

The Cold Shoulder

By Terry Leatherwood [t_leatherwood@peoplepc.com]

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Summary: In the episode "And The Answer Is," Lois survives being frozen by Superman with no lasting ill effects. In this alternate ending story, she experiences some severe side effects ... effects which change her relationship with Clark forever.

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When Lois came up with the plan to be frozen to save Clark's parents from Jason Mazik in the episode "And The Answer Is," Clark revived her with no lasting after-effects. In the story "She's" by this author, Lois also recorded a videotape at her attorney's office in which she took full responsibility for any negative outcome of this strategy. She included this statement on the tape.

Lois resumed her rambling narrative. "Anyway, whoever's here from the police department and the DA's office needs to hear this next part. Superman did not come up with this idea on his own. Right now ... at least, right now while I'm taping this ... he doesn't know any more than anyone else what I'm going to ask him to do. And I know the danger." She stopped and shuddered. "I know ... there's a chance he won't be able to revive me. And even if he does, there's a chance I'll have some kind of brain damage or be crippled or ... or somehow be changed mentally so that I won't be this Lois any more."

In the episode "And The Answer Is," Superman tried to dissuade Lois from her freezing scheme.

"Lois, do you have any idea how dangerous that is? There could be arterial ruptures, permanent brain damage... you could die."

In "She's," Lois didn't survive the freezing process. In this story, she does survive ... but at a cost.

Chapter One

The warm late spring night contributed to the relaxed atmosphere of the Metropolis Press Club Awards banquet. Clark stood and applauded with everyone else in the auditorium as Lois, wearing a sky-blue formal strapless gown with billowing floor-length skirt and peek-a-boo leg slits up to her hips, approached the dais. It was her second Kerth of the night, and he wondered if she'd prepared another spontaneous speech similar to her first one.

Perry nudged his elbow as they sat down. "You have to admit it, that woman knows how to make her words sing, whether it's a juicy sex scandal or a military rescue operation."

Clark nodded without taking his eyes from her. "I've never denied it, Chief. She's an outstanding writer."

"She is that." Perry leaned closer. "This isn't public knowledge yet, but that series she wrote on gangs in the Metropolis public high schools is up for a Pulitzer."

This time Clark did look at his boss. "Does she know that?"

Perry grinned one-sidedly. "She's not supposed to, but I'd bet dimes to dollars that she does. There's not much in this city she doesn't have covered."

True, Clark thought. She has spies and snitches everywhere. Then he sat down with the rest of the crowd and settled back to listen to another acceptance speech.

"Wow!" Lois gushed. "Getting one Kerth is such a great honor, but twice in one night!" She stopped and fanned herself, then her voice dropped a register and she wiggled her eyebrows. "I'm so very ... excited!"

The crowd chortled at the double entendre. Lois let the laughter settle before she continued. "I'd like to thank the Kerth committee for this award. And I'd like to thank the former governor's wife and her ex-boyfriend for making the story that won it possible!"

Laughter and applause broke out all over the building.

Except at the Daily Planet's table. Clark, Perry, Alice, Jimmy, and Lucy all applauded, but without much enthusiasm, and none of them laughed.

It was less than a year ago, Clark mused. She had begged Superman to put her life on the line for Clark's parents, to save them from Jason Mazik and Nigel St. John, to use her as a decoy, and now ...

She's come so far so fast, he thought with a twinge, she's done so much, and it's all because of me.

Me and Superman, anyway, he mentally amended.

He sighed as he remembered that terrifying afternoon almost a year ago ...

Nigel St. John was dead, poisoned by his partner in crime. Jason Mazik was gone, but it was no secret where he was. The Kryptonite was too far away to affect him. His parents were safe. Everything should have been fine.

But Lois wasn't moving, wasn't breathing, wasn't coming back to him.

Superman begged Lois to breathe again, he warmed her with his heat vision, he rubbed her arms and legs, he forced air into her lungs, he massaged her heart, but she didn't respond. He dropped his head in despair, fearing that he'd killed the woman he loved, and knowing that his own life might as well be over if she were dead.

Her skin was blue, almost translucent. He held her shoulders. They were so cold, so very cold.

He thought his own heart would stop.

Then she coughed. His head snapped up and he called her name. "Lois!"

Her eyes opened to slits. "Su ... Superman?"

"Yes! Yes, Lois, it's me."

"Wh ... what happened?"

"It worked. It worked just like you said it would."

"What ... "She took in a deeper breath and coughed harder.

"Lois, I'm going to take you to a hospital. I think a doctor needs to look at you."

She waved her arms in feeble protest as he lifted her, but she didn't say anything else. She couldn't. Her respiratory distress was too great.

He knew he was pushing the limits of safety as he rocketed around street corners and zoomed past astonished pedestrians, but the flight to the emergency room still seemed to take forever. He landed as gently as he could, given his velocity and total mass, and strode into the Metropolis General ER as if invading the place.

"Doctor! I need a doctor here right now!"

A slender young black woman sporting green scrubs and a stethoscope hanging around her neck grabbed his elbow. "Hey, pal, no more fraternity initiations here, okay? The last one ..."

He lifted nearly two feet off the floor and stared down at her. "I am the real Superman. This woman needs emergency medical help. Are you going to provide it or do I get angry?"

The woman gulped and stumbled back a step, then collected

her senses. "Come with me." Trusting that he would follow her, she turned and shouted, "Trauma victim in treatment two!" As she hurried down the hallway, she asked, "Superman, what happened to her?"

He laid Lois down on the bed in the trauma room. "Extreme hypothermia."

"How long was she unconscious?"

"At least twenty minutes."

"What's her name?"

"Lois Lane. She's a reporter for the Daily Planet."

The doctor smiled quickly. "I've read her work. She gets in trouble a lot, doesn't she?"

"Yes."

His clipped tone drew the doctor's gaze. "You said extreme hypothermia?"

"I did."

"How severe?"

Lois' words haunted him. "Like being dropped into a frozen lake."

The doctor touched the patient's dry clothing and blinked, then returned to business as a nurse hooked up various monitors to Lois' body. "Has she spoken?"

"She coughs hard every time she tries."

Lois chose that moment to try to speak, but she only coughed again as she grabbed the doctor's lab coat.

The doctor looked up at the hero and nodded. "Thanks for getting her here, Superman. We'll take good care of her."

He realized he was being asked ... albeit most diplomatically ... to leave the room and let the medical professionals do their jobs, so he nodded and turned to walk away. A nurse touched his arm and said, "Superman, can you give the registration desk clerk any information that you have on Ms. Lane?"

He nodded shortly and pushed through the swinging doors to the lobby. He told himself he had to behave as if Lois were anyone else, that Superman couldn't afford to be seen to be too concerned about her well being. It would compromise her safety, as well as endanger his secret identity, if his feelings for Lois became public knowledge.

He glanced around the room as he stood at the desk and answered the clerk's questions, all while trying to ignore the open-mouthed stares from the other people in the waiting area. He claimed not to know any specifics about her medical insurance, but gave them her home address, phone number, and place of employment.

As the questions began hitting too close to home, he tilted his head and appeared to listen to something. "I'm sorry, but I have something else I have to attend to."

He didn't wait for the clerk to ask another question. He strode majestically through the doorway and flew away into the night.

Nineteen minutes later, Clark vaulted out of a cab and ran into the emergency room. He skidded to a stop at the desk and called out, "Lois! Where's Lois Lane? Is Lois Lane here?"

The desk clerk waved for him to quiet down and said, "Please, sir, not so loud. Who are you?"

"I'm her friend, her co-worker. I have to see her!"

"You're her co-worker?"

Clark was almost frantic. "Yes!"

The young man lifted a clipboard. "Then maybe you can give me some more information on her insurance. The guy with the cape didn't ..."

For a moment, Clark forgot that he was supposed to be mild-mannered and meek, that he wasn't supposed to use his powers while in his civilian guise. He reached over the counter and grabbed the man by his lapels and pulled him halfway over the desk. Nose to nose with the man, Clark bellowed, "WHERE IS

LOIS LANE?"

The wide-eyed clerk pointed down the hall. "T-trauma two! Second room from the end of the hall on the left!"

Clark dropped the man and sprinted down the hallway. As he burst into the room, a tiny but determined Native American woman in nurse's scrubs stepped in front of him. "Sir! You cannot enter! Please wait outside!"

He barely kept himself from sweeping her to one side as he pressed forward. "I have to see her ..."

"Sir! You cannot come in here! You must leave before I call security!"

Clark stopped and looked down at the woman. She reminded him of a determined Martha Kent, so much so that his 'good son' reflexes kicked in and he stopped moving. "Please. How is she? Please tell me!"

The slight woman relaxed and said, "We are going to move her upstairs to a room and keep her overnight for observation. And that is all I can tell you."

Just then, Lois' quavering voice reached them through her oxygen mask. "Clark? Is that you? Clark?"

"Yes!" he called out. "I'm here, Lois. I'm here."

Lois looked at the doctor. "I want to see him."

The doctor locked eyes with Clark and nodded. "One minute, then we move her upstairs."

Clark rushed to Lois' side and carefully took her hand. "Lois! Are you okay? How do you feel?"

She squinted at him and grabbed at his hand. Her voice was weak and scratchy and her eyes weren't quite focused on him.

"Clark? Why ... why am I here? What happened?"

Alarmed, Clark glanced up at the doctor, who quickly shook her head. "Superman brought you in, Lois. Don't you remember?"

"No ... no. Wait. Callard's? We were going to Callard's, weren't we?"

"Yes. Yes, we were. Don't worry, we can go there any time."

"You ... you didn't come." She grabbed for his arm again.

"Did you? Why didn't you come? Why am I here? What happened to me?"

The doctor leaned closer. "Lois? Listen to me, Lois. We're taking you to a room so we can check you out, okay? You're going to be fine, don't worry."

"What? A room?"

"Yes. You'll be much more comfortable there."

"C ... Clark?"

The doctor glanced up at Clark, then looked at Lois. "What about him, Lois?"

"Can ... can he come?"

She grinned. "Not right away, but he can come see you later. Okay?"

Clark leaned down and kissed Lois' forehead. "I'll see you later. I promise."

Lois nodded once. The doctor looked up at the orderly and one of the nurses. "Floor three, and make sure they watch her close."

They nodded and wheeled her out. The doctor turned to Clark. "I assume you're the next of kin?"

He took a breath, then shook his head. "No, sorry."

She nodded. "Then I'm not supposed to tell you that she'll probably be just fine, that we're keeping her at least overnight mainly for observation, and probably for another twenty-four hours after that just to be on the safe side. I'm also not supposed to tell you that she may have some permanent short-term memory loss due to being oxygen-deprived for so long, and that we may not know for certain about that for a couple of days."

His mouth quirked to one side. "Thanks for not telling me all that, Doctor ..."

She pulled her nametag from behind her lapel. "M'Benga. Darlene M'Benga."

He extended his hand. "Thank you, Dr. M'Benga."
 She smiled as her tiny hand disappeared inside his. "You should be able to get in to see her first thing in the morning. There's a waiting room near the nurse's station where you can make all the phone calls you need to make to her ... ahem ... next of kin."

His smile grew wider. "Thank you again, Doctor."

Clark found the phone, pulled out his calling card to pay for any long distance calls, and began dialing. As he expected, Perry was shocked but not surprised, Ellen Lane was frantic and wildly accusatory, Lucy was frightened but optimistic, Sam Lane was out of touch, and Clark's parents were saddened but supportive. They promised to wait for him at his apartment, and that he should not expect them to be awake if he came home too soon. By the time he'd spoken to the last person on his list, the sun was peeking over the horizon and the day shift had taken over in that wing of the hospital.

Clark rubbed his hands over his face. He hadn't felt so wrung out in years.

"Mr. Kent?"

He looked up at the matronly woman. "Yes?"

"I'm Cora Flowers, head nurse on this shift. Miss Lane is asleep now, but if you promise to be quiet, you can go in and sit with her."

He smiled wearily. "Thank you. I won't wake her, I promise."

Cora smiled back. "But if she does wake up, you give us a call right away, you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

He watched her sleep for several hours. She was breathing more easily than before, and they'd replaced the mask with a nasal line. He glanced at the monitors beside the bed and saw numbers in the normal range for blood oxygen saturation, blood pressure, respiration rate, pulse and temperature. It eased his mind somewhat.

During the time between dropping Lois off at the hospital as Superman and then showing up as Clark in a cab, he'd taken Jason Mazik into custody and delivered him to the police, destroyed the book Mazik had brandished (he still had no idea where it had come from or who Tempus was), given the stolen diamonds to the detective who'd questioned them about the robbery, and reported the location of Nigel St. John's body. The detective had been far more impressed by Superman's presence than he had been about closing the case. He'd even offered Superman a jelly doughnut, which had been declined as politely as the situation allowed.

His parents were awaiting further word about Lois at his apartment, but Clark wanted them to sleep as long as they needed to. They'd been through a great deal. In his brief call, he'd told his father to assume the best unless he called and told them otherwise.

Ellen, understandably, had insisted on flying to Metropolis to check on her baby girl. Lucy was also coming, but it turned out to be easier for her to take the transcontinental express train from Colorado to New Troy than to fly, since the train's scheduled arrival time was only fifteen minutes later than the earliest available flight she could catch. When Clark suggested he ask Superman to bring her, Lucy's voice turned hard and she emphatically refused. Clark hoped Lucy's attitude was her residual bad feelings about Johnny Corbin's death and that she wasn't blaming him for Lois' current condition.

So he had Lois all to himself for a while. He sat back and drank in her soft curves, her creamy skin, her slender and delicate fingers, her exotic eyes ...

Her eyes. Eyes which were open. She was looking straight at him. The sight made him smile.

He leaned closer and whispered, "How long have you been awake?"

"Long enough to see you ogling me."

Something in her voice wiped the smile from his face and moved him back into his chair. That didn't sound like their usual friendly banter. "Um, excuse me, but the nurse told me I was supposed to call them if you woke up."

She didn't smile at him. "So call them."

He nodded shortly and pressed the 'call' button. When a nurse responded through the intercom, he said, "Lois Lane is awake now."

He sat back and assayed another smile. Her eyes narrowed and she said, "Why am I here, Clark? What happened to me?"

He frowned. "You don't remember?"

She flashed her teeth at him. "You idiot! Would I ask you a question like that if I already knew the answer?"

His mouth fell open at her harsh tone.

He was saved for the moment by Cora Flowers' chipper arrival. "Well! How are we this morning? Better?"

Lois shifted her laser glare from Clark to the nurse. "Depends on how you define the terms 'we' and 'better,' doesn't it?"

"Of course. Mr. Kent, could you give us some privacy for a few minutes, please?"

He nodded slowly. "Sure. Lois, I'll be right outside. Can I bring you anything?"

"You can get me donuts, coffee, and today's Daily Planet."

It wasn't a request, it was an order, and a fairly imperious one at that. As Clark walked to the elevator, he wondered why Lois seemed to be so cold towards him.

After Clark delivered the order, Lois told him to go downstairs and wait for her mother and sister. And he was not to return until then.

"Lois, don't you think ..."

She silenced him by snapping the newspaper open and studying it as if it held a great cosmic secret. Clark stood beside her bed for a long moment, but she behaved as if he no longer existed.

So he went downstairs to wait, no matter how long it took. Maybe she'd be over her anger by the time Ellen and Lucy arrived. At the very least, he hoped she'd be willing to talk to him.

Due to storms over Chicago and St. Louis which forced Ellen to miss her connecting flights, Lucy got to the hospital before her mother did. Clark was standing at the admissions desk, trying to correct some misinformation in Lois' insurance data, when Lucy walked up and bumped his elbow.

"Hi there, you tall, dark, and mysterious strange man."

He turned and looked down, then smiled. "Hey, Lucy. Did you have a good trip?"

She grimaced. "It was too long, but at least trains don't get grounded because of bad weather. How's Lois?"

He turned to face her. "Physically, she's fine. She's still got some short-term memory loss, and she's apparently still confused and angry about what happened."

"I see." She looked straight into his eyes. "What exactly did happen to her, Clark?"

The question was casual, but Lucy's body language was not. He guided her to one side of the desk for some privacy before answering. "I got a call from a man ... who is now in police custody, by the way ... saying that he'd kidnapped my parents and was willing to trade their lives for Lois'. She told ..."

"WHAT?" she burst out. "You moron! You let her ..."

"Wait a minute! I wanted her to get on a plane, to leave the city, but she refused!"

Lucy leaned closer and snarled, "Of course she did, Clark! What else did you expect her to do? She's the great Lois Lane!"

Clark took a deep breath to yell back again, but instead he

forced himself to exhale slowly. "Look, I'm just telling you what happened. Lois walked out of the office and asked me to have Superman meet her at her apartment."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "I see. And what did the big blue Boy Scout do this time?"

Clark didn't back down. "He did exactly what Lois asked him to do."

"Which was what?"

"Freeze her and give her to the bad guy in trade for my parents."

Lucy's mouth dropped open. She slowly turned away and found a chair. She sat there for several seconds before she found her voice. "Freeze her?"

"Yes."

"And ... and he agreed to do something that insane?"

"Lois thought that Superman could revive her with his heat vision. She compared it to someone being dropped into a frozen lake and revived half an hour or so later."

Lucy shook her head. "Like suspended animation?"

"Yes. Superman's rescued several people like that." Lois' statement that he'd 'done it a hundred times' echoed in his mind. It hadn't been a hundred, and he hadn't been able to save everyone in that situation. Some had survived but had never fully recovered.

He thrust that thought as far away from his mind as he could.

Lucy closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall, then blew out her breath in a long and loud hiss. "You know, as terminally stupid as that plan is, it actually sounds like something my sister would think of." She opened her eyes and fixed Clark with a granite stare. "So how's Lois? Did it work?"

Clark nodded slowly. "I think so. Apparently she doesn't remember anything from the past couple of days, but the doctor says that's not surprising. And she doesn't seem to have any other injuries."

"Can I see her now?"

"As far as I know, yes. She's in a regular room on the third floor."

"Good. You stay here until I come down, okay?"

Lucy stood and turned to walk to the elevator, but Clark suddenly blocked her way. "Why should I stay here, Lucy?"

"Because I want to talk to my sister alone!" she snarled.

Clark waited a beat, then slid to one side. "I'll be in the waiting room on her floor."

She glared at him for a moment, then nodded shortly. "That'll do."

As Lucy stomped towards the elevator without further comment, Clark pondered how well the sisters would get along now, since both of them seemed to be in full-blown porcupine mode.

He took the next elevator and went to the waiting room.

Lucy joined him in the waiting room less than thirty minutes later. She sank down next to Clark and leaned forward, pressing her hands against her eyes.

Clark waited for several seconds, but instead of speaking to him she began crying softly. Not knowing exactly what to do, he gently put his hand on her near shoulder. "Lucy, what's wrong? What is it?"

She pressed the dampness from her eyes and sniffed. "That's not my sister."

"What? What do you mean?"

"That's not Lois."

He paused. "I don't understand."

She sat up and waved her hands. "Oh, it's her body, her mind, her ... her mouth ... but something's gone." She sniffed again. "I was only in the room for about five minutes before she ordered me out. She cursed at me and told me she didn't need me or

anyone else to take care of her, that she was fine by herself."

"Oh." He sighed. "I thought it was just me she was mad at."

Lucy shook her head. "It's more than that, Clark. I talked to Dr. Sanderson. He said that Lois suffered the equivalent of a serious head injury while she was hypothermic, something to do with ... with tiny ice crystals forming in the soft tissue of the brain. He also said that people who have serious head injuries will sometimes undergo drastic personality changes." She looked at him with shimmering eyes. "Permanent changes."

An icy hand gripped Clark's heart. "What kind of changes?"

She dug in her purse for a tissue and blew her nose. "They lose something, something vital to themselves. Some people lose the ability to laugh or to cry, some can't stop laughing or crying, and some stop caring about others." She shuddered. "The doctor said that in the worst case it's ... it's almost as if they become sociopathic overnight. They still know what society considers right and wrong, but they ... they simply don't care any more."

Lois Lane, sociopath. It was a terrifying thought. "Is Dr. Sanderson sure that's what's happened to Lois?"

"No, he's not sure, but all the indicators ... she ... Lois isn't responding like she should. Her verbal skills are okay, her mental acuity is fine, but ..."

Lucy stopped and hugged herself. Clark put his hand on her shoulder. "But what?"

She visibly forced herself to relax. "She's just not the same, Clark! She's not like she was before. The doctors ... they say there's no treatment for it."

"No treatment?" Clark's jaw wobbled loosely for a moment.

"I mean, isn't there something they can do for her?"

She sniffed and rubbed her nose. "The doctor said that ... that sometimes ... sometimes the ... the patient will come around. Sometimes whatever part of the brain that got hurt heals itself. It takes time ... a lot of time ... and all we can do is ... is just wait it out."

"Isn't there anything they can do? Some therapy, some kind of rehab or ..."

"No." Lucy's fists clenched. "That's the worst part. Except for a little trouble walking, there's nothing physically wrong with her, at least nothing they can find, so there's no treatment. They're going to give her some physical therapy and some exercises she can do on her own, but that's all they can do. Even psychotherapy can't help fix this." She sobbed. "My sister's gone, Clark! She's gone! And I don't know if she's ever coming back!"

She leaned against him, her earlier enmity towards him apparently forgotten. Clark put his arm around her for comfort.

But he wasn't sure who was supposed to comfort whom.

Lucy finally wound down. She accepted Clark's offer of his handkerchief and wiped her face with it. "I'm ... I'm sorry. It's just ... she's right there in front of me, but she's not there! It's like she died and some stranger is using her body." She looked up at him. "She still doesn't remember those three days, Clark. Whatever happened to her, it completely wiped out her memory. She wanted to file suit against Superman."

"What!"

She waved her hand at him. "She's not going to, or at least I don't think she is. Her attorney called her this morning to ask her what to do with the tape she'd made, and she had no idea what he was talking about. He explained to her that she'd recorded a videotape and signed a notarized document stating that the freezing was her idea alone and Superman wasn't responsible for it. That's what she was so mad about when I walked into the room. I tried to tell her that her being in the hospital was partly her own responsibility, and that's when she ... she blew up and threw me out."

Lucy folded up again for a moment, then sat up abruptly.

"Clark, you can't let Mom see her like that! It'll kill her!"

"Me? How am I going to stop her from seeing her own

daughter?"

She swiped tears from her cheeks. "You have to! And you can't tell her why!"

"But ... "

"No! No buts, no excuses! You can't let Mom see Lois!"

A piercing voice sliced into their shared pain. "And why, pray tell, can't I see my own daughter?"

They both looked up to see Ellen Lane standing in the waiting room doorway with her hands on her hips, a fierce expression on her fore-thrust face.

An hour later, a broken and tearful Ellen left the hospital in a cab with Lucy. They had originally planned to stay at Lois' apartment to help her until she was fully recovered, but the vitriol with which Lois had greeted that idea convinced them both to check into a hotel until they could arrange to return home. Clark didn't tell them, but he planned to pay for their stay.

He felt it was the least he could do. The three days he ended up paying for were small change compared to the debt he felt he owed them.

After another week, Lois returned to work at the Planet, full of fire and ice. The fire was reserved for her job, for her investigations, for the victims of her interviews, for the people around her who didn't measure up to her impossible standards. The ice was distributed liberally among all of her co-workers, Clark included.

On her first day back, Clark brought her a cup of coffee just as she liked it. She took it and sipped it without a murmur of thanks. Then she turned to yell fiercely at a young research intern and send her on an all-morning research task. She managed to avoid Clark for the entire day.

On her second day, Clark brought her a cup of coffee just as she liked it. She glanced at him with a frown and turned back to the story she was working on. The few times Clark tried to start a conversation with her, she either ignored him or walked away without speaking to him.

On her third day, Clark brought her a cup of coffee just as she liked it. She acknowledged neither the coffee nor Clark. He didn't try to talk to her that day, nor did she speak to him except to demand his notes from an interview he'd done a week before.

On her fourth day, Clark stood beside her desk instead of bringing the coffee and waited for her to say something to him.

He waited some more. She didn't seem to realize he was there.

And finally he spoke. "Lois? Would you like some coffee?"

"Yeah, Kent, sure," she mumbled as she sorted through the file folders on her desk. "Just don't make a big production out of it."

He hesitated, then leaned closer. "Lois, you used to like it when I brought you coffee in the morning."

She turned a granite face towards him. "I used to eat chocolate-covered cereal with lots of sugar on it for breakfast, too."

He straightened. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning I grew up and acquired different tastes. Maybe you need to grow up, too."

He nodded slowly. "Okay. Maybe you should get your own coffee from now on."

"No problem. I'm a big girl and I know where the pot and the cups are."

He turned to walk away, but stopped after two steps. "Lois?"

She sighed dramatically. "Now what?"

"Would you ... would you go to lunch with me today? I mean, assuming work doesn't interfere?"

She met his gaze. "Lunch?"

"Yes. Lunch."

"With you?"

"Yes, with me." He put one hand in his pants pocket and gestured with the other. "We used to do that a lot, remember?"

Her obsidian eyes didn't flicker. "That was then, this is now."

"What? But ... I thought we ..."

"Hold it!" She slowly rose from her chair and stood toe-to-toe with him. "Listen to me very carefully, Smallville. I don't want to go to lunch with you. I don't care whether or not you bring me coffee in the morning, the afternoon, or at any other time of the day. All I care about is getting the next story, and the next story, and the one after that. I don't care about your tender feelings and I don't care about you."

He barely controlled his growing anger. "That's not what you were saying a few weeks ago!"

She put her hands on her hips. "This is what I'm saying now! Don't you hear well? Maybe you should get your hearing checked!"

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Maybe you should get your brain checked for missing pieces!"

She poked him in the chest with her index finger. "Go away and leave me alone, Kent! You come near me again and I'll have you arrested for sexual harassment!"

"Harassment? Me?" He lifted his hands to either side. "Three weeks ago you couldn't keep your hands off me!"

Even with his super-speed he couldn't dodge the unexpected slap. "Listen to me, you low-level wannabe hack! I want you to get away from me! I want you to leave me alone! I don't want to hear about your feeble little haystack fantasies or your wet dreams! You do your job and I'll do mine and we'll get along fine!"

Clark stared at Lois for several seconds, half-expecting her to drop out of character and tell him it was all a gag, or that the secretarial pool had put her up to it, or that he'd wake up and find it was all a terrible dream.

None of those things happened.

He slowly backed away. His voice was dangerously low. "All right, Lois. You have your wish. I'll stay away."

He did, too. For weeks he hoped she'd come around and thaw out to him again, but it never happened.

And Clark wasn't the only one to bear the brunt of Lois Lane's renewed Mad Dog exterior. She stopped speaking to Superman except to get news material, and her attitude towards him was always filled with barely repressed contempt.

Nine weeks after the freezing incident, Clark stepped onto the newsroom floor on a Tuesday morning and was greeted by a shouted "Kent! Where's your partner?"

He tilted a cynical eyebrow at his boss. "You mean Lois?"

Perry frowned back. "You have some other partner I don't know about?"

Okay, thought Clark, something's very wrong. "No, Chief, I don't. And I haven't seen Lois since yesterday afternoon."

As Clark realized how quiet the newsroom was for this time of the morning, Perry held up a copy of the morning edition. "Then you're telling me you can't explain this?"

Clark frowned at the headline, which read, Exclusive: President To Announce Hobbs Bay Renewal Project. It was Clark's story, one he'd planned to hand in that morning after one final editing pass. "Why is my story in today's edition? I was going to turn it in this morning after I went through it one more time. You told me it was going to run in tomorrow's morning edition. How did you get it already?"

Perry nodded. "That's what I thought." He leaned closer.

"Take a good look at the byline, son."

Clark did. He could feel the blood drain from his face. His

eyes threatened to pop out through his glasses. "No!" He grabbed the paper and stared. "This can't be!" He looked up. "Perry, I ... what happened?"

The byline credited the entire story to Lois Lane.

There was no mention of Clark Kent's efforts anywhere in the story, in the byline, or at the end of the last column.

He crumpled the paper in trembling hands, trying to control his anger. It couldn't be.

But it was.

Lois had stolen his story.

Again.

And this time it was a huge story, an award-worthy topic and piece of writing. He'd worked his contacts in the White House until their ears were sore. He'd interviewed the President's Chief of Staff on three different occasions. He'd traveled to Washington and met with four of the New Troy representatives pushing this plan through committee and onto the floor for a vote. He'd buttonholed both senators and coaxed information from them about the final version which was headed to the President's desk for his signature.

Lois Lane hadn't done a blessed thing.

Except steal his work.

Just then the elevator dinged. Perry looked over Clark's shoulder and his eyes narrowed. "Lois! I need you in my office right now!"

"I'm busy, Perry. What about after ..."

"NOW!" he exploded.

Clark turned to see Lois put her coat and purse down on her desk. "Okay, okay," she muttered. "You don't have to yell at me."

Clark followed Perry and waited for Lois to sashay in before he closed the door. Perry turned around and glared at her. "Lois?" His voice was tight with repressed anger. "Do you have anything you want to tell me?"

"About what?"

"About the page one story you snuck in last night after I left."

"Oh. That."

"Yes. That."

She crossed her arms and glanced at the ceiling, then looked back at Perry. "No."

Perry leaned on his desk with both hands. "Then, do you have anything to say to Clark?"

She turned and looked him up and down. "Nice tie. Is it new?"

Clark clenched his fists and took one step towards her. "Lois!"

"What? Geez, you two are really wound up over ..."

"You stole my story!"

She looked at him blankly for a moment, then the light of comprehension dawned in her eyes. "Oh, that. Well, you shouldn't leave your computer unsecured when you leave the newsroom. It's in the employee guidelines."

"What? I shouldn't leave ..." Clark's eyes blazed and he stepped closer. "What's the matter with you? Don't you understand what you've done? Can't you ..."

Perry stepped between them. "Now hold on, both of you! Clark, you just hold all of your horses! I mean it." Perry waited until Clark took a small step backwards, then he turned to Lois. "You stole your partner's story and you overrode my authority to print it when you did. I had it scheduled for tomorrow's front page. And it was going out with Kent's byline! What were you thinking?"

She narrowed her eyes at him and put her hands on her hips. "I was thinking that I needed another good story this week. And that one will do until something better comes along."

"Something better?" he snarled. "Something better!" Clark stepped past Perry and stood nose-to-nose with Lois. "I worked hard on that story! I put in days getting everything checked and

double-checked! It's a great story ..."

"And it should win me another Kerth!" screamed Lois.

"It was my story!"

"And if I hadn't taught you everything you know you'd still be writing gecko stories for the Borneo Gazette!"

Clark's eyes blazed with fury. He lifted his hands and leaned forward, forcing Lois to step backwards. Her eyes flickered and he saw uncertainty there, and he might have seen more had Perry not grabbed Clark's shoulder and physically pulled him back.

"Clark! No! Clark!" Perry yelled in his ear to get his attention. "Son, you need to back off right now!"

Reluctantly, Clark allowed himself to be pulled away from Lois. Perry turned to her and shook his finger in her face. "I ought to let Kent whack you at least once for what you've done and for the way you're acting! We're printing a correction tomorrow and we're going to credit Kent with the byline!" He backed off and blew out a long breath. "If it were anyone else who'd pulled this stunt, I'd fire you! But you've earned a little slack, Lois."

"Gee, thanks, boss," she drawled. "You don't have to put yourself out just for little old me."

"This isn't for you! It's for the paper! And you've used up all the slack I'm gonna give you!" His finger aimed for her forehead again. "You'd better mind every one of your p's and q's from now on!"

She slowly put her hand on Perry's extended limb and pushed it down. "I promise you, Perry, if you print any kind of correction, I'll sue you, the paper, Franklin Stern, Kent, and anyone else who looks like a target. And you won't like the end result."

She whirled and stormed out the door. The slam rattled the pictures on Perry's wall.

Clark watched his boss sigh and put his hands in his pockets. "Great shades of Elvis. I wish she hadn't said that."

Clark turned incredulous eyes to his chief. "What? Why?"

"Because now I have to get the legal department involved, and it's always a hassle when they get their fingers into anything on this floor. It'll probably take a couple of days, maybe a whole week, to get this all straightened out, and by that time it'll be too late to print a correction." Perry shook his head. "And if she wasn't bluffing about those lawsuits, that would really hog-tie us for quite a while."

"You're saying that it would be less trouble to let her off the hook? You've got to be kidding!"

"No, I'm not. It would be easier to just fire her, but then we'd have to explain why one of our best investigative reporters was being fired, and you can't imagine the public backlash that would produce. I know what Mr. Stern would say about that without my even asking him."

"So you're not going to do anything about this?" Clark stepped towards his boss and put his hands out as if begging for something. "Perry! Please!"

Perry put his hand on Clark's shoulder and a hound-dog expression on his face. "Son, I know this ain't a bit fair to you, but I gotta ask you something. Do you really want to pursue this, knowing how much trouble you're lettin' yourself in for?"

"Are you worried about my trouble or about the trouble this would dump on your desk?"

"I won't deny that it'd be tough for me, but whatever you decide I'll back you. It's your call all the way, Clark."

Clark glared through the window in Perry's office door at his former partner. "I won't work with her again. I can't trust her."

"I understand that, son, and I pretty much expected that. But you're right. The team of Lane and Kent is no more, no matter what you decide about her theft of your story."

Clark's breathing was back to normal, and his color had returned to its usual olive shading. He turned to his boss and said,

"Let it go, Chief. This time."

Perry nodded.

And Clark cried inside. Not for the loss of the story, but for the loss of the Lois Lane he'd loved, the one who wouldn't have stolen a paper clip from him. His heart would have been hers, but she obviously didn't want anything to do with him. So his heart would go back inside its fortress.

And he set about rebuilding the walls around it.

It got easier to reinforce those walls when he found out that Lois had been nominated for a Kerth for his story. Not once did she ever acknowledge that he'd so much as touched a word of the text for which she now accepted undeserved accolades from others. His only comfort came from the fact that she didn't win it for that story. She won for a story series on gangs in Metropolis's public high schools, a series which she'd hijacked from a reporter on the Star. Their lawyers didn't make a dent in Mad Dog Lane either.

And Clark's heart shrank away from her even more.

It had been three months since Lois had stolen Clark's story. During that time they'd spoken at length only twice, once on a stakeout on the Newtrich sisters where Lois angrily deflected any and all personal or relationship questions Clark threw her way and once when they'd been forced to pool their resources to prevent a coup at the NIA by the deputy director. There were entire days when they didn't speak, and once went eleven straight working days without uttering a single syllable to each other.

Then one Tuesday morning, Lois suddenly barged into Perry's office while Clark was getting an assignment. "Perry!" she shouted. "I have to see you right now!"

"Lois! Can't you see I'm in the middle of something here?"

She threw a scalding glance at Clark. "This can't wait!"

He turned to her and pointed with his index finger. "No, you can't have this assignment."

"What? No! I don't want your story, you moron! I want to take some vacation days!"

Both Perry and Clark lifted their eyebrows. "Well, Lois," Perry responded, "you've got at least three weeks saved up that you ..."

"I need to take some of that time this Thursday and Friday! Oh, and Monday, too."

Perry put his hands on his hips. "That's kind of short notice, don't you think?"

"I don't care! I need those days off!"

Perry shrugged. "Can you tell me why?"

Lois crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. "No."

Perry looked at Clark, who raised his palms and backed up a step. "Leave me out of this."

Perry looked at Lois again and frowned for a long moment. Then he sighed. "Okay, Lois, I'll take care of it. Be sure and send in the appropriate paperwork to Human Resources. I'll send Clark to cover the senator's speech on Friday morning ... that is, if you don't mind too much."

She sent another ineffective visual blast at Clark, then nodded at Perry. "Fine. As long as he doesn't mess it up."

"Hey, Lois, I'm in the room! You can talk to me!"

She didn't acknowledge his existence this time. "I'll wrap up what I have going before I leave tomorrow afternoon."

She turned and stomped out the door. "Whew," breathed Clark. "I wonder what that's all about?"

"She'll tell us, son, or she won't. I'm close to not caring if she quits anymore. I'm tired of being treated like a speed bump in her life."

"You? Chief, she hasn't talked to me since last Monday. And all she told me to do was to get out of her way at the coffee machine."

"I know. She's almost more trouble than she's worth any

more."

Clark leaned on his boss' desk and lowered his voice to a dangerous register. "What do you mean, almost?"

Perry sighed. "If it were up to me, I'd let her go right now. But the suits upstairs claim she's responsible for about half of the circulation increase we've experienced in the last six months. They won't even let me discipline her unless her conduct rises to the level of egregious behavior."

Clark goggled. "They actually said that?"

"One of them did. I'm sorry, Clark, I know you're hurting, but right now there's not a whole lot I can do."

On the following Tuesday morning, Clark was standing by the network printer waiting for a document when Lois marched past him. "Hi, Lois. How was your vacation?"

She didn't respond, so he followed her to her desk and tried again. "Did you go out of town or stay ..."

"Stuff it, Kent!"

Even for Lois these days, that was harsh. So he abandoned his attempt to speak to her and returned to the printer.

But as he reached for the printout, a strange man in a disheveled suit wheeled past him and made a beeline for Lois' desk. She looked up as he approached and leaped up so quickly her chair fell over. "Lance!" she burst out. "I told you not to ..."

"My baby, Lois! You took my baby!"

Clark glanced around and saw that everyone in the newsroom was now focused on the drama. Lois lifted her hands and spun away from Lance. "My body, my decision! You have no right ..."

"No right? NO RIGHT! I could sue you for what you've done!"

Clark decided to mosey on over to the scene of the conflict, if only to prevent Lance from being disemboweled. Of course, his curiosity would be satisfied in the meantime, but that was incidental.

Lois stepped around the desk to put it between herself and Lance. "You'd better not or I'll sue you right back! You told me you'd had a vasectomy! You lied!"

Vasectomy? Then Lois had ... oh, my, this had serious potential for bad, and despite Lois' behavior towards him, Clark didn't want to see her get hurt ... or see her hurt someone else. He stepped up just behind Lois' erstwhile boyfriend, about whom he'd had no inkling five minutes earlier.

"I told you I was thinking about having it reversed! I did! And it worked! And then you killed our baby!"

Lance moved to follow Lois around the desk, but Clark intercepted him. "Hang on, buddy. Why don't we dial it back a notch?"

"I'll dial you back more than a notch if you don't get out of my way!" snarled Lance.

Clark smiled and lowered his voice, trying to defuse the situation. "Look, I'm sure we can talk about ..."

He didn't finish his sentence. Lance swung a fierce backfist at his face. Clark ducked, then straightened and grabbed Lance by the lapels and shoved him down on the desk on his back. He leaned close and growled, "I know you're upset, buddy, but do NOT try that again."

He felt Lois punch him in the middle of his back. "Let him go, Smallville! I don't need your help!"

"You could have fooled me."

"Let him go! Right now!"

"Not until he promises to behave himself."

"Fine!" shouted Lance. "Anything! Just let me up!"

Clark allowed the man to stand but didn't release his hold. "Now, if you'll be so kind as to ..."

Lois kicked him in the back of the knee and Clark had to fake a minor stumble. "Get out of my way, Smallville!"

Perry chose that moment to return from his meeting upstairs.

He turned to Jimmy and snapped, "Olsen! Get security up here now!" He strode forcefully towards Lois and stopped inches from her face. "I will not allow your personal life to disrupt my newsroom! You have a beef with this man, you take care of it outside working hours!"

"I didn't invite him here!"

Lance pointed dramatically at Lois and shouted, "She killed our baby!"

Clark saw something he'd never expected to see ... Perry White with nothing to say.

Lance tried to get away from Clark but couldn't. "Hey! You want to let me go now, pal?"

Clark pulled him upright. "Do you plan to be a good boy now ... pal?"

"But I'm the injured party here!"

Clark lifted him another inch. "Trust me, Lance, I can do this dance longer than you can."

"Okay, okay! Just let me go, will ya?" Clark slowly released the pressure on the man's coat and stepped back. Lance turned to Lois. "Look, I think we need to talk about this."

"No, Lance, we don't need to talk about this! We're through! I thought you were a civilized human being!"

"And I thought you were a real woman!"

Lois' jaw tightened and her fists clenched. "I am a real woman! And I'm a woman who has the right to control her own body! No one tells me what to do!"

Clark glanced from Lois' expression to Lance's several times, trying to read the non-verbal communications. Lance blinked first. "Okay," he breathed. "Okay, I get it. I'm gone. Don't worry about returning my key. I'm changing the lock. And don't ever call me again, not for anything."

He turned and walked towards the elevator, defeat rolling from his shoulders. As the elevator door closed, he looked at Lois one more time.

Clark did too. Her face held nothing that could be called gentle or soft.

Perry sighed. "Lois, I think we need to ..."

"No, we do not need to talk! I haven't done anything wrong!"

"Oh, really? If Clark hadn't been here, that man might have hurt you."

"I could have taken care of him!"

Perry shook his head. "Lois, you've disrupted this newsroom by bringing your personal life into it. Look around you. Nobody's working. And I don't blame them."

Lois did look around. The only person not staring in her direction was Jimmy, who was still on the phone. "All right, you idiots! Get back to work! This isn't performance art, it's private business!"

"We still need to talk."

"I've already told you we don't need to talk! It's over and done with! Won't happen again."

Perry sighed in apparent resignation and turned towards his office. Jimmy called out, "Chief, security says they have that Lance guy downstairs. Do we want to have him arrested or something?"

Perry stopped and glanced at Lois, then said, "No. But tell them to make sure he knows that if he comes back here without an appointment he will be detained and turned over to the police."

"Got it."

Lois moved to her chair and set it upright. Clark moved closer and lowered his voice. "Why didn't you tell me about this?"

She spun around so fast that he almost didn't see the punch she slammed into his chest. "Listen, Smallville, I don't share my private life with you because you're not a part of my private life! And that's the way I want it to stay! You got that?"

Clark took in the set of her chin and the narrowed eyes. "Yes,

Lois," he answered quietly. "I've got it."

"Good. Now get away from me. I've got work to do."

He watched her slam herself into her chair and remembered the days when she appreciated his help, his company, his nearness. That Lois would never have gotten an abortion without talking to Clark about it. Of course, that Lois would never have gotten pregnant with Lance, either.

As he shuffled back to his desk, he felt as if she'd slipped even further from him. And not only could he not reach her, he could no longer touch her.

Two months after the incident with Lance ... two months of glares and snarls from Lois directed to everyone in the newsroom ... she didn't show up one Monday morning. Clark glanced at her desk and wondered if he should check on her, but then decided that if she no longer wanted his help he wouldn't try to force it on her. After all, they hadn't been partners for quite some time. So he went back to his own assignments.

Lunchtime came and Clark ate with Jimmy and his new girlfriend Janet. They all had a good time until Clark asked, "Hey, Jim, do you know where Lois is today?"

Jimmy's face fell. "Yeah. But I'm not supposed to tell you."

Clark leaned back in his chair. "Hey, if the Chief told you not to tell me, then you shouldn't tell me. No problem."

Jimmy's frown deepened. "The Chief didn't tell me to be quiet. Lois did."

Clark leaned forward. "I see. Did she happen to tell you when she'd be back?"

Jimmy opened his mouth, then closed it again, then sighed deeply. "When the mission's over."

Janet touched him on the elbow. "Jim, hon, if Ms. Lane told you not to say, maybe you shouldn't tell Mr. Kent anything."

He turned to her. "I know Lois warned me not to, but I have to tell someone!"

"Wait," said Clark. "You mean that Perry doesn't know where she is?"

"I'm not supposed to tell him until after lunch."

A niggle of worry began in Clark's mind. "It's after lunch. You're finished eating. You can tell Perry when you get back to the office."

Jimmy hesitated. "Okay, I'll tell you. First I have to say that Janet doesn't know anything about this. She's hearing it for the first time too."

Clark's voice took on a slightly harder edge. "Fine! Just tell me already!"

Jimmy flinched at the older man's tone, then he steadied himself and his eyes bored into Clark's. "The US ambassador to Columbia was kidnapped two days ago by one of the country's drug lords. Lois has hooked up with the Marine force sent to rescue him. They left for Ecuador at about eleven this morning."

Clark's mouth hung open so long that he almost drooled on his plate. Janet nudged Jimmy and stage-whispered, "Maybe you should take Mr. Kent back to the office now." She kissed him lightly on the cheek. "We'll talk later."

Lois' return from her journey to Ecuador and Columbia was celebrated in the Daily Planet ... which, of course, had the exclusive print story ... and by the city in general. The mayor called to schedule a press conference honoring the heroine who had so bravely reported from a combat zone on the Marines' courageous rescue of the kidnapped ambassador.

As confetti and streamers showered down on her in the newsroom, Clark slipped close to her and said, "Good job, Lois. I mean that."

She glanced at him momentarily and her smile slipped away as she registered who was talking to her. "Thanks." Then her attention was captured by the governor's aide, who hinted at some

state ceremony to honor her.

Lois and the aide stepped aside to talk more privately. Rebuffed yet again, Clark sighed and made his way back to his desk. She wouldn't even let him compliment her now. What chance did he have to ...

"Mr. Kent?"

The man in the military uniform seemed to materialize out of the confusion of Lois' celebration. Clark started, then relaxed. Lois must be bothering him more than normal today for him to have missed seeing a stranger in the newsroom.

"I'm Clark Kent," he told the man. "May I help you?"

"I'm Major Nathan Wilkerson, United States Marine Corps. I was the commander of the rescue mission Ms. Lane reported on."

Clark brightened immediately. "Major Wilkerson! I saw your name in the dispatches Lois sent back. We didn't print your name until everyone was back safe. That's company policy ..."

"That's what I want to talk to you about."

Clark frowned. "I don't understand. We didn't print your name before you returned home to protect you and your family. I hope that isn't a problem ..."

Major Wilkerson waved his hand in dismissal. "Please, Mr. Kent, that's not why I'm here. I need to tell you about Ms. Lane's last story."

Clark gestured to the chair beside his desk and sat down. "Go ahead, Major."

Major Wilkerson sat at attention. "The last story Ms. Lane filed from Ecuador revealed the location of our base. We were hit by a battalion-size ground assault less than two hours after she and the ambassador lifted off."

Clark's jaw dropped. "What? No! We made sure there were no place names in her story, no civilian names, no roads, no rivers, nothing! There was no way anyone could have traced you from her story!"

"Not from what the Planet printed, no."

The wheels turned and the penny dropped. "You mean ... are you telling me that Lois sold that story to someone else too?"

Wilkerson nodded. "It was printed in both Buenos Aires and Quito. I didn't know it until after the assault on our base."

"How did you find out?"

"The assault cost us three dead and eleven wounded. We took most of those casualties right away, but Marines are trained to react to armed attacks. We regrouped and counter-attacked. We think they lost as many as two dozen dead and an equal number wounded before they withdrew. An armed helicopter mission hosed down the area they were occupying fifteen minutes later. We hit them harder than they hit us, and we captured four prisoners. They all told us they'd read Ms. Lane's story in either El Comercio or El Espresso, two of Quito's daily papers, and that the stories gave them more than enough detail to find us."

Clark shook his head. "Does Lois know?"

The major's face hardened. "Know what? That she's responsible for three dead Marines? That she missed being under fire by a pretty slim margin? That she almost caused the death of an American diplomat? Is that what you're asking me if she knows, Mr. Kent?"

Clark pursed his lips. "Yes. That's what I'm asking."

"We transmitted the details to the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln. That was where ..."

"Yes, I know, where the ambassador was taken after he left your base."

"That was another factor which contributed to the attack on our base, Mr. Kent. Ms. Lane included the model of helicopter she and the ambassador were to ride to the carrier. There was only one carrier in the region at the time, and that aircraft has a known range. Anybody with a map and a piece of string could have plotted the area we might have been in." Wilkerson leaned forward. "She set us up, Mr. Kent! She left our butts hanging out

in the line of fire! And she knew what she was doing!"

Clark sat back and blew out a long breath. "Will you wait here, Major? I want my boss to hear what you have to say."

Wilkerson resumed his ramrod posture on the chair. "I'll wait, Mr. Kent."

"I'll be right back." Clark stood and looked for Perry across the still crowded room. He finally spotted his boss standing beside Lois, vainly trying to capture her attention. She apparently only had ears for the governor's aide and the mayor.

This was not going to be a pleasant conversation for any of them. For the first time in a long time, Clark was afraid for Lois.

Perry shook Major Wilkerson's hand and thanked him for coming to see them. The expression on the major's face seemed to say that he knew a brush-off when he saw one, and he didn't look at Clark as he marched out of Perry's office towards the stairwell.

"Close the door, will you, Clark?"

"Sure, Chief."

"Sit down, son. We need to chat."

Clark hesitated, then sat. "We're not printing the major's story, are we?"

Perry sighed and leaned his elbows on his desk. For the first time in a long time, Clark looked at his boss' face and posture and realized that the man was not as vibrant and alive as he had been when Clark had first joined the Planet. He looked thin and drawn and suddenly older, as if something were sucking the life right out of him.

Perry finally lifted his head. "We can't print it."

Another time, another place, another story, Clark might have exploded. But not now. He licked his lips and asked, "Because Lois is just too popular, right?"

"It's not just her popularity, son. This rescue is a military, diplomatic, political, and financial windfall for just about everybody. Our Washington bureau has quotes from the President, the Vice President, the majority leaders of both major parties, the Pentagon ... anyway, everybody and his pet goldfish is trying to claim some of the credit for this mission going so well."

Clark's voice sounded more calm than he felt. "But it didn't go all that well, did it?"

"The primary mission was to rescue the ambassador. That part went off without a hitch. And Lois' dispatches from the Marine base have caught the public's imagination like Edward R. Murrow's reports from London during the Battle of Britain did. She did everything but fire a weapon while she was down there, and right now everyone is calling her a hero."

Clark sighed. "She sold the Planet's exclusive stories to at least two other outlets, and I'd bet my retirement fund that there were more. And she's responsible for those Marines being dead and wounded. Don't we have an obligation to tell the whole truth? Especially the unpleasant parts?"

Perry leaned back in his chair and rubbed his hands over his face. "I guess I've been doing this job too long." He dropped his hands. "I agree with you. We should tell this part of the story. We do have an obligation to tell the public the whole truth."

Clark waited for his boss to continue, but he didn't. "But we're not going to, are we? At least, not this time?"

"Let's assume that I give you the go-ahead to write up the major's story. Let's also assume that every word of it is true and that we can independently confirm every aspect of what he sat there and told us. Let's further assume that I put it above the fold on page one, where it deserves to be. What do you think will happen next?"

"We print it, Lois gets mad and sues the paper, the truth is told, and her undeserved heroic reputation is ripped to shreds."

"In an ideal world, yes, that's what would happen. But a story like this has to be run past the legal department. They, in turn,

would tell the suits upstairs what the story's about. The suits would call me and tell me that I can't print it due to potential legal problems, difficulty in confirming facts, the military's right to secrecy, and so forth. And because the story is about something Lois is alleged to have done, she'll have to be consulted on it, too."

Perry paused and took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "But the real reason is that the current political climate won't tolerate it. And I know that political considerations shouldn't matter one little bit, but they do. This paper has been a vocal supporter of the current administration, and that's who green-lighted this operation. If we rain on their parade now, it will cost us both readers and advertisers."

"I thought we were above all that."

Perry sighed again. "Normally we are. But this time, the stakes are just too high. If I run this story, I won't have a job in a week, and at my age and in my physical condition I won't be able to find another one. I don't know what it would do to my pension from the Planet, and my other savings won't support me too long." He leaned back and rubbed his eyes. "You saw how I was when I 'retired' when Luthor bought the paper. How long do you think I'd last under these circumstances?"

Clark sat back in his chair and considered Perry's words. Major Wilkerson's story needed to be told ... it fairly begged to be told. And it would go a long way in taking Lois Lane down a few pegs, although Clark tried to convince himself that this outcome wasn't one of the reasons he wanted the story told.

But Perry was right about the process, and he was right about the roadblocks in the way. The story would never be okayed by Legal. The suits upstairs wouldn't tolerate anyone saying anything bad about their favorite reporter, "favorite" being defined as "the one for whose stories people bought the Daily Planet." Clark had seen the numbers claiming that Lois was personally responsible for the eighteen percent increase in sales over the last three weeks and the twenty-two percent increase in advertising revenue in the previous three months.

And the attention she was garnering from the important political people outside Perry's office would not go away soon. Too many people had a vested interest in Lois' heroine status. If the Planet did publish the truth about Lois' duplicity, the cost would be prohibitive.

Clark sighed again and closed his eyes. "Can you at least reprimand her for selling the story to another outlet without your permission?"

"Yes. I don't know how much good it'll do, but I will do that, no matter what the suits think." Perry stood and groaned softly. "Getting old stinks. And I'm sorry, Clark, but I'm caught between the devil and the deep blue sea on this one."

"I know, Chief." Clark looked through the glass around Perry's door. "I hate to say it, but I don't think she'll lose any sleep over any of it, not the reprimand or the dead Marines."

"No," replied Perry. "A year ago she wouldn't have thought about doing what she did. Now ... it's like someone else is living in her skin."

Perry's words hit Clark like a kryptonite sledgehammer. It was his fault she was the way she was. And he'd have to live with that knowledge for the rest of his life.

The applause brought Clark back to the present, back to Lois Lane's victory celebration. Lois had been nominated for three awards and had won two of them. She finished her second Kerth acceptance speech with a flourish and a huge grin.

Clark applauded perfunctorily with the rest, but his thoughts were dark and gloomy. Lois had cut off almost all contact with her family and former friends, and a heartbroken Ellen Lane had fallen back into her alcoholic lifestyle. Lucy hadn't spoken or written to her since Christmas, when Lois had snubbed everyone

by attending the governor's party and had failed to send as much as a card to anyone who couldn't immediately further her career. Nor had her father heard from her, and although Sam Lane had tried to comfort his ex-wife, he hadn't been very successful at that, either.

Lois' professional and personal ethical standards were long gone. She was seeing ... and sometimes sleeping with ... at least three powerful, important men in state government, trying to generate stories which would earn her even bigger awards.

Clark watched as she waved the second Kerth above her head. It was her last week at the Daily Planet. She'd accepted a position with LNN to be a roving political commentator, a position with more money, far more visibility, less oversight of her activities, less responsibility to be completely accurate in her reporting, and no Perry White or Clark Kent to look over her shoulder and ask her if what she was doing was the right thing.

Jimmy whispered to Perry, "I don't think she's looked in this direction during either acceptance speech."

Perry shook his head. "Doesn't matter, son, she's been gone a while. Just took until now to make the break."

Clark knew he wasn't supposed to overhear that exchange, so he kept quiet. But he agreed. The moment he'd frozen Lois to deliver her to Jason Mazik and Nigel St. John, he'd killed something inside her, something that had made her uniquely Lois. Her body and mind were still there. She was still beautiful, still brilliantly skilled, still driven to succeed, still Mad Dog Lane in high heels and business suit. But the part of Lois that Clark had loved was dead, buried deep beneath the frozen glacier of her heart, the part of her that she had sacrificed for his parents.

And in the intervening months, she'd managed to kill the part of Clark which had still loved her despite her personality shift. Like Jimmy and Perry, Clark was actually relieved that Lois was no longer employed by the Daily Planet. He'd lost her that day without knowing it at the time. And Lucy no longer tried to call or visit Lois. The only reason she was attending the awards banquet that night was because Jimmy, who'd been nominated for his photo essay on Suicide Slum, had invited her.

He glanced at Lucy and caught her eyes with his. She shrugged her shoulders and blinked quickly, then looked back at her sister again. He understood. The hope that Lois' condition would reverse itself had turned out to be a chimera, no more real than a desert mirage. She was now who she would always be.

Clark still grieved over losing Lois. He believed that he always would.

He remembered how cold her shoulders had felt that day, despite his efforts to warm her. And as he thought back on that day yet again, he imagined that he saw that same coldness spreading throughout her body, robbing her of some essence of humanity and compassion that made her Lois Lane, leaving only the furiously driven Mad Dog Lane in its wake.

He ached for what might have been. And had he been able, he would have cried for what would never be.

THE END