut your hair?"

Lois laughed. She could not help it. Clark thought Superman had been making out on his couch with his Lois and he decided to comment on her hair? Luckily her husband stood up and took over before Clark got too upset at her laughing.

"Clark," he said, his voice even. "This is Lois. My wife, Lois."

The relief on Clark's face was immediately apparent. "Right. Your wife. Of course. Who else would it be?" he asked with an uncomfortable laugh.

"It's okay, Clark," Superman said. "We should have been more considerate. I didn't even think about what this would look like to you."

Clark did not respond, staring at Lois in surprise. "You're really married?" he asked Lois.

"Yes," she said, her voice soft. "It took some time," she tried to assure him, "for me to see past the spandex to the man inside, but yes, I am very much in love with Clark."

Clark nodded, but said nothing for a moment. Then, hesitantly he asked, "Any tips? Something that would have helped you notice Clark faster?"

"Of course you did," Clark laughed. "I forgot. You've done all this before."

"I didn't pack, though."

"You didn't?"

"Nah, I had enough stuff still at my folks place... "

"But wasn't Lois suspicious?" Clark interrupted.

"She didn't know," Superman answered.

"She didn't notice you showing up at the airport without a suitcase?" Clark asked, one eyebrow raised and a grin on his face. "Your Lois didn't seem blind when I met her."

Superman laughed. "No, she's not blind. But I flew in ahead of her and met her at the airport."

"You did?" Clark asked. "Didn't the Planet wonder why you didn't expense your trip?"

Superman shrugged. "You know, I never thought about it, but you're right. I don't know. No one questioned me, and I hate commercial flights, so I just went on my own."

"You hate commercial flights?" Clark asked.

"Yeah. Don't you?"

Clark shrugged. "No idea. I haven't been on one since I was about seven. Are they bad? I mean, people fly them all the time, right?"

Superman smiled. "Yes, and I supposed if it's your only choice it certainly makes sense. But... well, I don't want to put ideas into your head about why I don't like them. That might make it harder for you and hopefully you won't mind the flight at all."

Clark nodded. "Okay. You'll tell me why you dislike them when I get back?"

"Of course," Superman said as he turned back towards the door.

He was in the living room when he heard Clark call out to him. "Superman? Was there something you wanted?"

"Oh, right," he said as he made his way back into Clark's room. "Look, you know I can't tell you anything about what you'll find in Smallville, but... "

"But what?" Clark asked. He stopped packing to look at Superman in confusion.

Superman sighed. "You may feel a bit... sick... while you're home, and I just want you to know that it will go away and everything will be okay."

Clark looked at him funny. "What?"

"I said... "

"I heard what you said, but I don't really understand it. Do you get sick? Is this like the airplane thing? Cause I haven't been sick a day in my life," Clark said looking at Superman with concern.

"I know," Superman said. "And I can't really explain. Just remember what I said."

"Okay," Clark said, shrugging his shoulders.

"And Clark," Superman said when Clark had gone back to packing. "I'm sorry. Really, I am."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Clark asked.

Superman tried to smile, but it did not reach his eyes. "Yeah. I just wish... Well, I'm sorry I can't make this not happen," he said sadly. He turned around and walked back to his room.

"Wait. Superman!" Clark called as he followed him. "What's going to happen?"

"I really am sorry, Clark. I want to tell you. I want to do

this for you. But I can't. But it will all end up okay. I'm nearly certain of it."

Clark continued to look at him strangely for a moment before he realized that Superman was not going to say anything else.

"What is your problem?" Lois asked as she tried to push Clark's arm off their shared arm rest.

"No problem," Clark said in a monotone.

"Great. Then would you *please* move off of this arm rest?" Lois asked with saccharine sweetness.

"Sure, Lois," Clark said, in the same monotone as before.

There was silence between them for approximately five seconds. "So?" Lois asked, exasperated.

"What?"

"Your arm?" Lois said, looking at it pointedly.

For some reason, that seemed to bring Clark out of the daze he was in. "My arm? What about it?"

"It's on the arm rest."

"Oh. Is that a problem?" Clark asked.

Lois gave a very loud sigh of annoyance. "Um, just that you said you'd get off of it."

"Oh, sorry," Clark said, moving his arm to his side. It stayed there for just a moment before he moved it to grab the edge of his seat the same way it had been holding the armrest earlier.

"Ok, what is the deal, Clark?" Lois asked so loudly that the woman sitting in front of her turned around to give her a dirty look.

"Nothing. What do you mean?" Clark asked, speaking entirely too quickly.

"What do I mean? I mean, why are you holding on to the armrest and chair for dear life? Are you afraid of flying or something?"

Clark felt himself blush. "I think so."

"You *think* so?" Lois asked, earning another glare from the woman in front of her.

Lois turned her attention away from Clark for a moment to look at the woman. "Excuse me, do you have a problem?" she asked. To her amusement the woman looked embarrassed and turned around.

"Clark, you've traveled all over the world. How is it that you don't know if you are afraid of flying?"

Clark glanced at her, not sure what to say. "I guess I am. I just don't like to think about it," he finally said, lamely.

Lois laughed. She leaned in close and whispered in his ear, "So, I guess it's safe to assume you've never gone flying with your roommate?"

"No, not really," Clark said.

Lois looked at him more closely. "You really are scared of flying, aren't you?"

Clark gave her a wan smile.

"Try to sleep, Clark. Maybe you'll be able to sleep until we land."

Clark started to thank Lois for her concern, but then realized that the last thing he should do is point out that she had been nice to him for a moment. That never led to anything good.

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“Did you see your father on your way in?” Martha asked as Clark walked in.

“No,” Clark answered as he gratefully accepted the sandwich she handed him. “He wasn’t in the field today.” Clark often passed his father out in the fields on his way home from school, but not always. Particularly this time of year, it was warm out and Jonathan sometimes took shelter from the heat in the relatively cool barn.

“How was school?” Martha asked. Her words were casual, but the look she gave Clark spoke volumes and he immediately understood the subtext of her question: Did anyone see you on the news last night?

“It was fine, Mom. How many high schoolers do you think watch the news anyway?”

He could see her shoulders drop slightly in relief. “Probably not too many,” she replied with a smile. “Your father hasn’t been in all day. Can you take these to him?” she asked Clark, handing him a plate with two sandwiches on it.

“Sure,” Clark agreed, reaching out to take it.

He thought nothing of it when his father was not in the barn and went back into the house to place the plate down. “He wasn’t out there. He must be over at the Irigs,” he told his mother.

She nodded, wrapping the plate in plastic wrap to keep until Jonathan came back.

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Clark sat up straight in his chair, shaking. He closed his eyes tightly, trying to pretend he was still sleeping. ‘It was all just a dream, that’s all it was,’ he told himself. He knew, though, that it did not matter what he told himself. It was not just a dream. It had happened, but if he could keep himself from remembering what came after, maybe he could ease the burning feeling in his chest.

“Clark?” Lois’ voice came from beside him. “Clark, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he said, but even he could hear that he was breathing rapidly. Still, Lois seemed to buy it as she got quiet.

He sat still for several minutes staring at the back of the seat in front of him, breathing in and out deeply and trying to empty his brain of all thought. He felt the tears come, but brushed at them impatiently. He was not going to think about this. He had managed to forget it for years now and there was no reason to remember now.

“What’s wrong, Clark?” Lois asked, her hand on his arm.

Clark nodded, “Nothing.”

“Nonsense, Clark,” she said, but her tone was kind. “You’re crying.”

“It was just a nightmare,” he told her.

“Clark, look at me,” she pleaded with him.

He turned to her, finding opening his eyes difficult.

“Whatever it is, it’s over now,” she said softly. “You are perfectly safe.” She ran a hand over his cheek, brushing the tears away. “Everything’s okay.”

“Thanks, Lois,” Clark said, his voice quiet.

“Just go back to sleep,” Lois suggested, running her hand through his hair. “I’ll be right here and it’ll be fine.”

“Mrs. McMurty?” Clark asked the woman holding the clipboard.

“Clark Kent? What are you doing here? I heard you had a spiffy new job writing for the Daily Planet in Metropolis.”

“I do,” Clark smiled. “We’re actually covering the EPA investigation of Mr. Irig’s property. This is my partner, Lois Lane.”

“Hi, Ms. Lane,” Alice McMurty smiled widely at Lois.

“Hi,” Lois held her hand out, looking aggrieved at being in this situation.

“Mrs. McMurty used to play bridge with my mother,” Clark said to Lois. “She makes the best chocolate chip cookies in the county.”

“Well, your mother certainly gives me a run for my money,” Alice smiled.

Lois gave a huff of annoyance and Clark turned to give her a look. He had told her in the car that things went at a slower pace in Smallville, but he was not surprised that she had not taken the information to heart.

“So, any information you can give us on what’s going on here?” Clark asked Alice.

“Nothing all that exciting, Clark. Wayne used a lot of pesticides during the sixties and we’re concerned about seepage into the local ground water. No big story, I’m afraid,” Alice smiled at them kindly.

Clark looked at her quizzically. “I didn’t think Mr. Irig used any pesticides.”

“Not since you were born, but before that he did.”

“Can we speak to him?” Lois asked.

“Mr. Irig was given relocation money,” Alice told her. “He didn’t say where he was going.”

“I’m sure you have that information somewhere,” Lois said, looking at the clipboard she was holding pointedly.

“I’m sure we do, but I don’t have it,” Alice said, her voice a bit harder than it had been earlier.

“We’ll check back later,” Lois said, grabbing Clark’s arm and pulling him back towards the car.

“Do we need to?” Lois asked Clark, looking across the street at the grassy area.

“This is a small town, Lois. Here, the best way to find information is to ask the locals. Someone will know where he went,” Clark said, grinning at her. “Besides, it’s the Corn Festival. It’s fun, Lois. Really.”

Lois gave him a look of utter disbelief. “Whatever you say, Farmboy.” She smiled at him to take the sting out of her words, although she was unsure why she felt the need to do that.

The grin was off her face a moment later anyway when a petite brunette launched herself into Clark’s arms. “Clark Kent!” the woman exclaimed, clearly happy to see him.

“Sheriff Harris!” he said with a teasing glint in his eye as he returned Rachel’s hug, actually spinning her around a little bit. “I bet you can still two-step and tush push better than anyone in town, even with the badge,” he teased her as he placed her down.

“You bet I can,” Rachel smiled at him. “I’ll show you tomorrow night.”

“You’re on,” Clark said before turning to Lois. “Lois,

this is Rachel Harris. Rachel, this is Lois Lane. Rachel and I went to high school together,” he explained to Lois.

“You two were close?” Lois asked, trying to tamp down the slight jealousy she felt at seeing Clark’s arm still around Rachel.

“Clark took me to his senior prom,” Rachel said proudly. “So, do you work at the Daily Planet as well, Lois?”

“Does everyone here know where you work?” Lois asked Clark, incredulous.

“It’s a small town,” Clark and Rachel said in unison just as Rachel’s radio crackled to life. “Sorry, I’ve got to go, Clark,” Rachel said, leaning onto her tiptoes to place a kiss on his cheek. “But I’ll see you tomorrow, right? Nice to meet you, Lois.”

“Do you know how to two-step?” Clark asked Lois as Rachel walked away. Lois did not reply, suddenly awash in memory.

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Lois felt a little guilty. She knew she was leaving Lucy home alone for the night, but... Chad was awfully cute. She was sixteen years old; she should be able to date, shouldn’t she? Even if it meant her thirteen year old sister had to stay home alone with their alcoholic mother?

With a sigh, Lois knocked on the door to Lucy’s room. “Hi,” she said softly as she opened the door.

Lucy looked up from the textbook she was studying. “Hi, Lo. What’s up?” Lois smiled. Lucy was such an optimist, she was always smiling, as if she was unaware of what their family life was like.

Lois sat on the edge of Lucy’s bed with a sigh. “Luce, I wanted to talk to you. I’m going out tonight.”

“On a date?” Lucy asked, her eyes lighting up. “With who? Is it with Peter? He’s so cute, the way he follows you home and stuff.”

Lois smiled — trust her sister to get focused on the date and not on being home alone. “No, not Peter. I don’t really like him. I think the way he follows me home is a bit creepy...”

“No, it’s not,” Lucy cut in. “It’s romantic.”

Lois grimaced. “Well, anyway, it’s not with Peter, but it is a date. I’m going out with Chad. You know him, right? His little brother Ben was in your class last year.”

Lucy nodded, trying to remember. “Yeah, I remember Ben. He was cute, I guess. If you like the nerdy type. Is Chad nerdy, too?”

“Nerdy?” Lois asked, thinking she was a bit nerdy.

“Does he wear glasses?”

“Yes. Does that mean he’s nerdy?”

Lucy nodded vehemently in response. “So, where are you going?” she asked.

Lois shrugged her shoulders. “I’m not sure. He said something about a two-step lesson.”

“A two-step? Isn’t that some kind of dance?” Lucy asked.

“Beats me,” Lois answered.

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“Earth to Lois,” Clark called. Lois smiled at him wanly. It had been a long time since she had allowed herself to think about Chad.

“So, do you want something to eat or drink?” Clark asked her.

Lois shook her head, ridding herself of the memory. “A drink would be good. Do you think I can get something diet here?” she asked Clark.

He laughed at her. “No, Lois. There are no artificial sweeteners allowed in Smallville. Most folks have never even heard of saccharine let alone aspartame and sucralose.”

Lois stared at him in amazement for a moment. “Really?”

Clark could not help the bark of laughter. “No, Lois. Not really. We’ll get you diet lemonade, best you ever tasted, right over there,” he said, pointing to a stand a few yards away. “You just can’t stand how normal it is here, can you?”

“Normal?” Lois asked, feeling stung at his joking at her expense. “I’ve heard about small towns, Clark. Take the woman over there,” she said pointing to the woman pouring lemonade. “I bet she’s really a man. Although, wow!” she said, taking a closer look. “He could give pointers to some of the crossdressers in Metropolis. He really looks like a woman.”

“That’s because she is, Lois.” Clark said, laughing.

“Don’t be so naïve, Clark.”

“That’s my mother.”

“Oh.”

Lois walked into the Kent’s farmhouse, looking for something, anything, to compliment the Kent’s on. To her horror, Martha Kent had heard her comment to Clark on being a crossdresser. She took it in good humor, even affecting a deep voice for a time, but Lois was feeling a bit foolish.

To add insult to injury, Martha had been incredibly nice, and Clark was right — she did make the best diet lemonade Lois had ever tasted.

“I like the painting,” Lois said to Martha as she walked inside.

“Thanks! It’s my latest,” Martha said. “I’m still grappling with abstract painting. That’s supposed to be a couple walking down a country lane. It doesn’t look like it, though, does it?”

Lois paused, and finally decided to be honest. “I thought it was a bowl of fruit.” To her relief, Martha laughed.

“Now, you’re in Clark’s room, Lois. Clark can sleep down here on the couch,” she said.

“Oh, thank you. You, too, Clark,” Lois said. “Oh,” she added as she remembered. “Any chance you have an internet connection?” Then realizing how presumptuous that was, she explained, “The internet is a network of computers with lots of information.”

Martha bit her lip. She had expected, based on Superman’s descriptions of his wife and Clark’s description of this woman, to like Lois, and she did, but that did not mean it was easy not to tease her. She was such a city girl. “I’m sorry,” she said in reply. “But what is a comp... It was a network of what?” She bit her lip harder when Lois rolled her eyes.

“A computer,” Lois said, suddenly remembering why

voice. “Don’t do it, Clark. Whatever they say, don’t do it.” It was his father.

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Once again, Clark woke up shaking.

“Clark,” Lois called from next to him. “Sorry, did I wake you?”

Clark found himself unable to speak.

“I just wanted to tell you that I checked my email and Jimmy sent us the list of EPA sites. Smallville’s not on it,” Lois said, sitting on the coffee table by the couch where Clark was sleeping.

“Clark,” she said in alarm. “Are your allergies getting worse? You look awful!”

Clark shook his head. The memory had pushed nearly all other thought from his brain. He had managed to forget already that they had told Lois he was suffering from allergies.

“Clark? I’m going to get your mother,” she said as she moved towards the stairs.

“No,” he finally managed to croak out. “It was just another nightmare.”

“Are you sure?” Lois asked, coming back over to place a hand on his forehead. “You have a fever.”

“It’s just the allergies,” he said, trying to keep his voice even. “I’m fine, Lois. Really.”

“You’re really sure?” she asked him.

“Yes,” he said. He waited until Lois left the room to let the tears start falling as the rest of the memory came to him in a rush.

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It had been a relatively fast rescue. The men had not taken his father far and a quick scan of Kansas had showed him in a warehouse a few hundred miles away. Clark had flown in quickly, getting in the door without being seen.

The men holding his father were upstairs arguing. Clark heard them clearly when he entered, “How long do we hold him?” one asked the other.

“Just until the alien gets here.”

“What if he doesn’t show?”

“Oh, he’ll show. If not, we’ll kill the old man. Wait a few days and then go for the mother. And if the alien doesn’t show then, we’ve learned something, right? We will have learned that there is no reasoning with them. They won’t even pretend to be humane.”

Clark did not want to hear any more and blocked out the sound of their voices.

“Dad?” he whispered as he opened the door to the next room over, where his father lay.

There was no reply and Clark quickly walked over. From the air, he had only noticed his father on the bed in the corner before he swooped in. But standing next to him now, he could see the angry bruises on his arms and face and the leg lying at an awkward angle. A fast scan with his x-ray vision showed him that the bone was broken and the joint and ligaments surrounding it all swollen.

He bit his lip tightly to keep from crying. They had done this to his father because of him. They were only trying to get to him. If he had been more careful as his dad had suggested, this never would have happened. It was all his fault.

The smell of smoke brought him out of his thoughts. What was that? Clark turned around in confusion and in horror saw the couch in the room he had been in before on fire. Lying on the ground was a candlestick, the candle itself nearly melted. Clark looked at the ground. He had probably knocked it over on his way in.

He heard a cough behind him and remembered his father. He may be fine in this room although it was rapidly filling with smoke, but his father was not.

He moved closer and scooped his father up in his arms. He bent at the waist, trying to keep as much of his father covered as possible as he ran through the door and out of the warehouse. As soon as he was out of the door, he took to the skies and flew his father home.

It was only as they landed that Jonathan seemed to wake up. “Clark?” he asked, his voice thick with sleep. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Dad,” Clark whispered as he came in the door. He looked up and caught sight of his mother. Her eyes were on his father and as she took in his leg, they grew wide.

“Jonathan,” she said and Clark could hear the tears in her voice as she came closer. “Are you all right?”

“I’m a bit sore,” he said in reply as Clark placed him on the couch, “but I’m okay. Those goons didn’t know who they were dealing with,” he joked, but the smile on his face turned to a grimace as he tried to sit up and fell back with a thud.

Clark was distracted, though. The goons. He had forgotten about the men upstairs. Without a word, he flew out the backdoor, but by the time he got back to the warehouse, there was nothing much left. With a sweep of his eyes, Clark saw the form of two bodies lying on the stairs. They had apparently noticed the smoke too late to get out.

His parents seemed almost happy about it later, glad that who ever was after their boy was no longer a problem, but Clark was troubled. He had not meant to kill them. Maybe his parents were right and it was better this way, but still — how could he have been so careless?

For a few days after that, things around the farm were tense, but eventually his father’s bruises healed, he stopped needing so much help from Wayne to run the farm, and life moved on.

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It had been so hard to think about for so long. Now that he remembered, he was surprised. It explained so much — Jason Trask from several months ago, for one. He must have been part of the same group. The fear at trying to fill in for Superman — he had not understood at the time why he was so worried about getting caught. Now, he understood. He had not realized that memories could be repressed that deeply, nor that if they were repressed they could still have such an effect on your psyche.

With a shudder he realized he was lucky that whoever Trask’s predecessors had been had not had some of the green rock Wayne had found on his farm. If they had, who knows what may have happened to his father.

“Are you okay, Clark?” Lois asked for the fourth time

since they had left his place.

"Yes, Lois. I'm fine," Clark said. "Really. But thanks for asking."

Lois glanced at him briefly before letting her eyes drift back to the road. "You do look better. Tired, though."

"I am a little tired," Clark said, "but okay."

"Did you have another nightmare?" Lois asked.

Clark shook his head, not wanting to tell her that he had not had another nightmare as he had stayed up all night thinking about the first one and the subsequent memory. Besides, that was the last of them, he suspected. He felt like he had been trying not to think about what had happened to his father for years now. While it was hard to remember, he felt a little bit like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"Are you coming?" Lois asked, looking at him pointedly.

Clark glanced around and realized they were at the Irig's place. "Yeah, sorry," he said, opening the car door.

"Maybe you should head to bed early tonight," Lois said.

"Morning, Clark. Ms. Lane," Alice said as the two approached.

"Good morning, Mrs. McCurty," Clark said with a smile.

"I'm afraid we still don't know where Wayne went," she told them.

"That's okay," Lois said. "We actually had a different question. We received this list of sites currently being investigated by the EPA and Smallville isn't on it."

Alice looked at the page in confusion. Then, carefully avoiding Clark's eyes, she said, "Well, sometimes it takes awhile for the government to update these things. Here's the updated version of that list." She handed Lois a piece of paper.

Lois looked at it, before handing it to Clark. "It's there." Turning to Alice McCurty, she asked, "And you said still no word on where Irig went?"

"No," Alice said, still avoiding Clark's eyes. "He has family in Oklahoma City. Maybe he headed there."

"Thanks," Lois said, but Clark said nothing.

When he got back in the car, though, he turned to Lois. "Did you see how she kept avoiding looking at me?"

Lois shook her head. "No, why?"

"It was weird. What if she's lying?" Clark said.

"Why would she lie? She lives here, right?" Lois said.

"What if she's in over her head?" Clark asked. "Mrs. McCurty lost her daughter a few years ago. She's been taking care of her grandson, Tory, since she died. Tory is all the family she has left. If someone was to threaten him..."

Lois sighed. "This is getting interesting," she said, but her voice was sad. "All the more incentive for figuring what's going on here. Right, partner?"

"Well, that settles it," Clark said as they took a seat at the booth. "The records at City Hall certainly make it seem like there is no record of Wayne using pesticides. They are after something else." He tried not to shudder as he worried that what they were after was more of the rock Wayne had found.

Just then Lois' cell phone rang. She glanced at the caller ID and not recognizing the number, she decided to let it go to voicemail. "Wrong number," she told Clark. "I've been getting them all the time since I got the new phone."

Clark nodded as he looked at the menu. "I'll have a burger and fries," he told the waitress.

"What?" Lois asked when the waitress had left. "You don't know her? Don't you know everyone in town?"

Clark shrugged, smiling. "Mostly, but not everyone. I haven't lived here full time since high school," he reminded her.

"Right," she said as the waitress came back to place their food in front of them. "Wow! That was fast."

"Maisie's husband's the fastest short order cook in the county," Clark told her, smiling.

"Maisie?" Lois asked.

"Maisie," Clark confirmed, pointing to the menu which said "Maisie's Café" in big letters across the front.

"Oh, right," Lois replied. Eyeing the burger on his plate and the BLT on hers, she commented, "They sure don't skimp on portions here, do they?"

Clark smiled. "Farmers can work up quite an appetite," he explained as he picked up his knife to cut his burger in two. "It's best to just give up and admit you need to cut the sandwiches. That's why they give you these steak knives." He glanced at Lois and grinned before calling out, "Ow!"

Dropping his knife on his plate, he looked at his hand in horror. "I'm bleeding," he exclaimed.

"Of course you're bleeding. You cut yourself with a steak knife," Lois said, rolling her eyes. A minute later, though, Clark was still staring at his hand in fascination. "Are you okay, Clark?"

Before he could reply, the waitress came back. "Oh my," she said when she saw his finger. "I'll go get you a Band-Aid." She was back a minute later and using a napkin to clean his finger, she wrapped the Band-Aid around the small cut. Then pouring them more water, she left.

Clark looked at the bandage on his hand in awe.

"Earth to Clark," Lois said. "Geez, it's like you'd never cut yourself before. Now eat up so we can back over to the Corn Festival and mingle."

"We've got to get you to a doctor," Martha said to Clark, while Jonathan smiled at the sight of Lois asking questions of everyone she saw at the fair.

"What are they going to do, Mom?" Clark asked.

"There's nothing wrong with me. I'm normal."

"That's not normal for you!" she insisted.

"I don't think it will last," Clark said.

"What won't last?" Jonathan asked, finally tuning in to the conversation.

"The loss of powers. I think Superman would have warned me if that was the case," Clark said.

"What if he doesn't know?" Martha asked.

Rather than answer, Clark took his cell phone out of his pocket and dialed. He sat in silence for a few seconds, hoping Superman was not out doing a rescue.

"Hi!" he said in excitement when he heard the phone being picked up.

"Hi. This is Clark." Superman said quietly.

An hour later, she was breathing hard and grinning from ear to ear. "Are you having a good time?" Chad asked her as they took a break.

"Yes," Lois said, enthusiastically. "It really is fun."

"Wait until you try the Tush Push," Chad said.

"The *what*?" Lois asked, laughing.

"The tush push," Chad replied, grinning. "I know. Funny name, isn't it? But it is really fun. Do you want anything to drink?"

"Just some water," Lois said, thanking him a minute later when he handed her a bottle.

"So, I thought we could go for dinner or something after this," Chad said, looking nervous. "Unless you just want to go home or something."

"I'd love to go to dinner!" Lois exclaimed, and then blushing, she restated her words to sound less excited. "I mean... I'd like that."

Chad's smile could have lit up the room and Lois was once again distracted by his dimple.

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"Hello! Lois! Lois, are you there?" Clark waved a hand in front of her face.

"Of course I'm here, Clark! Where else would I be?" she said in reply, sounding annoyed. The truth is she had been so focused on remembering those lessons with Chad, she had forgotten where she was.

Clark suddenly grabbed her arm and tugged her towards him. "Well, you stopped dancing. Nealen almost ploughed right into you."

Lois glanced to her left and saw a man in his forties trying to get back on step to recover from the missed step he took to avoid Lois. She smiled at him, embarrassed. "Sorry."

"No problem, ma'am," he smiled at her.

"Thanks, Nealen," Clark said, moving his grasp on Lois' arm down to her hand to tug her off the dance floor.

"Are you okay?" he asked when they were out of everyone's way.

Lois pulled her hand out of his, feeling annoyed at him, but not sure why. "I'm fine, Clark!"

Clark looked at her closely, his brows furrowed. "Really?"

Lois turned to him ready to snap, but took in the look in his eyes and softened. It really was not his fault she was thinking about Chad. "Yeah, Clark. I'm okay. Sorry about that. I was distracted."

"Want to talk about it?" he asked, his eyes still watching her with concern.

"Not really," Lois said. "What I was thinking about was a long time ago, Clark. It's not important."

"If it's important to you then it's important to me," Clark said earnestly.

Lois smiled a bit. Clark really was a farm boy. No one else could pull that line off without sounding either scary or sickly sweet. "I was just thinking of when I learned to Tush Push. It was on my first date."

"You learned to Tush Push on your first date?" Clark asked in surprise. "I thought you grew up in Metropolis."

"I did," Lois smiled. "Chad was not your normal Metropolis boy."

"Oh," Clark said. But then a moment later, added "Chad, huh? The name of the boy you went on your first date with was Chad?"

Lois' smile weakened. "He was my first boyfriend," she said quietly.

"Did it end poorly?" Clark asked, placing a warm hand on Lois' arm.

Lois looked away, trying to find the right words. Finally she turned back to Clark, "Don't all relationships end poorly?"

There was a sheen of tears in her eyes and seeing the glimmer of them, Clark used the hand he had on her arm to pull her close to him. He wrapped his arms around her, whispering, "I guess. Until you get married."

"Not all marriages," she said into his chest. Clark tightened his grip on her.

Lois stood there a moment, lost someplace between thinking about Chad and realizing that she felt comforted and safe in Clark's embrace. A moment more though, and she felt in control of her emotions. "Let's walk," she said firmly as she pulled out of Clark's embrace.

"Sounds good," Clark said, moving to place his hand in hers, but Lois moved her hand just slightly away. Clark's embrace was nice, but that was just because she had been feeling depressed. It did not mean she wanted to hold his hand.

"So," Clark looked at Lois, "what next?"

Lois looked around. "Let's go over there. Win me something, Farmboy!"

Clark laughed at her exuberance and walked over towards the strength test. He inwardly groaned when he looked around. The top of the test showed a small image of Superman and it looked like small stuffed Superman dolls were the prizes to be won, too. Did he really need to help her get a Superman doll?

With a sigh, Clark took the hammer from the barker. He lifted it high over his head and brought it down, but probably not quite as hard as he could. Given his current state of un-super-ness, this barely garnered him a "Big Boy."

"Come on, Clark. I know you can do better than that," Lois laughed, handing another ticket to the barker.

Clark smiled at her, and forgetting about the prize, he swung again. This time he got "Macho Man." Lois giggled and Clark reached into his pocket to pull a ticket out, before giving it to the barker.

He paused for a moment, placing the mallet down and Lois came closer. "Come on, Macho Man, show me what you're made of," she said in a breathy voice running her finger along his arm.

Clark gulped slightly, but kept his face impassive, and smiling at Lois, flexed his bicep. He wagged his eyebrows at Lois and she giggled again.

She backed up and he lifted his arms high above his head. He really concentrated on bringing the mallet down this time and was rewarded with a ding as the ball hit the bell at the top.

"We have a winner!" cried the barker.

Lois clapped her hands and jumped up and down a little

in excitement. "Here's your doll, miss," the barker said, holding out a Superman doll towards her.

Lois' eyes drifted towards Clark. He was looking away from her, but even from this angle, she could see the taut line of his jaw. The relaxed man from a minute ago was retreating. "Can I have Bugs Bunny instead?" she asked. She kept her face impassive as she saw Clark's head swing around to look at her incredulously.

"Sure," the barker said, shrugging his shoulders. "Your choice. We just haven't gotten too much demand for much else lately."

He held the new doll out to her and Lois smiled, hugging it to her.

"Thanks, Clark," she smiled up at him, linking her arm through his.

Clark smiled back at her in response.

"So," she said as she spotted Rachel and turned him away before he spotted her as well. "Was Rachel the first girl you kissed?" She turned towards him with a smile, her eyes glinting.

Clark laughed, "What?"

"I'm just wondering," Lois said, her voice completely innocent. "So, was she?"

Clark laughed, "Sort of, yeah, I guess she was."

"Sort of?" Lois asked. "There's a story there, I'm sure of it. Spill, Farmboy. How old were you? How did it happen? Tell me."

Clark laughed again. "Is this going to make its way to the front page of the paper?"

"Is it that good?" Lois asked.

"Definitely not," Clark said, smiling broadly. "Rachel and I kissed at our wedding."

Lois stopped walking. "Your wedding?" she asked. "Do they do arranged marriages here in Smallville?"

Clark smiled at her. "No, Lois, they don't. It was just something we did in kindergarten. I don't remember why."

"So you married Sheriff Rachel?" Lois asked.

"Well, as you may have guessed, she wasn't sheriff yet," Clark teased. "But, yeah, I did. My friend Pete officiated."

"And you kissed at the end of it," Lois prodded him on.

"Well, it wasn't that much of a kiss. I mean, Rachel was a girl after all."

"And that was a problem?" Lois asked, her eyebrows raised.

"Well, not now. But back then? Sure. She had cooties. All girls did," Clark turned to face her, his eyes glistening with laughter. "I bet even you did."

Lois laughed. "Nope, I never had cooties."

"Hmm?" Clark looked at her carefully. "Nope. Don't believe it."

Lois laughed. "So, then Rachel wasn't your first real kiss?" she asked, walking again.

"No," Clark said. "My first kiss was with my first girlfriend. Lana."

"Is she here?" Lois asked, suddenly unreasonably curious about this Lana.

"Here in Smallville? No, she actually married Pete years ago. They live a couple of hours away. Sometimes they make the trip down for the Corn Festival, but they just had their first baby last month, so they skipped it this year."

"So, you still keep in touch with her?" Lois asked.

"No, not really. Sometimes my mom hears some things from her mom and tells me. But usually I just hear from Pete. We still talk occasionally. Email once every couple of months, that kind of thing.

"So, what about you? What's the name of the first boy you kissed? Was it Chad?"

"Yeah," Lois said, her voice slightly quiet. She was surprised Clark had remembered Chad's name.

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"I really like you, Lois," Chad said, staring at his shoes.

"I... I like you, too," Lois said, feeling herself blush even though Chad was still not looking at her. This was the end of their third date, and Chad had not looked this nervous ever before.

"Lois," he asked, taking her hand even as he stared resolutely at the ground. He took a breath so deep it was audible before he blurted out, "Can I kiss you?"

Lois did not answer at first. She had not expected that question. Chad was so different than she had expected and this was just another way that was the case. She had expected him to kiss her at the end of their first date, even though she was not really ready for it. She did not think she had a choice, though. Why did he ask? Didn't she have to let him kiss her?

When he had not kissed her, she wondered if he did not like her as much as she was beginning to like him, but then he had asked her out again. After he asked for the third date, Lois was pretty sure he liked her, but just had forgotten about the kiss thing. Did boys normally ask?

Chad dropped her hands. "Forget I asked," he mumbled and Lois realized she had taken too long to answer.

"No," she said quietly. "I mean... I didn't expect you to ask," she finally blurted out.

Chad blushed even further. "I know. It's not very romantic, is it?" he asked.

Lois frowned. "That's not what I meant. I meant... shouldn't we just kiss if you want? Isn't that how it works?"

Chad looked at her in confusion. "What do you mean 'if I want'? We need to both want to."

Lois looked at him with wide eyes. "I need to want to, too?"

Chad shook his head, feeling very confused. "Of course. That's why I asked. I mean, I know, it isn't romantic, but I'm no good at these things. I didn't want to kiss you if you didn't want to."

"Really?" Lois asked.

"Really."

"Wow," she said.

"Well, good night," Chad said, turning around.

"Good night?" Lois asked. "Aren't we going to kiss?"

Chad looked at Lois like she had two heads. "I told you, I don't wanna if you don't wanna and since you don't..."

"I never said I didn't," Lois interrupted him.

"You mean... Do you want to?" Chad asked.

"Yes," Lois said softly.

Chad's lips were only on hers for a few seconds, but Lois thought it just might be the best few seconds of her life.

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"I think there's something here," Lois said as she and Clark poured over story notes in his parents' living room that night.

"Me, too," Clark said, looking over what they had. "Should we give Perry a call?"

Lois nodded. "I think this is bigger than we thought. I think this could be really huge."

Clark nodded in agreement, hoping that whatever it was, it was not really about that rock.

Clark sighed as they drove over to the Irig's. Perry had agreed that all signs pointed to this being a bigger story than they had originally expected and had even told them he was going to see if he could find a photographer to join them. Still, despite their belief that this was something big, the truth was that they had no idea how to prove that. Plus, Clark was a little worried about what might happen if they did. What if it was about the rock and the rock was linked to him or Superman?

He had considered trying to convince Lois to go home, but he could not do it. They had been getting along so well here. He really felt like they were partners, working together, unlike when they were in Metropolis and it often felt like Lois was letting him tag along on her stories. Maybe he was being foolish not to try to get her to go home, but he did not want the feeling of companionship to end. It turned out that when Lex and Superman were not around, Lois actually saw Clark Kent. He was certain that once they were home, that would no longer be the case.

"Any ideas?" Lois turned to him.

"What?" Clark asked, feeling startled out of his thoughts.

Lois laughed, "Distracted as always, I see. I asked if you had a plan. A next step."

Clark shrugged, although since Lois' eyes were back on the road, she did not see. "No. Not really. You?"

"Not yet," Lois admitted. "But we'll think of something," she said as she parked the car.

Clark pointed to a clump of trees. "Okay, I know this is the lamest idea ever, but we could just hang out over there until we see them do whatever it is that they're doing."

Lois shrugged and moved over to the trees. Once she got inside the group of trees that Clark had pointed to, she turned to him. "This seems like a reasonable vantage point."

"Wait," Clark asked, smiling, "Is Lois Lane using my suggestion?"

Lois blushed slightly. "Well, I don't have a better one right now. Don't expect it to happen again."

A second later, though, three men fell from the trees surrounding them.

Lois, her eyes alight, turned to Clark. "Great plan!"

"Hey, you agreed to it a minute ago!" Clark said, defensively.

"That was before we were surrounded!" Lois snarled at him.

"Enough!" one of the men yelled at them, before pushing them towards each other and leading them out into the clearing.

Lois and Clark continued to argue as they were pushed across the clearing. As they approached the tent on the other side, though, they stopped. Jason Trask was exiting the tent. Clark felt his entire body go tense. Somehow it was different to be confronted with a man who saw Superman as a threat to mankind now that he knew that there was actually a weapon that could be used against Superman. While he would like to think that Trask did not know that, it was unlikely. Why else would Trask be in Smallville?

After a brief moment of stunned silence, Lois, of course, spoke the first words. "Trask!" she said, her voice angry. "What are you doing in Smallville?"

Trask smiled at her. "I could ask the same about you."

"He lives here," Lois said, pointing her finger at Clark.

"Ah, just a day in the country to visit the folks?" Trask asked, making it clear he did not believe it for a moment. "What are you doing here, then? This isn't the Kent farm."

"My parents are friends with Wayne Irig," Clark said.

"He asked them to pick some stuff up for him. Lois and I offered to go." He saw Lois look at him with a smile out of the corner of his eye.

"Do you always enter the Irig place from across the way over there?" Trask asked, pointing towards the trees where they were found.

Neither Lois nor Clark had an answer for that. A moment more of silence passed before Clark decided to give up the cover. It was not like Trask was buying it anyway. "What have you done with Wayne Irig?" he asked Trask.

Trask smiled at them again in a way that made Lois' skin crawl. "I let him go," he said. "Small town ties mean a lot. Anyone else would have given up their contact in a minute. This man took sodium pentothal and a couple of broken fingers and he still didn't talk. Then it came to me. Let him go."

Clark felt his stomach turn over. Now it was Wayne who was getting tortured because of him. Or because of Superman this time, maybe. However, since Superman was only here because of him, it was still because of him.

"Take her away," Trask said to the men around them, gesturing to Lois. "Let the McCurdy woman watch her. I want to talk to Kent."

"Lois!" Clark cried as the men moved Lois inside a holding cell.

Lois looked at Clark compassionately. "I'll be fine, Clark." Given the way Trask was looking at him, she was more worried about him than herself.

Superman sat in the living room. It was weird being here this time around. He had always wondered what Metropolis was like when he was not around. Did crime increase? How many people got hurt that would not have if he had not left? At least this time, it was less than he would have thought. Superman duties were not keeping him as busy as he would have liked. He had way too much free time.

Time in which to think about Clark and what was going on in Smallville right now. What if Herb was wrong and something happened to Clark or Martha and Jonathan? It

was not even like Herb had promised that they would be okay. He claimed he had no way of knowing. This time/dimension hopping thing was annoying. It seemed like Herb was playing randomly with things, not really knowing for sure what the impact was.

Superman looked at the clock. It had been at least eight hours since he had been floating above the Daily Planet, desperate to see someone familiar even if he could not talk to them, and had heard Perry send Jimmy to Smallville. Jimmy had probably been in Smallville an hour or so by now.

If that was the case, right about now, Trask had the Kents in custody. Superman sat up startled. This was it. This was the moment he could help. Herb had said he could not take Clark's place, but this would not be taking his place. It would just be helping out. He would have the element of surprise and he would be less affected by the Kryptonite than Clark would be. He could just float over the farm and wait for the right time.

Clark pulled on the shackles holding him to the van, but he still had no powers. He was just an ordinary man — that was all he had ever wanted to be, but at that moment... They were at his parents' farm and he had no powers. 'It's always greener on the other side of the fence' he thought, but he knew it was not true. He would be happy, thrilled even, when his powers came back as long as his parents were still all right.

'And Clark, I'm sorry. Really, I am.' That is what Superman had said before Clark had left for Smallville. What was he sorry for? At the time, Clark brushed it off. It was just part of all the weird things Superman said about not liking to fly and getting sick. Now, though, it was different. As it turned out, Clark had not liked to fly and he had gotten sick while here. So, now he had to wonder — what was it Superman was sorry for? Was something going to happen to his parents?

The door to the van opened and Trask looked inside. "Your situation grows more desperate, Mr. Kent. I have your parents. I want Superman, but I'm a fair man. I'm willing to trade."

Clark blinked his eyes to rid himself of the tears that had gathered there. Not this time. This time his parents would not be used as pawns. "If you promise to let them go, I'll tell you what you want," he said, his voice surprisingly calm.

"I do. I absolutely give you my word," Trask said.

Clark took a deep breath. He was dealing with a man who might possibly be crazy, but he had no choice. "I'm Superman," he said.

Trask looked at him with a smile. "Right," he said, picking up his gun and aiming at Clark.

"No!" Clark cried.

With his smile even broader now, Trask put down the gun. "That was real fear, Kent. Nice try, but I want the real thing."

Clark sighed. He could not do it. His parents would be so disappointed in him if he gave Trask Superman for them. Superman had come here for him. He deserved better than this.

He pictured his parents' faces and sighed. What could he do?

Trask looked at him with contempt. "Play it the hard way, Kent," he said as he slammed the door closed.

"Wait!" Clark cried. "I'll tell you," but Trask did not hear him.

"Let's go," Alice McCurdy said to Lois as she untied her. "That's it?" Lois asked, having fully expected to have to convince the woman to let her go.

"Trask is a madman. And without our help, he's going to kill the Kents. And Superman if he can," she said.

"Can he?" Lois asked.

Alice shrugged. "He has some rock that he thinks will do it. I don't want to wait around and see if it works. Do you?"

Lois followed her out the back side of the tent.

Clark tried to pull himself together. There had to be something he could do — some way to save his parents and Wayne. He was at a loss of ideas, though. In frustration, he tugged on his arms again. The bar he was attached to creaked.

Clark looked at it quizzically, pulling on the shackles harder this time. They broke away. "I'm back!" Clark said in excitement, feeling a fondness for his powers that he had never felt before.

Exiting the van, Clark took in the scene in front of him quickly. There was a small flame on the ground at the head of a trail of gasoline leading directly to his parents and Wayne. Without wasting a second, Clark inhaled the flames and then blew them out skyward. Then with super speed, he raced into the farmhouse to untie his parents.

Martha noticed Trask coming closer with a look of amazement in his eyes. "Clark!" she said urgently, and Clark followed her eyes to Trask. Abandoning the ropes around his parents and Wayne for the moment, he moved toward the man, trying to rein in his anger.

"This is it, Trask," he said.

"A secret identity," Trask mused, taking no notice of what Clark had said. "Very clever."

Clark continued to walk towards Trask, but got only a foot closer before he felt it — Trask had the rock. Clark tried to stop himself from crumpling over, but the pain was too great. He fell to the ground with a thud.

For a second, the world went black, but then his vision cleared. Trask was coming toward him with a predatory gleam.

A whooshing noise came from behind Trask and Clark looked up to see Superman standing there.

Superman flew over the Kent farm, his stomach in knots. He had looked down below and everything looked the way he remembered. The Kents were tied up with Wayne Irig, and Clark was locked in the van. He took deep breaths, feeling inordinately nervous. On the surface, the idea of exposing himself to Kryptonite seemed ludicrous. He knew the effect it had on him.

On the other hand, he could not just stand by and let Clark get hurt. He had no idea what was going to happen to

Clark. Herb made it sound like it was likely to be the same thing that had happened to him, but he could not be sure. It was just not a chance Superman felt comfortable taking. He had come too close to dying when he had gone through this himself.

He knew he was messing with the timeline again, but it was getting harder and harder not to. He had been in this universe for a couple of months now. He cared about these people. He could not watch them in dangerous situations and sit on the sidelines. He sighed. He knew Lois knew that, she had said as much to him before he had come here, but did Herb? Did Herb really get that? If he was able to sit on the sidelines while others were in trouble, there would be no Superman.

With another sigh, he looked below him again. Clark was out of the van and had obviously approached Trask as he was now falling to the ground. With a whoosh, Superman was behind him.

“You looking for me, Trask?” he asked, his voice stern.

Trask turned around and seeing the man in the blue spandex, looked back at Clark. For a moment, he looked utterly confused, his head turning back and forth between Superman and Clark, who was still on the ground looking sick, but conscious at least.

“It’s started,” Trask finally said softly.

“What?” Clark asked, his voice impossibly weak.

“The invasion,” Trask said, his voice full of awe. “It’s started. There’s more than one of you.”

Trask looked terrified for a moment, but then he smiled. “It’s started, but I can stop it. I *will* save the human race.”

He took a small step towards Superman. Superman tried to stand his ground, but he was already realizing what an egregious mistake he had made. His stomach was roiling and his head was woozy. The reaction was much stronger than he had expected.

Trask saw him flinch. The movement gave him confidence and he took another step.

Superman was starting to sway on his feet. He had always thought the first Kryptonite exposure was the hardest to deal with simply because it was the first. Maybe that was true. However, this piece of Kryptonite was also much larger than most of the others he had encountered and he was finding it more and more difficult to remain standing the closer Trask got.

“Not another step, Trask,” Superman said, but his voice was less firm than he had hoped and Trask smirked.

“You think you’re better than us, don’t you?” he asked the man in spandex. “You think you can dominate us?” he asked, his voice raising.

Superman could not take it any longer and fell over, clutching his side in pain. This had been a really bad idea. Superman tried to stop the tears that filled his eyes. What if all he had done was succeed in getting himself and Clark into more trouble? What if they both ended up dead? The Kents and Wayne, too?

He took a deep breath. The effects of the Kryptonite always made him feel so sick that he was a bit more likely to get emotional. However, he needed to stay clearheaded here. He had managed to beat Trask last time and this time he had Clark to help. If he could keep in control of his

emotions, they would be fine.

Trask came over and kicked him in the side. Superman grunted, but took another deep breath to calm himself. The Kryptonite was so much larger than he had remembered. Was it bigger than it had been in his universe? No, he did not think so, he had just forgotten how large it was. “This is the end, Superman,” Trask said. Giving Superman another kick for good measure, he moved back over to Clark.

He stood over Clark, looking at him with contempt. “This is for all the people you intended to hurt,” he said, before leaning over to spit in Clark’s face.

Clark leaned up on his elbows. “You have no idea what you are talking about,” he said, his voice stronger now than before. “You have no idea what we’ve already done to help people here. You are a madman, Trask.”

The accusation seemed to cause Trask to go into a rage. “You think I’m a madman? Really?” he asked Clark, his eyes wide. “You are AN ALIEN!” he cried. “And now there are two of you. I think I may be the only person on this planet who was not foolish enough to fall for your oh-so-helpful act. You fly around, thinking you are so much better than the rest of us. Well, who’s better now?” he asked.

He placed the piece of Kryptonite close to Clark’s head, but just out of reach. He moved over to Superman and tried to pull him closer to the glowing green rock as well, but Superman was heavier than he had expected. With a few grunts, he moved Superman an inch or so. At that moment, the sound of sirens could be heard in the distance and Trask looked up in alarm. He took a deep breath and moved Superman another couple of inches before he stepped back, giving up on moving Superman, and moved the Kryptonite closer to the middle of the two men. Then with another look over the scene, he took off for his van.

For a second, there was silence except for the sound of Trask’s feet as he jogged towards the van, but then simultaneously, Clark and Superman reached for the rock. Clark reached it first and gasping in pain, he threw it as hard as he could to the pond on his parents’ lot.

The piece of rock whizzed past Trask’s head and for a moment everyone was still as they watched it arc across the sky. Then it smashed with a bang into the boulder in the middle of the pond. The rock broke into millions of pieces and for a moment the sky was a bright green with their luminescence. Then the green color seemed to just dissipate as the miniscule pieces fell into the water.

Trask stared at Clark and Superman, both of whom were struggling to their feet. “That was very brave and very foolish,” he said as he took his gun from his holster. “So,” he started, waving his gun around. “Who should go first? The alien in the cape or the alien trying to pass himself off as human by wearing our clothes? Or maybe, it should be the humans who sheltered an alien all these years?”

With a grunt, Clark charged at him, knocking Trask to the ground. An instant later, Superman had joined him. Trask kept a tight hold on his gun while Clark and Superman tried to get the weapon away from him. The three tumbled into the pond. A moment later, Clark and Superman seemed to have the better of Trask, with the man pressed up against the same boulder the Kryptonite had been smashed against and the gun no longer in his grip.

“Good morning!” Chad said as he leaned over to kiss her cheek.

“Hi,” Lois said shyly, still unused to having a boy visit her at her locker before first period... or ever, actually. “You seem pretty happy considering it’s a Monday.”

“I had the most amazing experience this weekend,” Chad said as he leaned over to grab her books out of her hand.

“What are you doing?” she asked him, eyeing her books.

“I’m walking you to class. I have to tell you what happened during my trip,” Chad said. “Unless... do you not want me to walk you to class?”

Lois smiled. “No, I’d like you to.”

“Good,” Chad said, leaning down to take her hand.

“So... ” Lois said slowly, looking down at where their hands were joined. “What happened?”

“Remember how I told you my dad hired someone to show us how to rock climb?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the guy he hired got the stomach flu or something and had to cancel. But he didn’t manage to get in touch with my dad until after we got to Boston. We talked about just staying in town, but Dad really wanted to try rock climbing,” Chad said.

“So what did you do?” Lois asked.

“We drove down to Quincy Quarry anyway and walked around until we found some guys that looked pretty friendly and asked if they’d teach us some basic stuff.”

“And that worked?” Lois asked.

“Yeah,” Chad shrugged. “My dad had read that before. It’s not that uncommon that someone will offer to climb with you. This was a bit trickier since we didn’t really know what we were doing, but the guys we found only had a little bit of experience so it wasn’t like we were holding them back very much, and they seemed eager to try some of the new gear my Dad brought.”

“Is that a good idea?” Lois asked. “To go rock climbing with someone who doesn’t know much?”

Chad grinned, “As it happens, no, it’s a terrible idea.”

Lois stopped in the middle of the hallway, heedless of the students behind them. “Chad! What happened?”

Chad sighed. Lois was getting more upset about this than he had expected and he had not even gotten to the part where something had happened yet. “So, I told you that rock climbing is pretty safe, right?”

“Yes,” Lois said, still looking at him warily. “You use ropes and find ways to attach them to the rock or something, right?”

“Something like that,” Chad said. “So, I was up on a climb — it was an easy one, really, but it was really long, so I was way off the ground.”

“So who decided it was easy?”

“The guys we were with had a book that rated the climbs. But they said the grade is usually more related to the difficulty of the hardest move than like how tall it is or other stuff. Anyway, I placed a Friend — that’s a piece of equipment that you put in a crack. The idea is — if you fall, you can only fall as far below the Friend as the distance you climbed above it before the rope catches you.”

“Okay,” Lois said, wishing he would get to the crux of the story.

“Anyway, I went a few feet up and I just couldn’t hold on anymore. I must have been tired, but I didn’t feel it. My hand just let go. I had no idea rock climbing would be that hard.”

“What happened, Chad?” Lois said sounding slightly impatient.

“I popped right off. And I guess I didn’t attach the Friend very well as it popped out, too.”

“What does that mean?” Lois asked.

“That I should have hung from the piece of equipment I placed before that. But that one popped off, too.”

“Oh my... ”

“I know,” Chad said, holding her hand tightly. “You know how they say your life passes before your eyes when you almost die?”

Lois nodded, not sure she had the voice to say anything.

“Well, that didn’t happen to me. But everything got all slowed down. I could hear my dad screaming and one of the guys we were climbing with cursing.”

“No one was trying to catch you?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know, it was all so fast I don’t think there was enough time for that,” Chad said. “But then this other guy, not one of the ones we were climbing with, pushed my dad aside and caught me.”

“Someone caught you?” Lois asked amazed.

“Yup. Just before I hit the ground, too. Only it wasn’t the ground I almost hit. There was a huge rock right there and I nearly smashed my head against it!”

“Chad!” Lois exclaimed, starting to feel queasy.

“I’m fine, Lois. I told you. That guy caught me.”

“Did you hurt him?”

Chad shrugged. “He seemed okay.”

“Who was he?”

Chad shrugged again. “No idea. Just some guy about our age. He said he was climbing with some friends and was on the climb next to ours. It was very close to the next climb — they even overlapped in a few spots, but I don’t remember anyone else being on that climb.”

“But he said he was?” Lois asked. “I guess it doesn’t really matter where he came from, does it?”

Chad shook his head. “Nope. Just that he was there and damn strong.”

“So, he caught you and then what?” Lois asked.

“Dad kept saying that I was lucky I wasn’t killed. And the other guys we climbed with just kept apologizing. I thanked the dude who caught me and Dad even offered him money, but he said he didn’t need anything and was just glad I was okay and walked away.”

“Wow!” Lois said, amazed.

“I know,” Chad said. “Pretty amazing, huh?”

Just then the bell rang. Chad handed Lois her books and gave her another kiss on the cheek before heading to his own class.

“Chad?” Lois called.

“Yeah?”

“You’re sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, Lois. I’m fine.”

“Wow,” Lois said again. “Chad?” she called again as he

turned to head towards his class. He turned towards her, walking backwards. "I'm glad you're okay," she said.

He laughed and winked at her before turning around and running to his class.

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Bringing herself back to the present, Lois took Clark's hand in hers. "I'm still glad you're okay," she said softly, before leaning over to lay her head on his shoulder.

"Thank you," Clark said as he walked into Superman's room once he finished unpacking.

"For what?" Superman asked, looking up at him.

"For coming to Smallville. Obviously that was a departure from the timeline," Clark pointed out.

Superman gave a wry smile. "Yeah, I still think I need to try to stick to the timeline as much as possible, and Herb confirmed that, but I have to admit it's hard sometimes. Anyway, I'm sorry I wasn't more help. I really thought I wouldn't be that affected by the Kryptonite. But I had forgotten how big that piece was."

Clark shrugged. "I'm just glad you came."

"No problem, Clark. Really. I wish I could have gone for you, to save you from that, but Herb made it clear I shouldn't. Besides, then you wouldn't have had a chance to bond with Lois."

Clark flushed before he asked, "So what was it like? In your universe, where there was no other Kryptonian to help, what happened?"

Superman shrugged, "In reality, it wasn't all that different. As you can guess," he smiled, "Trask did not kill me. And just like here, Rachel shot him instead."

"Did uh... did Lois run into your arms?" Clark asked, flushing again as he recalled one of the better parts of this trip home.

Superman smiled. "Yes, and it made my day, too." He grimaced a bit. "I'm sorry she kind of broke away from you abruptly."

Clark smiled. "No problem. You didn't do that. Besides, she came to me first. That has to count for something, right?"

Superman smiled back warmly. "I'd guess it counts for an awful lot, actually."

"How was your trip?" Lex asked Lois as he walked her to the limo.

"It was good," Lois said, feeling her pulse racing just slightly thinking about her time in Smallville. The trip had been different than she had expected. More fun. She had fully expected Smallville to equal Dullsville, but it hadn't. She came home feeling more like she had been on vacation than working, as long as she blocked out the moment when Trask had his gun trained on Clark.

"And Trask is gone?" Lex asked.

Lois flushed with pleasure. She had told Lex she had gone to Smallville, but she had said little about what she had been doing there. He must have read her article. Her article! The third richest man in the world had read it! "Yes, Trask is dead," Lois said. "I'd like to say I'm sorry, but..."

"He sounds like a madman," Lex concurred with her thought as he reached his hand out for hers. "I'm just glad

you're safe," he said, his voice dropping to a softer tone.

Lois shifted a bit on the bench seat in the limo. Lex was acting a bit... possessive tonight. This was their first date really, since she did not count that dinner when she was trying to get an interview; she wished he would take things slower.

Lex stayed where he was, watching her carefully. Finally, he seemed to make up his mind about something and relaxed. "So, are you excited?" he asked her.

"About what?" Lois asked.

"Tonight. The chef at The Cochon Savoureux is the best in all of New York," Lex informed her. "And we'll have the restaurant all to ourselves."

"We will?" Lois asked, surprised. When Lex had told her they were going to New York for dinner, she had been surprised, but she had not expected to have a table at a private restaurant.

"Chef Bernard owes me a favor. This is his way of repaying," Lex said, a strange tone to his voice. When Lois squinted at him to see better in the dim light of the limo, though, his face was placid.

"The food is delicious, Lex," Lois said as she wiped her mouth on her napkin.

Lex smiled, "Well, don't stuff yourself. I know you said you don't eat dessert, but Chef Bernard makes a wonderful chocolate mousse."

Lois promptly put her fork down. "Well, then, I'm done. Chocolate mousse is my favorite."

Lex smiled at her and snapped his fingers to summon the waiter. Within seconds their plates were cleared and the room was quiet for a few seconds. Lois played nervously with her wineglass. She glanced outside the window. This part of New York was quiet, which was surprising since it was only about nine o'clock.

"It's peaceful, isn't it?" Lex asked her as he followed the line of her gaze.

Lois nodded then, bringing herself back to the man beside her, asked, "Do you come here often? I mean, travel to New York for dinner?"

Lex laughed. "No. Chef Andre leaves me no reason to wander the globe looking for good food. Still, I come to New York often for business. I keep an apartment here for sudden trips. It's in this neighborhood."

Lois nodded as the waiter placed a small glass dish of chocolate mousse in front of her. She waited until Lex had a serving in front of him to pick up her spoon.

"Mmmm..." she murmured as she swallowed. "You weren't kidding."

Lex smiled as he watched her, picking up his own spoon leisurely.

A few moments later, Lois looked down at her glass bowl appalled. "I hadn't meant to eat all of it," she said.

"You enjoyed it," Lex stated, smiling. "You need to let yourself live a little."

Lois smiled, "I'm having dinner in New York. That's not living?"

"Fair enough," Lex said as he pushed away from the table. "Care to take a walk?"

Lois looked at him surprised. "But it's so quiet out," she

the heat wave,” Superman said.

Clark gave a half smile. “That wasn’t quite what I was going to ask, but it answered my question.”

Superman smiled, “What were you going to ask?”

“I was going to ask if it is always summer in Metropolis in your universe,” Clark admitted.

Superman smiled. “Clever. It may even have worked.”

Clark put his fork down. “I don’t suppose you can tell me if Luthor’s power plant is somehow related, can you?”

Superman coughed on the bite of chicken he had been trying to swallow. “Isn’t the plant down right now?”

Clark nodded, “Yeah, but he just got approval. It seems so... coincidental that Luthor gets approval for the plant in record time as Metropolis needs more power due to an unexpected heat wave. I’m not sure how he could be causing it, but I don’t know. The thought just occurred to me.”

Superman nodded, but did not say anything. He was not comfortable with the idea of lying to Clark, but he did not see how he could confirm the suspicion either.

“I’m making this public appeal asking him to submit to the laws of this community,” City Attorney Cheng told the press gathered in front of her, announcing her decision to seek an injunction ordering Superman to stop using his powers.

“What if he doesn’t?” a TV reporter asked. “If he’s endangering the lives of everyone in Metropolis, shouldn’t you be issuing a shoot-to-kill warrant?”

Clark blanched. “He can’t be serious! After everything Superman’s done?” he said sotto voce to Lois and Jimmy.

Jimmy smiled, “McKee is an idiot. You can’t shoot Superman!”

Clark smiled. “You’re right, Jim. Thanks for the reminder.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Lois said with force as the press conference let up around her. “It’s not whether or not we can hurt Superman physically. Don’t you think questions like that hurt him emotionally?”

Jimmy shrugged, “I guess. But it’s not like we even know if Superman has feelings like a person.”

“He does,” Clark said so quickly even Lois looked at him funny. “Lois is right. This has got to be hurting him.”

“Let’s do something to cheer him up,” Lois suggested.

“Like what?” Jimmy asked.

“I don’t know. Make him his favorite dinner?” Lois suggested.

Jimmy laughed, “I thought you wanted to do something nice for him!”

“Very funny,” Lois said. “Clark can cook. We’ll just help.”

“Maybe we could do something else,” Clark said. “Like a visit to my parents.”

“Your parents?” Lois asked.

“Yeah. I think he’d like that,” Clark stated. “Meet me at my place in a half hour; that will give me some time to get in touch with him” he said, shooting Lois a look. He hoped she would quickly catch on that he did not want Jimmy knowing where Superman lived.

“Sounds perfect,” Lois said. “Jimmy and I will go back

to the Planet and get started.”

“On what?” Jimmy asked.

“Well, the only way we’re going to be able to fix this is to find out what’s really causing the heat wave. That means we have some work to do,” Lois said.

“Are you up for a field trip?” Clark asked Superman as he closed the door.

Superman looked up from the television to smile at Clark wanly. “I guess.”

“You saw the press conference?” Clark asked.

Superman nodded. “It’s not like I didn’t know it was coming.”

“Still, McKee’s comment... ”

“Was stupid,” Superman said. “I can’t be shot.”

“That’s what Jimmy said,” Clark smiled.

“So,” Superman said, already looking a bit better, “where’s the field trip to?”

“Lois, Jimmy, and I are going to take you to Smallville.” Superman’s eyes lit up.

“I thought you’d like some time away,” Clark smiled.

“They are coming over in a few minutes. I’ll leave now, you can tell them you already took me, and then you can take them when they get here.”

“Thanks, Clark,” Superman said quietly. It felt nice to go through this with someone who really got what this felt like this time around.

“It was Lois’ idea to do something for you,” Clark admitted. “I just thought a visit to my folks would be... ”

“It’s a great idea, Clark,” Superman interjected quietly.

Superman landed in the corn field gently, placing both Lois and Jimmy on their feet. He was not sure, but he thought Jimmy may have been even more pleased about the ride than Lois.

Lois rubbed her arms. “Wow. I forgot that it’s still cold outside of Metropolis. It’s freezing out here.”

“Well, come on in then, honey,” Martha called from the doorway.

Lois walked over, giving Martha a hug. She still felt a little awkward for her behavior last time she was here, but it was hard to ignore the fact that Martha was not one to judge.

“Hi, Mrs. Kent,” Jimmy said softly. He had met Clark’s parents briefly when he came to Smallville for the Trask story, but he did not know them well.

“Good to see you again, Jimmy.” Martha smiled at him warmly and Jimmy felt himself relax.

Martha turned to Superman and opened her arms to him. Superman walked towards her, giving her a hug almost as tight as the one she gave him. He tried not to get all choked up at how good it felt to feel Martha’s unconditional love. Lois and Jimmy would surely find it strange that he was so close to Clark’s parents if he was too obvious.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Martha said. “I hope you aren’t letting what those people are saying in Metropolis get to you.”

She spoke softly, but not so quietly that the others could not hear and Jonathan added from the kitchen, “It’s all nonsense, of course. You’ve done so much for the people of

“Thank you, Lois,” Superman said as he dropped her off at her apartment.

Lois smiled, feeling herself flush slightly. Something was about to happen, she knew it. Instead of taking her home with Jimmy or Clark, he had taken Jimmy home first and then her. She guessed he was going to go back for Clark now, but he could wait another minute, right? Clark was their friend. He would understand.

“I’m glad it helped take your mind off things for a little while,” she said shyly.

Inwardly, Superman groaned. He had known taking her home alone was a bad idea. He had just been feeling so thankful for their doing this for him and he knew it was not nearly as fun to travel with him when he had a person in each arm. Plus, it had given Lois and Clark a few moments together while he had dropped off Jimmy.

He had thanked Jimmy as well and while the boy seemed a bit star-struck, that conversation had been easier than this one was turning out to be. Lois was not star-struck per se, but she seemed a bit... love-struck? And not in a good way. Well, not that there was any good way for her to be feeling about him that could qualify as love-struck. But not in a way that even made him feel all that good. On the other hand, it was a reminder, one he had to admit he needed every so often, that this was not his wife. Regardless of the resemblance, this woman was younger and still scared of a real commitment, and so was latching on to something that she saw as safe. The only difference between this time and the last time he had gone through this was that she *was* safe. He was off limits. Even as he found himself wanting to respond to her, she would slip into this role and he would remember — she was not his wife.

“Well, it did help me to do that, Lois. So thank you. Good night,” he said before he turned around and exited the window. Lois had looked disappointed that he had not continued their conversation, but this was the best way to deal with her, he was sure.

“This is a courtroom, not a circus tent. And this is a gavel. When I pound it, that’s the international symbol for all of you to shut up. You got that?” Judge Diggs asked. The room got immediately silent.

Her features softened slightly as she turned to Superman. “Good afternoon, Superman. Is that your real name?”

“That’s what people call me,” he said.

Sitting a few rows behind him, Clark could hear the slight catch in his voice when he said that. It was what people called him... , it was all that people ever called him. It must be so hard to be Superman all the time, almost never seen as a real person. That was why Superman liked going to see his parents. They saw him for who he really was — an older version of himself, their son.

Still, even they never called him Clark, but Superman never complained about it. He never really complained about anything. It was like this entire trip was not about him; it was only about the original inhabitants of this universe. At this point, though, Superman had been here for more than four months. This was not just a fast trip to help

another Clark Kent. He was living here and Clark was not sure how much longer Superman would need to do that. He knew he was still not ready to don the suit. The thought of it made him break out in a sweat, the image of his father’s prone body on the cot forefront in his mind.

Shaking his head slightly to bring his attention back to the trial, he decided that he was going to start calling Superman Clark when they were alone or with his family. It was a bad idea. He knew that. What if he slipped up in front of someone else? Still, he needed to do it. It was a very small way to say thank you for what Superman was doing for him.

As he tuned back into the trial, Clark stifled a groan. Superman had just volunteered to stop using his powers. Clark understood why he did it, but he could not help but be concerned. Would this be like last time? People would call for Superman and Clark would feel compelled to help? He was not sure he could handle it again. He imagined he would need to quell the desire to help anyway. Superman’s giving up use of his super powers would not prove anything if Clark started being Superman right now. For now, Metropolis was on its own, he supposed.

Clark stood in the police station watching the officers try to pretend not to be awed by the presence of Superman. It had only taken a moment after the trial for Superman to use his powers to stop a prisoner from shooting a bunch of innocent bystanders — many of them kids. Judge Diggs had had Superman arrested immediately, and Clark had volunteered to go with him and cover the story for the Planet.

He would have liked to have had a chance to apologize to Superman for having to go through this again. It could not be any fun to be arrested. They had not had any time alone, though, not that Clark should have been surprised.

Besides, now that he saw them here, he realized, Superman was not really that upset. He had never seen Superman act like this when around other people before. He was being himself.

Lois sat in her seat in the courtroom feeling frustrated. What was Judge Diggs going to do this time? She had said she was a fan of Superman, but then she had him arrested and now she was trying him for contempt of court. He needed a lawyer to help him get out of this mess. Why was he insisting on representing himself?

“Perry, we’ve got to...”

“We’re journalists. It’s our job to remain objective,” Perry said, anticipating her words.

“Clark, tell him!” Lois demanded. She tried not to feel too annoyed when Clark shrugged.

“What on *Earth* am I supposed to do with him?” Judge Diggs said when Superman floated above the floor to avoid getting hit by a cup of coffee, clearly to herself, but loud enough for everyone to hear.

Lois flashed a look at Clark. He had groaned when Superman moved out of the way. Okay, maybe Clark was a bit concerned for their friend.

“Your honor,” Perry started, standing up. “Perry White of the Daily Planet. The Planet will vouch for Superman.”

Lois smiled. Perry claimed to be nothing but an objective newspaper man, but he had a heart of mush.

“Clark, open up. It’s me!” Lois called from the other side of his front door. Clark smiled. She had a bag of groceries with her. Was she really going to offer to cook Superman dinner?

Clark turned to give Superman a grin as he went over to the door. “Good evening, Lois. What can we do for you?”

“I came to cook for you,” she said, her bag of groceries balanced on her hip.

Clark reached out and took them from her. “Jimmy made it sound like you don’t cook.”

“I don’t,” Lois admitted sheepishly. “But I make a mean pasta salad.”

Clark smiled. “Why don’t I make us something to go with that?” he asked her, moving to start taking things out of the refrigerator.

“How are you, Superman?” Lois asked.

“Okay,” he said. “Thanks for suggesting I stay with Clark tonight when Perry was trying to find someplace to keep me.”

Lois shrugged. “I figured you’d want to be at home.”

“Yes, well, I appreciate that you didn’t give away the fact that that was where I was going.”

Lois smiled. “No problem.”

“Why don’t you go help Clark make dinner?” Superman suggested.

“Oh, I’m sure he’s fine. I came to talk to you,” Lois said. Why was he trying to push her away?

“Thanks, Lois,” Superman said, wishing he knew the best way to direct her attentions to Clark. Not that he had been good at that last time around, either.

“Well, maybe we could both help him then?” Superman suggested.

Lois tried to cover her disappointment with a smile.

“Sure. Good idea,” she said, but everyone in the apartment could hear her true feelings.

“Need any help, Clark?” she asked as she and Superman headed back towards the kitchen.

“No,” Clark said, and Lois felt guilty when she could hear the slight undertone of unhappiness in his voice. Surely he understood — they were friends, sure, but it was not the same as with Superman. Clark had to understand that.

“It smells great, Clark,” Superman said.

Lois wondered if he had an enhanced sense of smell, too. Then she realized that she could smell it, too. “What is it?” she asked Clark.

“It’s halibut,” Clark said and again Lois could hear the sadness in his voice. “I spent some time living in Paris and someone there gave me some great cooking tips that I’ve used ever since.”

“Like what?” Superman asked, his eyes wide. Clark had lived in Paris. Superman had always stuck to small cities during his travels. Well, until Metropolis. He was beginning to suspect more and more that there were differences between them that Herb had not told him about.

Clark smiled, remembering the “cooking lesson.”

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“No, Clark!” Severine whined. “You need to fillet the halibut first!” she insisted.

Clark smiled. “Your mother said you weren’t a picky eater,” he said.

“I’m not!” Severine insisted, standing up as straight as she could. Clark tried to hide a small smile. At just under three and a half feet tall, Severine had no hope of looking menacing. “That doesn’t mean I don’t want things done right!” the six year old said.

Clark started to pat her on the head, but then decided that she might take that as patronizing right now. “Of course. What should I do after I fillet the fish?” he asked as he reached for the filleting knife.

“You need to put lemon and herbs on it,” Severine instructed.

Clark opened up the cabinet over his head to look for the spices. “Where are the spices?” he asked her.

Severine gave an adorable little sigh. “They’re in the refrigerator. We don’t use dried herbs. They don’t taste as good!”

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“Just to always use fresh herbs,” Clark said, getting back to Superman’s question on the tips he had learned. He could feel his mood dampen and felt no desire to talk about his time in Paris. He had had to leave after he saved Severine from a car accident by tearing a door off the car she was in.

“What do you think is going to happen to him?” Lois asked Clark on the way to the train station.

“I don’t know,” Clark said sadly. “But he couldn’t not go. They said there were three hundred people on that run away train.”

“I know,” Lois said. “But that doesn’t change the fact that he violated the injunction for the second time. Judge Diggs is going to have to do something.”

Clark nodded, keeping his thoughts to himself. If he was Superman, he would leave Metropolis. That could not be what Superman did, though. It was pretty clear he still lived there.

He had done it. Superman had agreed to leave Metropolis. Clark did not understand. The only thing that made sense was that it was not Superman’s fault and eventually someone, Lois probably, figured it out and Superman was able to come back.

For now, though, he had agreed to leave.

“You can’t leave!” Clark watched his partner accost Superman as he stepped away from the press conference.

“I’m sorry, Lois,” Superman said and Clark could hear that he meant it.

“Superman, we need you here,” Lois said, nearly pleading.

“Lois,” the superhero started, his hand moving up towards Lois’ cheek. At the last minute, though, he looked up and saw Clark’s face, and his hand dropped.

“I appreciate your support,” he said to Lois, his voice soft but firm. “But I need to leave. I’m sorry.”

“So, now what?” Jimmy asked Lois and Clark as they

"I told you," Clark sighed. "I heard Lana say she really wanted the teddy bear that's stuck at the top of the flag pole in front of the fire station. She told Kelly that she'd kiss the boy who brought it to her."

"And we can't do this after school, why?" Pete asked.

"Because by then, everyone will know and there'll be all sorts of boys trying to climb the flag pole."

Pete shook his head. "I don't think so. I mean, Clark, Lana's pretty and all, but she's sort of... shallow. Don't you think?"

"Of course she's shallow!" Clark exclaimed. "She's the head cheerleader. It's her job to be shallow. But I know that underneath it all she's really much deeper than that."

"If you say so," Pete said, shaking his head.

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Clark smiled. He had gotten the teddy bear and received the kiss Lana had promised. They went steady for two months after that — until he realized that Pete was right. She was no deeper than she had been acting.

"I didn't think so," Lois said smirking.

"Didn't think what?" Clark asked.

"That you ever played hooky. I don't get it. What's so great about playing hooky anyway?"

"It's fun to break the rules a little, Lois," Clark said.

Lois grimaced. She had actually played hooky once — successfully that is, and it was not what anyone would consider fun.

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"Hi," Chad said softly in her ear the day after he had come over to her house. Lois stared resolutely ahead. If she turned toward him, she would start to cry, she knew she would. Was he going to break up with her here? Right here in the hallway? Right now, just before the bell for last period rang? She would have to switch lockers. Would they let her do that? She could not come back here day after day to the place where Chad had broken up with her. Of course, since he had never asked to be her boyfriend, it wasn't like he could actually break up with her, right?

"Lois," Chad said, just as softly as before, placing a hand on her shoulder. At his insistence, she turned toward him, her eyes swimming with tears. "Can you come over after school?" he asked her.

Lois nodded. So he was going to wait. At least she was not going to have to change lockers.

Chad reached up to brush a tear from her cheek. Then leaning close to her, he whispered, "Please don't cry. It makes me sad. I just want to talk. I swear."

Lois nodded again, afraid to talk.

"Forget it," Chad said softly, "Let's just go now."

"Now?" Lois finally managed to get a word past the lump in her throat.

"Yeah, I'm not going to be able to concentrate on physics anyway knowing you're upset. And I doubt you'll get much out of your English class either. So, let's go now."

"You want to cut school?" Lois asked, not sure why she was stuck on this.

Chad nodded, "Just for today. This is more important."

Lois nodded again. She supposed making sure he was no longer associated with the girl with the alcoholic mother, the girl who was Metropolis' own Lolita, would be more

important than physics. She should be happy he was telling her he wanted nothing more to do with her rather than just ignoring her.

She packed the books she needed into her book bag and closed her locker. Chad grabbed the bag before she could, swinging it over his left shoulder. "Come on," he said, taking her hand. Lois blindly followed him, staring at his hand in hers the whole way.

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"Have you tried my new fragrance?" a woman asked, bringing Lois out of her memory and spraying both Lois and Clark with an atomizer before she moved around the rest of the newsroom.

"Ugh!" Clark said, and looked over to see Lois waving her hand in front of her face.

"What was that?" she asked grimacing.

"I think it was perfume," Clark said.

"Well, it smelled awful."

Clark nodded his head in agreement.

Lois looked around the newsroom. Were people acting funny? What was with Ralph? He was staring at Cat with a predatory gleam in his eye. Morgan, the new copy girl, was staring at Stan like he was suddenly the most attractive man in the room (and looking over at Stan, Lois confirmed that he was definitely not). She looked over at Clark. He looked different today, too. He looked... well, he looked sexy. How odd. Still, she could not seem to stop looking at him. Had he always been this good looking?

She removed her compact from her purse to steal a glance at her reflection. Wow, she looked awful! Did she always dress like a prude? She slung her purse over her shoulder, bolting for the ladies room. She had talked to Clark earlier. Darn it! How could she have let him see her looking like this?

She fished through her purse in the bathroom. Why didn't she keep make-up here in case of emergencies? Ages ago she had thrown some blusher and lipstick in here, but she could really use some concealer for those crows-feet developing near her eyes. Some eye shadow and liner would be nice, too. Oh well, she would have to make do with what she had.

Finally finding the blusher and the lipstick, she applied both, taking a step back to look at her handiwork. She still looked like some sort of Puritan. With a flick of her hand, she released her hair from the clip it had been in all morning. Remembering a trick Lucy had taught her, she flipped her head upside down, shaking her head from side to side before moving upright again. There — her hair looked better now.

She still had to do something about her clothes, though. What had she been thinking coming in to work in this outfit when she worked with someone who looked like Clark? She pulled her jacket off and unbuttoned the top three buttons on her blouse. She grimaced at her skirt. It was way too long. What was she going to do about that?

Then she remembered and rummaged through her purse again. Eureka! She may not normally keep make-up in her bag, but Lois Lane never went anywhere without a pair of scissors. She took the skirt off to make sure she cut in a

straight line and a few minutes later had turned her ankle-length skirt into a mini. It had some ragged edges since she had no way to hem it (not that she knew how), but a ragged skirt was better than a prudish one, right?

Feeling much better about her appearance, Lois packed up the rest of her stuff, throwing the remnants of her skirt away, and went back to her desk. Hmph! Clark did not even look up as she came over.

“Want some coffee, Clark?” she asked.

“Sure, Lois,” he said, still looking at his computer screen.

Lois sauntered over to the coffee area, pulling out two cups from the cupboard.

“Wow, Lois! You look... ”

“Cut it out, Stan,” Lois said, annoyed. Stan was blocking her view of Clark.

Flushing, Stan went back to his desk.

Finishing with the coffee, Lois picked up the two mugs and walked back to Clark’s desk. “Here you go,” she told him, setting his mug down. “Light and ridiculously sweet. Just the way you like it.”

“Thanks, Lois,” Clark said, reaching for his mug, still not taking his eyes off the screen. What was she going to have to do to get him to notice her?

She went back to her desk to place her coffee down and then moved back over to Clark. He took no notice as she walked around his desk and behind his chair.

“How are you, Clark?” she leaned over to whisper in his ear.

“Huh?” Clark responded. At least he had stopped typing.

Lois stood up and began kneading his shoulders, but Clark spun his chair around. “Lois, what is... ” He threw her a crazed look once he was facing her. “Lois, what did you do to your skirt?”

“Don’t you like it?” she asked with a pout.

“I... uh, Lois, are you all right?”

Lois sat herself in his lap, nuzzling her lips near his neck. “I am now that you’re paying attention to me.”

Clark tried to back away from her, moving his face away from hers, but she followed him. “Lois, are you feeling okay? You aren’t acting at all like yourself.”

“I told you, I’m fine. Don’t you like me this way?”

Clark closed his eyes, trying to keep clear headed, which was hard to do with Lois in his lap. “Um... Well, yes, but not as much as when you’re... well, you.”

Lois pulled away, the pout back on her face. “You don’t like me like this?”

“I do,” Clark repeated. “I just... I’m worried about you.”

“Oh,” Lois said, the pout disappearing. “I’m fine.” She resumed her previous position.

“Do you want something, Lois?” Clark asked.

“Just you, Clarkie.”

“Clarkie?”

“Don’t you like it?”

Afraid of what her reaction might be if he said no, Clark said nothing.

Having extricated himself from Lois earlier, and still

having no idea what she was up to, Clark had decided that a walk around the block was in order. When he came back, though, Lois attacked him. Pinning him up against her desk, she leaned as close as she could to kiss him, but Clark leaned back further.

“Lois,” he pleaded, “please. You’re starting to make me uncomfortable.”

Lois pouted again. Clark wondered how he could keep track of her mood swings. “I don’t want you to be uncomfortable,” she said in a childlike voice.

“I’m sure you don’t, Lois,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady, but she was still pressed intimately up against him. “But I’d prefer it if you just stepped back a half step or so.”

“Oh,” Lois smiled, still speaking in a childish voice. “But I can still stay close to you?”

“Yes,” Clark said, thinking that he would be fine if he could get her somewhere where he wasn’t feeling her breasts pressed to his chest.

Lois took a small step back. “So, let’s get out of here.”

“What?” Clark asked her. “Aren’t you the one that said we had work to do?”

“And you said I was no fun ‘cause I wouldn’t play hooky. Now I want to and you don’t?”

“I do, Lois,” Clark sighed, “I just, I don’t know if that’s such a good idea right now.”

At that, Perry came running out of his office, chasing Rehalia, the cleaning lady. “Rehalia, I love you!” Perry exclaimed.

Clark looked at Perry, then turned to Lois, then back to Perry. Okay, so whatever was wrong with Lois was wrong with Perry, too. Taking a look around the newsroom, he began to suspect that everyone but him was suffering from whatever it was.

“Hi, Lex,” Lois said as he approached her. She wished he would move to the side a bit. Like Stan earlier, he was blocking her view of Clark.

“So, are we still on for dinner tomorrow night?” he asked her.

“Sure,” Lois said distracted. Then seeming to remember where she was, she turned to Lex more fully. “Although, you need to know, you and I are just friends. Clark has my heart.”

Before she could see Lex’s response, though, she turned. Was that Clark there over by the elevator?

He was not even sure how he had managed to get free of Lois that time, but Clark knew an opportunity when he saw it. He packed up his stuff and headed for home in an effort to avoid any more weird interchanges with Lois. It was late anyway.

He decided to walk — to try to figure out what was going on in the newsroom. Something had caused everyone in the office to act crazy — to act in love or in lust anyway. The only thing Clark could think of was the perfumes from this morning. Could one of them be contaminated with something that everyone was allergic to? Could this even be called an allergic reaction? Or was this supposed to happen? Did someone plan this? What about that perfume that

smelled awful from this morning? Could that be it?

Suddenly, he heard screaming and looking up, realized a bus was about to run someone over. Clark dropped his stuff and ran toward the man, scooping him up and pushing him out of the way just before the bus hit them.

“Wow! Thanks, CK!”

Clark looked down. It was Jimmy. Placing him down, he asked, “Jimmy, what were you doing?”

“I was trying to get April’s attention. Clark, I love her!” he said and Clark cringed. This had gone too far.

Having picked up several magazines geared towards women, Clark had decided to spend the evening looking through them. He was not sure what he was hoping to find. Even if the woman was advertising her perfume in here, there was no reason she would use herself as a model. On the other hand, if the mayhem she was causing was done on purpose, she was likely a megalomaniac, and since in his experience megalomania correlated with egotism, maybe she would.

He heard a whoosh from the balcony and called a hello to Superman as he flipped through another magazine. Stopping, he stared. Was that her? Was it really going to be that easy?

He felt Superman stop behind him, but continued staring at the picture, trying to determine...

“Well, you’ve had a bad day, haven’t you?” Superman said with a bark of laughter.

Clark looked up at him startled. “I have actually. How did... Oh, right. You’ve done this before. I keep forgetting that.” At the look on Superman’s face, he felt badly. “I’m sorry, Clark. You probably don’t forget that, do you?”

Superman smiled slightly, taking a seat on the floor in front of Clark. “No, I don’t. But that’s okay. It’s not your fault.”

“Maybe,” Clark thought out loud, “you could step in as me for a day or something?”

Superman smiled, “I would love that. But it wouldn’t work. I tried it.” Off of Clark’s startled look, he rushed to explain. “When Superman was pushed out of town because of the heat wave, I had to leave town as Clark, too. It was clear that I was unable to be here and not help out. So, I left, or I tried to, but Lois figured out what was going on before I did.

“Anyway, when I planned to leave, I told Lois I was going to Smallville. I had tried to leave when she wasn’t around, but she was working late, trying to crack the story of course, and prove my innocence. So she was there, and before I left, I ended up kissing her. I hadn’t planned it, but it just happened.

“I didn’t think it was all that important, but my Lois said it was. I was worried about what would happen here when you didn’t try to leave. So, I thought I’d pose as you and kiss Lois.”

Clark’s eyes got wide, and Superman rushed to explain better. “My Lois said it made her realize how important Clark was to her. I didn’t want you to miss out on that.

“So, I decided on a practice run with your mother. This way if it didn’t work, I wouldn’t blow your secret.”

“And Mom knew it was you?” Clark asked.

“Immediately. Way too fast for me to think there was any hope of Lois not noticing. Anyway, I don’t miss being Clark for mundane things. I miss my interactions with Lois, Perry, and Jimmy. And I’m not sure I could fool any of them.”

“I’m sorry,” Clark said.

“No, don’t be. This isn’t your problem. And besides, you calling me Clark helps a lot. I know it seems small, but it makes me feel even more real around you, less like a cartoon cutout.”

“Clark, I don’t think anyone thinks you’re a cartoon cutout. Well, maybe some people, but not a lot. Lois certainly thinks you are real.”

Superman laughed. “I guess. Although, I could live with her not getting it. Really. The attention from her makes me uneasy. It makes me long for my wife in a way no one else does.”

“Well, they are a lot alike,” Clark smiled.

A knock on the door interrupted them both. “Do you mind getting it?” Clark asked.

“No, feel free to continue to figure out the perfume thing,” Superman said as he moved to the door.

As soon as he answered the door, Superman realized the mistake he had made. How could he have done this? How could he not have remembered that she was going to show up? If he had remembered, he could have stayed away for the night. Actually, he should not be answering the door ever. They did not want people knowing he lived with Clark. How neither of them remembered that, he had no idea, but he would have to discuss it with Clark. Maybe tomorrow, after Lois was gone.

“Good evening, Lois,” he said, trying to keep his tone even.

“Oh. Superman.” she looked at him confused. She had been expecting Clark. She forgot that he lived with Superman. She liked Superman, didn’t she? Yeah, she thought she did.

She smiled at him shyly. “Can I come in?”

“Um, yes,” Superman said, swallowing.

“Clark, Lois is here,” Superman called and he was glad he did. As soon as Lois saw Clark, she seemed to forget about him completely. So completely that for a second, he actually felt a little hurt. Was he too old for this Lois or something? Then he remembered — this was a good thing, a very good thing.

“I actually need to go,” he announced to the room.

“No!” Clark said immediately at the same time as Lois looked at him curiously.

“Okay, bye!” she said, seeming to be happy that he was leaving.

This caused Clark to look at her with wide eyes.

“You’re okay with Superman leaving?” he asked her.

She pondered that for a moment before asking, “You’re not going anywhere, are you? ‘Cause I was hoping we could be alone.”

“Um...” finally Clark seemed to remember the trouble he was in. “No, I’m not going anywhere. But neither is Superman.” He shot Superman a pleading look and after a moment, Superman seemed to understand what he was

stated.

Clark smiled and turned to her with one eyebrow raised.

"I don't!" Lois insisted. "And I am attracted to Superman, but I didn't try to seduce him last night."

Clark continued to smile.

"And," Lois continued, "you were sprayed, but you didn't fall for me."

Clark raised his eyebrow again. "Why would you think I would?"

"Oh, come on, Clark," Lois laughed. "You so want me."

"Guess not," Clark smirked.

"You do, too," Lois insisted.

"Maybe we could get back to the story now?"

With a sigh, Lois agreed. "So what did that bio Jimmy faxed you on Miranda say?"

"She was first in her class at MIT. Her research is funded by Luthor Industries," he said to her meaningfully.

Lois scoffed. "Lex funds half the scientists in the city. He probably doesn't even know who she is. But if it will make you feel better, I'll ask him."

"What?" Clark asked.

"I'll ask Lex if he knows Miranda. We're having dinner tonight," Lois explained. "He finds me very attractive," she teased.

"Great," Clark mumbled. That was just the reminder he needed to get back to reality.

"So, you really won't tell me how we catch Miranda?" Clark asked Superman. Not that Superman's reticence to tell him was a surprise. He had just been more talkative tonight than normal.

"No," Superman laughed. "But you will. I promise. Well, sort of." He looked at the table quizzically for a moment.

"What does that mean?" Clark asked, then added, "Forget it. I know you can't tell me. Will you at least tell me how Lois' date with Luthor is going?"

Superman smiled, "Oh, I think it's going well, but... well, never mind."

"Never mind what?"

"It won't matter. It won't be the same here."

"If it won't be the same, why can't you tell me?" Clark reasoned.

Superman smiled. "You're right. I guess I can. In my universe, I got sprayed with the perfume, but a stronger version of it."

"Did it affect you?" Clark asked.

Superman shook his head. "No, but Lois didn't know that."

"What do you mean?"

"She thought that I might have been affected and I was Superman at the time, so she sort of wanted me to be..."

"In the hopes that you'd swoon all over her."

"Yes. Obviously, I should have just told her no, but I didn't. I used the excuse and I kissed her."

"I bet Lois loved that," Clark said, a bit bitterly.

Superman smiled slightly, "I'm sure she did, and honestly, so did I. I felt vindicated after saying no to her all day and night when she was affected. But that wasn't the best part."

"Of the kiss?" Clark asked.

"Right," Superman replied. "The best part was that Luthor was there."

"Luthor saw you kiss Lois?" Clark clarified.

Superman nodded. "And he hated it. He kept making these comments about wanting to throw up."

Clark laughed.

"Yeah. But of course, if I get sprayed here, I won't kiss Lois."

"Thanks," Clark said.

"No problem. I told you. I don't want to. She's nice — don't get me wrong. But she's not my wife."

Lois shifted nervously from foot to foot while waiting for the elevator to reach the penthouse where Lex liked to dine. She had no problem with being attracted to more than one man at a time, but Clark? She was not attracted to Clark. She did not care what Dr. Friedman said, it just was not true. How could Clark Kent compete with Lex and Superman? He couldn't. That was clear. And that was why she was not attracted to him.

"Hello, m'dear," Lex smiled at her as the elevator doors slid open. See? Clark Kent could never call her 'm'dear' without sounding ridiculous. Lex was much more refined.

"Hello, Lex," Lois replied, letting Lex take her wrap from her.

"Chef Andre has prepared a wonderful feast for us tonight," Lex said as he led her into his private dining room.

Lois looked around. There was already a salad that looked wonderful on top of each place setting. "I can see that," Lois said, smiling at Lex.

"I thought eating up here would be nice. A bit more intimate than our last date," Lex said as he pulled her chair out for her.

Lois tried to think of a good reply. Being the only diners in a restaurant seemed like a pretty intimate dinner as well. She finally settled on "And the view from here is amazing, too," as she motioned to the city lights of Metropolis below them.

Once Lex had sat down and poured them both a glass of wine, Lois picked up her salad fork. A salad fork — that was another thing. Clark probably did not even know that some people used a separate fork for their salad than their main course. Although, now that she thought about it, Martha put one out the night they had dinner in Smallville.

Glancing up, she noticed Lex staring at her. "Is everything okay?" she asked him.

"Yes," he replied, still staring. "I've just never noticed your eyes before. How deep. What a rich and warm brown. They are the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen."

Lois felt herself blush. "Thank you," she mumbled.

"And your neck," Lex kept going. "It's so graceful, so elegant. You are a study in beauty, Lois."

"Lex, are you sure you're all right?" Lois asked. Even she had to admit that this was a bit much.

"I'm fine, Lois," he insisted. "Never better."

"How was your date?" Clark asked the next morning. Lois looked at him critically for a few minutes. What

was his game? Clark was never friendly when he asked about Lex. "It was okay," she finally said.

"Learn anything about Miranda?" he asked.

So, that was what he was up to. Now that Lois knew, she relaxed. "No. Actually... Clark, I think he might have been sprayed with the perfume," she admitted.

"What?!" Clark was shocked to hear it.

"It's just... he was acting weird. And he kept going on and on about how beautiful I am."

"I seem to recall someone telling me that Lex finds you very attractive," Clark quipped.

"Be serious, Clark! Not like this. He was just... Just trust me. He wasn't himself."

"For you, Lois," Jimmy said, passing her a note.

Curious, Lois opened it up and immediately tried to school her features as she read. No need to let Clark know about this.

"Lex?" Clark asked, watching the man look around Lois' desk.

"Is Lois here?" Lex asked, barely glancing at him.

Clark shook his head. "No, she went to run an errand. Can I give her a message?"

"No," Lex said. "I just wanted to apologize to her for last night. Miranda sprayed some of her perfume on me and... well, when Lois showed up I'm not sure I wasn't acting a bit odd."

"What happened last night?" Clark asked, and the harsh tone to his voice caused Lex to look up.

"It's not important," Lex said. "What is important is getting to Superman."

"Superman?" Clark asked.

"Yes. He's the only one who can save us. The whole city is in danger. Yesterday, Miranda threatened to release her Revenge all over Metropolis. And I think she's planning on using the 100% solution. The reaction is permanent."

Clark realized that this was probably the stronger solution Superman said he had been sprayed with in his universe. "I'll get in touch with Superman," he said to Lex. "And the police."

"Thanks," Lex said, turning away as Clark picked up the phone.

"This is Clark," came the voice on the other end of the line.

"Hi, it's Clark," Clark replied.

"Lex come to see you?" Superman replied.

"Yes. I think Miranda might be at Airfield Free. That's where they were going to use the crop dusters to spray the city for fruit flies," Clark said as he absently watched Lex say something to Jimmy and then swagger out. He felt himself grimace. He could not help it — Luthor bugged him.

"I'll be right there," Superman said.

"Okay, I'll probably see you there, although I'll be coming the normal way. Oh, and Clark?"

"Yeah?"

Clark lowered his voice so no one could hear. "Did you mean it when you said that you didn't really want to kiss Lois? She just makes you miss your wife?"

"Yes..." Superman said, clearly not understanding where this was going.

"Kiss her," Clark said.

"What?"

"Kiss Lois. Annoy Lex. Please."

Superman laughed. "Well, *that* I would like to do. See you, Clark."

Lois screamed. This had been a mistake. She should have told Clark that the note had been from Miranda. That Miranda had said she would give Lois information on Revenge if Lois would meet her at Airfield Free. She had not, though, and now no one had any idea where she was. In a few moments, her feet would touch the boiling liquid below her, not that she had any idea what it was, but she was sure it would hurt. Additionally, Miranda was going to spray all of Metropolis with Revenge.

"Help, Superman!" Lois called.

Just then, she was miraculously free falling directly into... Superman's arms. Lois looked up in confusion. "Superman?" she asked, looking at the ropes still attached to her arms and smoking at the ends.

"Sorry. That was the fastest way," Superman said as he placed her on her feet and pulled the ropes from her arms.

"Superman, Miranda is..."

"I know, Lois. Wait here," he said as he took off after Miranda's plane.

A moment later, Lex showed up in his limousine and Clark pulled up in a cab right after him. "Lois, are you all right?" Lex asked.

"I'm fine," Lois said, her eyes on Superman.

"Lois," Clark offered. "The spray in the plane is 100% solution. The one we got sprayed with was only 1%."

Lois' eyes wide, she turned to Clark, then groaned before turning back to Superman.

Clark was regretting his decision to tell Superman to kiss Lois. He had forgotten how hard it was to watch her fawn all over him. Was it really just a couple of days since she had shown up at his apartment offering herself to him? Why had he turned her down? So he could see more of this?

Clark shook his head. Those negative thoughts were not helping, and besides, if he had, when Lois awoke the next morning she would have been horrified to discover he accepted her offer. It had been the right decision.

It just was not fair, though. Superman had kissed his Lois twice by now and he had not gotten to kiss Lois at all. Would he really ever know what that was like?

He saw Superman shoot him a look, but he kept his face blank. For some reason, he did not want Superman to know that he had changed his mind.

"Lois Lane. I love you," Clark heard Superman say and then he bent towards her. Lois seemed to consider, made a comment about Superman not being himself, but then changed her mind. A moment later, they were wrapped in a lip lock.

Then Clark heard Lex, "I *may* throw up." Okay, maybe it was worth it.

"Lois Lane, I love you," Superman said keeping one eye

on Clark. Was this really okay with him?

Too late, Superman realized it did not matter. He had already spoken. Lois was now trying to say no, although he knew full well she would not be able to.

“Oh, Superman,” she said, “You don’t know how long I’ve waited to hear you say those words. But you’re not yourself, so I can’t take advantage of this situation and...” she trailed off as she looked at him. “Oh, what the...” and she leaned forward to press her lips to his.

Superman trained his ears on Lex, waiting to hear his complaints, but suddenly his hearing filled with a different sound. Lois’ heartbeat. It was not quite the same as his wife’s, but close. Close enough to be soothing and exciting all at the same time. Lois moaned softly and Superman forgot that Lex and Clark were watching.

Lois lay in bed, watching television. The Ivory Tower was on, but she was not watching it. A soap opera had nothing on her life tonight. She had kissed him. Really! She had kissed Superman and he had seemed to enjoy it. It was magical.

She relived the kiss in her head again and again. His lips had been firm and sort of... solid at first, but then they had softened, he had been more responsive. It just might have been the best kiss of her life.

Superman flew in circles over Metropolis. What had happened there? That was Lois, but not his Lois. He was not attracted to this Lois. Not really. She just made him miss his wife.

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“You’re going to be great, Clark,” she whispered, her face pressed into his chest. “You are going to be his best friend and the best Superman in any universe and then he’ll maybe get a little jealous and want to give it a try and you’ll be able to come home to me.”

“How long do you think it will take for him to get jealous?” he asked her, his voice soft.

“Almost no time at all,” she had said, leaning back to smile at him but she ended with a sob.

“I’m going to miss you so much,” he said to her.

“I know,” she nodded. “And I’m going to miss you, too. Well, for the minute until you get back,” she teased while tears still streamed down her cheeks.

“Clark,” she asked. “What do you think is going to happen with the other Lois?” They had talked about this before, but he could tell she needed to hear his reassurances again.

“Nothing,” he said firmly. “I’m sure she’s beautiful and brilliant, but she won’t be you. I’ll be too busy missing you to even notice her,” he said.

She smiled at him, leaning up to kiss him. “Go then. If you leave now, in a few minutes you’ll be home.”

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He closed his eyes, conjured up a clear image of his wife. She looked like this woman, but they were not exactly alike even physically. His Lois had short hair: this Lois’ hair was longer. This Lois had angular features: his Lois’ figure had softened slightly with age and two children. This Lois was reckless. His Lois was... well, reckless, but less so now

that she had Emily and Jory to deal with.

Opening his eyes, he realized they were filled with tears. He missed Lois, so much. That was all that his reaction to the kiss earlier was — she was the closest thing he had to his wife and he had reacted to that. But she was not his wife. She was not the same at all.

“Okay,” Lois admitted over coffee the next morning. “Maybe somewhere, buried incredibly deep inside me is some eensy weensy, microcosmic although highly unlikely possibility that I could feel some sort of unmotivated and completely unrealistic attraction to you.”

Clark grinned. He had not meant to tease her about this again, but it was hard not to. She was just so defensive about it. “As long as you’re being honest with yourself, Lois.”

“Look,” she said, hands on her hips. “Just because for a day I thought I was in love with you, doesn’t mean I was.”

“In love with me?” Clark asked, eyebrow raised. “I thought you were just attracted to me. Maybe infatuated. But you were in love?”

Lois groaned. “Clark, drop it, would you?”

“You’re just upset that I didn’t fall for you,” he teased.

Lois snorted. “I could not care less. It’s not my fault you have no taste.” With that, she stood up and walked back to her desk.

December 1993

The first time Lois had thought about what her honeymoon would be like she was sixteen years old. Unlike her classmates, she typically did not get carried away with thoughts of weddings and princes and happily-ever-afters. She knew full well that wedding day promises were not always kept and few people got a happily ever after.

Sometimes, though, even she got a bit swept away with such thoughts.

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Chad and Lois swayed slowly to the music coming over the speakers. Some of their classmates had complained that it was not fair that their junior prom was taking place in the school gym, but they did not care. It was a chance to be together, so they knew they would be having fun.

Chad buried his face in Lois’ neck. “I love this perfume,” he whispered in her ear.

“I know.” She smiled at him. “That’s why I wore it.”

Chad kissed her neck before backing away. “Lois,” he said softly, so softly she could not hear him over the music, she could only read his lips.

“Hmmm?” she responded absently.

“I love you,” he said, again so softly she could not hear him. She stopped moving. She must have misread his lips. He did not just tell her that he loved her. He couldn’t have.

“What?” she asked in an attempt to clarify things.

He leaned forward to place his lips right next to her ear. “I love you.”

Lois could not help the smile that spread across her face. “I love you, too,” she said in reply.

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She had been foolish that night. She thought that because they said that they loved each other, maybe they would get married and... have a life that was infinitely better than the one she had been living as a child. She knew better now, though. Nobody would call what she and Chad had a happily ever after.

Just because things did not work out with Chad, though, or Paul later, or Claude, did not mean that Lois would never get married. Maybe one day she and Lex... or she and Superman would get married. Her life could still work out the way she wanted it to as long as it was with someone like Lex or Superman, someone who could not... she meant — would not — hurt her.

Besides, she was a woman of the nineties. She did not need to wait for a man to propose before she could experience some of the luxury that came with getting married. Regardless of what Clark thought (and Perry and Jimmy), she was completely capable of taking a weekend off to pamper herself. And what better place to do that than in the honeymoon suite of the Lexor Hotel?

It had been a wonderful idea. So far, she had spent half an hour in the massage chair in the corner, ordered a decadent dinner through room service, and had a little too much of the free wine that came with the suite. Now, though... she was a little bit bored. Just a little bit, though. Maybe she would watch some television before taking a bath in the heart-shaped Jacuzzi tub.

Several clicks of the remote control later, Lois shut off the television. There was nothing on. With a sigh, she moved over to the tub and sunk to the bottom. Ah, that was better. She could probably relax in here for at least a half hour or so.

BBRRRING... Who was calling her? Who even knew she was here? Well, okay, she had told Clark, Perry, and Jimmy she was coming here, but they would not call her, would they?

"Hello," she answered the cordless phone next to the tub. She was unsuccessful in keeping the annoyed tone out of her voice.

Not that it seemed to annoy Clark. He was laughing on the other end of the phone. "Clark?" she asked. When he kept laughing, she repeated, "Clark? Is there some reason you are bothering me when I'm off?"

"Working hard?" Clark asked through his laughter.

"I'm taking the weekend off, Clark."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

There was a pause before Clark spoke again. "Sorry, Lois. I didn't really think you'd be able to do it. But congratulations. You are having fun ... relaxing?" Clark asked with a note of skepticism in his voice.

He sounded weird... maybe even... sincere? Still feeling on guard, Lois replied, "Yes, I am currently taking a bubble bath. Nothing more relaxing than that."

"Oh," Clark replied, his voice sounding a bit high pitched.

"Clark, are you all right? You sound weird."

"I'm..." Clark paused and Lois heard him take a deep breath. "I'm fine, Lois. I'll let you get back to your... um... bubble bath."

"Thanks, Clark," Lois said smiling.

She turned around to hang up the phone, but rather than turn back around to keep relaxing, she was transfixed by the image out the window across the way. Was that Senator Harrington? Exchanging something with that other man?

"Okay, you guys have three nights," Perry said.

"Guys?" Lois asked. When she asked if the Planet would put her up in the honeymoon suite for a few nights in the hopes of seeing more of whatever was going on with Senator Harrington, she had meant alone.

"Yeah," Perry said, looking at her quizzically. "You and Clark. This is a major surveillance operation. You're going to need help."

"Did you say 'Clark'?" Lois asked, her heart sinking. If it was Jimmy, it would not be so bad. She could push Jimmy around. Clark was not as amenable to that as Jimmy was. She probably would not be able to convince him to leave at night so she could take another bubble bath. Not that she would do that if the investigation was going well, anyway.

"I heard him say 'Clark'," Clark said with a grin. Lois shot him a look.

"He definitely said 'Clark'," Jimmy smiled. Well, until Lois shot him a look. Then he stopped smiling and started staring at his feet.

"Chief," Lois protested. "I can't share the suite with Clark. How would it look?"

"Like we were honeymooners, dear," Clark said, wrapping an arm around her and squeezing her hip.

She pulled away forcefully, glaring at Clark.

"Clark's right, Lois," Perry said, trying to keep the laughter out of his voice. "You need a cover. This one is perfect."

"Just don't try anything funny!" Lois demanded as she looked at Clark.

Adopting a look of pure innocence, Clark smiled. "Who me? No, I think I need to be more worried about you."

Clark whistled while he packed. Three whole days with Lois. This could be a great building block for their relationship — or it could be pure torture. He was not sure which was more likely.

Superman poked his head into Clark's room. "You're in a good mood today," he remarked.

Clark turned to him with a smile. "I'm about to spend the next three days at the Lexor with Lois. Should I be happy or should I be scared?"

Superman laughed. "With Lois, a little bit of both is always a good idea." Clark smiled in response and Superman added, "While not 100% pleasant, my stay with Lois was great. Really." He could see Clark's shoulders drop a little as he relaxed.

"Great," Clark said, swinging his packed bag over his shoulder. "I'll see you in a few days."

"See you," Superman said. He watched Clark leave somewhat wistfully. He missed that — both the excitement of working on a case and the ability to leave the house without being thronged with reporters. Maybe he would go visit Martha and Jonathan tomorrow. He could use a few

hours somewhere where he could be Clark.

On the other hand, this was not really the worst thing in the world. If he remembered correctly, Lois had not needed Superman all that much during the time she was at the Lexor. Keeping some distance from Lois was important right now. He was not sure what had happened during that kiss last week, but it had scared him a little. Yes, distance from Lois was a very good idea right now.

“Things that you’d find at a barbeque,” Clark said.

For a moment, Lois was silent, but only for a moment before she exploded with potential answers. “Grill, charcoal, hamburgers, hot dogs, potato chips, paper plates, soda, lighter fluid, blankets, ants, um... um...”

Clark watched the timer carefully while Lois jumped up and down trying to think of more things you might find at a barbeque. “Spatula,” she cried, then fell silent again. She stole a glance at the timer. There was still time. One more thing, she encouraged herself. Just one more.

“Time,” Clark said right as Lois screamed, “Frisbee!”

“So?” she asked.

“Six points. You got charcoal, hamburgers, ants, blankets, lighter fluid, and paper plates. You missed children, football, watermelon, and Frisbee.”

“Hey! I said Frisbee!” Lois insisted.

“Not before your time was up,” Clark said smirking. He loved the competitive side of Lois. It had taken some cajoling to get her to agree to play a game, but eventually even she had to admit that nothing was happening next door at the moment and staring at an empty office was pretty boring.

They had started with card games until Clark won a hand of gin rummy, causing Lois to rip up her cards in frustration. Then they had moved on to Monopoly, where Lois happily bankrupted Clark. Now they were onto Outburst and Lois’ competitive juices were really going.

“That’s not true,” Lois said, but she pouted as she said it, so Clark knew she knew she should not get the point.

“Fine!” she said, grumpily. “Your turn.”

Clark bit back a laugh when she grabbed the card viewer out of his hand.

“Books You Read in School,” she said, her voice still grumpy.

“‘To Kill a Mockingbird’, ‘Slaughterhouse 5’, ‘Catch-22’, ‘1984’, ‘Animal Farm’, ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’, ‘Pride and Prejudice’, ‘A Brave New World’, ‘Clockwork Orange’, ‘Hamlet’, ‘MacBeth’, ‘Romeo and Juliet’, ‘A Tale of Two Cities’,” Clark paused, trying to think of the books on his bookshelf that were in English. “‘The Good Earth’, ‘A Separate Peace’, ‘The Scarlet Letter’, ‘Great Expectations’, ‘A...’”

“You have them all,” Lois interrupted, passing the card reader back to him, still grumpy. “You probably own all those books, don’t you?” she asked.

Clark suddenly felt like the school dork and felt his face flush slightly. “Well, yeah, they’re good books.”

Lois laughed. Clark was not sure what was so funny about it, so he just watched her for a few moments, finally asking, “What is so funny, Lois?”

“You are so wholesome, Clark” Lois said still smiling.

“Why do you say that like it’s a bad thing? Like it makes me boring?”

Lois sobered. The response that had come to mind immediately was “Because it does,” but even she knew that was cruel, and it was untrue as well. “We should get back to work,” she mumbled.

“Superman!” Martha called happily as she opened the backdoor. “What brings you by?”

“I just...” Superman floundered for words, not sure he wanted to admit how lonely he was getting. Finally he decided to tell her the truth, or sort of. “Clark is gone for the next couple of days. The apartment feels too quiet when it’s just me,” he said, not admitting that even when Clark was not gone, he felt lonely. He missed his family and his friends — basically, his life. Life here was exactly what he had feared when he started being Superman back in his own universe years ago. He had become little more than a cardboard cutout of a superhero that bore only a passing resemblance to Clark Kent.

At home when things for Superman were busy and he felt this way, a reassuring hug from Lois would make it all better, Emily putting her hand in his as they crossed the street, or Jory snuggling into his side while they read a book together. Those things had never felt as far away as they did here.

“Superman?” Martha asked and Superman had to smile slightly. Like his mother, this woman was intuitive.

“I just wanted to see a friendly face,” he explained.

“Well, come in. Jonathan would like to see you, too.”

Superman came in and inhaled the smell of a freshly baked apple pie. It smelled like home here. He wondered how his parents were doing. He had to admit he missed them less than the rest of his family as he had developed a relationship that was similar with the Jonathan and Martha Kent here, but they still weren’t his parents. He tried to remind himself that however long he had been here, he would be returning to his life just moments after he had left it, so nothing had really changed for his parents yet.

“Superman,” Jonathan said, getting up with a smile. “What are you doing here?”

“He’s lonely,” Martha said and Superman smiled again. Even though he had tried to soft pedal it, she had known what he meant.

Jonathan came over and gave him a brief hug before motioning to the table. “Well, then sit down. There’s nothing better than a slice of Martha’s apple pie and a glass of buttermilk for loneliness.”

Martha placed a clean plate in front of him as he sat down.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “I really appreciate that I can come here when I need some time away from being...” he motioned to the suit.

“Clark told us he’s taken to calling you Clark,” Martha said. “I guess it must be depressing for everyone to refer to you as the superhero all the time.” Off of Superman’s nod, she said, “Well, then, maybe Jonathan and I can call you Clark, too?”

“I would really like that. Thank you,” Superman said.

“You don’t need to thank us, you know,” Jonathan said.

“We like having you come visit. I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but you bear more than a passing resemblance to our son,” he smiled.

Superman laughed. “So I’ve noticed.”

“And if you ever want to talk, we’re here for you. We know you’re probably closer to Clark, but since there are often things you can’t tell him, if you feel you can tell us, we’ll listen,” Martha added.

When Superman did not say anything for a moment, Jonathan leaned over to place a hand on his. “You know the longest Martha and I have ever been apart is one night. And I missed her like crazy the whole time.”

Martha laughed. “And we spent most of the time we were awake on the phone anyway.”

Jonathan laughed, remembering that she was right. Then his tone sobered, “I imagine you must miss Lois so much that it feels like a huge aching hole in your chest.”

Superman nodded, suddenly at a loss of words, worried that he may burst into tears. Taking a deep breath he said, “The last time I was gone for a long time, it was only a week. And I came home once for a few minutes so I could see her.”

“I’m sure she’s thinking about you,” Martha offered.

“She came for a visit. Did Clark tell you?” Superman said. “A few weeks ago, just before the whole thing with Trask and the Kryptonite, Herb popped in and he brought Lois with him.”

Martha smiled. “It must have been really good to see her.”

“It was. But now...”

“You miss her more,” Martha supplied.

Superman smiled slightly. That was precisely right. He had missed Lois before terribly. Somehow, though, seeing her had made it worse — made the missing more acute or something. That was not to say that he was sorry she had come, of course. He would not have given up the visit for anything. Still, he did miss her more.

“Were Emily and Jory with her?” Jonathan asked.

Superman shook his head. “We thought it would be too confusing for them. I’m only going to be gone ten minutes or so in their timeline.” He laughed as he thought about it. “I think Em’s too young to really understand time travel anyway, so she’d probably be angry at us, sure she was going to miss her party.”

Martha smiled, “I bet she was pretty excited. I still remember my first boy-girl party.”

Superman smiled, “Yeah, it was about all she could talk about for a week before I left. I think, although she wouldn’t tell us of course, that she had a crush on one of the boys there. Actually, I think my mom knew, but was sworn to secrecy as Em kept giving her looks and giggling when she came to help her get ready.”

Martha and Jonathan shared a look. “It will be fun to have grandchildren,” Martha admitted. “Not that we want to rush Clark or anything. But it will be nice.”

“He does have a long way to go yet,” Superman said. “I’m not sure how things will work out here, but for us, it took two years after I moved to Metropolis to get engaged and another year to get married. And then there were some issues with getting pregnant — we didn’t think we could at

first. So, all in all, about three and a half years from now if things are similar.”

“We waited nearly ten years for a son. Waiting three and a half for grandchildren sounds easy,” Jonathan said, winking at Martha.

“So,” Martha said, sensing that it was time to change the subject, “you said Clark was away for a few days. Where is he?”

“He’s spending a few nights at the Lexor with Lois,” Superman said.

“At the Lexor?” Martha asked.

“Yeah, they’re in the Honeymoon Suite,” Superman said, finally deciding it was time for a bite of pie.

“I’m confused,” Martha said. “Didn’t you say...”

“This tastes wonderful,” Superman said, then noticing the distressed look on her face, he laughed. “It’s for a story. They’re doing a surveillance operation there. Undercover of course, and Clark is sleeping on the couch.”

He could see Martha relax, but a moment later she smiled and looked at Jonathan. “Well, we should call him,” she said to her husband. “This should be fun.”

Jonathan laughed heartily in response.

“Can you hand me that?” Lois asked Clark.

He passed the camera to her.

“Are you sure this is the right placement?” she asked him, looking out the window to check for herself.

“Yes,” Clark said. “The living room of this suite overlooks the office on the left. The bedroom, the room on the right. That lackey guy has been doing stuff in the room on the right all day, so if something is happening tonight, it must be in there.”

Lois nodded. He was right. She was just nervous for some reason.

“Okay, I think we’re about...”

Clark cut her off by grabbing the camera, throwing it on the bed, and covering it with a blanket. Before Lois could ask what the heck he was doing, he grabbed her around the waist and threw her on the bed next to the camera.

“Clark, what are you...” her words were cut off. Clark Kent had climbed on top of her and stopped her torrent of words with a kiss. What did he think he was doing?

Why was he kissing her? Lois tried to calm the pounding of her heart. The adrenaline from getting thrown on the bed was clearly getting to her. That was it — the only reason her heart was pounding.

“Towels, ya?” came a voice from the door and Lois realized why Clark was kissing her. He was maintaining their cover. “Sorry,” the same voice said before Lois could hear the door click shut.

Clark had moved off of her a moment later. “Sorry,” he said, but he did not look the slightest bit sorry.

Lois had to admit, she was not sorry, either. Well, she did not need to admit it, at least not out loud. “Doesn’t anybody knock around here?” she asked instead.

“Have you ever lived with someone?” Lois asked as they watched the room across the alleyway.

Clark looked at her for a moment. How could he tell her that not only had he never lived with someone, but he was

not sure how he would ever be able to? Unless he got married, of course. Even that, though, seemed like an impossibility a lot of the time given that he was in love with Lois and she was most certainly not in love with him.

Then he remembered. “Yes,” he said smiling. “You’ve met my roommate, Superman, haven’t you?”

Lois smiled at him. “Very funny. That’s not what I meant and you know it. Not a roommate, but someone real.”

“No,” Clark admitted.

She responded with “Me neither.” They were silent for a few beats before Lois asked, “What do you think it’s like?”

“Why?” Clark asked. “Are you thinking of moving in with someone?” he teased. “My roommate perhaps?” He was not sure why he said that, he certainly did not want to know the answer to that.

Lois laughed. “No. Well, not yet anyway,” she said, but Clark could tell she was still joking. “I just wonder. You know.”

“I think it’s probably scary,” Clark said. “To be that open with someone else. Let them see you all the time. I guess I feel like if you live with someone, you need to be prepared to let down all your barriers. Let them see you when you first wake up with morning breath, when you’re angry, even without provocation, when you’re sad...”

“Yeah,” Lois agreed. “That would be sort of scary.”

Clark nodded his agreement.

Her voice quiet and introspective sounding, Lois offered, “I almost lived with someone once.”

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“What are you two doing?” Lucy asked. Now that Lucy was a freshman, she was on the same schedule as Lois, and the sisters often went to Chad’s house after school to study.

Lois was not sure what Chad had told his parents about her mother, but they never seemed to mind having the girls over, often inviting them to stay for dinner. Lois and Lucy usually accepted. It was not like their mother even noticed if they were home (although on her worst nights she would forget that it was not actually Lois’ responsibility to make them dinner and get angry that it was not done).

It was early now, though, and so while the Andrews had told them they could stay for dinner tonight and they had agreed, the three were in the living room studying before dinner. Or at least, Lucy was studying.

“We’re talking,” Lois said in response to Lucy’s question, and Lucy rolled her eyes.

“I know *that*,” Lucy said. “I thought we were studying, but you two are making too much noise.”

“Sorry, Luce,” Chad said. “We are studying, sort of. Lois and I need to start working on college applications and we’re trying to decide where to apply.”

“Oh, right,” Lucy said, sounding vaguely depressed.

“Met U is our first choice, Lucy,” Lois said quietly.

“It is?” Lucy asked, trying to contain her excitement.

“Well, it has both a great journalism department and premed program,” Chad said. “And of course, it’s near you.”

Lucy smiled, but the smile disappeared quickly. “But you’re not going to still want to live at home, are you?” she said to Lois.

“No,” Lois sighed.

“What are you going to do?” Lucy asked, even though she saw her sister start to say something else.

Chad smiled, “We’re going to get an apartment off campus,” he said, reaching over to give Lois’ hand a squeeze.

“Oh, right,” Lucy said, eyeing them carefully.

“Not for that!” Lois said, giving Chad a look. They had discussed it before. Given the lack of parental supervision they got, Lois felt she needed to set a good example for Lucy. Anyway, Chad had said he didn’t want to have sex yet. They were too young and if something were to happen, he couldn’t really support them yet. Lois agreed and wanted to make sure Lucy knew they were waiting so that she would think twice about sleeping with any boyfriends she had in the near future.

“I told you, Luce. We don’t do that,” Lois said quietly, so Chad’s parents could not hear. “We’ll be sleeping in separate bedrooms.”

“Oh,” Lucy said again.

Chad smiled at Lucy. “We think it shouldn’t be too hard to find a two bedroom apartment someplace on the bus route to the high school so you could live with us and still get to school.”

Lucy’s face broke out in a smile as she asked, “You want me to live with you?”

Lois nodded, smiling as well. “Well, we’d need to share a bedroom, but yeah.”

“But how will you guys get to school?” Lucy asked. “And how are you going to afford an apartment?”

“Damien is graduating from college this year,” Chad started, referring to his eldest brother. “He bought a car last year, but he said now that he’ll have a real job, he wants a new one, so he’s going to give me his old one and Lois and I can share.”

“And Chad’s parents are going to give him the money he would have spent to live in the dorms for the apartment,” Lois said.

“Is that enough for a two bedroom place?” Lucy asked.

“No,” Lois shook her head. “I’m going to ask dad for the rest.”

“You are?” Lucy was shocked. They almost never talked to their father.

Lois shrugged her shoulders. “I’m going to have to ask him for money anyway for college. The way I see it, he owes us. He’s the one that left us with mom all these years.”

Lucy nodded, looking sad. “You think he’ll say yes?”

Lois shrugged, “I don’t know, but we’ll think of something else if he doesn’t.”

“What if one of you doesn’t get in to Met U?” Lucy asked. “Like if you don’t get in,” she looked at Chad.

“What will you do?” she asked Lois.

Lois looked at the couch cushion carefully, pulling at a piece of lint.

“We’re not going to college without each other,” she said quietly. “I’m sorry, Lucy. And really,” she said, finally looking up at her sister. “it’s not going to be an issue. I mean, Chad is graduating salutatorian and I’m currently ranked fifth. And our SAT scores are good. We’re shoe-ins for Met U.”

paused to think for a moment. "I think she was a bit breathless afterwards."

Superman laughed. He remembered the kiss at the Lexor and Lois was breathless. It was good to know that some things were the same across universes.

January 1994

Superman looked out the window. The sky was getting darker, just as he had known it would. He had thought about this off and on from the moment he had agreed to do this. There were only two moments from his first year in Metropolis that he was afraid to relive. While Lois had worried about his meeting Trask in Smallville, he had not. He had known (even though he had been wrong in the end) that he would be fine as he would not react as strongly to the Kryptonite this time.

However, this, along with that stupid Kryptonite cage of Luthor's, were moments he feared. He had barely managed to escape either experience with his life. If things went differently this time... they would not, though. He had to be positive. It would be fine, and sooner, rather than later, he would be holding Lois in his arms again, reading Emily a bedtime story, and walking Jory to school.

The thought came to him suddenly while he watched the sky darken. Why had he never considered that before? He really should have. How should he handle it, though? He should... he probably did not have time to get there and back, but maybe he could have Clark meet him there.

He left Clark a note on the counter and took off.

It was just a strange sound at first. Everything felt a bit surreal with the sky going so dark in the middle of the day and none of the streetlights on. Clark peered through the darkness. He had better night vision than most people, but even he could not see as well in the dark.

His eyes widened as he realized what he had heard. It was a car missing a turn and moving over a barrier. It was headed straight for Lois.

"Clark?" she called out as he moved in front of her.

"I'm right here, Lois," he said as he put his arms out and stopped the car. Right then, the solar eclipse, or whatever it was, began to lift and daylight slowly seeped in, Clark hurled himself backwards, bumping his head on a dumpster. He lay on the ground for a moment, trying to look stunned. Then he stood up, dusting himself off.

"Clark," Lois said, moving over to him. "Are you okay?"

Clark put his hand to the back of his head, and nodded slowly. "I knocked my head, but I think I'm okay."

"Let me see," Lois said, moving around him. "You're not bleeding. Are you sure you're okay? Were you hit by the car?" she asked him, motioning to the car in front of them.

"Yeah," he said. "I think I was. But I'm okay."

Lois looked at him skeptically, but finally backed away.

"Clark?" Clark called out as he entered the farmhouse.

"I'm in here, Clark," Superman called back from the living room.

"Why are you here?" Clark asked Superman in

confusion as he entered. "Hi, Mom, Dad," he said.

"I came for a visit," Superman said, although he was not sure why he was being obtuse.

"You must have known, though," Clark said. "Professor Diatch wants to see you."

"I know," Superman said, his tone weary. He had meant to fill Martha and Jonathan in on this when he showed up, but it was easier to fall into small talk and forget this was coming.

Still, it was probably good that he came. He expected Clark to argue with him and he hoped Martha and Jonathan would back him up.

"It wasn't a solar eclipse earlier," Superman said out loud.

"What wasn't?" Martha asked.

"I know," Clark said to Superman. "They told us at the press conference." Then turning to his parents, he explained, "There's an asteroid. They're calling it Nightfall. It passed in between the Earth and the sun today causing something that looked like a solar eclipse. It was only visible on the eastern coast of North America and the western coast of Europe."

"It's heading on a collision course with Earth," Superman said and all eyes in the room swung to him in shock.

"What's the impact?" Clark asked.

"They think it might knock the Earth off its axis. It could be the end of life as we know it."

Clark felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Why are you here?" he asked as he started to understand.

"Diatch wants to see me as the military is going to ask me to knock it off course."

"And?" Clark prodded him quickly enough that Superman realized he had guessed that was coming.

"I'm going to do it, of course."

"You can't!" Clark said vehemently.

"It's either that or the end of life on Earth," Superman said.

"No," Clark said, searching Superman's face.

"Something needs to knock it off course. If it was easy for you to do, you wouldn't have come here. And if there's a danger..." Clark paused. "This is my universe. I have to do it."

"No, Clark," Superman said, his voice calm. This was what he had expected, and he had practiced this argument in his head. He had not realized Clark would realize how nervous he was, though, and that was certainly putting him at a disadvantage. "I've done this before. I know what I'm doing."

"It was easy?" Martha asked sounding dubious.

"No, it wasn't," Superman admitted. "But..."

"But nothing!" Clark said, his voice rising. "I can't let you risk your life for this."

"Clark..." Superman started, sighing. "You have to let me do this. I know what I'm doing this time."

Superman looked at Martha and Jonathan, hoping one of them would back him up.

"What happened in your universe?" Jonathan asked.

Superman sighed. "I hit it, but not hard enough. I came crashing back to Earth and had amnesia. When they found

me, they thought I was Clark. It took several days, but I finally remembered I was Superman with the help of my parents. I was successful the second time, but it was very shortly before Nightfall made impact.”

“I can’t let you do this,” Clark said again.

“It will be different this time,” Superman said. He had known from the moment the sky got dark that this time he would not adhere to the timeline. He would be successful the first time. Sticking to the timeline was not as important as getting back to his family. “I know what I did last time that worked,” he said to Clark. “I’ll be fine.”

Jonathan sighed. “Clark’s right, Superman,” he said, his voice flat. “He needs to go. We can’t ask you to do this.”

“You’re not asking me,” Superman said.

“We can’t let you do this,” Martha corrected Jonathan’s words, her voice soft.

“You have to,” Superman said. “Clark could get hurt. He could...”

“It’s my choice,” Clark said. “And you can give me pointers. Tell me what I need to do.”

“Please,” Superman pleaded. As much as he was afraid, he could not let Clark do this. If something happened to Clark... he would not be able to live with himself.

“Look, we don’t want Clark to go either,” Jonathan said. “But Clark’s right. One of you has to go.”

“And you have a family,” Martha said gently to Superman.

“And this is my universe. My responsibility,” Clark said.

“I can’t let you do this,” Superman said, although his protests were getting weaker. He had been sure the Kents would back him up.

“You have to,” Clark said. Only Superman had hearing good enough to pick up the tremor beneath the calmness of his voice.

“Let me think about it,” he finally said.

Superman sighed. While he knew what was coming, this was not going to be any more fun than the first time. He hoped he was convincing pretending he had no idea what was going on until they said something.

“Good evening, Professor Daitch. General Zeitlin.”

“Hello, Superman,” Daitch said.

“Care if I take a look?” Superman asked, motioning to the telescope.

“I thought you had enhanced visual abilities,” Zeitlin said.

“I do,” Superman admitted, noting Zeitman’s skeptical tone. “But even I have my limits.”

Superman peeked through the eye piece. He tried to hide the shudder he felt as he saw it. It was just as big as he remembered, maybe even bigger.

“Nightfall is nearly twenty miles across,” Daitch said. “It’s traveling close to thirty-five thousand miles an hour.”

So it was slightly bigger — the one in his universe was seventeen miles long and it had only been going thirty thousand miles per hour. Although he suspected at that size and speed, it would be hard for him to notice a difference.

“If my calculations are correct, it’s going to collide with the Earth in three and a half days,” Daitch continued.

“Superman,” Zeitlin interrupted, “this could knock the Earth off its axis. Maybe even throw us out of our solar orbit.”

“It’s far larger than the meteor that caused the distinction of the dinosaurs,” Daitch cut in.

“The President is planning a press conference for tonight,” Zeitlin said. “He plans to make this public, but he needs to avoid panic. And the military... Well, frankly we’re not prepared to handle this kind of thing.”

“You want me to fly into space to stop a rock the size of Metropolis that’s traveling faster than any spacecraft we’ve ever made?” Superman clarified even though he knew that was exactly what they were asking.

“Can you?” Daitch asked.

“I don’t know,” Superman admitted. But he had done it once before. Hopefully, he would be successful now as well.

“What are you wearing?” Lois asked Clark as they walked to the press conference.

“The world may be about to end and you are worried about my fashion sense?” Clark asked her.

“It’s just so...” Lois tried to find the words to describe her problem with his outfit. “It’s so morbid,” she finally settled on.

“I thought black was basic, not morbid,” Clark smiled at her, trying to quell the butterflies in his stomach.

“Black is nice. All black is morbid.”

“Well, next time there is an asteroid heading for the earth, I’ll be sure to call you for fashion advice, Ms. Lane.”

“Hardy-har-har,” Lois rolled her eyes at him.

“How are you feeling?” Lois asked Superman. Clark stood beside her, shifting nervously from foot to foot.

“I’m nervous,” he admitted, then realizing what he said, he blushed. He glanced at Clark, and gave him what he hoped was an encouraging smile. “But this will work,” he said. The words were to Lois, and would hopefully cover his slip, but he also hoped they would help Clark as well.

He glanced at Lois again and something in her eyes stopped him. She looked so... sad. So worried. “Lois, how are you feeling?”

Lois sighed. “Scared.” She turned to Clark. “We’re scared for you,” she said, including Clark in her words.

“I’ll be back,” Superman said. Looking into her eyes, he forgot himself for a moment. “We’ll go flying together.” He heard Daitch and Zietlin behind him. “I have to go.”

“Good luck,” Clark said, putting his hand out.

Superman started. He had forgotten Clark was there. The two men shook hands, but avoided looking at each other, both nervous about what they were about to do.

Lois looked at Superman closely. She could see how scared he was. “Good luck,” she whispered as she moved closer and wrapped her arms around him. As her lips met his, Clark looked away. He had expected that. Superman had told him it was going to happen, although he had said he would try to stop it. But Clark had seen his eyes — he was too focused on Nightfall to remember about Lois’ kiss.

Besides, he would have expected the kiss even if Superman had not told him about it. Still, that did not mean

he wanted to watch it.

Lois and Clark moved back, watching as Superman was fitted with the equipment for his trip — a communications device and an oxygen tank. Superman had told Clark that he had used little of the oxygen tank, last time he had been fine and able to hold his breath much longer than the twenty minutes he had estimated, but it did not hurt to have it.

Superman looked at him and nodded so slightly it would not have been noticeable if Clark had not been looking for it. “Lois,” he said, placing a hand on her arm. “I’m going to get some man on the street interviews.”

“What?” Lois asked, feeling strangely scared at the thought of Clark leaving her.

“I’m going...”

“I heard you,” Lois interrupted him. “It’s a good idea,” she admitted. “Go.”

Impulsively, Clark leaned forward to give her a hug. “You’re a great partner, Lois.”

Lois smiled, but hid it as Clark moved back. “I know. Now get off me.”

Clark smiled at her and she knew he had seen the teasing in her eyes.

“I’ll meet you back at the newsroom,” he told her, hoping he was being honest.

Lois walked back to the Daily Planet feeling listless. She felt... lonely, although she was not sure why. She had talked to Lucy last night. She even had a passably good conversation with her father. She would see Clark, Perry, and Jimmy when she got back to the newsroom. Still, she felt lonely.

The melancholy feeling was not just her, though. The streets of Metropolis were hushed. She had never seen them this quiet, particularly in the middle of the day.

She shook her head, trying to get herself out of her mood. She had once asked Lucy how she managed to be cheerful all of the time, and Lucy had told her that when she was sad, she thought of something good, some happy memory. Pretended she was in that moment again. Lois was skeptical that that would work, particularly when it seemed like the world may be about to end, but she was game for trying.

She cast her mind back, trying to think of something happy. How she got to this memory, she was not sure, but it was where she landed and it fit the criteria.

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“Come on. I know you two are the shyest couple in school, but this is ridiculous,” Samantha, the yearbook photographer, said.

“Sorry,” Chad said, blushing, “but it’s hard to kiss in front of the camera.”

“You don’t need to make out or anything,” Samantha said. “Just press your lips together. I just need one picture of you kissing.”

Lois flushed, but leaned towards Chad and the two gave each other a chaste kiss on the lips.

“Perfect,” Samantha said a second later. “Now. Do something goofy.”

“Goofy?” Lois asked.

“Yes, goofy. Something silly and cute,” Samantha instructed.

“Something silly and cute?” Chad repeated.

Samantha sighed. “The senior class voted you cutest couple. You need to pose doing something cute for the yearbook picture.”

“Like what?” Lois asked.

“I don’t know,” Samantha said. “Maybe stick your tongues out at each other. Give each other noogies. Something like that.”

“Or maybe...” Chad started, reaching his fingers out to tickle Lois’ stomach.

“Hey!” she said, between giggles. “Stop that!” She tried batting his hands away, but was ineffective, she was laughing so hard. “Come on, Chad,” she said breathlessly.

“We’re trying...”

“Got it!” Samantha cried. “That was perfect.”

Lois turned to glare at Chad. “Our picture is going to have you tickling me!” she accused him.

“Yup,” he said, laughing at her.

“I can’t believe...” but her words faded off as Chad started tickling her again.

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Lois smiled for a moment. Maybe Lucy was right. Maybe that did work. Her mind seemed focused on Chad’s young face. Then she remembered the last time she had seen him and her emotions tumbled.

Lois sighed. She was not Lucy. She should just learn to live with it.

Clark found an alleyway and making sure no one saw him, shot up into the sky. He hovered right above the cloud line for a few moments watching the ground until he saw Superman shoot up into the sky. He moved closer to where it seemed Superman was headed, and a moment later they met up.

“Are you sure I can’t convince you to let me do this on my own?” Clark whispered so that the microphone Superman was wearing would not pick it up.

Superman shook his head. He had told Clark that he was not comfortable with the idea of his going alone — not when Superman himself had knowledge of the best way to destroy the asteroid. They had finally compromised on going together — even Superman had to admit it would likely be easier to destroy Nightfall with two of them.

Unfortunately, with the communications link Superman was wearing and its very sensitive microphone, communication between them would be limited. They had discussed staying far enough away to be sure that only Superman could pickup anything Clark said, but not the mic, but decided they did not want to be that far from one another. Clark could clearly speak quietly enough for the mic not to pick up his sound, but neither were sure how the sound would travel once they left the earth’s atmosphere. So instead, they discussed a game plan ahead of time, and both felt fairly confident that it would be okay.

Pointing up with his left hand, Superman shot off, Clark trailing just slightly behind him. Within a few moments, they were further up than Clark had ever been before and he started to feel panicky. He reminded himself that Superman

wanted to go home but was afraid to — afraid that somehow he would still be recognized, somehow... So, he had moved to Moscow, hoping that a big city would help him blend in better. He had spent the first month he was in Moscow holed up in the room he was renting, certain that if he left the room someone would recognize him, certain that his parents could still be in danger from his stunt in Belize.

He finally woke up one morning and vowed never to think about that cot in Kansas, the awkward angle of his father's leg, or the burned bodies on the stairs ever again. He left his room the following day and had not thought about those memories again until recently.

It relieved him somewhat to associate this nervousness with the terrorizing fear that he had felt that day and the weeks following. That had worked out okay. Aside from having to leave Belize, it was all okay. No one had gotten hurt. Maybe, the same would be true today.

Superman placed a hand on his arm, although that was not what yanked Clark out of his thoughts or what had made him stop flying. It was massive. Any calm he had felt a moment ago was gone now. He was suddenly glad that he had kept his gaze down during most of the flight, just glancing up every so often to make sure Superman was in front of him. He was not sure he would have been able to fly towards this if he had been watching it.

"I can see it now," Superman said into the microphone. Clark realized he had been speaking since they stopped moving, he had just not been able to concentrate on the words while he watched the rock fly towards them. "In fact, it's hard to see anything else. It's immense," Superman added.

A moment of silence followed while Clark knew Superman was being given last minute instructions from the ground. Superman then nodded to him, and they started moving again. The goal was to push from nearby places, Superman on the stress point he had been informed of and Clark just to the right of it. Superman seemed convinced that given his last experience, that would work best.

"I look like an ant next to this," Superman said into the microphone and Clark looked at him. Superman looked frightened, more so than Clark had ever seen him before. He was surprised to notice the fear in Superman's eyes. While he was feeling the same fear himself, he had imagined that Superman was feeling more confident than he was. Somehow it was not reassuring to see that they were both frightened.

"Here goes, my friends," Superman said into the microphone and with a last nod at Clark, they charged at Nightfall simultaneously.

"Hey, man. Whatcha doin' here? You gotta be freezing." He looked up, trying to locate the source of the sound through the pounding in his head. It was a homeless man, now rifling through his cart. "Put these on," the man said as he thrust a pair of pants and a shirt at him.

He looked down and realized that he was naked. How had he gotten here? And naked?

"They're clean," the man insisted, misinterpreting his hesitation. "I only worn them a couple of times."

He nodded. "Thank you. That's very kind of you."

"Are you in some kind of a trouble?" the homeless man asked.

"No," he replied, but then reconsidered. "I don't know."

The homeless man blinked at him and then laughed. "I've had a few nights like that myself. It's okay. Things here were crazy last night after Superman destroyed that asteroid."

Superman? Asteroid? What was he talking about?

"You from around here?" the homeless man asked.

"I don't know," he answered, his voice quiet. How could he not know where he was from?

The homeless man shook his head in amazement. "What's your name?"

He said nothing for a moment. Certainly, even if he had no idea how he got here, even if he could not remember where he lived, or even where here was, he knew his name. Right?

"I don't know," he finally concluded.

Lois sat on Clark and Superman's doorstep feeling the tears drip down her cheeks, but not caring. He had done it. Nightfall was smashed into millions of pieces and the earth was safe once more. Superman had saved them. But at what cost? No one had seen him since it had happened. What if he had died in the process?

Lois had come here hoping to find Clark. He was the only person she knew who would be as upset about this as she was.

Clark was not here, though. Where was he? She had not seen him since the news conference yesterday. Would he have gone to Smallville to spend the last few hours with his parents? He would have told her if he was going to do that — at least she thought he would.

Besides, it had been impossible to buy a last minute flight in the past few days.

The tears continued to fall. Lois tried to use Lucy's trick again, even though it had not worked all that well last time. Try to think about something happy. But this time, it did not work at all.

"Lois?" the voice brought her out of her thoughts. She looked up into a pair of concerned eyes.

"Martha," Lois said, falling into the older woman's arms.

"It's going to be okay," Martha said as she cried.

"They can't contact him. They can't see him. They think he didn't survive," Lois sobbed.

"I know," Martha said, holding her tightly.

She felt a third hand on her back and Jonathan's voice, warm near her ear. "Superman's tough, Lois. I'm sure he's fine."

Lois pulled away from Martha, swiping at her cheeks. "Thank you," she whispered. It was kind of them to try to console her, particularly when the tones in both their voices made it clear that they were just as concerned that Superman had not made it as she was.

"I don't know where Clark is," Lois said. "I had hoped he would be here."

Martha and Jonathan exchanged a glance. "Well, then, we'll just wait inside," Martha said as she reached down for the spare key Clark insisted on keeping under the flowerpot.

“What do you want, Henderson?” Lois asked, feeling annoyed. There was still no news of Superman and no sign of Clark. The call which had come on Lois’ cell phone had interrupted the lunch Martha had prepared, and for some reason Lois felt guilty leaving Clark’s parents alone in his apartment.

Bill Henderson smiled at her tone and motioned for her to follow him into a room.

“What if I told you that your name is Clark Kent and you’re a reporter for the Daily Planet?” someone was saying in an adjoining room. There was a mirror between the two rooms and Lois looked through it in disbelief. The man speaking had his back to her, but the person he was speaking to was unmistakably exactly who he had just been told he was — her partner. He looked awful, though.

“Clark Kent?” Clark asked. “Do you know that for a fact?”

Lois groaned. “What happened to him?”

“No idea,” Henderson told her. “We found him in Suicide Slum. He had no idea who I was when they brought him in, so I decided to call you.”

She started to wave to Clark, but then realized it was one-way glass — he could not see her.

“I don’t think it would matter,” Henderson told her when she dropped her hand. “He doesn’t remember his own name or yours. So I doubt he’ll recognize you.”

The thought made Lois want to cry, but she was not sure why.

“Doctor Jerri McCorkle. Lois Lane, Clark’s partner at the Planet,” Henderson introduced Lois to the doctor when he joined them. Clark was still in the other room, looking around in confusion.

“What caused this?” Lois asked.

Dr. McCorkle shrugged. “Anxiety caused by the asteroid, maybe. Although usually amnesia is triggered by something physical even if its real cause is emotional.”

“He got hit by a car the other day. Hit his head. Could that have caused it?” Lois asked.

The doctor nodded. “Possibly. It’s as good a theory as any.”

“Is he okay?” Lois asked.

“Physically he’s fine,” Dr. McCorkle answered. “But I have no idea if he’ll ever regain his memory.”

“What can I do?” Lois asked without thought.

“Surround him by the familiar. Be patient with him.”

Henderson laughed. “Lois doesn’t do patient.”

“I can be patient!” Lois insisted. She knew Henderson was right, she was impatient. But if Clark needed her to be patient, she could be patient.

He looked up from where he lay on the ground. The building next to him was tall, very tall. Where was he?

“You need help?” someone asked him. He looked up at the person speaking. They had been speaking... French? No, that was not right... German. His thoughts, though, were in English. So, he was far from home? On the other hand, he had understood the question. He spoke German. Maybe he was an American who was living in Germany? Or a Canadian, he supposed. Maybe even British or

Australian, but he immediately rejected those. He seemed to think people in England and Australia spoke with an accent, and he did not think he would think that if he lived there.

“No,” he finally said to the man hovering above him. He was not at all sure who he was or what he was doing in Germany, but he would figure it out.

When given the choice, Clark said he would rather not go home yet. He had looked guilty admitting that he did not remember his parents, and Lois supposed that was why although she worried it was going to hurt Martha and Jonathan’s feelings. Lois waited until he was busy speaking to Dr. McCorkle to call his apartment. It was not going to be easy to make this call.

“Hello?” Martha said. Lois was glad Martha was the one who had answered. She thought that Martha might be a bit more reasonable than Jonathan.

“Martha, it’s Lois,” she said, feeling her heart rate pick up. “I’m with Clark.”

“You are?” she asked. She and Jonathan had tried to pretend that they were not worried about Clark, but Lois had her doubts about whether they were being sincere or not. The relief in Martha’s voice made it clear that they had been just as worried as she was.

“He’s at the police station.”

“The police station? Why? What happened?”

“We don’t know. He doesn’t remember anything,” Lois said.

Martha sighed, but overall seemed a lot less upset than Lois would have expected.

“Is he okay other than that?” she asked.

“Yes,” Lois confirmed. “The doctor said to surround him with familiar things for the next few days.”

“We’ll come meet you,” she offered.

“No,” Lois said quickly. “We’re about to leave. We’re going to head to the newsroom first. I wanted to take him home, but I think Clark feels badly for not remembering you. I think he’s hoping the newsroom will jog his memory so he’ll remember you before he sees you.”

“Okay,” Martha said sounding disappointed. “Just let him know that we’re happy he’s okay, and we’re not upset that he does not remember us.”

“I will.”

“And Lois?”

“Yeah?”

“Take care of him for us.”

“I will,” Lois said, hanging up the phone.

He wandered the streets aimlessly, not sure what he was looking for. Maybe something that looked familiar?

It was weird to wander around, though. People kept coming up to him and thanking him. He could not determine what they were thanking him for, though. Something to do with something called Nightfall?

Weirder yet, no one seemed to be reacting to his weird clothes. He was wearing a leotard in blue with red underwear — on the outside no less! The look was completed with a red and yellow shield on his chest and red boots. Apparently, the outfit was normal, though, as a couple of people had said something about it being too bad

Clark placed a hand on her arm. "It sounds like he's important to you."

Lois gave a half smile. "Superman's important to everyone, Clark." She took a step closer to whisper, "It's not exactly public knowledge, but you two are friends. You're roommates."

"I'm roommates with Superman?" Clark asked, his voice a tad louder than Lois thought it should be. She looked around, though, and no one seemed to have noticed.

She nodded.

"What do I have in common with a superhero?" Clark asked.

Lois remembered the first time Clark had told her he was friends with Superman. She had thought the same thing — what could out-of-this-world Superman have in common with Smallville Kent.

"A lot, actually," she told Clark now.

"Superman!" yet another person called.

"Hi," he braced himself for another person to thank him for something he had no recollection of doing.

"That was great work you did, son," he said. Son?

"Any chance we could get a front page story on what you were thinking? I'm sure Lois or Clark would be happy to write it up," he said. "Well, maybe Lois. Clark has amnesia right now, so he probably won't be writing for the next few days."

Something stirred in Superman at the names Lois and Clark.

"Maybe tomorrow?" he asked, hoping he would remember whatever he was rumored to have done by then.

"Sure thing. We're all real proud of you," the man said again as he turned away.

Superman wandered around some more, wondering what to do with this new information.

"Hey, Superman! Great job!" someone called and he turned to see someone at a news stand. "Want to see the story?" he asked, grinning.

Superman walked over. "Sure," he said, wondering if it would help.

"For free," the man said handing him a paper.

"Thanks," Superman smiled, walking away. He found a bench a few blocks away and sat down to read it.

The byline read 'Lois Lane'. It startled him for some reason. Then he remembered — he was married to Lois Lane. Or he thought he was. That Perry guy would have said something about that if it was true, though.

Then in a rush, it all came back to him. He was married to Lois Lane... just not this Lois Lane.

So, it had worked, sort of. On the other hand, as with the Kryptonite in Smallville, it had not been any easier this time around. He was going to have to learn that his last experience did not change his physical capabilities. He could not do more now just because he had done this before.

Perry said Clark had amnesia, too. Not that that was a surprise, but Superman supposed he should try to find him.

"Anything look familiar, son?" Jonathan asked. Martha, Jonathan, and Lois watched him walk around his apartment,

picking things up at random.

"I own eighteen copies of 'To Kill a Mockingbird'?" he asked from the bookcase.

"It's your favorite," Martha and Lois said in unison.

"I don't remember," Clark said, falling on the couch, dejected.

"It's okay, Clark," Martha said.

"Dr. McCorkle said not to push yourself," Lois reminded him. "It will come back eventually."

The opening of the door startled everyone.

"Superman!" Lois said as he walked in.

She ran to him, wrapping her arms tightly around him.

"We thought something had happened to you."

He smiled. He knew it shouldn't, but it felt good to hold her. "I'm okay, Lois," he said.

Martha and Jonathan came over to hug him as well and he could tell from Martha's hug that she had been as worried as Lois.

"Hi," he said to Clark.

"Hi," Clark said back, looking awkward. "Sorry. I got hit by a car a few days ago and apparently I have amnesia from it. I didn't even remember my own name. But Lois tells me we live here together and you saved the world from the asteroid."

Superman smiled. He wished he could answer that honestly. 'We saved the world', he wanted to say. With Lois here, though, he knew he had to be quiet.

"I was sorry to hear about the car accident, Clark. I hope you'll be okay."

Clark smiled, "It can't be any worse than coming face to face with an asteroid the size of Metropolis."

"Probably not," Superman smiled. "Still, I'm sure it's disconcerting not remembering who you are."

"I should head back to the Planet," Lois announced.

"The fact that you're back is news," she said to Superman.

"I bumped into Perry White on my way here,"

Superman told her. "I told him I'd give you and Clark the exclusive to what it was like up there," he said and tried to tamp down his emotional response to the broad smile she bestowed upon him in response. "I'll come by the paper tomorrow."

"See you then," she smiled at him. Then in a softer, more nurturing tone, she said to Clark, "I'll call you tonight."

"Shouldn't I come with you?" he asked.

Lois smiled, "No. You need to rest up. You've been through a lot, Clark." On impulse she walked over to where he was still sitting on the couch and gave him a hug.

Clark left the following morning happy he had work as an excuse for getting out of the house. It had been a frustrating night. His parents had tried to convince him that he had all these weird abilities like Superman. Superman had tried to tell him that his amnesia was not due to a car accident, but because he had gone with him to stop the asteroid. None of it made any sense.

He had a headache from going around and around with them all over and over again. He was looking forward to the break.

"Good morning, Clark," Lois said. Not for the first time,

Clark wondered if there was anything between them. Lois had been so kind to him and he could not help but notice the way he reacted to her.

“Good morning,” he replied.

“Anything?” she asked as he sat down behind his desk.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. He had promised his parents and Superman that he would not tell Lois about the weird things they had been trying to convince him of. He picked up his glasses. He also promised to start wearing his glasses. His parents insisted it was dangerous for him not to, although he still had trouble believing he could set things on fire with his eyes if he did not wear them.

“You’re wearing them?” Lois asked as she placed a cup of coffee and a donut on his desk. “The coffee is how you like it and this is your favorite kind of donut.”

“Thanks,” Clark said. “My parents suggested I start wearing the glasses. They say I get headaches otherwise.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Wow, Lois, this is great.”

“No problem, Clark,” Lois said, her smile so wide it made Clark feel a strange sense of euphoria. He somehow had the feeling he rarely got to see Lois like this.

“Thank you,” he said again, only this time his voice was soft.

“For what?” Lois asked, as she leaned her hip against his desk.

“For whatever it is you’ve done for me that makes me feel as good about you as I do. For taking such good care of me the last couple of days. For just... being a great friend.”

Lois smiled, leaning over further to place a hand on his arm. “Clark, whether or not this memory of yours comes back... I just want you to know, I think you’re terrific. I love you — I mean, like a brother, but I love you.” Blushing, Lois walked away.

Clark smiled. Maybe he was starting to remember, because he had expected her to qualify her “I love you” in some way.

Clark walked home from work slowly. It had been a good day. Superman had come by and given them an interview; although, he kept throwing weird glances Clark’s way while he did. Lois suggested Clark try writing part of it up and he found that while he had no memory of writing before, it was still something he was good at. Plus, Lois had been solicitous and caring all day long.

Clark was hesitant to go home and back to the argument with his parents and Superman. It was pretty clear from all that he had read that there was only one Superman. Why would he have all these abilities and not be willing to use them?

For a moment an image entered his mind of his father looking bruised and with a broken leg, but it was brief and not having any idea what it meant, Clark ignored it.

Suddenly he heard something. It was not a sound he recognized per se, so much as he knew it was not normal. He looked up and realized there was something wrong with the billboard he had just walked under; it had come loose and was swinging back and forth. While he watched it seemed to come completely loose and fell. A moment later, Clark was balancing it in the palm of his hand.

He dropped it in surprise and then stared at it. He looked

around and no one else was around. No one else had seen. Had he really just caught a billboard on the palm of his hand? Were his parents correct?

He closed his eyes for a moment and it all came rushing back — the fact that he did indeed have the abilities his parents said he did and the explanation for the memory about his father earlier, which was why he was not using his abilities.

He felt sick. While, with Superman’s help, he had been successful this time, in reality, this was another failure. Superman had been able to do it in his universe alone. Clark probably would have been caught if he had been alone. If not because of the amnesia (although he thought Superman had said he had had that in his universe as well and he definitely said he woke up in Germany yesterday with no memories) then because he had refused to wear glasses yesterday. If there was no separate Superman walking around, someone would have been suspicious. As it was, he was lucky that no one had noticed the resemblance. How had Lois missed it?

This was why he could not be Superman full time. He just did not know what he was doing: he made far too many mistakes.

With a heavy heart, wishing he was still suffering from amnesia, Clark headed home.

Lois dropped the washcloth she had been using to wipe the stain from her blouse. That sound... like a gun. A gun with a silencer, perhaps, but a gun all the same. Spinning around, she peered through the small gap between the door and the door jam. Vincent Winninger was on the ground. A man was standing above him.

One glance at Winninger told her that her interview was over. He was dead. Worse yet, the man who had been standing over him was coming this way. Lois quickly grabbed the notebook Winninger had handed her and stepped into the bathtub, closing the curtain and praying that he was not actually coming into the bathroom.

Her prayers were not answered. She could hear her breath coming out in short, fast rasps and clamped a hand over her mouth. He could hear her breathing, she was sure of it. She held her breath. He could hear her heart pounding. He would need to be deaf not to and there was nothing she could do to stop that.

Lois had gotten herself into some tight spots before, but this one seemed particularly scary. It was not her fault, though... this time at least. She had not taken any undue risks. It was just supposed to be an interview.

Her eyes closed, she pictured Clark’s face from earlier. He had wanted to come with her and she had said no. Why had she said no? On the other hand, what would he have been able to do in this situation? She really needed his roommate, but somehow a call for Superman did not seem like the best idea right now.

The man, whoever he had been, left the bathroom and a moment later, Lois heard the door to the apartment close as well. She slowly let out the breath she had been holding and when the apartment was still quiet a moment later, she finally exited the bathtub and called the police.

“Lois, be serious!” Clark was nearly yelling at her.

“I am. This isn’t the same thing at all, Clark!” Lois yelled back. “No one’s life is in danger from my printing this story.”

“Except yours,” Clark shot back.

“Well, that’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

“I’m going to have to side with Clark on this, darlin’,” Perry said as he held up her copy. “I can’t let you print this.”

“Perry!”

“Don’t ‘Perry’ me, Lois. I won’t have you getting yourself killed for the sake of a story. This can’t go to print like this.”

“Fine, I’ll edit it,” Lois said.

“I hope one of the parts you plan to edit is this,” Clark said, pointing to the screen.

“What? Clark, are you crazy?” Lois asked. “Don’t you think it’s important information that the killer took those diaries? Don’t you think people are going to want to know that?”

Clark took a deep breath. “I think you’re right. But the person I think who will be most interested to read this is the killer. Because no one but the killer could know that he took those diaries. Unless of course, they were there.”

“It wouldn’t have to be me. It could be a source,” Lois protested.

“Fine. He’ll come after you trying to determine your source,” Clark said, the anger barely concealed in his voice. “That *is* better. That way he’ll have some reason to keep you alive for a while.”

“I would change this, too, sugar,” Perry said pointing at the screen. “Just change it so it’s not so obvious you were there,” he said off of Lois’ look.

“I’m leaving,” Lois announced, “before I have no story left.”

Clark turned towards his desk.

“Where are you going?” Lois asked him as he grabbed his coat.

“With you,” he said.

“The police never gave any indication that I needed a bodyguard, Clark. And honestly, if I did,” she watched as he tripped over his left foot as he came around his desk, “you would not be my first choice.”

“Well, then,” Clark said, “that shouldn’t be a problem since you don’t need one anyway. Humor me, Lois. Please.”

Lois rolled her eyes, but she let Clark walk her home.

“That’s him!” Lois said loudly. Clark turned around.

“Who’s who?” he asked.

“That man,” Lois said pointing to a short mild-mannered looking man who had just entered. She and Clark had ended up going back to Winner’s on the way back to her apartment. The police were there looking for fingerprints or any other clues the killer may have left. “He’s the one who killed Winner. Henderson,” she called. “That’s him. That’s the killer.”

Henderson gave her a strange look and the man she was pointing to looked positively horrified.

“I’m... I’m Vincent’s associate. I like him. Why would I...,” the man stumbled for words. “I didn’t kill him,” he

finally finished meekly.

“I saw him kill Vincent Winner this morning,” Lois insisted.

“I was in Washington, D.C. this morning at a conference,” the man said, sweating. “I gave a presentation. There were thirty or forty people there, including the Vice President.”

Henderson gave Lois a look. “Thanks, Dr. Hurbert,” he said. Turning back to Lois he finished, “Sounds like an alibi, Lois, doesn’t it? I’m sure Ms. Lane here is very sorry for the confusion,” he turned back to Dr. Hurbert.

Clark reached over to give Lois’ hand a squeeze, but she just stalked off.

“I saw him!” Lois hissed as she exited the building.

Clark jogged to catch up with her and placed a hand on her arm, “So, you made a mistake. It’s not a big deal, Lois. You’ve had a stressful day.”

Lois whirled around and fixed him with a glare. “I did NOT make a mistake, Clark! I saw him there this morning.”

“Okay,” Clark said, deciding that agreeing was the best idea for now.

A moment later, as they reached her doorstep, Lois turned to Clark. “Well, here we are,” she said to Clark. “Thanks for the escort.”

Clark tried not to grin at the look on Lois’ face. She was biting her tongue to keep from pointing out that no one had jumped out of the bushes to attack her. It was clear that being right had put her in a better mood. She was so predictable.

“We’re not there, yet,” he said looking at the entrance to the building. “When I offer to walk someone home, they get door-to-door service.”

“Of course they do,” Lois smiled. “You’re from Kansas.”

“How do you always manage to make that sound like it’s a bad thing?” he asked.

Lois laughed as she walked up the steps.

Clark turned slightly. He thought he heard something besides Lois’ laughter. Shrugging his shoulders at himself, he turned back towards Lois. Just before she opened the door however, he heard it again. Pushing Lois against the door, Clark covered her body with his own.

“Clark, what are you doing? Get off of me?” Lois mumbled against the door.

Clark said nothing. One, two, three bullets struck his back and bounced off. Then things got quiet.

“Sorry,” he mumbled as he backed away. “I thought I heard something.”

“Yeah,” Lois said, “a car backfiring. Just a pointer, Farmboy, if you want to be a body guard, you have to be less jumpy.”

Clark smiled at her. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

He turned around while she opened the door, but who ever had shot at her was gone now.

A moment later, he stood nervously at the top of the stairs while she worked the locks to her apartment door. He could still feel the shadow of the bullets hitting his back. The idea of her being here all alone tonight...

“Lois,” he said and she turned to him just as she opened

the door to her apartment. “Maybe I should stay here with you tonight.”

Lois smirked. “Nice try, Farmboy.”

“What’s with the ‘Farmboy’ today,” he said, smiling.

“What?”

“You haven’t called me that in months. This makes twice in five minutes.”

Lois laughed. “It’s the bodyguard thing. You’re being so... chivalrous.”

“Again,” Clark laughed, “you make that sound like a bad thing. Besides, what’s so chivalrous about asking to spend the night with you?” he asked, his eyebrow raised.

“Nothing,” Lois laughed back. “That’s what made it so funny.”

“So?” he asked her.

“So, what?”

“Can I stay the night? I’ll really feel much better if you let me...”

“Go home, Clark,” Lois laughed. “I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure? Maybe I should check for monsters first?” Clark said. He was not sure why he was making a joke out of this. He really did not like the idea of her being home alone. He was just hoping that maybe, as ridiculous as the thought was — maybe if he got inside her apartment, she would consider letting him spend the night.

Lois placed a hand on his chest and pushed him backwards softly. “Go home, Clark.”

“Good night, Lois,” he said, lingering at the top of her stairs.

“Good night,” she replied more forcefully as she closed her door.

Ten minutes later, Lois was standing in her apartment with the phone in her hand. “Pick up, will you?” she demanded into the headset.

“You’ve reached Clark Kent...” droned the machine on the other end and Lois slammed the phone down.

“You know, if he was going to get me all nervous about every little sound, the least he could do is be home to listen to me rant!” she said to herself as she looked around the apartment.

She was trying to find something to keep herself occupied. She had tried watching the latest episode of “The Ivory Tower,” but found she could not concentrate on it. She had tried cooking, but that was not any fun and she wondered why she even thought of it.

With a sigh, Lois looked around the room again. Maybe she should redecorate. Not really, of course, but rearrange the furniture. Remembering the room Lex had shown her in his bunker a few weeks ago, she decided that was a very good idea. Something about there being an exact replica of her apartment in Lex Towers made her very uncomfortable.

Of course, this would be much easier with Clark around she mused as she tried to move her couch. With a sigh, she looked around. Did she really want to do this? She decided that she did. The exercise would be good for her and would keep her distracted.

Maybe, though, she would start small — like the end table rather than the couch.

“Nice night out,” Superman said as he sank onto the bench beside Clark.

Clark smiled at him, “Hi.”

“Hi,” Superman replied. “So, um, Lois... saw Winner get murdered today, huh?”

Clark smiled at him. “It’s so weird that you know all this stuff. That you could tell me if she’s about to get killed or not. Although, now that I think about it, she’s probably okay, right? I mean, you’re married to her.”

Superman smiled. “True, but that doesn’t mean she’s not in danger. What would have happened to her earlier if you had thought of that and let her walk herself home? That guy in the wheelchair would have...”

“What guy in the wheelchair?” Clark asked.

“The one who...” Superman looked confused. “Wasn’t Lois shot at today?”

“Yes.”

“By a man in a wheelchair.”

“No,” Clark said. “By a sniper or something, I guess. It was someone in the bushes. I didn’t even see him.”

“Oh,” Superman said, feeling a bit nervous. He knew there was no reason to, but the idea that things were different in this world made him uneasy. What if this Lois didn’t make it? “In my universe it was a guy in a wheelchair,” he said, sounding disgruntled.

“All the more reason for me to stay out here tonight,” Clark said, sobered by the revelation that things were not exactly the same as they had been for Superman. Like his doppelganger, he worried that this could mean bad things for Lois.

“Right,” Superman replied, still sounding decidedly less cheerful than when he sat down.

“I wish she would let me spend the night there,” Clark said. “I worry that from here there’s not as much I can do to help.”

“Do you want me to go check on her? Make sure she’s all right?” Superman asked, wondering as he did if that was a bad idea.

“Would you?” Clark asked, his eyes alight with hope. “Just maybe spend a few minutes with her, make sure she’s not nervous. Maybe suggest she let me stay?” Clark smiled.

“Sure thing.”

“Need a hand?” Superman said from the window.

Lois dropped the edge of the coffee table she had been holding. She had been so lost in memories she had sort of forgotten about the outside world.

Superman swooped in and grabbed the table just before it crashed onto the floor.

“Thanks,” Lois said. “You startled me.”

“Sorry,” he said, but he smiled at her. “Where do you want this?”

“Did Clark send you here?” she asked him suspiciously. “He told you, didn’t he?”

“He’s just worried about you, Lois,” Superman pointed out.

“So he sent you over here to watch out for me since I wouldn’t let him do it,” she said, sounding annoyed.

“He cares about you,” Superman insisted. “He’s not trying to butt into your life, Lois. He’s just trying to make

me, I'm happy that you've come to your senses and decided you need a bodyguard, but Superman is out."

"I didn't decide I needed a bodyguard," Lois insisted. "I just..."

"What?" Clark said as he moved aside so she could get in.

"I just wanted some company," she admitted in a little girl voice.

"Lois? Is everything all right?" Clark asked her, placing a hand on her arm.

"Everything's fine, Clark," she growled at him, pulling her arm away. "I just wanted some company. Is there a law against that?"

"Of course not," Clark said, ignoring her tone. "Would you like something to eat?"

"I'm not hungry," she said while shaking her head.

"So... anything you want to do?"

"I brought a movie," Lois offered, reaching into her bag to show him the video she had picked out.

"Die Hard?" Clark asked. "Somehow you don't strike me as a Bruce Willis fan."

"He's okay," Lois said, shrugging her shoulders. "I thought all guys liked 'Die Hard'."

"Maybe," Clark said, looking at her closely. "But somehow I doubt you often watch movies you don't want to see even if you're watching with someone else."

"It's an apology, okay?" Lois spat. "I'm sorry I poured water on you. Now can we watch the movie, or what?"

Clark unsuccessfully bit back a laugh. "Sounds great, Lois."

Clark went into the kitchen. "Popcorn?" he asked her.

"That sounds great," Lois said from right behind him. "You don't happen to have any chocolate, do you?"

Clark turned around apologetically. "Sorry, no."

"It's okay," Lois said going back to the living room. "I always carry an emergency stash with me anyway," she called into the kitchen.

Clark poked his head out. "You carry emergency chocolate around?" he asked her.

Lois nodded. "Sometimes I can't get to the store when I need it."

"When you *need* chocolate?"

"Are you making fun of me, Kent?"

"Of course not. Not at all. Everyone needs chocolate once in a while." Clark went back into the kitchen to check on the popcorn in the microwave. "Anything to drink?" he called out to her.

"Cream soda?" she said, back in the kitchen now, a Double Fudge Crunch bar in her hand.

"Cream soda?" Clark asked.

"Yeah, cream. Like vanilla."

"And you thought I might have some in the house?" Clark asked with a smile. He had never met anyone who drank cream soda before.

"Anything diet," Lois said with a sigh.

Clark looked through the refrigerator. "Sorry, I don't have anything diet."

"Nothing diet?" Lois asked in surprise.

"Sorry, Superman and I don't tend to drink diet soda," Clark said, grinning. Did she really expect to find diet soda

in an apartment inhabited by two bachelors?

"Water," Lois said grumpily before heading back to the living room.

"So, um..." Clark came out to the living room with a soda for himself and a water for Lois. "Do you um... want to spend the night?" He decided to beat it back to the kitchen before Lois the Tornado attacked.

"Would that be okay?" Lois asked.

Shocked, Clark poked his head out of the kitchen. "You aren't going to bite my head off for asking?" he asked with a teasing tone to his voice.

Lois smiled slightly, "Thanks for caring, Clark. It really means a lot to me."

Clark smiled, feeling indescribably happy.

Lois looked at the gun pointing at her face. It was unbelievable. Again, she had not taken any undue risks. Her worst transgression tonight was asking Jimmy to get her some coffee when he was supposed to be her bodyguard until Clark got back from looking for Barbara Trevino. Even that, though, had not seemed like a risk. They were in the newsroom where Perry assured them that there was increased security.

Of course, it never occurred to any of them to suspect the cleaning woman. Now that Lois thought of it, that was odd. While Trevino had done a remarkable job of looking like an old cleaning woman, she did not look at all like Rehalia, their most common cleaning person.

The upshot of this, though, was that once again this week, Lois was fearing for her life at a time that calling for Superman did not seem wise. Trevino could shoot her much faster than Superman could respond.

Instead, she leaned forward slowly. Trevino did not seem to notice the small changes in Lois' position until it was too late. She grabbed Trevino's wrist. She could not seem to get Trevino to drop the gun, but at least from this angle, she could not be shot.

Additionally, now she could do it. "Help, Superman!" she called as she fought Trevino.

A noise outside startled Trevino and Lois took the opportunity to press her advantage. Trevino dropped the gun as Lois wrestled her to the ground. The door of the supply closet opened and Lois looked up expecting to see Superman. Only it was Jimmy on the other side of the door, looking white as a ghost. Lois was sure that when he had agreed to be her bodyguard, he did not think he would need to do anything.

He was saved from having to overcome his fear when Superman came up behind him. Taking in the situation quickly, he moved around Jimmy and grabbed Trevino by the hands while Lois got up. "Are you okay?" he asked, looking her over quickly.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Lois said.

"Good," Superman smiled at her and Lois felt herself blush. Why did she sometimes act like a schoolgirl around him? Sometimes she was perfectly capable of behaving like an adult, but other times, like now, she acted like a groupie.

By the time Clark returned to the newsroom, Superman was gone and things were quiet. Lois had tried to get Jimmy

to go home, but he refused, rather adamantly for Jimmy: “Are you kidding, Lois? CK will never speak to me again!”

“Jimmy, just go home,” Lois said rolling her eyes at him.

“No way,” Jimmy replied and when Lois looked surprised, he explained, “You’re scary, I admit that, and I don’t want to tick you off, but you are no match for Clark when he’s looking after you.”

For some reason, the comment made Lois smile. Jimmy was right — Clark was fiercely protective, and when it was not annoying her, it almost felt sort of... nice.

Clark entered a few minutes later, looking dejected. “I know you’re not surprised to hear this,” he said to Lois, “but I couldn’t find her.”

“I did,” Lois said simply and was happy with the shock value of her statement.

“What!”

“She was the cleaning lady. Superman has taken her off to the police station,” Lois explained.

“Are you okay?” Clark asked, looking at her so intently Lois started to feel uncomfortable.

“I’m fine,” Lois said, but Clark took a step closer to her.

“What’s that?” he asked, his finger lightly caressing a spot on her neck.

“What’s what?” Lois asked although she knew the answer to his question.

“There’s a red mark here. What happened to you? Did she try to strangle you or something?”

“I had it under control, Clark,” Lois said. This was one of those moments where she found his protectiveness a bit much.

Clark nodded, seeming to understand that she did not appreciate his tone, and then spoke again in a softer, gentler voice, “I’m not saying you can’t take care of yourself, Lois. I just... I guess I don’t want anything to happen to you.” He blushed when he finished and Lois thought he must have realized it as he turned away from her.

“Thanks for staying here, Jimmy,” he said.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t much help,” Jimmy said, getting up to put his jacket on. “Good night, guys.”

Lois stood up as well. “Are you coming?” she asked Clark.

“Where?”

“Aren’t you going to walk me home?” Lois asked.

“I... um... do you want me to?” Clark asked.

“I think I do,” Lois smiled at him. She was not sure why, but his blushing earlier had melted her annoyance at him.

Clark escorted her to the elevator and as they stepped inside, Lois linked her arm through his. She supposed there were worse things in the world than an over-protective partner.

February 1994

“Let’s do something,” Superman suggested. It had been a relatively calm night in Metropolis and Clark and Lois were between stories, so Clark and Superman had both arrived home in the late afternoon with no plans for the evening.

“What?” Clark asked.

“I’m not sure, but I’m going stir-crazy,” Superman said.

“Smallville to play hoops? Or just the park?” Clark suggested.

Superman shook his head. “No, not tonight.”

“Is everything okay, Clark?” Clark asked.

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” Superman responded, but with no conviction in his words.

“Okay, let’s go somewhere,” Clark said, not wanting to push, but hoping to find a way to cheer Superman up.

“Alaska? China?”

“The Great Wall?” Superman said.

Clark looked at the clock, “It will be quiet now.”

Superman shrugged. “I think I want something busier.”

“Okay, so Asia’s out,” Clark said.

“Right. Or maybe... The Tsukiji Fish Market?”

“The what?”

“The fish market in Tokyo,” Superman said.

“I’ve never been,” Clark said. “Is it open at this time? It’s about four in the morning there now.”

“Now’s the best time,” Superman smiled.

“Okay,” Clark replied. He went to his bedroom to change into less conspicuous clothes for flying.

A little while later, and they were standing in Tokyo’s Tsukiji Fish Market. Despite the fact that it was early morning in Tokyo, the market was bustling and numerous tourists were milling around waiting to watch the tuna auction.

Superman had borrowed some of Clark’s clothes and was enjoying the feeling of being a person and not a superhero for a few minutes. While some of the tourists were American, and Superman had made appearances in Japan before anyway, he doubted anyone would recognize him without his suit. Hopefully, they would just assume he was Clark’s older brother.

He and Clark wandered through the market for an hour or so before the auction started. Superman could feel himself start to relax while they walked around. Here the workmen yelled at him to get out of the way and the men at the stalls cutting the fish into chunks to be sold to restaurants gave him a dirty look. It felt good to blend in with the other tourists, to not stand out, to just be Clark for a few minutes.

By the time they got to the auction, Superman was feeling downright giddy — that was the only explanation he could come up with for what happened next anyway. He and Clark watched the purchasers walk around prior to the auction, making small cuts in the surface of the frozen tuna and checking out the color of the meat. For those that looked good, they broke a small piece off and rolled it around their fingers until it defrosted before popping it into their mouth to make sure the taste matched the quality of the color.

Watching this, Clark pointed out a rather small tuna off to the side. The meat inside was red and tender looking and when the purchaser placed it into his mouth, he smiled. “I think it’s a hidden gem,” Clark whispered to Superman and Superman smiled.

“None of the other purchasers have even looked at it,” he agreed.

A few minutes later, the auction started, and things

happened quickly. Some of the Americans walked away; not understanding Japanese, there was not much for them to see. Clark and Superman, however, remained, listening to what was going on. Sure enough, when the small tuna Clark had pointed out came up, only that one man bid on it. He was about to take it away for a low price when Superman piped up and bid on it, too. For a moment, the two were in a bidding war, but then his opponent looked at him and said, "Wait! You are a tourist! You can't bid on the tuna!" A minute later, Clark and Superman were ushered out of the auction with a firm suggestion to leave the fish market altogether.

Superman tried to feel embarrassed. He knew only the merchants in the market could purchase a fish, but he had gotten caught up in the moment. Still, he could not work up the proper level of embarrassment. It had been too good a day.

As they got closer to the apartment, though, Superman sobered. "What?" Clark asked, and then following Superman's eyes, he glanced into their apartment. "What's Dad doing here?" he asked.

"I need to do a fast circuit around Metropolis to make sure everything's okay," Superman replied. "You go ahead."

Clark glanced at him, but not feeling in the mood to quiz Superman about what was about to happen, he let it go.

"Dad?" he asked as he landed.

"Clark," his father replied tonelessly.

"Is something wrong Dad?" Clark asked. When Jonathan did not reply, Clark added, "Is it Mom?"

"I think... I think your mother is having an affair with a younger man," Jonathan said.

Clark started to laugh, but caught himself when he realized his father was serious. "Dad, Mom would never..."

"I saw them," Jonathan said.

"You saw them together?" Clark asked.

Jonathan nodded. "They were having lunch together after one of her classes. I had finished the planting early and drove into town to surprise her for lunch, but she was already eating with someone else."

Clark shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts. "So they were just eating?"

When Jonathan looked up at him, though, he had anguish in his eyes. "She was all lit up and laughing at something he said and he was gazing at her... he's in love with her. I know he is."

"Dad, just because some guy is in love with Mom doesn't mean..."

"How could she resist, Clark? He looked to be in his late thirties. He has no grey hair, no extra..." Jonathan trailed off, patting the extra layer of fat around his middle. "And, to top it off, he's an artist. He shares her passion. How could I even hope to compete?"

"Dad, Mom loves you," Clark insisted.

Jonathan nodded, "I know she does, but after thirty years, Clark, the mystery is gone. I'm boring and predictable. He's new and exciting."

"Dad..." Clark tried to get his father to understand how unlikely it was that his mother would have an affair, but

Jonathan cut him off again.

"I saw her place her hand on his arm. Do you know how long it's been since I've seen your mother touch a man besides me?"

"Morning," Superman yawned as he came into the kitchen.

"Morning. Breakfast?" Jonathan asked.

Superman nodded. "Sure. But uh... I need to get my morning patrol done first. It seems pretty quiet this morning, though, so I should be back before Clark gets up."

"Sure," Jonathan said as he went back to the skillet.

The phone rang a few minutes later, waking Clark up.

"ello," he said sleepily into the receiver.

"Clark," his mother's voice came from the other end of the line. "Sorry to wake you."

"Mom, what's going on?" Clark asked, yawning.

Martha sighed. "It's complicated, Clark, but tell your father I'm coming to Metropolis in a couple of days."

"A couple of days?" Clark said surprised. "Mom, he's in pain here."

"I know. And I'm sorry about that, but... just tell him, okay?"

"Sure, Mom," Clark said, hanging up the phone. He looked at it in wonderment after he placed it down.

Yesterday he had thought his father was crazy, but now he was not so sure. Why was she waiting a couple of days to come?

"Breakfast, Clark?" his father called from the kitchen.

"Just a second, Dad," Clark called back before jumping into the shower.

By the time he finished, Superman was back from his patrol and the three men sat at the table. Jonathan served them hash browns, eggs, and bacon and Clark looked at his father in surprise.

"I didn't know you knew how to cook," he said.

"Well, I'm not your mother, but I can make a few things. Since she's started her art thing, I need to make some of my own meals," he explained.

"Mom called this morning," Clark said as he ate.

"She did?" Jonathan asked and neither Clark nor Superman could miss the eager look in his eye.

"She said to tell you she'd be here in a few days," Clark relayed the message.

"In a few days?" Jonathan repeated.

Clark shrugged. "I'm sorry. That's what she said."

"Probably doesn't want to miss her class," Jonathan said bitterly, going back to moving food around his plate.

"Clark?" Clark called as he entered Superman's room.

"Hi, Clark," Superman said as he ironed another suit. Jonathan had gone for a walk a few minutes earlier and Clark was due to leave for work any minute.

"Can I ask you a question?" Clark asked, sounding unsure of himself.

"Of course, but you know I won't be able to answer everything."

"Right," Clark nodded, "but this one's not about me. Or not really..." Clark's voice faded off as he tried to find the right words for asking this question; though, in the end, he

just blurted out what he was thinking. “Is my mom having an affair?”

Superman stopped ironing for a moment. He should have expected this question, but it had not occurred to him that Clark would ask. Recently, Clark had started to understand that there was little he was willing to share about what was going to happen here. “Clark,” he said gently, “you know I can’t...”

“Can’t or won’t?” Clark interrupted and his voice was hard when he did. “My dad is hurting and if my mom isn’t having an affair you could tell him and put the whole thing to rest. How does it matter if he knows? Will it do anything other than make him feel better?”

The two men watched each other in silence for a few moments. “Is it true then? Is the reason you’re not saying anything because she is having an affair?” Clark asked.

“Clark,” Superman tried to make his voice gentle and calming, but it did not have the desired effect.

“This is insane!” Clark exploded. “Tell me, is the timeline really that important? Does it really come before everything else?”

When Superman said nothing, Clark stalked off and a minute later, Superman could hear the door slamming shut.

Superman flew in lazy circles over Metropolis. He was beginning to think Clark was right. What harm would it cause to tell Jonathan that Martha was not having an affair? Jonathan was hurting and if it was within Superman’s power to make it better, then he should, shouldn’t he?

Superman headed back towards the apartment on Clinton when he realized — what if this was one of those little things that was different in this world. With a sudden movement, he was off in the other direction.

“Superman, how good to see you,” Martha said without turning around from her painting.

“Hi, Martha,” Superman said quietly so he would not break her concentration. A moment later, she had stroked her brush against the canvas in a thoughtful fashion, and then moved to the sink.

“I just have to wash this out or it will be ruined,” Martha said to him. “Just give me a moment.”

Superman took a seat in the living room, suddenly feeling somewhat uncomfortable. This woman had promised to be there for him, to help him when things were difficult and now he was going to accuse her of having an affair? That was not true, though. He had no intention of accusing her — he did not even think it was true. Still, the potential that this would hurt her certainly existed.

“How’s Jonathan?” she asked as she came into the living room.

Superman smiled. She was not having an affair. That was clear.

“He’s okay. Scared, I guess.”

Martha shook her head. “Silly man.”

“He just...”

“When you met your Lois was it like it was for Clark? She burst in on your job interview at the Planet and you were in love?” Martha asked.

Clark smiled. “Pretty much. And like Clark I spent the

next two years trying to get her to see me with just some of the same awe I saw her.”

“It took two years?” Martha asked, surprised to hear it.

“Well, no, it took a week,” Superman smiled. “But that was awe for Superman. It took two years for her to feel that way about Clark. Or at least to admit she felt that way.”

“I was more like Lois,” Martha said softly.

“What?”

“When I met Jonathan, I was more like Lois than you.

Oh, I wasn’t as scared as that poor girl is,” Martha rushed to clarify. “But I was young — I was still in high school.

“Jonathan and I met at a party. My folks lived two towns over in Gates and I had come to spend the weekend with my cousin. I was eighteen years old and was graduating in a few months. I had been on lots of dates before, but nothing serious. Jonathan told me he was smitten with me after our first dance. It seemed sweet at the time and I didn’t think anything of it.

“I had these grand plans for myself,” Martha laughed. “I thought I was going to move to Kansas City and start a career. I had no idea what career that might be, but I knew that I was cut out for more than my mother was. I was not going to just be a homemaker.”

Superman smiled. “You’re not just a homemaker,” he said softly.

“No.” Martha smiled. “I’m not. And being a homemaker is a much harder and more fulfilling job than I thought when I was that age. Anyway, you can imagine with ideas like that, Jonathan Kent seemed like a nice boy, but no one I was going to get serious about.

“I knew from the day I met him that he wanted to be a farmer and live on the outskirts of Smallville. He had already started saving to buy a plot of land.

“When he started courting me, coming into town one day a week to take me to dinner, calling me random nights during the week, it was flattering. He seemed very grown up, very focused. Still, he was just a boy and I had no intention of changing my plans for a boy.

“We were dating for six months when he proposed. I laughed. I was sure he was joking. I wasn’t even in love with him, why would he propose? After I realized he was serious, I felt awful about laughing, but I had to tell him no. I told him about my grand dreams for my life and he took my hand in his and told me that that was fine with him. If I could give up the Kansas City part and be a career girl in Smallville, that was fine.

“I said no. I knew what Jonathan wanted was a farmer’s wife. He was insistent, swore up and down that what he wanted was me, but in the end, I did what I knew was right, and I broke up with him.

“It was the hardest three months of my life. I nearly called him every night. Sometimes to tell him what a fool I was, sometimes just because I felt so awful, and he was the person who was best at cheering me up. Still, I was convinced that I couldn’t change my mind and so never made the call.

“Jonathan called all the time during those three months, but I never spoke to him. I felt like I had to be strong. He sent me notes, love letters, promises that he did not need me to give up my dreams for him. I ignored all of them.

he had been doing.

“Oh, Clark. Sorry, I was sort of lost in thought,” Jonathan said.

“I was just in Smallville,” Superman said softly, sitting beside Jonathan on the couch.

Jonathan turned towards him with interest. “How is she?” he asked.

“Funny,” Superman smiled. “The first question she asked was about you.”

“It was?” Jonathan said, sounding doubtful. With a sigh, he said, “I need to do something. Go to the gym or something. Become more like the man she married.”

“Did she marry you for your body?” Superman asked gently.

Jonathan gave a small laugh. “I can’t imagine that she did. I was always kind of... soft.”

“So, why did she marry you, do you think?” Superman asked.

Jonathan shrugged. “I have no idea. I wasn’t nearly good enough for her. But I loved her to death. Still do. You know, she gave up her dreams for me. Martha wanted to move to Kansas City and have a career. She did not want to be a farmer’s wife. But she did. Because she loved me.”

“Loved you? You think she doesn’t love you anymore?”

Jonathan shook his head. “I can’t imagine that. I can’t imagine Martha not loving me anymore. It feels like she’s loved me for as long as I can remember.”

Superman smiled. “I think it’s best that you not tell Clark this, but just so you know, she’s not having an affair.”

“She’s not?” Jonathan asked.

“No,” Superman smiled, shaking his head. “Of course she’s not.”

“Did she tell you about the fight we had before I left?”

“No, but she did say that the reason she wasn’t coming here right away was that she was upset and she wanted some time to calm down.”

“It was pretty foolish of me to think she was having an affair,” Jonathan admitted, looking out the window.

“Martha’s the most loyal person I know,” Superman nodded. “Why can’t Clark know?” Jonathan asked.

Superman shrugged. “I’m not sure. It may make no a difference at all, but just in case. In an effort to preserve the timeline or whatever. The truth is that when this happened in my universe, it threw me. I’m not sure if it had any impact on anything, but just in case.”

“Is Clark upset?” Jonathan asked.

Superman gave a slight laugh. “He thinks his mother might be having an affair. Of course he’s upset.”

Jonathan grimaced. “I shouldn’t have gotten him involved.”

“No,” Superman said. “It means a lot to him that you trust him enough to come to him when you’re having a problem. The family the three of you have is important — it’s what makes us who we are. A Kal-El raised by someone other than Jonathan and Martha Kent may not be Superman.”

“Kal-El?”

Superman grimaced. “Sorry. Another thing you can’t tell Clark. It’s our name. Or was — our Kryptonian name.”

“You know your Kryptonian name?” Jonathan said.

“Yes, well... I’m sorry,” Superman said as he tilted his head to listen more closely. “I need to go.”

“Good night, son,” Jonathan said. “Thank you.”

Superman nodded. “No, thank you. You and Martha have been great. Really.” With that, he took off.

“Tell me the biggest secret you have,” Lois demanded.

“What?” Clark replied in confusion.

“Tell me the biggest secret you have!” Lois insisted. “I’m about to tell you the biggest one I have and I need leverage.”

“Haven’t we been through this before?” Clark asked. “When Trask was here?”

“Yeah,” Lois rolled her eyes. “And as I recall, you didn’t say anything that time either.”

Clark sighed. “I think my mother is having an affair.”

Lois gave a dramatic sigh. “That’s barely a secret. My dad had so many affairs when I was growing up, I couldn’t keep count.”

“Lois, my parents have been married for thirty years.”

“Being married has nothing to do with having an affair,” Lois said. “Here in Metropolis, affairs are part of marriage.”

“Well, not in Smallville,” Clark said, starting to feel annoyed. Taking a deep breath, though, he tried to calm himself. It was easy to forget sometimes that he and Lois came from different worlds. “I’m sorry, Lois, but the fact that my mom might be having an affair is a big deal. My parents brought me up to believe that marriage is forever — as is the fidelity that is promised along with it.”

Lois smiled at him, patting him on the arm. “Okay, Smallville. So that’s the best you can do?”

“So, what’s yours?” Clark asked, ignoring her question.

“Eugene Laderman is hiding in my apartment.”

“What?!” Clark screamed and pulled away when Lois grabbed his arm.

“Stop screaming!” she said.

“Lois, the man is a wanted felon. For murder. Why would you allow him to be hiding in your apartment?”

“He’s innocent, Clark,” Lois insisted and her voice was softer now, more pleading.

“Lois... ”

“Just come by tonight. Listen to him and see if you still think he’s guilty.”

Later that night, Clark followed Lois back to the newsroom.

“So?” Lois asked as they entered the Daily Planet building.

“I’m sorry, Lois. I don’t believe it.”

“What?! Clark, were you there with me? Did you see Eugene?” Lois asked outraged.

“I’m sorry, Lois. Just because Eugene claims he’s innocent doesn’t mean he is,” Clark said.

Lois sighed. “What happened? When did you become such a cynic? You’re supposed to be the one in this partnership that sees the good in everyone.”

“Well, maybe not everyone has good in them,” Clark countered.

“Does this have to do with your mom? You found out your perfect little world isn’t so perfect and so now poor

chose you. I mean I know why they chose you if they had to choose someone. But why did they have to choose? Why did they send me away? Even if they sent me here.”

“What?” Lois asked as she saw Clark get off the phone. “What is it?”

Clark shook his head as he grabbed his jacket. “My apartment’s been broken into,” he told her as he walked towards the elevator.

“Wait!” Lois called after him. “I’ll go with you.” She was struggling into the arms of her jacket as she ran after him. “Jimmy,” she said to the younger man as she passed his desk, “tell Perry that I finally had a break in my story, the human interest angle to the increased crime rate he’d been asking for.”

“CK’s apartment?” Jimmy called after her. “Isn’t that a little... predatory?”

Lois glared at him as she reached the elevator. “There’s no reason I can’t be there for a friend while I develop my human interest angle.”

She finally caught up to Clark in the lobby. “Come on, I’ll drive you,” she offered.

“Thanks, Lois,” he said, clearly distracted.

“I’m sure it will be fine. I mean what were they going to steal? Some books?” Lois asked as they got into her Jeep.

“What if they found... I don’t know... some evidence that Superman lived there?” Clark asked her.

Lois’ face fell. She had not considered that. It was not just Clark’s place that had been broken into — it was Superman’s. “That poor man,” she said.

“What?”

“Superman. His place was just broken into. He’ll feel so violated,” Lois explained to Clark.

Clark’s look almost made Lois slam into the car in front of her as she pulled up to a stoplight. She had never seen him look so... angry at her. “Thanks, Lois. I appreciate the ride, but I think I’ll walk from here.” He opened the car door and stepped onto the sidewalk before the light had changed.

“Wait! Clark!” Lois called after him. “I didn’t mean it like that,” she mumbled to herself when Clark did not turn around.

“It’s gone,” Clark said as he stood in the middle of his bedroom. He did a fast scan with his x-ray vision, hoping it had just been carelessly tossed onto the floor and rolled away, but it was nowhere to be found.

“What’s gone?” Lois asked and Clark looked up, surprised to see her. He had not thought she would follow him after he had left the car.

“Nothing,” he said curtly. “What are you doing here anyway? Don’t you want to check to see what they did to his room?”

Lois flushed. “Clark,” she said imploringly as she moved closer and put a hand on his arm, “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. Obviously you are going to feel the same way.”

“Thanks for noticing,” Clark said, as he brushed past her to move to Superman’s room.

“Clark, I really am sorry. I...”

“It’s okay, Lois,” Clark said, realizing that he was taking his frustrations on the robbery out on her.

“Well, you just need to understand. I’m in love with Superman so...”

Clark spun around. “You’re what?”

Lois flushed again. “I’m... in love with Superman?” she said, her voice soft.

“I see,” Clark said and then without another word, he turned around and went back to what he was doing.

Lois felt awful. How could she have been so insensitive? She cared about Clark — a lot. She loved him. Not like Superman, she was not in love with him, but she did love him. It was true that her feelings for the superhero had made her feel more sympathy for him than for Clark, but she realized that was unfair. Clark was affected by the break-in just as much as Superman — in the end more, since they had not found the secret compartment and so not much damage had been done to Superman’s room. Since they did not want anyone to know that Superman was living there, aside from the secret compartment, the room was empty of anything aside from a bed and a night table with an alarm clock on it. Superman had decorated the walls with some pictures that were destroyed, but all in all, he had less stuff than Clark to get stolen and damaged in the robbery.

She had to do something to get Clark to forgive her, but she had no idea what to do. She knew something was missing from his bedroom that meant a lot to him. If she could figure out what it was, maybe she could replace it for him? Knowing Clark, though, it was something sentimental and irreplaceable.

Then she smiled. “Clark,” she called out to her partner, who sat at his desk looking forlorn. He looked up at her, but did not respond. “Come on. I know someone who may be able to help you get your stuff back.”

“Nothing was taken from *his* room, Lois,” Clark said.

Lois flushed and then moved over to his desk. “I know that. But something was missing from yours. Don’t you want to recover it?”

“Is this some angle for your story?” Clark asked.

“No,” Lois said softly. “Clark. Please. I’m so sorry. You have to forgive me. Let me help you.”

“Who is this guy?” Clark asked, clearly not sure he should forgive Lois just because she was introducing him to Louie.

“He’s... a friend of a friend,” Lois said.

“What friend?” Clark asked, looking around the dingy pool bar.

Lois smiled. “Remember Chad?”

“Your first boyfriend?” Clark asked.

“Yeah. Louie was his next door neighbor and his daughter Ashley was a year ahead of us in high school.”

“You still keep in touch with your next door neighbor from when you were growing up?” Clark asked.

“What? You don’t?” Lois asked him.

“That’s different. My parents haven’t moved. And... well, it’s Smallville. But if the Irgs moved, I don’t think I’d still talk to them.”

“Well, maybe not everyone in the big city is more cold and unfriendly than you small-townners after all,” Lois said with a grin.

“Really?” Clark said, disbelieving. “How many other old neighbors do you keep in touch with? Or better yet — can you name two people who live in your building now? And the super doesn’t count,” Clark asked.

“Um... well, there’s the guy with the blond hair who always wears pajamas and the Chinese guy who likes acid rock and plays it all night long,” Lois said.

“Their names?” Clark asked.

“Okay, fine!” Lois snapped. “But Louie’s a helpful source. You should be appreciative of my keeping in touch with him. He’s going to get your stuff back.”

“If you say so,” Clark said, still feeling doubtful.

“They didn’t get into the secret compartment,” Clark told Superman as the superhero landed on the balcony and came in later. “So, they don’t know you’re here.”

Superman nodded. “That’s good. I’m sorry about the globe, Clark.”

Clark shook his head. “Just another in a long line of disappointments today,” he mumbled.

“What? What else happened?”

“You mean besides the apartment being trashed and my things stolen? Well, Lois told me she’s in love with you.”

“She what?” Superman asked surprised. Had his Lois felt that way this soon? Although now that he thought about it, it was probably only about a few months until the Lex proposal thing, so perhaps she had. Of course, she had not told him that.

“She said she was in love with you,” Clark replied matter-of-factly.

“She’s not,” Superman said. “I mean, maybe she thinks she is, but... she’s not,” he finished lamely.

“Whatever,” Clark said. “I need to go take care of some things.”

“Clark,” Superman said as Clark turned to leave. He felt awful. Clark must be devastated. “I’m sorry. Really.”

“I know,” Clark nodded his head. “I know you’ve been trying to keep your distance from her and I appreciate it. I guess it’s just hard to blend in when you’re wearing brightly colored tights,” he gave a small smile.

Lois handed over the container of duck a’la orange and creme brulee. “So, where is it?” she asked sourly. The duck smelled fantastic and the crème brûlée was browned just right.

Bobby gave her a dirty look. “Stop salivating over my food and I’ll tell you.”

Lois schooled her features to look more serene. She normally would not let Bobby get away with that, even if he was one of her best sources, but today she was desperate. She needed to do something so that Clark would forgive her.

“There’s a bookstore on the corner of 3rd and Palm. They have both the books you mentioned. Tell Clark I want something out of the Julia Child one,” Bobby told her.

“Thanks,” Lois said dryly. Like she was buying Clark a cookbook so that he would be able to prepare food for

Bobby Bigmouth.

“Here,” Lois said, shoving the package at Clark.

He gave her a quizzical look, but took it from her. Unwrapping it, he smiled. “Lois?”

“Okay, okay. I know. A first edition of ‘Alice in Wonderland’ is sort of stupid, but it was the best I could do on short notice. I know you had a lot of that kind of thing and I’m guessing many got ruined or stolen in the robbery, so I thought I’d help you rebuild the collection. Anyway, that’s why I got you the Julia Child book, too. I’m not really sure if you like cookbooks and you’re already a fantastic cook, but...”

“Thanks, Lois,” Clark said, his voice soft. “I love them. Both.” He reached out to pull her towards him, wrapping his arms around her tightly. “I really appreciate the thought.”

“So,” Lois asked, pulling her head away from his chest to look up at him. “Does this mean I’m forgiven?”

Clark laughed. “Yeah, I think it does,” he said, releasing her.

“Good,” Lois said. “So you’ll help me with my article? I think it might be too wordy.”

“That your stuff?” Louie asked when they entered the pool hall.

Clark looked at the pile of stuff on the pool table. It did look like his stuff. He sifted through it quickly. CDs, books, random junk, but no globe. Disappointed, he turned back to Louie, “Yeah, this is my stuff.”

“Kid tried to move it through a guy who knows a guy I know,” Louie explained, gesturing to the boy.

He was about sixteen, but an old looking sixteen, roughened by a hard life, Clark guessed. “How old are you?” Clark asked.

“How old are *you*?” the boy asked in response. “Look, just let me go. I don’t know nothing.”

“Is he handcuffed?” Lois asked, then turning to Louie, she chastised him. “Louie, he’s just a kid.”

“He’s a runner,” Louie explained, but he handed Lois the keys to the handcuffs.

The boy watched her warily as she undid the handcuffs and his eyes wandered back and forth between the three adults when he was released from them.

“Look,” Clark said, “I just have a couple of questions about some things that aren’t here. Personal things.” Clark hid an inward smile — the boy had looked up quickly at that. He knew about the globe, and he was a scared kid. Hopefully getting it back would not be that hard.

Before he could say anything else, though, the boy had jumped up, run between them, and made it out the front door. “Hey!” Lois called after him.

“I’ll go,” Clark offered as he watched Lois start to look through some pictures the boy had taken of Clark’s stuff.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Clark said before the boy had even stopped running. “I just want to ask some questions.” The boy stared at him with wide eyes. “Do you have the globe?” Clark asked.

“I sold it,” he said. Then defensively he added, “I had

to.”

Clark felt his hopes crash. “Who did you sell it to?”

The boy shrugged. “Older guys. No one I knew.”

“What’s your name?” Clark asked.

“Jack. Was the globe yours?” the boy asked relaxing slightly now that Clark seemed safe.

“I’ve been...” Clark trailed off, not sure how to answer that without admitting it was his.

“Who was the guy with Superman’s ‘S’?” Jack asked and Clark could feel himself start to panic.

“You saw that?” he asked. “What else did you see?”

“Nothing,” Jack said. “He said something like ‘This is the second time I will appear’ and then I dropped it and it stopped. Look, just let me go, okay?”

“Where?” Clark asked. “Where will you go?”

“Nowhere,” Jack said, his chin jutting out defiantly.

“Take this,” Clark said handing him his card. “If you want to talk, you can call me.”

Jack took the card and looked at it skeptically.

“Take this, too. It’s cold out,” Clark said, handing Jack his coat.

“That doesn’t change anything,” Martha said over the phone. “Whether or not you believe that he didn’t know who he sold it to, you still need to get it back. If it was giving Jack messages, it probably will again and someone else will find out about you.”

“I don’t understand it,” Clark said. “It said it was attuned to me. Why did it work for Jack?”

“Maybe you just had to be around to start it up?” Jonathan suggested. “Once the first message was played it wasn’t looking for you anymore.”

“Maybe,” Clark said. “I’m waiting for Superman to get back. I’m not sure, but I’m hoping he’ll be able to share some information with me on this.”

“Don’t push him, Clark,” Martha warned. “This is tough for him, you know. He’s just doing what he thinks is right in keeping things from you.”

“I know,” Clark said, feeling vaguely annoyed that his mother was taking Superman’s side, but he knew she was right.

“Good luck, son,” Jonathan said. “We love you and we’re here if you want to talk later.”

“Thanks, Dad. I love you, too. You, too, Mom,” he said as he hung up the phone.

Hanging up the phone, Clark put his head on the desk. He was feeling tired, but he knew it was all emotional. It felt like an emotionally draining few days — the globe, the robbery, the fight with Lois, Lois’ saying she was in love with Superman... it all felt like a lot to deal with.

He was just starting to doze off when he heard the voice. “This is the second of five times I will appear.”

Clark bolted upright. The globe was giving another message, and while he could see it, he could only assume that so could the person who had bought the globe. He felt his fingers splinter the wood on the edge of desk and released the tight grip he had had. A moment later, he was once again seemingly embraced by the hologram with the details of his bedroom fading.

He watched Jor-El and Lara continue to work. Jor-El

explained again that time was short, but again, did not explain what the deadline was. Another tremor shook the lab they were in and Jor-El said something about a pattern of core-disintegration. Then the image seemed to focus on the small capsule in front of Lara. Inside was a small baby a couple of months old. The jet black hair and black eyes made it clear to Clark even if he had not recognized the capsule as his spaceship — the baby was him. The question was: would whoever else saw this also guess that?

The hologram ended and faded on the image of the baby, and as Clark became aware of his surroundings, he realized he was not alone.

“Superman?” he called.

Superman stuck his head in Clark’s room. “How are you holding up?” he asked.

Clark shrugged. “Could I ask you a question? Or maybe two? It’s okay if you can’t answer. But in case you can...” He did not want to push. He had been trying to be understanding about Superman’s reticence to share things with him. After all, in the end Superman had told his father that his mother was not having an affair, even if Superman had not told him. He clearly was trying to do what he could.

“Sure,” Superman said, settling on Clark’s bed.

“Could whoever bought the globe see the message? I mean, Jack said he saw the beginning of it, so I think they can, but I thought it was attuned to me,” Clark said.

Superman smiled thinly. “I know. I never understood that either. Honestly, I don’t know if whoever bought the globe saw the message, too.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll tell me who bought it so I can get it back,” Clark asked, but his grin made it clear he knew Superman would not say.

“I don’t really know, anyway,” Superman admitted.

“While I had suspicions, I never knew for sure.”

“I won’t get it back?” Clark asked looking panicked.

Superman sighed. He was getting worse and worse at this. It was just so hard. The more he got to know the people here, the harder it was to stay detached. Finally, he decided he had already gone too far. “No, you will. It just won’t tell you who had it.”

“You think it’s Luthor, though?” Clark asked.

“Well, I did have a habit back then of blaming him for everything,” Superman smiled.

“How often were you wrong?”

“Not often,” Superman said, and the two men laughed. “Let’s do something,” Superman suggested.

“Feeling stir-crazy again?” Clark asked. “I’m sorry. I’m sure sitting around here half the day so you don’t help too much can’t be fun. I know I have trouble not responding to the calls for help, and I don’t even respond to the name Superman.”

Superman nodded, “It’s just the desperation in their voices. I know. Anyway, I just thought you might want to do something to take your mind off the globe.”

“Sure,” Clark answered, standing up. “Can I ask you one more question first?” Superman nodded and Clark said, “Jor-El said that I was seeing these messages now because I had reached full maturity. Was that... does that mean I’m ready to take on being Superman?”

Superman closed his eyes, weighing the answers in his

mind. The honest answer was obviously no. He had heard the messages about the same time and had been Superman for months. On the other hand, what if this was the push Clark needed? What if he could go home tomorrow? The thought brought Lois' face to his mind, his Lois, and he knew he could not do it. She would be so disappointed in him.

"No," he said, dispirited. "I saw the messages at the same time. I'm not sure if there's something else going on in our bodies we're not aware of, or if we were supposed to see the messages when we were younger, but were separated from the globe too long."

Clark nodded. "Thanks, Clark. That makes me feel better."

They both heard the cry at the same time. "Of course, if you think you might be ready..." Superman said.

Clark looked anguished. "Okay," he agreed, although he sounded unsure. He moved to Superman's room and borrowed a suit.

"You'll be fine," Superman said. "And when you get back, we'll do something to celebrate."

"Thanks," Clark said, smiling although he felt sick to his stomach.

Lois sat on her couch staring at the picture in her hands. She could not decide if she was more upset or curious. How did Clark know about this... whatever it was that produced the image the boy took a picture of? She assumed, given the clothing on the man, that it was Superman's. Was it in Clark's room? It was with his stuff and Superman said nothing had been taken from his room.

And that hurt. Superman had some sort of prized possession and not only did Clark know about it, but it sounded like he was allowed to keep it in his room. She thought she and Superman were friends, but was it all one-sided?

She stood up. She could not sit here thinking about this any longer. She was going to take care of it.

"Where's Clark?" she asked as she entered their apartment.

"He's... not here," Superman said, wondering if he had made a mistake in answering the door. What if Clark came back while she was here? He had not been able to leave her out there, though. One glance with his x-ray vision showed her outside visibly upset. He had not even bothered to think about it — he spun into his suit and answered the door. "I can tell him you dropped by," he said.

"Don't you even care?" Lois asked, and the anguish in her voice made Superman take a step back. "Can't you tell that I'm upset?"

"I can," Superman said, trying to keep himself from reacting to her. The urge to bring her into his embrace was strong when she was so upset. "But I thought you wanted to talk to Clark."

"I do. But I want to talk to you, too," she said. "What is this?" she asked defiantly, shoving the picture in his face.

Superman gasped. He had not considered this — this Lois was more brazen with him than his wife had been. She had told Clark she was in love with him just yesterday. Of

course she was hurt that he had shared the globe with Clark and not with her. Unlike in his universe where Lois thought Clark had kept it from Superman, here she would not make the same assumption. It was unlikely Clark would try to keep something from Superman in the apartment Superman lived in.

"Lois," he said, trying to find the right balance between apologetic and distant. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about this."

"You have secrets," Lois said cutting him off. "I get that. But... if you couldn't tell me about this, why could you tell Clark?" The tears slipping down her cheeks were in contrast to the fierceness of her words and Superman felt himself take an involuntary step towards her.

Gripping his fingers in a tight fist in a symbolic attempt to strengthen his resolve to keep his distance, he apologized again. "I'm sorry. I wasn't really trying to keep it from you. I just..."

"You just what?" Lois demanded when his voice trailed off.

Finally Superman decided to be honest. "It's hard for me to talk about, Lois. Even though Clark knew about it, we never talked about it either."

"What is it?" Lois asked, her voice still hard.

"I don't really know. It has messages on it from my parents. I..." Superman felt his resolve weakening. He had to make her feel better without touching her. He could not stand to see her so hurt. "Lois, you can't tell anyone this. You can't print it."

"No one knows you live here," she pointed out.

"My parents sent me here. The globe has messages from them explaining why they did that," Superman said, trying to keep his words vague. The last thing he wanted was for Clark to find out he had told Lois about the rest of the messages when he was unwilling to share that information with Clark.

"Why didn't you tell me this before? Does Clark know?"

Superman nodded, and Lois' rage, which had cooled slightly, boiled again.

"I thought we were friends, Superman!" she yelled at him. "I mean, I know I don't live here with you or anything, but I thought..." Tears fell down her cheeks once more. "I care about you. I thought you cared about me, too."

"I do," Superman replied honestly, hating himself both for having hurt her and for being honest with her now. That was not helping, but she was crying and... It was so unfair. It did not matter that this woman was not quite his wife. He still could not stand to see her cry.

The truth was that even if he had told Clark about the globe, he was closer to Clark than to Lois. He thought that would be obvious, given that they lived together, but he also knew Lois. It was not surprising that she did not understand that, particularly given how she viewed her emotions for him. And the truth was, he could not tell her that — it would hurt too much and she was already hurting.

"Then why didn't you tell me?" Lois asked, her voice small, her eyes looking exceptionally large when covered with tears.

"I'm sorry," Superman said, not sure what else he could

say. Then, finally losing the battle with himself, he moved forward to place his arms around her and held her while she cried.

Clark landed on the balcony, feeling sort of weird.

“So?” Superman called from the living room.

“I think...” Clark floundered for words. “I think it went okay,” he finally said.

“Really?” Superman smiled.

“Yeah. I um... maybe we could turn on LNN? See what they had to say?” Clark suggested. He was hesitant to feel too happy with how things had gone until he knew what other people had thought.

Superman turned on the television, glad to have an excuse not to talk. He should tell Clark that Lois had been here — that she had left not that long ago, but he was not ready yet. While he felt like Lois left feeling better about things with him, he also felt like he was leading her on. He did not mean to be, but it was so hard to keep his distance sometimes. Additionally, he knew Lois, or at least he thought he did, and just because things were okay between them now did not mean she was not still angry at Clark.

“A grease fire at one of the many restaurants at the ferry terminal spread quickly today,” the reporter said, the video showing the terminal on fire. “The fire quickly spread from kitchen to kitchen in the food court and it took more than an hour to put out. With the help of the fire department and Superman, though, there were no deaths and the injuries were minor.”

Superman turned to Clark with a smile. “It went more than okay,” he said.

Clark smiled too, but then turned back to the television when the newscaster spoke again. “Connie, did Superman seem off to you?” he asked the woman in the corner of the screen who was at the docks.

“Off?” Connie asked.

“He seemed a bit more formal than normal,” the man explained. “Something about him...”

Connie shrugged. “He came in and helped. He didn’t stay to talk to the press, but other than that, no. Sorry, Eddie.”

The other anchor gave Eddie a dirty look and in an effort to wrap up the chitchat he started introducing the next news story.

Clark looked at Superman with wide eyes. “Or maybe not so well?” he said, his voice sad.

Superman put a hand on his arm. “No. It’s unavoidable that we won’t act the same. Over time, though, people will get used to you.”

“Over time?” Clark asked.

Superman looked at him oddly. “Over time. If you’re out there all the time...”

“No!” Clark said, rather loudly. “I didn’t realize...” He stopped and took a deep breath. “I’m not ready yet,” he finished, his voice much softer.

“Clark,” Superman said, trying to keep his voice calm as well. Still, he could not help but feel disappointed. He had thought... He so wanted to go home. “It’s okay. Whatever it is that’s making this so hard for you, I’m sure we can work through it. Just tell me what it is.”

“It’s nothing,” Clark said. It was one thing to remember what had happened. It was quite another to put voice to it.

“Okay,” Superman said, wondering yet again what Clark was not telling him — what part of this man’s history was so different from his own that he was nearly physically frightened of the suit. “Let’s do something,” he said. “Like we talked about before. Something to celebrate your success today.”

“Okay,” Clark said and Superman could see that he was trying to control his breathing. “Lois gave me a cookbook earlier today. Feel like cooking?” he asked.

“Lois bought you a cook book?” Superman asked.

“It was... an apology,” Clark finished. “She was sort of obnoxious yesterday.”

“Lois apologized for being obnoxious?” Superman asked in surprise, and that seemed to dispel the tension in the room.

Clark laughed first and then Superman played the words in his head again and, realizing what he said, he laughed as well.

“Probably a once in a lifetime experience,” Clark said, still laughing as they made their way to the kitchen.

“Clark,” Superman started as he poured flour into the measuring cup. “While you were out, Lois was here.”

Clark put down the molasses he had just gotten out of the cupboard. “She was?”

“She came to see me. Well, and you,” he said.

“What about?” Clark asked as he once again picked up the molasses.

“The globe.” The molasses went back down, but Clark did not say anything, so Superman tried to explain. “When Jack tried to sell the globe, he took pictures of it. One with the hologram of Jor-El showing. It was with the stuff Louie found for you. Lois saw it and made the obvious connection.”

“So she came here to ask what it was?” Clark asked, feeling his heartbeat picking up at the knowledge that Lois knew about the globe.

“No,” Superman said, realizing how weird that was. Then he felt badly. Lois was clearly more upset than he had ever realized — his Lois, too, if their first reactions were emotional and not curiosity. “She was upset with us. Me for sharing it with you and not with her and you for keeping it from her.”

“Wait,” Clark said as he put the molasses away and moved to the refrigerator to take out the coffee beans. “Lois is upset that you keep secrets from her?”

“Well, no, actually. She said she was okay with that. She’s more upset that I have secrets from her that are not secrets from you.”

“So, you’re supposed to make sure to tell her everything you tell me?” Clark asked laughing. “Only Lois.”

Superman smiled. “Well, yeah. No one else would think that, but Lois...”

“Is in love with you,” Clark said softly. “And so she thinks...”

“We’re closer than we are.”

“Did this happen with your Lois?”

“The globe thing or this thinking we were closer than

we were?" Superman asked. "Although," he added before Clark could answer, "it doesn't really matter. The answer to both questions is no."

"No?" Clark was clearly surprised to hear this.

"Well, as for the globe — in my universe, it was stolen from Clark Kent's apartment, not Clark and Superman's. So, Lois was angry at me, like she is at you, for keeping it from her, but she didn't realize Superman even knew about it."

"She thought you were keeping it from Superman?"

"Yeah. You can imagine how happy she was about that," Superman grinned. "And as for thinking we were closer than we were... Well, it was complicated. The truth was that since I was Superman, we were as close as she thought we were. It just was... well more complicated than she realized."

"Was it hard?" Clark asked quietly. "Seeing her as Superman?"

Superman looked up from the faucet where he was getting warm water. "Sometimes. Sometimes it was nice. Lois acted with Superman in a way I wanted her to with Clark. Sometimes I could forget that I was Superman and just enjoy being with her in that way. Of course, then I'd get home and realize I had just helped her crush on Superman along and made getting her to see me as Clark that much harder."

"Is it like that here?" Clark asked. "Sometimes hard to see Lois and sometimes good to see her?"

Superman nodded, trying to choose his words carefully. "Yeah. Sometimes it's good to see someone who feels familiar. And other times it just makes me miss my Lois so much..." Superman paused for a moment and when he spoke again, his voice was a bit more deliberate. "But mostly it's just awkward. Trying to forge the right relationship with her here."

Clark put down the butter he had gotten out of the refrigerator. "Thank you," he said softly. "I know I don't say it often enough, and I also know that I'm not always good at even realizing it, but I know this is difficult for you, and... well, I really do appreciate it."

"I know, Clark," Superman said quietly. "And really, it's not all bad. I like being here sometimes. I've never spent this much time with another Kryptonian before and while this is probably different than that would be, since you're not just another Kryptonian, but sort of me, it's nice."

Clark smiled. "Yeah, you probably never played basketball at full speed before."

"No," Superman agreed. "And possibly even more strange — I haven't made bread with someone in years."

Clark grinned. "So, all Loises don't cook?"

Superman nodded. "If I want to cook with someone, it's pretty much my mom. Although, Emily is showing some interest in it, too. Jory, on the other hand, firmly takes after his mother in that department."

"You must miss them," Clark said, trying to call up mental images of what his and Lois' children would look like.

"Sometimes, I miss them the most," Superman said quietly. "Your parents help me miss my parents less, and while it's not the same to interact with Lois or even Perry or

Jimmy, at least I do get to do something with them occasionally."

"But no Emily or Jory here," Clark said softly, looking contemplative. "How about," he asked, "I start taking over for you part time?"

"Part time?" Superman asked.

Clark nodded. "I'm sorry. I'm just not ready to do it yet. But maybe... I could ease into it or something. And this way, I could start to emulate you. Maybe you could even emulate me a little or something. And over time, we'll be harder to tell apart so that we won't see any more reports on LNN about Superman acting weird."

"Are you sure, Clark?" Superman asked, trying to tamp down his excitement.

"No," Clark admitted while he slid the bread into the oven so it could rise, "but I have to start somewhere."

"Jack," Clark called as he approached the fence. "Jack, I just have a question for you."

Jack came out with a two inch piece of pipe in his hands for protection. Once he saw Clark, though, he relaxed. Behind him, a smaller boy stood wearing Clark's jacket.

"Who's this?" Clark asked, keeping his voice soft so Jack would continue to feel comfortable with him.

"Denny. He's my brother," Jack said and Denny stepped forward slightly to get a better look at Clark. "Go on back, Den," Jack said to the boy.

"Where are your parents?" Clark asked.

"Look, what are you, Social Services? My parents are dead and the system don't work for us. It's better this way, so just leave us alone!" Jack said, his stance defensive again.

"Okay," Clark said taking a step back. "I just have another question about the globe."

"So ask it and go," Jack demanded.

"The guys who bought it — what did they look like?"

Jack shrugged. "I only saw one of them. An English dude. Tall and skinny."

Clark nodded and turned to leave. Then thinking better of it, he turned back. "Look, Jack, I can help you if you let me."

"I thought we had a deal. I answer your question and you leave," Jack said.

Clark nodded. "Okay. But if you change my mind, you have my number."

He was almost at his desk when the next message started. Luckily the newsroom was empty — even the night staff was home before three in the morning.

Clark stumbled to his desk before the holographic image enveloped him. He watched Jor-El and Lara as the lab shook several more times and seemingly random data flew across a computer screen.

"At last the computers have located a suitable destination," Jor-El said. "A planet physically and biologically compatible with Krypton whose inhabitants resemble ours, and whose society is based on ethical standards which are similar to ours. It's inhabitants call it simply — Earth."

Clark felt himself relax. He was worried Jor-El would

Martha smiled. "Of course they did, honey."

"So, Jack's okay?" Jonathan asked.

"Yup. I went to the precinct and Henderson had already secured a good home for Denny and a place at a halfway house for Jack. And Perry agreed to give Jack a job as a copy boy at the Planet."

"No idea who took him and the globe?" Martha asked.

Clark's face fell slightly. "No. But Superman said he was rarely wrong to blame Luthor for any wrongdoing, so I'm going there."

"More wine," Lex asked, motioning to Lois' half empty glass.

"Sure," Lois said, smiling at him. It was Sunday night, and normally she would limit herself to one glass of wine on a work night, but she was still feeling annoyed at Clark for their argument last night and so decided another glass of wine would not be a bad idea. While she had forgiven him for leaving in the middle of the fight when she saw Denny at the precinct, Clark had been missing in action all day. He was avoiding her. She was sure of it, and she was not going to let time erode her anger at him. Time might heal most wounds, but not this one.

"You're friends with Superman, aren't you?" Lex asked her, bringing her back to their date.

Lois nodded, wondering the best way to phrase what she wanted to say. "Yes, we're friends," she finally decided to be vague. No need to let Lex know how she felt about the superhero. She had learnt her lesson with Clark — there was no need to hurt Lex as well.

"Has he ever mentioned anything to you about how long he's been here?" Lex asked.

"Why the sudden interest in Superman?" Lois laughed. Lex had always shown less interest in Superman than anyone she knew. What had changed now?

"It's not sudden," Lex said. "I'm always curious to know more about people who live in Metropolis. Particularly others like myself that do so much to help the common man."

Lois choked a bit on her wine. She was not sure but thought she was probably one of the "common men." She covered quickly, though, and smiled at Lex. "Still, I don't really understand the question," she said. "He got here months ago, last September or so. During the attempt to explode Prometheus."

Lex nodded his head, then moving to play with Lois' fingers softly, he said, "I just wondered if he was here before that. As a boy, you know. Maybe he has a secret identity."

Lex looked thoughtful and Lois looked at him closely. Was he right? It did not seem like Superman had a secret identity. He lived with Clark and seemed to have few possessions. On the other hand, he had said that the ball thing had messages on it from his parents about why they had sent him here. Why had they not just told him? Unless he was sent here as a baby and was too young. Was Superman holding out on her again?

"Okay, so how should we do this?" Clark asked Superman at dinner. He had spent the day in Smallville with

his parents and had come home to find Superman out on a rescue. He decided there was probably no time like the present to discuss how they were going to share duties and so had made dinner so they could talk when Superman got home.

"I could take day time stuff and you night time stuff," he suggested. "But then you'd be working one job or another non-stop, so maybe that doesn't make sense."

"How do you balance things at home?" Clark asked, realizing he had no idea how Superman did this.

"Well, like here, I don't respond to every call for help," Superman explained. "It was hard to do at first, but my parents and Lois kept reminding me that it was okay. And mostly, it is. I run out on things at work occasionally, but..." Superman smiled. "Well, it helps when your boss knows you moonlight in tights."

"Perry knows?" Clark asked surprised.

"He didn't get to be editor of the Daily Planet by learning how to yodel," Superman smiled. "But he's not my boss."

"Wait — is he or is he not editor of the Planet in your universe?" Clark asked confused.

"He was. He retired a few years ago," Superman explained.

"Is Lois your boss?"

"Lois? Editor? No, she tried it once. Hated it. We did not get along well with her as my boss," Superman smiled. "Jimmy took over."

"So Jimmy knows, too. Does everyone know?"

Superman shook his head. "More than I would have been comfortable with when I was your age, but no, not everyone. Aside from Perry and Jimmy, it's just the family — my parents, Lois' parents, and Lucy and her husband."

"Lucy's married?" Clark asked, trying to picture the girl he had met once, right after he moved here, married. She was so young.

"Yeah, nice guy," Clark said. "They live nearby and our kids are close."

Clark nodded. "Wow," he said, trying to process how many people knew Superman's secret in his universe.

"Anyway, enough about things you're not supposed to know," Superman said, flushing a bit as he realized he was giving away the future, even if he felt like he was not. "It was much harder when I started. It took a long time before Perry figured it out and even longer before he told me he had. I used to make up the lamest excuses to run out on Lois."

"I bet she loved that," Clark smiled.

Superman nodded. "A word of advice. Practice a few good ones. Reusable ones. It will make things much smoother. But for now, I can handle anything during the day."

"Maybe I should do it if something is happening right in front of me, though," Clark suggested. "Although, if I'm with Lois..."

"Tell her you're going to call the police," Superman suggested. "It's what I did."

"Why wouldn't I just use my cell phone?" Clark asked.

Superman laughed. "No idea. Cell phones weren't as common when I started out." Clark gave him a quizzical

look. "I know. I'm not sure why, but technology was a bit further behind at this point in my universe, so when I was your age, cell phones were pretty uncommon. Anyway, you could say you forgot your cell phone or the battery was dead?"

"I should probably avoid doing things in front of her, though," Clark thought out loud.

Superman nodded. "Good idea. Lois is likely to spot the change."

"Okay. So you do daytime things or things where Lois would see, but I do things that are right in front of me provided Lois won't see. We split night time things?" Superman nodded, so Clark continued, "Should I take over one of your patrols?"

Superman nodded. "Which would you prefer? Morning or evening?"

"Morning," Clark said. "I'll be fresher, more able to concentrate before work."

"Okay," Superman smiled. "It sounds like a deal." He picked up his soda and took a sip, but when he put it down, he was frowning. "What are we going to do about the fact that we act differently, though? I mean, no one noticed that we don't look exactly alike the other night, but like you said, we need to start emulating each other."

Clark shrugged. "I guess the best thing would be to have an objective third party help us determine the differences."

"Lois would be great for that," Superman smiled. "But she's probably not the best choice."

"Probably not," Clark agreed. "Maybe Mom and Dad?" Superman nodded. "I can download some clips of the other night and others of your rescues and bring them home tomorrow night and we can take a trip to Smallville," Clark offered.

"Sounds like a plan," Superman agreed.

"Clark," Lois called from the doorway. "I'm giving you a ride to work. Stop trying to avoid me!"

Superman groaned. While he and Clark had yet to work on imitating each other, they had decided there had not been enough discussion last time of Clark's performance for Clark to put off taking over some of the duties, so he was out doing the morning patrol. Superman had been trying to enjoy a rare morning to sleep in, but that was no longer looking possible.

Spinning into the suit with a sigh, he went to the door. "He's not here, Lois," he said as he opened it. "He had an errand to run before work."

As he looked at her, clearly still annoyed at Clark, he wondered if he had just made a huge mistake. If he was here and Superman was out doing a rescue... He could only pray that nothing big happened this morning so Lois would not see that there was a Superman rescue when she was standing on his doorstep watching him. He could not remember anything happening, so it was probably all right, but from now on he should not answer the door when Clark was out being Superman.

"Oh," Lois said, deflated. She had been all ready to fight with Clark.

"Okay," Superman said, moving to close the door, but Lois pushed her way past him.

"Coffee?" she asked as she moved toward the kitchen.

"Did you just barge into my apartment and offer me coffee?" Superman asked, smiling.

"I saved time this morning to argue with Clark. He's not here. So, I have some extra time on my hands," she explained holding up the coffee beans.

"Let me wash up," Superman said, not sure if he felt happy that she was still here or annoyed.

Lois called out to him as he was drying off from his shower. "How do you like your coffee?"

"Light and very sweet," he called back. A second later he was finished and walked into the kitchen to see a mug waiting for him on the counter.

"I have no idea how you and Clark can drink coffee that way. You can barely taste the coffee," Lois said.

"That's sort of the idea," Superman smiled at her.

Lois looked at him appraisingly and Superman started to feel uncomfortable. What was she up to?

"Superman, can I ask you a question?" Lois asked.

"Um... yeah," he floundered for words. "I guess. I may not answer it, though."

"When did you get here?" she asked. "I mean, not Metropolis, but Earth?"

Superman nearly dropped his mug. His Lois had never asked him that. What was going on here? "What do you mean, Lois?"

She shrugged. "Well, I mean, I know you were never really known until you got here, but you said your parents left you that globe thing to give you messages on why they sent you here. I was wondering why they didn't just tell you. Unless you were too young. But then you would have gotten here as a baby."

Superman told himself to loosen his grip on his coffee mug before he broke it. "I... Lois, my parents did send me to Earth as a baby. But I did not get here until shortly before I found you on the space station," Superman said, keeping his voice calm. It was the truth after all. He had not gotten to *this* universe until then.

"So, is Krypton really far away so you got here as an adult?" Lois asked.

"I'm... I don't really know how far away Krypton was," Superman said.

"Was?"

He shook his head. He really should have known better than that. "This is not for print, Lois," he warned.

"Of course not," Lois said, managing to look offended.

"Krypton doesn't exist anymore. My parents sent me here as Krypton was in danger. It exploded shortly after my ship left the atmosphere."

"Oh, Superman," Lois said, moving to place a hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you, Lois," Superman said, backing away from her. He glanced at the clock. "Thanks for the coffee, Lois, but I need to do my morning patrol." He hated to lie, but he needed to get her out of the apartment. This was already too much time together that served no purpose besides bonding.

"Kent!" Lois called as she walked across the newsroom. She had managed to harness her anger back into attack mode on her way over.

“Morning, Lois,” Clark smiled — way too brightly in her opinion considering the discussion they were about to have. “I know you want to continue yelling at me, but could you read this first? Perry needs it before the morning meeting. Feel free to make any changes you want.”

Lois snorted as she sat down, but she decided to let the yelling pass. It was an article on the treasures found beneath the Metropolis Art Museum and as with all of Clark’s writing, it was good. She made small changes to it here and there, but overall left it as is.

“It’s fine,” she said to Clark grudgingly. “Now send it to Perry so we can have our discussion.”

“You can have it,” Clark said softly.

“What?” Lois asked confused.

“Come on, Lois. This is going to be a first page article. Take it,” Clark insisted.

“You mean by myself? But that’s insane, Clark. I wasn’t even there,” Lois said, looking at him suspiciously. “What are you up to, Farmboy?”

Clark smiled at her sincerely. Or at least she thought it was sincere. What was he up to? “You were right to be upset with me, Lois. Sort of. I should be able to keep other people’s secrets from you. But I shouldn’t have lied when you asked if anything else was missing. I should have told you that something else was missing and I didn’t want to tell you what it was. Not that you ever would have let up if I said that,” he grinned at her. “But I should have. This is my way of apologizing.”

“Really?” Lois asked, trying not to get upset about the ‘I should be able to keep other people’s secrets from you’ thing. She knew he was right, but that did not mean she had to like it, did it?

“Clark, Lois, where’s the art museum story?” Perry asked.

“Right here, Chief,” Clark said and Lois noticed that even though he had not changed it, her name was the only one on the byline. She had just not noticed it when she read it. Clark gave her a questioning look.

Lois felt like perhaps this was more than she deserved. It was a big story. On the other hand, Clark should know that lying to her was not acceptable. She nodded and Clark gave the story to Perry.

Clark’s first morning patrol went well in that nothing needed to be done. Clark felt like this had the very real benefit that he could not screw anything up if he did not do anything.

Superman said that it was not that unusual for Metropolis to be quiet — as long as Superman showed up in the seedier sections of town often enough, petty crime tended to be kept to a minimum.

As a result, though, Clark had gotten to the newsroom early. What he should have done, he realized now, was to start copying video files to a disk to bring to Smallville. However, he had wanted to finish the article on the findings at the art museum before Lois got in, so he had worked on that instead.

Maybe that was the right choice, as Lois certainly seemed over her annoyance at him for lying to her now that he had given her the story. Still, it meant he had not had a

chance to copy the files until after the staff meeting at which point Lois was around.

The staff meeting might have been good for providing a distraction for Lois from what he was doing by giving her something else to work on, except that there did not appear to be much else to do. Aside from the article Clark had penned this morning, not much was going on, and the suits upstairs were not happy. Recently, the Metropolis Star had been scooping them daily and readership of the Planet was at an all-time low.

So, while they should have been hot in the pursuit of a story, Lois and Clark were at loose ends — a situation that was getting more and more worrisome as time went on.

More importantly right now, though, was the fact that Clark looked busy while copying files to the jump drive, and given their lack of assignments, this made Lois suspicious.

“What are you working on?” she asked him, coming around his desk to stand behind him.

“Nothing,” Clark said, but then thought about what he was saying. He was just repeating the same mistake as he had with the globe. Honesty was the best policy. Or that was what his mother had always told him, but then she had not met Lois until recently. “Actually, it’s a project. For Superman. But I can’t talk about it.”

Lois’ eyebrows raised and Clark could see her ready to pounce, so he reminded her, “I told you — I can’t talk about it. I didn’t want to lie to you about it either, but you need to respect the fact that I can’t tell you what it is.”

Lois glared at him without saying a word and moved back to her desk. Once there, she turned around for one last glare, “I could help, you know!”

“Hotel fire!” Jimmy called out a half hour later.

Perry stuck his head out of his office, but before he could say anything, Lois and Clark had gotten up. “We’re on it, Chief,” Clark called. Smiling, Perry went back into his office.

They were almost at the elevator when Clark realized this was a chance for him to be Superman. Should he? It was not actually happening right in front of him, so maybe he should not. He and Superman had not talked about how to deal with this — what was the best way to make sure two Supermen did not show up at a potential rescue?

Lois got in the elevator and gave Clark a pointed look. “Coming, Farmboy?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Clark said, deciding not to go as Superman. Hopefully, if when they arrived Superman was not there, he would be able to slip away from Lois and help. They had said he shouldn’t try to help in front of Lois anyway.

“What is *she* doing here?” Lois asked as they pushed their way through the crowd. A fast look had shown that everything was taken care of, so Clark could relax and focus on being a reporter. This having two jobs thing was going to be tough, he could already tell.

“Who?” he asked Lois, realizing she was waiting for him to respond.

“Lois. Nice to see you,” a tall, beautiful blonde woman said to Lois. Her voice was saccharine sweet and it was

immediately clear to Clark that this was the woman Lois had been speaking of.

"Not now, Linda. We're here on business for the Daily Planet and we need to talk to Superman," Lois said, not bothering to introduce Clark to the woman.

"Sorry, Lois," she replied gleefully. "You just missed him. He was very helpful — gave me a quote for my story for the Star."

"You work for the Metropolis Star?" Lois asked, incredulous.

Linda smiled, "Yup. And I believe that you've just been scooped." Then turning to Clark, she smiled. "Hi. I'm Linda King. And you are?"

"Clark Kent. Lois' partner."

"Well, don't believe anything she told you about me," Linda warned.

"Told him about you? Ha!" Lois laughed. "As if I would mention you to him. Or to anybody. You're not worth the effort it would take to breathe enough to get the words out."

"Ouch," Clark said quietly and Lois glared at him.

"And one more thing," Lois said, "Stay away from Superman."

"What? Is he your personal source?" Linda asked.

"No, but he works exclusively with the Daily Planet," Lois said, but she blushed when she caught the skeptical look Clark gave her. "Well, not exclusively, but..."

"Nice to meet you, Clark," Linda said before walking off with a swish of her hips.

"Clark," someone called as Clark made his way back to the office later that afternoon. Lois had disappeared at lunch and had not come back.

He turned around to see Linda King coming toward to him. How odd.

"Hi, Linda," he said cautiously. Lois had given him an earful about Linda earlier. He was not sure how much was true — Lois did have a flair for exaggeration — but she had warned that Linda was without morals or conscience.

"I read your article on the hotel fire," he said as she approached. It had been in the afternoon edition of the Metropolis Star, something Perry was not at all happy about given that Lois and Clark had gotten there too late to write up much of anything at all. "Nice work."

"Thank you," Linda said graciously. "I'm surprised to hear you say that, though."

"Why?" Clark asked. "Just because we're competitors doesn't mean I can't appreciate good journalism. I also liked the editorial Preston Carpenter wrote demanding changes in the fire department."

"Yes," Linda agreed, "Well, Preston is a very powerful man. Would you like to meet him?"

"Um... sure?" Clark replied, unsure of where this was going.

"He's throwing a party at the Metropolis Press Club tonight. Want to come?"

"Oh, um... I need to check with Lois," Clark stammered.

"What? Is she your keeper?" Linda asked. "Listen, Clark, I don't know what your relationship with Lois is, but you shouldn't let her hold you back."

"She doesn't," Clark said, his voice holding just a tiny bit of anger. "Lois and I are partners. I just want to make sure we're not working on anything tonight."

"Wouldn't you know?" Linda challenged him.

"Sometimes. But this is the news business. Things change quickly," Clark said pointedly, trying to keep himself from getting annoyed. He did not want to get in the middle of whatever the argument was between Lois and Linda. He could forgive Lois for putting him there, but it was harder to forgive Linda, whom he had just met.

"Well, if you're free, you're invited to come tonight," Linda said, ignoring his barb. "I'd ask you to be my date, but unfortunately, I already have one," Linda said, all smiles again.

Clark relaxed. Linda was not flirting with him if she had a date with someone else and was still inviting him to come. He had to admit she was attractive, but he did not want to send her the wrong message. If he thought there was no chance for him and Lois it might be different, but he tried to remember the short-haired Lois he had met months ago. She had promised that it took some time, but she had fallen for her Clark. He just had to believe that it would happen for him as well.

"Okay. Thanks," he smiled at her.

"See you tonight," Linda said before she walked off.

"What are you doing tonight?" Clark asked Lois when she returned to the newsroom that afternoon.

"Why?" she asked him, feeling suspicious.

"Linda King invited us to a party at the Press Club," he told her.

"Linda? You saw Linda? You accepted an invitation from Linda?" Lois fired questions at him.

"Yes, yes, and yes," Clark smiled at her. "Come on, Lois. It's just a party. And a chance to meet Preston Carpenter."

"Why would I want to meet Preston Carpenter? He's not exactly Perry White," Lois said.

Clark rolled his eyes. "I'm not trying to say that Preston is better than Perry. But don't you have a desire to meet the man who single-handedly turned the Metropolis Star from a second-rate newspaper into the paper read by more Americans than any other?"

Lois rolled her eyes at him. "What, are you doing commercials for him now?" she asked.

"Do you want to go or not?" Clark asked her.

"I'll meet you there at seven."

"So, how much time do we have?" Martha asked, taking the jump drive from Clark.

"I have an hour or so before I need to be back in Metropolis," Clark said, looking at his watch. "But we can come back tomorrow night."

"We should probably keep doing this until we are perfectly matched," Superman suggested. "I mean, if you're willing to help us?"

"Of course we are," Martha said.

"Okay, so what should we watch first?" Jonathan said opening the directory of video files Clark had copied from the Planet's archives.

“Let’s look at Clark first,” Clark suggested. “While I think we need to be imitating each other, come to some sort of compromise Superman, for now, I probably need to make the most changes. ‘Superman’ can’t change too much at first.”

“Right,” Superman agreed. “I think maybe for now, you should try to act as much like me as possible. Once we’re indistinguishable, we can make subtle changes at the same time so we’re a Superman you’re more comfortable being.”

“Right,” Clark agreed, leaning over to point to a file on the computer. “This is Clark at the hotel fire this morning.”

Jonathan double clicked on the file and the four watched in silence for a few minutes. Once it was finished, Jonathan clicked on the file Clark pointed to which showed the rescue at the fire at the ferry terminal Clark had helped with.

When they had watched both clips, the four stepped back from the computer to take seats around the living room.

“Okay, the obvious difference is that Clark looks nervous,” Martha said.

“Yeah, Clark definitely looks more comfortable as Superman,” Jonathan said and all four of them laughed.

“I think for these conversations, it’s okay if you all call me Superman,” Superman smiled.

“Okay,” Jonathan agreed. “Superman definitely looks more comfortable.”

“But how do I look comfortable?” Clark asked. “I’m not comfortable.”

“When I first started in my universe, I was really nervous,” Superman said. “But I just didn’t think about it. I pretended I was in a play and I was playing the part of a superhero. I think it made me come across as a little stiff, but other than that it was okay.”

“You still come off as a little stiff,” Martha pointed out.

Superman smiled. “Yes, well, I decided that worked for the personality. I mean... I’m not describing this very well, but I guess I still see Superman as a character I play. I get to write my own lines and develop my own character, but I definitely try to act a specific way.”

“So, I need to pretend to be comfortable with what I’m doing,” Clark said, looking doubtful this was going to work.

“Anything else?” Superman said.

“Clark, Superman holds the victims differently,” Jonathan noted. “During the hotel fire, he carried the woman in his arms. You wrapped an arm around the waist of the young man at the grease fire.”

“Do you always hold victims that way?” Clark asked.

Superman nodded. “Unless there is more than one,” he clarified.

“Okay. Carry victims in my arms.”

“Maybe that’s enough for now,” Martha said, looking at her son worriedly.

Superman nodded. “I should get back and do the evening patrol anyway. Are you coming, Clark?”

“I want to look over these again. Go ahead without me. I still have a few more minutes before I need to head back.”

“Okay. Have fun with Lois tonight. Thanks, Martha, Jonathan,” he said, giving each of the older Kents a hug before he took off.

When Superman left, Clark turned back to the computer.

“Clark,” Martha said gently. “How are you?”

Clark gave a slight smile. Leave it to his mother to realize that he was not doing well. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “It all feels so overwhelming.”

“You’ll get better with practice,” Jonathan said.

“Isn’t this exactly what you didn’t want me to be doing?” Clark asked his father, confused. “Helping in public.”

Jonathan nodded his head. “It is. But I don’t think that’s who you are. You’ve shown effectively that unless someone else is around taking care of things and ordering you not to help, you feel the need to do so.

“It’s taken me some time, but I’ve come to terms with it. It seems to work for Superman,” Jonathan said.

“We’re so proud of you, honey,” Martha said. “We know how scary this is. But you have to do this. Superman can’t stay here forever.”

“I know,” Clark admitted. “Still, I... I feel like throwing up every time I put on the suit. I’ve never thrown up, but that’s all I can think of to describe the feeling. I haven’t been able to eat for the past two days.”

“It will get easier,” Jonathan said, placing a hand on Clark’s shoulder. “You’ll get more practiced at it and you’ll feel more comfortable. It’s different now, Clark. This isn’t like when you were a teenager.

“I’m not saying it doesn’t make me a little nervous as well, but I think this will make you happy once you work past all the old stuff. I think this is what you always wanted to do.”

Clark nodded. “Maybe.” He looked at the clock. “I should get going.”

“Have a good time, honey,” Martha said, holding him tightly.

Clark walked up to Lois as soon as she came into the party. “Wow!” he said. “You look great!”

“Have you seen Linda?” she asked him, barely paying attention to what he had said.

“No one fields a compliment quite like you,” he said with a smile and Lois looked at him.

“Sorry. Thank you. And you look good, too. Now, have you seen Linda?” She was trying to stay calm, but the truth was, just knowing she was in the same room as Linda made her nervous. They had nothing in common anymore. Still, it was hard to see her.

Clark smiled broadly. “I haven’t seen her yet. Lois, what is this rivalry about?”

“Rivalry? What rivalry?” Lois asked.

“Between you and Linda,” Clark said slowly.

“There is no rivalry. I don’t like her. That’s all there is to it,” Lois explained.

“You brought Lois,” Linda said as she came up to them, looking directly at Clark. “I didn’t realize you’d bring...”

“We’re partners,” Lois and Clark said together, although Clark’s tone was friendly while Lois’ was cold.

“Right,” Linda said, linking her arm through Clark’s.

“Let me introduce you to Preston.”

Clark gently removed her arm from his, but Lois glared at him anyway.

Grabbing a Double Fudge Crunch bar out of her drawer, she ripped the wrapper off and took a big bite. If that was how Clark wanted to play it that was fine by her. What did she care who he dated?

Clark was glad for the sirens which started during his lunch with Linda. He had agreed to come to lunch with her against his better judgment, and it had been uncomfortable. Clearly, his initial assessment that she was not flirting with him was off base. While he had to admit that some small part of him relished the fact that any involvement he had with Linda would rankle Lois, he was unwilling to lead Linda on like that.

Still, Linda had doggedly ignored repeated attempts during lunch to let her know he was not interested, so Clark was glad for the reprieve. The two had quickly gotten up and run to the elevators where the sirens in the building were coming from.

“An elevator cable snapped,” Clark heard someone say and he started to get out his notebook. Then he realized what he was doing. Someone was in danger right in front of him. Superman would not be coming to this — it was precisely the type of thing Clark had said he would cover himself.

Noticing Linda was distracted with getting quotes from passersby, Clark turned around and found an unused stairwell where he could spin into the Superman suit. He still felt weird wearing it — he felt so exposed, but he knew he did not have a choice. Within seconds, he was in the elevator shaft just in time to see the last cable snap. He caught the car, slowing its descent.

This part was easy — in the elevator shaft he was all alone and did not feel on display. No one could criticize his actions or tell him what he was doing wrong. However, as he passed by the floor where everyone was gathered, intending to lower the elevator so that the people inside could get off at this floor, dozens of flashbulbs went off.

For a moment, Clark felt pure, unadulterated panic. He had been found, exposed. What would happen to his parents, Lois... Then he remembered, he was wearing the suit. It would be all right. He hoped.

Lois glanced up at the television monitors as they showed a Superman rescue from a hotel moments ago. The news program showed Superman lowering the elevator to an open floor, but something was off. “Turn it up,” she called out and Jack, who had been passing by, turned the volume up.

“You could do it yourself,” he said to her, but Lois paid no attention to him.

“Superman sped away after the rescue,” the reporter on LNN was saying, “and did not discuss the incident with the press.” That was odd and very unlike Superman. And did he look nervous when lowering the elevator? It could not have been difficult for him — he had lifted a space shuttle into space and smashed an asteroid the size of Metropolis. This was an elevator! What was going on with him?

She had vowed to leave him alone and not ask about whatever project Clark was working on — she wanted to show Clark and Superman that she did not have to be in the

know at all times, although it really was difficult to concentrate when she knew they were keeping secrets from her. Now, though, she knew she could not do that. Something was wrong with Superman, and as his friend she had to help him.

She showed up right after he had seen the report of Clark saving the falling elevator. He considered not answering, but this was Lois. She would just come back. As long as there was not another Superman rescue going on while they were chatting, it would be fine. He would have to be extra vigilant about keeping an ear out for calls.

“Hi, Lois,” he said as he answered the door. “Clark’s not here.”

“I know,” she said, her voice bitter. “He’s having lunch with Linda King,” the name was venomous coming from her lips. “I came to see you,” she told him.

“Okay,” he said, already feeling nervous about what she could possibly want.

“Is everything okay?” she asked as she walked inside. “I saw the elevator rescue.”

Superman looked at her quizzically. Was she worried that the rescue had been hard for him? That did not make any sense — it had been easy and successful. “Yeah, um... what’s the question?” he asked her.

“I saw the LNN report on it and you seemed... off,” Lois said. “Nervous — almost like it was hard for you. But come on, how hard can it be for you to hold an elevator if you can lift space shuttles into orbit? So I thought something might be wrong. Plus Clark mentioned he was working on something for you — something secret. I just... I want to help.”

Superman smiled, while inside he was feeling anxious. This was the Lois he loved, although she had rarely come out that first year in Metropolis — the Lois that not only wanted to make the world a better place, but wanted to make *his* world a better place.

On the other hand, she had been willing to do that for Superman from the beginning, so this was not that surprising. More nerve-racking than her concern was the cause for it. She had noticed a difference between his demeanor and Clark’s. He had seen Clark’s rescue — while he had looked nervous, it was a marked improvement from the fire the other day.

They were lucky that the television cameras were not quite crisp enough for Lois to recognize that this Superman was younger as well.

“I’m fine, Lois,” he finally said.

“But you looked nervous,” she insisted.

“I’m...,” he started to say that he was not sure why, but did not feel right lying to her, especially when she was trying so hard to be helpful. “I wasn’t,” he finally settled on.

Lois gave him a look and he knew that she did not believe him, so he reached forward and placed a hand on her arm. “Thank you for caring, Lois. But I’m fine. Really.”

“And the thing Clark’s working on for you? Maybe I could help with that?”

Superman smiled at her tenacity. He could not help it, he found that particular character trait endearing. It

reminded him so much of his wife. “Maybe at some point,” he told her, knowing that shutting her out like this was probably hurting her, but also knowing that it was probably not that bad an idea. “But for now, I’d like to keep it between me and Clark.”

Lois nodded, clearly fighting with herself, but she finally stood. “Okay. But if you change your mind... We are friends, right?” Lois asked sounding very unsure of herself.

“Yes, we are definitely friends,” Superman said, smiling at her.

“Superman’s the biggest story of the day, and all we’re leading with is a weather graph!” Perry nearly screamed at the afternoon meeting. “Would someone please explain this to me?”

“How could you let her scoop you?” Lois asked Clark.

He wanted to have a fast retort, something that was just as biting as Lois’ tone had been with him, but he did not. He was awash in guilt. Not that there was any real decision to have been made — clearly if it was between the lives of the people in the elevator and a story for the Planet, he had made the right choice. Still, the Planet was struggling. He knew Linda was there. Maybe he should have written something up, say he bumped into Superman afterwards. He had just been so busy dealing with his feelings in the aftermath of the rescue that he had not thought of it.

He had instead been going over the rescue from every angle, trying to determine if he had missed anything. Should he have done something differently? He had not spoken to the media — that was definitely something he was going to have to get comfortable doing, but wanted to perfect his Superman first.

“Well?” Lois prodded him.

“What are you asking him for?” Perry asked. “If you want to know something, look at the Star,” he said, clearly annoyed, before disappearing into his office.

For a moment, nobody moved, but then Lois got up and moved to the coffee pot and the meeting seemed to break up. Clark was staring at the picture accompanying Linda’s article, a man in the back looked familiar, when Lois came back. “Oh, stop drooling!” she muttered.

“What?” Clark asked. What was she talking about?

“Linda. You’re drooling over her writing now,” Lois pointed out.

“I’m not drooling,” Clark said. “What is with you anyway?”

“Me? You’re the one who’s more interested in making the society page in the Star than the Planet’s front page,” Lois said.

“What? Lois, I have no idea what you’re talking about. The society page? What would I be doing on the society page?” Clark asked.

Lois picked up a copy of the morning edition of the Star and pressed it into Clark’s face. “Dancing with Linda King,” she said in a singsong voice.

“What is your problem, Lois?” Clark asked, long over his guilt about not getting the elevator story and fully back to being annoyed at Lois. “Are you jealous? Do you think I’m interested in Linda or something?”

“I don’t care who you’re interested in!” Lois insisted.

“What I care about is my job. And your letting her scoop you puts my job in jeopardy.”

“Really?” Clark said, deciding not to tell her about the piece of wire he had found from the elevator accident that looked cut, not broken. “You think your job is in jeopardy and it’s all *my* fault?”

“Yes,” Lois said. “I think if you weren’t so busy fawning over Linda, you would have gotten the elevator story.”

“You know what?” Clark asked. “You can think whatever you want!” With that, he stormed out.

“Hi,” Superman said as he came into the farmhouse.

“You’re early,” Martha told him. “Clark isn’t here yet.”

“I know,” Superman said. “I was trying to avoid Lois.”

“Lois?” Jonathan asked.

Superman nodded his head. “Things have gotten a bit... complicated.”

“Complicated how?” Jonathan asked.

“Well for starters, I’m not sure how, but she knows Clark is working on something for me and is upset that we haven’t asked for her help,” Superman said.

Martha laughed. “I don’t see Lois as someone who is comfortable with secrets being kept from her.

“No,” Superman agreed. “She most definitely is not. Although, thank goodness for small favors, she seems to be trying to prove that she’s okay with it this time. Not well, mind you, but at least she didn’t just camp out in the apartment until one of us told her what was going on.”

“You said that was one way in which things were complicated. What was the other?” Martha asked.

“Clark did a rescue this afternoon,” Superman started.

“He did? We’ve been watching and didn’t see anything,” Jonathan said, surprised.

“It would have only made local news. An elevator cable snapped at a hotel in Metropolis this afternoon and the elevator was on the seventy-first floor at the time.”

“Oh, my. Did he get everyone out in time?” Martha asked.

Superman nodded. “He did great. The problem is that Lois saw the report.”

“Did she recognize Clark?” Jonathan asked, and Superman could hear a note of panic in his voice.

“No, I don’t think the video they show on television is high enough quality for Lois to ever notice a difference. But she did notice that ‘Superman’ was acting funny,” Superman said.

“Funny how?” Martha asked.

“Well, he was much better than the other day at the fire, but he was still nervous. I doubt anyone but Lois would have even noticed and the talking heads didn’t make any comment about it at all, but Lois did. She quizzed me about it quite a bit.”

“Is this going to work?” Jonathan said. “I don’t mean to be a naysayer, but Lois is not stupid, and if Clark takes over for you full time she’s going to notice a difference. I mean at some point she’s likely to see Clark as Superman in person.”

“I know,” Superman said, dejectedly. “I’m not sure what we’re going to do about that.”

hesitant. “But try to hear me out, okay?”

“Why?” Superman asked warily.

“I know that a large part of that will be my getting more comfortable being Superman and not freaking out when someone takes my picture, but I keep thinking — what if Lois shows up some time when we don’t expect her? I don’t think we can do much to fool her, and so I think we should avoid that if we can, but in an effort to try, I had this idea...”

“So you said,” Superman said. Why was Clark taking his time bringing it up?

“I was thinking that aside from the glasses and the hair, which I’ve been able to copy without a problem, we still look different. Not a lot, but you are older than I am,” Clark said hesitantly.

“Go on,” Superman prodded him. He somehow just knew he was not going to like what was coming next.

“So,” Clark said taking a deep breath. “I thought maybe you could wear make-up. Not a lot,” he rushed to explain. “Particularly not at first. Just to look a little younger.”

“Until I look more like you,” Superman said slowly, hating the idea and hating even more the fact that it made sense.

“Right.”

Superman turned to Martha. “Is it possible?”

Martha laughed, “That we can use make-up to make you look younger? What do you think it’s for? The entire industry is built on trying to help women look younger.”

“So, what do we do?” Superman said.

Clark pulled something out of a bag he had brought with him. “I bought foundation. I’m not sure if this is the best way to go, but I stopped by a make-up store and asked. I got some strange looks,” Clark smiled, “but I’m told this matches my skin tone the best.”

Martha took it from him and opening it up put a small amount on her finger and leaned over to spread it on Superman’s cheek. “Perfect,” she said.

Superman glared at her.

“You’ll get used to it,” Martha assured him.

“Really? You don’t wear any make-up,” he pointed out.

“Well, no, but on the farm? That would be silly. But I do for special occasions. Trust me — you forget about it after the first few minutes it’s on.”

Superman looked at her dubiously. “Well, let’s try it now,” he suggested.

Martha moved over and rubbed the foundation on, taking special care around his eyes — which certainly was one place where the age difference between him and Clark had taken a toll.

When she had finished, she stepped back and took a look. “Just give me a second,” she said and ran upstairs.

“How’s it feel?” Clark asked.

“Like there’s gunk on my face,” Superman said with a smile.

Martha came back downstairs armed with more make-up. Superman did not even want to ask what it was she was using, he was afraid it would be too mortifying to know. A few minutes later and Martha stepped back. “What do you think?” she asked Jonathan.

Jonathan looked back and forth between Clark and

Superman. “Wow!” he said. “Are you indistinguishable from each other? No. But darn close!”

“Can you show me how to put this stuff on?” Superman asked, already praying Martha was right and he would get used to it.

“I don’t think he should wear it all at once,” Clark said. “Or at least so much. It will look weird if he suddenly looks ten years younger. I was thinking, maybe doing it in stages, so on any given day he doesn’t look noticeably different from before, but over time, it’s harder and harder to tell the differences between us.”

“That makes sense,” Superman agreed.

“Why don’t you go upstairs and wash it off and then I can show you how to apply it?” Martha suggested.

With a whoosh, Superman was gone and back a second later. Martha suggested they go to the bathroom and a few minutes later they came back, Superman looking just slightly younger than normal.

“Perfect!” Clark said.

“Easy for you to say!” Superman said. “I suppose I should make sure to wear this all the time in case I bump into Lois.”

Clark nodded. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s not that big a deal,” Superman said. “Martha, can you write down the stuff you used so I know what to buy?”

“Just keep it,” Martha said. “As you pointed out, I barely ever wear make-up. I’ll just buy more next time Jonathan takes me out for something fancy,” she said, winking at her husband.

“Should we look at the elevator rescue now?” Clark asked. “I have the video clip of it ready.”

“Yes,” Superman said. “I definitely think it’s your turn to be tortured.”

“What are *you* doing here?” Lois asked as she walked into the restaurant to pick up the food she had ordered.

“I have a date,” Linda said.

Lois looked around for Clark, but did not see him. Then again, Linda was alone right now. Maybe he was meeting her later. “Well, have fun,” Lois said in an effort to get away quickly.

“What, no barb?” Linda asked.

Lois rolled her eyes. “No. Although a warning — stay away from Clark. He’s a nice guy and a little naive.”

“First Superman and now Clark? Do you own all the men with great bodies in this town?” Linda asked.

“I’m serious. I know you’re just using him to get back at me and I’d hate for him to be hurt.”

“For me to want to get back at you, you would have had to do something that mattered to me,” Linda said. “Which you didn’t. Besides, if you think that’s the only reason I’m interested in Clark, you must be blind, deaf, and dumb. He’s smart and kind, in addition to being one of the hottest guys I’ve met in Metropolis. What’s not to like?”

Clark got in to work before seven the next day. He knew Lois had been coming in late since they were quiet and Perry was coming in early because the drop in circulation meant he was not sleeping well. He figured this was the best way to talk to Perry alone. He felt badly for keeping

this from Lois, but given the issues with Linda, he thought it might make sense this time. Maybe. He was still torn about that.

“Perry?” he asked, sticking his head into his editor’s office.

“Oh, good morning, Clark. What are you doing here this early?” he asked, then his eyes lit up. “Do you have a story?”

“Sort of,” Clark said. “Nothing for today’s paper. But maybe in a few days.”

“What is it?” Perry asked, still excited. “If you can get it in before we’re closed down...”

“We’re about to be closed down?” Clark asked.

Perry shook his head. “I don’t know. But the numbers don’t look good. So, what have you got?”

“I think Preston Carpenter and Linda King are staging the news,” Clark said.

“What?” Perry was confused. “Clark, that’s a serious allegation.”

“I know,” Clark said. “And I’m not sure it’s Preston and Linda which is why I’m not ready to print it yet, but I have good reason for suspecting them.”

Perry sat back, giving Clark a ‘Let’s hear it’ look.

“Linda admits that the only reason she’s been getting the news stories she has is that she just happens to be in the right place at the right time. At lunch yesterday, he called to check that she was at the restaurant moments before the elevator cable snapped, and she says he always keeps close tabs on his reporters. Carpenter has editorials written recently on the topic of the latest news stories and he writes them fast enough to get them in the paper at the same time as Linda’s article,” Clark explained.

Perry looked interested, but not one-hundred percent convinced. “If he keeps as close tabs on Linda as you say, he probably knows what she’s going to be writing about and could be writing the editorials at the same time.”

Clark nodded, “I know. And Lois said something similar when I mentioned the elevator editorial. But then there’s this...” he held up the elevator cable. “I got this from the site. It looked cut to me and the lab analysis confirms it. That was not an accident.”

Now Perry looked very interested.

“I know that doesn’t mean Carpenter and Linda did it, but...”

“But maybe it’s time for some undercover work,” Perry smiled. “You know, Clark, things here at the Planet are not looking that great. A man of your talents, well, you’d probably get a job pretty quickly if you tried.” He smiled widely at Clark.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Clark said. “If I can get Preston to hire me...”

“If? Clark, he’s going to be tickled pink to get one half of the Planet’s best reporting team.”

“What about Lois?” Clark asked, looking uncomfortable. “I mean, to be honest, we haven’t been getting along all that well since Linda came to town, but I still feel weird about not telling her this.”

“What’s Linda King have to do with you and Lois?” Perry asked.

Clark shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t really know. Lois

and Linda have some sort of rivalry going on. I don’t know what it’s about, but Linda has made some attempts to get me in the middle and Lois thinks...”

“Right,” Perry remembered. “The lunch from yesterday.”

“Yeah,” Clark said.

Perry thought. “Well, I’d love to have Lois’ perspective on this, but if she’s not going to be able to be objective about it... Given her attitude yesterday, and I’m guessing what happened at the staff meeting was not the worst of it, maybe it’s best to leave her out. Maybe you could have another argument with her and use that as yet another reason you’re leaving. Would Linda King buy that?”

“Oh, yeah,” Clark confirmed. “In an instant.”

Clark knocked on Lois’ door just a few minutes later. He suspected Lois was up and just was not coming in to work in the mornings as it was too depressing to sit at her desk with nothing to do. Just to be sure, he had listened at her door for a few moments. He could not tell what she was doing, but he was certain she was awake and in the kitchen.

Lois grunted when she opened the door. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Good to see you, too, Lois,” Clark said wryly.

“I’m still annoyed at you for letting Linda scoop you,” Lois reminded him.

“I’m sorry,” Clark said. He knew he was supposed to have another argument with her, but he found it hard to let her remain angry at him for this. Who knew how long he would be undercover?

Lois looked at him with her hands on her hips, clearly waiting for more.

“I don’t know what happened. But Lois, you are letting her get to you an awful lot. Can’t you just tell me what happened with her?”

“Oh, she hasn’t told you yet? It didn’t come up over dinner last night?” Lois asked.

“Dinner? Last night? I didn’t have dinner with Linda last night,” Clark said, confused.

“You didn’t?” Lois asked.

“No.”

“But I saw her at the Chinese place. She said she had a date,” Lois explained.

“With me? Lois, I did not have dinner with Linda last night.”

“Oh,” Lois mumbled. She supposed Linda did not actually say her date was with Clark. She had just assumed it was. “Look,” she said, feeling sort of sorry for all the mean things she had been thinking about Clark all morning. “This can’t leave this room. You can’t tell anyone. Not even Superman.” Clark looked at her with his eyebrows raised. “Hey, I’ve left you alone on that. You have secrets with Superman, I’m okay with that.” She looked at the disbelief on his face, and reworded, “I can live with that. But you have to be willing to keep this from him for me.”

“Of course, Lois,” Clark said, trying not to look too pleased that she was telling him something she did not want Superman knowing. On the other hand, he was also feeling a bit guilty. Lois was opening up to him and telling him some big secret and he was going to follow that up by picking a fight with her. Maybe he should stop her right

Or he could say it was Superman's. That was an even more obvious choice than Linda. Except, he was not really sure he wanted Perry to hear that he was having tea with Superman.

Lois seemed to take his silence to mean he had something to hide — which, of course, he did. She turned away from him and with a slightly scary tone to her voice she called, "Come out, come out, where ever you are."

Clearly having Perry think he was having tea with Superman was better than having Lois know what he was up to. Besides, with Perry in the closet it was not clear that he would be able to hear him anyway.

"Lois," he said, following her into the bedroom, "you know sometimes Superman drinks tea with me."

Lois turned around and looked at him critically. "Superman likes tea?"

Clark nodded. That was the truth — he did like tea. Of course, it was not the truth that Superman had been drinking tea here earlier, but Clark had not actually said that he was.

"Oh," Lois said deflated. "So Linda wasn't here."

"No. Lois, she's my partner. But that's all. I know you have this impression that something is going on with us, but it's not."

"I only have that impression 'cause you follow her around with your tongue hanging out," Lois lashed out.

"I do not!" Clark said. He was not sure why, but this ongoing argument about his behavior with Linda really got his goat.

"Really? Maybe I should give you a mirror so you can see how ridiculous you look!" Lois said, speaking more than a little loudly as she headed back to the living room.

"You are being completely unreasonable!" Clark yelled back at her.

"Me? I'm being unreasonable? You're the one who abandoned all your friends at the first sign of trouble. You know, I used to think you were a lot like Superman, but you've turned out to be a whole lot weaker than he is. He would never abandon his friends like this! Think about how Perry must feel!"

"I talked to Perry," Clark said, his tone quieter now. He did not realize Lois had ever thought he was like Superman. The thing was, he did not feel much like Superman. He knew they had the same background and the same desire to help, but Lois was right — he was a lot weaker than Superman was.

"And you think he told you how he really feels?" Lois asked as she moved towards the door. "Face it, Clark. You let everyone down."

"She is a spitfire," Perry said, smiling as he exited the closet. Clark rolled his eyes in response. "Now, son, don't let her get you down. She'll forgive you just as soon as she knows what's going on. And certainly her behavior indicated that we were right — the further away we keep Lois from this, the better. Now did you really tell her you were having tea with Superman? It's hard to hear from the closet."

Clark blushed and Perry smiled at him indulgently. "Well, Lois knows Superman and I are friends..." Clark

said lamely.

"Well, it was good thinking," Perry said. "It seemed to do the trick — she stopped looking around."

"Yeah," Clark said in reply.

"Buck up, son," Perry said. "It will be fine once it's over."

Clark nodded his head. He hoped so, but he was starting to wonder if Lois would ever forgive him.

"That can't be true," Linda said, her eyes showing the shock she was feeling. "It just can't."

Clark, watching her, was now certain he was correct. Linda was not a part of this. She seemed way too horrified about what Carpenter was doing to be playing a part in it. "Think about it," he said gently. "He always calls to verify your location. He has editorials written to go alongside each of your articles. Those are pretty big coincidences."

Linda nodded her head in agreement. "Still. I mean, sure Carpenter seems ambitious, and he's made some off-handed comments that made me think he might be a little off balance, but this is huge!"

"I'm sorry," Clark said, putting a hand on top of hers for comfort. "I know this is a shock."

Linda nodded slowly. "What do we do to catch him?" she asked, and Clark grinned. He could see how she and Lois would have had issues — they were a lot alike.

"Well, first, while it's not the most important thing, let's get something straight. This is a Planet story."

"But you work for the Star now," Linda said, but then the light bulb when off, "You also work for the Planet, don't you? Why didn't you tell me this from the beginning?"

"I didn't know for sure," Clark said, not wanting to let her know that he had suspected her. "I needed to get on the inside to see if I was right."

"How is it that Lois is letting you do this on your own?" Linda asked. Clearly, the uncertainty she had been feeling at knowing she had been duped by Carpenter was gone now.

"Linda, I don't want to keep getting in the middle of you and Lois," Clark said.

"No one's putting you in the middle. I just asked a question," Linda said, the picture of pure innocence.

"First off, Lois is my partner, not my boss. I'm not sure what your impression of our relationship is, but we're equal partners..."

"I bet that's not how Lois would describe it," Linda cut in.

"Actually," Clark said, feeling himself start to get annoyed, "it is how she described it. I had amnesia a few weeks ago and when she showed me around the newsroom that is exactly how she described our relationship. I know you and Lois have your differences, but Lois and I are friends as well as partners, and I'd appreciate it if you would stop making snide comments about her."

"Okay," Linda said quietly. "I can't promise to keep quiet in front of her, but when it's just the two of us, I'll stop."

Clark smiled. "Good. Now, Lois doesn't actually know I'm working on this. Which doesn't change the fact that it's a Planet story."

“Got it,” Linda said. “But I want a name on the byline, too. You can’t get this story without me.”

“Fair enough,” Clark said.

“How are we going to get this story?” Linda asked.

Clark smiled. He was starting to see why Linda had stolen Lois’ story in college. She was a good writer and she clearly had the drive, but when it came to investigative skills she did not compare to Lois. Lois was right — there was no question who was the better reporter.

“Well,” he said, “you said Carpenter has hit on you. Maybe you could use that. I just need you to get him out of his office long enough to take a look at his computer. I’m hoping he has his next editorial written there and we can guess the location of the next disaster.”

Lois walked into the hotel lobby annoyed. She was sick of the slow work week. Just because there was nothing to work on and she was without a partner, because Clark turned out to be about as loyal as Benedict Arnold, should not mean that she was stuck with nothing to do.

In an effort to change that, she had a meeting with Bobby Bigmouth this afternoon. Unfortunately he knew how hard up she was for a lead, so he had only agreed to meet with her if she brought him his favorite lobster bisque from the Grand Hotel’s seafood restaurant.

She was about to walk into the restaurant when she spotted Linda and her puppy, Kent, having a discussion a few feet away. Before either of them spotted her, Clark walked off and Linda stood in place for a minute before following Preston Carpenter.

It was weird — Linda seemed to be trying to keep out of Carpenter’s sight. Lois had no idea why she would not want her editor to see her, but decided to follow Linda. There was a story here; she could smell it.

“What are *you* doing here?” Linda asked her angrily.

“I’m following you,” Lois said, her voice equally angry.

“What are you doing following your editor around?”

“I’m working. You should go!” Linda said.

“I’m not leaving. Feel free to go yourself,” Lois said, her voice firm.

“Linda, dear.” A voice came from overhead. “I see that you’ve discovered that I won’t be making it back to our dinner date.”

Clark was trying to determine the best way to stop the assassination when he heard the scream. That sounded like Lois. What was Lois doing here? What was he going to do?

An arm snapped out of the hallway he was passing and tugged on him — hard. “Excuse me!” Clark said, then saw who it was. “What are you doing here?” he asked confused.

“Just stay focused on the assassination,” Superman said. “I’ll get Lois and Linda. Are you going to be okay?”

Clark nodded. “I think so. The make-up looks good by the way. Barely noticeable.”

Superman smiled. “Well, I guess I’m about to put it to the test. We’ll see if Lois notices.”

Lois sighed. She was going to die. Worse yet, she was going to die tied to Linda King. This morning she thought

her life could not get any worse. Now she knew she was wrong.

“This is just great!” she mumbled.

“I did not steal Paul Bender from you,” Linda said in response.

“I didn’t say you did,” Lois said.

“So, that’s not the problem between us?” Linda asked.

“And while we’re at it, I didn’t steal Clark from you either.”

“You didn’t? I guess I didn’t walk in on you two playing tonsil hockey, but...”

“Fine!” Linda said. “I did sort of steal Paul from you. But it wasn’t like you were dating or something. It was a crush. I didn’t realize that made him off limits.”

“You didn’t?” Lois asked, the disbelief clear in her voice. “Was I your first friend?”

Linda took a deep breath. “We’re about to die in here, Lois. Could we try to get along for the last few moments of life?”

“No,” Lois said. “I’m sorry, but it’s been five years and nothing is different.”

“I didn’t steal Clark from you!” Linda insisted. “I mean, I admit, I tried, but he was resistant.”

“What do you mean, ‘resistant’?” Lois asked. “I mean, he is your partner now.”

“Not really,” Linda muttered.

“What do you mean, not really? Are you using him, Linda? I told you, Clark is...”

“Clark is not stupid!” Linda insisted.

“Of course not,” Lois replied. “Why would I partner with someone that was? Clark is naive.”

“Not as naive as you think. It was all a ruse,” Linda said. “He’s still working for the Planet.”

“What?” Lois asked, confused now.

“As you can tell, Carpenter is planting the stories and making sure I’m in the right place to report them. Clark figured it out and took a job at the Star to uncover Carpenter.”

“He did?” Lois asked, completely confused. “But he didn’t tell me.”

“Do you blame him?” Linda asked. “You’re not exactly objective right now.”

“Did Perry know?” Lois asked, ignoring the barb.

Before Linda could answer, the door to the freezer was ripped off. “Ladies,” Superman said as he came over and pulled them both to their feet.

March 1994

Lois stared out the window. She was so angry at Clark. He had let her believe he was abandoning her and the paper. Sure, he was not actually doing so, but he had let her believe he was.

To make matters worse, because he had left her out of the loop, the byline for the story breaking the Carpenter/Star issue was “by Clark Kent, with special assistance from Linda King.” No mention of Lois Lane at all. Not that that was unfair. Of course she was not mentioned. She was completely unrelated to the story.

Oh, Clark suggested she write a sidebar article, but that was almost patronizing. Lois Lane did not write sidebars; she wrote the main article, thank you very much.

How could he and Perry keep this from her?

She stood up. She was not going to sit here and get angrier and angrier at Clark. She was going to go over to his apartment and let him know how angry she was.

She sat outside in her car looking at the lights on inside. She needed to knock on his door, but somehow, now that she was here, the fight had gone out of her. She was feeling less angry and more hurt.

He had let her think he had abandoned her. How could he do that? She thought they were friends. Didn't he know how much of a sore spot this was for her?

Sighing, though, she realized that she was being unfair. Clark did not know that this was an issue for her. She had never told him — how would he know?

With a sigh, she opened her car door and walked up the walkway to Clark's apartment.

Clark watched LNN's coverage of the assassination attempt in silence. Superman was off doing a night patrol. He had let Clark know that if Lois noticed the make-up, she must not have wanted to mention anything in front of Linda. However, he did not think she did as she had not looked at him funny or given any other indication that she thought he looked different. Clark was not surprised. Right now, the make-up barely changed the way Superman looked.

He was fairly happy with his rescue of Secretary Wallace. It was hard to tell as the cameras had been far away, but he did not look noticeably nervous on the footage they showed on LNN, and none of the anchors mentioned anything about awkward behavior. Luckily, the press had been far more interested in speaking with Wallace than with Superman, so he managed to avoid speaking to the press yet again.

The knock on the door surprised him, even more so when he used his x-ray vision to see who it was. Lois had been cold and aloof all afternoon. He had tried to go up to her in the newsroom and explain what had happened, but she had brushed him off. It had not helped matters when Linda appeared and they discovered that she had gotten her name on Clark's article. Lois was understandably more than a little upset to discover that the byline read "Clark Kent with special assistance from Linda King" rather than the more standard "Lois Lane and Clark Kent."

Not that Lois was unaware that she had not gotten to work on this story, but unsurprisingly, that had not made her feel better.

"Hi," he said shyly as he answered the door.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Lois asked as she walked inside and the hurt in her voice broke Clark's heart. "Why didn't you tell me you hadn't really quit the Planet?"

"I wanted to, Lois. Really, I did. But you just weren't being objective about this and Perry thought it would be best that you not work on it."

"I thought you had abandoned the Planet," she said to him. "Perry, Jimmy, ... me," she added at last in a voice so soft Clark needed to use his super hearing to hear it.

"Lois," Clark said, his voice nearly as soft as hers. "I'm so sorry. I never did, really. I... "

"Linda said you defended me," Lois said. "She said you asked her to stop bad mouthing me."

Clark nodded. "You're my partner. And my friend. Nothing is going to change that."

Lois took a seat on the couch. "Did I ever tell you that my dad left without saying goodbye?"

"What?" Clark asked, wondering what this had to do with Linda.

"When my dad left my mom, I was there. I was in the living room. He passed right by me. You know what he said?" Lois asked him. Clark did not answer, afraid to interrupt her. Instead, he sat down next to her and took her hand in his. "'Turn that racket down'," Lois said softly. "I had the television on and when my dad left us, all he said to me was that I had the television on too loud."

Clark used the hand he had in hers to tug her towards him gently. He wrapped his arms around her. "I'm so sorry," he said.

Lois did not say anything, but after a moment she pulled away. "Remember Chad?" she asked him. "My first boyfriend?"

"Of course," Clark said, still not sure where all this was going.

"We were pretty serious," Lois told him. "We were going to get married."

Clark nodded his head.

"We were planning to go to college together. We were going to live in the same apartment — Lucy and I were going to share a bedroom, 'cause Chad didn't want to leave her alone with my mom anymore than I did."

"What happened?" Clark asked quietly when Lois stopped speaking.

"Before we started college Chad's grandfather got sick. He needed 'round the clock care, but his grandparents couldn't afford it. So, Chad offered to go out and help them. We thought it would last a semester or so and then he'd come back. He wouldn't have had any trouble making up the classes."

"But he didn't come back?" Clark guessed when Lois got quiet again.

"He did," she finally said, her voice very soft again. "It took a year, and we only saw each other once, about a month after he left, but his grandfather made a remarkable recovery and Chad came home."

Clark decided to stay quiet again when Lois stopped. Within moments, she took a deep breath and spoke some more.

"His parents picked him up at the airport and we decided that I wouldn't go as we wanted a more private get together. He was coming over on his bike... He was hit by a car on his way over."

"Oh, Lois," Clark said softly, but she kept speaking.

"When I saw him at the hospital, he looked okay. Bruised and battered, but okay. And he was going to be okay. He promised me that he was going to be okay." Lois swiped angrily at the tears falling down her cheeks. "Early on, we'd been together maybe a month or so, Chad went on a rock climbing trip with his dad. He had a bad fall off the rock. Nearly killed himself, but he was lucky. Some guy nearby caught him before he hit his head. I remember when

I saw Chad in the hospital, he said to me, ‘Remember when I fell during the rock climbing trip? I’m indestructible, baby.’”

“But he wasn’t,” Clark said softly, guessing where this was going.

“They made us go home. Told us that he just needed to rest. That he was fine. He told me he was fine and promised again that everything was going to be all right.”

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He had lied. How could he have lied? He promised. Several times he had promised. And it had all been lies. He had promised... he had promised that he was going to be fine. He had looked at her with clear eyes and smiled and...

It was hard to comprehend. Nothing made sense. He had looked so well. So... healthy. The doctor said something about internal bleeding, but she had not really heard the explanation well. After the doctor had not let them back into Chad’s room without taking them to a private waiting room first. After he had said those awful words — I’m sorry — she had sort of tuned out.

How did this kind of thing happen? It just wasn’t fair.

He had promised he would never leave her without at least talking about it, and he had done so. She knew, or at least some part of her was aware, that it was not his fault, but that was small consolation. Even if he had not meant to, he had left her.

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“He promised he wouldn’t leave me, but he did it anyway,” Lois finished her story softly.

Clark pulled her to him again, rubbing her back in slow circles.

“I’m sorry,” Clark whispered to her softly. “I’m sorry for what happened to Chad and I’m sorry that you thought I was leaving you, too. I wasn’t, Lois. I really wasn’t. I can’t promise that I’ll never leave you, but not by choice. Really, Lois. You’re my best friend.”

“You’re mine, too,” Lois admitted softly.

Superman touched down lightly on the balcony. Glancing inside before he landed, he had seen a strange sight. Lois and Clark were sitting close together on the couch, arms wrapped around each other. His super-hearing had picked up the deep breaths reminiscent of sleep.

Just what was going on here? He could not remember this happening in his universe. On the other hand, it was clear that things were not the same as he remembered. He had seen the article on the cover of the Planet, and Lois’ name was not on it. How had Clark managed that?

With a sigh, Superman floated into his room so as not to disturb the couple on the couch. Sometimes things here were mind-numbingly similar to his life and other times they were so different he was unsure how these worlds could possibly be on the same path.

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Lois walked beside him on the way to the restaurant. Their footsteps matched step for step. Clark knew he was being silly, but these little things gave him hope. Maybe tonight she would admit that Dan was just a diversion, that she wanted her relationship with him to get more serious.

Not that he was sure she would do that. First off, Lois

Lane was nothing if not stubborn. For another, he deserved her flaunting Dan in his face. If he could just explain to her that he was not trying to create this distance between them... He just did not feel ready, though. He knew it was his fault, his insecurities, and he even knew they were stupid, but he just could not do it.

Lois was less likely than anyone he knew to run off screaming at the idea that she was dating an alien — particularly when that alien was Superman. She had never been anything but accepting of Superman’s differences, and there was no reason to think she would react differently to Clark Kent when she found out that he shared those differences.

Of course, when she found out that he shared those differences because he was Superman, she might be less pleased. There was little that bothered Lois as much as someone keeping a secret from her. It was a double-standard, but she freely admitted it. It was okay to keep secrets from the people around her, but they must be completely open with her.

Besides, the truth was the double standard did not exist anymore, or at least he did not think it did. Lois was nothing but open and honest with him now. Particularly since he had been shot in that club earlier this year, she had been different.

He knew that she deserved to know his secret and the only reason he could even fabricate for not telling her was that he was scared. While he was not sure exactly what he was scared of, the truth was that he was scared. The thought of telling her made his heart thump wildly and his hands break out in a sweat — physical signs that he normally never had to deal with.

“Are you okay, Clark?” Lois asked, linking her arm through his.

“I’m fine,” Clark lied, smiling down at her. This was what it was all about. None of the rest of it mattered to him. Being here like this with Lois, just being close together, that’s what he wanted for the rest of his life. If he could just tell her the truth, maybe he could even have it.

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Superman sat up in bed, surprised. The memory itself was not that surprising as he had wondered when he saw them together on the couch if Clark was going to tell Lois his secret sooner than he had done in his universe. Still, like the other day, something was off about this memory, but he could not determine what it was. The sound of her heels hitting the pavement seemed right, her linking her arm through his was also right. Even the conversation — he was pretty sure that was right, too. What was it that was wrong with this memory? He knew it was silly, but it was driving him crazy.

“Morning,” Clark said sleepily as Lois woke up.

“Did we spend all night on the couch?” she asked him, blushing slightly.

Clark looked at the clock. “It’s nearly seven, so yeah. I’m sorry. I’m sure it wasn’t very comfortable.”

“Actually,” Lois said in surprise, “I feel great.” She grinned at him before adding shyly, “Maybe it helped to talk last night.”

"I'm glad," Clark said, his voice soft and gentle.

Lois stood up and stretched.

"Do you want some coffee before you head home?"

Clark asked.

"That would be great," Lois said. It was weird. She should feel shy and awkward, but somehow after their talk last night, she felt completely comfortable here.

"Do you mind if I turn the news on?" she called into the kitchen.

"Go right ahead," Clark called back, and Lois moved over to turn on the television. As Lois would expect, like her, Clark had it on LNN.

"In his last circle, the pilot used up all but enough fuel to complete the landing," the morning anchor was saying as Clark came into the living room with two cups of coffee.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"A plane in Paris. At Orly. It's about to make a crash landing," Lois explained.

"This just in," the newscaster continued. "The famed Man of Steel from Metropolis is flying alongside the stricken airliner."

"I didn't know Superman helped outside of Metropolis," Lois said.

"I think he does, but not often," Clark said. "I guess he caught the news of this before we woke up."

"How did he not wake us up?" Lois asked. "We were in his living room... I mean, your living room, but... well, you know what I mean."

Clark shrugged, "Super quiet powers?" he joked. "I guess he floated around the apartment so we wouldn't hear him."

Lois nodded as she took a sip of her coffee.

Two days later Lois was still feeling sort of strange about Superman's help of the plane in Paris. Since then, he had saved a sinking ship in Brazil and a busload of children in Africa. On the other hand, he had not been seen at all in Metropolis. That seemed more than a little bit odd.

"Clark," she called when she saw her partner enter the newsroom.

"Morning, Lois," he said as he put his things down on his desk.

Lois walked over and her voice quiet, she asked, "Have you seen your roommate around?"

"What?" Clark asked looking at her with alarm. He took a fast look around, though, and no one was listening to their conversation.

"Superman's been seen on nearly every continent but North America in the past few days. Doesn't that strike you as a little odd?" she asked.

"It does," Clark admitted, "but I'm not sure what's going on. I haven't seen him for days."

"You haven't?" Lois asked, surprised by the answer.

"No. And it's weird. He's told me before when he was planning to be out of town for long periods of time, but this time it's like he just disappeared or something. Maybe he's on vacation?"

"And he didn't mention that to you?" Lois asked.

Clark just shrugged.

"Hi, Mom," Clark said as he landed on the porch. He and Superman had agreed to come out every Tuesday night to talk about how they were doing in terms of Clark looking more comfortable, maybe adjusting Superman's make-up — in general, just check up and make adjustments in their attempts to be more alike.

Of course, given Superman's disappearing act, Clark was not at all sure he was going to make it here today.

"I'm not sure Superman is coming," he told his mother as they entered the farmhouse. "He's been gone the last few days."

"I've been here," Superman said, entering from the living room.

"You were here?" Clark said confused. "Why didn't you tell me you were going to be staying here?"

Superman smiled. "I was going to, but the morning I left, you and Lois were all snuggled up on the couch together. It didn't seem like the right time."

"What were you doing snuggled up with Lois?" Martha asked, her eyes glinting with pleasure.

"She was upset. She came over to talk," Clark said.

"Is she all right?" Jonathan asked, and Clark smiled. His dad did not say much, but this comment alone made it clear he liked Lois.

"I think she's okay now. She was hurt that I left her out of the Star thing."

"Yeah, what happened with that?" Superman asked.

"Didn't she find Perry in the apartment when she dropped by?"

"No," Clark said confused, but then he realized — in Superman's universe, he would not have had a roommate to blame the extra cup on. "I told her the tea cup was yours and she stopped searching."

"Oh," Superman said, realizing that that made sense.

"So when did she find out that you hadn't actually left the Planet?"

"Linda told her just before you pulled them out of the freezer."

"She must have been tickled pink to learn of it that way," Superman laughed.

"I guess she must have been angry at some point," Clark admitted, "I mean, she seemed angry when we were at the Planet, but by the time she came over to talk to me, she was just hurt."

"Surely she understood," Martha said.

Clark nodded, "I think she did. It's just... Lois has some abandonment issues and my leaving the Planet without talking to her first sort of played right into them."

"Abandonment issues?" Jonathan asked.

"When her dad left her mom, he didn't say goodbye to her. She was in the house, too, but he sort of ignored her," Superman supplied.

"Well, not ignored her exactly," Clark clarified. "She had the TV on and he told her to turn the volume down. But that was it. So, between that and Chad..."

"Who's Chad?" Martha asked.

"Her first boyfriend," Superman said. "He died during a rock climbing accident. Although, I always got the impression from my Lois that they weren't that serious when it happened. So, she was upset, but not that upset."

when I went to get Dad. I wasn't thinking straight and it seemed like the most important thing was to get Dad home. By the time I came back they were both dead," he said, his voice breaking.

"Clark, that wasn't your fault," Martha said firmly.

"It most certainly wasn't," Superman added, taking in the pain on Clark's face. "Clark, I'm sorry. I had no idea. If I had..."

"What?" Clark asked. "You would have offered to fill in and be Superman until I was ready?" he gave a wan smile. "Even if you didn't know, you did all you could. I'm so grateful to you for giving me a chance to get used to this."

"Still," Superman said. "If you need more time..."

"No," Clark said. "I need to keep doing this. I can't keep you away from your family any longer than necessary."

"Okay," Superman said, smiling slightly. "But if you change your mind, please just let me know."

"I will," Clark smiled. Then eager to change the subject he asked, "So, what's the deal with staying here anyway? And why have you been keeping a low profile in Metropolis but roaming the rest of the earth looking for people to help?"

Superman took a deep breath. "That's not me."

"What?" Clark said.

"It's not me. I can't tell you who it is, but when it happened in my universe, I kept a low profile trying to figure it out. For the most part, no one ever figured out there were two Supermen around, so I thought I should do the same thing here."

Clark flew over Metropolis slowly. Superman had said he was staying in Smallville for another few days. Clark was curious. Did Superman know who it was? He said this had happened in his universe, too, so probably. Was it another Clark Kent? Maybe the one whose parents had died when he was young?

"Hey, you!" called someone to Clark's left.

Clark looked over. There he was. He flew over to the other Superman. "Hi," he said while he looked him over. He looked like Superman, meaning the other one. This guy was definitely older than he was, and looked to be about the same age as Superman. In fact, this guy and Superman could be twins. They looked identical.

"I don't want to talk," the other Superman said. "You're my enemy."

"I'm your what?" Clark asked confused.

"I'm the most powerful man in the universe. You have outlived your usefulness," the other Superman said petulantly.

"I'm not your enemy," Clark said, not understanding what was going on. The demeanor of this Superman was completely different than the one sitting in his parents' living room. "I want to know more about you — where you came from. Are you from another parallel universe?"

"Parallel universe?" the other Superman asked. "I was born. My father took me out of the womb."

"Jor-El took you out of the womb?" Clark asked. Maybe this Superman had gotten different messages on his globe?

"Who's Jor-El?" the other Superman asked.

"Your father," Clark said confused. "Isn't he?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," the other Superman said before he took off, flying away so quickly Clark had trouble seeing where he went.

"Lois Lane, Daily Planet," Lois said to the police officer when she arrived at the bank. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Hostage situation," the officer said. "It was tense until Superman got here."

"He's here?" Lois asked. The officer pointed off-handedly to where Superman was talking to the other officers.

He looked... off again. Not so much nervous this time, but more... cocky? What was with Superman? She knew he had told her he was okay, but his behavior was getting weirder and weirder.

Lois made her way over to him. She wanted to ask where he had been, why he had been keeping such a low profile in Metropolis recently. Before she got there, though, one of the guys broke free of police custody and made his way right toward her. Superman caught him just seconds before he reached Lois and grabbing him around the collar, hauled up way above his head. Then with a flick of his wrist, he tossed the man into the police van knocking him out cold.

Lois watched in fascination. This was getting seriously weird.

"Are you all right?" Superman asked her.

"I'm fine. Are *you* all right?" Lois asked him.

"I'm fine, miss," he said and if Lois did not know any better, she would think he was leering at her.

"Miss? Superman, it's me Lois."

"Nice to meet you, Lois," he said before he flew off.

Lois walked quickly towards Clinton Avenue. She really needed to see Superman. She did not care what he said, he was clearly not okay. Last week he was acting all nervous saving people from an elevator and today he was almost too confident, and definitely too aggressive, with the hostage situation. Plus, the way he had spoken to her had been strange. Almost as if he had never seen her before.

She knocked on the door, but no one answered. She knocked again, but still no answer. Where was he? With a sigh, Lois headed back home. She was going to talk to Superman and find out what was going on whether he liked it or not.

"I saw him," Clark said to his parents. Superman was taking a walk around the farm, but Clark had the impression that what he was really doing was avoiding him. "He looked exactly like Superman — like me, only older. And he has all my powers."

"Mmmhmmmm," Martha said as she worked on a sculpture sitting in the middle of the room.

"Who do you think he is?" Clark asked his parents. "A Clark from another universe? Something else entirely?"

Jonathan shrugged and Martha said nothing.

Clark looked back and forth from one to the other of them. They were acting weird — and almost completely

newsroom.

“Okay,” Clark smiled at her. Even for Lois, she sounded a bit high-strung today.

“Not here,” Lois said, looking around furtively.

“Okay,” Clark smiled even wider. “We can go to the coffee shop, Sherlock.”

“Are you making fun of me?” Lois asked with a glare.

“Just a nickname.”

“I don’t do nicknames,” Lois replied.

“Really? Cause you certainly hand them out with enough relish. ‘Farmboy’ ring a bell?” Clark asked her with a grin. “‘Hack from Nowheresville’? Oh, right, and last week it was ‘Lap Dog’, wasn’t it?”

“Cut it out,” Lois said threateningly.

“Are you okay?” Clark asked with concern seeing how she was responding to his teasing.

“No, something is wrong,” Lois said.

“Okay, let’s go,” Clark said, placing a hand on the small of Lois’ back to guide her out of the newsroom.

“So, what’s up?” he asked as they took a seat at the coffee shop downstairs.

“Something’s seriously wrong with Superman,” Lois said. “I know you don’t want to tell me what it was you were working on for him, and I respect that, but Clark, I’m worried about him.”

“I know he hasn’t been around Metropolis recently,” Clark started, not sure he wanted to tell Lois about the other Superman until he figured out who he was and what he wanted.

“He was here this morning,” Lois interrupted. “I saw him, and Clark, he was acting really strange.”

“Where did you see him? How was he acting strange?”

“Perry sent me to cover the hostage situation over at Merchant’s Bank. Superman had released the hostages before I got there. But one of the guys who did it got away from the police. Superman caught him, but he was about fifteen, twenty feet from the police van. And Superman tossed him back in.”

“From twenty feet away?” Clark asked incredulously.

“Yes. He knocked the guy out cold. See what I mean? And when he talked to me, you know what he said? He called me ‘Miss’ and when I reminded him my name was Lois, he said ‘Nice to meet you, Lois’. Like he didn’t know me at all.”

“That is weird,” Clark thought. This other Superman really was quite different from himself and the Clark currently staying at his parents’. What was he doing here?

“Oh, and... Clark, I think he leered at me. Superman doesn’t leer!”

“No, he doesn’t,” Clark said, mostly to himself. This was getting out of hand. He needed to see this new Superman and talk to him, but what about Lois? He disappeared all morning to spend time with his parents, how could he leave this afternoon for this? It could probably wait a little while, right?

“So, you’ll help me convince Superman to tell me whatever is wrong with him?” Lois asked.

Clark flinched slightly. Would he? Not with the real Superman for sure, but what about the new one? “Of course,” he finally said quietly.

He knew he should not do it. Things sent to Lois were not his business. Yet, for some reason, he could not seem to stop himself and when Lois got a message by delivery that afternoon, he used his super-vision to read it.

Why was Superman offering to explain himself to Lois? Was it the new guy or the old one?

Clark picked up the phone and called his parents.

“Hi,” he said into the phone softly. “Is he there?”

“Your father?” Martha asked, confused by the request.

“No,” Clark said. “Please, Mom, I need to ask him a fast question.”

There was silence on the line that let Clark know she had figured out what he was talking about and within a moment, Superman was on the line.

“Hi, Clark,” he said, sounding sort of weird. Sad, maybe?

“Did you send Lois a message?” Clark asked quietly.

“No,” Superman said, “that wasn’t me.”

“Okay,” Clark said, hanging up. He was going to have to visit Lois’ place tonight.

Superman hung up the phone with a grimace. Should he be interfering and going to visit Lois tonight and tell Clark to leave it to him? That would certainly alleviate any concern that this clone would be more willing to share his knowledge about Clark with his ‘father’ than the clone in his universe had been. Not that Superman knew who his ‘father’ was, but, as with everything else that year, he just assumed Luthor was a good guess.

On the other hand, he was still trying not to interfere in the timeline, even if he seemed to be failing miserably at every turn.

Maybe he should just stay here. Clark would go and everything would be okay. He hoped. Maybe... he picked up the phone.

“Clark?” he asked as the phone was picked up.

“Yeah?” Clark sounded confused, but that was not surprising since they had just gotten off the phone.

“I just wanted you to know that Lois figures out that there are two Supermen. So, if you wanted to use her help, that would probably be okay.”

“Okay,” Clark said over the line, sounding confused.

Superman hung up the phone. There — that put a mild change in the timeline, but Lois figured it out in a little while anyway. Maybe having someone to talk to would help Clark. Perhaps, if Clark talked to Lois she would decide not to have dinner with Superman tonight. He did not think there were any consequences to Clark telling her there was more than one Superman anyway. It was all so confusing!

Lois moved around her apartment feeling frazzled. Given Superman’s strange behavior recently, she had some misgivings about the romantic dinner she was preparing. On other hand, it was Superman. So he had been acting strange. He said he would explain, and she could forgive him for his behavior earlier today, right?

She checked the pasta — it was perfect. She felt a little badly about using canned sauce, but Superman knew she could not cook. Besides, she had bought the expensive kind,

probably better than homemade.

She sort of wished he did not live with Clark. Did they often eat together? She hoped not. Clark was a fantastic cook, and she had to admit, it would surprise her if Clark's homemade sauce was not much better than the stuff she had bought today, even given how expensive it was.

She realized she had no idea whether or not Superman could cook. It was sort of understandable — she had not been lying when she told Clark that he was her best friend. The truth was, though, that she was in love with Superman. She really wanted to get to know him better. Ideally, Superman would be her best friend and given how close Superman and Clark were, the three of them could all be close — as long as Clark understood that she and Superman were closer to each other than him. Clark was a great guy, though; he would understand, she was sure. Plus, he would meet someone else who was perfect for him and they would live happily ever after. Maybe not as happily as she and Superman, of course, but happily none-the-less.

She heard the whoosh of Superman's arrival and turned around, hoping she still looked okay. "Hi," she said shyly.

"Hi," Superman said, also acting shy. Lois wondered if he had ever been on a date before. He looked her up and down with appreciation and Lois was pleased to note that his look was more appraising than leering now. "You look hot," he said.

Lois coughed. Did Superman just tell her she looked hot? She could not determine if she should be happy or alarmed. She wanted Superman to find her attractive, of course, but somehow she had never imagined Superman speaking to anyone in quite that way.

"Thanks," she finally said, deciding to settle on being happy. She definitely wanted to quiz Superman on what was going on, what all his strange behavior was about, but maybe now was not the best time. He still looked incredibly nervous.

"Do you want to sit down?" Lois asked, gesturing to her sofa.

"Thanks," Superman said as he took a seat on the couch and Lois sat beside him.

He grimaced a bit and looked at her. "Your couch is a little hard," he said. "My father's couches are much softer."

Lois started. She was sick of complaints about her couch. So, it was not comfortable — it looked nice! But even stranger was the other comment. Superman had a father here on Earth?

"I didn't realize your father was here. I thought he was on Krypton."

"Krypton?" Superman asked. "What is Krypton?"

Okay, that was it. Lois was sick of trying to find the right time: "Superman, what is going on with you?"

"What you mean?" he asked, sounding sad. "Why do you sound so angry? I thought you liked me."

Lois took a deep breath. "I do like you, but..." Before she could finish what she was planning to say, though, Superman lunged at her. Pinning her against the arm of the couch, he started kissing her.

The kiss was awkward and sort of wet, though — not at all like the other kisses she had shared with Superman. She pushed against him, convinced there was something wrong,

but of course, she had no hope of being able to move him. Scariest than that, though, was the fact that he did not move on his own. The Superman she knew would back away the instant he could tell she was trying to push him.

Her heart rate sped up. What had she gotten herself into?

"Am I interrupting something?" she heard and Superman instantly moved away.

Lois looked at the door and there was... another Superman? She decided she did not care who it was as long as he would keep the current man in her apartment away from her.

"Go away," said the man who had been pawing at her.

Lois moved over to the one in the doorway. For now, he seemed the safer choice.

"I think Miss Lane wants me to stay," the Superman at the door said. Lois took a deep breath. It all made sense now. She was not sure who the guy on her couch was, but he was not Superman. His behavior made it clear he was some sort of imposter. Of course, her inability to move him and his ability to throw men around meant he was not some sort of ordinary man. What was he?

Not that that was important now. What was important was getting him out of here. Then she could tell Superman what was going on and they could talk about what to do. Maybe they should call Clark and get him to help, too? She was not sure.

"I said, 'Go away,'" the imposter said, his voice growing a bit whiny.

"I want him to stay," Lois said to the imposter and then turned to smile at the real Superman. Only... he looked funny. She was not sure how, but he did not look like Superman. He looked... younger?

Lois almost groaned. There were three super-men? If there were three, maybe there were more. She took a half step back from the young imposter. Right now, he seemed okay, but she wanted to be sure.

The imposter on her couch walked towards the imposter in her doorway and raised an arm to hit him, but the young Superman just grabbed his arm. The imposter from the couch grimaced slightly and then backed away. "I need to go now. It's almost ten." He backed towards the window and flew away.

The imposter who remained turned to Lois with a smile. "Are you all right, Lois?" he asked her and his voice was gentle.

"I'm fine. Thank you for coming," she said. His demeanor made her feel safer, but she was not taking any chances. She wanted this guy out of her apartment as soon as possible.

"You're welcome," he smiled at her. "Good night," he said as he turned around and left.

Clark started at the pounding on his door. He was still feeling jittery, not sure that going to help Lois as Superman had been the best idea. He had intended to go as Clark, but then when he looked through the door with his x-ray vision, he worried that perhaps he would need more strength than Clark Kent should have. He wished he had taken Superman's veiled hint to let Lois know what was going on

so maybe he would not have needed to help her at all, but he had not had a chance. Lois had disappeared by the time he had gotten off the phone and he had not seen her again until he showed up at her apartment to find her being man-handled by the imposter.

Lois had not seemed to notice a difference; she certainly had not screamed out, “Clark, what are you doing in Superman’s suit?” She also had not welcomed him the way he would have expected if she really thought he was Superman.

Just in case, Clark had decided to walk out of her apartment rather than fly. This way, if Lois said she knew it was him, he could claim that he had borrowed the suit in an effort to be more intimidating. He knew the excuse was lame and hoped he would not need it.

“Lois,” he said with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach as he opened the door.

“Things have gotten really out of hand, Clark,” Lois said as she walked into his apartment. “Superman came over tonight, only it wasn’t Superman. He had no idea what Krypton was and spoke about a father who has couches more comfortable than mine and then he kissed me. Only it was nothing like my other kisses with Superman. It was all sloppy and forceful and I tried to push him away but I couldn’t, and then another Superman showed up and he scared the first one away. And he seemed nice, but he was clearly not Superman either as he was way too young.”

Lois finished her rambling speech and fell onto the couch. “Why isn’t my couch this comfortable?” she muttered as she landed on the soft cushions.

“Are you all right?” Clark asked, looking at her with concern as he sat down.

“Yes,” Lois said, taking a deep breath. “But I’m so confused. Now there are at least two super-men here, and neither of them are the one I’ve known for the past several months. Is he here? The real Superman I mean?”

Clark shook his head apologetically. “No, he still isn’t back,” he said trying to be as vague as possible. The last thing he needed to do was admit that Superman was staying at his parents’ place. Plus he had to do something about the fact that she thought there were two fake Supermen. At least she had not recognized that the younger one was him.

“What do you think is going on?” Clark asked.

Lois stood up and started pacing. “I’ve been thinking about it all evening and I’m not sure. I mean I thought maybe the first one was an imposter, but he flew, Clark! He couldn’t just be a normal guy who put a very good Superman costume on if he could fly, right? And the second one — well, I didn’t really see him do anything super although he did grab the first one’s arm and it looked like it hurt, so maybe he really is a normal guy, but then how could he hurt Superman? The only thing I could think of was...”

“He’s a clone,” Clark interjected as the thought occurred to him, and Lois nodded in amazement.

“That’s what I was thinking, too. And so there are two clones and the second one is younger than the first. Can you make clones younger than the donor?” she wondered out loud.

Clark thought for a moment, knowing the younger

Superman was not a clone, but this was an uncomplicated way of getting rid of him. “I think so,” he said. “I think clones are really more like siblings that share genetic material. They grow from babies. The question is how could any Superman clone be an adult right now? I mean, how could a Superman clone exist at all?”

The more Clark thought about it, the less likely the clone idea seemed to him and the more convinced he was that this Superman was from a different universe as he had first thought. Still, he thought he should keep up the idea of the clones for Lois since he had no intention of talking about alternate universes yet.

“Well,” Lois said, “if someone has the ability to clone Superman, they could probably grow him really fast, right?”

Clark nodded. That did make sense. “But aren’t we years away from the ability to clone?”

Lois nodded her head in agreement. “Yes, but... actually, let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To the Planet. I think I have a name there of a scientist who said he had successfully cloned a frog before. Or something like that.”

“Lois,” Clark called from his desk. She was at her desk, seething. Their meeting with the scientist, Fabian Leek, had not gone well. He had denied any knowledge of cloning even though Lois had found several articles he had published when in graduate school claiming that he had cloned a rabbit and thought humans could be cloned with the right process. To make matters worse, he had hit on Lois. Given her experience with the imposter Superman earlier today, she was in no mood for that type of behavior.

When they got back to the newsroom, Clark had decided to do some research. The clone idea was starting to seem more likely to him now, and since Lois was clearly planning to sulk for the next little while, it seemed the job of doing research had fallen on him.

“What?” Lois called back glumly.

“Come here,” he said. “I think I found something.”

Lois walked over to his desk, leaning on the side with little interest. “What is it?”

“Look,” Clark said, pointing at his screen. “It says here that Superman donated a lock of hair at a charity auction.”

Lois perked up. “Where is it?”

“It says a Mrs. Doyle Alexander bought it,” Clark said. “What do you say we give her a call?”

“I’m on it,” Lois said feeling energized again.

Clark laughed at her sudden exuberance now that they had a break in the case and almost called her back. After all, she had taken over what he had been planning to do.

Then he realized — there was only one way to determine if this cloning idea was correct or his original idea of an alternate universe was the right one.

“I’ll be back in about an hour,” he said to Lois as he made his way towards the stairs, but typical Lois, she was engrossed in her task and just nodded at him as he passed.

“Hey,” Clark called as he spotted the other Superman up ahead. They caught up to each other within seconds, and

Clark took in the look on the other Superman's face. He did not look happy.

"I don't like you," he said simply and Clark stared at him. Sometimes this Superman spoke like a child. "You weren't very nice to me," he explained still sounding child-like.

"I'm sorry," Clark said, finding himself reacting to this Superman as if he were a teenager. "But you were frightening Lois."

"She said she liked me."

"I'm sure she does, but I don't think she wanted to kiss you."

"But if she likes me it should be okay," the other Superman insisted. "And I could kiss her. She couldn't push me away. Might is right."

"What?" Clark blinked his eyes. What the heck was that?

"Might is right," the other Superman said again.

"Look, Superman," Clark said, trying to keep his tone even. "I just want to know who you are. I didn't mean to hurt you at Lois'. I just want to know — are you from another universe?"

"I told you. I was born," the other Superman said.

"Where did you grow up?" Clark asked. Did this Superman remember his childhood on Krypton? Although, if he did, he would have known what Krypton was.

The other Superman's face scrunched up as he thought. "I don't remember. But I was born in the womb and my father took me out."

Clark was becoming more convinced the clone theory was right after all. "Who is your father?" he asked, his heart beating loudly.

"I can't say."

"I think you're a clone," Clark said softly. "That's why you don't remember growing up. I think you were made out of a lock of hair."

"You don't know what you're talking about!" the other Superman said, sounding upset. "I don't want to talk to you anymore."

Clark decided not to follow him when he flew away.

Clark flew to Smallville after he saw the clone. He knew his parents knew what was going on, but he needed someone to talk to about this — someone who knew all the important pieces, which meant Lois would not work.

Martha looked sad when he entered the farmhouse. "Clark, I'm so sorry for this morning."

"I know, Mom," he said as he put his arms around her. "Where's Dad and Superman?"

"Dad's in the barn and Superman got bored with sitting in the house, so he offered to plow the field. You know how much your father hates plowing, so he gladly let Superman take over."

"Hi," came a voice from the doorway. "I'm so sorry, Clark. I shouldn't have told your parents what was going on," Superman said. "I didn't think about the impact it would have on you."

Clark waved away his apology. "It's not your fault. You need someone to talk to as well," he said, not knowing he was repeated Martha's words from earlier. "But I still need

someone to talk to, even if no one here can really help me."

"What is it?" Martha asked as Clark and Superman took seats at the kitchen table.

"I thought it was a Superman from another universe," Clark said. "But now I think it's a clone — Lois does as well, although she doesn't know about parallel universes. Oh, and that reminds me. I sort of screwed up, but I think it may end okay."

"What do you mean?" Jonathan asked, having just come in.

"The clone or whatever came to see Lois. I didn't trust him, so I went to make sure she was okay."

"She didn't cancel her plans? I thought once you told her there was more than one..." Superman started.

"I didn't get a chance to tell her," Clark explained. "She was gone when we got off the phone. Anyway, so I went over, but when I glanced through the door, it looked like he was hurting her. He was kissing her and it looked like she wanted to get up and he wasn't letting her."

Martha shot a look at Superman. "You didn't tell us this!" she said somewhat accusingly before turning back to Clark. "Is Lois okay?"

Clark nodded, "I decided that maybe more than Clark Kent was necessary and since Superman said she was going to find out there was more than one anyway, I spun into the suit and came in before things went any further."

"Did she recognize you?" Jonathan asked.

"No," Clark said. "That's why I think it may be okay. She thinks I'm just another clone." He could see his father's shoulders slump in relief.

"Anyway, we found an explanation for how a clone could exist — I found a record of a lock of your hair auctioned off for charity," he said to Superman, "and I went and talked to the other Superman and I'm even more convinced that the clone idea is right as he seems very immature. Plus, he doesn't know anything about Krypton or Jor-El, but he keeps referring to a father he won't name."

"What's Lois think?" Martha asked.

"She agrees with the clone idea, although I obviously haven't told her about my chats with him. She's at the Planet now looking up what happened to Superman's lock of hair."

Something seemed to occur to Superman as he suddenly spoke with urgency in his voice. "This is probably a mistake, but we need to figure out what to do about the young Superman clone idea. So..." he hesitated for a moment, "I'm going to tell you what happened next in my world so we can determine the best way to proceed. But we need to move quickly. I don't think he would hurt Lois, but just in case..."

Clark smiled. It felt good to be on the inside for a change.

"Let her go," one of the Supermen called as the original imposter tied her to a pole. From this distance, Lois could not tell if it was the young imposter or the original, or perhaps a new clone she had not met yet.

"I never would have hurt you," the imposter said to her. "But I had to be sure he would come."

The other Superman walked over and, ignoring the

imposter, untied Lois. She looked at him closely. He certainly looked like the original.

"Where have you been?" she asked, although she still could not be one-hundred percent certain that this was the Superman she had known for several months rather than yet another clone.

"Sorry, Lois," he said to her softly. "I was trying to figure out what was going on."

"What is going on?" Lois asked. "Clark and I think it's clones. But who knows how many of them there are."

"I think there's just the two you've seen," he said. "No, please, Lois, stay here."

He spun around and Lois watched him walk away for a minute. Then she remembered — she was Lois Lane. She did not stand still for anybody — not even Superman!

She turned to head into the bar Superman had disappeared into, but he appeared in front of her with the imposter in pursuit before she could get inside. She backed away and hid behind a post.

The two Supermen seemed to move at a distance from each other and then suddenly the imposter aimed a ray of heat vision at Superman. Superman flew up and avoided the beam. A second later, the imposter tried again, and again Superman flew above it.

"Why aren't you fighting me?" the imposter asked, sounding frustrated.

"I don't want to hurt you," Superman said. "But you are getting weaker and I can keep dodging your attempts to hurt me until you can't do so anymore."

"How did you know that?" the imposter asked, sounding scared.

"I can tell," Superman replied softly.

"Why would you care about hurting me? Might is right," the imposter said sounding confused and sad.

"I don't believe that," Superman said. "You and I, we're brothers."

As he finished speaking, another Superman flew down and landed next to the original. It was hard to tell from where she was hiding, but she thought it might be the younger clone.

"Who are you?" the older clone asked.

"I'm Superman."

"Then who are you?" the imposter asked the original.

"I'm also Superman."

The imposter looked at the newcomer critically. "You don't look like us," he said. "Not exactly. You're the one that was in Lois' apartment."

"I'm younger than you are," the young one said.

"What do you mean?" the imposter asked.

"I think you are clones," Superman said to the imposter. "He must have been born after you," he said, gesturing to the young clone.

"Are you supposed to replace me?" the clone asked the younger clone.

"I don't know," the younger one said. "If so, I'm not going to do a very good job of it."

The older imposter moved closer to the other Supermen. "Are you dying?" he asked. "Because I'm dying," he admitted, his tone less combative.

"I don't know," the younger Superman said.

"Why don't you take us both out?" the imposter asked the real Superman.

"I told you," Superman said. "We're all brothers. I can't hurt you."

The imposter looked at the ground. Then looking up again, he asked the young Superman, "Do we have the same father?"

The young Superman nodded. "I don't know."

"Don't you talk to your father?" the imposter asked. "Don't you live with him?"

The young Superman shook his head. "No."

"Did your father kick you out?"

The younger one shrugged. "I don't remember my father."

The imposter suddenly bent over and the younger clone moved over to him. "Are you all right?" he asked.

The imposter nodded his head, then looked up at Superman. "You aren't my enemy, are you?"

"No," Superman said.

"We're brothers," the younger clone said softly and Lois crept closer so she could hear better.

"Can you wait here? I have something I need to do," the imposter asked, and when Superman nodded, he took off.

Superman glanced up at Lois. "You need to go back to the Planet," he said to her.

"I..." Lois started to tell him she would go back when she was good and ready, but something in his eyes made her change her mind. "Okay," she agreed.

"Will you be okay here alone for a minute?" he asked the young clone. Once he nodded, Superman picked Lois up and flew her away.

"What's going to happen to them?" she asked him.

Superman spoke softly. "I think they are both dying. The younger clone seems to have a little more time, but I think they'll both be dead by tomorrow."

"Was it a clone last week at the elevator rescue?" Lois asked as the idea occurred to her. "Is that why you seemed so nervous?"

Superman thought. He had already told her it was him, but since that was a lie, would it be any more of a lie to tell her it was a clone? He had seen Clark's most recent save and he was doing better now. He doubted Lois would notice a difference anymore as long as she was not there.

"I'm sorry," Superman finally said. "I was still trying to figure out how someone else had shown up to do that rescue."

He flew her into the window of the Planet. "I need to go," he said as he set her on her feet.

"I'm glad you haven't been acting weird," Lois said. "I was worried about you."

"Thank you, Lois. It means a lot to me that you care," he said, hating himself for saying it, and hating himself more because he knew it was true.

"Where is he?" the clone asked Clark as he landed.

"He went to take Lois back to the Planet," Clark said.

"Where did you go?"

The clone held up a lock of hair. "This is what my father cloned us with, right?" Clark shrugged since as another clone, he could not really know. "I think... I think we were

only made to destroy Superman, and he's good, don't you think? I like him better than my father."

Clark nodded.

"So, I don't want my father to be able to make more of us."

Superman landed behind him as he said this. "Thank you," he said in response.

"But that's not all," the clone said. "You need to kill us, too, or he could use tissue from one of us. You need to kill us and burn the bodies."

Clark groaned slightly from behind the clone. When Superman had told him what was going to happen, he had refused to tell him what happened to the clone. He knew the clone was dying, but the idea of burning his body still bothered him.

"I'm in pain," the clone said. "You would just be putting me out of my misery. And you could wait until he gets the same way," he said, gesturing to Clark. "Just as long as he stays away from my father."

"Who is your father?" Clark asked.

"I don't know his name, I always call him Father. But he lives in the big tower in the middle of the city."

"LexTower?" Clark asked, exchanging a glance with Superman.

"That's the one," the clone said as he fell to the ground. "I don't have much longer."

Clark moved forward first and wrapped his arms around the clone. "I'm glad to have met you," he whispered.

The clone smiled through his pain. "I am glad to have known both of you. The world is different than Father taught me. Nicer." With that, his eyes closed and he seemed to drift off.

"That's it?" Clark asked with tears in his eyes.

Superman nodded.

"I told Lois the Superman at the elevator rescue was a clone," Superman told Clark later as they cleaned up from dinner. "It explains all 'my' strange behavior, and seeing you recently I don't think she'll notice anything anymore. If you're still nervous, you're covering well."

"Thanks," Clark said quietly. "I'm still petrified, but I'm glad it isn't coming through."

He picked up a glass and brought it over to the sink as he thought. "I think we should do away with the make-up idea," he said. "At least when you're not on rescues."

"What?" Superman asked.

"I think you should keep wearing it for rescues in case a reporter starts to notice the differences between us, but not around her. Not for Lois. She spotted the difference too quickly," Clark said.

"So, what are we going to do?" Superman asked, although he would be more than happy to not have to wear make-up around the apartment. "I mean, at some point she's going to be faced with a younger Superman. You can't keep not performing rescues in front of her once I'm gone."

"I don't know yet," Clark sighed. "But we'll think of something."

~#~#~#~#~

"I'm so sorry," Lois said softly, her cheek against his

chest.

"It's not your fault," Clark replied. "If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. I'm sorry."

Lois leaned back. "Don't be ridiculous. I didn't even want kids until I met you, Clark. I'm still not really sure. But you want them and I want you to be happy."

"I am happy," he said as a tear leaked out of his eye and Lois laughed at him. "I am," he insisted. "I'm not saying I couldn't be happier, but I am already happier than I've ever been."

Lois leaned up and kissed him. She pulled away a moment later, though. "Herb said that our descendents lead to Utopia."

Clark smiled, realizing what she was getting at almost immediately. "Which means we have descendents."

"Right," Lois agreed. "I mean, I don't know how yet, but it seems like we must."

"Maybe we adopt?" Clark suggested.

Lois shook her head, "But then our descendents wouldn't have superpowers."

Clark shrugged. "Maybe they don't need them. Remember what else Herb said. We're both revered in the future."

"It's not your superpowers that are important," Lois realized, "It's your desire to help."

"Which is something you share in spades," Clark said, placing a kiss on the tip of her nose.

"So, should we start thinking about adoption?" Lois asked.

"Maybe..." Clark paused. "I'm not quite ready for that yet."

"Me neither," Lois admitted. "Maybe we'll revisit it in a few months?"

"Sounds like a deal."

~#~#~#~#~

Superman lay on his bed, taking in the quiet of the building around him. Everything had ended well, including seeming to rid Lois of the desire to ask him what was wrong. Clark, as a result, was sleeping like a baby. He could not sleep, though. He was restless.

He was getting more and more homesick and it bothered him. He did not want to abandon Clark right now, not when he was making such strides towards overcoming his fears. Still, he was eager to get home.

He smiled. At least this time, Lois' hair had been the right length in his memory. It was the same short hair cut she had had when they had that conversation. Although, now that he thought about it, something was still wrong about the memory. What was it?

Superman went through a list of Lois' physical traits and finally convinced himself that she had looked fine. He went through the memory again, and was also sure that he was recalling the conversation right. So what was it? What else could it be?

With a start, Superman sat straight up in bed. It was Lois' heartbeat. That was not the heartbeat of his Lois. It was the heartbeat of the Lois in this universe. They were similar, but not the same. He sighed. He had been away from home too long and was getting confused.

He lay back down, schooling his breathing to be calmer.

It was just a silly memory. There was no reason to panic. So what if he was having trouble remembering his wife? It would be fine. In a few weeks, Clark would be ready to take over and this would finally be done.

April 1994

"I'm going to a movie with Jack and Denny tonight," Clark called out from his bedroom. "I'm not sure how you could come with us, but if you want I'm sure we can figure something out. Lois isn't coming so..."

"Thanks for the offer," Superman said appearing in the doorway, "but I'm just going to hang out around here tonight."

"Okay," Clark said. "If you change your mind, we're meeting at the Planet."

"Thanks," Superman said again before disappearing back to the living room. He came back a minute later, though, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "When are you leaving?"

Clark glanced at the clock. "About half an hour," he said. "Why?"

"Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure," Clark said, motioning to the living room.

"I'm not sure I should do this," Superman mumbled.

"What?" Clark asked and when Superman looked at him confused he asked, "What is it you're not sure about?"

Superman smiled, "I forgot you can hear me when I speak super-softly."

"Sorry," Clark said, smiling back.

Superman took a deep breath. "Something's going to happen tonight. Just sit tight and let me deal with it even though it's right in front of you."

"What?" Clark asked. "Why would I do that?"

Superman sighed again. He had wanted to do this without talking to Clark about it — without letting him know what was going on. He could see now that that was not going to be possible.

"There is going to be a break-in tonight at the Planet. But it's going to be hard for you to do anything to help."

"What did you do?" Clark asked.

"Nothing, really. I waited. But someone was shot in the process..."

"Were they hurt?" Clark asked.

"Not seriously, but they could have been. I'm not sure when I'll be able to help — they'll be on the lookout for me and they have a dirty bomb they will threaten to use if I show up. But I'm going to try. If you don't see me, I guess, try to do what you can, but I'm going to try to help head them off before anyone is hurt."

"Sounds like a deal," Clark said. "Let me know if I can help if there's any way to contact me."

Clark sat at his desk working. He had received a last minute call from a source and wanted to write up a small article beforehand. He glanced at the clock. There was still an hour and a half before the movie started. Both Jack and Denny were busy playing video games, so he had some time. Besides, while he was not sure, he assumed they would not make it to the movies tonight anyway due to the hostage situation Superman had mentioned.

The elevator doors dinged, and out of habit, Clark looked up to see if it was his partner. Of course, given that it was a Saturday night and Lois had mentioned that she had a date with Lex tonight, there was no reason why she would be coming in.

"How was I supposed to know my source was going to get arrested?" Lois asked as she exited the elevator. Seeing that it was Lois, Clark smiled. Then Luthor followed her and Clark's smile disappeared.

"The opera starts in half an hour," Lex said, and his tone was slightly exasperated. Not that Lois seemed to notice.

"I know," Lois said, placing a hand on Lex's arm. "But I just have to rewrite my lead," she said as she sat at her desk.

"What are you doing here?" she asked Clark.

"We were supposed to be meeting here to go to a movie," Jack answered for him.

"And we still will. It doesn't start for an hour and a half," Clark said. "Last minute story I want to write up. Hi, Lex," he said, trying to appear friendly.

"Hello, Mr. Kent," Lex said and Lois smiled at him.

Clark grimaced. Did Lex get points for being polite now?

"What are Perry and Jimmy doing?" Lois asked while she waited for her computer to start up.

"Cleaning Perry's office," Clark said with a smile.

"More like fighting over what can be thrown away," Denny offered.

"Well, Perry is a bit of a pack rat," Lois said.

The elevator dinged again and Willie, the old security guard from downstairs, came out and looked around.

"Evening, Willie," Clark called.

"Uh, hi, Mr. Kent," Willie said. "I wasn't expecting the Planet to be so busy on a Saturday night."

"Yeah, it's sort of a weird Saturday, isn't it?" Clark said with a smile.

"Well, good night," Willie called as he got back into the elevator.

"Good night," Clark called back.

"Hey!" Lois said a minute later, just before she started banging the top of her computer.

"Lois, calm down," Clark said, laughing at her as he moved over to her desk.

"I just lost my story!" she said to him.

Clark bent down to look at the computer. "It's off," he said from Lois' feet.

"Let me," Lex offered, bending down in his tux.

"It's all right. I have it," Clark said.

For a moment, there was silence while Clark and Lex stared at each other. It was clear to everyone but Lois that neither of them wanted the other helping her. Finally, Lex stood back up with a grunt. "Have it your way," he mumbled.

"I didn't shut it off," Lois said to Clark.

"Well, I just turned it back on," Clark said as he crawled back out from under the desk. For a moment, Lois, Clark, and Lex watched Lois' computer reboot. Just as it finished rebooting, it crashed again.

"That's just great!" Lois said. "I lost my story."

Just then the elevators dinged for a third time. "What is it — Grand Central Station in here?" Lois asked, still

“Clark, they’re going to kill us!” Lois insisted, getting up, but to Clark’s frustration she ran her hand along Lex’s shoulders as she paced. “We know what they look like.”

“I know these kinds of people,” Lex said, and Clark rolled his eyes, but no one noticed and Lex continued talking. “We should consider ourselves dead. In that regard, we have nothing to lose.”

“Luthor,” Clark said and grimaced when Lois glared at him. He tried to remember to call him Lex, but it was hard. “They may be holding the lives of thousands of people in their hands. We don’t want to do anything to provoke them.”

“Well,” Lex said with a simpering smile, “now that we know what Mr. Kent is made of...”

“Fine!” Clark said, feeling exasperated. “I don’t care if you think I’m a coward. I’m not playing it safe, I’m playing it smart. I would have thought a man in your position would be able to tell the difference.”

Lex, who had been sitting, now stood and the rest of the room got quiet watching the two men battle it out.

“So what is it you’re suggesting, Mr. Kent?” Lex asked. “That we just sit here and wait for them to kill us?”

Clark sighed, but it did nothing to cool his temper. “No, but I have no choice. If I try to get to the bomb, one of the others might try to kill one of you. And I risk them setting the bomb off!”

“Clark, take it easy,” Lois said. “You’re not Superman.”

Everyone in the room laughed except Clark. She was right. He was not. Still, he should be able to help them and it was frustrating that he could not.

“Superman will find a way to save us,” Lois said, her voice firm. For a moment, Clark had to fight the urge to smile. As much as Lois’ adoration of Superman bothered him, it was clearly nothing compared to how much it bothered Luthor. The man was virtually steaming.

After a moment of silence, Denny asked, “What if he can’t? You heard what that man said.”

Lois’ head fell as she acknowledged that Denny had a point.

“We need to negotiate,” Lex repeated.

“We need a plan,” Lois spoke over him and to Clark’s surprise Lex allowed it. She turned to Lex. “I’ll create a diversion. Lex, you hit him over the head with a chair.” She turned to Perry. “Chief, sit down. You’re having a heart attack.”

Lois started screaming, calling for help. At first just the man who had been watching guard over their room came in, but Lex did not hit him and within moments, Lois’ screaming had gotten the remaining men and the one woman to gather in the doorway.

“That’s enough!” the lead man yelled, shooting a shot off towards the ceiling. Everyone got quiet, and that was when Clark saw it. No one else would have been able to, he had gone way too fast, but Superman had come in and taken the bomb and left.

Clark sat still. He still could not move right now with all the guns around, but things were a lot simpler without the bomb.

“Now, you will all stay quiet. I trust you are fine now, old man,” the leader asked Perry, the tone making it clear

he was aware the whole thing was a ruse.

Superman was back. He nodded to Clark and at once while Superman aimed his heat vision on the guns of the men who had turned back to the newsroom, Clark did it to those that were still mostly turned towards him. With everyone’s attention now on Superman, no one noticed Clark’s actions. Within moments, the men had dropped all their guns and Superman was keeping a close eye on them until the police arrived.

“I wonder what they were after,” Jack said as they all made their way downstairs.

“I heard them say something about something called Dragonetti,” Lois said.

“Dragonetti?!” Perry said.

“Yeah, why?” Lois asked.

“Dragonetti was a mobster during the Depression. He built this building. Operated a speak-easy where the cafeteria is now. He was gunned down and no one ever found his stash. There were rumors that it was in here, but no one knows where.”

“Well, apparently, someone thought they knew,” Clark said with a smile.

“Well,” Lex said looking at his watch, “we missed Madame Butterfly, but perhaps I can interest you in dinner?” he asked Lois. “You look way too lovely to go straight home.”

Lois put her arm through his, “That sounds perfect.”

“We could still make the late showing,” Jack said to Clark. Clark did not respond, however, as he was watching Lois and Lex. Jack reached over and punched him on the arm. “Yo, Clark! Are you interested?”

“Sure,” Clark said, still distracted by Lex and Lois. A minute later, he seemed to wake up, though. “Now that you’re finished with the office cleaning for the evening, do you two want to join us?” he asked Perry and Jimmy.

“I need to get home to Alice,” Perry said, “but thanks for the offer.”

“I’m in,” Jimmy said.

As they exited the building, Lex’s driver pulled the car around.

“Good night everyone,” Lois called as she and Lex disappeared into his car.

“Must be nice,” Denny said, looking wistfully at the car.

“Come on,” Clark said, taking in his expression. “I think after the night we’ve had we should splurge on popcorn and candy at the movies. ‘Night, Perry.”

Denny smiled as Perry turned towards home. “Really?”

“Definitely,” Clark said. “I think we could all use a pick-me-up.”

May 1994

“Did you enjoy Madame Butterfly?” Lex asked Lois a week later as she put her napkin down.

“Yes,” Lois said, although that was not strictly true. She found the opera hard to follow and hated needing Lex to explain it. Additionally, the story was terribly sad, and she had the impression that Lex would not necessarily be okay with her tears. She was sort of sorry he had managed to get them tickets for another night after they had missed it. Still,

she appreciated his taking her, and did not want to seem ungrateful.

“Your first opera is always a little hard to follow,” Lex said as if he had been reading her thoughts. “But it gets easier over time.”

Lois smiled suddenly. “What?” Lex asked, taking in her smile.

“I was just thinking, I bet it’s easier if you understand the language they are singing in, too,” Lois started.

“Well, yes,” Lex admitted, not seeing the joke.

“It’s just... well, next time you should take Clark. I bet he does.”

“He does what?” Lex asked, clearly confused.

“Understand the language,” Lois explained.

“I didn’t realize Mr. Kent spoke Italian,” Lex said, his tone hard to read.

Lois rolled her eyes. “There’s barely a language the man doesn’t speak. It’s downright annoying!”

Lex laughed and Lois could see him relax.

Lois got up to move to the couch. “Dinner was wonderful, Lex,” she said as she leaned back against the plush cushions.

“Well, Chef Andre did prepare your favorites,” Lex smiled at her as he opened the door for the entrance of a middle aged woman with a violin.

“A violinist?” Lois asked.

“Miss Choi is world famous,” Lex said as the violinist took a seat on the other side of the room.

“And she’s going to play for us?” Lois asked. Lex never ceased to amaze her.

“Only the best for you,” Lex said.

Lois leaned forward and kissed him softly on the lips. “You spoil me.”

Unexpectedly, rather than responding, Lex got up and walked back to his desk. When he came back, he knelt before her with a small box in his hand.

“I’d like to spoil you for the rest of your life,” Lex said softly as he opened the box. In it was a ring with the largest diamond Lois had ever seen. “Lois Lane, will you marry me?”

Lois gasped. She had not expected this at all. Even seeing the ring and hearing his words, until he said the more standard “Will you marry me?” Lois had thought... Well, she was not sure what she had been thinking, but not this. Sure, she and Lex had been dating for months now, but she had not thought they were this serious. She liked Lex, but marry him? It was funny, now that she thought about it. She had fantasized about marrying Lex before, more than once, but she never thought it was a real possibility.

“Lex,” she started, knowing she needed to say something, but not sure what it should be. “I barely know you.”

“The only thing you need to know, Lois, is that I love you,” Lex said, his tone soft and gentle.

“I don’t know,” she finally said. When she saw his face, though, she rushed on. “I think you’re a wonderful man, Lex, really. And I’m not saying no. Just... well, this is all so unexpected. I need a little more time.”

Lex nodded his head in acceptance and got up, but then before he put the ring away, he sat down beside her on the

couch taking her hand in his. “Take all the time you need, Lois. I love you. I’ll wait until you’re ready,” he said earnestly, looking deep into her eyes.

Lois stopped in front of Clark’s apartment. She needed to talk through the whole proposal thing with Clark. He would be able to tell her what to do. She only hoped that she had gotten there before he had left for work.

She had hardly slept all night — her mind was whirling. Should she say yes? She liked Lex. She had certainly thought of being married to him enough. Living in Lex Tower would be wonderful — with all the staff around, there would be no issue with having a job. In fact, never having to worry about cooking or cleaning again, she probably would have even more free time than before.

On the other hand, while she liked Lex, every once in awhile he did something that made her feel... not scared exactly, but maybe unsettled? There was the time she had turned down his offer to spend the night in his apartment in New York, although she still was not sure she had not imagined that. And the apartment he had built for her in the ark — that was weird, particularly the Kerth case. She still did not know how Lex knew about that.

She just was not sure. Maybe these were good things? Lex was passionate and he liked her... actually, he loved her. Of course he was upset when she declined his invitation to spend the night. She should feel lucky that he loved her enough to want her to feel comfortable in his ark — that she was so important to him that he produced a reproduction of her apartment in his home.

Really, how often did someone like her get a chance to marry someone like Lex Luthor? This should be a dream come true. How many women would kill to be in the position she was in? Well, probably not many. Any sane woman would be engaged by now — who would need time to think about whether or not they wanted to marry Lex Luthor?

She knocked on the door and waited as patiently as she could manage until the door was opened.

“Morning,” Superman said quietly.

“Oh, hi,” Lois said, flustered. For some reason, she did not want to talk to Superman right now. She had been so focused on wanting to talk to Clark that she had forgotten that she was likely to see the superhero here. Had she remembered, she would not have come. Her life was enough of an emotional mess right now. Adding Superman to the mix did not seem wise. “Is Clark here?” she asked.

“Uh, no. He left for work a little early today,” Superman said.

“Oh, okay,” Lois said, turning back to her car.

“Lois, do you want to come in?” he asked her.

“No, no,” Lois said, backing away further. “I need to get to work.”

Superman shut the door behind him, leaning heavily against it. What was wrong with him? Why had he invited her in? He felt like he was barely in control of his actions anymore; like his mouth had started working independently of his brain.

It was ridiculous really. If it had been anyone but Lois

“Oh, hi Clark,” Cat said, sounding dispirited and not like her normal self at all. “I suppose you and Lois are safe. There’s not much of a Daily Planet without a city section. Not like the gossip column,” she said bitterly.

“I’m really sorry, Cat,” Clark said. “But for what it’s worth, you’re fantastic at your job.”

“Yeah,” Lois agreed, coming to join them. “I bet you’ll get another job like that,” she said snapping her fingers.

Both Clark and Cat stared at her in amazement. It was not exactly a secret that Lois did not like Cat.

“Thanks, Lois,” Cat finally said when it became clear that Lois was not planning to follow up her comment with a barb.

“If we can help in any way, let us know,” Clark said.

Lois watched Cat walk away.

“That was nice of you,” Clark said.

Lois shrugged. “I know Cat and I don’t really get along, but that doesn’t mean I wanted her to lose her job. I still recognize that she’s a good writer.”

Clark smiled at her. “It was still nice of you.”

“Clark, can we talk?” Lois asked.

“Of course. Is this about what was upsetting you this morning?”

“Yeah,” Lois answered stirring her coffee.

“Do you want to ditch this coffee and go someplace quieter?” Clark asked.

Lois smiled at him. “Yes, please.”

They both poured their coffees in the sink and headed back to Lois’ desk so she could grab her purse. Before they could make their way out, though, the elevator opened revealing several men in suits, including Lex.

“Lex?” Lois looked at Clark quizzically, but he just shrugged.

“I’m sure all of you know me,” Lex said, and Clark rolled his eyes. “But in case you don’t, I’m Alexander Luthor. I am so disappointed to see what has happened to the Daily Planet. I don’t know why your advertisers have deserted you or why circulation is down. Nor do I know why the banks have shut down your credit lines.

“What I do know is that these problems can be solved with strong leadership and fiscal responsibility. So, in an effort not to lose the greatest paper in the world, I have done the one thing that I know will mean the revival of the Daily Planet — I bought it.”

The newsroom staff burst into applause and Lois flushed with pride. Clark felt a little sick.

Smiling at the faces below him, Lex added, “And please, call me Lex. I promise you no interference, only a few minor modifications, and *no* layoffs. Why tamper with greatness?!”

Clark watched with disgust as everyone cheered. He could see why the people who were laid off were happy and he was happy for them, too. He did not understand, though, how no one else could see that working for Lex was not likely to lead to good things.

Lois turned to Clark. This was the perfect solution for everything! “Isn’t this wonderful?” she asked him before she realized that unlike everyone else, he did not look pleased.

Clark shook his head. “I think it’s great for Jimmy, Jack, Cat, and Steve, but... no, overall I think it’s a disaster.”

“A disaster? Clark, we’re saved! What’s wrong with you?”

“It’s Lex Luthor, Lois. I know you refuse to see it, but Lex is not a good person, and not someone you want controlling the news,” Clark said, sounding annoyed at her.

His annoyance was fine with Lois, because she was starting to feel pretty annoyed at him. “Clark, I don’t know what your problem is. You seem to think that Lex is the root of all evil in Metropolis. You need to stop!”

“He is!” Clark insisted.

“Give him some credit,” Lois said. “He just saved our jobs!” She knew she was feeling even more annoyed at him than was warranted, but she had been planning to tell him that Lex had proposed to her. How was she going to do that when he had this attitude towards Lex?

“For today maybe,” Clark said.

“Stop being such a sourpuss, Clark!” Lois said before stomping back to her desk.

Clark looked up at Lois. She was annoyed at him. Maybe she had a right to be. He was the only person in the newsroom who did not think Luthor had just brought Christmas early. Of course, he knew some things about Luthor that no one else did. Well, except Superman, presumably. He had not been able to shake his suspicions about Lex Luthor, and given Superman’s comments, he decided to start investigating him. What he had found so far was not pretty.

Unfortunately, it was also not printable. Well, it never would be if Luthor was in charge of the Planet. But right now, even Perry would not let it see the light of day.

It was frustrating that Lois did not see the warning signs. While no one else did, either, Lois was better than that! Still, Clark realized he was being a little unfair. While Lois was more perceptive than most people, no one but Clark was suspicious. Even Perry did not seem worried. Plus, Lois was incredibly loyal and she thought Luthor was her friend — maybe more than that. It was really not that surprising that she saw Luthor with rose-colored glasses given her relationship with him.

Sighing, because he wished he could just tell her what he knew but knew he could not as she would never believe him, he got up and walked over to her desk.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly.

Lois looked up at him in surprise. “You are? You no longer think Lex is the root of all evil?”

Clark sighed, sitting in the chair next to her desk. “Honestly, no, I do. But I get that you don’t agree and I don’t have proof, so...”

“Do you have *anything*?” Lois asked with interest.

“It’s all circumstantial,” Clark admitted.

“You have something?” Lois asked, surprised. “On Lex?”

“Shh!” Clark said, looking at her in alarm. “I’m not sure if you know this, but he’s our new boss.”

“But you have something that backs up your claim that he’s pure evil?”

Clark nodded his head.

"I want to see it," Lois insisted.

"You do?" Clark asked, surprised.

"Yes," Lois insisted. "Not here, obviously, but somewhere. Your place?"

"Okay," Clark said, feeling unsettled by this change in attitude.

"Let's go. Now," Lois said standing up.

Clark moved over to his desk, still feeling a bit confused, but got his notes together and put his coat on.

Lois watched Clark put his stuff together. She did not really think he had anything convincing. The idea that Lex was a monster was really hard to swallow. Still, maybe if he showed her what he had, she could show him how he was jumping to conclusions and he would see that Lex was really a great person. She desperately wanted Lex and Clark to get along. If she married Lex... well, she did not want it to affect her relationship with Clark.

Not that she was ready to say "yes" yet. There was still so much to think about. What about her job? Would Lex expect her to be a trophy wife?

More importantly, what about Superman? She had told Clark she was in love with him, and she was. Could she marry Lex knowing she was in love with Superman?

It was all a lot to think about, and she really wanted to talk it over with Clark. But she could not do that until he saw that Lex was a good person.

She and Clark walked to the elevator quietly, neither knowing what to say when Perry pushed past them angrier than Lois had ever seen him. "Perry?" she asked.

"Yeah?" he answered her gruffly.

"What's up?" she asked.

"What's up?" Perry asked, his voice raising. "Oh, nothing!"

Before Lois could follow-up on this completely unbelievable claim, Jimmy joined them on the landing carrying a box that was overflowing.

"What are you doing, Jim?" Clark asked.

"Cleaning out my desk!" Jimmy said angrily as the elevator dinged to announce its arrival.

"I thought you got your job back," Lois said as they got into the elevator.

"No," Jimmy said, his voice sounding very angry for Jimmy. "It turns out I got a job. Not my old job. I report to the printing plant tomorrow. Jack, too."

Lois turned to Perry. "Can't you do anything?" she asked as they all stepped out of the elevator.

"Me?" Perry asked. "No, not me. If you have any issues, you should bring them up with our new owner and his new Supervising Editor-in-Chief!"

Perry stalked off and shrugging, Jimmy followed him.

Lois stole a glance at Clark, sure he was gloating that things had not worked out perfectly just because Lex bought the Planet. Of course, though, he was not. She should have known he would not be. Clark was not one to gloat.

She smiled at the look on his face. He was looking concerned for their friends.

"Where's Superman?" Lois asked when they walked in.

Clark shrugged. "Doing a patrol?" he suggested. "I haven't seen him much the last couple of days. Should we do this at the table?"

"Sure," Lois said as she went to sit down.

"Something to drink?" Clark asked.

"Sure," Lois agreed. "What do you have?"

"Coffee, tea, milk," Clark thought. "Oh, I picked up some diet cream soda for you."

"You did?" Lois asked. That was so sweet of him, so Clark.

"Yeah, you mentioned you like it, so..." he flushed slightly and Lois wanted to hug him for being so cute.

"Thank you, Clark. I'd love some."

Clark put a cold cream soda in front of her and some iced tea for himself before sitting down. "Are you sure you want to see this?" he asked her.

"Yes," Lois insisted.

"Okay," he said, removing his notes from his bag. "Look, I know this is circumstantial, but I really think there's something here," he said.

"Clark," Lois laughed at him. "Just show me already."

"Okay," Clark said. "Let's start at the beginning."

"Wait!" Lois cut him off.

"What?"

Lois took a deep breath. "Before we start, there's something I have to tell you. I wanted to talk it over with you and we can do it some other time, but I think I should tell you what it is before we start going through this."

"What is it?" Clark asked sounding worried.

"Last night..." Lois hesitated. She was not sure why this was so hard to say. "Just buck up!" she told herself. "Last night, Lex asked me to marry him."

Clark dropped the papers in his hands. "He what?" he asked in a strangled voice.

"He asked me to marry him," she said softly.

"Did you say yes?"

"Not yet. I told him I needed to think it over. I just thought... well, I thought you should know before you showed me what you had."

Clark nodded his head, still looking flabbergasted. "Okay," he said weakly while he picked up the papers. "Let's start at the beginning. Prometheus."

"The space station?" Lois asked. "What's Lex got to do with the space station?"

"Remember Platt?" Clark asked.

"Of course," Lois said. "He was my source. Or our source, I guess."

"Right. I went through his report in detail to understand how the original space station module could have been destroyed. And then I looked into who had access to it and the ability to cause the kind of damage that was done. It all pointed to one name — Antoinette Baines."

"The scientist woman who thought you were cute," Lois said.

Clark blushed slightly. "Yeah. And then I did some digging into Baines' finances. It turns out, right after the explosion, someone deposited a million dollars in her bank account."

"Wow!" Lois said. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

“It wasn’t really news. I didn’t look into this until a couple of months ago — long after our story had been written.”

“So, this certainly implicates Baines. But what does it have to do with Lex?” Lois asked.

“I traced the deposit into her account to a B&B Consulting,” Clark said. “B&B Consulting is owned by Sunter Science. And Sunter Science is owned by LexLabs.”

Lois laughed. She could not help it. “Come on, Clark. That’s insane. You think Lex was involved because some company he owns owns a company that owns a company that paid off Baines? Don’t you see how ridiculous that is? I mean, why would Lex even want Prometheus damaged?”

“Because the explosion caused the Congress of Nations to consider canceling the launch. And Lex had offered to create Space Station Luthor if it did.”

“And you don’t think it was a generous offer?” Lois asked.

“No, I think it was a way for Lex to make money off all the inventions that come off the space station.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“Okay,” Clark said. “Let’s try another one.”

“Is it any better?” Lois asked.

“Do you mean is it any less circumstantial? No. I told you I don’t have anything concrete.”

“This is ridiculous, Clark. You can’t amass a bunch of stuff that shows that subsidiaries of subsidiaries of companies that Lex owns paid someone off and think that makes him guilty. First off, Lex owns more than half of Metropolis. So it’s not surprising that you can make links between him and anything that happens — good or bad. It’s like discounting an actor because he has some tie to Kevin Bacon. It’s just silly. Plus, because Lex owns half of Metropolis, he can’t keep close tabs on everyone who works for him. He probably has no idea that there’s any tie between him and Baines,” Lois finished.

“So, that’s it?” Clark asked. “You’re dismissing all of it?”

“I’m not dismissing it. I’m just... Okay, I’m dismissing it. It’s silly, Clark.”

“Well, it’s good to see you kept an open mind,” Clark said sarcastically.

“You aren’t keeping an open mind about Lex!” Lois insisted.

“That’s because I have a pile of papers here that says the man is dangerous!”

“No, you have a pile of papers that say nothing, Clark. Nothing!”

With that, feeling more frustrated with Clark than she thought she had ever been before, Lois stormed out.

Clark flew over Metropolis slowly. He hoped there was nothing below that could really use his help. He was too distracted to do much good. Lois was considering marrying Lex Luthor. The thought made his stomach clench and roil while his palms broke out in a sweat.

He could think of nothing worse. Admittedly, the idea of Lois marrying anyone but him would be hard to deal with. Lex, though? That took the pain to a whole new level. The man was evil and who knew what he would do to Lois once

she was married to him?

He wondered — the paper suddenly took a huge hit in advertising sales and then Lex swept in and saved them. Did Lex do something to cause their advertisers to pull out? It would be a typical Lex move. Add to that the fact that doing so would make Lex the Planet’s — and thereby Lois’ — savior, and the move was all the more strategic. There was no doubt that part of what made Lex so dangerous was that he was brilliant. Causing the Planet to move into a financial tailspin and then pulling it out of the tailspin would be a brilliant move.

Just one more thing to add to the list of things he was investigating Lex for.

Not that it would matter. Lois had categorically dismissed all of his evidence. He understood, and had told her repeatedly that all the evidence he had was circumstantial. Still, he thought it was pretty damning — even circumstantial evidence in the quantities he had amassed against Lex would make most people wonder.

What did he have to do so that Lois would not marry Lex? That was the important thing. He had to stop her from saying yes and destroying her life.

“Excellent writing, Clark,” Lex said as he approached Clark’s desk.

Clark took the piece of paper Lex was holding out skeptically. Luthor was going to read everything they wrote? What was the point of Perry and Perry’s new boss, Chip, or whatever, if Lex was going to read everything?

“I think we’ll hold off on running it for now,” Lex finished. “It’s sort of a controversial topic.”

“Controversial? What’s controversial about excessive rate hikes at Metropolis Electric?”

“The rate hikes are fact, Kent. The fact that they are excessive is your opinion, not fact and not the opinion of this paper,” Lex said.

“Would this have something to do with the fact that you’re on the board of Metropolis Electric?” Clark asked.

Lex got visibly annoyed. “That inference is insulting and unprofessional. I expected more from you! If you don’t feel free to write what you want here, Mr. Kent, you are free to leave.”

Shooting a look at Clark, Jack passed by muttering.

“What was that, young man?” Lex asked.

Clark looked at Jack, willing him not to repeat his words, but Jack, as always, was willful. “I said ‘Who died and made you king?’” Jack asked before walking off.

Lex gave Jack a dirty look before turning and going back to his office.

“What’s going on?” Lois asked as she put her purse in a desk drawer. She had heard Lex saying something to Clark about leaving and then Jack’s snide remark. It was starting to seem like it was not going to be a good morning.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just a typical day at the Planet,” Clark grouched.

“Stop being petulant, Clark. What was going on with you, Jack, and Lex?”

“Luthor apparently has decided that he will decide what is news-worthy and what is not. Apparently, my article on

excessive rate hikes at Metropolis Electric is not.”

Lois looked at him quizzically. “How can that not be news? This is the third rate hike they’ve taken this year.”

Clark looked at her with raised eyebrows. “Maybe you should ask your betrothed that.”

Lois, flushing, came closer to his desk to whisper. “Could you not say that out loud? I don’t want anyone to know. Besides, it’s not true. I haven’t said yes yet.”

“Yet,” Clark said.

“I’m still thinking about it, Clark. I’d wanted to talk to you about it, but that was...”

“So, talk,” Clark interrupted her.

Lois started to snap at him, but decided against it. He was understandably annoyed if Lex was saying no to a perfectly good story. She had proofread it for Clark yesterday. It was well-written and something that would be of importance to the people of Metropolis. She could not see any reason not to include it.

“First,” Lois smiled at him, “I’m going to talk to Lex and see if I can get your article back in the paper.”

“You’re what?” Clark asked.

“It’s a good article. I’m not sure what Lex’s issue with it is, but it should be in the paper. I think I may be better able to get through to Lex than you,” Lois said before turning around and heading into Perry’s office, which Lex had commandeered as his own.

Now that Lois thought about it, that was odd, too. As she had told Clark yesterday, Lex owned more than half of Metropolis. Why was he hanging out here just because he had bought the paper?

“Lois,” Lex said with pleasure when she entered his office. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Hi, Lex,” she said. To her surprise, Lex got up and moved around his desk to kiss her on the cheek. She would have expected Lex to want to keep things completely professional at work.

“Lex,” she said, not sure where to start. “Did you fire Perry?” She decided to start with the most egregious of errors.

“Of course not,” Lex said as he led Lois over to the couch so they could sit side by side. “Chip is just here to help him out. Take on some of the workload. Perry works too hard.”

“Perry likes working too hard,” Lois said. “The Planet is his life. Mine, too.”

For a moment, Lois thought she saw something... she was not sure what, but something flashed across Lex’s face, but then he smiled and seemed back to normal. “I know,” he said tenderly. “And I’m sorry about Perry. If I made a mistake in getting him help, I’ll apologize. It would be a huge loss to the paper to lose Perry. Or you,” he added, leaning forward to kiss her softly.

“And what about Jimmy and Jack?” Lois asked, but she was softening. Lex seemed sincere in his actions towards Perry. It was just a misunderstanding. Lex was new here — he did not know Perry like she did.

“I know, Lois. And I’m sorry. I’ll get them jobs in the newsroom as soon as I can, but with money tight right now, the printing plant was the best I could do.”

Lois smiled. “I thought that was the case.”

“Good,” Lex said, squeezing her hip. “Anything else?”

“Oh, right, one more thing. Clark’s article on the rate hikes at Metropolis Electric. Why aren’t you running it? I saw it — it’s good.”

“It’s not really news, though, is it?” Lex asked. “The rate hikes are, but Clark’s article states that they are excessive. That’s his opinion — at best a conjecture. But not fact.”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Lois,” Lex cut her off, “I’d be happy to run Clark’s article with a few minor modifications. Things got out of hand when I spoke to him this morning. I tried to be nice, but he seems to have this unreasonable hostility towards me. I don’t know what caused it, but it seems to blow up at every opportunity.”

Lois did not know what to say. Lex was right, but if she wanted them to get along, she could hardly fuel the fire by telling Lex what Clark really thought of him. “But you’ll print his article if he makes the changes?” she asked.

“Of course,” Lex said. “I’ll go talk to him now.”

“Thanks, Lex,” Lois said as they got up.

Lex wrapped his arms around her, “Everything’s going to be just fine,” he said as he nuzzled her neck. “Trust me.”

“Are you hiding out here again?” The question came from the doorway and caught him by surprise.

“Clark!” Martha said, also surprised. “What are you doing here?” she asked as she got up to give her son a hug.

“I needed someone to talk to. And I couldn’t figure out where Superman had gone. I see now, though,” he said looking at Superman.

“Sorry,” Superman said. “I haven’t been hiding out here per se, but I have been coming by a lot.”

“Is something about to happen?” Clark asked and Superman blanched. The truth was that he had not even considered what might have been going on in Lois and Clark’s lives. He had gotten too wrapped up in what was going on with him. Not that he had actually told Martha and Jonathan what was going on completely.

How could he tell them that he was starting to daydream about the woman their son was in love with? No, he could not do that. He was able to tell them how much he missed his wife, though, how he was forgetting her. It was good to say it out loud and he did not think it was something he could really share with Clark. He did not want Clark feeling guilty about his being here. He just needed someone to hear him, to share his pain.

“No,” he finally said to Clark, although he had not really thought about it. “What’s going on? What is it you need to talk about?”

Clark took a seat, looking at Superman strangely. He felt himself flush. He knew this was the first time he had not known what was bothering Clark long before Clark was even bothered and Clark clearly realized it, too.

“Luthor proposed to Lois,” he announced and everyone in the room gasped. In horror, Clark looked at Superman, “This didn’t happen in your universe?”

“No, it did,” Superman admitted. “I just... somehow I didn’t realize it was that time yet.”

“What did she do?” Clark asked.

silly crush. You must know that I'm in love with Clark?"

~#~#~#~#~

He put his head in his hands. He was not sure he could do this anymore. Not that he saw any way out. Well, aside from abandoning Clark, and how could he live with himself if he did that?

He had gotten nothing done today except for helping at the Planet's explosion, and he had been so wrapped up in his pain that he had almost missed that. Luckily, he had remembered at the last minute. He was sure if he had not shown up Clark would have helped, but with Lois right there, that would not have been a wise move.

Why wasn't Herb bringing Lois by? A visit from his wife, even if he could just hold her for a few minutes, would help so much. He needed to feel and see for himself how she was different — how he felt different with her.

He felt like he had no memories left. This Lois had invaded all of them.

This... this was not living. Even with Clark and Martha and Jonathan trying to be there for him, he was just... empty. He needed Lois so much it was becoming a physical pain.

"How can you just say no, Clark?" Lois asked him.

Clark felt like he was talking to someone else. Someone who was not Lois. This woman was giving up on the Planet and she was agreeing to work for a television station. Worse yet, she was agreeing to work for LNN. Even though she could not see Lex for who he was, he thought this went against her rules. Or did it not count as being involved with someone you worked with when you were married to the boss?

"I can't do this, Lois," he sighed. "I'm sorry, I can't work here."

He could see her getting frustrated with him, could tell that she was moments away from leaving. He had to do something, anything, to get her to see that she could not marry Luthor.

"Is there somewhere we can talk?" he asked.

Lois nodded, although she was looking at him skeptically. "Is this to show me more research on how Lex is evil?" she asked him.

"No," he assured her. "It's not about Lex at all."

"What is it?" she asked him as they walked. She hoped this was the beginning for them. That Clark was letting go of his anger towards Lex. She would let him talk, tell her what he had to say, and then maybe he would be ready to talk through her thoughts on Lex's proposal. She was becoming more and more convinced that she had to talk to Superman about this too, though. Still, that would be a very different conversation than the one she wanted to have with Clark.

"Lois, I've been thinking about my life a lot for the past couple of days. Why I'm having such a hard time getting over the destruction of the Planet. I mean, this is the longest I've ever been at a job. I'm an old hand at brushing myself off and starting over, but I haven't wanted to do that since I got here. And, I've been trying to determine why."

"Have you?" Lois asked, reaching for his hand as they

sat side by side on a bench in the park.

"Yeah," he said, turning slightly so he was looking directly at her as he took her other hand in his as well. "You. I want to see you every morning and talk to you every day."

"Then why won't you come to LNN?" she asked confused.

"Lois, you're not listening. I'm not talking about working together. Not that I don't love that, but... it's just a poor substitute for what I want."

"What do you want?" Lois asked, afraid of the answer.

"You. Every day. Lois, I'm in love with you. I think I have been from the first moment I saw you."

Lois tried to school her features. She did not want to hurt him, but that was unavoidable. Pulling her hands gently from his grasp, she stood up. "I love you too, Clark." One look in his eyes, and she could tell he already knew where she was going with this. "You're my best friend and the only partner I've ever actually liked working with. But... I don't think of you that way. I'm so sorry."

She willed herself not to cry. She was hurting horribly, but she knew Clark was the one who was allowed to be angry and hurt here, not her.

"And Luthor?" he asked quietly. "Do you love him?"

She had to look away from him. His eyes were so full of pain she could not look at him. "I don't know," she admitted. She almost smiled when she realized what had happened. They were having the conversation she had desperately wanted to have. She would not have thought it was possible after his admission. "I'm attracted to him," she said quietly. "But I don't know if I love him."

"So what are you going to do?" he asked.

Lois gave a half laugh. "I still don't know. I need to talk it over with someone else first."

"I don't know where he is," Clark said in a strangled voice.

Lois nodded, finally asking timidly, "If you see him, though, you'll let him know?"

Clark nodded, but Lois turned away when she saw the tear slip down his cheek.

Clark sat on his couch trying not to feel anything at all, which was not all that hard in his current mental state. It was certainly preferable to what he had done when he first got home — which was picture Lois marrying Lex Luthor.

He wondered if Superman had told his Lois he loved her when she was considering marrying Luthor. He had hoped the answer was no — until Superman told him that his wife had accepted Lex's proposal, he had assumed Lois would say no in the end. He had hoped that his desperate plea would change things. What if he was wrong? What if she still accepted Lex's proposal? Given her response to him, it certainly seemed likely that she would say yes to Luthor. It was not like Superman was going to date her — which was clearly the only thing Lois saw as standing in the way of her accepting Lex's proposal.

What if she still accepted Lex's proposal and the part that was different here was that she actually went through with it?

"Oh, hi."

been missing my wife? I forgot to mention that when I've said I've forgotten what she looks like that I actually still have memories of her. Only it's this Lois in the memories. Yes, the Lois your son is in love with.

"Oh, yes, it's very sad. And it makes things complicated 'cause Lois thinks she's in love with me. And she told me so today. Oh, yeah, I knew she was going to. My Lois did, too. What did I do? In my universe? Oh, I told her that there were things she didn't know about me and I flew off.

"Was she hurt? Of course, she was hurt.

"Should Clark go pay this Lois a visit? No, I don't think that's necessary. This Lois isn't hurt. Why not? Oh, well, instead of flying off, I kissed her. Yeah, I think she's probably feeling okay right now."

No, going to Smallville was definitely out. Certainly Asia could use another patrol right now, right?

Lois sat in her new office, taking things out of the box of belongings she had brought from the Planet. She could not believe she was starting a whole new life now. She was working at LNN. She was working in television rather than print. Best of all, though, she was dating Superman. Not that they had talked about the specifics or anything. He had flown off right after he kissed her. There must have been some sort of emergency, although it was a little weird that he never came back.

Still, he told her he loved her and he kissed her. She could certainly be patient enough for him to have time to discuss where they were going to go from here. After all, being with Superman required lots of patience. He would often have to fly off and take care of emergencies, but he was Superman. You could not really blame him for that.

For a moment, she wondered — was it possible that she should not really consider this her job now? Would the offer disappear after she had a chance to see Lex and let him know that she was going to have to say no to his proposal?

She shook her head. Lex offered her this job because she was highly qualified, not because he was hoping to marry her. It would be fine.

She took out the book of Superman clips — pictures of him at rescues, all the stories she had ever written about him, and smiled. She could not believe it. She had never thought she stood a chance with him. She knew she was special to him — he had told her that. Still, he was Superman. She was not sure he even had feelings like that for Earth women.

She could not wait to see him again, to kiss him again. Her future had never looked so bright.

Lois looked around the table. Perry looked happy — she never would have expected that. Although, the excess alcohol may have helped with that.

Even Jimmy and Clark looked happy, although she suspected that was partly at seeing Perry happy. The belly dancers probably did not hurt, either. They had really barred no expense for Perry's retirement party.

She had not shared her news with anyone yet, so none of them knew why she was so happy. She was not ready yet, though. It was big news, maybe even bigger than Lex's proposal. She wanted to get the timing just right. Plus, she

had to be selective about who she told. Being Superman's girlfriend was the kind of news that got you in the paper. It also put you at risk for being used as a bargaining chip. She was not worried about that — Superman would always manage to get to her, she was sure — but she did not want to make things more complicated for him.

"Here's to the Daily Planet," Perry interrupted her musings.

"No more deadlines," Jimmy added.

"Just think, Chief. Maybe now you can plan that trip to Graceland and actually go," Lois smiled at him.

Perry did not hear her, though, as at that moment a belly dancer danced right in front of him, and he got up to dance after her as she moved away.

Clark laughed at the sight and Lois sighed happily. "So much for Perry not having a good time," she said.

"Has anyone talked to Jack?" Jimmy asked.

Lois shook her head. "I haven't had a chance, but I talked to Lex yesterday and pleaded his case. I know he's innocent. Lex agreed to get him a lawyer."

"Jack's met with him," Clark added, although he avoided looking at Lois while he spoke. "He seems sort of... I don't know. He's not Jack. He seems ready to admit defeat. He doesn't have a lot of confidence that Luthor's lawyer is going to get him off."

"I'm sure he will, Clark," Lois said, the tiniest edge to her voice. Why was he always so negative recently? "We know Jack is innocent and if Lex got him a lawyer, I'm sure it's a good one."

Clark said nothing, but gave an exasperated sigh. "Can I have a word, Clark?" Lois asked. She wanted to give him a piece of her mind, but she did not want to do so in front of Jimmy.

Without a word, Clark got up and walked towards a dark, quiet corner of the restaurant.

"What is your problem?" Lois said angrily when she reached him.

"You really don't know?" Clark asked, and Lois was surprised to see the anger in his eyes. The hurt from yesterday was still there, but he looked more angry than hurt right now.

"Lex got Jack a lawyer. What else are you expecting him to do?" Lois asked, trying not to raise her voice.

"Oh, I'm not surprised he got Jack a lawyer," Clark retorted. "It's perfect. It makes you feel like he does things for you and helps your friends — both of which go a long way towards turning your maybe into a yes — and it allows him to control Jack's fate."

"Why would he care about Jack's fate?" Lois asked, completely skipping his remarks on how it might make her feel. She did not want to tell Clark she was turning down Lex's proposal yet. She did not want him to think it was because of his wild accusations — it was not. She knew Lex was a wonderful man. He just wasn't Superman.

"Because if he can get Jack convicted of the bombing, there will be no further investigation and no one can turn up evidence that Lex was responsible."

"You think Lex is responsible for the bombing?" She was incredulous. Was there no end to the things Clark would blame on Lex?

“Well, I don’t have any proof, but yeah, I do,” Clark said.

“You are a madman, Clark. This is ridiculous. I hurt you. I get that. And I’m sorry. But you need to end this vendetta against Lex.”

“I plan to.”

“When?” Lois asked pointedly, even though she could tell he had been about to say something else.

“When he gets everything he deserves. And for the record, that does not include you. And it’s not sour grapes or something like that, Lois. The truth is, my feelings for you aside, you are way too good for Lex Luthor.”

With that Clark stormed off, leaving Lois staring after him. That was sweet. Sort of. She was not sure if she wanted to strangle him or kiss him.

“Must be nice having a free car and driver at your disposal,” Jimmy said as they exited the party.

Lois did not say anything. It *was* nice. Still, she felt guilty using it since she was going to tell Lex tonight that she was not going to be able to marry him. She had told him she did not need the car, though, and he had insisted. Since she did not want to talk to him about the proposal over the phone, she agreed. She did not have a good explanation for why she did not feel right using his driver without telling him. It was just easier this way.

“Maybe I can drop you off at home?” she suggested to Jimmy. “You, too,” she included Perry in the offer. They were really not on the way to Lex’s, but it was the least she could do, right? Plus, it would give her a few minutes more to enjoy the luxury before she gave it all up.

Not that she was having second thoughts. Being with Superman was better than anything Lex could offer her. Still, cars with drivers, maids, and cooks were nice, too.

“Really? Thanks, Lois,” Jimmy said with his usual youthful exuberance.

Perry did not answer, but Jimmy tugged on his arm and Perry came willingly. He had had a little too much to drink and was singing Elvis songs at the top of his lungs.

“Clark?” she asked. She and Clark had not spoken for the rest of the evening, but both had stayed until the end of the party, wanting to be there for Perry, so they had walked out together.

Clark gave her a withering look. “It’s not free,” he said in reply.

“What?” Lois asked. He really was going off the deep end.

“The car,” Clark clarified. “It’s not free. Trust me, Lois, with Luthor there’s always a price.”

Lois sighed to keep from reviving their argument in front of Jimmy and the driver. Perry did not count, since it was unlikely he would remember much of this tomorrow. “Are you coming or not?” she asked him.

“Not,” Clark said. He leaned into the window to say goodnight to Perry and Jimmy and walked away.

“So, how was the retirement party?” Lex asked her as she entered the room.

“Painful and funny,” she said as he came over to engulf her in his arms.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I wish I could do something to help.” Lois backed away. “Is everything okay?” he asked her.

Lois moved to sit on the couch. “I’ve been thinking about... the question you asked me,” Lois said nervously.

Lex sat down. Lois could tell he was eager to hear her answer, but he was trying to be patient. He took her hands in his. “And?”

“Lex, you’re an amazing man,” Lois said. “You’re kind and smart. You’re generous. I mean, even aside from the obvious wealth, any woman would be lucky to have you.” Lois was surprised. She had not thought she was being terribly obtuse about where this was going, but Lex was still watching her eagerly, looking pleased at her words.

“But... I don’t think I can marry you,” Lois said softly.

For a moment, Lex said nothing. She could tell he was surprised. Lex probably did not get told no frequently. Then the words seemed to sink in. Something weird flashed across his face, before the expected disappointment crossed his features.

“Well,” he said, letting go of her hands and standing up. “I’m...” he paced, clearly at a loss for words.

“I really like you, Lex,” Lois said. “I’m just not...”

“Is there someone else?” Lex cut in. “Mr. Kent, perhaps?”

“Clark?” Lois asked confused. “No, we’re just friends,” she said ignoring the little voice in the back of her head that was screaming ‘Friends! He’s in love with you, idiot!’

“Or Superman?” Lex asked.

“Superman?” Lois asked, stalling this time. No, she probably should not tell Lex about Superman. “Does Superman even date?” she asked instead, but she could feel she was blushing. “It was just... I’m sorry, Lex, but as much as I like you, I’m not in love with you.”

Again something flashed across his face quickly, but then he turned away. “Well, I have to admit to being a bit disappointed.”

A bit disappointed? Not that Lois wanted to hurt him or anything, but that seemed like an understated response to someone saying no to a marriage proposal. Clark had not asked for anything and yet he had been clearly crushed when she told him she did not return his feelings. Yet Lex, who wanted to marry her, was only a bit disappointed that she had said no. Was he trying to save face?

“I’ll have Mrs. Cox show you out,” Lex said as he picked up his phone.

Mrs. Cox came to the doorway in an instant. “Ms. Lane will be leaving now,” Lex said.

“Lex, I really... I’d like to be friends,” Lois said, but he did not reply and after a moment of awkward silence, Lois followed Mrs. Cox out.

Superman hovered outside the window. He was not sure what would happen — what the implications of his kissing Lois were. He had been curious, sort of, to see whether she would still accept Luthor’s proposal. She had not. He sighed. Maybe something good did come out of the kiss?

Somehow, he was not sure Clark would feel that way.

Lois opened the door to her apartment. The ride home

was weird. Lex had told his driver to take her home, but she felt even stranger using the car than she had before she rejected his proposal.

She sighed. That was weird. She was glad it had gone well — not that she could imagine Lex making a scene, but it was still weird. She wished he had not ignored her before she left.

And the expression on his face — she had seen it twice, both times so briefly she was not sure she had not imagined it. Would she have imagined it twice, though? It was the same look he had given her in New York when she did not agree to stay the night. It was ... anger was not the right word. It looked more like... barely controlled rage.

Did that make any sense? Lex always seemed so polished. Was it all just a veneer?

She was not sure, but she knew someone who thought they knew the answer. Whether or not he was right, she did not know, but it seemed like perhaps she should talk to Clark about Lex. And this time, she should hear him out.

“He was?” Clark asked. “Okay, thanks.”

Feeling concerned, he went to hang up the phone, but it rang again before he had a chance to.

“Hello?” he asked.

“Clark!” Perry sounded more energetic than Clark had ever heard him.

“Chief! I was just about to call you,” Clark said.

“Yeah? I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I’m on my way to the airport. I talked to Alice this morning and she has never sounded so happy — we’ve never spent more than a long weekend in the little cottage we bought in Florida. She’s already started settling in and says she’s making a special dinner for my arrival tonight,” Perry explained.

“That’s great, Chief,” Clark said.

“So, how are you, son?” Perry asked.

“Well, I’m fine, but... I just tried to call Jimmy and his phone’s been disconnected.”

“What?” Perry asked, confused.

“I know. Luckily I had the number for his landlord from that time he locked himself out and asked me to call his landlord for him. But when I called he said Jimmy was evicted for not paying his rent.”

“What? Why didn’t he tell me?” Perry said. “He must have known last night at the party.”

“He was probably embarrassed,” Clark said. “I’m sorry. I had sort of hoped that you knew where he went, but I guess not.”

“No,” Perry said, sounding sad. “Maybe I should stay and help you find him.”

“No, Chief,” Clark laughed. “Alice’ll kill you. I’ll keep you updated, though.”

“Thanks, Clark,” Perry said, his voice dropping slightly. “You’re a good kid, you know. I know you haven’t been with the Planet for that long, but not only are you talented but you really care about people. It makes you both a great reporter and a great friend.”

Clark did not say anything at first — he was surprised. Perry did not normally get mushy. “Thanks, Chief,” he said quietly. “I’ve never worked with an editor that was even in

the same league as you before.”

“No thanks necessary, son. I meant it. You’ve been a good friend to me. I’m going to miss working with you.”

“I already miss working with you,” Clark said honestly. Perry suddenly laughed slightly. “You know what, Clark?”

“What?”

“I’m glad I sicced Lois on you when you started. I almost sent you packing. That would have been a mistake.”

Clark laughed, too, “I’m glad you sicced her on me, too, Chief. Sort of.”

“Oh, come on, son, she’ll come around. I know you two are not getting along right now, but you care about each other. It’ll work out in the end.”

Clark nodded, not really believing it. Then realizing Perry couldn’t see him, he said, “Thanks, Perry.”

“Listen, Clark. I’m about to arrive at the airport, but give me a call when you find Jimmy,” his voice had the same commanding tone that made him a great editor.

“Will do!” Clark replied, grinning.

Clark hung up the phone smiling, but then he remembered about Jimmy. He was about to spin into the suit so he could fly over Metropolis and find him that way when he realized he was not sure what his roommate was up to. Not only had Clark not seen Superman in days, but there was no sign that he had slept in his bed the last couple of nights. It did not make any sense. Who was Superman hiding from? This was not like when he was trying to hide out from Luthor or he had to keep a low profile in Metropolis for some other reason. Clark had checked, and he was still doing his nightly patrols and helping out during the day sometimes. So, why was he not coming home to sleep?

He remembered Superman telling him that he was homesick. Superman had brushed it off as being unimportant, but now Clark wondered if it was worse than Superman had implied. Now that he thought about it, Superman had seemed depressed for a while. It had to be hard to be away from his family for this long.

Clark thought he might try helping more, try to get closer to a time when Superman could go home. Particularly now that he would not be around Lois that much, he would have time. The problem was finding Superman to tell him.

He turned the television on to check his roommate’s whereabouts. LNN was reporting a Superman rescue in Suicide Slum. He wondered if Lois had written the copy. Anyway, it meant he could not go out looking for Jimmy yet.

There was a loud knock on the door and, surprised, Clark looked to see who it was. Lois. What was she doing here?

Grabbing his glasses on the way to the door, Clark went to open it for her.

“Lois?” he asked.

“I’ve been waiting to talk to you all night,” Lois said, brushing past him.

“All night?” Clark asked.

Lois understood why he sounded surprised. Normally, if

she wanted to talk to him, she felt no qualms about waking him up. "I came by last night, but it was after midnight and it was dark in here."

"And?" Clark asked.

Lois blushed. "I didn't think you'd appreciate me waking you up considering how things have been between us."

"Oh, Lois," Clark said, looking sad at this. "You can wake me up whenever you want. I promise." Smiling at her, he added, "I'm sort of used to it."

"Thanks," Lois said shyly.

"So, what is it you wanted to talk about?" Clark said as he moved around the kitchen making them coffee.

"I told Lex no last night," Lois said.

"You're not with Luthor?" Clark asked, dropping the filters on the counter to turn to look at her.

Lois hesitated. Clark was her best friend. She had desperately wanted to tell him yesterday, but with the fight about Lex last night, she had not had a chance.

That was not really why, though, and she knew it. Things were different between them now. Clark's confession had irrevocably changed things, and Lois could not help but selfishly wish he had kept it to himself.

Still, Clark and Superman were roommates. It would only be so long before Clark would know anyway. "No," she finally admitted.

"That's great!" Clark said, the relief clear in his voice.

"Clark," Lois said, wanting to get the confession over with quickly. "I'm... I'm dating Superman."

"You're... you're what?" Clark asked, looking pale. He moved over to the table to sit down, the coffee forgotten.

"I'm dating Superman," she whispered, hating the look on his face. She had not come over here to break his heart again.

"When? How? You're dating Superman? My roommate, Superman?" Clark tried to clarify.

Lois nodded her head. "Let me make the coffee," she offered, getting up.

They said nothing while Lois finished getting the coffee started, although she could feel Clark watching her the entire time. Finally, when she sat back down at the table, Clark's face cleared slightly and she could see something besides surprise and shock there.

"What did Luthor say?" he asked, the concern clear on his face.

"I didn't tell him about Superman," Lois said. "I figure that's probably something I shouldn't tell many people. But you're his roommate and my best friend, so..."

"What did Superman say?" Clark asked. "About telling other people, I mean?"

"We didn't talk about it," Lois admitted. With a sigh, she explained, "When he came over, I told him I loved him. He said he loved me, too, and he kissed me." She rushed on at the look of pain on Clark's face. "But then right after that, he must have heard a call for help or something as he flew off. I guess he's been busy as I haven't seen him since."

Clark nodded, not sure what to say.

"Anyway, I came to talk to you about Lex," she said, wanting to move off of this uncomfortable topic.

"What about him?" Clark asked, guarded.

"When I told him no, I thought I saw something..."

Maybe I should start at the beginning. A few months ago, Lex took me to New York for dinner. While there he mentioned he kept an apartment in the area," Lois started. She saw Clark's jaw clench and realized he knew where this was going. "He asked me to spend the night with him in New York and I said no. At the time, I brushed the whole thing off as my imagination, but he gave me a look when I said no. I wasn't sure what it was, but it gave me the creeps. And he was chilly on the way back.

"But I figured he was just disappointed and, you know, it's probably rare that someone says no to him. So I decided to forget it — thinking I probably imagined it and it wasn't important anyway."

"Lois, did he hurt you in any way?" Clark interrupted her, his voice fierce.

"No. I'm fine, Clark, really," she said, giving him a smile and squeezing his hand.

"Anyway, then during Nightfall, he invited me over to show me this bunker he'd built." She stopped at the smile on Clark's face. "What?"

"Nothing," Clark said. "I'm just not surprised that Luthor had a plan for survival if the world ended."

Lois laughed. "Well, that wasn't the weirdest part. The room he showed me... It was my apartment."

"What do you mean?"

"It looked exactly like my apartment," Lois explained. "Every detail. I even have a..." she broke off blushing, but then realized she needed to tell him this. "I have a secret compartment in my cabinet where I keep my Kerths. I checked and it was there. In Lex's bunker."

Clark looked flushed. "I didn't... um, I didn't realize Luthor had spent that much time at your place."

"He hasn't," Lois insisted. "He's only been by once for maybe ten minutes. Other than that, he's been in the doorway when he's picked me up or dropped me off, but not inside."

"You should ask Superman to sweep your place for bugs," Clark suggested.

Lois nodded. "So, last night, when I saw that same look again when I said no," she continued, "I wondered if... well, if you were right. I'm not saying I think he's evil or anything yet, but I'm ready to see everything you've collected and think about it."

"Really?" Clark said. "Because it's still all circumstantial."

"Really," Lois said. "I really want to see it all. And I promise to keep an open mind this time."

When Lois and Clark had finished going through all of Clark's notes two hours later, Lois looked pale. "Do you really think he's connected to all of this?" she asked Clark.

"I don't know," Clark said, "but the trails are all there."

Lois closed her eyes tightly. "I'm an idiot, aren't I?"

"No!" Clark said fervently, getting up to put his arms around her. "Luthor fooled a lot of people. And you are one of the most loyal people I know. You didn't want to believe it because you were being loyal to Luthor."

"Thanks, Clark," Lois said, resting her head on his

chest. "I don't deserve you."

Clark tightened his grip on her, but a minute later, she had recovered. "So, if we want to start really looking into this, we need to get cracking. I think we should call Perry. And maybe Jimmy could help with some of the leg work."

Clark's face fell. "I forgot to tell you. Jimmy's missing. He was kicked out of his apartment."

Lois looked at her watch as she entered LNN's offices. She was ten minutes late, but given how much time she and Clark had spent going over files, this was not surprising. Still, as the new kid on the block, coming in late was not the wisest move. Of course, she was less convinced that she even had a job now that she had seen Clark's evidence. She was not one hundred percent convinced Lex was evil, but she had to admit, she could see how Clark had come to that conclusion.

She still believed that Lex might not know all the details of everything that went on in every subsidiary of his companies. With the information Clark had uncovered, though, Lex would have to have no idea what any of those companies were doing, and it was unlikely Lex had gotten where he was without mastering the art of keeping close tabs on everyone while leaving them free to make their own decisions.

"Morning, Wendy," she said to her assistant as she passed.

"Oh... you're here," Wendy said nervously.

"Yes," Lois said. "Where else would I be?"

"I just... um... well, there's someone else in your office."

"What?" Lois asked. "Who?"

"Her name's Jessica. She used to be a writer for the Washington Post. She's currently the writer for the afternoon news anchors and is covering the evening anchors as well," Wendy explained.

"I thought writing copy for the evening anchors was my job," Lois said, as the sinking feeling in her stomach got worse. She had wondered if she even wanted to work at LNN given some of what Clark showed her, but she needed an income. Now it looked like the choice had been taken from her.

"I think Jessica should explain it to you," Wendy said.

"Wendy," a petite blonde woman poked her head out of Lois' office. "I need you to arrange a meeting for me with Senator Weiss."

"Sure," Wendy said. "Jessica, this is Lois Lane."

Jessica smiled at Lois. "Yes, I've heard about you. Please come in."

Lois gritted her teeth. This woman was inviting her into her own office?

"Ms. Lane," Jessica said as Lois entered the office. "There's been a reshuffling of assignments. HR felt that given your experience and skill set you would be better suited to edit the materials our anchors read."

"Edit?" Lois asked.

"Right. I'll write them, then Janelle will look them over, Bill will do fact checking, and once I've incorporated all of their comments, you'll give it a final read-through."

"Who was doing this before now?" Lois asked.

"No one," Jessica shrugged. "But we really don't want our anchors making silly errors, do we?" she asked.

"Thank you, Jessica," Lois said, standing up. "But I'm a reporter. I think I'll look for a job where I can report on the news, not give a third edit to it."

Jessica gave a small smile, "I'm sorry things didn't work out for you here at LNN, Lois. Good luck on future endeavors."

Superman flew away from the rescue in Hobbs Bay, glad that things were quiet in Metropolis now. He needed to go see Lois and apologize to her. He needed to go to Clark and explain. He did not feel up to either.

How could he break Lois' heart? Or Clark's? This was such a mess. How could he have done this?

"Lois... I love you, too." How could he have said that to her? Was it even true? He was not sure. Did he love this Lois? Or did he just think he might because she reminded him of his wife?

A few years ago, he recalled watching a movie with Lois — it was some sort of Cinderella movie with Drew Barrymore. The prince in the movie asked... someone, he was not sure who, about soul mates. The question was something like: "What if you meet your soul mate, but then they die and you meet someone else? Is the old person still your soul mate or is the new person your soul mate and you were supposed to be with them the whole time?"

What if he was *supposed* to be with the Lois here? He supposed that might lead to Utopia, too. Would it ruin Utopia in his universe for him to disappear? Or was it just the ideals and progeny that were important so he was not needed there anymore?

How could that be, though? How could he be meant-to-be with this Lois now? It felt so forced and... But that was a lie. It did not feel forced with her. It felt more real with her than it ever had with his wife when he was Superman. He had let this Lois see him as a person. He had been a person around her.

So, it felt natural and right with her. More than with his wife? He just did not know. He wished he could remember enough to know the answer to that, but all the memories he had left were snippets, and most seemed to feature this Lois now anyway.

If he was supposed to be with this Lois, what would that mean for this Clark?

With a sigh, he turned east. It had been awhile since he had looked for cracks in the tourists' sections of the Great Wall.

"Is he here?" Clark asked as he entered the farmhouse.

"Superman?" Martha guessed. "Not yet."

"I don't think he's coming," Clark said as they made their way into the living room where Jonathan was already sitting reading the paper.

"Why not? We haven't seen any big Superman rescues," Jonathan said motioning to the television which was on mute, but showed LNN footage.

"I think he's avoiding me."

"Why would he do that?" Martha asked.

"He kissed her."

“He kissed who?” Jonathan asked.

“Lois. They’re dating now,” Clark said bitterly. “Am I supposed to be happy? She’s not with Luthor — she turned down his proposal. That’s a good thing, but... this?”

“Oh, honey,” Martha said, getting up from her seat to join Clark on the couch and put an arm around him.

“Do you think he did this in his universe?” Clark asked. “Dated Lois to keep her away from Luthor? But why wouldn’t he tell me? I mean he told me about the clone and the Planet break-in. How could he not tell me that he was going to date Lois to keep her away from Luthor?”

“Actually, he couldn’t have done this in his universe. He said his Lois accepted Luthor’s proposal. My Lois turned Luthor down.” Clark continued. “And how can he date her and not tell her about himself? How can he date her when he’s married? I just can’t believe he would do this.”

Martha and Jonathan exchanged a look. “What?” Clark asked.

“Well, when Superman told us about his life he definitely mentioned dating Lois for a little while before he told her about his dual identity,” Jonathan said carefully.

“He dated her as Superman without telling her he was Clark?” Clark asked, incredulous.

“Ah, well, no,” Jonathan admitted. “He dated her as Clark without telling her he was also Superman.”

“But that’s not what he’s doing here,” Clark said. “If that was what was supposed to happen then I would be dating Lois. And it’s pretty clear she’s not interested in that.”

“It wasn’t now,” Martha added quietly. “It was in about a year.”

“What?!” Clark asked. “So, you’re saying he said he dated her, but that was a year from now?”

“Now, Clark,” Jonathan said. “He also said it nearly killed him to watch Lois prepare to marry Lex. Maybe he was trying to spare you that.”

“Spare me?” Clark asked. “Spare me? Dad, do you think this is fun?”

“Less miserable than watching her date Lex?” Martha suggested.

“No!” Clark said. “Less worrisome, yes. But... it’s more painful. I trusted him, Mom. I admit, I was suspicious of him at first. But then he seemed like such a nice guy and like he sincerely wanted to help. I thought he was my friend. Apart from Lois, he was my best friend. How could he do this?”

Martha rubbed Clark’s back slowly, soothingly. “I don’t know, Clark,” she whispered.

“But maybe it was a mistake,” Jonathan said, exchanging another glance with Martha. “Superman’s been pretty lonely. He misses his wife terribly.”

“I know that!” Clark exploded, getting up from the couch. “And I feel badly for him. I do. And I appreciate all he’s been doing for me. But does that mean I need to sit by and watch him date Lois?” Clark asked.

Neither Martha nor Jonathan seemed to have a response to that.

“Maybe it’s time I took over as Superman full time,” Clark said.

“What?” The non-sequitur caught Martha off guard.

“Are you ready for that?” Jonathan asked.

“I don’t know,” Clark answered honestly. “But I am ready for him to go home.”

“Don’t rush yourself because of this,” Martha cautioned him. “It could have disastrous consequences.”

“Son, I know you don’t want to hear this, but that isn’t completely your choice,” Jonathan added. “If he and Lois are happy and he wants to stay... ”

“I just need to stand by and watch it happen?” Clark asked.

Jonathan sighed.

“That’s not quite what your father is saying, Clark. Just that you need to be prepared for the possibility,” Martha said.

“Do I have to let him keep living with me?”

“Of course not,” Jonathan said.

“I should go,” Clark said. “He’s clearly not showing and Perry is on his way back to Metropolis.”

“Coming out of retirement already?” Martha asked with a smile.

“Well, the one good thing about Lois dating Superman is that she’s not marrying Lex. She said he gave her a look when she said no that scared her — in addition to a few other things that happened while they were dating. So, she decided to look through my notes.

“She believes me now, or sort of. She’s still not convinced he’s one hundred percent evil, but she thinks it’s likely he’s not the good, beneficent philanthropist he claims to be.

“So, she suggested we call Perry to help us mount a full-scale investigation.”

“I bet Perry was happy to have a reason not to go to Florida,” Jonathan said.

“Yeah,” Clark responded with a smile. “I think so, too. Anyway, I really should get home before he gets there.”

“Honey, we’re so sorry,” Martha stood up to give Clark a tight hug.

“Thanks, Mom,” he said before giving his father a hug as well and heading back to Metropolis.

“Lois?” Clark asked as he came up the walk. He had seen her from the air and decided to land in an alley nearby.

“Let’s nail him!” Lois said hotly from the doorstep.

“Excuse me?”

“Let’s nail Lex. I want to see him come crumbling down like the Saint Francis Dam.”

“I take it something happened at LNN?” Clark asked as he unlocked his door.

“Yeah, you could say that,” Lois put her purse on the counter and moved over to the couch.

“Did Lex rescind the job offer?” Clark asked.

“No. He wouldn’t do that. Too obvious. It just got changed to a different job,” Lois said with a smirk.

“What job was that? Janitor?” Clark asked with a grin.

“You know, you should go work for Lex. You could give him ideas,” Lois groused. “No, not janitor. Although, not that much better. I was moved to the editor of the news stories for the evening news. Oh, and not the first editor. The third editor!”

“They have three different people edit stories at LNN?”

"Not now they don't. They normally have two — one is a fact checker, but he checks language at the same time. They created this job just so I'd have an excuse to quit."

"I'm sorry, Lois," Clark said, putting a hand on her arm. "I really am."

"I know," Lois said. "Besides, it just adds fuel to the fire. I'm ready to get started. When is Perry getting here?"

"I'm right here, darlin'," Perry called from the doorway.

"Perry," Lois ran towards him. "It's so good to see you."

"It's good to see *you*, Lois," Perry gave her a hug. "You too, Clark. Any word on Jimmy?"

"No," Clark said with a shake of his head. "I haven't been able to find him yet."

"Who you lookin' for?" came the voice from the doorway.

Clark looked up. "Jimmy!" he exclaimed. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Where have you been?"

"Well, first you should know that I'm not alone and the person with me should probably come inside."

"Who's with you?" Lois asked.

Jack came out of the bushes.

"Jack!" Clark admonished. "What are you doing here?"

"I broke out of Juvie," Jack said. "But I had to."

Clark moved over to the door to put an arm around Jack and led him inside. "Somehow I doubt that, but please come in and explain."

"The guy's name was Pete Black. His brother's name's John," Jack explained. "He was bragging about planting the explosives in my apartment."

"Anything about who hired him?" Lois asked.

"Just someone called the Boss. But I have to say a lot of the kids in Juvie seemed to know the name."

"You still think it's Luthor?" Perry asked Clark.

Clark sighed, "I do, but I'd hate to miss the real culprit just 'cause we're looking in the wrong place."

"Right," Perry nodded his head, clearly agreeing. "So, Jimmy and Jack — find out whatever you can about this John Black. Clark and Lois — try to find out more about this Boss."

"And you, Chief?" Jimmy asked.

"I'm going to start looking into Daily Planet finances."

"You two can stay here tonight," Clark said, looking at Jimmy and Jack.

"No, they can't!" Lois said.

"What?" Clark looked at her confused. Then she made a slight motion with her head towards Superman's bedroom and he realized she was right. While Superman had not come home in a few nights, he might tonight, although, Clark doubted it now that he knew why Superman was avoiding him. "You're right, Lois. I don't know what I was thinking."

Jack and Jimmy gave him a funny look, but Perry just got up. "That's okay. You can spend the night at my place. It'll be pretty quiet without Alice there anyway."

"Good night," Clark said as they headed out the door.

"I'm going to head home, too," Lois said.

"Okay," Clark said, wanting her to stay, but also afraid that Superman would come back while she was here and he would have to watch them together. "Good night."

She came over to give him a hug. "That's for not saying 'I told you so'," she smiled at him.

This time Clark heard him landing on the balcony. He had been in the living room watching LNN — noting the lack of Superman rescues.

"You're back," he said, looking at Superman coldly.

"I'm guessing you talked to Lois," Superman said, his voice soft.

"Yeah," Clark said. "She told me. So, I guess congratulations are in order. Is this what you're *really* here for?"

"No... Clark, I am so sorry," Superman said.

"What?" Clark asked, getting up. Was he just supposed to tell Superman that it was okay? That he understood? "Was it a mistake? Did you just happen to fall on her so that your lips touched hers? Did you mean to say something other than 'I love you'?"

Superman sat on the couch with his head in his hands. "I didn't mean to do that."

"Well, you did," Clark said coldly. He felt like perhaps he was being unfair, but he could not calm his anger. It did not matter how miserable Superman was. Did he have to understand why Superman would kiss Lois? "Lois thinks you're dating now. Are you?"

Superman looked up, his eyes wide with alarm. "She thinks we're dating? We're not. I... it was a mistake, Clark. Really."

"Well, it was quite a mistake!" Clark said coldly. "I'm sorry. I get that you miss your wife. I even get that this Lois is a lot like your wife. And I can see how you could have gotten carried away or something and kissed her. I don't like it, but I can understand it. But then not to talk to her for two days? What did you think she was going to think?"

"Did she tell Luthor we're dating?" Superman asked, his eyes showing panic.

"No," Clark said. "She's not stupid."

"I know she's not. But she is a little blind when it comes to Luthor," Superman said.

"Not anymore. Your little stunt meant she called off the wedding," Clark said.

"I know. I saw them talking. That's a good thing, right?"

"What? Am I supposed to thank you for that?" Clark asked. "Was that some sort of favor you were doing for me?"

"No," Superman said, hanging his head again. "That's not what I meant."

"I need to go talk to her. Let her know we're not dating." He stood up and moved over to the balcony.

"That's it?" Clark asked.

"I need to fix this," Superman said. "Then I can come back here and you can hate me some more."

"Superman," Lois said with pleasure when she heard his arrival at the window. She got up and walked over to where he was standing in her entryway. "Where have you been?" she asked him.

"Lois, we need to talk," Superman said.

"I know," Lois smiled. "Come in." She moved over to the couch and sat down. Superman stood near the window

awkwardly for a moment, but then joined her.

"I know we didn't talk about telling people," Lois said, snuggling up to his side. Superman stiffened, but did not seem to move away. "And I realize I can't go around telling everyone, but I did tell Clark. I mean, I figured as your roommate, he'd find out anyway."

"He's in love with you, Lois," Superman said softly.

"I know," Lois replied. It was so sweet of Superman to care about Clark's feelings, but he clearly did not know Clark as well as she did. "And I feel badly about that, but I know Clark will understand. He's friends with both of us. He'd want us both to be happy. And he knew I loved you. I'd told him. I'm guessing if you knew he was in love with me, then you had talked about it?" Lois asked, but speaking before he could answer, she finished, "So, you must have told him that you're in love with me, too."

For a moment Lois thought about that. Clark and Superman were both in love with her. Plus, even if she was not sure he was sincere, Lex had pretended to be. What had happened with the universe? When had she gotten so popular?

"I didn't tell him," Superman said, drawing her out of her thoughts. He moved his arm gently out of her grasp and got up. "Lois, I..."

He looked so sad, she was sure he was feeling sorry for Clark. Getting up she moved over to him and covered his lips with her own before he could finish his thought. "Let yourself be happy," Lois whispered. "Clark will understand."

For a moment, neither spoke at all while lips caressed lips, but then Superman pulled himself away. "I have to go," he said, his voice a ragged whisper.

"Okay," Lois said. "Come back when you're done."

What was he doing? If there had ever been a hope of Clark forgiving him before, it was gone now. He had meant to go there to let her know they were not dating. That had been his only intention, but he could not seem to get any words past hers and then when her lips had met his...

He was an awful person. When had he turned into this? How could he have let himself do this? Even if he was ever allowed to go home, his wife would not want him anymore. How could she? He was only a hollow farce of the man she had fallen in love with.

"Is she okay?" Clark asked, and in astonishment Superman realized he had gone back to the apartment.

Superman nodded his head. "I didn't tell her..."

"What?!" Clark asked, and the compassion that had been on the younger man's face disappeared in an instant. "How could you not tell her? Were you lying to me?"

"No," Superman insisted. "I meant to tell her. But then she kept talking and I couldn't... It was hard to do. And then when she kissed me..."

"What?" Clark asked quietly, his voice full of recrimination. "When she kissed you, what?"

"I forgot myself," Superman answered in a quiet voice.

"You kissed her again?" Clark asked.

Superman nodded.

"Well, that certainly is not the same as letting her know you're not dating, is it?" Clark said. "You know, I was

trying to understand before, but I can't understand this. You are not at all who you made yourself out to be."

With that, Clark moved to his bedroom, slamming his door shut behind him.

"Okay," Perry said as everyone sat around Perry's table. "What do we have?"

"The Planet board all originally voted not to sell to Luthor," Jack said. "Then, they changed their minds. But, two of them have brand new Ferraris, another has a new 'summer' home in Switzerland, and two more have recently acquired Rolex watches with diamond studded faces."

"I found John Black," Jimmy said. "We need to do something to set him up, but at least we know where he is."

"I've tried to talk to the advertisers who pulled out of the Planet. Most of the companies won't talk to me," Lois said. "But the woman at the Florist Emporium cried when I asked, talked a lot about how much she loved the Planet. When I asked why she pulled her ads, she got fairly quiet, but then admitted that she had just moved. Apparently, her old location was half the size of her current place and was in the suburbs. Now she's right across from the train station. She was paid off by..." Lois paused for dramatic effect, "the Boss."

"Just about every criminal element you can think of in Metropolis pays protection money to the Boss," Clark said, "but most don't know who he is, and those who might, seem terrified and won't talk."

"And I found additional insurance on the Planet," Perry said, "through a subsidiary of Lexel Investments. I don't know how much it's for..."

"But it's through Lexel," Clark offered.

"So, no real cost to Lex," Lois concluded.

"If Luthor manipulated the Board to sell the Planet to him, then blew it up to collect the primary insurance which was not from a LexCorp subsidiary, well..." Clark paused, afraid the others might still think his idea was too radical.

"Then what if Lex is the Boss," Lois finished his thought. "Oh my... I considered marrying the biggest criminal Metropolis has ever known."

"We don't know that yet, Lois," Clark rushed to reassure her. "And even if it's true, he fooled a lot of people."

"Not me," Jack said, but Clark glared at him.

"I idolized him when I first got to Metropolis," Jimmy said, winking at Clark.

"And I thought he was the same thing you did, Lois. A smart, generous business man," Perry said. "A bit cocky maybe, but nothing like this."

"You didn't," Lois said looking up at Clark. "You've never liked him. Have you?"

Clark sighed. "I don't think it's fair. I think... I don't know. Lex and I don't mix. He was rude to me the first time we met, but I think I just rubbed him the wrong way."

"Maybe he knew you were going to be the reporter who was going to bring him down," Lois said with a smile.

"No idea how," Clark smiled back at her. "I'm sure you were letting him know what a hack I was."

Everyone laughed at this, and Lois' mood seemed to lift.

Clark walked in the door, feeling more hopeful. At least the attempt to bring down Luthor seemed to be going well. Lois was on board and they were finding good information. They were not finished yet, but they were heading in the right direction.

That had no bearing on Lois' relationship with Superman, of course, but at least she was safe.

He was on his way to his bedroom when he saw the blinking light on the answering machine. Pushing the button to play the message, Clark then turned to go into his bedroom. He stopped still at the voice on the machine.

"Mr. Kent, this is Lex Luthor. I'm looking to have a word with Superman about Lois Lane. Would you ask him to stop by when you see him?" Click.

What did Luthor want with Superman about Lois? Was this sour grapes? Had he somehow figured out that Lois was dating Superman?

He wondered how he would ever get the message to Superman. It seemed quite likely that Superman was being even more careful about avoiding him now. With a sigh, he picked up the phone.

"Hi," he said quietly.

"Hi, Clark," Lois replied.

"Um... is Superman there?" he asked.

"No, I haven't seen him since yesterday," Lois said, sounding disappointed. "I don't understand either. I asked him to come back after his rescue."

"I'm sorry, Lois," Clark said, not really feeling all that sorry. "Um, thanks."

He hung up the phone, wondering what to do. Should he fly around the earth looking for him? Actually, the first thing he should do is check. He turned the television on, but LNN showed no Superman coverage right now.

Maybe he should just go himself? It was not like Luthor would be able to recognize the difference.

"They say that civilization was invented so that men could cooperate in the making of wine," Luthor said as Clark entered the wine cellar.

"What do you want, Luthor?" Clark asked, his heart pounding a mile a minute. What if he was wrong and Luthor realized he was not Superman?

"A favor," Luthor replied.

Clark looked at him in surprise. "From me?" he asked wondering why on Earth Luthor would think Superman would do him any favors.

"My fiancée, Lois Lane..." Lex started.

"I thought Miss Lane rejected your proposal," Clark interrupted.

"Precisely," Luthor said with a smile. "And I've been trying to figure out why. I'm a reasonably attractive man," he said, gesturing to himself. "And I do fairly well. I've never had problems with female partners in the past. So what would make Lois say no?"

"I also know that she was not completely against the idea, given that she took some time to think about it. However, I don't think it's much of a secret that Lois has a little bit of a crush on you," Luthor motioned to Clark dismissively.

Clark watched him, but decided not to say anything.

"You and I both know, Superman," Luthor continued, "that you can't really have a relationship with Lois. She would be a target for all sorts of criminals and even you can't keep her safe all the time. She would be much better off with me."

"So, what is it you want me to do?" Clark asked coldly.

"I want you to make it clear to Lois that nothing can happen between you two and that you give her your blessing to accept my proposal," Luthor concluded.

Clark gave a bark of laughter. "I think you're delirious, Luthor. Regardless of my potential to have a relationship with Lois, I would never push her towards you!"

"I see," Luthor said with a strange smile. "Well, then, I suppose you are of no further use to me." With a flick of his wrist, Luthor turned a nozzle on one of the wine caskets, but rather than releasing wine, it seemed to release a cage from the ceiling above Clark.

Clark watched the bars surround him with amusement. Surely Luthor knew enough about Superman to know this would not work. "Bars won't hold me, Luthor," he said.

To his surprise, Luthor smiled at him. "Oh, I think they will," he said as he took a small box with a dial on it from his pocket and turned the dial. "It was too bad you missed my test run this afternoon at the bank," he said, "but I'm fairly certain this will work out just fine."

Clark had no idea what Luthor was talking about. There had been an attempted break-in at Metropolis Mutual, but he had not responded to the call as he assumed Superman would take care of it. He heard later that everything was fine — nothing had been stolen. What had Luthor been trying to test?

Right as Clark reached forward to grasp the bars and escape, the bars glowed a sickly green. Clark's hands closed on them and he screamed. It felt like the bars had burned his hands. He stood in the middle of the cage in silence for a moment, before the obvious occurred to him — the cage was somehow coated in Kryptonite.

"I'll be back later to check on you," Luthor said with a smile, as if Clark was a guest in his hotel.

The pain from the bars drove Clark to the floor before Luthor exited the cellar.

Superman watched as darkness approached. He had come back to the Great Wall last night after his argument with Clark. However, unlike his normal Wall visits, where he sat on one of the sections that were closed to visitors, he had gone to a more populous location. Being alone with his thoughts was not helping. What he needed was something to block out those sounds.

He knew he really needed to go see Lois again and explain this time that they were not dating, but he was afraid. His reaction to her was alarming. He felt like he had no control over his actions when she was around.

He knew he needed to talk to Clark some more and settle the problems they were having, but given Clark's anger at him right now — Clark's reasonable anger at him — it did not seem to make sense to even try to see Clark again until he had straightened things out with Lois.

The same was true with the Kents. How could he go see them until he had straightened this mess out? They had

been so kind to him during the time that he had been here, but could he really expect them to understand what he had done now? How could he when he barely understood it himself?

So, after a fitful flight to China in which he dissected each of his options over and over again but accomplished little more than making himself feel sick with anger at himself, he made his way to the Badaling Section of the Wall. It was the shortest distance from Beijing and therefore saw the most tourists. Having changed into some old clothes of Clark's that the Kents had loaned him when he first arrived, he blended in with the other tourists.

The day was over now, though, and tourists had left to head back to Beijing hours ago. He had stayed at the Wall for several hours after the day had ended, but he was getting tired. After two nights without sleep, even he needed some rest. So, the question was where to spend the night?

It was early afternoon in Metropolis now, maybe Clark would be up and about looking into Luthor. Could he sleep in his bed there? While he was not sure, it seemed like a possibility, and making sure that he was indeed alone, he took off.

He was over the Pacific Ocean when the thought occurred to him — Luthor's test of Kryptonite at the bank. It was supposed to be today, this morning. It was unlikely Clark would go since Superman was still supposed to be answering calls in the middle of the day, but he had forgotten, having spent the better part of the early morning in China.

He pushed himself, trying to get to Metropolis faster, although he was not sure why he was rushing. What would Luthor do if he did not show up for the test? In all likelihood, he would stage another test. He would not want to tip his hand by letting Superman know he was might have Kryptonite without making sure he had the genuine article first.

Arriving in Metropolis, he flew directly over Lex Tower. Using his x-ray vision, he saw Luthor in his penthouse office. "Please try to locate Miss Lane, Mrs. Cox," he was asking his assistant.

Not particularly useful, although this meant that perhaps he and Clark should keep a closer eye on Lois. It sounded as if Luthor had not given up yet. He was about to fly home and tell Clark this — whatever their differences, he knew Clark would support him in protecting Lois — when he had another idea.

Was the cage built yet? Using his x-ray vision, he looked at the space between the ceiling of the cellar and the floor of the room above. If he recalled correctly, that was where the cage had come from, but the space was empty now. Everything was probably okay for now, although he needed to stop feeling so sorry for himself and start helping out more here.

Just as a precaution, he gave a quick sweep of the cellar itself. What he saw there made him drop ten feet in the air. Either Clark had shown up at the test this morning, or Luthor had decided to take the risk. It was possible that he was feeling a bit more panicky given Lois' rejection. Regardless, the outcome was the same. Clark was lying on the floor of the cage, looking very weak.

"Where's Clark?" Perry asked as Lois entered his kitchen.

"I don't know," Lois said. "I haven't seen him all day." She sat down quietly. Things were not right today. She could not pinpoint what was wrong, but she had not been able to find Clark all day. Actually, now that she thought about it, she had not seen him since they left here yesterday.

Additionally, Superman still had not come by. Stranger still, she thought she saw him a few times out of the corner of her eye. If she did not know any better, she would think he was following her. Why would he follow her and not come see her, though?

"Are Jimmy and Jack here?" she asked Perry.

"Right here," Jimmy said with a smile. "We hit pay dirt. It turns out John Black'll do just about anything he's paid to do. Just like he did for a Mrs. Cox. He even gave me Mrs. Cox's number."

"Mrs. Cox is Lex's personal assistant," Lois said.

"Bingo!" Jack added with a smile.

"How about you, Jack?" Lois asked as Perry served them each a soda.

"Simon Truesdale suddenly had an attack of conscience," he said.

"Isn't he one of the Planet board members?" Lois asked Perry.

"Yes, he is," Perry said turning to Jack. "What did he say?"

"He's willing to confess to receiving a substantial cash inducement to support the sale of the Planet to Luthor," Jack said.

"How'd you do that?" Lois asked.

"Oh, I'm not sure. But I think it might be related to a certain tape he's hoping his wife doesn't see," Jack said with a smile. "It stars a blonde woman about half his age."

Perry shook his head with laughter. "You don't play fair, son. Lois?"

"I looked into the insurance from Lexel you found, Chief. I'm curious. Just how much would it take to rebuild the Planet building?"

"About thirty million," Perry said. "Why?"

"Because the insurance Lex had through Lexel was for seventy-five million," Lois said with a grimace. "It was all a lie. A way to create a situation where he controlled me."

"Now, don't be so hard on yourself, darlin'. You backed away. Luthor has not won!" Perry said, putting an arm around her shoulder.

"Thanks, Perry," she said softly.

Clark could barely hear the door to the wine cellar when Luthor came in. He was in so much pain, he was starting to wish the Kryptonite would work a little faster. Death would be better than this.

"And how are we feeling today?" Luthor asked somewhere near Clark's left ear. He could not get up enough energy to respond. He heard a small squeaky noise and realized Luthor had let himself into the cage, but Clark was in no position to take advantage of this.

"I'm feeling wonderful," Luthor said. "Do you know what I have planned for this evening?" he asked Clark, then

continued on without waiting for a response, "I am going to visit the lovely Miss Lane. With you out of the way, she may be more amenable to my proposal."

"Never," Clark said as strongly as he could. "Lois will never marry you."

"Strong words from the man on the floor," Lex said, giving Clark a kick in the stomach. "You won't exactly be around to stop it, Superman. Trust me. Lex Luthor always gets what he wants one way or another."

"Now, which one would be better for a visit with Miss Lane?" he asked holding up two ties, "Red for passion or white for purity?"

When Clark did not say anything else, Luthor answered his own question. "I agree. In this position, white is definitely better," he said, draping the red tie around Clark's neck as he leaned down. "Have a nice death," he whispered in his ear.

A moment later, Luthor had locked the cage behind him and left the wine cellar, the key sitting on a wine casket several feet away.

Lois let herself into her apartment, wishing she knew where Clark was. Where had he disappeared to? And what was going on with Superman? Was he avoiding her? Why would he do that?

The knock at her door surprised her and, hoping that it was Clark, she went to open it quickly. She was surprised to see Lex on the other side.

"Lex," she said, trying to keep her voice even. She did not want him to know she was investigating him. The sight of him made her nervous now, given all she knew. How could she ever have thought of spending her life with him?

"Lois," Lex said, his voice warm. "How are you?"

"I'm okay," Lois said. "I didn't expect to see you again. After the way we left things..."

"I'm sorry about that," Lex said, his voice still warm. It was giving Lois the creeps. He really was quite the actor. "I admit, I was surprised by your answer. I'm... I'm not used to people saying no to me," he said, and Lois realized why she had assumed that was the excuse for his behavior in New York — he had given it to her. Was she really that malleable?

"I can be a bit of a spoiled child," Lex said. "I'm sorry. I don't want to lose what we have just because you're not ready to get married yet."

Yet? That was not what she had said. She had given no indication that with time, her answer would change to a yes.

"Lois, you said you still wanted to be friends," Lex said. "Do you?"

Lois looked at him. She was afraid to let him know she was suspicious of him and she was afraid to let him into her apartment. Finally, she decided letting him in was probably safer. Besides, if he actually hurt her, she could call for Superman.

"Of course, Lex," she said with a smile. "Do you want to come in?"

Lex followed her inside. "Coffee?" she asked him.

"No, I can't stay long," he said in an eerie replay of the last time he had come by. "Can I ask you a question?" he asked as he sat on the couch.

Lois moved to the seat across from him before answering, "Of course."

"I'm just wondering... why did you say no? Did it have anything to do with Superman?" he asked.

Lois suddenly felt very cold all over. "No," she said. "I just don't feel like I know you well enough."

"Because, it's not like your crush on Superman is a secret, m'dear," Lex said casually. "But you must know that you can't date Superman. It would be far too dangerous for you."

"It really didn't have anything to do with Superman, Lex. You're right. I had a crush on him at one time. But that's all it was. I'm over it now," Lois said. It was true, sort of. She no longer had a crush on Superman. Her feelings were much stronger than that now.

Lex shook his head before standing up. "Well, I must go," he said, making his own way to the door. Once he reached it, he turned back to Lois, saying, "If you ever change your mind, Lois, please let me know."

Lois nodded her head and sagged in relief when he left.

Clark pulled the tie from around his neck. If he had any super breath left, he could use it... maybe? He was hoping he could use it to capture the key to the cage. If he could just get away from the Kryptonite, he would have some hope. He had no hope of having powers anytime soon, but at least he might live.

He slid forward to be closer to the key and groaned at the intensity of the pain. Being this close to the bars was necessary to get the key, but it was certainly not helping him feel any better.

With shaking hands, he threw the end of the tie out of the cage, trying to get it as straight as possible while he held the other end. He paused for a moment, trying to regain his strength before lifting his head and blowing under the tie, getting it to rise off the ground. It was nowhere high enough off the ground to grasp the key ring, and Clark fell back down.

After resting for another few minutes, he lifted his head up again. This time he lifted the tie up above the key ring. Then weakening his breath, he let the tie fall slightly — right into the key ring, which was hanging off the wine casket.

He rested again before giving a tug on the tie. The key fell with it, clattering to the ground, the sound giving Clark hope. After another rest, he gave another tug, hard again, to get the key as close as possible before the tie fell out of the key ring.

The key landed a few feet beyond the bars of the cage and with a deep breath, Clark reached past the bars to grab it. He screamed in pain as his arm hit the Kryptonite bars and collapsed when he realized it was still out of reach. The tie had fallen out of the key ring and there was no way to get it back in now that the ring was lying flat on the floor.

He slid back to the middle of the cage and lay there for a few minutes to rest. Then standing up slowly, he backed up to the back of the cage and ran forward, screaming and falling to the ground when he made contact with the front bars. He was successful, though. The cage had moved an inch or two closer to the key.

After another brief respite, Clark reached out again and this time, he grasped the key in his hands.

“Superman!” Lois said in surprise as she rounded the corner.

“Hi, Lois,” he said flushing.

“Where have you been?” she asked. “Why haven’t you stopped by?”

“I... um...” Superman stumbled over his words, not knowing what to say.

“Have you seen Clark?” Lois asked.

“What?”

“Clark. We’ve gotten the rest of the evidence. That’s where I was heading, actually. I’m meeting Perry, Jack, and Jimmy at Lex Towers. Henderson said we could come with him when he went to arrest Lex, given all the work we had done. But it was Clark’s research that spurred us on. I hate that he’s missing it, but I haven’t seen him for a couple of days now. I thought maybe you had.”

“I’m sorry. I haven’t,” Superman said softly.

Lois shrugged. “If you see him, you’ll let him know what’s going on, right?”

“Of course, Lois.”

“Okay, well I’d better go. Henderson is unlikely to wait for me,” Lois said, looking around. Then realizing they were all alone in the alleyway, she leaned up on her toes and kissed Superman.

He stood there, frozen to the spot, but as had happened the last two times, his lips responded to hers. He had to stop this.

“Lois,” he pulled away. “We need to talk.”

“Not now, Superman. I really want to see Lex get put away,” Lois said. “But maybe you can come by later?”

Before he had a chance to answer, she had run off.

Lois ran to the front entrance of Lex Tower right before Henderson and crew stepped inside. “Darlin’, I thought you were going to miss it,” Perry said to her.

“Sorry, I got delayed,” she said as they followed the police to the elevator.

“Now, let’s be clear,” Henderson said, turning to look at the Planet crew, but singling out Lois for his lecture. “No speaking. This is a police matter. Your coming with us is highly unusual, and only because you did... well, all the legwork for this case.”

“Understood,” Lois said cheekily, giving Henderson a salute. He rolled his eyes at her as the elevator arrived.

They were greeted by a receptionist outside Lex’s office, just as they had been downstairs. Henderson ignored her, but she called out after them, “You can’t go in there.”

“I think we can,” Henderson said to her, flashing his badge.

“Mrs. Cox?” the receptionist asked, seeing Lex’s assistant in handcuffs in the back of the group. Mrs. Cox stayed silent, a fact that did not surprise Lois a bit.

“I’m sorry, you can’t just barge in here like this,” Lex said as the group entered his office. His eyes focused on Lois. “Lois, what’s going on?”

“I have a warrant here for your arrest,” Henderson said. “For arson, murder, and other crimes too numerous to

mention.”

“Are you insane?” Lex asked him, and Lois saw it again — a brief flash of rage. “There is clearly some mistake. Lois, what is going on here?” Then Lex’s eyes settled on his assistant and realization seemed to dawn. “Et tu, Mrs. Cox?” he asked. As when they were outside, Mrs. Cox chose to remain silent.

“You have the right to remain silent.” Henderson began reading Lex his Miranda rights, and Lois breathed a sigh of relief. She had almost married this man and ruined her life. “You have the right to an attorney,” Henderson continued. “If you cannot afford an attorney...”

“If I can’t afford an attorney? I can afford a thousand attorneys!” Lex interrupted and now the rage was clear. Whatever mask he normally wore to hide this side of himself was gone. “I’ll have your head... badge for this.”

“... one will be provided for you,” Henderson carried on as if Lex had not spoken. “Do you understand these rights?”

“Do I understand them? Of course I understand them, you overpaid monkey!” Lex yelled.

Two of the officers with them moved forward to handcuff Lex, but he backed away. “Lex Luthor will never be kept in a cage!” he announced as he backed onto his balcony. The policemen followed him, but a minute later, Lex climbed onto the railing and jumped.

Three of the officers ran back to the elevator, although they had no hope of using either elevator or stairs to get to the ground floor from ninety-five stories in time to catch Luthor. The rest of the party, including the Planet crew, ran to the balcony.

For a moment, they all watched Lex dropping through the air, although Lois felt a little sick to her stomach watching it. Her feelings towards Lex were not clear cut — she had cared about him, been on the verge of agreeing to marry him three days ago. It was hard to turn those feelings completely off. She recognized that the man she cared for was not real and that the real Lex was a horrible person, but that did not mean she wanted him dead.

Before he hit the ground, though, Superman swooped in and caught him. Even from up on the balcony, Lois could hear Lex’s muttered, “Superman?”

The group went to join the police officers downstairs, getting there as Lex was pushed into a patrol car. Superman was standing around awkwardly, and Lois started to walk over to him but then turned to Perry first.

“I wish Clark was here,” she said. “This was largely his work.”

“I know, darlin’,” Perry said.

He did not know, though, and Lois knew that. She also wanted Clark here as she was feeling sad about Lex and Clark would understand that. He had been gone for so long now that she was really worried about him.

To her surprise, at that moment, Clark came stumbling out of Lex Tower. “Clark!” she called, so happy to see him she did not even notice how awful he looked.

Superman stared after Lois when she ran off. Again he had kissed her. What was wrong with him? He was unable to get the words out, but he really needed to let her know that they were not dating.

Then her words came back to him — she was going to LexTower to watch Luthor’s arrest. Superman had no intention of letting Luthor drop this time. No one knew what had happened to his body until that horrible doctor woman had nursed him back to health. That would not happen here. Since he had never been in the cage, he was perfectly capable of catching Lex himself.

He flew over to LexTower, getting there after Luthor had jumped. He still managed to catch the madman long before he would have touched the ground. It was almost fun doing this — Luthor was surprised, bewildered, and furious that the superhero had caught him. Superman felt no need to let Luthor in on the secret. He was happy to have Luthor think he had escaped the cage and it had had no ill effects on him.

He was about to go inside and assist Clark when Lois walked out the door. Seeing her there made him stop in place. Would he be able to control his behavior around her in public? He was not sure, given his complete inability to do so in private.

He saw her turn towards him, but then change her mind and turn to Perry. “I wish Clark was here,” she said.

Superman started toward her, even knowing it was a bad idea, but then saw Clark stumble out of the building and Lois fall into his arms. Some small part of his mind registered that while he had been kissing Lois, Clark had escaped the cage that was meant for him, but he was distracted. It was hard not to notice that the man Lois had called for here was not him.

Watching Lois in Clark’s arms, Superman wondered what he was still doing here. No one was paying attention to him; he was not needed here. He lifted his arm into the air and took off.

He headed back over to Lois’ apartment with the intention of waiting for her there. He thought he would just get the uncomfortable conversation over with now, but then he pictured her in Clark’s arms.

He could not help it; he was jealous. He did not want to be, he wanted to be happy to see them together. He was clearly not ready to do this. On the chance that the hug with Clark was platonic only and Lois tried to kiss him again, he could not see her now. He was not ready.

“What are we doing here?” Clark asked Lois as he joined her in front of the old Planet building a week later.

“No idea,” Lois said. “Perry just said to meet here at four.”

Clark smiled as he saw Jimmy and Jack run up. “He called you, too?”

“Yeah. What do you think it’s about?” Jimmy asked.

“No idea,” Clark said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Perry,” Lois called as she saw him approach. “What’s this all about?”

“I have a surprise,” Perry said. He motioned to a truck behind him with a large object in the back covered by a tarp. As they watched, the tarp was removed.

“Oh my...” Lois started.

“How did you do this?” Clark asked.

“Well now, son, the Planet is made of more than steel and cement. It’s the people that work there that make the

paper,” Perry said.

“Which is what he told me, and I agreed to buy the paper,” a tall African-American man said from behind Perry. “I’m Frank Stern,” he introduced himself. “And Perry tells me that you are the crew that brought down Lex Luthor. Impressive work. It’s not surprising to me that you’re all Daily Planet alum. I hope you’ll all come back or my investment won’t be nearly as good.”

Stern shook Perry’s hand, “I hope to see an edition of the Planet out by the middle of next week,” he said before walking away.

“We’re back?” Clark asked.

“We’re back.” Perry smiled. “Sorry I didn’t tell you I was working on this. I didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up until we knew for sure.”

“What did Alice say?” Clark asked.

“That she loves me and wants me to be happy,” Perry said. “And that being in Florida without any responsibilities is the most boring thing she’s ever done, and she’ll be home in two days,” he finished with a grin. “So, what do you say? Are you coming back?”

“Coming back?” Lois said. “We never left.”

June 1994

How they had gotten to this point, he was not sure. In that quiet time before he fell asleep each night, he thought of it and it made him feel slightly sick, but in the daylight, he forgot. When she was in his arms, it was hard to think.

It was hard to imagine how this was supposed to go. In the timeline Superman claimed to be so desperately trying to follow, life could not have gone this way. Without a separate Clark Kent from Superman, who did Lois spend time with?

Here, she came over often, much more than ever before. Ever since the Planet had re-opened, she had been over nearly every night — always to see Superman, but Superman’s schedule was unpredictable at best. That was the excuse he was giving Lois, anyway. The truth was that Superman was not sleeping here anymore in an effort to avoid Clark, so he never came home. As a result, often Lois would end up spending the evening with him. How this had developed into spending evenings in his arms while they watched movies, Clark had no idea.

It was wonderful in a way to spend this much time together. He had never felt closer to her. On the other hand, he felt awful. He could not have her this way. They were almost a couple, except that she was in love with someone else.

How could Superman do this to her, lead her on like this? He was more than ready for Superman to go home. He was ready to take over for Superman full time. Maybe it was foolish, but his anger at Superman was giving him courage. He had yet to have a chance to act on this courage, though, as he had yet to see Superman and the superhero still came by to do daytime rescues.

He needed a way to get through to him. To let him know that it was time for him to go home.

“Do you think Superman is avoiding me?” Lois asked Clark as the movie ended. Her voice was quiet, and she

could feel the vibrations of her words moving through his chest where her head rested.

“What?” he asked.

“Do you think he’s avoiding me?” Lois asked. “I haven’t seen him in nearly two weeks now. I’ve tried everything. I spent the first week at home every night in case he stopped by. I’ve spent every night this week here with you, but he never seems to come home.”

She could not figure out why Superman would be avoiding her, but it seemed like he was. She was not sure what to do about it, though.

“I don’t know,” Clark said. “Maybe he’s just busy. I haven’t seen him either.”

Lois sat up to look at Clark closely. “Do you miss him, too?” she asked. Clark and Superman were friends: it would only stand to reason.

Something unreadable crossed Clark’s face, but then he gave a sheepish look. “Actually, yeah, a little bit. I’d like to talk to him.”

“Just a little bit? I thought he was your friend. I would have thought he was your best friend,” Lois said.

“Well, he is my friend. A good friend. You’re my best friend, but you’re right. I am close to Superman, too. But... we had a fight a few weeks ago and we haven’t had a chance to talk since then.”

“What was it about?” Lois asked.

“I’d rather not say,” Clark said.

“Clark! You can’t keep something like that from me!” Lois insisted.

“Oh, I think I can. Another cream soda?” he asked as he got up.

“You are so mean!” she said as she followed him into the kitchen.

“Maybe.” He grinned at her. “But I’d lay off the insults if I were you.”

“Or what?” she asked, her hands on her hips.

“Or I’m going to vote for ‘Terminator’ as the next movie we watch instead of ‘Far and Away’,” Clark teased.

Lois lay in bed thinking. She was becoming more and more convinced that Superman was avoiding her. They were supposed to be dating, but she had only seen him twice since the night he told her he loved her and both of those had been very brief.

What was going on with him? Why would he avoid her?

More confusing was the fact that she was not sure she cared. She had taken to spending evenings with Clark while she waited for Superman, and she had to admit she rarely thought about Superman while she was there.

She wondered if her behavior with Clark was wrong. They had been sort of... well, not sort of, but actually cuddling recently. It had not started on purpose. She had come over to see Superman — she always came over to see Superman. He had been gone, though, as he always was recently. Clark had suggested they watch a movie, and they had sat side by side on the couch to do so.

There was nothing wrong with that, was there? She was allowed to sit on the couch with her best friend, right? She had gotten up to go to the bathroom, though, and when she sat back down, she moved a little closer to Clark. Not a lot

— it was still a perfectly okay place to sit with her best friend. But it was getting chilly and she wanted to get under the blanket Clark kept on the couch and she felt like she should share.

Then she had fallen asleep, though, and had apparently fallen against him. That was okay, right? She could not be blamed for leaning on her best friend when she was asleep, could she? It was not like she was conscious of her behavior.

When she woke up, though... well, it was comfortable there. So she had stayed. That was all right, right? She did not need to move from someplace where she was comfortable?

Maybe, though... maybe she should not have taken to leaning against him every time they watched a movie, though. He was so comfortable, though. Superman would not mind. Besides, she would not be cuddling with Clark if Superman were around. It was his fault for ignoring her!

Was it mean to Clark? Should she not be cuddling with him while she was dating his roommate?

He had seemed to be able to move past his admission of love better than she would have been. She felt closer to him now than she had before the whole Lex thing. He was comfortable and safe and she fit against him perfectly. She wondered if all best friends were like that. Then again, she did not know that many women whose best friends were men.

That was because they did not know Clark, though. There were few men like him. He was sweet and kind, warm and caring. Not to mention that he had a body to die for. Lois sat up in bed. That was no way to be thinking about her best friend.

It was true, though. Whether she thought it or not, she could not honestly say she had not noticed. Not that he could compare with Superman, of course, but...

Actually, maybe he was better, she thought. She could not imagine ever spending an evening snuggled on the couch with Superman watching movies.

Was she in love with Clark? No, that was ridiculous. Why would she be in love with Clark when she had Superman?

“Sally,” Perry called from his office door. “There’s a hostage situation going on at the new mall on Summerside.”

Sally, one of the new members of the city beat, grabbed her bag and ran to the elevator. Clark watched her go and then got up himself. Maybe he had to stop waiting to talk to Superman. Maybe he just had to start getting to rescues before Superman and taking over. This was the perfect opportunity since Lois was not covering this particular rescue.

“Where you going?” Lois asked.

“I just realized I left my coffee pot on this morning,” Clark called as he ran out.

Lois watched Clark run out with interest. She was nearly certain his coffee pot had one of those automatic off functions. What was he up to?

Then she realized. He thought there was something big at the hostage situation and wanted to make sure to get in

on whatever Sally was doing. Well, two could play that game!

She grabbed her coat and followed Sally and Clark.

He had allowed himself to become just what he had always feared. He had no life aside from the superhero. He had had no idea how full his old life in this universe had been. He had not valued the time he spent with Clark and the Kents nearly enough. Maybe not Lois, though. He had let his relationship with Lois get too comfortable, too easy to slip past a reasonable point.

His method of avoiding her now was only going to last so long. At some point, and knowing Lois it was probably sooner rather than later, she was going to need saving. What was he going to do then? She was going to ask him where he had been, why he had been avoiding her, and what was he going to say?

He was behaving no better than Claude. Clark was right — how could he do this to her?

The sounds from the police scanner in the patrol car below him brought him out of his thoughts. There was a hostage situation in that new mall. With a whoosh, he made his way over there.

Just before he landed, though, he saw it — or rather saw him. Clark was already there. This was not Clark's shift. What was he doing? But Superman knew what he was doing. He was making him obsolete so he would go home. Could he go home, though? How was he supposed to go home? When he did, how could he explain his behavior to his wife?

He flew away before someone noticed the presence of a second Superman.

Where the heck was that partner of hers? She had arrived at the crowd outside of the mall quickly and had spotted Sally almost immediately, although she stayed out of sight, lest Sally think she was trying to steal her story. Clark, though, was nowhere to be found. Was it possible that this was not where he went? Did he really have an antique coffee pot? Probably from Timbuktu, knowing Clark.

"Superman!" someone called, and Lois looked up. There he was. Her boyfriend. She had seen him on a couple of rescues before, but he had always avoided her. Maybe this time she would get a chance to talk to him and figure out what was wrong.

"Hey Lois," came the voice near her ear. She turned to face Sally.

"Oh, uh, hi," Lois said, embarrassed at being caught.

"Could you help me?" Sally asked. "I want to get a Superman quote for the story, but he intimidates me. I know he shouldn't, everyone says he's really nice to the press and all, but... I don't know. He's an international hero. But you're really good at talking to him."

"Sure, Sally," Lois smiled at the younger woman. Sally was not angry she was here at all! Sometimes she forgot that not everyone was as competitive as she was. Grabbing Sally's hand, she pulled her towards the front of the crowd.

"Superman!" she called to get his attention. "How many people were held hostage? What was the mood in there?"

Superman turned towards her and for a moment looked frightened, but then his face cleared and he answered her question. "There were probably more than a hundred people in the mall, Ms. Lane, but the hostage situation was just in a small store on the top floor. Only about half a dozen people were in there, but of course they were all frightened."

Lois looked at him quizzically. Something about Superman looked off, although she was not sure what it was. Was there another clone? Now that she thought about it, he did look a bit like the young clone she had seen before both clones died. Although she had not seen the young clone from quite so close before. This one had an eerily familiar look.

He turned his head to answer a question from the WMNR reporter and something about the way he turned his head struck her, too.

"Thanks so much, Lois," Sally said. "I never would have been able to ask that question. I really appreciate the help."

"No problem, Sally," Lois smiled at her, thankful Sally had been there. Lois had not heard Superman's answer at all; she had been so distracted by what he looked like.

Clark walked into the Planet newsroom feeling nervous. Lois had been there. He was not sure why, but she had come. She had seen him as Superman. Did she know? He had trouble imagining that she would have been able to keep the revelation to herself and not yell out, "That man's an imposter!" right during the impromptu press conference, but maybe she had. Maybe she was waiting to get him alone to accuse him of putting on Superman's suit and... What would she think? He had no idea.

He walked by her desk slowly, sure she was going to start screaming at him at any minute, but all she said as he passed her desk was, "Hi, Clark." She seemed engrossed in whatever she was looking at on her desk.

He sat in his own chair intending to get back to the piece he had been writing before the call for help. He was distracted, though. He wondered if Superman had come and seen him. If so, what did Superman think he was doing? Or was he not planning to come to this rescue anyway?

It did not matter. He was going to answer as many calls for help as he could manage from now on. He was going to take over until there was no need for another Superman.

He was past being quite so angry at Superman. He still was angry at him to some degree — how could he have kissed Lois? How could he have kissed Lois more than once? How could he have kissed Lois more than once and then have ignored her like that? How could he have told her he loved her?

On the other hand, Superman's time avoiding Lois as well as him gave him the impression that Superman felt badly for his behavior, even if he was following it up with more bad behavior. He did know that Superman was lonely and missed his wife. Plus, he was not foolish. Superman had been here long enough that he had built a relationship, a real relationship, with Lois. He could see the problem: he could see how Superman could make this disastrous mistake.

That, though, did not change the fact that he was ready

anything harder than being away from Martha for months on end with no contact with her and no way to know when I would see her again.”

“And having someone just like me nearby who was falling all over him would probably only make things worse, not better,” Martha added.

“I’d like to think I would be good about keeping my distance, but I think that is a lot easier said than done. I’m not sure many men would have remained impassive as long as you did, Clark,” Jonathan said.

“You made a mistake,” Martha said. “That doesn’t make you a bad person.”

“Clark hates me,” Superman said quietly, not ready to believe their words.

“Oh, nonsense!” Martha said. “I’ve known that boy since he was in diapers and he barely has the ability to hate anybody. Except maybe Lex Luthor. But not you, Clark. Not you.”

“He’s hurt,” Jonathan said. “And it’s not surprising, is it? I think he thought you were going to sweep in and take Lois from him when you first got here. He’s been waiting for this. And then when you didn’t do it, he started to think you wouldn’t. So this surprised him.”

“And he’s a little upset that you’re ignoring Lois,” Martha added gently. “But he doesn’t hate you. You’re his friend, Clark. Really. He’s closer to you than we’ve ever seen him with anyone besides Lois. He’s just... waiting for you to do the right thing.”

“Talk to Lois,” Superman said and the Kents both nodded in agreement. “But I can’t,” he said. “I’ve tried. Twice now. Both times I haven’t gotten anywhere. She kisses me and I forget who I am.”

“Well, then, drink up,” Martha said, pushing the glass of buttermilk closer to him. “It sounds like you need all the help you can get.”

Lois paced her living room. What did he mean Superman was not who she thought he was? Of course he was. Who else could he be?

Clark was the one who did not know Superman, clearly. Clark thought he could chase Superman away, but he could not. Superman was happy here now. Right? He had her and...

But Clark had not been working to get Superman to leave on his own. Superman was doing something, be it make-up or something else, to make himself look younger. Why was he doing that?

And if he was so happy with Lois, why was he avoiding her?

She sat down heavily on her couch. Was Clark right? Was there something about Superman that she did not know?

Superman flew to Lois’, trying to keep the discussion with the Kents in his head. He needed to keep his distance and let her know they were not dating.

He took a deep breath as her window came into sight.

“Who are you?” she asked before he was even fully inside. Her voice was harsh, but he was surprisingly unharmed by the tone. She was not his Lois. He could see that now.

Suddenly, with an aching clarity, he could tell the small, subtle differences, and with a longing that was nearly palpable, he desperately wanted his Lois, with her heartbeat that was so like this woman’s but not exactly the same. With her short, sexy hair that this woman was not yet sporting, and with his eyes closed, he could see her in a way that he had not been able to do for months.

When he opened his eyes, this Lois was still looking at him coldly. “Who are you?” she asked him again.

Superman took a deep breath. “I can’t answer that for you. I wish I could, but I can’t. You’ll find out someday, and I suspect it will be someday soon.”

Lois regarded him coolly. “Get out,” she said, her voice quiet.

“We need to talk first,” Superman said, and he felt the detachment he had had in the beginning, the detachment he had been missing for weeks. He wanted to laugh with joy, but he was afraid that would not encourage Lois to talk to him. He could not leave yet. He had really messed things up in this universe and he needed to fix them.

“I don’t have anything to say to you,” she said coldly.

“That’s okay. You can just listen to me,” Superman said. Lois glowered at him, but did not say anything.

“First, I want you to know that I do care for you. Very much. But kissing you was a mistake. I should not have done it. Neither should you. You’re in love with someone else.

“Lois, I think you’re scared,” he said before she had a chance to interrupt him. “You considered marrying Luthor not because you loved him, but because you didn’t and that meant he could never hurt you.”

Lois gave a humorless chuckle. “I guess you didn’t read the articles on who he turned out to be.”

Superman gave a small smile, “Yes, but you didn’t know that. You thought he wouldn’t be able to hurt you. And you were interested in me because you think I’m perfect and thus I can’t hurt you either.

“I’m not perfect, Lois. I’d like to be, but I’m not.

“Being in love is a risky thing, Lois. I know you’ve been hurt before, but I think this time things will work out fine if you just give him a chance. I’m not saying that everything will be perfect, but I do think you’ll be making the right decision.”

“So, that’s it?” Lois asked, her voice still cold. “You’re breaking up with me and pushing me towards Clark? I’m not in love with Clark!”

“I never said you were,” Superman pointed out. “I said you were in love with someone else. *You* said it was Clark.”

As he should have expected, Lois was not happy to have him point this out to her. “Clark lied to me. I can’t trust him. And as it turns out, I can’t trust you either. I don’t know what the two of you are doing, but I intend to find out.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know Clark has been taking over your Superman duties, and you’re doing something to look younger so he can do that. I don’t know why you’re trying to leave Metropolis, but I think between that and having a real identity for Superman, this could be Pulitzer news.”

She knew? How had she found out? “You’re not that

type of reporter, Lois,” Superman said. “If you were, my address would have been plastered all over the Planet months ago. You’ll get a Pulitzer one day, but it won’t be for exposing all of Superman’s secrets.”

“Get out!” she said again, and this time, Superman decided to do as she asked.

Superman nodded at her, but before he left, his voice soft, he added, “He needs you, Lois. He has a secret so big it’s destroying him, and he wants to share it with you. Please try to help him.”

“Hi,” he said as he landed softly.

“Hi,” Clark replied. “Lois recognized me. I did a rescue earlier today and she recognized me.”

“I know,” Superman said. “I mean, I didn’t know the details, but I saw her. She told me she knew.”

“Did you two kiss and make up? Or was she not even angry at you, just at me?” Clark asked bitterly.

“I’m so sorry, Clark. I... I lost my head for awhile. No, we didn’t kiss and make up. I told Lois that it was a mistake. For both of us. I’m not in love with her. I admit that I thought I was for a while. I just sort of... well, you don’t want to hear it, but it was a mistake.”

“I do want to hear it,” Clark said, looking at him earnestly. “Please help me to understand.”

Superman smiled. Martha was right; Clark did not hate him. Maybe he could salvage this and they could even be friends. It would be weird to be friends with someone he never saw, but it was far preferable to leaving here still arguing with Clark.

“Okay,” he said sitting down. “I’ve been... feeling homesick. A lot. I didn’t want you to know as I didn’t want you to feel like I was pushing you to let me go home. And I didn’t know that things would come to this.”

“Anyway, I started spending more and more time thinking about my life in my universe, trying to remember what it was like. But I couldn’t remember. More and more of my memories were hazy rather than clear. Most particularly memories of Lois. It started with memories where she just looked weird. The rest of the memory was okay, but she looked like this Lois. She had her hair — you may remember that my wife has short hair — or something like that. Then her heartbeat was different. Your Lois and my Lois have slightly different heartbeats, and the Lois in my memories started having the heartbeat of your Lois.

“Then, though, things got worse. Lois started acting weird in my memories. They weren’t really memories at all — they were more like bizarre daydreams. They’d start off with something from my old life, but then Lois would be this Lois. Like I had a memory of Lois getting pregnant with Emily where I admitted that I had never really thought I could have children.

“Now that I remember better, my Lois was very caring and felt badly that I had had all these doubts. In my memory, though, she pegged me with questions about my Kryptonian heritage.”

Clark smiled. “That sounds like Lois.”

“Yeah,” Superman smiled, too. “Anyway, I don’t know — I guess when Lois told me she was in love with me, it felt too hard to do what I was supposed to do. And it felt so

easy to kiss her. I know it was wrong; I knew it then. But it all felt so overwhelming.

“And the other times, Clark, I really intended to let her know we couldn’t be together, but I... I still felt this huge aching hole in my chest, and being with Lois soothed that slightly. I still thought I was in love with her. So, when she kissed me, I wanted to tell her no, but again, it was just too hard.”

Clark nodded and Superman prayed that this was working. Clark understood what he had been going through and would forgive him.

“Clark, you need to know,” he continued, “I never intended to hurt you. I feel so awful about what this must have been like for you and for Lois. I know I hurt you both, and I’m so sorry. If I could do anything to make it up to you... ”

“You’ve spent nine months taking care of calls for help so I could get up the nerve to do so myself. You don’t owe me anything,” Clark said.

“I don’t deserve for you to understand and forgive me,” Superman said softly. “I know that. It’s something I want more than anything, though. I’ve never had a close male friend before — someone like you who is really just a friend.

“I won’t lie — I’ve spent a lot of the time I’ve been here focusing on the bad parts, and how much I miss my wife and kids, but... I realize now, that when I leave here, I’m going to miss you. Your friendship has meant so much to me.”

“Me, too,” Clark admitted as he stood up and moved over to give Superman a hug.

“Thank you,” Superman said softly.

“Thank *you*,” Clark said. “Really. Having you here really did help. I think I’m ready now. I mean, at first it was just because I was angry and wanted you to leave, but that’s not the case now. I think I really am ready.”

“What are you going to tell Lois?” Superman asked.

Clark shrugged. “The truth, I guess. She’s already guessed most of it.”

“Speak of the devil,” Superman said, and Clark followed his gaze to the door. Using his vision to look through it, he saw Lois approaching.

“Is she here for you?” Clark asked.

“I doubt it. She kicked me out of her place before. She’s probably here for you,” Superman said. “I’ll go out and do a patrol while you talk.”

“Thanks,” Clark said as he made his way towards the door.

“So, who is he?” she asked as she walked past him into the apartment. Clark stared at her blankly, so she clarified. “You said he was not who he was pretending to be, so who is he?”

There was a pause and then, in a voice so soft Lois was not sure she had not imagined it, he said, “He’s me.”

“What?” That did not make any sense. How could Superman be Clark Kent? She had seen them together. Superman looked different than Clark. Well, they looked amazingly alike, but not exactly the same. It just did not make any sense.

“Sort of. Could you sit down? It’s a long story and the two aliens from another planet is only part of the weirdness,” Clark said.

She wanted to tell him to just tell her what was going on. She was so angry at him for lying to her, but looking at him she could not do that. He looked so sad, so pained. With a sigh, she sat on the couch. “Okay, I’m listening,” she said.

“Superman is me. Really. Sort of,” Clark said.

Lois nodded, waiting for this to make sense.

“Okay, maybe we should start with Superman’s history. He was born on the planet Krypton and his parents sent him to Earth on a ship because Krypton was exploding. He landed in a field in Smallville, Kansas, and was found and then raised by Martha and Jonathan Kent.”

Lois could actually feel her eyes get wide. Were they brothers?

“The Kents named him Clark Kent, and as he grew, he discovered he had some strange abilities,” Clark continued.

“After college, he decided he wanted to see the world, but the more he was out in it, the more he realized there was a need for the type of help he could provide. One day, he got sick of moving around and hiding who he was. So, he moved to Metropolis and got a staff job at the Daily Planet.”

“What?” Lois interrupted. When had Superman had a job at the Daily Planet?

“I know. Just hear me out,” Clark said. “He was there for a few days before his partner, Lois Lane, suggested that he bring a change of clothes to work.”

“You’re telling me that I was Superman’s partner,” Lois said disbelievingly.

“Not quite,” Clark replied before continuing as if she had not interrupted. “The idea of bringing a change of clothes to work brought Clark to the idea of a costume, and one day about a week after his arrival in Metropolis, he flew in and saved a space station and Superman was born.”

At least this was a part of the story Lois could understand. Still, she did not understand where he was going with this.

“Then one day, about a year after he was in Metropolis...”

“Superman’s been in Metropolis for more than a year?” Lois asked confused.

“Yes. Just let me explain,” Clark said, giving a small smile at her prodding. “About a year after he was in Metropolis, Superman discovered that H.G. Wells had actually built a time machine. He’s flown in it.”

Suddenly, Lois started to understand. “He’s future you?”

“Not quite. Wait? You’re okay with this?”

“What? That there are time machines? I’ve kissed a man who can fly,” Lois said. “Actually, I’ve kissed two men who can fly. Time travel doesn’t seem so surprising compared to that.”

“Right,” Clark said, amazed, “So, it also turns out that the time machine can be used to move between universes. There are lots of parallel universes where things are similar, but different. Superman is from a different universe. He was sent here to help me.”

“Help you with what?” Lois asked.

Clark took a deep breath. “Let’s jump to my history for a moment. Like Superman, I was born on Krypton and raised by Martha and Jonathan Kent in Smallville, Kansas. But unlike Superman, when I started to fly, I decided to start helping people.

“I was stupid about it, but I started doing something like what Superman does now, only I didn’t wear a costume.” He stopped to take a deep breath. “When I was in high school, I was coming back from a trip in Europe when I passed a boy about my age falling off a rock in Quincy Quarry near Boston. I flew down and saved him.”

“Chad?” Lois asked, her voice very soft.

Clark nodded. “Superman’s Lois also dated Chad. But her Chad died during the rock climbing trip because Superman was not doing rescues yet.”

Lois nodded. This was a lot to take in. “So what happened?” she asked.

“I kept helping, but one day I was caught on tape. It was foolish, and my parents kept telling me not to do it, but I thought I knew better. I thought nothing could hurt me.”

“But something can. Kryptonite,” Lois supplied.

“Well, yes, but I didn’t know that until Trask found it a few months ago. But there are other things that can hurt me. The guys who found me, I think they were predecessors of Bureau 39. They wanted to run tests on me, see what I could do, make sure they could control me.”

Lois gasped and unconsciously she reached out for Clark’s hand.

“To make sure I cooperated, they kidnapped my father,” Clark said, his voice soft. “They beat him up pretty bad. But they didn’t have Kryptonite, so I could save him. In doing so, though, I caused a fire and they died.”

“Oh, Clark,” Lois said, unconsciously moving closer to him on the couch.

“I was so afraid of helping after that. I traveled after college, too, but I was so afraid of being recognized. I moved all the time, even more than Superman did. Every time I did anything super, I moved so I couldn’t be recognized. No one could trace Clark Kent to what happened, and thus Martha and Jonathan Kent would be safe.

“And I planned to do the same thing in Metropolis...”

“Thus the request for freelance work,” Lois breathed. “And I was so awful to you...”

“You weren’t awful, and you didn’t know. Anyway, I... well, I fell in love with you almost as soon as I met you, and I decided I wanted to stay. So, I just wasn’t going to help. I was just going to be Clark Kent, farm boy from Kansas.

“I was afraid, though. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to keep to that. But then right as I was accepting a full time job offer from Perry, Superman showed up.”

“So you could be Clark Kent full time,” Lois said as realization dawned.

“Yes. But he can’t stay here indefinitely.”

“He has a life somewhere else,” Lois realized. “Oh my... Does he have a girlfriend?”

“He has a wife,” Clark said gently. “Her name is Lois Lane.”

“He...” Lois could not finish her thought.

"I know it's all very surreal. But it's true. I met her once. He's married to the Lois Lane in his universe and they have two children. He didn't mean to hurt you, Lois. He just... he was homesick. He's only seen his wife once since he got here, and you are so much like her..."

Lois smiled. "So, we made the same mistake."

"What?" Clark asked.

"Superman thought he had fallen for me because I reminded him of his wife, and I thought I had fallen in love with him, because..." She could not really say it out loud, could she? She had to, though. Clark had given her everything he could. She had to go the rest of the way. "Because he reminded me of you."

"What?" Clark asked, clearly shocked. "But... but I thought..."

"He was right. He said I'm afraid of falling in love with you. Because of what happened in my past. And it's true. I've had lousy luck with men — both awful guys like Claude and Lex and nice guys like Chad.

"Thinking I was in love with Superman was safer than admitting that I was in love with you. I thought he couldn't make any mistakes, and then he couldn't hurt me. And he was Superman, so he'd never die and leave me alone.

"But Superman said that I should be willing to take the risk with you, and if he's married to his Lois Lane, then maybe he knows what he's talking about."

"Do you mean it?" Clark asked, and Lois could see he still did not believe her.

She moved closer to place both her hands in his. "I love you, Clark Kent, and not Clark, the reporter, but Clark the good, kind man who is my best friend and closest confidante. If you were a superhero, flying around in tights to save people, living a super-powered life, I would love you just the same. Can't you believe that?"

He looked at her with wide eyes for a few minutes before asking, "You're not angry? About lying to you?"

"You are clearly scared of your own shadow," Lois teased. "We'll need to work on that. But no, I'm not. I won't tolerate it any more. I mean that, Clark. From this moment on, I expect you to be one hundred percent honest with me. But I'm ready to move forward."

Clark looked at her like he still did not believe her, so she moved forward until her lips had nearly touched his. She could not do it. It was too hard to kiss him. What if she was misreading the signs and he did not want to kiss her?

He moved forward the smallest amount and their lips touched. It was incredible. Lois smiled against his lips. Kissing Clark was better than kissing Superman. She felt connected to him in a way she never had with Superman.

She closed her eyes and lost herself in the kiss. They were finished talking. Talking was overrated.

Superman flew slowly over Metropolis. He wondered if this was going to be his last patrol here. He had no idea how he was supposed to contact Herb to go home. He had expected Herb to just show up, but he was no longer sure that was the case. He had also expected that Herb would come by if he went way off track. That had been proven wrong by Herb's not showing up the first time he kissed Lois.

Wait. There was someone on the roof of the Daily Planet building. What were they doing? Actually, there was more than one person. He swooped down closer. Was it real? Was he imagining things?

"Lois?" he asked as he landed. She nearly flew into his arms and he held her more tightly than he had ever done before. Then he pulled her away from him and pushed her to arm's length so he could look at her. He took in her short hair and slightly fuller breasts, and, most of all, the wide smile on her face. "You are so beautiful," he whispered.

He nodded to Herb and the small man came over. "I'll give you some time to get reacquainted with Lois and say your goodbyes here. Fly back here when you're ready to leave and I'll take you home."

"I'm really going home?" he asked.

"Yes. You did excellent work, Clark. The Guardians are very pleased," Herb said before walking to the other end of the roof and disappearing.

"I can't believe I'm going home," he said to Lois. "I'm never letting go of you again."

"So, you missed me," she teased him. "How long have you been here? Herb wouldn't tell me anything more than that it had been a long time for you since we last saw each other."

Superman sighed. "It's been about nine or ten months. Luthor's capture was nearly a month ago now."

"Oh, Clark," Lois said. "You must have been so lonely." She put her arms around him, but he moved away.

"We should talk. You may not want to hold me when I've told you what happened here," Superman said, his voice soft.

"What are you talking about, honey?" Lois asked quietly, taking his hand in hers.

"I... I missed you so much, Lois," he said. "So much. But I started to forget you. Not that I forgot you existed or anything like that, but I couldn't picture you in my mind."

"Oh, Clark," Lois said, moving to embrace him, but he shook her off.

"You don't understand!" he said. "You shouldn't feel badly for me. I... I cheated on you, Lois. Okay? I'm so sorry and I don't know what I was thinking, but I..."

"Clark!" Lois said firmly. "Calm down, and tell me what happened. Really tell me. Stop making it out to be something awful. Let me decide."

"You know how when you were considering marrying Luthor you asked Clark to see Superman?" he said, tears streaming down his face. He could not recall the last time he had cried this much, but... what if she did not forgive him? What if he had lost everything in his own universe because of his behavior here?

Lois nodded. "I was stupid and thought I was in love with Superman and made that silly comment about loving you if you were an ordinary man. Did the Lois here do that, too?"

Superman shook his head. "No, she didn't have a chance. I don't know what came over me, Lois, but she told me she loved me and I... I told her I loved her, too. I kissed her, Lois. Not just that time, but twice after that, too. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't..."

"Stop it!" Lois nearly shouted at him. "What is wrong

with you? I told you that I knew how hard this was going to be. I told you I almost kissed the other Clark, and I was with him for a week at most. You were here for months and at the very end you got confused and you think I'm going to throw away thirteen years of marriage for that? Get over yourself, Clark. You're no better than the rest of us. You make mistakes, too."

Superman laughed through his tears. "Are you really more upset that I'm upset than that I kissed her?"

"That you kissed who? Me essentially? Yes. Did I want you to kiss her? No, of course not. But did I expect you, too? Yeah, I sort of did. I know you, Clark. You are a lunkhead with a soft spot for Lois Lane. It's one of the reasons I love you so much."

"I don't deserve you," Superman said as he took his wife into his arms.

"Of course you don't," she smiled at him. "Now kiss me, Lunkhead."

"Well, it looks like you got a taste of kissing Clark Kent and can't stop," Lois said as her husband let her down.

For a moment the couple on the couch did not stir, but then Clark pulled away. "Lois," he said.

"Hmmm?" the woman on his lap replied. "I thought I told you. Less talking, more..."

"Not you," he laughed. "Her."

Lois turned around. "Oh," she said. "You're her. You're... well, Superman's wife."

"And you're... well, Lois Lane," Lois said with a smile.

Lois stood up and moved over to her doppelganger, walking around her. She nearly bumped into Superman in doing so and stopped. "Oh," she said. "Um... Clark explained everything to me. Everything. I understand."

"I'm glad," Superman said. "I meant what I said. I do care about you."

"But I'm not her," Lois said with a smile, gesturing to Superman's wife. "And you're not him," she gestured to Clark. "I completely understand."

"I'm glad," Superman said. "Really."

"So... um... when did you cut your hair?" Lois asked Lois.

Superman's wife ran her fingers through her hair self consciously. "I was a few years older than you. I've grown it back a few times, but Clark prefers it like this."

"You do?" Lois asked, turning to face Clark.

Clark laughed. "I think she means her husband."

"Oh, right. I forgot your name is Clark, too." Lois laughed. Then she turned to Clark. "Do you like it better short?"

Clark moved behind her to bury his face in her hair. "No, I like it like this. But you'd look beautiful however you wore it." Then picking his head up, he asked. "Does this mean you're heading home?" he asked Superman.

"Soon," Superman said.

"Wait a second!" Lois interrupted. Looking at Superman she said, "When we talked earlier today, you said I was going to win a Pulitzer. Am I really?"

Superman's wife laughed and Lois turned to her. "Did you? Win a Pulitzer?"

"I did. And I'm guessing our lives are pretty similar.

Well, except that I wasted another year not being with Clark."

"And," Lois said softly, "your Chad died sooner than mine."

"What?" Lois asked. "Who?"

"Chad," Lois said. "Your high school boyfriend."

"Oh, right. I forgot about him. We only dated for a few weeks before that rock climbing accident," Lois said.

"Clark saved Chad during that accident and he lived," Superman told his wife.

"Oh," Lois said in surprise. "Did you two..."

"We were pretty serious," Lois said. "But he died a few years later. We were freshmen in college."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Superman's wife said. "That must have been so hard for you. I was sad when Chad died, but we weren't that serious. He wasn't..."

"It doesn't matter," Lois interrupted. "That's all behind me now. Wait. Did you say that you wasted another year not being with Clark?"

"Well, it's a long story, but yes," Superman's wife said.

"Did you know? That he was Superman, I mean?"

Lois laughed. "That's a dangerous question to ask. It's a bit of a sore spot. No, I didn't know."

"You didn't tell her?" Lois asked Superman.

Superman flushed slightly. "As you've probably figured out, the whole 'I'm an alien from another planet and I moonlight in tights' thing is a bit hard for Clark Kent to admit to. Apparently, for many Clark Kents."

"But she's your wife!" Lois insisted.

"Lois," Clark said softly. "She wasn't his wife yet and I think..."

"Right," Lois cut in, blushing. "Sorry. You did say this was a sore spot, so I should have just dropped it. It's just... sometimes I forget not to be a reporter."

"I think I can understand that." Superman's wife smiled.

"So," Lois said in an effort to change the conversation, "Clark says you two have children."

"Oh, yes," Superman's wife's face lit up. "Would you like to see pictures?"

"Can we?" Clark asked moving to stand by Lois' side.

"This is Emily and this is Jory," Lois said, showing the pictures in her wallet. "Emily is twelve and Jory is eight."

"They're beautiful," Clark said.

"They really are," Lois agreed.

"Clark," Superman interrupted. "I was going to take Lois to see your parents before we go. If you want to come with us..."

"Do you?" Clark asked Lois. "Mom would love to see you."

"Are you going to take me flying?" she asked. "I've never flown with you, have I?"

"No, you haven't," Clark smiled back at her.

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" She jumped up, knowing he would catch her.

"It's so nice to meet you," Martha said as she handed Superman's wife a cup of coffee.

"Clark tells me you've been wonderful to him while he's been here," Lois said.

"It's been our pleasure," Martha said including

Superman in her comment. “You probably don’t need us to tell you that your husband is a special man.”

“And he missed you terribly,” Jonathan said with a smile.

“I know,” Lois said, taking her husband’s hand in hers. “This was a lot easier for me. Herb came to get me for this trip about four minutes after he left and I had come for a visit just a minute ago.”

“This is so weird,” Lois whispered to Clark. “Did you get used to this living with him?”

Clark smiled. “It did take a little bit of getting used to. It was weird how he always knew what was going to happen beforehand, though.”

“Things in their universe were that similar?” Lois asked.

“Very similar,” Superman answered her. It was different being around Lois with his wife right here. Somehow it made her feel more like a little sister or something. He still cared about her, but there was no danger of his doing something stupid.

“Did you also consider marrying Lex?” Lois asked Superman’s wife.

“Consider it?” Lois laughed. “Goodness, that was one of the worst parts of my life. I almost married him. Didn’t back out until I was at the head of the aisle.” She paused, “I guess that didn’t happen here. Since Superman...”

“Right,” Lois said blushing. “So things were different for you.”

“Yeah, Perry, Jimmy, and Jack stormed into my wedding and Henderson arrested him. It was crazy. But I’m sure it was here, too, with Lex jumping off the balcony and the cage and all,” Superman’s wife said.

“What cage?” Lois asked.

There was silence around the room before Superman spoke. “Luthor wanted to kill Superman. In our universe it was just for sport, but here he was fueled on by jealousy as well. So he built a cage and lined the bars with Kryptonite.”

“But wouldn’t that kill you?” Lois asked.

“He escaped,” his wife said. “Just before Lex jumped.”

“But... I’m confused,” Lois said. “I saw you just before that. You were fine.”

“I didn’t go in this universe,” Superman said quietly, and both Loises looked at him in surprise.

“You didn’t?” his wife asked.

“I... I went in his place,” Clark said.

“You were in a cage?” Lois turned to him, her eyes wide. “Lex put you in a cage?”

“I’m fine, Lois,” he said softly.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “You’re really going to be okay?”

“I’m sure,” he insisted. “That was weeks ago and as you’ve clearly witnessed today, my powers are back.”

“Well, we should probably go,” Superman’s wife stood up.

Superman followed more reluctantly, but he knew she was right. He watched his wife hug these people goodbye, but she barely knew them. This was much easier for her.

Martha came to him while he stood there watching. “We’re going to miss you. You’ve been a wonderful addition to our family,” she said, tears falling down her cheeks.

“Thank you,” Superman said, whispering into her hair. “I’ve felt so at home here. You and Jonathan have really helped me feel so much less lonely. You can’t know how much I’ve appreciated that.”

“Clark,” Clark interrupted. “I know you need to go, but maybe... well, maybe one more game of basketball before you go?”

“Basketball?” Lois asked.

“Oh, you have to stay,” Martha said.

“I promise you ladies, you’ve never seen anything like this,” Jonathan added.

The group moved outside and within minutes the two Kryptonians were shooting across the field, basketballs falling left and right.

“Incredible,” Lois muttered and her doppelganger laughed.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Clark have so much fun,” Superman’s wife said.

Lois stole another look at Superman’s wife. They did look a lot alike. She was torn between wanting to speed up to the place where she and Clark were like the other Clark and Lois and wanting to slow down.

This morning, she had been ready to tell the world all about what Superman and Clark were doing. Then she found out what it was they were doing, and that anger had all melted away. She was not even sure why. Clark had lied to her and she was okay with that?

She was, though, and she knew it. It was weird, but she sort of understood it. What was it that she had told Perry when he asked if she never lied to Clark? Something about it being different?

She had thought it *was* different — partly because Clark grew up in Smallville, but more than that because she had a bad history with men. Clark should have been more honest with her because she had been lied to in the past. Now she realized how selfish that was. She had decided that because she knew her own history and not Clark’s, that she had had a harder life than he had.

If she had known at the time about what had happened when he was a teenager... Clark had saved Chad. How weird was that! She wondered for a moment — what if Clark’s rescues had never been caught, so he had kept doing them and he had somehow managed to save Chad again during the car accident? She and Chad would have lived together during college and... What would have happened? They would have gotten married, probably. But what about her and Clark?

Would they have ever met? Maybe Clark would never have settled in Metropolis if that was the case? If he did, though, what would have happened to her? This morning, the answer to that would have been clear. She and Chad would have been married and she and Clark would have been best friends.

Now she knew better, though. She and Clark were best friends, but that was not all they were. She glanced down again and saw the wedding band on the other Lois’ finger. She was destined to marry Clark Kent, the Hack from Nowheresville.

She watched as Clark swooped down from far above to drop a basketball through the hoop. That realization was not

nearly as scary as she would have thought it would be.

She stole another glance at Lois. Could she ask her a couple of questions? Was that allowed? There was so much she wanted to know. How long had it taken her to forgive Superman for not telling her who he was? Had Lois forgiven him as quickly as she had forgiven Clark? How long were they engaged for? How had they decided they wanted to have children? She had never wanted them herself, but this Lois seemed happy enough and her children were beautiful. Did they have super powers? How did Lois, without powers, discipline super-children?

She took a deep breath, “Lois,” she asked, and the older woman turned to her smiling. She was so friendly. How could Lois not hate her for what had happened between her and her husband? “I’m sorry for... well, I’m just sorry. I didn’t know he was married and...”

Superman’s wife put a hand on Lois’ arm. “It’s all right. Really. I should thank you. You could never have understood before now how hard being here was on Clark. I really appreciate that you were kind enough to him that he was able to feel that at home here. That he was able to forge a relationship with you where he cared that much.”

“How can you just forgive him like that?” Lois asked.

Superman’s wife laughed. “It takes years of being married to him to learn this fully, but one thing you need to learn about Clark Kent — he may be Superman, but that doesn’t mean he’s not an idiot. He screws up. A lot. And when you have the responsibilities he has, sometimes it’s easy for those screw ups to be big.

“Of course I didn’t want him to kiss you, but I know him, so it doesn’t surprise me. When I was where you are... I thought love was supposed to be easy, and if you were in love it meant that you couldn’t get hurt. I know better now. It takes work and a lot of forgiveness.

“I won’t lie. That was a hard thing for me to learn, but over time I realized it was worth it. I had two choices — I could learn to forgive Clark when he screwed up or I could learn to live without him. As hard as learning to forgive was, I think it was infinitely easier than learning to live without him would be.

“Besides, I’d rather forgive someone like Clark who means well and feels horrible when he does something wrong than someone like Lex — where I barely understood at the time all the things he was doing wrong and he felt no remorse for it. That’s the key, I think. Remembering that no matter what he does, Clark is not Lex or Claude. Even when he hurts me, he doesn’t mean to.”

“That’s it?” Lois asked with a smile. “The secret to a happy life with Clark Kent?”

“Something like that,” Lois said, smiling in reply.

“That’s not to say I never get angry at him or that I always forgive him immediately. I’m way too stubborn for that. But I do try to remember even when I’m really angry at him that life with Clark is easier, more rewarding, and more fun than life would be with someone else. Not that it’s always easy to remember, but it makes me want to work through our problems rather than leave.

“And really, as husbands go, he’s pretty good. He doesn’t screw up too much.”

“What was that, honey?” Superman asked with a kiss as

he passed by on the way to shoot another basket.

“I was just saying I thought I’d keep you,” she called after him, and his laugh floated down to them.

Lois watched in amazement how comfortable they were with each other. Even though she was already more comfortable with Clark than she had been with anyone else, it was hard to imagine being that comfortable with each other.

She was about to ask Lois more questions when Superman and Clark stopped their game.

“I’m going to miss that,” Clark said.

“Me, too,” Superman agreed.

“Who won?” his wife asked.

“No one,” Clark said. “We weren’t playing to win. We were just playing to... play.”

Lois looked at Superman’s wife and they both rolled their eyes.

“What’s the point of playing then?” Lois asked her husband, voicing both Lois’ thoughts.

“I love you, you competitive freak,” Superman said to his wife as he wrapped his arms around her.

Lois watched their interaction and realized she did not have any more questions for the other Lois. She did not need to know everything. It might be fun to find out on her own. Well, not completely on her own. She would be with Clark.

“Are you ready?” Superman asked his wife.

“I think so. The question is, are you ready?” she answered him.

Superman moved over to hug Martha again before saying good bye to Jonathan. “Thank you for being so understanding.”

“Thank *you*. You know how I feel about my son. You being here really helped him,” Jonathan said.

Superman moved over to Lois. “I... I really am sorry for all that happened between us, Lois. You mean a lot to me.”

“I’m not,” Lois said, leaning forward to engulf him in a hug. “Sorry I mean. Without it, I’d never have admitted how I felt about Clark. Thank you.”

Superman and Lois broke their embrace, and Superman turned to Clark. “I don’t know if we’ll ever see each other again,” Superman said quietly.

Clark said nothing for a moment, but then moved to engulf Superman, hugging him tightly. “Thank you for everything you gave up for me. I... I can never repay you for that. And for being my friend. I’ve... never had a friend like you before. I’m going to miss you.”

“I know what you mean. I’ve never had a close male friend either, aside from Jimmy and Perry...”

“And that’s not the same,” Clark said.

“Not by a long shot,” Superman said. “I’m glad I came, Clark. Really. Getting to know you was worth it.”

The two men hugged once more, before Superman took his wife in his arms and flew off.

“I can’t believe...” Clark said, but he could not finish his thought.

“You’ve been blessed,” Martha said.

“First with Superman and now with Lois,” Jonathan added with a smile.

The three Kents hugged and Martha snaked an arm out to include Lois.

“Well, we should probably head back, too,” Clark said.

“But you’ll come by this weekend for dinner, right?” Martha asked.

“Of course,” Lois said, surprised at how easily she seemed to have slipped into the Kent family.

“Good night,” Clark said, hugging each of his parents and she followed suit. Then Clark leaned over to pick her up.

“Ready?” he asked her.

“To go with you?” Lois asked. “Anytime, anywhere.”

THE END